

Sundiata: The Epic of Mali, West Africa

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In Africa, the tradition of storytelling goes back to ancient times. Stories, folktales, songs, and proverbs are often preserved by people called *griots*, who make learning about history interesting through storytelling performances. In thousands of small villages across the great continent of Africa every day, children and adults gather to hear stories of the past; what life was like, how wars were fought and won, and who were the heroes of the time. In the West African land of Mali, griots to this day tell the tale of Sundiata, the ancient warrior king who saved the Malian people from falling under the rule of a ruthless invader.

It is the 13th century, and the country of Mali covers an enormous area in western Africa. Within its borders are vast deserts, sticky jungles, deep rivers, long shoreline, and grassy savannah; and a great number of animals roam freely. The people of this land are known as the Malinke (mah-LIN-keh) people, and they are ruled by King Maghan who is said to possess the spirit of a lion. He has the brave and sturdy heart of a warrior, and at this time is trying desperately to protect his precious land from being conquered by the evil sorcerer king of neighboring Ghana, King Sumanguru.

King Sumanguru longs to expand his dwindling empire to include the lush lands that Mali encompasses, but he knows he must be patient and build up a strong army before any great battle can be won. He knows the Malinke people to be strong, and King Sumanguru does not want to lose.

As King Sumanguru patiently and stealthily waits, King Maghan leads a happy life. He rules his vast empire gracefully, and he is a kind and generous leader. One day, his counselor, or *griot*, announces the arrival of a maiden named Sogolon. This woman is being brought to King Maghan as a gift for the slaying of a dangerous buffalo, and it is said that she is like the buffalo, possessing its brave spirit. The *griot* advises his king to take the woman as his second wife, for any son born of buffalo and lion will indeed be great.

King Maghan does marry her, and for a long time lives in happiness. After many, many years, the king has fathered many children; ten of which are with Sogolon. With his first wife, Sassouma, he has only one son, who is his first-born and legal heir to the throne. Sassouma wishes for more children, but she is old now and it would be impossible for her to have more. She is terribly envious of Sogolon's massive brood, and places curses upon them every day.

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When Sogolon gives birth to her eleventh child, a son, Sassouma, calls upon the gods to curse all of Sogolon's offspring. The evil Sassouma rejoices when one dark night, 10 of Sogolon's children are kidnapped and never seen again. Little does she know that it is King Sumanguru who has plotted this evil kidnapping in order to weaken the Malinke kingdom so he himself can one day assume the throne. King Sumanguru has spared Sassouma's last born because he was born weak, without the ability to walk or speak. He knows this child will pose no threat to him.

Sassouma rejoices even more when it is discovered that Sogolon's last born, who is called Sundiata, is not able to speak or walk. She knows that her own son will someday become king, and she is pleased. King Maghan is devastated at the loss of his great family, but still has hope; based on the advice of his *griot*, that Sundiata can one day become king. As the king grows old and realizes that his time on earth is ending, he makes it clear that his throne should be passed to Sundiata, despite his physical deficiencies. Before his death, he bestows upon Sundiata a gift: his own *griot*, Balla, who will be a counselor for him in times of need. It is then that Sundiata speaks his first words, and King Maghan is confident in his choice of Sundiata as successor to his throne.

After the death of King Maghan, however, the Malinke people disregard his wishes and make Sassouma's son the king. Sassouma also banishes Balla, Sundiata's newly appointed *griot*, to the court of Sumanguru. Sogolon and Sundiata are ridiculed and chased from the kingdom, left to wander for many years searching refuge. As they wander through the deserted lands, Sundiata grows stronger, more physically competent, and begins to speak. He is now the one who assists his ailing mother to walk, holding her arm and supporting her bent frame.

Together they journey from desert to forest, dry riverbed to lush jungle, imploring villages and kingdoms for shelter and nourishment. Greatly fearing the wrath of Sassouma and the new king, however, most rulers deny them assistance and the travelers are forced to continue like that for many years. Finally, after much traveling, Sundiata and his mother reach the city of Mema. It is here that they are finally granted refuge, and are able to learn about what has befallen the Malinke empire.

By this time, Sundiata has grown into a strong and powerful man. He no longer resembles the sickly child he was when he left his own village.

When the people of Mema come to him with news of Sumanguru invading his land, he knows he must go back to claim his rightful throne. The people of Mema tell him that the king and his mother have fled, and the people are lost without a leader. Only Sundiata can save them now.

There is no question in Sundiata's mind of what must be done. He gathers many armies from Mema and surrounding towns, and riding on strong horses and carrying long silver spears, Sundiata leads them heroically back into his own countryside. For many days, Sundiata rides like this, searching for Sumanguru. As he is riding, he is startled by a horse that draws up beside him. It is to his great delight that he recognizes his old griot Balla who has been sent away to the court of Sumanguru many years ago. Balla has alleged false loyalty to Sumanguru, thereby discovering his secrets and his weaknesses. Now Balla explains to Sundiata how to weaken Sumanguru with his nemesis, the spur of a white rooster.

From Balla, Sundiata takes a poisoned arrow with this spur at its tip and continues to search for Sumanguru. Soon he spies the great and terrifying sorcerer standing on a mountain-top nearby, surveying the raging battle with delight in his eyes. Sundiata stops his horse, takes aim, and lets loose the arrow which grazes Sumanguru's shoulder. Startled, the wicked king sees what has impaled him and he screams in anguish, knowing that it is to be his demise. Legend has it that he runs into the stone caverns where he becomes one with the gray cave walls.

Witnessing the retreat of their leader, Sumanguru's armies admit defeat and escape into the deserts never to return again. Sundiata is crowned the rightful king in a ceremony that brings together all the great leaders of the powerful Malinke lands, and the now all-powerful king who was once just a weak and sickly child rules his people for many years.

Through the labors of the brave Sundiata, the nation of Mali became one of the richest in West Africa. As a gateway into the great desert, Mali was a crossroads for trade in gold, copper, and salt; all extremely valuable commodities in the 13th century. Sundiata had great influence over the creation of this empire, and went down in history as the one who established the foundations of the Malinke civilization.

