

# From Djenne to Mali



## QUESTIONING CITY & EMPIRE IN THE CLASSROOM



# Outcomes



The purpose of this discussion is to help instructors to prepare students to:

- Complicate the ideas of “city” and “empire” as part of the process or recognizing the complexities of human history.
- Understand Mande societies in their own terms (to some degree)
- Use common sources about Mali for the classroom, including *Sundiata: An Epic of Mali* and *Keita*, to enrich their understanding of Mande history, values, and heritage in the past and today.

# Part I: Making “Mande” in Djenne-Jeno



# Some questions to start



- What did pre-Islamic sub-Saharan African societies look like?
- Did their inhabitants construct cities and states?
- Why do these questions matter?
- How did generations of “professional” historians, political scientists, and archaeologists respond to these questions?
- How would your students respond to these questions?

# What is a city?



- any site that is labeled a city should include evidence of: a hierarchical class structure, monumental architecture, dense population, literacy, science, long-distance trade, and a state bureaucracy that among other tasks redistributes food or wealth. – V. Gordon Childe, 1950
- One characteristic that can be used to distinguish a small city from a large town is organized government. A city has professional administrators, regulations, and some form of taxation (food and other necessities or means to trade for them) to feed the government workers. Societies that live in cities are often called [civilizations](#). A city can also be defined as an absence of physical space between people and firms. – Wikipedia, 2005-2013

# Did Africans build cities?



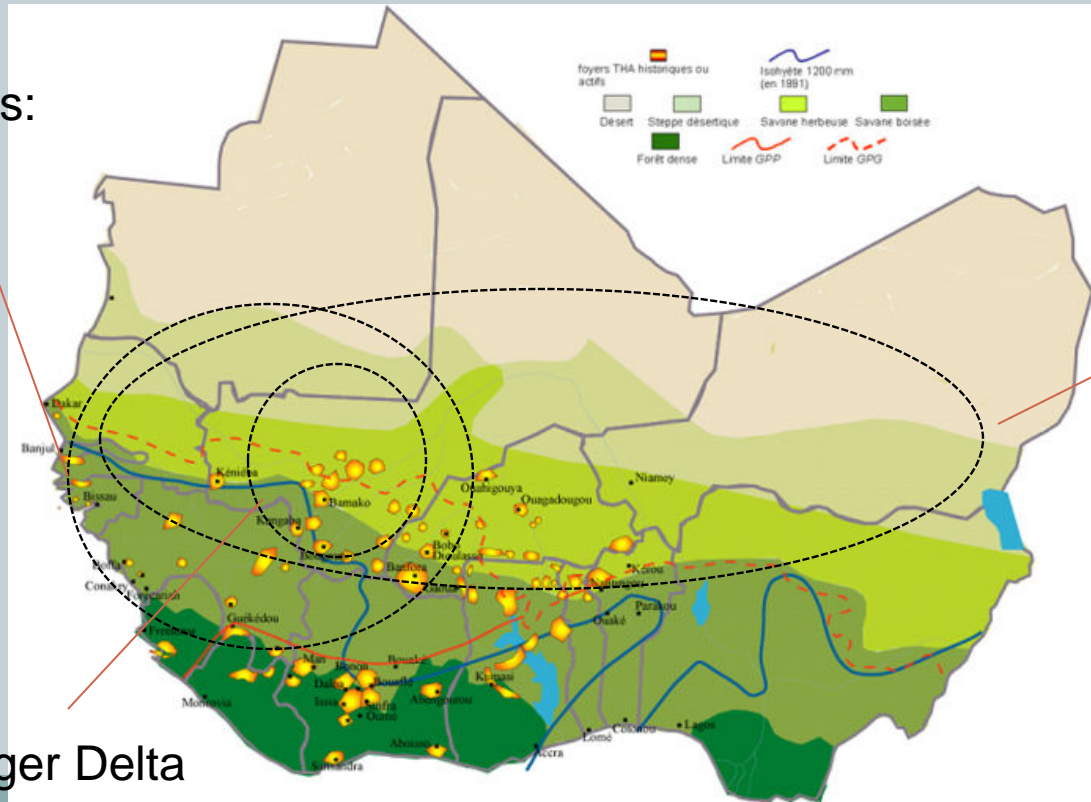
- In the master narrative told by colonial-era European historians about W. Africa, “cities” could not have been invented by black Africans, but must have been imported by outsiders such as Arabs.
- Great Zimbabwe is one example – European scholars claimed it was built by: Phoenicians, Hebrews, Arabs, or Hindus

# Mande-speaking Sahel



Mande-speakers:

- Soninke
- Manding
- Bamana
- Mende

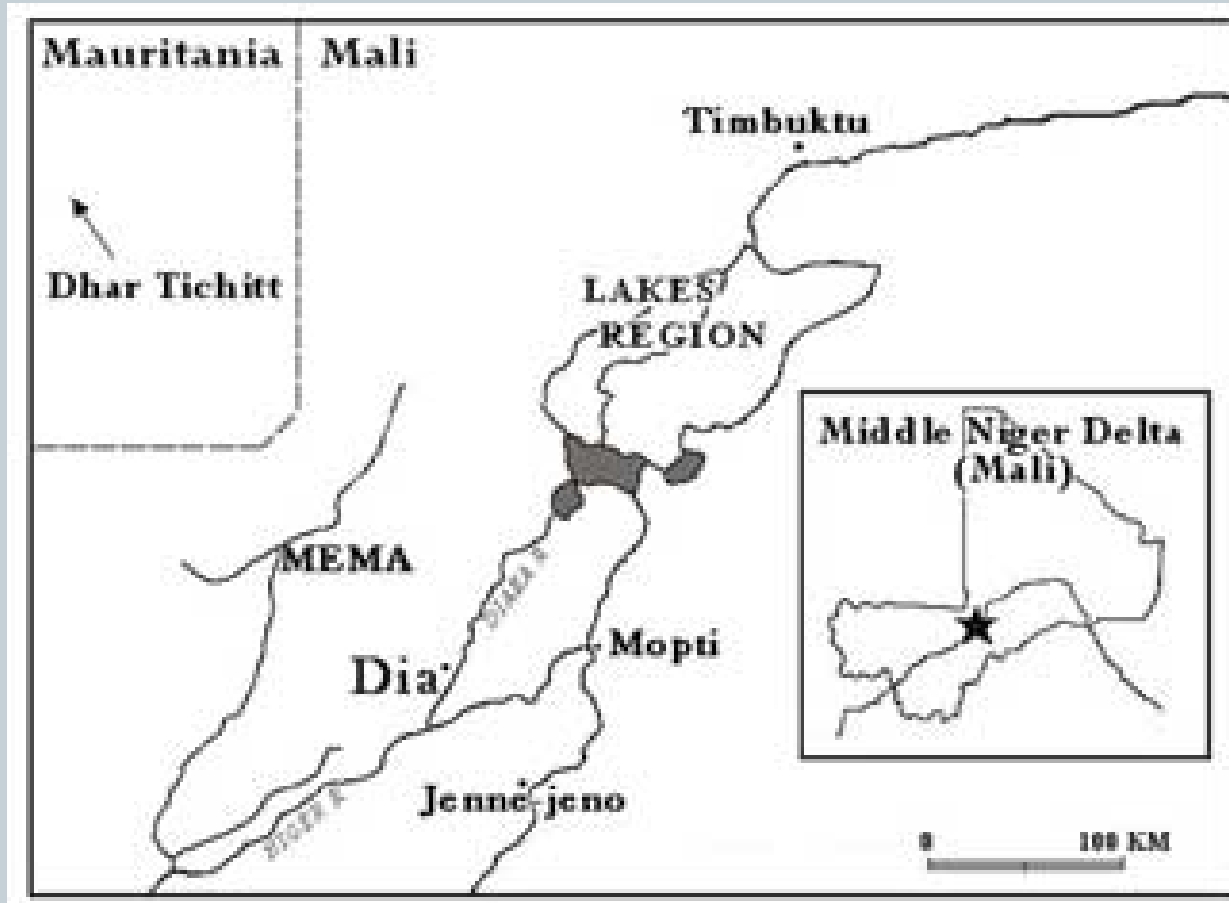


Sahel

- semiarid
- transitional
- grasslands
- riverine
- oases

Inland Niger Delta

# Pre-Islamic archaeological sites of the Inland Niger Delta





# Roderick McIntosh' 1977 field journal on Djenne-Jeno



- “In the morning we went out, at last, to Djenne-djeno. It’s about three kilometers over the floodplain to the south-east of the city of Djenne. The site is absolutely incredible – it defies description. It seems to be divided into two parts, the larger of which must be almost a half-kilometer in length. It is literally a mound of potsherds.”
- Looking back, 2005: “In a short time, this site would utterly transform our thinking about the origins of cities in Africa south of the Sahara.”

# What did they find?



Table 5.1. *Sequence of development at Jenné-jeno, reconstructed from excavation*

Jenné-jeno	Phase I/II 250 BC–AD 400	Phase III AD 400–900	Phase IV AD 900–1400
<b>SITE AREA</b>	12 ha–AD 100 25 ha–AD 400	33 ha (maximum extent) by AD 800	gradual contraction after AD 1100 abandoned by AD 1400
<b>SUBSISTENCE ECONOMY</b>	domestic rice, wild Brachiaria, rare domestic sorghum & millet; cattle, dwarf ovicaprids, antelope, fishing water fowl	antelope decline, dwarf ovicaprids increase; large and small cattle breeds present; all other elements remain constant	same as Phase III, but only small cattle present
<b>ARCHITECTURE</b>	daub-smeared pole-and- mat huts	banco huts c. 3 m diam.	cylindrical mud brick round huts c. 3 m. diam c. AD 900 city wall c. AD 1000 rectilinear mud brick houses appear
<b>EXCHANGE/ TRADE</b>	iron, stone from up to 50 km distant; rare glass beads from Mediterranean sphere	copper appears AD 500 (nearest source 300 km); gold present by AD 900 (nearest source 600 km); geometric painted ware distributed from Jenné-jeno to Lakes Region	from AD 1000, North African brass, glass, spindle whorls
<b>BURIAL</b>	single flexed inhumation; no grave goods	large funerary urns in cemetary precincts; inhumation also practiced; no grave goods	funerary urns in cemeteries or associated with residences; no grave goods
<b>SYMBOLIC</b>		potsherd pavements	terracotta statuettes; warrior styles appear c. AD 1200

# What did they find?



- 69 simultaneously estimated *tells* (hillocks)
- Population: 15,000-27,000 for main site and satellites c. 900 CE, perhaps 42,000 for entire urban complex
- Specific sites for smelting iron, ceramics, grain production (rice, sorghum, millet), animal husbandry, fishing, and many small ritual/decorative sites



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# What did they not find?

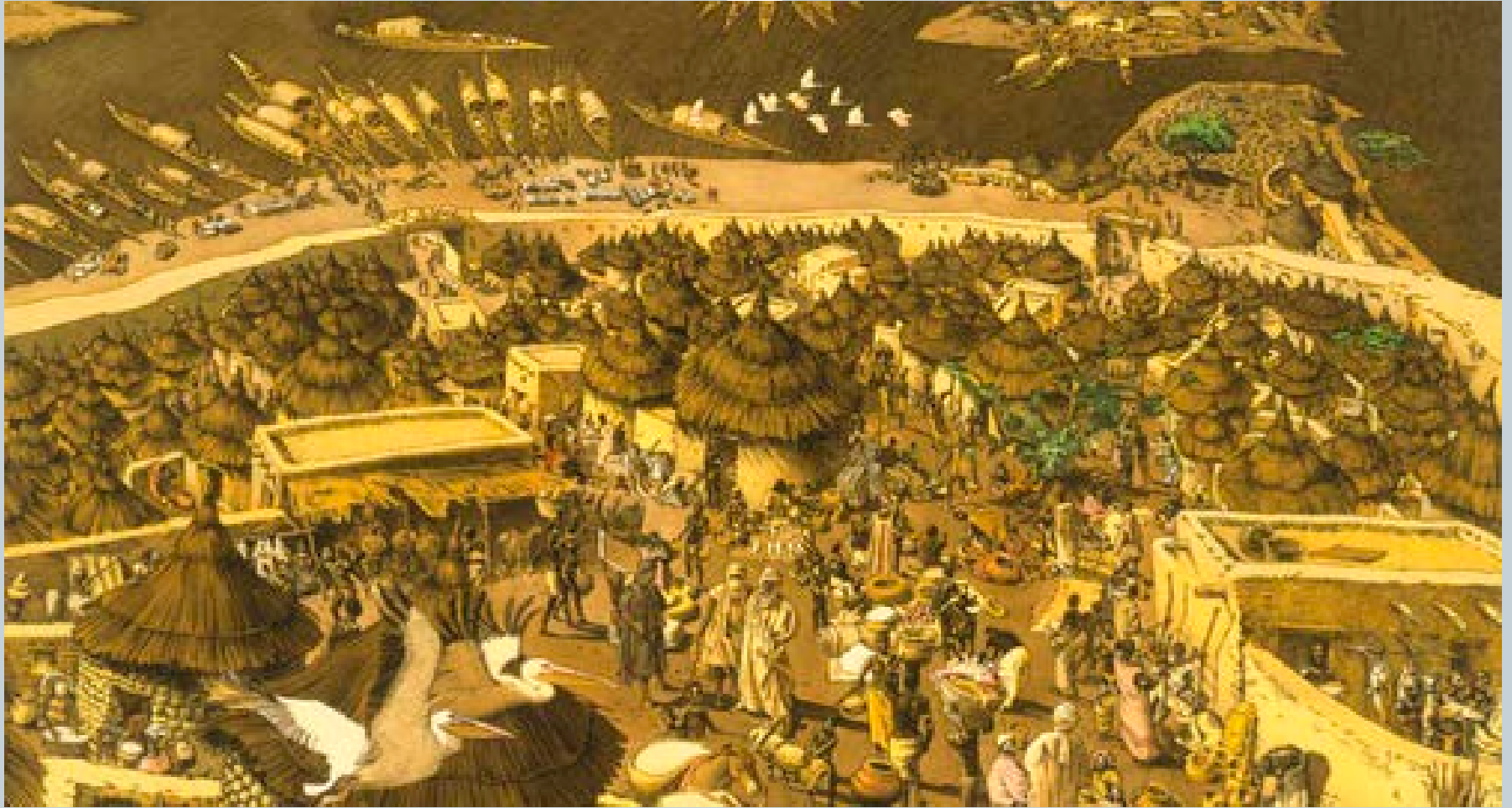


In the pre-Islamic period:

- No “citadels”
- No “temples”
- No ancient city walls
- No evidence of literacy
- No evidence of state bureaucracy
- No evidence of “chiefs” or “kings”



# Was this a city?



# How did the “city” work?: “Specialization heterarchy”



- Roderick MacIntosh argues that several ethnicities and many families co-existed because they shared a core set of **ethics**: the Mande core rules.
- Authority came through a different route than “chiefs”.... Through spiritual “knowers”: bards/griots, smiths, sculptors, and food-production experts
- The “knowers” are all acknowledged as powerful, and are located at a variety of (relatively) equally valued sites scattered across the landscapes.
- Decisions involve the consultation of the various specialized knowers.

# An alternate view of heterarchy: lineage negotiation



- Susan Keech Macintosh argues that heterarchy came in the form of a “federation” of family/**lineage** heads (each representing a “lineage spirit” or ancestors who really owned the land).
- Each lineage thus occupied its own *tell*, and consulted each other.
- No centralized leaders, but rather a model of multiple lineages negotiating.
- This may have been because land was freely available, and there was no real source of individual power.
- **This will be important when we discuss Sundiata!**

# The technology



- Beneath this, Djenné-Jeno had all of the technology that drives most cities:
  - Domesticated animals (c.9000 BCE)
  - Domesticated plants (c.4000 BCE possibly)
  - Iron (c.500 BCE)
  - Long-distance trade





# Islam



- Entered West Africa c.850 CE as a “trading” religion.
- Found “cities” already existing
- May have then fundamentally altered the existing system by introducing “prestige goods” as a route to individual power.



# The 4<sup>th</sup> age of the Sahelian city



- Now the cities had citadels



# Part II: Sunjata's Mali



## SOURCE, HISTORY, HERITAGE

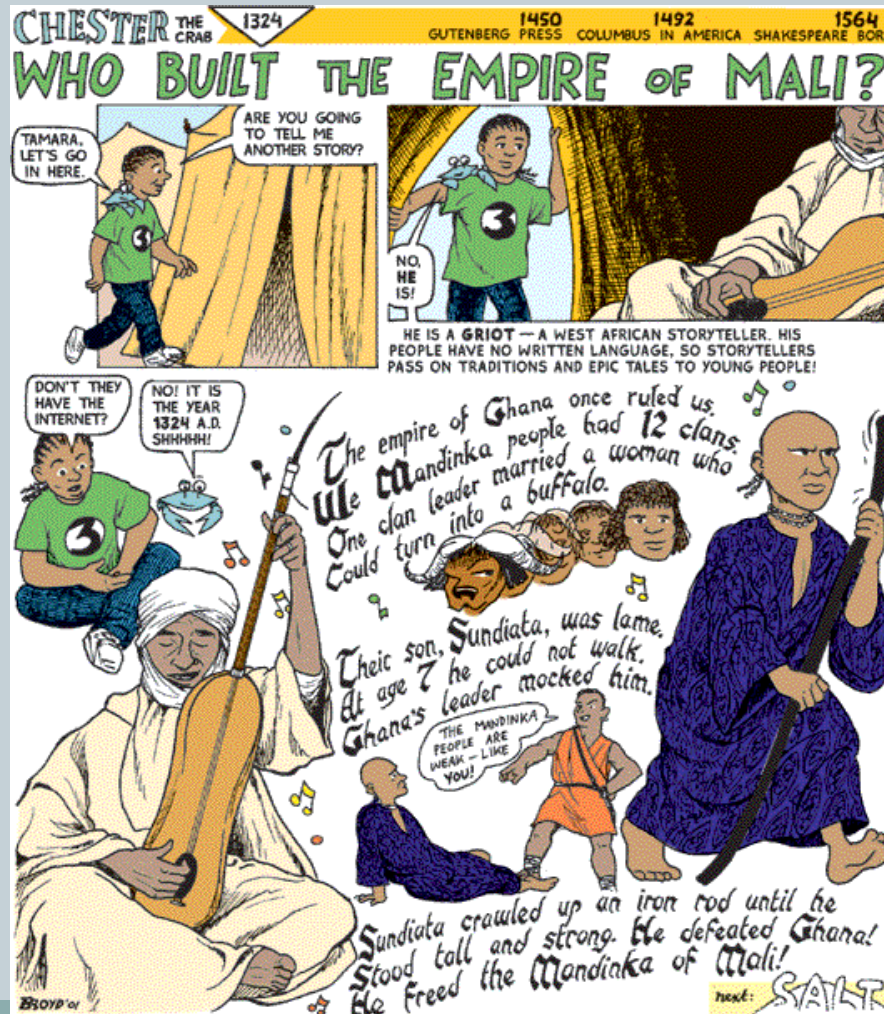


# Mali in the world history classroom



- Most common S-S African state/society discussed in pre-1500 world history (before: “Bantu”, “Ghana”, “Songhai” in that order)
- Features in world history AP
- Commonly discussed as an “Empire” with a “King” or “Emperor”
- Keywords: “gold”, “Arabic”, “Timbuktu”, Mansa Musa”, “Islam”, “African civilization”
- What is the connection between pre-Islamic Mand societies in the West African Sahel and the state built by Sogolon Djata (Sundiata)?

# How do you teach about Mali?



# A debate about sources (and epistemology)



**THE HISTORY OF THE SUNDIATA EPIC AND  
THE PRODUCTION OF *SUNDIATA* AND *KEITA***

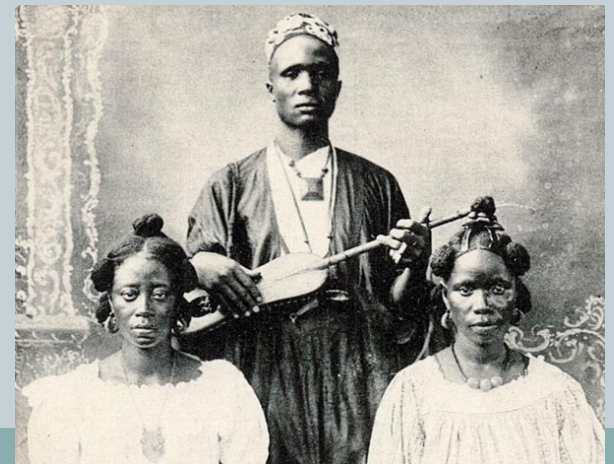
# The debate



- The Sundiata epic is “a pivot in the historical traditions of the Malinke” and can be used for purposes of “historical reconstruction” – Levtzion
- “I should regard with extreme suspicion any aspect of [Sunjata’s] life reported in the oral tradition. Indeed, I would need convincing that his career as it is recounted by the griots bears any relationship to the career of the historical Sunjata”. - Innes

# 4 reasons why oral traditions *might be* especially useful in the Mande-speaking world

- The professionalism of the “griot” or “jali” – the knower of the past.
- Their mnemonic (memory-enhancing) techniques using objects, places, and poetry.
- The wide range of versions of the same story collected from different places and times.
- Transmission along family lines.





# Ivor Wilks' arguments 1



- Wilks looks at a number of sung versions of the story presented by griots. He argues that:
  - The songs usually have “complex patterns of alliteration, assonance, and repetition”... the words in each line are “fixed or almost so.... There is little variation of text in different presentations”. However, there are sometimes improvisations.
  - The narrative between the songs did sometimes vary.... Perhaps the songs were the important events or messages?
  - The griots often tell us explicitly about the transmission process – whom they learned it from and so on... although these usually only go three generations back

# Wilks' arguments continued

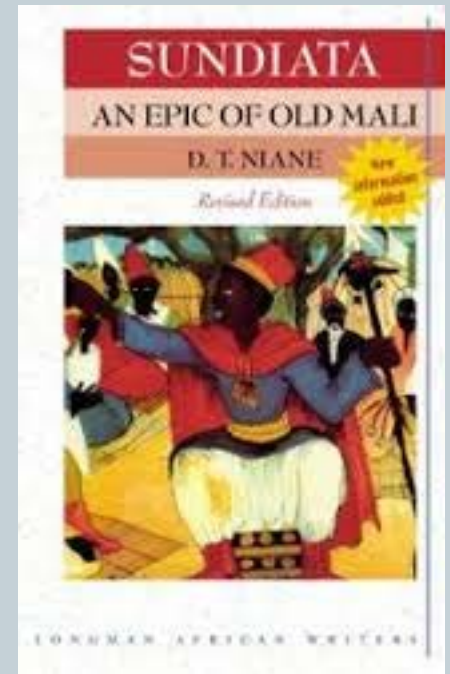


- The griots usually attribute their songs to some sort of “first singer” who sang the story to Sunjata during his lifetime.
  - The most common of these is Jankuma Duga or “Kouyate ancestor”
  - Wilks concludes that the songs are older than the narrative that accompanies them.

# D.T. Niane's "Sundiata"



- Transforms oral tradition into written text... it does not, of course, “sound” like the griots versions.
- Niane conflates the songs and the bridging narratives together, thus confusing “accuracy”.
- Based on the work of several griots (Kouyates)
- A specifically Afro-centric motivation, but intense adherence to detail.
- A synthesis.



# Dani Kouyaté's “Keita: The Heritage of the Griot”



- A descendant of the “Kouyate founder”?
- The work of a griot using new techniques (film) but from an old griot lineage.
- A specifically nationalist-traditionalist message of redemption, tradition, and anti-colonialism.
- Key idea is “heritage” – the rejection of western or colonial heritage/learning for “Mande Core Rules”?



# Three questions and the evidence



**TO THINK ABOUT**

# Question 1: Was Sunjata a Muslim?



- Wilks points out that Ibn Battuta (who visited the court of Mali during the period of Mansa Musa's rule c.1312-1327) writes this:
  - ✦ His grandfather "Sariq" Jata embraced Islam at the hands of the grandfather of this Mudrik (a visitor)."
- Ibn Khaldun also suggests the people of Mali (but not Sosso) were Muslims c.1393/1394
- HOWEVER: there was also clearly a process of "Islamicization" of the *narratives* (if not the songs!) as part of a contestation of identity among griots and Muslim scholars over the centuries.

# From Niane and Kouyaté



- The use of “magic”: male good, male bad, female good, female bad
- The role of Djinns
- Shape-shifting “totems”: Keita’s lion, Sogolon’s buffalo
- Sundiata’s ancestry: Bilali Bounoma and others

*What is the nature of West African Islam?*

## Question 2: Did Sundiata rule an “empire”?



- Western scholars have posited the “nation-state” and the “empire” as the heights of political development
- “Empires” signify power without contemporaneity, and thus the term as used in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is both positive and negative.
- Afro-centric scholars, however, in the 1970s applied the term in West Africa to indicate that early modern Africa states were just as large as their European counterparts: the “Lunda Empire”, the “Asante Empire”, the “Mali Empire”, etc.



# What is an empire?



- Center-periphery
- Control/sovereignty
- Uneven
- Difference

# Governance in Mali



- Core district (Mande Kaba) under **direct authority** of the Mansa
- Central provinces under “**segmentary**” **authority** of allied Mande families (*kafo*) acknowledging the Mansa as first among equals
- Periphery provinces largely conquered and ruled by **thin elite** of Mande-speakers, also semi-independent
- Cities like Timbuktu had imperial administrators **sharing power** with locally-appointed judges enforcing local law.

# Specialization heterarchy?



- The hunter and his cowries
- The smith and the forging of iron
- The griot

“And when they had smelted the ore they made it iron;  
and they forged the iron and made it into rods  
-two rods.

They put one into one of his hands,  
And they put the other into the other hand,  
And they said that he must get up.”

- Banna Kanute

**Sundiata’s epic  
journey as  
consultation?**

# Lineage heterarchy?



- From D.T. Niane

“The Kondés of the house of Do became henceforth the uncles of the imperial family of Keita, for the later... had to take a wife in Do.... No kin group was forgotten... each had its share in the division. To Fakoli Koroma, Sundiata gave the kingdom of Sosso, the majority of whose inhabitants were enslaved. Fakoli’s tribe, the Koromas... had the monopoly of the forge, that is, of iron working. Fakoli also received... part of the lands situated between the Bafing and Bagbé rivers. Wagadou (Ghana) and Mema kept their kings who continued to bear the title of Mansa, but these kingdoms acknowledged the suzerainty of the supreme Mansa....”

# Question 3: What do the sources suggest about constructions of gender?

“A man should be able to control his wife.  
But here we are with a woman who has more power than men.  
The woman should submit,  
Even if she has all the power.  
A woman should humble herself to her husband.  
Anything her husband tells her to do,  
She should obey.  
That is what will make your children what you want them to be.  
If a woman controls her husband,  
The child will not flourish,  
The child will be no good  
(Mamady Condé)

# More on gender



- Women and authority— good mothers, bad rulers? (Sogolon vs. Sassouma)
- Women and magic – sister and mother
- Women and heritage – Sogolon's Djata
- Male virtues – honesty, honor, prowess

## Ibn Battuta, in the 14<sup>th</sup> century:



Their women are of surpassing beauty, and are shown more respect than the men. These people are Muslims, punctilious in observing the hours of prayer, studying the books of law, and memorizing the Koran. Yet their women show no bashfulness before men and do not veil themselves, though they are assiduous in attending prayers. Any man who wishes to marry one of them may do so, but they do not travel with their husbands, and, even if one desired to do so, her family would not allow her to go. The women have their "friends" and "companions" amongst the men outside their own families.

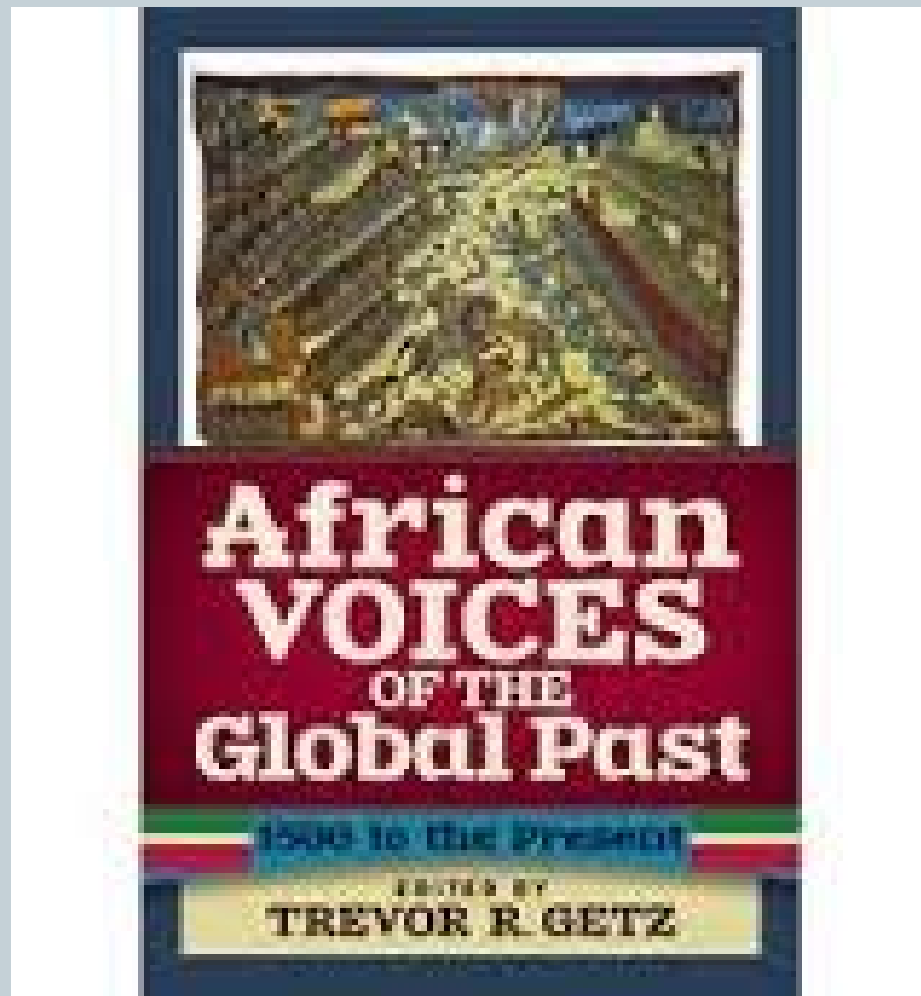
# Some concluding thoughts



- We can use Djenne-Jeno and Mali to introduce epistemological complexity to students in terms of “city” and “empire”
- We can use sources like *Sundiata: An Epic of Mali* and *Keita* to help students think about methodology and empiricism.
- In doing so, we can still help students to understand important content in terms of West African and world history.



# African Voices of the Global Past



# African Voices of the Global Past



- **1: Naming and Framing a Crime against Humanity: African Voices from the Transatlantic Slave System, c.1500-1900 - *Kwasi Konadu***
- **2: Prophetesses and “Native Capitalists”: African Voices from the Industrial Revolution, c.1760-1880 - *Trevor R. Getz***
- **3: When Satiety and Avarice Marry, Hunger is Born: African voices from the Colonial Era, c.1896-1945 - *Tim Carmichael***
- **4: Isaac Fadobeyo at The Battle of Nyron: African Voices from the First and Second World Wars, c.1914-1945 - *Saheed Aderinto***
- **5: Pathways to Decolonization: African Voices from the Fight for Independence, c.1880-1994 - *Peter Adebayo***
- **6: Moroccan Feminism as Universal Feminism: African Voices from the Feminist Struggle, c.1930-2000 - *Osire Glacier***