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Individuation in African Oral Epic: A Study of *Sundiata*

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Abstract

This study explores individuation in African epic literature, focusing on Sundiata Epic. Individuation, a concept developed by Carl Jung, refers to the integration of the unconscious and conscious aspects of the self, leading to the realization of one's true identity. The application of Carl Jung's theory of individuation is much studied in literature and psychology of the West, but it is barely touched on in relation to African narratives. Through a critical analysis of Sundiata Epic, this study explore how the concept of individuation is portrayed in African epics with focus on the hero's journey of self-discovery , personal development, and integration within the community. The study is guided by the objectives of: analysing the depiction of individuation in the Sundiata Epic, analysing African concepts of individuation in relation to Western archetypal frameworks; and investigating the influence of oral tradition on the construction of African identity. This study aims to bridge a gap by analysing how African epics, *Sundiata,* reflect unique perspectives on individuation that emphasize the importance of communal support, ancestral guidance, and cultural heritage in shaping individual identity. The study findings indicate that African epics integrate psychological

changes deepened by cultural, historical, and spiritual dimensions, thus expanding the concept of Jungian individuation.

Keywords: Individuation, Africa, Epic, Literature, Identity

Introduction

African epic literature is a cornerstone of African cultural heritage, embodying a legacy that goes beyond entertainment to impart values, histories, and wisdom from one generation to the next. Central to African literature are the oral traditions that have preserved the stories of legendary heroes, historical figures, and the socio-cultural dynamics of African societies. African epics are lengthy, heroic narratives that detail the journey of a hero or protagonist through challenges, growth, and triumphs, while addressing universal themes such as community, honour, and spirituality (Diakite, 2020). They highlight collective histories that resonate with people across generations, offering cultural continuity even as modern African societies evolve. The story of *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* stands as one of the most renowned African epics, originally preserved through oral tradition by griots and later transcribed to reach wider audiences.

Unlike written literature, African epic narratives are dynamic cultural artifacts, adaptable to the sociocultural context and evolving with each retelling. This oral nature infuses them with a unique flexibility, allowing storytellers to tailor the narrative to the specific needs and circumstances of their audience, thereby reinforcing relevant cultural values and teachings. Through characters, heroic deeds, and complex plotlines, these epics encapsulate the moral and ethical codes that guide African societies, addressing themes such as honor, bravery, leadership, destiny, and the importance of communal well-being.

African epics also serve as historical records, preserving events, genealogies, and the achievements of notable ancestors. In many cases, these narratives blend myth with history, infusing real

events with supernatural elements to convey both the factual and spiritual truths valued by the community. This fusion of reality and myth adds a rich layer of depth to African epics, portraying historical figures like Sundiata Keita as heroes who transcend mere mortal boundaries, embodying ideals that resonate culturally and spiritually.

In essence, African epic narratives are more than just stories; they are living traditions that reflect and reinforce the cultural and historical identity of African societies. Their study offers insights into the collective consciousness of African peoples, the values they hold, and the ways in which they interpret the human experience, both individually and collectively. Through these narratives, African societies express their worldview, establish a collective sense of self, and pass down fundamental cultural teachings that continue to shape their identities in the modern world.

Individuation, as a psychological and cultural process, relates to the formation of an individual identity distinct from others but influenced by societal factors. In the African context, individuation often balances personal and communal identities, where the individual's journey is intricately linked to their role within the community and the expectations surrounding them. Rooted in the work of Carl Jung, individuation describes a process of psychological integration, where an individual comes to terms with the various aspects of their psyche to achieve a harmonious self (Frager and Fadiman, 2017). Within African societies, however, the path to self-actualization involves not only personal challenges but also understanding and embodying collective values. African culture generally emphasizes interconnection, so individuation is a journey of defining the self in relation to family, ancestors, and community. This notion of community is prevalent in African literature, where heroes are seldom isolated figures but rather individuals who achieve greatness through both personal agency and the guidance of cultural heritage (Kamara, 2019).

Sundiata epic is a powerful narrative that exemplifies this process. It tells the story of Sundiata Keita, the founder of the Mali Empire, who overcomes a prophecy, physical limitations, and numerous hardships to establish a legacy. His journey is emblematic of self-realization and individual destiny intertwined with communal identity. Born into royalty yet disadvantaged by his physical inability to walk, Sundiata's life journey reflects both personal and communal expectations. The prophecy surrounding his birth posits him as a destined ruler, thereby creating societal pressures and expectations. His mother, Sogolon, and the griots play instrumental roles in guiding him through his trials, underscoring the communal support in his individuation process.

Throughout his life, Sundiata transforms from a child who struggles with his physical limitations to a ruler who unites his people, embodying both personal transformation and communal duty. The epic captures his journey towards self-fulfilment while respecting the heritage and beliefs of his people, illustrating the African approach to individuation as an integrated process of personal growth within a community framework (Johnson, 2021).
In the African epic framework, individuation is also profoundly linked to destiny and spiritual beliefs. Sundiata's journey is laden with spiritual elements that signify a higher power governing his path. African epics often involve divine or supernatural forces, emphasizing the interplay between human agency and destiny.

The African worldview considers destiny as something one fulfils rather than chooses, reflecting a philosophical orientation that values harmony between personal ambitions and collective wellbeing. For instance, *Sundiata* integrates elements of African spirituality, where the griots act as custodians of tradition, bridging the spiritual and physical realms. This spiritual dimension informs the individuation process in *Sundiata*, as the protagonist's journey is not only about self-realization but also about manifesting the

destiny prophesied for him, aligning individual purpose with ancestral guidance and spiritual order (Diallo and Tounkara, 2020).

Through *Sundiata*, African epic literature reveals the importance of integrating personal identity with cultural heritage, bridging the individual's journey with societal obligations. The hero's path to greatness serves as an archetype for achieving balance between self and community, offering a perspective on individuation that aligns with African cultural values. This approach underscores the African worldview in which the self exists as part of a larger, spiritual, and communal context, with individuation symbolizing the harmonious integration of one's identity into the broader cultural and societal framework (Adjei, 2023).

Individuation in Literature

Individuation is a central concept in analytical psychology, developed by Carl Gustav Jung, which describes the process through which an individual achieves self-realization and becomes whole by integrating the conscious and unconscious aspects of their psyche. According to Jung, individuation involves the differentiation of the individual from the collective unconscious, leading to the development of a unique personal identity while maintaining harmony with the broader community and cultural context (Jung, 1939).

In contemporary interpretations, individuation is seen not only as a psychological journey but also as a framework for understanding character development in literature, particularly in narratives that focus on the hero's journey. As Luyten (2019) explain, individuation involves navigating internal conflicts, confronting archetypal symbols, and achieving balance between one's inner world and external reality. This process is often represented in literature through symbolic encounters, trials, and transformations that the protagonist undergoes, which mirror the stages of psychological development.

Jung (1939) emphasizes that individuation is a lifelong process marked by the integration of opposites, such as light and dark, conscious and unconscious, masculine and feminine, within the individual's psyche. This integration is achieved through self-awareness and confrontation with the "shadow" (the repressed or unacknowledged parts of the self) and other archetypes, including the "anima/animus" and the "self." Such archetypes, deeply embedded in the collective unconscious, are universal symbols that appear across cultures and are particularly prominent in myths, legends, and epic literature (Smith, 2021).

Modern studies have expanded Jung's concept of individuation to include cultural and social dimensions, especially in postcolonial and non-Western contexts. For example, Broome and Harris (2020) argue that individuation in African epic literature reflects not only the psychological growth of the protagonist but also the negotiation of identity within a communal framework. Unlike Western narratives, where individuation often emphasizes individualism, African epics highlight the interconnection of personal and collective identities, suggesting that true individuation cannot occur in isolation from the community or cultural heritage.

Individuation is closely tied to the narrative structure of epics, particularly those that follow the "hero's journey" model. Campbell's (1949/2018) monomyth, although originally based on Western myths, resonates with Jung's concept of individuation by describing the hero's transformation through stages such as departure, initiation, and return. African epics like *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* adapt this model to reflect cultural values and the collective aspect of self-realization. As Nwosu (2020) notes, the individuation process in African epic literature often intertwines with themes of ancestral guidance, community responsibilities, and the restoration of social harmony, emphasizing the communal aspects of self-identity.

In literature, the individuation process can also be seen as a response to external challenges that force characters to grow and adapt. For instance, Hillman (2018) highlight that individuation in literature often involves encounters with symbolic trials and adversaries, which represent both external obstacles and internal conflicts. These trials compel the hero to confront their fears, integrate disparate aspects of their psyche, and ultimately achieve self-actualization.

Through this lens, individuation is not merely a psychological phenomenon but a literary device that enables a deeper exploration of human experience. African epic literature, with its rich oral traditions and archetypal themes, provides a fertile ground for examining individuation as a cultural and narrative process. As Ndibe and Akubueze (2022) observe, the use of symbolic language, ritualized actions, and mythic structures in African epics underscores the universality of individuation while highlighting its unique cultural expressions.

Individuation as a Psychological Concept

Individuation is a central concept in Jungian psychology, referring to the process by which an individual achieves self-discovery and personal integration. Developed by Carl Jung, the process of individuation involves the integration of various aspects of the self-such as the conscious and unconscious mind, personal and collective experiences into a cohesive, unified identity (Stein, 2020). This transformative journey aims to bring about psychological maturity, self-knowledge, and a sense of wholeness, ultimately allowing individuals to realize their unique potential while harmonizing with broader collective.

According to Jung, individuation is an archetypal process, meaning it unfolds through universal patterns and themes across different cultures, though it can vary significantly in its expression depending on cultural context (Roesler, 2017). The individuation

process often begins in adulthood and involves facing one's "shadow" the repressed or unrecognized parts of the self as well as harmonizing other unconscious aspects like the anima, animus, and persona (Hoelzl, 2019). By integrating these components, individuals achieve a balanced sense of self, transcending the limitations imposed by purely conscious or social identities

In recent studies, scholars have explored the relevance of Jung's individuation process beyond Western frameworks, recognizing its adaptability to non-Western contexts. For instance, Green et al. (2019) argue that while Jung's theories originated in a Western, individualistic setting, the core principles of self-integration and transformation can be applied across cultures, provided they are adjusted to accommodate collective and communal conceptions of selfhood. This perspective suggests that Jungian individuation is not restricted to a purely individual pursuit but can also include fulfilling cultural and communal obligations, which are particularly important in collectivist societies.

In African cultural contexts, individuation often manifests through stories, myths, and epics that emphasize the hero's journey toward self-realization as an intertwined process with the welfare of the community. For example, African epics such as *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* illustrate a version of individuation in which personal and communal identities are mutually reinforcing (Osei, 2021). In *Sundiata*, the hero's journey toward becoming the ruler of Mali and fulfilling his destiny reflects a culturally embedded form of individuation where self-realization aligns with serving one's people and honouring ancestral lineage (Diakité, 2020).

Research has also shown that non-Western perspectives on individuation often prioritize communal relationships and collective responsibilities (Okeke and Osei, 2018). In African epic narratives, the hero's individuation is depicted not only as a personal journey but as a contribution to the collective well-being

of the society. Such epics reflect a model of selfhood in which personal growth is measured by one's ability to fulfil roles that benefit both family and community (Osei & Kamara, 2022).

This study seeks to contribute to the understanding of individuation within African epic literature by analysing *Sundiata* recognizing it as cultural representations of self-discovery that contrast yet resonate with Jungian principles. Through examining these narratives, it becomes evident that individuation in African contexts represents a balance between personal identity and collective duty, allowing for a fuller understanding of Jung's concept as a universal, yet culturally adaptable psychological process (Mbiti, 2019).

African Epic Literature and Oral Traditions

African epic literature, a genre rich in history and cultural significance, has long served as a medium for preserving and transmitting the values, beliefs, and histories of various African societies. These narratives, which include well-known epic Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali, are traditionally passed down orally from generation to generation by griots or storytellers. The griots, revered as cultural historians and custodians of knowledge, play a crucial role in maintaining the continuity of cultural memory, linking past generations to the present, and reinforcing collective identity.

Unlike written literature, African epic narratives are dynamic cultural artefacts, adaptable to the sociocultural context and evolving with each retelling. This oral nature infuses them with a unique flexibility, allowing storytellers to tailor the narrative to the specific needs and circumstances of their audience, thereby reinforcing relevant cultural values and teachings. Through characters, heroic deeds, and complex plotlines, these epics encapsulate the moral and ethical codes that guide African

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Moreover, the oral tradition adds a dynamic layer to the narrative. In African societies, the griots plays an essential role as a storyteller, historian, and keeper of cultural knowledge. By recounting Sundiata's life story, the griots contribute to the communal memory and solidify his legacy, demonstrating the importance of collective consciousness in shaping individual identity. Oral tradition ensures that individuation, as observed in *Sundiata*, is not a singular journey but one that is witnessed, guided, and celebrated by the community. It reinforces the collective identity and aligns personal journeys within the shared values of the society. The fact that Sundiata's story has been passed down through generations reflects its enduring relevance,

serving as a model for individual and communal growth in African contexts. The epic illustrates that in African thought, self-realization is closely tied to one's role in the community, and the journey toward individuality does not negate communal identity but rather enhances it.

Theoretical Framework

Psychoanalytic theory

Jungian psychology, particularly the concept of individuation, provides a compelling psychoanalytic framework for studying African epic literature. Carl Jung's theory of the unconscious mind, archetypes, the process of individuation, the integration of the conscious and unconscious elements of the psyche offers deep insights into the psychological dimensions of epic narratives.

According to Jung, archetypes are universal symbols that appear in myths, legends, and literature, representing fundamental aspects of the human experience. In the case of *Sundiata*, the hero's journey from a disabled, exiled prince to a powerful ruler embodies the process of individuation. Sundiata's victory over personal challenges and his eventual unification of the Mali Empire symbolize the integration of the unconscious represented by his disabilities and early challenges) with the conscious aspects of his identity (as a powerful and just leader). This journey parallels Jung's view of the individual's quest for psychological wholeness and self-realization (Jung, 1939). Through a Jungian lens, the African epic not only reflects the hero's personal transformation but also the collective journey of the society, as the epic reinforces cultural and social ideals such as leadership, justice, and resilience.

Jung's concept of the *collective unconscious*, which suggests that all humans share a set of common ancestral memories, can also be applied to the study of African epics. The repetition of certain themes, characters, and plot structures across African narratives may be seen as expressions of the collective unconscious,

illustrating how these cultural stories help shape communal identity and personal psychological growth.

Methodology

This study will adopt a qualitative research approach grounded in textual analysis, aiming to provide an in-depth examination of the process of individuation within African epic literature, specifically through *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali*. Qualitative research is chosen for its strength in exploring complex social and psychological themes within cultural texts, allowing for nuanced interpretations of identity formation, self-realization, and communal integration that are not easily captured through quantitative methods. This approach enables a deeper engagement with the cultural and psychological dimensions of African epics, facilitating a more contextualized understanding of how these narratives communicate processes of individuation within an African context.

Analysis

Individuation in *Sundiata*

In many African epics, individuation is not portrayed in isolation; rather, it emphasizes the interconnectedness of the individual and the community. In African societies, personal identity is often shaped by collective values, ancestral ties, and social roles. Thus, the individuation process in African epics often involves not only the protagonist's self-realization but also the restoration of balance within the community.

In Sundiata, Sundiata's journey is not just about personal growth but about fulfilling his role as a leader to unite and protect his people. His individuation is deeply connected to his responsibility toward his community, and his success is viewed not just as the achievement of a personal goal but as the restoration of social harmony. This contrasts with Western literary traditions where

individuation is often focused solely on personal autonomy and individual achievement (Smith, 2021).

In alignment with the African worldview, Sundiata Epic is centred around the culturally collective communal and personal identity destiny, prophecy, ancestral guidance, spiritual trials, and the restoration of order. The griots preserve Sundiata's story and the related individuation processes. Sundiata achieves his success through the emergence of Mandé collective identity (Conrad, 1992). Sundiata Epic, a foundational narrative of the Mali Empire, transcends its historical and cultural role to present a universal and profound story of psychological development. Through the lens of Carl Jung's theory of individuation, the process by which an individual integrates conscious and unconscious elements of the psyche to achieve wholeness and self-realization Sundiata's journey can be interpreted as a classic heroic individuation. His life maps the struggle to acknowledge and assimilate his shadow, transcend a flawed persona, connect with the anima principle, and ultimately embody the Self, becoming the symbolic ruler of both his inner world and the external kingdom.

The first stage of Sundiata's individuation begins with a confrontation with his "shadow," the repressed, underdeveloped aspects of the personality. Born crippled and unable to walk, Sundiata is the embodiment of weakness and dependence, a living contrast to the heroic ideal. This physical limitation represents a profound psychic disunity, an internal shadow that is mocked and rejected by his community, especially his mother's co-wife, Sassouma Bérété, and her son, Dankaran Touman. The collective scorn forces Sundiata to confront his own inferiority. His mother, Sogolon, laments, "Oh son, misfortune has dogged your steps since your birth" I have suffered enough humiliations because of you. This period of suffering is essential, as the shadow must be brought to light before it can be integrated.

Sundiata's narrative depicts individuation, the hero transcends personal limitations to realize his full potential and communal responsibilities. Scholars point out Sundiata's weakness to strength journey as the archetypical embodiment of Jungian psychology's shadow work, mentorship, and the subsequent weaving of personal and collective identity.

Sundiata Epic provides a powerful narrative blueprint for the process of individuation. Sundiata's journey from marginalized cripple to legendary emperor parallels the psychological journey from a state of fragmentation to one of holistic self-realization. By confronting his shadow, discarding his limiting persona, integrating the wisdom of the anima, and ultimately embodying the Self, Sundiata achieves a state of inner kingship. His story demonstrates that true power is not merely political or military, but psychologically the hard-won integration of all parts of the self into a harmonious and purposeful whole, making the epic a timeless testament to the human potential for growth and wholeness.

For instance, in *Sundiata*, the archetype of the "mentor" is embodied by the griots, who provide guidance and wisdom to Sundiata. The griots, as symbolic representations of ancestral wisdom, aid in the individuation process by helping Sundiata reconnect with his heritage and personal identity. The "shadow" archetype is personified by his enemies and the challenges he faces along the way. By confronting these external threats, Sundiata must face his own weaknesses and doubts, ultimately growing into his full potential (Nwosu, 2020).

Joseph Campbell's monomyth, or the "heroes journey," often aligns with the process of individuation in many cultures, particularly in epic literature. The hero's journey is structured as a series of stages that include the call to adventure, initiation, trials,

death and rebirth, and the return with the boon. Each of these stages corresponds to a step in the individuation process.

In *Sundiata*, this journey follows the classic structure. Sundiata's early life is marked by rejection and hardship, resembling the "call to adventure" where he must overcome external and internal forces. His exile represents the "descent into the underworld," a symbolic death where he must confront the psychological and cultural challenges of becoming a leader. His eventual return to reclaim his kingdom symbolizes the "rebirth" phase of individuation, where he integrates his past experiences with his newfound wisdom and power

Conclusion

The element of individuation in African epics has been given attention through data presentation, theme analysis, interpretation of culture, and making comparisons. The profound journey of transformation that Sundiata goes through was evidenced in a study on the Sundiata Epic; it embraces Jung's archetypal stages in transformation as well as a focus on common integration. Theme and cultural analysis reveals factors such as the hero's journey, storyline conflict, ancestry and spirituality, as well as the individualistic and collective relational growth. The individualistic nature of oral traditions, griots, and collective value systems was identified 'sustaining' individuation as a collective endeavour. Moreover, a collective, comparative analysis showed variations and distinctions among African epics as well as diverging from Western models.

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