

# Sundiata Study Guide

## Sundiata by Djeli Mamoudou Kouyate

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# Introduction

This tale tells of Sundiata, the great thirteenth-century ruler of Mali. The story comes to us through the centuries from a long line of oral historians, or *griots*, who are charged with keeping the memories of the past alive. Once only available to those who could understand the native language of the griot, which in the case of *Sundiata* is Malinke (or Mandingo), this epic tale intrigued Mali historian Djibril Tamsir Niane. He transcribed the words of the griot Djeli Mamoudou Kouyate and produced a French translation in 1960. In 1965 an English translation by G. Pickett appeared.

*Sundiata* illustrates the anthropological importance of saving the words of the oral historians before the advent of literacy extinguishes their memories. Griots, like most oral historians, work for a particular patron, and as the patronage system falls into decline, these tale-weavers are less and less able to support themselves with their words. The significance of these oral historians is underlined in the epic itself: a griot plays an important role in helping Sundiata defeat his enemy Soumaoro.

In addition, the story of *Sundiata* contains important lessons for people of all times. Appearances can be deceiving, we learn: Sundiata's physically repulsive mother becomes an honored queen, and Sundiata himself overcomes a severe handicap to become a great warrior. Hospitality pays, as those rulers who receive Sundiata well during his period as an outcast are rewarded under his reign. Above all, readers learn to respect their own history and ancestors, for they are the link to a glorious past.

## Author Biography

The story of *Sundiata*, the thirteenth-century ruler of Mali, came to the present through a familial line of *griots*, bards whose function in their society is to preserve the oral history of their people. This account was told from father to son for generations. It was first written down by the historian Djibril Tamsir Niane, who transcribed the story as it was recounted by Djeli Mamoudou Kouyate.

The stories told by griots are not fixed in the way that written texts are: each recitation or performance may include additions or deletions, and can feature embellishment of some episodes and the downplaying of others. The griot may choose to play up the accomplishments of the distant ancestors of audience members as a sign of respect or to ensure that they will like what they are hearing. Thus, while the basic story derives from multiple storytellers who shaped it over time, the version that Niane wrote down is distinctly Kouyate's. He is the modern-day griot of the Keita clan, which claims descent from Sundiata himself. Niane made the work available to a wide audience by publishing his version in French, and G. D. Pickett later translated the work into English. Pickett also collated his translation with the original Malinke (or Mandingo) version spoken by Kouyate.



# Plot Summary

## Part I: The Buffalo Woman

After giving his lineage and justifying his right to tell the tale, the narrator begins the story of *Sundiata* by telling how Sundiata's mother and father came to be married. Sundiata's father, Maghan Kon Fatta, rules Mali. He has one wife, Sassouma Be'rete', and a son named Dankaran Touman. One day a hunter comes to Maghan Kon Fatta's court, bringing part of his catch in homage to the ruler, as was customary. The king asks the hunter, who is also a fortune-teller, to throw his cowry shells in a divination ceremony to reveal the future. Speaking in obscure language, the hunter reveals that the king's successor is not yet born, and that his heir will come from a hideous woman brought by two strangers.

Some time later, two hunters appear at court from the land of Do with a veiled woman hunchback. The brothers announce her to be a wife worthy of the king and proceeded to relate how they obtained her. The hunters had gone to search for a buffalo that was ravaging the countryside of Do. Great rewards had been promised to whoever killed the buffalo. They encountered an old woman who begged for food, which they gave her. In return for this kindness, she revealed that she is the buffalo in human form, and told them the secret of how to kill her animal form. She insisted that when the hunters were offered their choice from among the local maidens as their reward, they select the ugly hunchback named Sogolon Kedjou. Sogolon is the buffalo's wraith; that is, she embodies the soul of the shape-shifting buffalo. The hunters agree to all of this.

The spirit of the buffalo makes Sogolon strong, however, and she fights off the hunter who attempts to consummate his marriage with her. Unable to use her as they wish, the hunters thus bestow her on Maghan Kon Fatta, neglecting to tell him that she will not submit to any man.

Reminded of the fortune-teller's prophecy by his griot, Gnankouman Doua, the king takes Sogolon Kedjou as his second wife. On their marriage night, however, the king tries in vain to possess her, but with the strength of the buffalo spirit, she rebuffs him. After a week of such failures, the king tells her that he has discovered that he must sacrifice her. She faints from fear and he is able to consummate the marriage. Sundiata is conceived that very night.

## Part II: Sundiata's Childhood

Maghan Kon Fatta's first wife, Sassouma Berete, fears that the prophecy, which seems to be coming true, will mean that her own son Dankaran Touman will not rule Mali after his father. She is pleased when it becomes evident that her rival's son cannot walk. Sogolon and the king tried remedies of all sorts, but Sundiata remains lame. The king marries a third wife, Namandje, whose son Manding Bory becomes Sundiata's best



friend. The king seeks more advice about his sons, and is reassured that Sundiata is the foretold heir. The king gives his own griot's son, Balla Fassdke, to Sundiata to be his griot.

The king died not long after this. Sassouma plots with the council of elders to have her son Dankaran Touman put on the throne. Sassouma encourages others to ridicule Sogolon and her other children, but especially Sundiata, who is still crawling at the age of seven. One day, in tears from being mocked, Sogolon laments to Sundiata that he cannot not go and pick baobab leaves for her as other boys do for their mothers. Sundiata calls for an iron rod. He uses it to haul himself to his feet and takes his first steps. Striding to the baobab tree, he pulls it roots and all from the ground and brings it to his mother. From that day on, Sundiata excels at all physical pursuits, in particular hunting.

As the years pass, Sassouma grows more worried that Sundiata will take the throne from her son. When Sundiata is ten, she asks the nine great witches of Mali to kill him. They agree to try, but when Sundiata returns their deceit with kindness, they find they cannot harm him and instead offer their powers in protection.

Sundiata's mother Sogolon realizes that her family is in danger at the Mali court. When the regent prince Dankaran Touman sends Sundiata's griot, Balla Fasseke, to the court of the sorcerer king Soumaoro, Sogolon and her children leave. Sundiata vows to return and reclaim the throne someday.

### **Part III: Sundiata in Exile**

Sundiata and his family spent seven years in exile, sometimes finding welcome but more often finding that Sassouma has sent messages to other kingdoms urging that they turn the wanderers away. In the court of Djedeba, for example, the king Mansa Konkon challenges Sundiata to a life-or-death match of a word game called won, which Sundiata wins by revealing that the king has accepted a bribe to kill Sundiata. When Sundiata wins, the king allows him to live, but expels him and his family from the court.

Next the family goes to Tabon, where one of Sundiata's childhood friends, Fran Kamara, is crown prince. The reunion is joyful, but the boy's father is afraid of Sassouma, and he insists that Sundiata and his family go elsewhere. They travel to Ghana, to the palace of the great Cissé clan. King Soumaba Cissé welcomes the visitors and treats Sundiata and his siblings as princes and princesses of his own realm. Sogolon falls ill, and the family must move to a more favorable climate. In Mema, the court of King Soumaba Cissé's cousin, Tounkara, the family thrives, and the youthful Sundiata becomes an important advisor to King Tounkara, even governing in the king's absence.

### **Part IV: Soumaoro Kante, the Sorcerer King**

During Sundiata's years of exile, his griot, Balla Fasseke, had been at the court of Soumaoro Kante. This evil king's power is legendary. His town of Sosso is fortified and



invincible, his own palace a seven-story tower in the center of town. On the seventh floor he keeps his fetishes, magic charms that are the source of his evil power. Soumaoro Kanté has conquered all the surrounding peoples, including the people of Mali.

One day Balla Fasseke stumbles into the fetish room. Carpeted in human skins, the room contains the heads of the nine kings that Soumaoro had conquered. A giant snake, owls and fantastic weaponry also fill the room. The griot spotted a magic balafon, or xylophone, that he began to play, bringing the ghoulish chamber to life. Soumaoro knows that someone had touched his xylophone, and he raced to the chamber to kill the intruder. Balla Fasseke, hearing the king's arrival, improvises a tune in honor of the sorcerer king. The song so pleases Soumaoro that he decided to make Balla Fasseke his own griot.

The evil king continues attacking and subjugating lands, ruling his people in terror. In an ultimate outrage, Soumaoro steals the wife of his own nephew and chief general, Fakoli Koroma. Fakoh swears revenge, and the men of many lands attacked by Soumaoro answered Fakoli's call to arms. As Dankaran Touman seeks to join the revolt, Soumaoro again invades Mali. Dankaran flees, leaving his villages to be pillaged and the capital city of Niani to be burned to the ground. Soumaoro proclaims himself king of Mali, but some villagers remember the words of the soothsayer and form resistance groups loyal to the prophesied king of Mali, Sundiata. No one knew where to find the exiled king, however.

## Part V: The Return of Sundiata

One day in Mema, Sundiata's sister Kolonkan sees a woman selling baobab leaves, a type of produce available only from Mali. She speaks to the woman, who is in fact one of the Malinke' searching for Sundiata. Sogolon and Sundiata receives an embassy of notables from the court of Mali, learning of Soumaoro's depredations against their homeland. Sundiata vows to join the army of Fakoli to help defeat Soumaoro. The next morning, Sogolon dies. Sundiata leaves to join Fakoli, despite the protests of the king of Mema, who had considered Sundiata his heir.

Sundiata begins his march on Soumaoro by defeating the troops under the command of Soumaoro's son. Later he met Soumaoro's own troops, and though Sundiata and Fakoli's other allies fight well, they cannot take Soumaoro himself, for he has magical abilities and can vanish at will. Little by little, the allies drive back Soumaoro's troops, but he eludes them.

Reunited in battle with his griot, Balla Fasseke, Sundiata learns that Soumaoro's evil power can be destroyed if he is shot with an arrow tipped with a magical rooster's claw. During the next battle, Sundiata grazes Soumaoro with the magic weapon, depleting his powers enough so that he can be driven from the battlefield, though not killed. The victorious troops then march on Soumaoro's town of Sosso, take the fortified city, and find that the king's fetishes had lost their power. The Sorcerer King has been conquered.





## Part VI: Sundiata, Ruler of Mali

The allies go on to defeat all of Soumaoro's partisans. Sundiata travels back to Mali to rule. He appoints the descendants of Balla Fasse"ke\ the Kouyatds, as the official griots to his heirs, the Keitas. He finds that the inhabitants of Niani have already started to rebuild their city, and Sundiata makes it his center of power. Here Sundiata rules justly and wisely for many years. Though many great rulers come after Sundiata, none equal the son of the Buffalo Woman and the Lion King. He left his mark on Mali for all time, Kouyatd reminds us, and his decrees still guide the citizens in their conduct.

# The First Kings of Mali

## The First Kings of Mali Summary

The early kings of Mali were religious people who pilgrimaged to Mecca and sought Alla's advice for ruling the kingdom. They were great hunters who communicated with the spirits of the savannah. They also knew medicinal properties of herbs and plants. Sundiata was descended from these early native kings. Manding Bory is Sundiata's best friend and half brother, the son of his father's third wife.

## The First Kings of Mali Analysis

Djeli Mamoudou Kouyaty is a griot, a "vessel of speech," who takes readers through the ancient tales of Mali. This book is a collection of tales retold by Kouyaty, a character much like Homer, who retold the history orally. Kouyaty begins by discussing the greatness of Sundiata, the first and most accomplished king of Mali.

Translator D.T. Niane mentions in the preface that this epic tale was retold by the griots that still pass on oral histories today in rural villages in Africa. The most famous of the griots, Djeli Mamoudou Kouyaty, is the narrator of this tale. The stories in this book are transcribed from Kouyaty's oral narration.

This first chapter in the epic is a typical patriarchal lineage chapter. The names of all the fathers and sons in Sundiata's ancestry are listed. The spiritual qualities of the kings and also their sense of closeness with their land is also discussed to set up Sundiata as a spiritual, hard working king who truly knew and loved the land he ruled.



# The Buffalo Woman

## The Buffalo Woman Summary

Maghan Kon Fatta is Sundiata's father. In the days before Sundiata is born, he spends time sitting under a silk-cotton tree, resting. A master hunter approaches the kingdom and bows before the king. He has killed a deer near Mali's walls and has come to offer a portion of the deer to the king. The king is most pleased and his griot offers the hunter a seat of honor at dinner.

The hunter is from the land of Sangaran and his people are famous for their ability to read fortunes. The hunter starts reading the king's fortune in some seashells he carries with him. The king's men notice the hunter is left handed, a sign of evil. The hunter tells the king to marvel at the mystery of nature. A tiny seed hides inside itself a great tree such as the silk-cotton tree; a tiny seed is strong enough to brave the elements and produce a mighty tree.

The hunter then says two men will come to the kingdom. He says a great light will come from the east. He predicts two hunters approaching with an ugly, humpbacked woman and tells the king he must marry her and sire a son, who will become the greatest king of Mali. This son, says the hunter, will be a greater king than Alexander.

Some time later, Maghan Kon Fatta is sitting under his tree when two men approach with a young woman. Though she hides her face with a veil, it is obvious she has a humped back. The men say they are from Mali and have been away seeking adventure. They return with the woman as a gift for the king. The men had been away in the land of Do.

In Do, a buffalo was running rampant, killing villagers and destroying crops and animals. Do was offering a reward to anyone who killed the beast. On their quest, the men met an old woman who was hungry. After they feed her, she tells them she is the buffalo they seek. Others have tried to kill her with spears and they have stopped her with kindness. She hands the men a bow and an egg and tells them how to kill her. She says the only condition to the deal is this: when offered his choice of the most beautiful woman in the land, the hunters must select an ugly hunchback. The woman says this hunchback is her spirit. She adds that the woman will be extraordinary if they manage to "possess her." The hunters do as they are told and journey back to Mali, where they offer the hunchback woman to Maghan Kon Fatta.

The king hides his bride, Sogolon, and prepares for a great wedding. The king's sisters prepare Sogolon for the wedding as dancers and festivities get started outside. They hide her under a veil and Sogolon is married to the king. In the wedding bed, the king is unable to convince Sogolon to make love to him. The king confides in his griot that he cannot make love to her and is scared of her apparent superhuman qualities. The girl is apparently possessed by ghosts.



The king consults sorcerers and one night, as if in a dream, he begins writing signs in the sand. Sogolon sees the message and the king suddenly wakes up. He says he must sacrifice her to the gods and grabs her head. Sogolon faints and the spirit leaves her body. Sogolon and the king make love and conceive a child.

## **The Buffalo Woman Analysis**

This tale draws upon several themes of classic parables. First is the notion that appearances can be deceiving. The hunter reveals to Fatta that an ugly woman will bear him a child; a child who is destined to become the greatest ruler in the history of the world. A woman who is ugly on the surface is capable of nurturing a fantastic king.

There is also the theme of the dominance of inner strength. The hunter tells the story of the tiny seed surviving the elements and producing a magnificent silk tree. Finally, the tale addresses the idea that kindness is more important than strength and anger. The two travelers are rewarded not for their bravery or their ability to kill and hunt but for their kindness to a stranger.

# The Lion Child

## The Lion Child Summary

Sogolon is the second wife of the king. Maghan Kon Fatta's first wife, Sassouma, is concerned that the child of this ugly woman might disinherit her own son. She plots to kill Sogolon to prevent her son from taking the throne of Mali. Sassouma hires sorcerers to see how she might kill Sogolon, but the men agree that Sogolon cannot be killed. Sassouma decides to see what will happen when the child is born.

When Sogolon goes into labor, the king is very nervous, more so than he was during the birth of his other children. A great thunderstorm gives way to sunshine as a baby boy is born to Sogolon. The griots and advisors prepare a royal song for the boy, calling him the Lion Child and Buffalo Child. The king is so pleased he gives many grain rations to his subjects.

At the naming ceremony, it is decided that the infant will bear two names. One, the traditional name of his father, will be Maghan. The second is an entirely new name to Mali: Mari Djata. The people of Mali celebrate the new birth with a great festival and all speak the double name of the new baby.

## The Lion Child Analysis

This tale quickly conveys the ease with which Sogolon adapts to a lavish lifestyle after bringing her baby into the world. It also begins to hint at the themes of jealousy and cruelty by foreshadowing danger to come from Sassouma.



# Childhood

## Childhood Summary

The tale begins by telling readers that God is mysterious and that any one person may someday be king. People are unable to control the plan God has set out for them. The baby develops slowly and is still crawling at age three. He is homely like his mother rather than attractive like his father.

The baby's nickname is Sogolon Djata since he is so attached to his mother. While Djata seemed slow to some, his mother feels he does not speak or interact with other children because he has thoughts more advanced than theirs. Sassouma is delighted that Djata displays none of the prowess of her own son, Dankaran. Sassouma speaks very hurtfully to Sogolon, comparing Djata to a lion that can but crawl on the ground.

The king loses hope that this baby will be the great king. He and Sogolon have another child - an ugly girl. Maghan is angry and bans Sogolon from the palace. He marries another woman who gives birth to a son. The fortunetellers say this son, Manding Bory, will be the best friend of a great king. Maghan is confused. He does not know whether Djata is the great son the hunter foretold. His friends remind him that the silk-cotton tree grew from a tiny seed. Maghan brings Sogolon back to the house and she becomes his favorite wife.

Years pass and Djata still does not walk. The king grows very sick and calls Djata to him. He says every king assigns his successor a griot and gives Djata the griot named Balla Fassyky. Maghan tells Djata to always remember his home and that Mali is a great land.

## Childhood Analysis

This chapter continues the theme of appearances being deceiving. The fortunetellers also constantly reinforce the need for patience, as Maghan is eager for his son's greatness to be revealed. Readers see further foreshadowing of evil plots from Sassouma as the chapter ends with her son being secretly stripped of the throne by the dying Maghan.



# The Lion's Awakening

## The Lion's Awakening Summary

Doua, the king's griot, insists that the king had wished for Djata to rule the kingdom. Sassouma's son Dankaran is made king and Sassouma made the powerful queen mother. Doua soon dies.

The people have seen all sorts of disabilities in kings, but never a king who could not walk. The people of Mali think nothing of Djata after Dankaran takes the throne. Sassouma, jealous that the king favored Sogolon, forces Sogolon and Djata to live in a tiny area behind the palace. She also allows people to look and gawk at Djata and his lame legs.

Sogolon is upset at how hateful Sassouma is toward her. Sassouma takes every opportunity to remind Sogolon of her lame son. When Sogolon asks to borrow a baobab leaf, Sassouma sneers that her own son was picking the leaves for her when he was seven. In tears, Sogolon hits her son and asks why he will not walk. Djata says he will walk today to get his mother the leaves. Sogolon laughs and said she would need the whole baobab tree to make up for her humiliation. Sassouma, listening, laughs and tells the other women what happened.

Djata asks that the smiths build him an iron rod. The smiths, who are fortunetellers, have kept a large rod for some time and know that this is the day the rod will be used. They carry it to Djata. Fassyky tells Djata that the river can wash away everything but insult. This is the day Djata must roar like a lion and make things right for his mother. Djata picks up the iron rod with one arm and uses it to stand up. Fassyky sings for Djata to take his bow and the whole palace comes to see him walk.

Djata walks to the baobab tree, pulls it from the ground, and carries it to his mother's hut. He replants it there so the whole palace must come to Sogolon when they need its leaves. Sassouma is uneasy from this day forth.

Suddenly, Djata is the most popular boy in the kingdom. Everyone remembers the fortunetellers' words and they all want their sons to play with Djata. Fassyky is Djata's teacher, not just of the family history but of all the things a king needs to know. Fassyky finds lessons in everything Djata encounters.

Djata liked hunting the most and quickly becomes a Simbon, or master hunter. He learns about medicinal plants from his mother and animals' relationships to his family from Fassyky. By the time he is ten, Djata's name has morphed to Sundiata because people spoke his names so quickly. Manding Bory is his best friend and Sassouma is wildly nervous.

Sassouma hires nine witches to kill Sundiata. They refuse, saying he has done nothing to harm them. Sassouma encourages them to steal from his mother's garden as this will



enrage Sundiata and cause him to harm them, so they will feel justified in killing him. They execute the plan; only Sundiata is not cruel to the witches. He tells them the garden is communal and offers them all they want in addition to the elephants he has just killed while hunting. The witches confess they were going to kill him but are impressed by his kindness. They promise to watch over him from now on.

Sundiata's sister, Konkomba, asks Sundiata why the witches scared him so badly. He is stunned that his sister knew he was frightened for he did not reveal his fright. She confesses to having overheard their schemes and says she will watch over her brother. Djeli Mamoudou Kouyaté reveals that Konkomba is a very skilled witch.

## **The Lion's Awakening Analysis**

This chapter is full of the capers and plots typical in mythic stories of archetypal characters. The great king, once again, has deceiving appearances and only chooses to reveal his greatness when necessary. Because he is such a gentle king, he overcomes evil plots with just his good heart.

The jealous Sassouma starts threatening Sundiata in earnest, and the failure of this first attempt at his life foreshadows more evil schemes to come.





# Exile

## Exile Summary

Sogolon wants to take Sundiata into exile, fearing that Sassouma will try to kill Manding Bory to get at Sundiata. Dankaran, at the command of his mother, orders Fassyky to go on a mission in another kingdom, taking away Sundiata's inheritance. Sundiata is enraged and storms into Dankaran's council. Manding Bory tells Dankaran that they are going away and Sundiata screams that he will be back one day. The king shivers in fear.

At Sassouma's urging, Dankaran develops hatred of his brothers. He vows to kill them if he ever sees them again and becomes an evil king. For seven years, Sogolon and her children wander in the dust and are treated badly. The experience makes Sundiata wise and appreciative. The family settles with a king in Djedeba and the boys play with the king's children. They discover that this king, Mansa Konkon, is a great sorcerer.

Konkon asks to see Sundiata. Sundiata is not afraid and, in fact, is never afraid because he knows he has a great destiny. He complements the king's weapons and begins fencing, impressing the king. The king says they are to play a logic game. If Konkon wins, he will kill Sundiata. If Sundiata wins, he asks only for the sword he was just using. Konkon says he never loses at this game. Sundiata wins easily and reveals that he knows Konkon has been paid to kill Sundiata. The king is astonished and will not give up the sword. He throws Sundiata and his family out of the kingdom. Sundiata promises to return one day.

The family, in exile again, comes to the home of Sundiata's boyhood friend Fran Kamara. They are not allowed to stay in his home, but Sundiata promises to return for Fran when he returns to Mali. Fran promises to be a great general and Sundiata says kings will tremble before them.

Back on the road toward Ghana, Sundiata learns that Fassyky works for Soumaoro, a powerful and evil king. A forest and a badly maintained wall surround Ghana. Though the party is far from Mali and their native language is not spoken, they are shocked to learn that everyone can understand them. Many white men come to trade there and the people of Ghana are renowned traders. The king asks to speak to Sundiata and is very impressed when the boy is careful to introduce all the people in his family. He predicts that Sundiata will be a great king.

A year later, Sogolon grows ill and king Soumaba sends the family away to a river country, Mema, where Sogolon might recover. The people of Mema are also able to understand Sogolon and her family. The king, Moussa Tounkara, must battle a neighboring tribe every year. Sundiata goes to his first battle to help.

Sundiata's leadership on the battlefield shocks everyone. He leads the army and everyone remarks that Sundiata will be a great king. Moussa vows to teach Sundiata to



be a great warrior. Moussa, who has no sons, sees Sundiata as the heir to Mema. Sundiata becomes the governor and rules when the king is away. Sundiata is now a man and wants to return to Mali.

Sogolon, realizing she is done raising her son, tells him to have patience. He will return to Mali as is his destiny, but she tells him to wait.

## **Exile Analysis**

The heroic character of Sundiata is well established in this tale. He is a powerful man who is wise, appreciative of the land and the people who love him. He remembers the people who have been good to him and his only apparent weakness is slight impatience.

This chapter once again reveals how kindness diverts evil schemes. Sundiata is well rewarded for his constant goodness when affronted.



# Soumaoro Kanty, the Sorcerer King

## Soumaoro Kanty, the Sorcerer King Summary

Soumaoro Kanty is the cruel sorcerer king who rules the land where Dankaran sent Fassyky for council. Kanty has taken control of Ghana and many neighboring lands and demands that Mali respect his authority. Kanty and his men are all smiths, masters with fire, and are thus excellent sorcerers.

Dankaran, afraid of Kanty, immediately submits Mali to his rule. Kanty keeps Fassyky behind as a prisoner. One day while Kanty is out, Fassyky explores the king's sorcery chamber. He uncovers a room filled with human remains and strange beasts and instruments. Fassyky sits to play one of the instruments and everything in the room is transfixed by the griot's skill.

The xylophone is a magical one, which not only brings the human skulls to life but also alerts the king that someone has entered his private room. Kanty rushes back angrily to see Fassyky playing the instrument. Fassyky quickly writes a song of praise about the king, who is touched. Kanty demands that Fassyky become his griot. The narrator informs readers that this decision seals the necessity of war between Sundiata and Kanty.

## Soumaoro Kanty, the Sorcerer King Analysis

This chapter discusses the life of a king who does not rule with goodness but with fear. Kanty is a man who uses bewitched instruments to sing his own praises and kills all men who disagree with him. He is set up as the ultimate evil character, with no redeeming qualities, which allows readers to foreshadow his imminent death at the hands of Sundiata, the nearly faultless good character. Through these tales, this epic is unfolding to be a classic case of good versus evil.



# History

## History Summary

Ancient kings wanted griots because they wanted to be immortal. The griots passed their history and knowledge down through the generations. Each king's griot knew and retold the story of each prior generation for centuries. This chapter, told from the perspective of Kouyaty, emphasizes that griots do not judge, interpret, or see the future. They are merely vessels of the past.

Kouyaty has been charged to tell the tale of Sundiata and goes back to his story, picking up at the point where Sundiata has become a man and is ready to reveal himself to the world. Kanty is a king who wears clothes made from the skin of the kings he has defeated. His power has corrupted him greatly and he steals the wife of his sorcerer nephew.

The nephew, Fakoli, curses at Kanty and says from now on he will side with Kanty's enemies. As Sundiata is reaching his manhood, Fakoli is leading a great army against Kanty. Dankaran is quick to join the fight. Kanty attacks Mali and burns the palace. Dankaran flees but the citizens will not recognize Kanty as king. They consult the fortunetellers and remember that the boy with two names will rule Mali. A small group of his relatives go out to search for Sundiata while war rages between Kanty and Fakoli.

## History Analysis

This chapter serves several purposes. The switch in perspective demonstrates the importance of griots to Mali culture. These keepers of oral tradition were so important that the griots made special care to remember historical griots. The emphasis on Fassyky's importance foreshadows how he will be instrumental in the eventual rule of Sundiata.

This chapter also sets up the current conditions in Mali. The evil king, who has been corrupted by power, is weakened by war and is perplexed by his citizens who will not recognize his rule. This chapter is an excellent setup for the grown Sundiata to enter the scene and set things right.



# The Baobab Leaves

## The Baobab Leaves Summary

Mema is at peace and Sundiata spends his days hunting for food. He and his siblings are fully grown and Sogolon is getting older and feeble. Sundiata's sister Kolonkan sees some merchants from Mali in the market. She runs in excitement to tell her mother and brings the merchants back to the palace, where Sundiata is just returning from a hunt.

The merchants are none other than Sundiata's relatives, seeking for him to return and save Mali. They relate the tale of Mali's destruction and the war that rages there. They salute him as king and Sundiata decides now is the time to head back home. He is already king.

Sogolon dies in the night and Sundiata asks the king Moussa Tounkara if he may bury her in Mema. The king is angry that Sundiata will leave Mema. He demands that Sundiata must pay for the earth she will take up. Sundiata offers the king some pottery and bits of feathers and hay. The king is angry, but his advisor says the broken bits indicate that Sundiata will make war with Mema if the king does not give Sundiata the burial plot. The king gives in and Sundiata gives Sogolon a proper funeral before departing.

## The Baobab Leaves Analysis

This chapter plays on the often-repeated theme that wise people are able to choose the time of their own death. Sogolon knows her purpose in life has been fulfilled - she raised Sundiata to be a wise and gentle man. Knowing she has nothing left to do, she dies just as he is leaving to reclaim his throne.

The concept of jealousy and its power over people returns briefly as the king is blinded by his own hurt feelings that Sundiata is leaving the kingdom. This time, Sundiata does not thwart the confrontation with kindness. According to the advisors, Sundiata gives a subtle threat of violence to the king. This is the first time his character has profited from a threat of violence rather than a kind act.



# The Return

## The Return Summary

Moussa Tounkara gives Sundiata half of the Mema army, and the men go with Sundiata eagerly. Along the way, cities give Sundiata men from their armies and they all head toward Tabon to gather Fran Kamara as promised. Kamara, now king of Tabon, is also fighting against Soumaoro.

Soumaoro knows Sundiata is approaching and sends troops to block his way to Tabon. A battle ensues in the nighttime, which surprises Soumaoro's army. Sundiata is glorious in battle, slaying Soumaoro's men by the dozens with each sword stroke. Sundiata's army wins easily and there is a great celebration in Tabon. Soumaoro also knows he must not overlook Sundiata.

Soumaoro heads to Tabon to attack. Sundiata does not want to wait for the battle and rushes Soumaoro's army. Sundiata wears the white Muslim clothes of Tabon and seems to glow in the battle, destroying Soumaoro's men as he watches in horror. Sundiata's men move in formation without being told and dominate Soumaoro.

Sundiata tries to kill Soumaoro with a spear, but it bounces off. The man catches Sundiata's arrow and tells him he is invincible. Sundiata realizes that Soumaoro can vanish, change shapes, and reappear wherever he wants. Sundiata realizes he must learn sorcery. The fight continues with a surprise attack from Soumaoro at night and Sundiata's men win, but are now frightened.

## The Return Analysis

No man can know everything. The tale of this battle shows Sundiata, in all his glory and unsurpassed skill at hunting, is still defeated by magic. While the evil characters have no redeeming qualities in this book, the character of Sundiata is more realistic because he has faults and weaknesses.

This chapter reinforces the fact that Sundiata is impatient, a quality that has been demonstrated in several earlier chapters, and now shows that his weakness is in his lack of knowledge of black magic. Based on several earlier mentions of magical characters being on Sundiata's side - his sister, the nine witches, and others - one can predict that Sundiata will enlist their help to defeat this enemy. On the battlefield, he has learned all he needs to know. To defeat Soumaoro, Sundiata will need to rely on the female characters of the book.



# The Names of the Heroes

## The Names of the Heroes Summary

All the childhood friends of Sundiata are now kings or great men. The griot uses this chapter to provide an update on the lives of all these characters.

Siara Kouman Konaty, Sundiata's cousin, lives in Toron and sent troops to help Sundiata. The king of Do, land of Sogolon, also sends troops. Mansa Traory, who has eyes in the back of his head, comes to help. Anyone descended from Mali arrives to help Sundiata reclaim the land. They shout Sundiata's name and chant the song Fassyky wrote the day Sundiata began to walk. Sundiata promises to return Mali to splendor.

## The Names of the Heroes Analysis

This chapter is written in the style of the genealogy chapters of the Bible. There are lists of names and relationships, all to emphasize the importance of remembering ancestors. This chapter shows how Sundiata valued lessons learned in the past and the achievements of those who came before him. It recalls the pleasure of the kings who, when Sundiata was a boy, praised him for remembering to name all his relatives.



# Nana Triban and Balla Fassyky

## Nana Triban and Balla Fassyky Summary

Nana Triban and Balla Fassyky, Sundiata's sister and his griot, have escaped from Soumaoro and returned to Sundiata. Triban, daughter of Sassouma, weeps and tells Sundiata she never hated him, it was only her mother who did. Sundiata consults them and other sorcerers on how to defeat Soumaoro. He sacrifices 300 animals and makes plans to reconcile with his brother.

Triban has seduced Soumaoro to get him to reveal his magic secrets to her. She knows all the secrets of his special chamber, as does Fassyky. As they prepare to leave, Fassyky asks Fran Kamara to see his mighty strength so he might store a tale of this great man. Fran runs and slices a tree in two with one stroke. All Sundiata's generals then perform for the griot so he can retell the tale to generations to come.

## Nana Triban and Balla Fassyky Analysis

This is another chapter of names, but it also serves to reunite Sundiata with his relatives. These chapters of inaction come between chapters of battle, so in addition to emphasizing the importance of history to the people of Mali, they serve to build tension as readers anticipate the meeting of Sundiata and Soumaoro.





# Krina

## Krina Summary

Sundiata and Soumaoro have not officially declared war against one another. Therefore, they send bewitched owls back and forth with the declarations that they each claim the throne of Mali. They will battle at Krina. Meanwhile, Fakoli comes to Sundiata's camp and offers his services. His men join Sundiata's as they march to Krina.

The night before the battle, Sundiata hosts a great feast to entertain his men. Fassyky speaks the history of Mali to inspire everyone. Fassyky compares Mali to Sundiata. Both had difficult childhoods and both prepare to return to their rightful state of splendor. He then speaks of the deeds of Sundiata's ancestors, so he will remember their lessons.

In the morning, Sundiata dresses as a hunter for battle. He sets up the troops' formations and then prepares a bow with an arrow of a magic cock feather, the secret to defeating Soumaoro, which was stolen by Sundiata's sister. The battle begins.

Sundiata's men break the center lines of the cavalry. Soumaoro sends his reserves to attack Fakoli, who is struggling and starting to retreat. Sundiata heads over to aid Fakoli and the sight of him recharges the troops, who start to win. Sundiata sees Soumaoro and charges toward him with the bow.

The magic spear just grazes Soumaoro, but it is enough to strip him of all his powers. Soumaoro sees a black bird and knows he is doomed. He flees, and his army follows. Sundiata's men are victorious. Rather than celebrate, Sundiata gallops after Soumaoro and chases him northward all through the day and night.

Sundiata, accompanied by Fakoli, finally catches Soumaoro and his son the next evening. Sundiata takes down Soumaoro's horse and chases Soumaoro on foot. Soumaoro escapes into a cave and Sundiata leaves him for the time being. He concentrates on establishing his kingdom.

The kings of neighboring villages send tributes to Sundiata as they march toward Sosso, Soumaoro's chief city. Sundiata wants to take the city in one morning, and so they do. His archers set the city on fire and Sundiata's men round up the remaining members of Soumaoro's army. They herd the prisoners outside and burn the city to the ground. Right before burning the palace, Sundiata and Fassyky enter Soumaoro's magic chamber. Since Soumaoro lost his powers, the magic creatures in the room are dying. Sundiata is very pleased.

The griot flashes to present tense and tells readers that the location of Sosso is today a barren wasteland full of thorns and hyenas. The evil king who wore clothes made from the skin of the men he defeated left nothing but a miserable desert behind him.



## Krina Analysis

Sundiata is presented as such a strong and invincible character that the battle scene almost lacks excitement. There are no moments where the audience doubts the outcome of the battle as Sundiata's men dominate the skilled sorcerers, best archers, and metal smiths in the world. Only briefly, when Soumaoro attacks Fakoli, is there the slightest suggestion that Sundiata might not win *easily*.

Sundiata also operates a bit out of character when he storms Sosso. Earlier in the epic, Sundiata showed mercy to people stealing from his mother and has always used goodness when encountering enemies. In Sosso, he ruthlessly destroys all memory of his opponent's home though he still has not located and tortured Soumaoro.

Speckled throughout this chapter are numerous references to honoring ancestors and the importance yet again of the griots. An overwhelmingly present theme in this tale is the great respect given to the past and the accomplishments of one's family. The repetition of these scenes helps to reinforce the main message of this tale: never forget where you come from.



# The Empire

## The Empire Summary

Sundiata travels around defeating the remaining allies of Soumaoro. He fells cities in single days and conscripts the soldiers for his own armies. Each day before battle, Sundiata sacrifices animals and prays to the gods at the advice of his spiritual advisors. At one point, he prays and drinks from a magical stream and returns to his men with a special glow in his eyes. He has become one chosen by the gods.

Sundiata rests at Do and sacrifices a rooster in the spot where the buffalo fell. The winds blow westward and he knows he must return to Mali. He commands his armies to meet him in Ka-ba, where Sibi is king. Sundiata's generals have secured Sundiata's rule in most of the land and all will meet at Ka-ba.

## The Empire Analysis

This is another summary chapter that serves to both fill in background details of the side characters and also to generate a break in the action between the two action scenes in order to build suspense and drama in the tale.



# Kouroukan Fougan or The Division of the World

## Kouroukan Fougan or The Division of the World Summary

The twelve kings of the nations of the savannah congregate at Ka-ba. Fassyky begins the meal by recounting the history of what has happened in each of the nations. Sibi then gives a grand speech acknowledging Sundiata as his sovereign and gives Sundiata his spear. The other twelve kings follow suit and Sundiata is named Mansa, or emperor of the land.

A great celebration ensues, with war dances, songs, and amazing performances by the different nations. A great cultural exchange takes place and all the people are very happy. Then, the war prisoners and former allies of Soumaoro file in to the celebration. Their heads are shaved and the guests mock them. The son of Soumaoro files in last, which makes Sundiata remember Soumaoro's disappearance. Fassyky assures Sundiata the son can be made to pay for his father's sins. The procession leaves the celebration.

Sundiata silences the crowd and returns sovereignty to the twelve kings, saying there should always be peace in his empire. Each country should welcome the inhabitants of each other and treat them all like family. Sundiata then established boundaries, rules, and relationships for each of the countries.

Sundiata names Fassyky supreme master of ceremonies and says all kingdoms must choose their griots from Fassyky's family. A ceremonial tree is planted at Kouroukan Fougan to commemorate the division of the world.

## Kouroukan Fougan or The Division of the World Analysis

This chapter is very rich in detail in describing the ceremonies and customs of the different lands. The griot takes great pains to describe the rituals used to divide the world and acknowledge sovereignty.

Once again, this narrator steps in to comment on current day Africa by telling readers of the memorial tree still found at Kouroukan Fougan. This repetition of the importance of griots allows readers to see how vital repetition was in preserving history in a culture without written language.



# Niani

## Niani Summary

War had depleted the land of its food stores, so people come from far and wide to enjoy the remnants of Soumaoro's animals and grain. They all praise Sundiata for showing them abundance and his generosity. He grows restless and wants to return to Mali to reconstruct the palace at Niani.

As Sundiata marches home, the effects of his laws are obvious. He has set up punishment systems for crimes and there is no theft or murder. The people are so glad with his wise decisions they praise him everywhere he goes. New towns spring up all over the place and there is happiness and prosperity all across Africa.

The griot telling the tale switches to summary mode and discusses how Africa has not seen such a great emperor since Sundiata. Niani becomes the center of commerce, the capital of the continent. The griots of the age told everyone to go to Niani for any of their needs. The griot finishes the chapter by saying all that remains of the great cities are the silk-cotton trees.

## Niani Analysis

As the tale comes to an end, the chapters move away from specific detail and dialogue and into summary mode. Since Sundiata is now emperor over all the land, there is less need to highlight specific characters. It is more fitting for the griots to give an overview of the state of the kingdom in one of the final chapters. The summary mode also helps prepare readers for the ending of the story, now that the enemy has been vanquished and there is peace in the land.



# Eternal Mali

## Eternal Mali Summary

In this final chapter, the griot speaks of present day Africa going back to Sundiata's time, discussing how no king after him came close to his greatness. The griot encourages his audience to travel to Mali and the sites of the battles and conference to see the remainders of the parts of the tale. The forests near Mali remain, as do the battleground and the tree marking the meeting of the twelve nations. The griot also warns that there are mysteries of Mali known only to the griots, and that outsiders will never know the full wonder of the eternal nation of Mali.

He ends by saying many people today do not appreciate or value the lessons he has learned. Thus, he has been instructed to reveal only those secrets appropriate to tell and the rest are confined within the vessels of the griots.

## Eternal Mali Analysis

The notes indicate that griots must travel extensively and study with great masters before they are allowed to relate tales to audiences. They are, as a result, very proud of this tradition. While eager to share the great epics of the land, the griots still hold sacred some of the history of their people.

Ending with a first person perspective of the griot in the present time leaves the audience with a lasting impression of the value of the oral tradition. The morals and themes presented in each of the tales sink in, but no theme as much as the great importance of an oral culture and the wisdom of ancestors. Once again, the resounding message of Sundiata is to always remember where you come from.



# Characters

## Sassouma Berete

Maghan Kon Fatta's first wife, Sassouma B6rete expects her son to become the next king of Mali. When prophets foretell the marriage of the king and Sogolon and the birth of Sundiata, Sassouma is consumed with jealousy that haunts her throughout the epic. She taunts Sogolon when her son cannot walk, thus provoking Sundiata to raise himself to his feet to avenge his mother's honor. Plotting his death, she hires witches to kill him, but they are won over to his side because of his inherent goodness. Knowing that his family is in danger, Sundiata flees from the intrigues of Sassouma, but she continues to plague him. Sending sums of money to his hosts, she convinces them either to turn him away or try to kill him. In the end, however, Sassouma's plotting only serves to fulfill Sundiata's destiny, as the travels and travails she forces upon him cause him to develop into a strong, wise, cautious, and judicious person and mighty warrior.

## Manding Bory

Manding Bory, son of Namandj6, is Sundiata's step- or half-brother and best friend. The two boys grow up together, inseparable, and when Sogolon and her family go into exile, Manding Bory accompanies them. Later in life, when Sundiata becomes the commander of his own troops, he appoints Manding Bory as the head of his rear guard. Manding Bory continues to be Sundiata's most important general under the new Empire of Mali once Sundiata has taken the throne of his homeland, and he receives many honors in return for his services.

## Manding Boukari

See Manding Bory

## Buffalo of Do

When a buffalo terrorizes the countryside of Do, the king puts a bounty on its head. Many hunters try to kill the buffalo, and are killed in the process. Nonetheless, the hunters, Oulamba and Oulani, decide to try their hand at the task. On the trail of the buffalo, Oulamba sees an old woman lamenting her hunger and begging for food, and he responds by sharing his food with her. She is in fact the Buffalo of Do in human form. Touched by his generosity, she tells him the magical method of killing her. In return, the Buffalo of Do asks that the hunter choose Sogolon Kedjou, her wraith, as his reward.



## **Buffalo Woman**

See Sogolon Kedjou

## **Soumaba Cisse**

The king of Ghana welcomes Sundiata and his family into his court for a year after they flee Mali. Hospitable to his guests, he treats the children like princes and princesses of his own country. When Sogolon falls ill in Ghana, the family must leave for the more healthful climate of Mema. The generosity and kindness of Soumaba Cisse ensure goodwill for his people when Sundiata becomes a great ruler.

## **Do Mansa-Gnemo Diarra**

Do Mansa-Gnemo Diarra is the king of the land of Do. When he grants the ugly hunchbacked woman Sogolon Kedjou as the prize to the hunters who kill the buffalo ravaging his lands, he starts the cycle of events that bring Sundiata's parents together. The people of Do join Sundiata in defeating the sorcerer-king Soumaoro.

## **King Gnemo Diarra**

See Do Mansa-Gnemo Diarra

## **Handing Diara**

See Sundiata

## **Sogolon Djamarou**

Sundiata's youngest sister, Sogolon Djamarou goes into exile with her family when her mother, Sogolon Kedjou, fears that Sundiata is in danger from the plotting of the king's first wife.

## **Djata**

See Sundiata

## **Mori Djata**

See Sundiata





## Nare Maghan Djata

See Sundiata

## Sogolon Djata

See Sundiata

## Gnankouman Dona

Griot to King Maghan Kon Fatta, Gnankouman Doua often advises the king when he must make important decisions. It is the griot who encourages the Hunter of Sangaran to reveal the prophecy about the king's future bride, Sogolon. Reminding the king of his duty to follow the prophecy of the hunter, Gnankouman Doua helps fulfill Sundiata's destiny. Gnankouman Doua's son, Balla Fasseke, continues his father's line, becoming griot for Sundiata.

## Balla Fasseke

Given to Sundiata by his father, Balla Fasse'ke" is Sundiata's griot and the son of King Maghan Kon Fatta's griot Gnankouman Doua. Sundiata's half-brother Dankaran Touman sends Balla Fasseke to the court of the sorcerer-king Soumaoro. Having learned the secrets of Soumaoro's chamber of fetishes, Balla Fasse'ke, along with Nana Triban, advises Sundiata on the magic required to drain the sorcerer king's powers. Because he is instrumental in Sundiata's victory over Soumaoro, and the praise songs he sings about Sundiata, Balla Fasseke ensures that Sundiata's descendants, the Keita, will always chose their griots from his line, the Kouyate. Djeli Mamoudou Kouyate, who told the version of the epic that was transcribed by D. T. Niane, claims descent from Balla Fasseke.

## Maghan Kon Fatta

Sundiata's father, Maghan Kon Fatta, is known for his great physical attractiveness and his hunting skills. He is also considered to be a wise and kind ruler. Already married, he expects his first son, Dankaran Touman, to be his heir until the day that a soothsaying hunter tells him that another son, not yet born, had been foreseen to rule Mali. From this point on, Maghan Kon Fatta struggles between following that which was foretold and that which appears on the surface to be the natural way of things. When he sees the ugly hunchbacked woman Sogolon, he can hardly believe that he is to marry her, yet he fulfills the prophecy by their union. Even when their son, Sundiata, is born lame, Maghan Kon Fatta complies with the soothsayer and declares the child to be his heir. Each decision is difficult for Maghan Kon Fatta, but the fact that he follows the advice of



the soothsayers and village wise men, rather than making the choices that his pride dictates, is held to be indicative of his wisdom and goodness as a ruler.

## Hunter from Sangaran

The Hunter from Sangaran shows up at Maghan Kon Fatta's court one day to give the king a portion of his catches, as custom dictates. Sangaran hunters were known to be great soothsayers, so Maghan Kon Fatta and his griot ask him to tell about the future of Mali. Divining with cowry shells, the hunter is the first to tell the king about Sogolon, her destined marriage with the king, and the remarkable destiny in store for the son they will have together.

## Fran Kamara

Son of the King of Tabon, Fran Kamara grows up in the court of King Maghan Kon Fatta together with Sundiata. When Sundiata's family flees Mali, they travel first to Tabon, but Fran Kamara's elderly father fears retribution from Sassouma Berete and her son Dankaran Touman and insists that the family stay only briefly before moving on. Once his father has died, Fran Kamara becomes an ally of Sundiata in his battle with Soumaoro.

## Soumaoro Kante

The evil sorcerer-king Soumaoro subjugates the surrounding peoples and reigns over them. His strength derives from the powers of darkness. When he appropriates both Sundiata's griot and his nephew's wife, he angers these two warriors enough to encourage them to join forces to defeat him at the battle of Krina.

## Sogolon Kedjou

A hunchback, the ugly Sogolon is an unlikely choice as bride by the successful hunters of the Buffalo of Do. However, they promised the old woman who revealed the secret of hunting the buffalo to select Sogolon. Unable to consummate a sexual relationship with her, because she draws on the strength of the buffalo which she embodies to fight them off, the hunters give Sogolon to the king of Mali, thus fulfilling the destiny prophesied by the hunter/soothsayer of Sangaran. The second wife of the king, Sogolon is mocked by the king's first wife when her son Sundiata turns out to be crippled. When Sogolon finally laments her son's condition in front of him, Sundiata finds within himself the strength and courage to walk. Sogolon flees with her family after the king's death to protect her son and eventually dies in exile.



## **Frako Maghan Keigu**

See Maghan Kon Patta

## **King of Ghana**

See Soumaba Cisse

## **King of Mali**

See Maghan Kon Fatta

## **King of Mema**

See Mansa Tounkara

## **King of Sosso**

See Soumaoro Kante

## **Sogolon Kolonkan**

Sogolon Kolonkan is Sundiata's oldest sister. While her family is in exile in Mema, it is Kolonkan who recognizes the baobab leaves from Mali in the market. Knowing that they are not locally available, she speaks with the woman selling them and learns that envoys from Mali have come searching for her brother Sundiata.

## **Sogolon Kondouto**

See Sogolon Kedjou

## **Mansa Konkon**

The first host of Sogolon and her family, Mansa Konkon welcomes the exiles from Mali at the royal court of Djedba until SassoumaBerete bribes him to kill Sundiata. Mansa Konkon challenges Sundiata to a word game called wori, with the stakes being death to Sundiata if he loses. Sundiata, aware of the bribe, wins the game in revealing the king's treachery. Sundiata's life is spared, but he and his family must once again flee.



## **Fakoli Koroma**

Fakoli is Soumaoro's nephew and right-hand man until Soumaoro steals his wife. This so enrages Fakoli that he begins the revolt against the tyrant. Sundiata joins forces with this mighty warrior to defeat Soumaoro at Krina.

## **Lion of Mali**

See Sundiata

## **Maghan the handsome**

See Maghan Kon Fatta

## **Nare Maghan**

See Maghan Kon Fatta

## **Namandje**

Namandje is the third wife of Sundiata's father, King Maghan Kon Fatta. In sharp contrast to Sogolon, Namandje's beauty is legendary. Namandje's son, Manding Bory, becomes Sundiata's best friend.

## **the old woman**

See Buffalo of Do

## **Oulamba**

One of the two brothers who hunt and kill the Buffalo of Do. Their kindness to an old woman unlocks the secret of killing the buffalo. In return for the knowledge she gives them, they agree to select Sogolon as their bounty. Unable to possess Sogolon sexually, Oulamba gives her to the king of Mali, Maghan Kon Fatta, forming the union that will produce the great king Sundiata.

## **Oulani**

One of the two brothers who hunt and kill the Buffalo of Do and bestow Sogolon on King Maghan kon Fatta.



## Sogo Simbon Salaba

See Sundiata

## Sundiata

Sundiata begins his life as an unlikely hero. Although soothsayers have predicted great things for this child, his body is crippled from birth and by the age of seven he has still not learned to walk. He was conceived in the union of the Buffalo Woman with the Lion King. Fortune tellers say that he will become the greatest ruler Mali has ever known. His mother's rival attempts to change his destiny and keep her son on the throne of Mali, but as the story shows, the rightful ruler of the Malinke eventually triumphs. Despite hardships, misfortune and physical infirmity, Sundiata grows to be the mighty warrior predicted by the prophets, saving his people from a tyrant.

## Darikaran Touman

Dankaran Touman, son of Sassouma Berete, is Maghan Kon Fatta's first son and the heir to the throne before the birth of Sundiata. Even though the conflict between Dankaran Touman and Sundiata over the throne causes much hardship for Sundiata and his family, Dankaran Touman never proves himself to be a bad person. He would have been content to let Sundiata take his place as heir, but Dankaran's mother prods and goads him into an antagonistic relationship with his stepbrother. He proves to be a coward rather than a scoundrel, subjugating himself to the evil sorcerer king, Soumaoro, and fleeing from conflict when his attempt to revolt against Soumaoro meets with failure.

## Mansa Tounkara

The king of Mema hosts Sundiata and his family during their exile from Mali after they have been forced to leave several other courts due to the intrigues of Sassouma Berete. Impressed by Sundiata's courage, he makes Sundiata his heir and main general. When Sundiata decides to return to his people and try to free them from the tyranny of Soumaoro, the king grows angry and even refuses to let Sundiata bury his mother in his land. Tounkara and Sundiata are later reconciled. Tounkara is an ally during the fight with Soumaoro, and is rewarded once Sundiata becomes ruler of Mali.

## Nana Triban

Nana Triban is the daughter of Maghan Kon Fatta's first wife Sassouma Berete and the sister of Dankaran Touman. Because of the enmity between Sogolon and Sassouma, one would expect Nana Triban to join with her family in hating Sundiata. At an important moment, however, Nana Triban sides with Sundiata and is crucial in helping him overcome the sorcerer king, Soumaoro. Nana Triban had been given to Soumaoro as a

wife by her brother during his rule of Mali. She helps Sundiata overcome the evil sorcerer king by telling him how to overcome Soumaoro's powers.



# Themes

## Artists and Society

In the version of *Sundiata* collected by D. T. Niane, the narrating griot, Djeli Mamoudou Kouyate, makes the role of the oral historian a primary theme of the work. One of the major characters in the story is Sundiata's griot, Balla Fasseke. *Sundiata* opens with the griot Kouyate himself explaining his right to tell this epic story. At the point when the main battle is about to take place, the griot again pauses to commend the role of the oral historian in preserving the culture and history of his society. The importance of tradition and the griot's role in preserving memory emerges as a central concern of *Sundiata*.

## Physical Appearance

Sogolon, Sundiata's mother, is considered the ugliest woman in her village. When the hunters choose her as their bride, they are laughed at by the villagers. Yet the unattractive Sogolon is destined to carry the greatest ruler of Mali. While her lack of beauty makes her an unlikely consort for the king, the prophecies concerning her offspring prove stronger than societal judgment. Sogolon, proves to be the most important wife of the king. Sogolon also proves to be intelligent, perceptive, and a good mother.

## Coming of Age

The first part of this epic concerns itself with the journey, both physical and spiritual, that Sundiata makes as he grows from a child into a man. While Sundiata always has the strength of a ruler within him, as was predicted from before his birth, he must change in several ways in order to claim that power. He must first learn to walk, and to lead his peer group in such traditional activities as hunting. Lame from birth, he finds the power within himself to stand up and walk in order to avenge his mother's honor. Made to leave his own country by the mother of his half-brother, Sundiata must learn how to be a warrior and how to comport himself in the courts of other rulers. He excels at hunting, and his feats in battle lead one foreign king to regard the exiled prince as his own. Then, called to lead his people in a time of great trouble, Sundiata must leave this comfortable position and go forth on his own as a ruler. Finally Sundiata must learn when to make his stand, as he does on the battlefields of Knna. The warrior-king who emerges from this process is strong and wise, admired by all. This king will establish the administrative and justice system for the great empire of Mali.



## Limitations and Opportunities

Stricken from birth with a disability that prevents him from walking, Sundiata seems far from the great leader foreseen by the soothsayers. His father doubts whether a boy who cannot even walk can be the predicted savior of the Malinke. Sundiata must overcome both his physical handicap and the perception that it renders him unfit to rule.

While his victory over the tyrant Soumaoro gains Sundiata immediate acclaim and the throne of Mali, his lasting accomplishments are his establishment of a system of administration and justice for his vast kingdom. Sundiata's true strength comes from within. Great power can be overcome by simple acts of kindness.

## Mystery and Intrigue

The intrigues of the Mali king Maghan Kon Fatta's first wife, Sassouma Berete', against Sundiata plague his childhood. Sundiata and his family leave their home because of the danger that Sassouma represents, but even at a distance she remains a threat, attempting to bribe others to kill Sundiata while he is with them. Sassouma never tires in her quest to undo Sundiata, but ultimately, her son's cowardice leaves the throne of Mali vacant for Sundiata to assume after his victory against Soumaoro.

## Magic and the Supernatural

Magic and supernatural events surround Sundiata even before he is born. Soothsayers predict the circumstances of his parentage and birth, and that he will become Mali's ruler. Sundiata's parents are brought together by the hunters of a supernatural buffalo, and his mother magically partakes of the spirit and strength of the buffalo. In an attempt to thwart Sundiata's predicted destiny and ensure that her own son will inherit the throne of his father, Sassouma hires witches to kill him by supernatural means. Her plan backfires: their malevolent powers cannot work against anyone with a truly pure and good heart. The sorcerer king Soumaoro derives his evil power from his room of magic fetishes, and Sundiata eventually overcomes him with the aid of magic.

## Strength and Weakness

The epic calls into question traditional perceptions of strength and weakness. The buffalo ravages the lands of Do, but when the hunters give hospitality and kindness to an old woman, she unlocks the secret of the buffalo's power and they easily defeat it. When Sassouma Berete sends the most powerful witches in Mali to kill him, Sundiata's kindness overcomes their power, leaving them unable (and unwilling) to harm him. The kings who are kind to Sundiata and his family during their years of wandering are repaid by being made allies of this powerful kingdom once Sundiata takes the throne of Mali. The sorcerer Soumaoro derives great strength from his evil fetishes, but the scratch of a magic arrow is enough to leave him powerless. In *Sundiata*,





# Style

## Form and Style

Like many epics, *Sundiata* is meant to be sung and performed. The role of the griot in the production of the epic is paramount; he or she must embellish the language and make the story pleasing to the listeners. *Sundiata* does not appear to adhere to any regular meter of stresses or syllables, and most versions are told in everyday vernacular language. The audience does not participate, except to honor the griot with gifts at the end of the performance.

## Language

The story of *Sundiata* appears in the oral literature of many West African tribes and in many languages. Djeli Mamoudou Kouyate recounted the tale to Djibril Tamsir Niane in Malinke, or Mandingo. Niane wrote down his words in that language, then translated the tale into French for its initial publication in 1960. G. D. Pickett translated the epic into English in 1965, working from Niane's published French text as well as his original Malinke transcription.

## Point of View

The point of view of the narrator, griot Mamoudou Kouyate, plays a crucial role in the epic. He states again and again his inherited right to tell the history of the Keita ruler, because he is descended from the griot who served Sundiata. Several times in the course of the story, the griot makes reference to himself and to the importance of the griot's art. The griot functions as an omniscient narrator, able to adopt shifting points of view, to describe the thoughts and feelings as well as the actions of every character, and even to step back and comment about the meaning or importance of what is unfolding.

## Foreshadowing

The technique of literary foreshadowing is used to hint at something that is yet to come, preparing the reader or viewer for later revelations. In *Sundiata*, prophecy plays a similar but even more direct role. Most of the major events are foretold by seers or fortune-tellers before they take place. One tells the King of Mali that his heir will be born of an ugly woman who will be brought to his court. Other soothsayers tell the king that his crippled son is the future savior of Mali, unlikely as that seems. Prophecies do not hint at what is to come the way that foreshadowing does. Rather, these prophecies indicate the path of destiny. The king may choose not to follow the path indicated, but then he will not produce the heir that had been predicted. Further, indigenous African cultures are replete with cautionary tales about the bad luck that commonly befalls



those who chose to disregard such prophecies and to forge their own destinies in defiance of what has been foretold.

## Grotesque

Elements of the grotesque plays a role in the epic. Sogolon's deformity, a hump that makes her resemble a buffalo, makes her repulsive to men. Nonetheless, she is the only woman who can transmit the spint of the buffalo to the son she will bear.

Soumaoro's chamber of fetishes also enters into the grotesque. The heads of the kings he has conquered as well as human skins of his victims line the chamber. Soumaoro derives his magic power from these symbols or emblems of evil. This power, however, is not permanent; more magic can break its spell. The grotesque images in the epic serve to cover forms of power: Sogolon's serving good and Soumaoro's pledged to do evil.

## Imagery and Symbolism

Animals serve as symbols for many of the characters in the tale. Sogolon is the Buffalo Woman, strong and unattractive. Maghan Kon Fatta is compared to a lion, and he is handsome and a good hunter. Sundiata combines the qualities of his two parents and of the animals that represent them. Soumaoro's den of fetishes includes a giant snake, a sign of evil. Owls represent the night-flying witches of Mali.



# Historical Context

## Sundiata's Dynasty: the Keita Clan

Sundiata was not the first Keita to rule the Malinke people. The Keita dynasty began sometime in the eighth century and continues into the late twentieth century: the Keita are still chiefs of the Kangaba province. Rule passes from father to son, but if the child is too young to rule, a close family member from the father's side will rule until the child is of age. This appears to have been the case with the son of Sundiata himself. Manding Bory, Sundiata's step-brother and best friend, ruled Mali for a period of time after the death of Sundiata in 1255.

Islam was introduced into Mali with the conversion of a Malinke king around 1050, and Malinke griots have long claimed that the Keitas descend from Muhammad's companion Bilal ibn Rabah, the first mu'adhhdhin (the man who issues the call to prayer). Forming a link between the Keitas and the companion of the Prophet makes their rule seem divinely ordained. According to the griots, the grandson of Bilal ibn Rabah came to Mali and was the first of the Keita.

## The Rise of the Empire of Mali

Until the time of Sundiata, Mali was a minor kingdom owing allegiance first to the King of Ghana and later to the king of Sosso, Soumaoro Kante. Most of the history that is available to the present comes via the epic *Sundiata* in its many forms and across many nations. Over the years, many additions have been made to the Sundiata story, giving him credit for the actions of previous or later Malinke kings. One story tells that Sundiata was the twelfth son of Maghan Kon Fatta. Soumaoro Kante is said to have killed the other eleven, leaving the sickly Sundiata alive because he did not appear to be a potential threat. In this version, Sundiata recovers the use of his legs just in time to defeat Soumaoro at the battle of Krina.

The battle of Krina is estimated to have taken place in 1235. With this battle, Sundiata became the leader of a vast empire that covered much of present-day West Africa. Less clear is what happened to Sundiata following the victory at Krina. Some say he was killed by an arrow at an exhibition of arms while others relate that he was drowned near his home-town of Niani. Also unknown are the exact descendants of Sundiata. In order to please the patrons of a performance, griots will often add the names of those in the audience to the list of Sundiata's sons. In this way, a prominent family can gain even more prestige by claiming to be descended from the great Sundiata himself.

## Sundiata's Times: 1230-1255

Sundiata played such a vital role in the history of Mali that the entire thirteenth century is referred to as "Sundiata's Time" by the Malinke. After the battle at Krina, the conquered



countries were divided into administrative units. Soumaoro's people were made slaves. Some of them took flight, settling in what later became Ivory Coast. Some of the Keita clan remained loyal to Sundiata's half-brother Dankaran Touman, and these peoples fled to the south. Sundiata's empire spread the Malinke" language throughout West Africa.

The extended family has always formed the basic social unit of the Malinke". The head of the family filled many roles. Among them, he had certain priestly powers and acted as judge, administering communal property and making decisions on relationships within the family. The head of the village was simply the head of the family that was thought to have been in the village for the longest period of time. He performed as village chief and priest. Different villages were also sometimes linked into one group, as was the case with the Keita clan. With time, the leader of a large group of villages became called a king. He usually had several wives, with the senior of them receiving the most societal respect.

Commoners paid great respect to their king. The king usually ate in private, his meals surrounded by mystery. When a subject was in the royal presence, he or she would lie prostrate and put dust and ashes on his or her head. The king had a spokesman who did all of his public speaking. The etiquette of the court demanded distance and respect from the king's subjects.

Subjects could appeal to the king for justice. The court usually had scribes, but most of the king's decrees were transmitted orally. The king consolidated his strength by making sure that his vassals paid him strict obedience. The sons of vassal kings were often sent to court to live, as seen in *Sundiata* at the court of Mema. The court was filled with slaves loyal to the king, and at times the slaves were given positions more powerful than some of the noblemen. Another caste important to the court were the *jelis*, or griots. These men served as close confidants to the king and transmitted the oral history of the monarch.

## Economy and Daily Life

Salt and gold mines brought wealth to the people of Mali. Generally, the king exacted a tax from the miners, often enough to make him quite rich. Mali was an important trading center during Sundiata's time. Most of the populace, however, were farmers and had little to do with external trade. Some of their crops included millet and sorghum. Often the slave caste worked the land. Another of the castes were the blacksmiths, but they were noblemen. Other artisans such as tanners and carpenters were also respected. Textile manufacture eventually developed into an art form. Along with gold, cowry shells were used as currency in Mali. By the time of Sundiata, some historians believe that the kola nut, which when chewed has the effect of a stimulant, had already attained the ceremonial significance that it enjoys today in West Africa.



## Critical Overview

The story of *Sundiata* has attracted little critical interest among speakers of English. This can be attributed to two main reasons, the first being the lack of interest in African texts until recent decades. Only now are literature departments including courses and specialists in African literature. The critical world had privileged the Western literary canon for many years. Those wanting to see other texts undergo mainstream critical analysis had a hard battle to fight. With the development of professorships in African literature throughout the world, this problem is being overcome.

The second, and still relevant, problem is that of linguistic and social accessibility. Many stories from Africa are oral, told in indigenous languages. Those outside the small language-speaking community are unable to access the tale until it is transcribed and then translated into a common language. In addition, many of the guardians of African oral tradition do not wish to communicate their words outside of their own communities. They feel, perhaps rightly so, that in fixing their stories in written form they will lose control over the production of the text. The important element of performance is always lost in the written version of any oral tale. Little by little, many of the oral texts of Africa are being recorded and eventually transcribed. Even so, much of African oral literature remains unknown outside of its small community of production. *Sundiata* was largely unfamiliar outside Mali before D. T. Niane's version was published in French in 1960. The English-speaking world had to wait until G. D. Pickett's translation appeared in 1973.

*Sundiata* is now known as an excellent example of West African epic. A children's version, with beautiful papercut illustrations, has been produced by David Wisniewski. The first steps have thus been taken, spreading knowledge of this epic throughout different communities of readers. During this first phase, critical attention has been focused on the anthropological and historical detail found in *Sundiata*. Critics have tended to read the tale as history rather than literature, although it of course enters into both realms. As a piece of history, *Sundiata* tells us much about life in thirteenth-century Mali and the reign of the great king Sundiata.

But *Sundiata* is equally a literary text. The part the griot plays in shaping history to please his audience cannot be overlooked. Each griot plays the roles of both historian and artist. More studies on both the oral and literary functions of *Sundiata* are certainly in order.

Post-colonial criticism has flourished in the late twentieth century, and can be used to help non-African readers of traditional African texts gain insights and understanding. Problems such as audience (is the text meant for those inside a specific cultural community or open to universal interpretation?) and applicability of Western critical theory (for instance, can an ancient African text ever be called "feminist") are two of the many questions that must be raised and answered by readers of *Sundiata*. These issues have been initially addressed in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* published in 1995.



Other forms of criticism available to the reader of epic will also prove invaluable for reading *Sundiata*. The oral aspect of epic has been examined, with one of the first and outstanding examples being that of Alfred Lord's *Singer of Tales* (1960), which looks at contemporary Serbo-Croatian epic. Questions of nationalism and nation-forming have been long associated with epic, and current critical approaches to the epic and history should be examined to see if they shed light on reading the West African epic as well. One thing is certain, however. *Sundiata* is the epic recounting the pinnacle of an important dynasty in West Africa, and it tells us much about the heritage, literary and cultural, of a population still vital today. With that in mind, it seems certain that only toward the end of the twentieth century is the critical history of the thirteenth-century epic story of *Sundiata* beginning.

# Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2



# Critical Essay #1

*In the following essay, Ramey focuses on the role of the griot in crafting a unique, individualized version of the story each time it is retold, and comments on the atypical nature of a written and published version of Sundiata.*

When reading an epic like *Sundiata*, the reader must realize that the tale was designed to be performed for a certain audience at a specific time. Most stories that we read today have one, fixed version. However, *Sundiata* is an oral tale, carefully passed down through the centuries by a segment of African society charged with preserving the collective memory. Many different tribes will have griots that tell the story slightly differently, from the perspective of their own people's history. For instance, we would not expect the griots of Soumaoro's descendants to tell of the battle of Krina in the same manner as do the Kouyates, griots to Sundiata's ancestral line. In addition, different griots in the same family will have various strengths, some perhaps preferring to leave out battle scenes while others relish in the gory details. Likewise, the same griot may tailor his or her story to various audiences. If one of Manding Bory's descendants is the guest of honor, perhaps the griot will emphasize his role in Sundiata's reign. No two oral versions of *Sundiata* will ever be the same.

However, *Sundiata* is a living history text. The story tells of the beginning of the high-point of the great African empire of Mali. Still performed today, the epic conveys to the people of Mali where they came from and what makes them special. The goal of the storyteller is not necessarily to tell the facts of history in a concise and meticulous fashion. Rather, like the author of a literary text, the aim of the griot is to please the audience at the same time that he or she instructs. This technique involves, of course, attention to aesthetic properties of speech, including metaphor, descriptive passages and building to climactic moments. The content, too, is subject to manipulation in the repertoire of the well-trained oral historian. While the backbone of the tale remains constant, slight changes in the content can pique the audience's interest. The "truth" of history takes a backseat at times to artistic production.

In fact, Christopher Miller maintains, factual truth *always* gives way to the creativity of the griot. Miller notes that in Malinke society silence is revered. Kings and noblemen, therefore, show their status by maintaining silence whenever possible. The griot caste functions in society precisely to allow the speech necessary and desirable for social interaction to take place. The griot speaks for the king on occasions where public speaking is needed, such as speeches, judicial declarations, and historical recitations. Because the griot is so gifted with words, his status is ambiguous. He has power to create or recite the history of important deed, yet by speaking aloud he has lowered himself. His rhetorical agility leads the Malinke to suspect his every word, and yet his pronouncements carry important weight. For instance, if the oral historian says that a piece of property was given to someone by another's ancestor, his words are often heeded.





Djeli Mamoudou Kouyate's task in recounting the story of *Sundiata* has very real implications for today. Because the epic is about origins, the tale treats carefully the people and places where each event occurred. As if to answer questions that members of the audience might ask, the epic provides the genealogy of the mighty Keita clan and the feats performed by the clan and its friendly neighbors. How did the Kouyaté clan come to be the griots for the ruling Keita clan, someone might inquire. Kouyate responds by telling how Sundiata's father, Maghan Kon Fatta, gave Balla Fasseke of the Kouyate family to his son as griot. Then when Balla Fasseke performed extraordinary service at the battle of Krina, Sundiata decreed that the Kouyates would always be griots to the Keitas. Out of self-interest, the story of Balla Fasseke is probably always recounted when a Kouyate tells of Sundiata. By telling of his auspicious origins and authority, the griot raises the worth of both his story and his position. When a griot from Ghana tells the story of *Sundiata*, however, Balla Fasseke might well be altogether absent from his account.

Djeli Mamoudou Kouyate not only elevates himself in *Sundiata*, he does the same for many members of Malinké society. In the opening of the epic, he recounts the origin of the Keitas and the Malinke people, claiming that they are descended from the black companion of Muhammad, Bilali Bounama. Since the Malinke converted to Islam in the eleventh century, great prestige comes from having a close connection to the Prophet. The factual truth of this claimed lineage bears no significance to either the audience or the griot. The griot's word is always suspect, but it carries authority nonetheless. History once again defers to the larger goal of the griot, which in this case might be to create pride and unity among the Malinke people.

The Malinke people gain as well a sense that they are unique and special, distinct from their neighbors. Mamoudou Kouyate states his goal at the beginning of the text: "By my mouth you will get to know the story of the ancestor of great Mali, the story of him who, by his exploits, surpassed even Alexander the Great; he who, from the East, shed his rays upon all the countries of the West." When he gives their ancestor as Bilali, the griot states that the inhabitants of Mali are not indigenous, that they come from the East. They are a people blessed by the Prophet and not simply converted Muslims like those around them. Because they are not from the land they conquered and rule, they are above the other tribes. The hunter divines for Maghan Kon Fatta and reports that a light is coming from the east. This light is Sundiata, who like Bilali has a divine presence and spreads his aura among all the Malinke. Finally, when Sundiata is born the griot tells that "great clouds coming from the east hid the sun" and a flash of lightning "lit up the whole sky as far as the west." This stormy sky mirrors the birth of Sundiata, who comes with fury from the East and gives light to an entire community.

Griot Mamoudou Kouyate" is also a man of his own times. As he tells his version of the story to Niamey, he incorporates his own concerns and those of his audience. Griots often include the names of their patrons in the lists of illustrious men at battles, much as Jacques Louis David painted his contemporaries into the *Coronation of Emperor Napoleon and Empress Josephine* (1804-07). Such additions are not considered to radically alter the account of history, but are rather whimsical touches that please the author and audience. Inspiration comes from the patronage system, which ensures that



those storytellers who flatter the audience will receive the most gifts in return. As Kouyate summarizes, "the generosity of kings makes griots eloquent."

Kouyate's privileging of the East over the West, as he repeatedly gives the origin of the great *Sundiata* as Eastern, may well stem from the concerns of the 1950s when Niane collected the griot's words. After World War II, as the world seemed to organize itself into Eastern and Western blocs, Africa had to find its place. US and Soviet interests began competing in Africa, trying to win access to rich mineral deposits. A former colony of France, Mali harbored some resentment against the intrusion of Western culture. In 1961, Mali began cooperative agreements with the Soviet Union to locate mineral deposits. Mamoudou Kouyate's insistence on the supremacy of the East over the West held not only historical significance for Mali, but also a clear message for his listeners in the late 1950s.

The epic is a living text. Djeli Mamoudou Kouyate claims that his oral history is superior to written history, for those people with a written history "do not feel the past any more, for writing lacks the warmth of the human voice." Part of feeling the past is participating in it. *Sundiata* allows its Malinke audience to become a part of the past. The griot creates an illustrious history for his listeners. By making reference to the present within the past, history becomes alive. The ability (and necessity) for the historical text to change with each telling is part of what makes oral history fascinating and ever-relevant. Our text of *Sundiata* is simply one version, rooted in a specific time and place. If and when oral history disappears from Mali, it will be a truly great loss.

**Source:** Lynn T. Ramey, for *Epics for Students*, Gale Research, 1997.



## Critical Essay #2

*In the following excerpt, the critic discusses characteristics of African heroic epics and notes ways that Sundiata (here called Sunjata) both conforms to and differs from other such epics.*

[For] each epic tradition there seems to be a central core. In the various known versions of the Sunjata epic, [there] is a clear-cut central core of thematic material. It includes events leading to the birth of the hero, the hero's youth and exile from the Mande, and the hero's return to reconquer the Mande from Sumanguru. Each major set includes a recurring number of episodes.

Underlying the various epics are, of course, many of the quasi-universal epic patterns, with many variations from culture to culture and within the same culture. To give a few examples, the epics illustrate many different cases of a miraculous conception and birth. One hero is born the same day that he was conceived, another is born after the one hundred-fifty year long pregnancy of his mother, still another is born through parthenogenesis. Some of the heroes are active and can talk while they are still in their mother's womb. They leave and reenter the womb freely and also decide autonomously the manner and moment of birth. One is born from the palm of his mother's hand, another through his mother's medius, another one by ripping her belly open. The heroes are born possessing certain gifts (the capacity to walk and talk, the foreknowledge of events, and invulnerability) and holding certain objects (knives, scepters, spears, shoulderbags). Most heroes are ready for great action right after birth, but Sunjata is weak and cannot walk for many years after his birth. There are numerous other common patterns. Herculean deeds; extraterrestrial journeys; fierce individual battles with heroes, with divinities, with animals, dragons, and monsters; possession of extraordinary magical devices; tests of strength and intelligence; games. Some of the heroes are quasi-invulnerable and invincible; others have the capacity to resuscitate themselves and to revivify others, to make themselves invisible, and so on. Whereas most of the main heroes are fierce warriors and ruthless fighters possessing superhuman strength, there are exceptions to this pattern. Mwindo, the hero of the Nyanga, is a small being; he is not a great killer or fighter; he pays great attention to revivifying his defeated enemies, and becomes, through purification in the celestial sphere, a poised, peace-minded, and balanced leader of his people.

African epics present extremely significant testimonies about the value systems and patterns of thought of African peoples. Several authors have pointed out that in the Sunjata epic the main hero is depicted as a good leader whose destiny it is to make immortal the name of the Mali Empire. He is a good leader because by going into exile he avoids bringing to a climax the intense rivalry between himself and his father's son. He returns only after the throne has been left vacant and has been usurped by a foreigner. [Some critics see] a political charter underlying the Sunjata epic: it instructs the king in how to deal with people, and the people about their rights and their duties towards the king. The king can be harsh and severe, but not unjust; he must respect the



forces of love, trust, allegiance, that keep society together. In a certain sense the hero, Sunjata, is a spiritual more than a physical force.

**Source:** Daniel P. Biebuyck, "The African Heroic Epic," in *Heroic Epic and Saga: An Introduction to the World's Great Folk Epics*, edited by Felix J. Oinas, Indiana University Press, 1978, pp. 336-38.

## Adaptations

The story of Sundiata is told in part by a master griot in the film *Keital*. The griot teaches a young boy his own worth by sharing with him the story of his ancestor, Sundiata. The 1994 motion picture directed by Dani Kouyate is available on videocassette from California Newsreel. The film is in Jula and French with English subtitles.

A children's retelling of the epic, *Sundiata: Lion King of Mali*, was written and beautifully illustrated by David Wisniewki in 1992. It was published by Clarion Books.

The Disney full-length animated movie *The Lion King* incorporates many elements of traditional African oral narrative. The cartoon's plot resembles that of *Sundiata* in several respects.



## Topics for Further Study

The griot plays an important role in Malinke society and in sustaining and developing the oral texts of such epics as *Sundiata*. Find one or more passages from the text of *Sundiata* in which the griot's art is discussed. Contrast that image with the image of the historian in American or European cultures.

Explore expressions of friendship in the epic. Who are the important sets of friends? What traits are admired in friends? How do friends help Sundiata accomplish his destiny?

Animal imagery plays an important role in the epic. What does this imagery add to your reading of the epic? Give examples from both this work and twentieth-century books or movies.

Sundiata divides his empire into parts at the end of the text. Contrast his system of administration and justice with that of present-day Mali or that of your own country.

Most of the women who appear in *Sundiata* are defined by their relationships to men. Then-actions are considered important chiefly for the ways that they impact male characters. Are any of this epic's women characters defined wholly on their own terms? Consider some differences between the status of women in thirteenth-century Mali culture and late twentieth-century American culture. Is it ever appropriate to apply the standards of one culture to the literature of another? Can a modern American or European student find anything to value in a work of art produced by a culture that differs radically from the student's own?

Compare the plot of the full-length animated Disney film *The Lion King* with that of *Sundiata*. Discuss what you see as similarities and differences between the thirteenth-century epic and the 1994 cartoon movie.



# Compare and Contrast

**1200s:** Sundiata consolidates a vast empire stretching over most of West Africa and including many different peoples.

**1900s:** A colony for many years, Mali receives her independence from France in 1960. The former French colonies are divided into many different countries, often with disputed borders. An ongoing border conflict with Burkina is not resolved until 1986.

**1200s:** The Keita clan rules the Malinke people, and Sundiata's empire includes many ethnic groups throughout West Africa. Sundiata divides Mali into administrative regions, remaining chief ruler of the region.

**1900s:** Members of the Keita clan remain chiefs of a province in Mali, but the government is now a republic.

**1990s:** President Alpha Oumar Konare is elected in 1992. Prime Minister Ibrahim Boubacar Keita heads the government elected in 1994..

**1200s:** Mali is largely an agricultural state, with gold and salt mining later providing additional trading materials. The unit of exchange is most often the cowry shell, occasionally gold.

**1900s:** Mali remains an agricultural state, with gold, cotton, and livestock being the main export commodities.

**1990s:** The currency used in Mali today is the CFA, shared with most countries in the former French West Africa.

**1200s:** Hunting is the main occupation of the ruling class. The Keitas are known to be great hunters, and Sundiata and his father are often referred to as "lions" for their hunting ability.

**1900s:** Expanding human population, over-hunting, and poaching by Africans and Europeans depletes much of Mali's wildlife.

**1990s:** Significant conservation efforts, including two national wild game preserves, aim at preserving Mali's wildlife heritage.

## What Do I Read Next?

Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) relates the clash between African and European culture during colonial days, using a style very similar to that of the oral historian.

Camara Laye recounts another version of the Sundiata story in his *The Guardian of the Word: Kouma Lafdld Kouma*, translated from French into English in 1980.

*The Children of Segou*, translated into English in 1989, is Maryse Conde's fictional account of the Bambara kingdom in Mali at the end of the late eighteenth century.

A collection titled *West African Folktales* (1993) by Jack Berry introduces the reader to the spoken art of West Africa in a series of short tales.





## Further Study

Biebuyck, Daniel P "Heroic Songs of the Mande Hunters," in *African Folklore*, edited by Richard M Dorson, Doubleday, 1972, pp. 275-93

Biebuyck explores *Sundiata* and other African epics in detail.

Camara Laye, *The Guardian of the Word-Kouma Lafolo Kouma*, translated by James Kirkup, Aventura, 1984, 223 p

Examination of African oral traditions, focusing on the role of the griot in Mandingo culture.

Imperato, Pascal James. *Historical Dictionary of Mali*, Scarecrow Press, 1996, 362 p.

Many of the characters in *Sundiata* are included as entries in this dictionary. Imperato's chronology of Mali shows the political and social changes that have taken place in Mali from its early history. The Introduction supplies information about present-day Mali, including data about resources, economy, and politics.

*Mali- A Search for Direction*, Westview Press, 1989, 170 p.

Imperato takes particular interest in the political climate of present-day Mali and its relationship with its neighbors and the global community, including U.S.-Malian relations.

Levtzion, Nehemia. *Ancient Ghana and Mali*, New York, N.Y : Africana Publishing Company, 1980, 289 p. One of the few sources on the historical period of *Sundiata* written in English. Levtzion treats all aspects of society, from life at court to the economy and religion.

"Miller, Christopher "Orality Through Literacy: Mande Verbal Art after the Letter," in *The Southern Review*, Vol. 23, no. 1, Winter, 1987, pp. 84-105.

Miller explores the role of the griot in Malian society and as represented in various versions of *Sundiata*.

Niane, Djibril Tamsir *Recherches sur l'Empire du Mali au Moyen Age*, Presence Africaine, 1975, 112 p.

This short book, as of 1997 only available in French, gives an account of Niane's historical research before his eventual transcription of Kouyaté's version of *Sundiata*. He chronicles the history of the Keita dynasty and the impressive accomplishments of *Sundiata*.

Pickett, G. D, translator. *Sundiata: an epic of old Mali*. Longman, 1973.



Pickett translated the epic from D.T Niane's French version with reference to Niane's original Malinke' notes He includes a short preface from Niane's edition that explains the art of the griot

Shelton, A. J. "The Problem of Gnot Interpretation and the Actual Causes of War in Soundjata" in *Presence Africaine*, n.s.66,1968,pp 145-52

Contrasts the historical and literary accounts of Sundiata's battles.



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## **Introduction**

### **Purpose of the Book**

The purpose of *Epics for Students (EfS)* is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's *For Students* Literature line, *EfS* is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on *classic* novels



frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of EfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

### Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of EfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel; and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals—helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

### How Each Entry Is Organized



Each entry, or chapter, in EfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- **Introduction:** a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- **Author Biography:** this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- **Plot Summary:** a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- **Characters:** an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in *Invisible Man*—the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- **Themes:** a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- **Style:** this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- **Historical Context:** This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- **Critical Overview:** this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- **Criticism:** an essay commissioned by EfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).



- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an "at-a-glance" comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

### Other Features

EfS includes "The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature," a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Epics for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the EfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the EfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.



Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

### Citing Epics for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Epics for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from EfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Epics for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from EfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Epics for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of EfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Epics for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of EfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

### We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Epics for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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