

African Epics: A comparative Study

(*Al-Sira al-Hilaliyyah* In Egypt and *The Sundjata Keita Epic* in West Africa for Example)

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Introduction

This paper will focus on *The Epic of Sundjata Keita* and a different narrations of *Al-Sira al-Hilaliya* in Egypt, to investigate the similarities and differences between them in relation to the structure of the epic, represented by the stages through which the folk cultural hero passes; for example, the prophecy; the birth of the hero; the alienation of the hero; and the final recognition of the hero. It will depend on the comparative method and the oral-formulaic theory (Finnegan, 1977), (Ong, 1992).

(1)

Literary Genre (epic/sirah¹)

It may be somewhat striking that the Arab folk conscience has so far kept on the oral narration of "Sirat Bani Hilal"; though its narration began as early as the Tenth Century. The *sirah* is an Arabic folk art while the epic is a Western folk art. Although they differ in name, structure and content, they share a great deal of their artistic characteristics. In his study of the relationship between the Arabic sirah and the Western epic, al-Hagagi has proved a high degree of similarity. He even considers the structure of the epic a part or a section of the folk sirah. The sirah is the whole of which the epic is a part. The similarities even transcend the few existing differences of structure and text, blurring the difference of language and locale (1991, pp. 25– 26). Among the important similarities are focus on the

¹ The term of "sīrah" being the variously translated into English as saga, epic. But all these English terms are not exactly translation.

topics of war and chivalry and motivating for revenge. Linguistically speaking, the lexical item “epic”² is translated into Arabic as “*malhama*” which gives the meaning of bodily engagement in the heat of battle, thus, denoting raging battle, but technically speaking it is a “long narrative poem recounting great deeds and extraordinary heroism”. Similarly, the “*sirah*” is the biography of a hero or a tribe including encounters, wars and fighting. Arabic dictionaries consider “*malhama*” and “*sirah*” synonymous (*al-Wageez*, The Arabic dictionary, 1993) in the tradition of the scholars³ that use the two terms interchangeably. Scenes of battle are so numerous in both that they can be seen as series of scenes of continuous battles where these scenes and battles are greatly similar. The two genres are not set apart despite the radical difference between them. The epic tends to display conflict among gods or demigods, sometimes with heroines that are goddesses as well. The *sirah*’s hero, on the other hand, is human and it is populated by heroes who are mere mortals with human conflicts and characters although some of its heroes and events are sometimes of supernatural proportions with unrealistic deeds.

In his pioneering study, al-Hagagi (1991) argued, “*Sirah* is a wide world more spacious than the epic... the latter being a part of *sirah*” (pp. 25-26). Perusing the *Sundiata Keita: the Mandingo people Epic*, one will discover that it does not go beyond being one of the episodes of *sirah*—namely the episode of “births”. Studying this epic shows that it does not go beyond the initial episode of the number of episodes which the Arabic folk *sirahs* cover. The only episode covered is the phase of “births” which start all Arabic *sirahs*. This proves the argument of al-Hagagi as was revealed in the above-mentioned distinction between *sirah* and epic.

(2)

Prophecy and its role in shaping the epic hero

² A long poem narrating the deeds of heroic or legendary figures or the past history of a nation, from Gr. *epekos*, f. *epos* = word, narrative, song. *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*.

³ A single example of numerous others is Dr Abdel Hameed Younis in his two studies *a--Zahir Beibars in folk storytelling*, 1946 and “*Al-Hilaliyyah in History and Literature*, 1950 and Dr Muhammad Ragab al-Naggar in his study “*The Hero in Folk Epics: Issues and Technical Aspects*, 1976.

In his well-known *Prolegomena*, ibn Khaldun comments on the old Mali Kingdom giving special mention of its king Sundiata the hero of the *Sundiata Keita* epic, quoting his credited historians, one of whom was Sheikh Othman, the most famous learned and pious cleric and Islamic jurist of the Guinean people, who arrived in Egypt in H. 699 [around AD 1300] with his family. He was familiar with the history he was recounting since it was relatively recent at that time. Quoting him, ibn Khaldun said, “their great king who defeated Sosso conquered their land and became their king Mari Djata ... He ruled them for twenty-five years as they said. When he died, he was followed by his son Mansa Uli (i.e. Sultan Ali) ... son of Sultan Mari Djata, then his son Muhammad ibn Qu. The line of kings was shifted then from the line of Sultan Mari Djata to the line of his nephew Abu Bakr, so they were ruled by Mansa Musa son of Abu Bakr” (Ibn Khaldun, *History*, vol. VI, p. 200).

This reference gives the epic under study a historical nature especially when ibn Khaldun also refers elsewhere to the migration of the Hilali tribe to North Africa. The *Sundiata Keita* epic runs within the context of the social and political history of the Mandingo country. Its people, as the epic shows, belongs to oriental Islamic origins as the Mandingo are the descendants of Bilal ibn Rabah; they are Bilali. "The epic is based on the real life of the African king who lived in the 13th Century and established an empire in west Africa that extended from the coast of the Atlantic Ocean along the coast towards the east where there are now the following countries: Gambia, Guinea, Senegal and Mali" (Paterno, 1995, p. 3). It was said the name *Mali*, with the variants *Mallel*, *Mel*, and *Melit*, as appears on some middle-ages maps, was a Berber name. The country had many names; it was the Mandingo country, Mali and the Takrur Kingdom. The common name used by the Mandingo tribes is Manenka, Mandinka, Mandin, Maning, Manenga or *Mandeng* or *Manenka*—all of a similar nature (Tarkhan, 1973, pp. 27- 30). The old Mandingo country was composed of twelve kingdoms, one of which was the Niani Kingdom, ruled by Maghan Kon Fatta. This kingdom was under the rule of Soumaoro the King of Ghana but soon got independent and Ghana itself came under the rule of the Kingdom of Mali. Seers had predicted that the King Maghan would have a son from an ugly hunchbacked woman, and that son was destined to lead the Mandingo people to victory. The epic sees the

prophecy coming true through a number of folk motifs which connect this hero with Alexander the Great, with the heroes of Arabic epics and with heroes of the Western tradition such as Oedipus and Odysseus. On the other hand connections are made with other African epics as other scholars showed the links between the Sundiata epic and the story of Shaka Zulu, king of the Zulu city in south-eastern Africa. However, this last reference relates historical events of a later time since Shaka was born in 1787 and fought against the English occupation of his country. Siendou confines the comparison to the phases of birth where the two works are similar in the vague atmosphere of their moments of birth. "While this epic contains universal elements that are common in this genre, it also contains unique African roots which are confined to Africa" (Paterno, 1995, p. 3).

The phase of the birth of the hero in the *Sundiata* epic shows particular affinity to Western epics and especially the Arabic Hilali folk epic. The prophecy carried by the hunter/seer to the father King Maghan Kon Fatta in *Sundiata* is its first springing point as the seer himself says, "I see two hunters coming to your city; they have come from afar and a woman accompanies them. Oh, that woman! She is ugly, she is hideous, she bears on her back a disfiguring hump. Her monstrous eyes seem to have been merely laid on her face, but, mystery of mysteries, this is the woman you must marry, sire, for she will be the mother of him who will make the name of Mali immortal for ever. The child will be the seventh star, the seventh conqueror of the earth. He will be more mighty than Alexander" (Niane, *Sundiata*, 1965, pp. 5-6).

The prophecy unfolds and the two hunters arrive to rid the Daw kingdom of the buffalo calf, a looming menace as in King Oedipus myth or in many Folk tales, most famous of which is the tale of Saint George. As the king of the Daw kingdom had promised the hero to select the most beautiful girl of his kingdom for marriage, the hunters chose the ugly hunchbacked woman Sogolon leaving behind all the beauties of the kingdom, causing much ridicule on the part of the king and the people. The hunters carried Sogolon to the King of the Mandingo, Maghan Kon Fatta, in compliance with the prophecy. The marriage resulted in the birth of the legendary hero Sundiata Keita.

Prophecy also played an important role in *Al-Hilaliyyah*; it urged Rizq ibn Nayl al-Hilali to go on a journey to Mecca to marry a noble woman who would later bear him a male child to fulfil his heart's dreams. The urge came through a divine inspiration. The hero recites,

Old age creeping, I was bent,

It's God who fulfils all intent.

Plights make me cry and crave,

One little child brave.

* * *

Heard and a divine call found,

Everyman by his lot bound.

Listen, Rizq, to God's divination,

Get married and Mecca is your destination. (*Al-Hilaliyyah*, 2002, pp. 67-68).

* * *

Tying the knot of marriage is done, and similar to what happens in the African counterpart in fulfilment of the prophecy of the hunter/ soothsayer concerning the fate of the offspring of the marriage, the "the pool of birds" plays the role of the prophecy. It predicts the future of the new-born boy of the noble Khadra.

Eighty maids of the Hilali tribe caught her eye,

Sweet creatures brought up by the Lord of the sky.

A pool of birds hovering in heaven,

By seeking the Lord's blessing they are driven (*Al-Hilaliyyah*, p. 98).

The expected son would accomplish great deeds. He would resemble the crow in colour and bravery. It is the bird that would fly up and hit all the other birds around, “all in reach will bleed”. Thus, the noble Khadra wishes she could get a child like this crow which fears nobody and gains the respect of everybody (*Al-Hilaliyyah*, pp. 103–105).

Thus, the prophecy is the nucleus around which all the events take place in both works; it also serves this central role in other Arabic and Western narrative poems. Prophecy plays a major role in “transferring the hero from the domain of ordinary people to the domain of the mythical characters, i.e., from the realistic to the mythical. The hero, thus, enters the circle of the great universe and establishes his place in it” (Al-Hagagi, 2001, P. 18). The role and place of prophecy in the *Sundiata Keita* epic is by no means unique to it since the same role and place is present in the world folk traditions as in the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid* in addition to the myth of Oedipus, etc. Even religious narrative included such folk traditions as in the Prophet Muhammad biographies by Ibn Hesham and Ibn Isahq as well as other life stories of Moses and Jesus. Confirming this view, al-Hagagi said, “Folk Arabic epic hailed prophecies which determined the destiny of their heroes, which makes them share concepts of other folk epics around the world. Such prophecies played a major role in the structure of these oral narratives... Prophecies added to the role they played in folk narratives another role in religious stories” (Al-Hagagi, 2001, pp. 18–19). Prophecy in this folk narrative traditions took a number of forms, such as visions, dreams, observing the stars and reading their clues, and telling the future through deciphering signs in the sand or extrapolating from the prophecies of old books (Al-Hagagi, 1991, p. 49).

(3)

Marriage of the parents and the birth of epic heroes:

The hero’s birth is almost always laden with mystique and mystery. The mystical events that surround the hero’s birth do not shield him from hard time and extreme

suffering. Unlike the birth of “ordinary and normal” humans, the condition of possibility of the hero’s birth is the commitment of the helping hands of a god or a supernatural force that either anticipates or delays the process of coming to life (Siendou. 2012. P. 3). We can find the same characteristic in both of Sundiata epic and *al-Hilaliyyah* Sirah. In the epic of Sundjata, "the noble king Nare Maghan determined to solemnize his marriage with all the customary formalities so that nobody could dispute the rights of the son to be born to him... Sogolon walked in front held by two old women. The king's relatives followed and, behind, the choir of young girls of Mali sang the bride's departure song, keeping time to the songs by clapping their hands" (Niane, *Sundiata*, 1965, pp. 9– 11). Marriage to Sogolon was motivated by the desire to see the dream of the birth of a legendary hero come true—a hero that would inherit the fathers’ kingdom and kingship. "You have ruled over the kingdom which your ancestors bequeathed to you and you have no other ambition but to pass on this realm, intact if not increased, to your descendants; but, fine king, your successor is not yet born" (*Sundiata*, P. 5).

King Maghan Kon Fatta was already a father of more than a son, his eldest being Dankaran Touman, but neither the latter, nor any of the other sons, was good enough to achieve the father’s ambition for a king to inherit the great heritage of the ancestors. It was this ambition that drove Rizq ibn Nayl to marry the noble Khadra. He was a father of a girl (Sheha). It was further said that he was also the father of another disabled son. This created permanent angst in Rizq’s heart, wondering who will be his heir (*Al-Hilaliyyah*, p. 85).

Every time he saw fathers at an age similar to his playing with their children, his longing for offspring becomes stronger. Then, an inspiration/prophecy visits him in his sleep and urges him to start his journey to the Holy City of Mecca to marry the daughter of its noble ruler as she would be the one to give him the son/hero who would bear the name of his father and have a great status in the future.

Studying the way the African counterpart, Naré Maghan, married his ugly Sogolon shows the points of similarity in the manner another Arab lord, Shaddad ibn Qerad married an Abyssinian slave girl, Zabiba, mother of the Arab poet Antara ibn Shaddad

with the folk narrators attempts to add a touch of beauty on the whole affair. Shaddad captivated this slave girl following one of his triumphant battles. She refused to succumb to his amorous attempts unless they got married first and he promised to recognize the offspring of this relation as his legitimate children (*Antara ibn Shaddad* Epic, pp. 72-73). Zabiba bore him Antara the renowned Arab poet. Zabiba abstaining from surrendering to Shaddad reminds us of Sogolon's reaction to her husband Naré Maghan who could not have his way with her until he threatened to kill her in compliance with the orders of the genies (jinns) (*Sundiata*, P. 12).

(4)

Alienation of the two heroes:

Sogolon, Sundiata's mother, did have better luck than that of the Noble Khadra and her son, or Zabiba and her son Antara. Khadra was accused of adultery and had to depart from the land of her tribe for the land of the Zahlah tribe where she brought up her son, Abu Zayd al-Hilali. She raised him on the principles of chivalry and heroism in his exile, hence his return as a hero to his hometown. Similarly, Antara was accused of being a slave for his black skin, and Sogolon suffered the same injustice and fate for herself and her son. Sundiata was the son of the ugly Sogolon whose person and the king's good care of the child since his prenatal phase, keeping in mind the words of the soothsayer, instigated hatred in the heart of Sassouma Bereté, the king's first wife. Sassouma feared for the future of her son Dankaran Touman who was then eight years old. Numerous attempts were made to get rid of Sogolon and her son. One such attempt occurred when the mother was pregnant, using tricks of senior magicians who admitted failure to do Sogolon and her son any harm. Another attempt was excluding Sundiata for his young age and physical disability to pave the way after his father's death for Sassouma to declare Dankaran Touman, her own son, king. In so doing she totally ignored the king's will based on the prophecy of the soothsayer. Khadra bore great sufferings caused by the colour of her son's skin, where she was accused of adultery and begetting that child from an illicit relation, which hurled on her a great deal of insults and bad treatment. Similarly, Sogolon endured terrible ordeal

after the death of her husband and the apparent disability of her son. The first wife Sassouma used to send them to the backyard of the Palace. "She banished Sogolon and her son to a back yard of the palace. Mari Djata's mother now occupied an old hut which had served as a lumber-room of Sassoum's" (*Sundiata*, P. 18). and when Sogolon felt there was danger looming around she decided to depart with her son in the company of Sundiata's brother Manding Bory and their sister Kolonkan (three half siblings). King Dankaran Touman's and his mother's trick to get rid of Sogolon was to separate Sogolon and Sundiata Keita's griot (storyteller) Balla Fasséké whom his father had appointed for him (*Sundiata*, P. 27).

The mother Sogolon's decision to save her son by departure in the company of his siblings was wise. She departed with Sundiata's half-brother Manding Bokari and two half-sisters Djamarou and Sogolon Kolonkan (half siblings from his father and a third wife. She got them in her company as she felt they were kind-hearted and loyal to their half-brother. On the one hand, Khadra travels with her maid Saeeda and her son Abu Qomsan who becomes a faithful follower of Abu Zayd. On the other hand, Sundiata travels in the company of his mother and half-siblings as he was deprived of the company of his griot Balla Fasséké. Exile, or the hero's alienation, is forced on the hero who comes back after this obligatory journey to liberate his country as a hero saviour. "Let us leave here, my son... You will return to reign when you are a man, for it is in Mali that your destiny must be fulfilled" (*Sundiata*, P. 26- 27). Okafor refers to this common characteristic between the epics: "It is noteworthy, here, that the exile of an endangered saviour of his people is recurrent in many traditions the world over" (Okafor, 2004, 413).

The act of overthrowing the child king done by the step-mother who managed to banish him from his people and land resembles the act of sending Abu Zayd al-Hilali and his mother into exile. However, it denotes another angle of similarity to the folk epic of Sayf ibn Dhi Yazan in the ordeal he endured with his mother Qamaraya. Queen Qamaraya, the spy, who was planted by Sayf Araad in his father's Royal Palace with the purpose of getting rid of him together with her own unborn son, Sayf. When she gave birth she was overwhelmed with his great beauty and was terribly jealous of his succeeding

to the throne. The king died for unknown reasons revealed by the story; he could have died of natural causes or poisoned by Qamaraya (*Sayf ibn Dhi Yazan Epic*, 1999, pp. 42-43). Sayf was raised away from his kingdom because of his mother who played a role similar to that of Sundiata's step-mother. Qamaraya left him in a desert where he was raised by a deer which suckled him. He grew up in exile but managed at the end to return to his country to rule over it. Banishment and growing up in exile are common features shared by epics and sirahs except in rare cases. "The birth of the epic hero is usually followed by rejection and ostracism. The hero travels through a string of crises that he surmounts" (Siendou. 2012. P. 3).

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Similarities between *Sundiata* and *al-Hilaliyyah* go further to include the destination chosen by the mothers of the two heroes finding safe havens for the upbringing of their children on principles of chivalry and heroism. Khadra made for the Zahlah tribe territory with her maid Saeeda and her son Abu Qomsan. King Bassem al-Zahlan, ruler of the territory, took good care of them, providing sustenance and education for the little child. In one account, the name "Barakat" (blesses) was bestowed on the child by the prophet al-Khidr who also protects the mother Khadra when thugs tried to rape her.

In a similar way, the hero Sundiata goes through several adventures while on the road with his mother to the land of Mema to settle down there. They left Niani making for the city of Djedeba under the rule of Mansa (king) Konkon who was a great seer. The king received them with some caution at the beginning but Sundiata soon got along with the children of the city. Here the child showed signs of heroism; he even won a sword duel with Mansa Konkon. This is similar to the phase when Abu Zayd was schooled in the madrasa.

When Sheik Saleh, his madrasa tutor, hurls insults at Abu Zayd and his mother and tries to torture him, instigated by one jealous mother, Abu Zayd kills the sheik whose brother, a minister of the state, tries to take revenge. The king however protects the lad. Another similarity appears in Sundiata's duel with Mansa Konkon (playing the game of

work in which the king excels) compared to Abu Zayd's duel with Gouda ibn Selim, nephew of King Fadl. Abu Zayd kills his opponent and faces attempts on the part of the parents of his dead opponent to revenge and send him to exile. Similarly, King Fadl protects him; he even suffers the enmity of his brother and sister in law for the sake of Abu Zayd whom he treats as one of his children.

Just as the land of the Zahlan tribe was the settlement haven of Abu Zayd and his mother, Sundiata was destined to find such haven in Mema, but not yet. He was expelled together with his company from the city of Djedeba after a sojourn of two months. They pass by the city of Tabon where they were well received by its king who was too old to take the challenge of keeping them for long in the face of threats from the king of Niani. They move to the city of Wagadou where the chief merchant recommends giving them the best of welcome. Before the king of Ouagadou, Sogolon went on presenting her case depending on the ties of friendship that was between the king and her late husband (*Sundiata*, P. 33). The impressive and welcome response of the king was: "No stranger has ever found our hospitality wanting. My court is your court and my palace is yours. Make yourself at home. Consider that in coming from Niani to Wagadou you have done no more than change rooms. The friendship which unites Mali and Ghana goes back to a very distant age, as the elders and griots know. The people of Mali are our cousins" (*Sundiata*, P. 34). The king's generous and hospitable reception was even extended more by sending them to the court of his nephew Tonkara in Mema. This looks like the same welcome reception enjoyed by Khadra and her son in the court of king Fadle ibn Bassem al-Zahlan.

The Mema court was the last destination of Sundiata and his mother. There he trains on the use of weapons and shares in the king's conquests where he greatly excels. He gains people's amazed admiration as they even described him as a "successor to Dhu al-Qarnayn", the Quranic name for Alexander the Great. The king and the army appoint him the king's viceroy, a decision which the people hailed. Abu Zayd al-Hilali achieved the same status in his exile in the court of King Fadl in the Zahl territory where he was first schooled for literacy then for chivalry and martial arts. "Five years hence, listen to the tale's

intent, I sent to the Zahlan king, I want my boy taught. Most important for me... I want a teacher for my boy, I want my lad literate” (*Al-Hilaliyyah*, p. 175).

(5)

Returning of Heroes to their home land:

Recognising the status of the two heroes after their long journeys of exile goes through comparable processes in the two epics. The Zahlan tribe, which gave refuge to Abu Zayd, was subjugated by the Hilali tribe and paid the tribe annual war tax, but when Abu Zayd al-Hilali grew up he refused to pay the tax and even cut off an ear of one of the Hilali two messengers (Abouel.leil, 2012, p. 196). In another account, the Hilali tribe supports Ben Aqeel, which used to pay poll tax to the Hilalis, but Abu Zayd defeated them, killing off forty of their warriors including Atwan, Dagher, Jassar, and Jayl. So, Aqeelis sought refuge with the Hilalis (Ibid., p. 340). Abu Zayd’s sister, Sheha, was the means of the connection through the motif of the three apples which he splits with his sword instead of catching and eating them. In parallel veins the Baobab leaves, the counterpart of the three apples, help in recognizing the hero in the *Sundiata* epic. When Sundiata settled in Mema, he learned that Soumaoro had invaded the Mandingo land and that his brother Dankaran Touman took flight leaving his people subjugated by Soumaoro. In the Mema market, Sundiata’s sister Kolonkan, who used to live with him, met a woman and a number of Mandingo merchants who sold Baobab leaves “nafiola and gnougou”, used as condiment and only known in the Mandingo land. The sister Kolonkan, in the *Sundiata* epic, plays the role of the medium that connects the hero with his people. After consulting with her mother, she accompanies the Mandingo merchants to the mother who welcomes them and restores some of her withering powers. It transpires that these merchants were actually the courtiers of old king, Sundiata’s father. Under the disguise of merchants they were searching for the hero Sundiata (*Sundiata*, p.45).

They beg him to come back to lift the oppression suffered by his country, softening his heart with the pleadings of the oppressed and the tears of mothers who lost their sons. one of his visitors tried to convince him in analogous lines to those expressed by the

courtiers of the Hilalis while trying to convince Abu Zayd to come back to his homeland to liberate it of its enemies leaving behind all the glory he achieved in the land of the Zahla tribe. The two heroes cannot but answer the call of the homeland and go back.

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However, before the homecoming, both had to honour their mothers. Sogolon died and her son wanted to honour her with the right burial in a land granted to him by the king. He sought to express his wish when he took leave from the king to return to his homeland in the Mandingo country. "King, you gave me hospitality at your court when I was without shelter. Under your orders I went on my first campaign. I shall never be able to thank you for so much kindness. However, my mother is dead; but I am now a man and I must return to Mali to claim the kingdom of my fathers. Oh king, I give you back the powers you conferred upon me, and I ask leave to depart. In any case, allow me to bury my mother before I go" (*Sundiata*, p. 45).

The king was upset and did not grant Sundiata the needed lot of burial land, but he eventually took the advice of an Arab Sheikh, a counsellor of his, since refusal meant peril for him and his kingdom. The Arab Sheikh's counsel is comparable to the advice of Sultan Sarhan's daughter to the Hilalis in the relevant epic. This is when Abu Zayd asked the Hilalis to honour his mother and pay her moral amends by spreading some of the best silk cloth from the land of Zahla tribe (where he dwelt) to the Hilali land in Najd.

Until we cross our doorsteps,

Her camel on silk spread steps.

Girls and women singing en route,

Of her honour and good repute.

Sogolon underwent actual death in the *Sundiata* epic while Khadra only experienced existential death as she had no subsequent role in *Al-Hilaliyyah* epic after her son went back to the care of his tribe. The two mothers were absented after their sons

found recognition in their homelands. The role they played was to prepare the son away from the homeland so that he can go back and liberate his people, take revenge and expel the enemy. Thus, they could restore the past glory of their lands and put other powers under their dominance after times of weakness, subjugation and paying poll taxes to others.

The two heroes went back to their respective homelands: Sundiata to the Mandingo land and Abu Zayd to Najd. They, then, started their battles of destiny against their enemies, the Sosso country and the Aqeeli tribes, to restore the lost pride of their peoples after periods of subjugation and humiliation in their absence. The two heroes manage to accomplish their goals. "Sundiata was able after a series of long battles to defeat Soumaoro Kanté and in a few years became the chief of their fighters in Mandinka" (Vij, 1982, P. 52). In 1235, Sundiata kills king Soumaoro in the battle of Kirina. In 1240, he seized the capital of Ghana and destroyed all vestiges of Soumaoro's former power. By acquiring the gold mine fields at Wangara, and by establishing his capital at Niani, a trading crossroads, Sundiata was able to bring peace, sovereignty and prosperity to his West African kingdom of Kangaba. In a comparable way, Abu Zayd was able to wage a battle against the Aqeeli tribe who wanted to avenge themselves for his previous killing of forty of their warriors, and waged war as well against the Jews who attacked Mecca.

(6)

A common Traditions, Beliefs and Customs between Sundiata and al.Hilaliyya:

The parallels in the two works appear in similarities of a number of folk beliefs and habits and the artistic properties of both. **First**, there is the **black bird**. A black bird hovering in the sky appears to the women of the Hilalis near the pool of birds at the beginning of the phase of births. It is the source of the prophecy for the noble Khadra, mother of Abu Zayd, and a propitious sign for her. She prays God for a child as black as this bird, "all in reach will bleed". This is the *Al-Sirah Al-Hilaliyyah*, and again we come across the black bird in the *Sundiata* epic. It hovers above the battle field in the decisive battle

between Sundiata and his opponent Soumaoro. Its hovering there is a propitious sign for Sundiata, an indication that he will triumph over rival Soumaoro in their battle (*Sundiata*, P. 65).

Second, there is the **water pool**. It is the pool of birds in the *Hilaliyyah*, a great place for fulfilling wishes. Around the pool all those who have unfulfilled wishes would gather. Women go to “the pool of birds where the rite of wishing is practiced as a strong belief” (Abdel Hafiz, 2014, p. 135). The Noble Khadra is “deprived of male offspring and thus suffers a great deal especially the mocking eyes of all Arab women since women beget males who inherit their fathers, but her husband is left with no heir. At the pool of birds, she prays that God may give her male offspring like that black bird that hovered above and frightened off all other birds” (Ibid, p. 136).

In the *Sundiata* epic, there is the magic pool of water which is "In the middle of the mountain was a little pool of magic water. Whoever got as far as this pool and drank its waters became powerful, but the jinn of the pool were very evil and only the king of Rita had access to the mysterious pool" ((*Sundiata*, P. 65), P. 70). The person who controlled this genie through offering a sacrifice could also control the pool. Sundiata won the favour of the genie guarding the pool through offering “He sacrificed a hundred cocks to the jinn of the mountain” (Sundiata, pp. 70- 71).

Third, there is the **custom of naming the new-born**. The *Sundiata* epic reflects this custom practiced by the old Mandingo people. The new-born is given a name on the eighth day after his birth. According to this social custom, Sundiata was given his name on that day which was a great feasting day in the Mandingo land (Ibid, P. 14).

It is clear that this ritual rite combined the folk rites where old women contributed to the nutritional needs of the mother with some foods and beverages that were thought as of good health value for both the mother and the infant on the one hand and of symbolic fertility value on the other. The celebration has as well its formal nature when the entourage of the king celebrate the new-born by offering presents to the king. It is the same scene with all its symbolic, formal and folk meanings in the *Hilaliyyah* epic where the

celebration of *Seboa* (seventh day, and not eighth) of the birth of Abu Zayd al-Hilali. “the custom is the day of seboa, with the crowd gathering .. They give the babe a name, amongst maternal and paternal uncles.. In the midst of Hilali gatherings .. The dignitaries come, and words go round” (*Al-Hilaliyyah*, p. 116). On that day the new-born was given a name and the princes and the king offered his father Rizq ibn Nayl presents.

Fourth, there is the **custom of declaring the honourable chastity** of the bride on the morning following the wedding night. After many failed attempt on the part of the King Naré Maghan and adamant refusal on the part of his new wife Sogolon, he finally succeeds and manages to deflower her (*Sundiata*, P. 11- 12).

After this week, through a ruse of his contrivance, he manages to deflower Sogolon and impregnate her on that night. The *Sundiata* epic depicts at length the scene of the encounter between Maghan and Sogolon and his success after many troubled endeavours. In contrast, while the scene where Rizq ibn Nayl meets his wife the noble Khadra gets the same interest, there is no rejection on the part of the wife who, on the contrary, made herself ready and beautiful for the expected meeting. On the following morning women come to apparently congratulate her and actually to make sure that she was deflowered as a sign of her premarital chastity.

Fifth, there is a similarity of **Folk games**. The Wori game (a kind of draughts or checkers which involves pebbles and sorcery) in the *Sundiata* epic resembles the draughts game in the *Hilaliyyah* epic. The Wori in the Sundiata epic is "a popular game In Upper Guinea and western Sudan (*Sundjata*, Arab translation, 2010, footnote P. 119).

It is the same like the draughts of the *Hilaliyyah*, but engravings are made on the ground not on a tree trunk. The game plays a symbolic role in the two works as they are not mere games. They rather communicate certain messages between the two opponents similar to the case of a game of chess between two rivals. Meaningful phrases are exchanged during the game with the purpose of achieving a moral victory of one rival. The hero is often one of the rivals, which explains the emergence of the game in the two works in the decisive moments of the events.

Consequently, Sundiata and his family left Djedeba for the city of Tabon. In a like manner, the game of draughts plays a role in decisive moments in the *Hilaliyyah* epic, comparable to that of the wori game. It appeared before the migration of Bani Hilal from Najd to Tunisia.

In another decisive event when the draughts game was used in the *Hilaliyyah* epic, Abu Zayd played a game with his Tunisian friend Al-Allam who made a pact with him against his cousin Al-Zanati Khalifa.

Conclusion

This paper attempted to prove the existence of a strong connection between the *Sundiata Keita* epic and Arabic folk epics (sirahs), especially the *Al-Sirah Al-Hilaliyyah*, in a number of aspects, among which are the different phases of the hero's life, e.g. phases of prophecy, birth, exile and the hero's homecoming to gain recognition as a folk hero. The paper reviewed as well the common cultural characteristics related to folk customs, traditions and beliefs. The comparison between *al.Hilaliyyah* and *Sundiata* need to more study and analysis in the future.

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