



# The Epic and Modern Hero between Myth and Reality

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## Abstract

*Mythical, epic, tragic hero, are just some of the adjectives attributed to the figure of the valiant warrior, depicted in literature throughout the ages. Although there are variations, generally speaking, we can define the hero as someone who performs extraordinary feats, who battles to overcome obstacles, who grows and undergoes an internal transformation. In many classical epics, the hero undertakes a journey which leads him to traverse the unknown, both inside and outside Himself. In our study we present the migrant as the modern hero, whom, driven by the call to adventure, embarks on a journey through different lands, conquering numerous hurdles and gaining greater self-awareness. This article is, therefore, a reflection on the parallelism between the experience of the mythical hero and that of the migrant.*

**Keywords:** Journey, Hero, Immigration

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## Introduction

The hero's path is the journey of a man who overcomes obstacles and hurdles in order to obtain an elixir, win a battle or save his community. His compelling actions win us over by leading us into a world filled with imagination and fantasy, but also with bravery and valour. A closer examination of the hero's exploits, beyond the world of fantasy, gives us a glimpse of several symbolic features which provide an insight into human nature, passion, strength, but also human fragility. The quintessential epic heroes Aeneas or Achilles, whose adventures abound with demonstrations of human complexity, are a perfect example. Which is why, as Joseph Campbell, one of the world's foremost scholars of mythology, says, when we venture into the consciousness of the hero's path: "where we had thought to travel outward, we shall come to the center of our own existence; where we had thought to be alone, we shall be with all the world" (Campbell, 2008, p.18). The hero's experience is the universal experience of the human being on his journey through life.

It is due to adversity that the hero is able to confront and understand his own limits, overcome them and acquire a new awareness, of himself and everything around him; ultimately "what all the myths have to deal with is transformation of consciousness of one kind or another" (Campbell, 2012).

The exploits of the hero begin with the call to adventure, followed by phases that are paradigmatic of all heroic tales. When the adventure begins, the valiant hero abandons his everyday existence in favour of discovering a different world, in which he undertakes battles and overcomes obstacles, so he can then go back to his ordinary life. He returns once he has acquired a new awareness and, consequently, undergone a personal transformation. His conquests are then shared with his community, with which he reconnects; thus the hero is able to make a new beginning, for himself and for others.

Using the structure of heroic stories as a basis, we have aimed to create a parallelism with our modern hero, the migrant. The latter also begins his adventure with a call which will enable him, via the arduous migratory journey, to attain new self awareness.

The theoretical framework we used to guide us in this study of the hero is, "The writer's journey" (2007) by Christopher Vogler, which describes a paradigm that forms the basis of all heroic adventures. Yet "The writer's journey" is not solely a guide that helps us understand various different myths, just as it is not solely a creative writing manual, it is, as it states in the opening pages of the book, a reflection on man's passage through life. It is possible to state that the archetype of the hero is, quite simply, the representation of the life of common men, who suffer defeat, gain victory and fight to obtain their own elixir.

After an in-depth analysis of Vogler's studies, we correlated his ideas with the accounts of three migrants of African origin, who, having arrived in Italy, related their experience of the migratory journey and described the hardships they had to face before eventually managing to become integrated in the country. The autobiographical

texts we refer to are, “I, an elephant seller” by Pap Kouma (1990)<sup>1</sup>, “Love your dream. Life and insurrection in the land of red gold” by Yvan Sagnet (2012)<sup>2</sup> and “The desert in his eyes” by Ibrahim Kane Annour (2013)<sup>3</sup>.

Just as the hero “leaves her comfortable, ordinary surroundings to venture into a challenging, unfamiliar world” (Vogler, 2007, p. 7), the migrant too leaves his country behind to undertake the arduous migratory journey. The hero’s journey leads to an interior transformation: “there are as many stories that take the hero on an inward journey, one of the mind, the heart, the spirit” (7). The migrant too undergoes the same change, as a result of his journey to a strange land, where he has to struggle to adapt linguistically, culturally, socially and occupationally, and seek new affectional and friendship bonds. This adaptation process transforms the migrant, turning him into a different man. The old and the new converge in him: what he was in the past and what he became after the migratory journey. The adventure is not an easy experience for the hero: “he grows and changes, making a journey from one way of being to the next: from despair to hope, weakness to strength, folly to wisdom, love to hate, and back again (7). Similarly, as we can see in the migrants’ autobiographical accounts, they too have moments of doubt, uncertainty, hope and victory.

The classical hero goes through 12 stages during his adventure which, according to Vogler (8), are:

1. Ordinary world
2. Call to adventure
3. Refusal of the call
4. Meeting with the mentor
5. Crossing the first threshold
6. Tests, allies, enemies
7. Approach to the inmost cave
8. Ordeal
9. Reward (Seizing the sword)
10. The road back
11. Resurrection
12. Return with the elixir

Our aim in this article was to show how the migrant experience also includes these evolutionary stages.

### **1. Ordinary world**

According to Vogler, mythological stories: “take the hero out of his normal, mundane world and into a Special World, new and alien” (10). Similarly, in the migrants’ autobiographical accounts, the protagonists speak of their mundane life in Africa, until the moment when they decide to undertake the migratory journey to a European country.

Yvan Sagnet refers to the *ordinary world* when he relates his life in Africa in chronological order, from when he was an adolescent boy, until he left for Italy as a young university student.

Through Ibrahim Kane’s story we come to know his family and the work he did in Africa before leaving. He worked in the desert as a tourist guide for westerners; he was forced to emigrate because of political persecution from the dictatorial political system in his country.

Finally, Pap Kouma describes his ordinary world, referring to the financial hardship he faced in Africa, that drove him to leave in order to escape from poverty.

<sup>1</sup> Pap Kouma came to Italy as an illegitimate immigrant and tried to scrape a living as an itinerant carved elephant seller on the beaches of Riccione. It was a life made up of hardship and dodging police controls. A life defined by difficulty in adapting to a new socio-cultural situation. Everything changed when an amnesty allowed him to obtain a residence permit in Italy. Pap Kouma, Senegalese by birth, is now an Italian citizen. He is the chief editor of the online magazine of migration literature El-Ghibli. The quotes are from the Bompiani edition.

<sup>2</sup> Yvan Sagnet from Cameroon emigrated to Italy driven by his passion for the country and by his burning desire to get a university degree. When he arrived in Italy, his need for money forced him to go and work in Puglia picking tomatoes. He tells of the slavery he endured as an illegal worker. Thanks to his determination he managed to rebel and to report his employers to the police. He currently lives in Italy and works for the union Cgil-Flai. The quotes are from the Fandango libri edition.

<sup>3</sup> Through Ibrahim’s words we learn of his life before he migrated. He belonged to the Tuareg community and worked in the desert as a tourist guide for westerners. When the uprising in Tuareg broke out, the dictatorial regime in Niger branded him as a rebel and he was persecuted for political reasons. In his autobiography he talks about his migratory journey and the difficulty of adapting to life in the city. Today Ibrahim lives in Pordenone. The quotes are from the Nuova Dimensione edition.

## 2. *Call to adventure*

The hero's everyday life is interrupted by the *call to adventure*:

The call to adventure establishes the stakes of the game and makes clear the hero's goal: to win the treasure or the lover, to get revenge or right a wrong, to achieve a dream, confront a challenge or change a life (Vogler, p. 11).

The protagonists of the autobiographies we have referred to in this paper also received the *call to adventure* which, for different reasons, caused them to interrupt their lives in their country of origin.

Ibrahim Kane responded to the call to adventure in order to save his life when he was accused by the government of his native Niger of being a rebel, therefore, for him, leaving meant defending his life: "(...) going to Italy was the only way to avoid going to prison" (112).

Pap Kouma's call to adventure, on the other hand, was driven by the need to escape from the dire poverty in which he and his family lived and from the need to change his life: "I need to help my family but if I stay I can't help them as much as I'd like. There are so many brothers and sisters in our family. About thirty (...) I want to help them all (24). Yvan Sagnet's call to adventure was motivated by his desire to pursue his dream: "Ever since I was a small boy it had always been my dream to go to Italy. I had no doubt that it was the best country in the world (...) (26).

## 3. *Refusal of the call*

Both heroes and migrants establish their goals with the call to adventure. However, despite the will for change and the need to bring it about, the decision to leave is extremely painful because it implies going into the unknown, which is daunting and that, on occasion, results in the refusal of the call:

This one is about fear. (...) After all, she is facing the greatest of all fears, terror of the unknown. (...) Some other influence – a change in circumstances, a further offence against the natural order of things, or the encouragement of a Mentor – is required to get her past this turning point of fear (Vogler, p. 11).

Like the hero, the migrant does not know quite how his journey will go, whom he will meet and whether he will manage to succeed in his new life project, these uncertainties cause fear, which can sometimes lead to the refusal of the call, to a reconsideration which pushes him to remain in the ordinary world.

These are the words of Pap Kouma: "So, what could happen to me? My God, what will happen to me? Hanging in the air, between one coast and another, between one sea and another, anxiety attacks from all directions, and there's no way of controlling it" (25).

Ibrahim too was assailed by doubts and fears at the idea of leaving his family behind in the civil war that was ravaging his country: "(...) I considered calling the whole thing off and staying. Instead I closed my eyes and promised I'd be back soon. (...) I was terrified, for the life I was leaving behind" (135).

## 4. *Meeting with the mentor*

Despite their hesitation, the decision has been made. However, both the hero and the migrant remain gripped by fear, which is why they feel the need to turn to a figure who can show them the way, provide encouragement and psychological security. It is at this point when a mentor appears to the mythological hero: "The function of mentors is to prepare the hero to face the unknown. They may give advice, guidance or magical equipment" (Vogler, p. 12). That is exactly what happened to Ibrahim. His mentor was his marabutto<sup>4</sup>, to whom he turned for strength and protection. "My trusted marabutto said I would be safe there [in Italy], despite the thousand difficulties" (133). Pap Kouma too turned to his set-kat for comfort and protection before undertaking the arduous migratory journey:

To ensure my safety, I first of all went to consult my set-kat, my sage, my fortune teller, the person who guides me (...). My trusted set-kat consulted his shells, the cour<sup>5</sup> that came out of the sea, he examined my hands, drew symbols in the sand. And he advised me: «Not Spain, Germany is better for you». So Germany it was (23).

From this point onwards, the hero crosses the threshold of doubt and fear and embarks on his journey: "The hero, having overcome fear, has decided to confront the problem and take action. She is now committed to the journey and there's no turning back" (Vogler, p. 13).

Similarly, the migrant has taken the decision to leave and embarks on his journey, he knows there's no turning back, that, from now on, he can only look forwards. This is how Pap Kouma describes that moment: "Our

<sup>4</sup> A *marabutto* is a fortune teller.

<sup>5</sup> African Word for fish.

life-changing moment, when we'll need to put our brain, our arms and the money we have saved or borrowed to good use, is coming" (25).

### 5. *Crossing the first threshold*

For the hero, the tests that have to be passed, the battles that need to be won until his journey comes to an end have begun:

Once across the First Threshold, the hero naturally encounters new challenges and tests, makes allies and enemies, and begins to learn the rules of the Special World. (...) The hero comes at last to the most dangerous spot (...) the inmost cave. Here the fortunes of the hero hit bottom in a direct confrontation with his greatest fear. He faces the possibility of death and is brought to the brink in a battle with a hostile force. The ordeal is a "black moment" for the audience, as we are held in suspense and tension, not knowing if he will live or die. (Vogler, p. 13-15).

The migrant too must pass a series of tests once he has undertaken the journey. He has to learn a new language, understand a different culture, adapt to a different social context. He has dark moments, when he endures racist attacks and is rejected by those who should be welcoming him; furthermore, when the migrant arrives in Italy, he often has to live as an illegal immigrant, until he manages to obtain a residence permit.

When Pap Khouma arrived in Italy, his compatriots told him:

Try not to go out, because here we have to spend our lives in hiding. We haven't got residence permits. That's forbidden. Prohibited. If you go out, some guy might see you and stop you. And if he stops you he'll take you to the cop shop and hand you an expulsion order. And when you get an expulsion order, dear "sir", you have to leave the country. (...) I was frightened. But I was bewildered too (30).

And there are other hardships too:

My memories of Paris aren't happy. I can still feel the cold in my bones and the greyness of those dismal days is still right before my eyes. I get off the train and a shudder runs through me. It must be because I'm tired. But it's my spirits that are at rock bottom (...) I feel desperate in this foreign capital, where I have no-one to turn to (51).

Migrants' experience in Europe is much more difficult than they imagined. It bears no relation to their expectations, and they struggle to adapt to their new life. Yvan Sagnet says:

(...) I was convinced that the real Italy was light years away from the Italy I had dreamed of in Africa (...). The fields in Boncuri were a more poverty-stricken and dismal version than anything I had ever encountered in Africa. Even the heat, which was completely dry, seemed more scorching than the heat in Africa (37 and 58).

### 6. *Tests, allies, enemies*

The hero is now in the thick of his adventure:

This new world is very different from the one we came from. Not only are the land and its inhabitants different, but the rules that govern it are very strange too. It has different values and we have a great deal to learn (...) (Vogler, p. 167)<sup>6</sup>.

Similarly, migrants too have to try and understand the culture, the rules of the country they have arrived in. Social norms are different from those in Africa, as is the culture and the values. Everything that is part of their cultural heritage clashes with the new world. Ibrahim Kane describes his feelings of alienation:

I had to keep my eye on the clock all the time, everyone's life was ruled by their diaries, I would greet people and they wouldn't reply. I was bewildered. I hated having to make an

<sup>6</sup> "Este nuevo mundo es muy distinto en relación con aquél de dónde venimos. No sólo el terreno y sus habitantes son distintos, sino que las normas que lo rigen son también muy extrañas. Se valoran cosas distintas y tenemos mucho que aprender (...)"

appointment even if it was just to go and see a friend (...). But you Italians are obsessed with Italian laws, the rent, bills, the price of petrol, you forget to live (95-145).

Yvan Sagnet felt the same alienation: “During the euphoria of the first few days I tried to chat to everyone (...) but they answered in monosyllables and didn’t want to talk to me” (35).

The migrant has to learn to fend for himself in his new situation, he has to learn to recognise his allies, who may be his compatriots who arrived in the new land before him, just as he must learn to recognise his enemies, who may be the natives that consider the migrant as someone to fear and therefore to keep at a distance.

According to Vogler: “This is also a kind of test of the protagonist’s insight and judgement” (169)<sup>7</sup>. The discernment which the migrant must demonstrate will evidence his ability to analyse reality and everything around him.

### 7. *Approach to the inmost cave*

For heroes this stage represents a period of reflection. In fact, according to Vogler: “They may take some time to plan, recognise the enemy, reorganise or divide the group (...) before advancing into this unknown land” (177)<sup>8</sup>. For the migrant it’s the moment when he has to decide where he is going to concentrate his efforts, in which direction he is going to project his new life. In general, this is the phase when he looks for work, somewhere to live and emotional stability.

These are Ibrahim Kane’s reflections: “I had two options if I wanted to stay in Europe legally: to apply for political asylum, or marry an Italian woman. I thought if I chose the second option I wouldn’t be able to apply for reunification of the family (...)” (145).

Yvan Sagnet relates how he decided to go and work in the South of Italy:

I searched high and low for work: but there was nothing (...) I was desperate. I explained my situation to my friends in the hope that someone would come up with a solution: one of them, a student in Pavia, suggested I went and worked as a day labourer picking tomatoes in Nardò (54-55).

While Pap Kouma, after a very difficult period in France, spoke to his friends and decided to go and live in Riccione in Italy:

«Dear cousin, I’m going to Italy». «I’m happy to hear it, you would have come to a bad end, you would have ended up under the bridges of the Seine». I’m convinced I would have too, after seeing drug dealers, drug addicts and good Senegalese boys sprawled out on top of a sheet of cardboard, enslaved by the bottle (56).

The decisions taken by the migrants during this period of reflection and analysis of their situation appear to open up new and better life prospects for them. However, we will see how they are yet to endure the real ordeal.

### 8. *The ordeal*

It is at this point that, according to Vogler, the hero enters the: «inmost cave» (14) where he will undergo a lifechanging experience; “the hero must die (...) so that she can be born again” (15).

During this phase the migrant begins to get a true taste of his life in Europe and comes up against all the difficulties of adaptation.

Ibrahim Kane went from one job to another without managing to achieve any kind of stability, which left him very despondent:

I was really enthusiastic every time I started a new job, hoping each time that I had found a solution that would mean I could finally sleep easy. But, without fail, a few months later I would be unemployed again (...) I find the strength to carry on, to ask for help, thinking only of my children. I never let my unhappiness show, I have to set an example. To always be strong (186-194).

<sup>7</sup> “También esta es una suerte de prueba con la que se examina la perspicacia y el buen juicio del protagonista”.

<sup>8</sup> “Pueden tomarse algún tiempo para hacer planes, reconocer al enemigo, reorganizar o dividir el grupo (...) antes de internarse en ese territorio ignoto”.

Yvan Sagnet, on the other hand, writes how, to go and work in Puglia, he had to prepare himself to endure: "Something that resembled hell on earth" (56).

Meanwhile, after arriving in Italy, Pap Kouma struggled to find a house: "I'm not talking about a lovely, warm, cosy bed (...) Our only car is our bed, that we park somewhere dark and sheltered" (61). They each need to face different hardships: the search for a job and a house, the pain of being away from their family. Their dreams seem to be dashed and they have to battle with their fears in order to continue believing their lives really can change.

### 9. *The reward*

If the hero is strong, once he has passed several tests, he will finally get his reward: Having survived death, beaten the dragon, or slain the Minotaur, hero and audience have cause to celebrate. The hero now takes possession of the treasure she has come seeking, her reward" (Vogler, p. 16). For migrants the reward is integration. After obtaining his residence permit, Ibrahim Kane settled in Pordenone, home to the largest Tuareg community, and he also managed to obtain reunification with his family. However, he says he feels as though he's in prison because, for a Tuareg like him, it's not easy to get used to living in closed spaces (194).

Yvan Sagnet's reward, on the other hand, was to succeed in his fight against modern slavery, which won freedom and dignity, both for him and for many foreign field workers in the South of Italy.

For Pap Kouma his reward came in the form of his residence permit and integration in Italy.

### 10. *The road back*

At this point the hero's path differs from that of the migrant. The hero sets out on the road back: Having survived the ordeals, having overcome death, heroes return to the starting point (...) with the sensation that they're starting a new life or that the path they have taken has transformed them forever (Vogler, p. 254)<sup>9</sup>. For the migrant however, most of the time that does not happen. In the migratory journey, the circular continuity that completes a journey, that closes with the return to the native land, is interrupted. The migrant's experiences in the new world continue.

### 11. *Resurrection*

The resurrection phase sees the figures of the migrant and the hero reconnected once again. The latter, before returning to the ordinary world, undergoes a resurrection, which consists of a change in his way of being, of a rebirth: "The hero is transformed by these moments of death and rebirth, and is able to return to ordinary life reborn as a new being with new insights" (Vogler, p. 17)

The migrant too, despite not returning to his country, undergoes a resurrection. All the experiences he has had have transformed him, and he is now a different man. He is reborn and has acquired a new self awareness, of his physical and interior strength, of his capacity to adapt; this is his rebirth that he implements in the target country.

Yvan Sagnet tells of his rebirth when he speaks of his experience as a tomato picker in Puglia: " (...) Nardò: an experience that changed me profoundly, a journey that made me face up to myself and the strength that God gave me" (140).

### 12. *The return with the elixir*

After the resurrection the hero can finally return to his country with the elixir, with a new lesson acquired in the special world he has entered:

The elixir is a magic potion with the power to heal. It may be a great treasure, like the Grail, that magically heals the wounded land, or it simply might be knowledge or experience that could be useful to the community someday (Vogler, p. 18).

Even without returning to his homeland, the migrant has an elixir that he shares with his family members who have remained in Africa; the elixir being the financial aid that the migrants provide for their family, which continues to live in poverty.

According to Vogler, the hero's return with the elixir has another function too: "it's a model for others, a model that shows it's possible to conquer death" (258)<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> Habiendo sobrevivido a las odiseas, habiendo superado la muerte, los héroes regresan al punto de partida (...) con la sensación de que comienzan una nueva vida o que se han transformado para siempre en virtud del camino recorrido.

<sup>10</sup> "Es un modelo para otros, un modelo que demuestra que es posible vencer la muerte".

Similarly, the migrant who succeeds in becoming integrated in Europe is an example to those he has left in Africa and who yearn to reach Europe and become successfully integrated too, as is it only the strongest and bravest few, the true heroes, who manage to accomplish it.

### Conclusions

Heroes' adventures are stories of men who, left alone with themselves, confront their fears and weaknesses, as they attempt to surpass their own limits. Similarly, the journey that leads the hero to his adventure is a personal road which results in a transformation, which he undergoes whilst acquiring new self-awareness. The trajectory is not an easy one. The modern hero, like the epic hero, receives a call to adventure which will change his life. This call produces doubts, sadness at having to leave behind his loved ones, his country and the certainties that have guided his life until that moment. Despite all of this, the call to adventure proves to be strong and he undertakes the journey.

The path is a difficult one and he needs to ask a superior force for help, guidance and protection. For the epic hero it is the gods, for Africans it's the *marabutto* or the *set-kat*. They are people who embody divinity, who know how to read signs, who can interpret shells and know how to advise on the road to take in order to guarantee a happy future. Driven by this spiritual support, the migrant embarks on the adventure, he has to overcome obstacles, battle with monsters, both inside and outside himself. He needs to be aware of what he's doing, understand how to proceed, where to go, look for allies and defeat enemies, all so that he can obtain an elixir which, for our migrant, is integration into the new country, and financial security. This elixir, however, goes beyond adaptation and a social role in the land of arrival. The most important element is the change, the transformation the migrant undergoes. He acquires new self awareness, he now understands his limits and has learnt to surpass them, he has come to know his fragilities and turned them into strengths. All of this is an individual trajectory, which is later shared with his community. Once the migrant succeeds in obtaining gainful employment, he sends financial aid to his family in Africa and becomes a model to emulate, a symbol of victory.

The hero's adventure and the migrant's journey represent the universalising journey of man who, by acquiring new self awareness, helps the moral evolution of the human race. The conquests of a single man are the conquests of an entire community; the experience of an individual affects and influences the next man, help arouse feelings of empathy, of a desire to open up to the Other and be guided by the logic that says we are all one.

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