

SUNDIATA: AN EPIC OF OLD MALI

Nobody knows exactly how long the griots (storyteller historians) of West Africa have been telling stories about Sundiata, the prince of Mali. We can be pretty sure that Sundiata was a real person, and really a ruler of Mali, because the Arab historian Ibn Khaldun mentions Sundiata, only about 150 years after his reign. But nobody knows how old these stories are. The oldest written record of the story of Sundiata goes back about 100 years, to about 1895, but the story is probably much older than that.

I am a griot. It is I, Djeli Mamoudou Kouyate... Since time immemorial the Kouyates have been in the service of the princes of Mali; we are vessels of speech, we are the repositories which harbor secrets many centuries old. My word is pure and free of all untruth; it is the word of my father; it is the word of my father's father. I will give you my father's words just as I received them; royal griots do not know what lying is. Listen to my word, you who want to know; by my mouth you will learn the history of Mali.

The story begins before Sundiata was born, when a fortuneteller told King Maghan of Mali that he must marry an ugly woman, and their son would be Mali's greatest king ever.

I see two hunters coming to your city; they have come from afar and a woman accompanies them. Oh, that woman! She is ugly, she is hideous, she bears on her back a disfiguring hump. Her monstrous eyes seem to have been merely laid on her face, but, mystery of mysteries, this is the woman you must marry, sire, for she will be the mother of him who will make the name of Mali immortal for ever.

Sure enough, two hunters came by after a while with a very ugly woman named Sogolon. They told the king the wild story of how they had met Sogolon. They had been traveling in the distant land of Do, when they heard of an amazing wild buffalo that was attacking the countryside. The King of Do had offered a great reward to any who could kill the beast, so they decided to try. While searching for the buffalo, they came across a sad old woman by the side of a river who was so hungry that she was crying. Out of kindness, the hunters shared their food with her.

When she had eaten well she said, "I know that you are going to try your luck against the Buffalo of Do... Many others before you have met their death... but, young hunter, your heart is generous and it is you who will be [successful]. I am the buffalo you are looking for, and your generosity has defeated me... There is one condition, hunter." "What condition?" I replied impatiently. "The king promises the hand of the most beautiful maiden of Do to the victor. When all the people of Do are gathered and you are told to choose her whom you want as a wife you must search in the crowd and you will find a very ugly maid-uglier than you can imagine-sitting apart on an observation platform; it is her you must choose... for she is my [daughter]."

The two hunters offered this woman to the king, saying that she was worthy only of him. So, based on the word of the fortune teller, King Maghan married Sogolon, and soon they had a son, and that was Sundiata.

Now King Maghan already had a son, with a different wife, and his first wife, Sassouma, was very jealous when she saw that King Maghan intended Sundiata to be the next king, instead of his older brother, Dankaran Touman. How happy Sassouma was when the little boy, Sundiata, turned out to be no good at all! He was ugly like his mother, and slow - even when he was three years old, he still couldn't walk and he could hardly talk at all.

At the age of three he still crawled along on all-fours while children of the same age were already walking. He had nothing of the great beauty of his father Maghan. He had a head so big that he seemed unable to support it... He spoke little and his severe face never relaxed into a smile. No matter how great the destiny promised for Sundiata might be, the throne could not be given to someone who had no power in his legs; if the jinn (spirits) loved him, let them begin by giving him the use of his legs.

King Maghan was worried too, but even so he respected the prophecy, and so when he was dying he gave his best griot - his advisor - to Sundiata to help him become king. When King Maghan died, Sassouma made sure her own son, Sundiata's older brother Dankaran became king. And Sundiata still couldn't walk, so he couldn't do anything about it. But one day Sassouma was making fun of Sundiata's mother, Sogolon, because Sundiata still could not walk, and she started to cry and then got angry. Sundiata then promised his mother that he would walk. Sundiata asked for an iron stick, and he used the iron stick, slowly, little by little, sweating and shaking, to pull himself up, and then he could stand! He pushed so hard on the iron stick that it bent into a bow.

He crept on all-fours and came to the iron bar. Supporting himself on his knees and one hand, with the other hand he picked up the iron bar without any effort and stood it up vertically. Now he was resting on nothing but his knees and held the bar with both his hands. A deathly silence had gripped all those present. Sundiata closed his eyes, held tight, the muscles in his arms tensed. With a violent jerk he threw his weight on to it and his knees left the ground. In a great effort he straightened up and was on his feet at one go-but the great bar of iron was twisted and had taken the form of a bow!... When Sogolon saw her son... she sang... "Oh day, day of joy; Allah Almighty, you never created a finer day. So my son is going to walk!"

Now that Sundiata could stand, he was in great danger from Sassouma, who feared he would try to become king. So Sogolon took Sundiata away to hide while he grew up and got stronger. They traveled around together from kingdom to kingdom, learning to fight and learning wisdom. Then Sundiata heard that the evil king of Sosso, Soumaoro, had invaded Mali and thrown out King Dankaran! To make things worse, Soumaoro kidnapped Balla Fasseke, Sundiata's griot!

One day when the king was away, Balla Fasseke managed to get right into the most secret chamber of the palace where Soumaoro safeguarded his fetishes (magical items). When he had pushed the door open he was transfixed with amazement at what he saw. The walls of the chamber were tapestried (decorated) with human skins and there was one in the middle of the room on which the king sat; around an earthenware jar nine heads formed a circle; when Balla had opened the door the water had become disturbed and a monstrous snake had raised its head... He saw on a perch above the bed three owls which seemed to be asleep; on the far wall hung strangely-shaped weapons, curved swords and knives with three cutting edges. He looked at the skulls attentively and recognized the nine kings killed by Soumaoro. To the right of the door he discovered a great balafon (xylophone), bigger than he had ever seen in Mali.

Instinctively he pounced upon it and sat down to play. The griot always has a weakness for music, for music is the griot's soul. He began to play. He had never heard such a melodious balafon. Though scarcely touched by the hammer, the resonant wood gave out sounds of an infinite sweetness, notes clear and as pure as gold dust... He played with all his soul and the whole room was filled with wonderment. The drowsy owls, eyes half closed, began to move their heads as though with satisfaction... The nine skulls resumed their earthly forms and blinked at hearing the solemn 'Vulture Tune'; with its head resting on the rim, the snake seemed to listen from the jar. Balla Fasseke was pleased at the effect his music had had on the strange inhabitants of this ghoulish chamber, but he quite understood that this balafon was not at all like any other. It was that of a great sorcerer. Soumaoro was the only one to play this instrument. After each victory he would come and sing his own praises. No griot had ever touched it... Soumaoro was constantly in touch with this xylophone and no matter how far away he was, one only had to touch it for him to know that someone had got into his secret chamber...

Right away Sundiata began to get an army together to attack Soumaoro. Sundiata went from kingdom to kingdom all over West Africa, getting more and more archers and horsemen and fighters. When Sundiata was ready, he attacked Soumaoro. At first Soumaoro's magic was too much for Sundiata, and he was sure he would lose the battle.

Soumaoro was now within spear range and Sundiata reared up his horse and hurled his weapon. It whistled away and bounced off Soumaoro's chest as off a rock and fell to the ground. Sogolon's son bent his bow but with a motion of the hand Soumaoro caught the arrow in flight and showed it to Sundiata as if to say "Look, I am invincible." Furious, Sundiata snatched up his spear and with his head bent charged at Soumaoro, but as he raised his arm to strike his enemy he noticed that Soumaoro had disappeared!

He was very discouraged. But just then his griot came back! They had escaped from Soumaoro, and they had learned all his magic. They told Sundiata how to beat Soumaoro. So Sundiata beat Soumaoro in a great battle, and he became king of Mali. Then he told all his allies, from all the other kingdoms, that they should all join together in a big empire, and so they did. Sundiata ruled this empire until he died, and his sons and his grandsons ruled after him. The story was passed down through the generations by griots, trained in the telling of the history of Mali.

Griots know the history of kings and kingdoms and that is why they are the best counselors of kings. Every king wants to have a singer to perpetuate his memory, for it is the griot who rescues the memories of kings from oblivion, as men have short memories. Kings have prescribed destinies just like men, and seers who probe the future know it. They have knowledge of the future, whereas we griots are depositories of the knowledge of the past. But whoever knows the history of a country can read its future. Other peoples use writing to record the past, but this invention' has killed the faculty of memory among them. They do not feel the past any more, for writing lacks the warmth of the human voice. The prophets did not write and their words have been all the more vivid as a result. What paltry learning is that which is congealed in dumb books! I, Djeli Mamoudou Kouyaté, am the result of a long tradition. For generations we have passed on the history of kings from father to son. The narrative was passed on to me without alteration and I deliver it without alteration, for I received it free from all untruth.

This reading was adapted from two sources. The quoted portions are from Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali by D.T. Niane, based on the oral story of the Malian griot Maoudou Kouyaté. The remaining portions are taken from a HistoryForKids.org article by Dr. Karen Carr.

Directions: Read “Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali” and answer the questions based on the story.

1. What factors made Sundiata a unique child?
2. What made Soumaoro a powerful enemy?
3. According to the Griot telling the story, what makes his account trustworthy? Do you agree?
4. Do you think this story has been exaggerated at all? Give examples.
5. What evidence do you see of religious syncretism between Islam and traditional African folk religion? Give examples.
6. Is oral history more or less trustworthy than written history? Why? (Examine both sides)