

## SUNDJATA

This story is told by a **jali** - or griot - an oral historian of West Africa. Sundjata (also known as Sundiata) was an actual person, the first King of Mali, born about 1210 A.D. The Battle of Karina (told about at the end of the story) took place in 1235 A.D. This version is abridged and adapted from three written versions of the Epic of Sundjata and with information and support from Yacine Kouyate from Mali. [Retold by Nick Bartel, 2015, for a teenage audience.]

*Yacine Kouyate playing a kora - often used by a jali in the telling of the epic of Sundjata.*



### Part One : The Jali Speaks

I am a jali, master of the art of **eloquence**, descendant of the royal historians. Since time **immemorial** my family has been in the service of the princes of Mali. We are the **vessels** of history and hold in our minds the secrets of many centuries. Through our speech we bring to life the **valiant** deeds of kings to younger generations. I teach kings the history of their ancestors so the lives of the ancients may guide them. I shall teach you your history so you may be guided, too. I shall teach you of our time of greatness. The past is only the seed of the future.

Listen, children of Mali. Don't doubt my words. What I say is what was told to me by my father, as was told by his father to him, and so on through the generations.

We are sworn to pass on our stories as we learned them.

Now listen to the story of Sundjata, the Lion King of Mali, as it was told from time beyond memory. Sundjata, the father of the bright country, the master of a hundred conquered kings! Sundjata, great among kings, and **peerless** among men, beloved of Allah for he was the last of the great conquerors! Sundjata, the greatest in a great line of kings.

The first kings of Mali were not **indigenous**. They came from the East and were descendants of a faithful servant of the Prophet Muhammad, may the peace of Allah be upon him. It was this **lineage** that held the power and they were initiated into the arts of hunting and healing. It was through them that their people conquered the neighboring lands and they became kings of a vast empire known as Mali. From this noble line came Maghan, the handsome, father of Sundjata. Maghan had three wives and six children - three boys and three girls. His first wife was the beautiful Sassouma. The second wife was Sogolon, the Buffalo Woman, the mother of Sundjata.



Clay statue of Mali equestrian (Smithsonian) 13<sup>th</sup> -14<sup>th</sup> century

Return now to the time before Sundjata the great Lion King was born, before he united the territories and ethnic groups of Mali into a mighty empire. Return to the **savanna** along the river before Sundjata's mother and father had met.



Baobab tree of the Savanna



Canoe on the Niger River, Mali

## Part Two : The Prediction

King Maghan was **renowned** for his good looks in every land, but he also was a good king and loved by all the people. In his capital of Niani he loved to sit under the great shading arms of the silk-cotton tree which dominated the royal yard of his great clay palace. Here he could enjoy the shade and the breeze during the hottest times. Unlike his **subjects**, he could not go down to the river to get cool. As was the custom, the king would only present himself to the people on special occasions, so he was somewhat isolated within the royal fences.



Photo of Jali with three-stringed instrument by David Conrad in Dioila, Mali 1976. MANSFA



Savannah (Wikipedia commons)

His jali was with him singing his praises while playing on a three-stringed guitar. Servants waited upon him and fanned him, chasing away the flies. Maghan's beautiful wife Sassouma was in the palace, pregnant with their second child. His only son Dankaran was already eight years old and often came to sit on the ox-hide beside his father.

As he sat in the shade of the mighty silk-cotton tree, a hunter from far away approached carrying an offering of meat. (Since the hunter had killed an animal on the king's land, he was **obligated** by custom to give the king part of the animal.) His **garments** were covered with cowrie shells which showed him to be a master in the art of hunting. He wore a reddish-brown skull cap over his gray hair braided in the fashion of the hunters of that land. These hunters were known as great **soothsayers**, or fortune tellers, as well. The man walked up to the king and bowed. "I salute you, King, and bring you part of the animal I have killed on your land."

The jali of the king spoke for his master. "Welcome stranger, and thank you for observing our customs. You have traveled far. Sit and share with us some stories of our neighboring lands."

Sundjata – a retelling by Nick Bartel - <http://orias.berkeley.edu/hero/sunjata/>

The hunter came and sat down upon a mat. He said, "I am not a teller of tales. I do not **spin adventurous yarns**, nor trick my listeners with a golden tongue. But I can boast of being a **seer** among the best."

He took twelve cowrie shells out of his hunter's bag, raised them to his mouth and murmured an **incantation**. Then he threw the shells before him on the mat. He looked at them for a long time studying the way they fell and the patterns they made. Then he addressed the king. "Oh, great ruler, our world is full of mystery. Great things come from small. This silk-cotton tree springs from a tiny seed. Kingdoms are like trees; some will become great, and others will remain like dwarf palms. Mighty rivers begin as small streams. And who can recognize in the little child the great king to come? Know this, King Maghan. Your land is about to emerge from the night."



The jali of the king was puzzled and said, "Hunter, your words are strange. Make them as clear to us as the savannas of our land."

"Oh, King. Listen to my message. Your successor is not yet born," he said trying to avoid the eyes of the king who looked **apprehensively** at his son while stroking his beard. "I see two hunters coming to your city. They have come from afar. A woman comes with them. Oh, that woman! She is ugly. On her back is a hump giving her the appearance of a buffalo. Her eyes are **misshapen**, too. But this is the woman you must marry, for she will be the mother of the one who will make the name of your family **immortal**. This son will be mightier than all who have preceded him."

The hunter picked up his cowrie shells and returned them to his bag. "I am only passing through, and now I must return."

The king laughed as if to appear that he was not listening deeply to the hunter's words and he said, "Don't you have any other stories for a king?"

The hunter replied, "I have spoken not to entertain, sire. But only after you sacrifice a red bull calf and let his blood sink deep into the soil, will this girl come. Farewell, great king. I am but a passing stranger."

The hunter disappeared down the trail, but the king did not forget his words and later that day ordered the sacrifice of the red bull calf. Gossip of the stranger's words were spread throughout the palace.

News of this prediction were met with fear by Sassouma, the queen and mother of eight-year-old Dankaran, whom she wanted to become the next king. The seer's words were as disturbing to her as they were attractive to her husband. Did Maghan not want to be remembered as the father of powerful rulers? Did he not want to take more wives and have more children? Such were the thoughts of the king and queen.

## Part Three : The Hunters

After the harvest season in a neighboring land, two brothers, Oulamba and Oulani, were eager for traveling and hunting. They were dressed in hunters' narrow trousers and the wide and long over-garment dyed by roots and bark to a reddish-brown. They were barefoot, but able to cross any **terrain**, and each had a hunter's whistle to signal across great distances. They carried a **quiver** of arrows and a bow and their leather hunting bags were covered with cowries, testaments to the kills they had made on behalf of the village. The youths were strong and slender and anxious to prove their skills to the people of their village. As was the custom, the young hunters consulted a soothsayer before traveling abroad.



The soothsayer wished them well on their trip and said, "Remember well to befriend the hungry and to keep your word. If you do, great honor will come to you." The two brothers thanked the soothsayer and set out on the trail.

Two days' journey beyond their village they met two other hunters, one of whom was brutally wounded and the young hunters feared that he would not survive. His leg had been torn apart by the sharp horns of a wild buffalo. An amazing buffalo was **ravaging** the countryside of Daw and daily it claimed some victims. The brothers learned that no one dared leave the village after sunset and none of the fields were safe from the destruction of the **marauding** animal. The leader of Daw had promised a fine reward to the hunter who killed the buffalo and rid the village of this curse.



The two brothers decided to try their luck and therefore advanced deep into the land where the buffalo had caused its destruction. **Warily** they pursued the buffalo and by chance came upon an old woman by the side of a river. She was weeping and **lamenting**. She was thin and frail with white hair and her skin was wrinkled and scaly like a

lizard's. She **beseched** the young hunters for something to eat.

Touched by her tears and remembering the advice of the soothsayer, the younger brother approached and gave her some dried meat from his hunter's bag. When she had eaten well, she smiled broadly showing her gums and her few remaining teeth.

She said, "May Allah return to you the charity which you have shown me."

They were getting ready to leave when the old woman stopped them. "I know that you are going to try your luck against the Buffalo of Daw, but you should know that many others before you have met their death through their foolishness. Arrows are quite useless against the buffalo because of its thick hide. But, young hunters, your hearts are generous and it is you who will vanquish the buffalo. I am the buffalo you are looking for and your generosity has vanquished me. I have killed a hundred and seven hunters and wounded seventy-seven more. Every day I kill an **inhabitant** of Daw. But now my anger against my brother has run its course. I have punished my brother enough for depriving me of my part of the inheritance from our parents. He has taken my land, my home, all my possessions, and turned me out of the village. And now he will have my life." She spoke and was resigned to her death which would soon come.

"Here, take this staff, this rock, and this egg and go to the plain over there where I **browse** among the king's crops. Before using your bow you must take aim at me three times with this staff. Then draw your bow and I shall be **vulnerable** to your arrow. I shall fall, but shall get up and pursue you, but you will eventually kill me. As a proof of your victory you must cut off the buffalo's tail and bring it to the king of Daw who is my brother."

Crazy with joy, the brothers seized the staff, the rock, and the egg, but the old woman stopped them with a gesture and said, "There is... one condition."

"What is that?" the older brother asked impatiently.

"The king promises the hand of the most beautiful maiden of Daw to the victor. When all the people of Daw are gathered and you are told to choose among the beautiful maidens of the village, you must search in the crowd until you find a very ugly maiden, uglier than you can imagine, sitting apart on the observation platform. You must choose her for she is my **spirit double**. She will be an extraordinary woman for the man who is able to possess her. Swear to me that you will choose her, hunters."



*Southerby auction*

The young hunters promised and eagerly took the staff, rock, and egg from the old woman. The older brother was suspicious of her, but said nothing until they were out of her sight. "She is only leading us to our death," he said.

"Then I will die like a brave warrior, not a coward," he said. "Let's go!" And the two brothers continued on to the plain of Daw.

## Part Four : The Buffalo

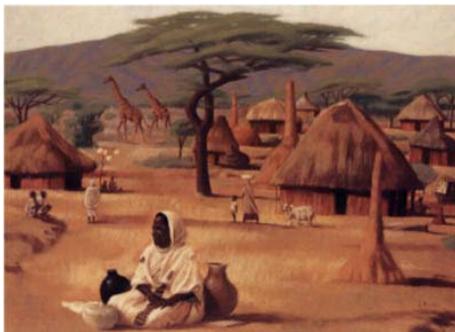
Out on the plain of Daw the two young hunters saw a browsing buffalo with black hide and silver horns. The older brother became frightened and didn't trust the old woman's powers and tried to convince his younger brother to turn around. But the younger brother advanced cautiously stooping to hide himself in the tall grass.

Then the buffalo raised its head and saw the young hunter. It **bellowed**, lowered its mighty head and charged.

The hunter took the staff and pointed it at the buffalo three times. The buffalo hesitated and the hunter shot an arrow into its **massive** neck. The arrow seemed only to inflame the buffalo, and it charged again. Turning to run the hunter tossed the staff behind him and up sprang a forest of bamboo. The buffalo could not **maneuver** easily through the forest, and the hunter was able to escape to the plain once more. The older brother quickly climbed a tree to avoid being killed.

Once again out on the plain the buffalo pursued the young hunter. With its horns nearly tearing into his body, the hunter tossed the rock behind him and the plain was **transformed** into an immense **labyrinth** of stones. The buffalo was again delayed while the hunter **hurtled** like a meteor across the plain. It was as if rabbit's feet had sprouted, so swiftly did he run.

Then the buffalo once again was able to bear down on the hunter, and almost exhausted, he reached for the egg in his bag and let it fall behind him. The plain was transformed into a muddy marsh and the buffalo fell into the clinging **mire**.



African Village by Larry Moore (fine art poster)

The hunter took his bow again and shot the buffalo and this time killed it. He took his hunter's whistle and signaled his success. His older brother climbed down from the tree and congratulated him. They cut off the buffalo's tail and headed for the village of Daw.

## Part Five : The Choice

The brothers arrived at the village of Daw to meet the king. Drums spread the joyful news throughout the land that the buffalo had been slain, and soon fathers accompanied by daughters of marriageable age came to the village.

The next morning everyone was gathered in the main square. Young children perched like grasshoppers on the branches of trees sat gazing at the festivities. A platform had been built for the king's family. The square was filled with the excited throng that circled the carcass of the buffalo that had been brought there. The hunters' names, Oulamba and Oulani, were sung by the crowd in praise of their great deed. Others, whose relatives had been killed by the buffalo, shrieked insults at its **mutilated** body. Drums and eight-string hunter's guitars joined the voices in their praises. The dancing was **punctuated** by foot stomping and clapping.



Fulani women and man dance – Mali [Flickr, Chris G]

When the king appeared a deep silence settled on the crowd. Next to him was his jali and the two hunters. The beauty of the two young hunters set every woman day dreaming that she might be the one chosen. The jali spoke directly for the king who remained silent. "The buffalo is dead, and here is the hunter Oulani who killed it. I promised the most beautiful woman in marriage as a reward. Great hunter, look upon the daughters of Daw and take your pick." The crowd cheered its approval, and the young hunter was **exhilarated** by the beauty which was **arrayed** before him. The maidens wore **festive** dress and gold shone in their hair and their fragile wrists bent under the weight of bracelets. Smiling teeth as white as rice **vied for** the hunter's attention. As he walked among the crowd, he wondered how he could decide among such loveliness.



But overhead a **hawk** appeared and after circling, **plummeted** three times over a platform. The hunter remembered the words of the old woman and tore his eyes from the smiling beauties.

On the raised platform he spotted Sogolon, with a humped back and bulging eyes partially hidden by a veil pulled shyly across her face. The hunter elbowed his way through the crowd, took her by the hand and pulled her into the middle of the great circle. The crowd gasped in disbelief. Was the hunter **mocking** them or had he gone mad? He had chosen one of the king's daughters, the girl everyone called the Buffalo Woman because of her misshapen body with its huge hump.



screen grab *keita - l'heritier du griot* (Heritage of the Griot)

Bringing Sogolon to the King of Daw, the hunter said, "This is the one I have chosen and would like for a wife."

The king could not control his laughter at the hunter's choice made from all the beautiful maidens. Then general laughter spread throughout the crowd. Insults were hurled by the rejected maidens, and **ridicule** was heaped upon them by all. The brothers left that very day pursued by the **mockery** of the people of Daw. As they left they kicked the dust from their feet vowing never to return there again. They escorted Sogolon, the Buffalo Woman, away from Daw and started on their return to their own village.

## Part Six : Rejection

On the path home the young hunters slowed their pace to ease the journey for Sogolon, the buffalo woman. She was weeping for she was leaving her home. Even though her villagers and her own family had ridiculed her, she was sad to be leaving the only home she had ever known. But soon her tears dried and she **reflected upon** the moment when the handsome young hunter had chosen her, out of all the beautiful girls on earth! It was the sort of moment that she would always hold precious in her store of memories. But she was a daughter of a king, and she knew that her destiny was partly determined by her spirit double. Was she to become the wife of a mere hunter?



screen grab *keita - l'heritier du griot* (Heritage of the Griot)

The three spoke along the trail, and Sogolon was put in good spirits by the kindness of the young hunters. As night was about to fall, they began to search for a village where they could stay. **Hospitality** is freely offered to the stranger in Africa, and the two brothers were offered one hut and Sogolon another.

Later that night the older brother said, "Aren't you going to sleep with your wife tonight? You are the one who was victorious over the buffalo."

And the younger brother said, "But you are the eldest. You know that it is not fitting for me to take a wife before you."

So later that night after the village was asleep, the older brother Oulamba went to the hut where Sogolon slept. Oulamba lay down beside her. But in her sleep she was protected by her spirit double. Every hair on her body sharpened and lengthened becoming like **quills** of a porcupine which prevented anyone from touching her. Of course Oulamba called upon his spirit double, too, and the two spirits battled throughout the night. But Sogolon's was much more powerful.

In the morning Oulamba returned to the hut half dead from weariness and rejoined his brother. "I couldn't do anything!" he cried angrily. "You were the one who

triumphed over the buffalo, so it is up to you to make her your wife."  
"Fine," he answered. "I shall go to her tonight."

They continued on their journey, and at night they again found a village which provided them with huts and food. In the middle of the night the younger brother Oulani slipped into her hut. As he crossed the threshold, he was caught in her magic spell. He froze in an upright position half in and half out of the doorway and slept that way until the morning. He awoke and returned to tell his brother of his misfortune.

"She is a very powerful sorceress. Her spells are more powerful than any we know. I failed miserably with her, just as you did."

Oulamba bitterly agreed, "Sogolon is not for us."

They decided to try nothing more and continue on their journey. Oulani had been over the moon with joy just a few days before. Now he wished that he had not followed the request of the old woman to choose Sogolon; he could have chosen from the most beautiful women who wanted to be his wife! Now he would be remembered only for his choice of the Buffalo Woman. Never would he have an extraordinary son from her who would perpetuate his name. Such was the bitterness he now felt.

## **Part Seven : Maghan and Sogolon**

King Maghan was once again seated under the silk-cotton tree. It was a hot day, and his beautiful wife Sassouma had brought some water to him and sat down to enjoy the shade. She had given birth to a daughter almost two years before, and she had regained her beauty. Her attention was now on her husband and their happiness together.

Two young hunters and a young maid approached. The queen got up and went inside the palace as was required of her when strangers came. A flash of anxiety swept through her when she saw the woman covered by a veil coming down the path between the two hunters. Would her husband remember the prediction made long ago?

When the strangers were a few steps from the king, they bowed. "Great king, we are hunters from far away. The young girl is from Daw and we present her to you, for we think she is worthy to be a king's wife."

The girl was kneeling in front of the king with a veil hiding her face. Bowing, she could not conceal the hump which deformed her shoulders and back. The king was embarrassed and stared a long time at his jali searching for advice.

The jali broke the silence by asking them to tell of how they happened to leave Daw with that maiden, and the hunters sat down to tell their story. They told of the old woman at the river, the killing of the buffalo, and the choice of the Buffalo Woman over all the beautiful maidens of Daw. (They **discreetly** told nothing of their own attempts at trying to marry her.) The king and his jali knew this extraordinary woman was the one prophesied. She must become the king's wife and mother of his son! So the king ordered a gift of kola nuts for the young hunters for bringing her to the king. The hunters were also given two beautiful maidens of the king's village to take home as their own wives.

The date of the wedding was set for next Wednesday, a lucky day, and throughout the twelve villages of the kingdom the drums announced the marriage. All the important dignitaries were invited. The royal family gave out gifts to celebrate the wedding: rice, clothes, and even gold. Oxen were sacrificed. Each village sent a **troupe** of dancers and musicians to participate in the celebration of the second marriage of the king.

Sogolon, the Buffalo Woman, stayed with an old aunt of the king until the wedding. In preparation she received the finest care and pampering. Along the river's edge she sang and bathed with her age-mates, who would become like sisters to her. She got marriage advice from old married women while they gave her a ritual hot-then-cold bath: "In marriage there are beautiful days, and **inevitably** there will be bad days. Your dignity as a woman makes it **imperative** that you accept either kind with a smile... Your honor requires that you offer your heart and your body only to your husband, and you are to submit them to him absolutely. If you drink honey water with your husband, be prepared to drink the bitter **herbs** as well. This will make certain the success of your children in this life and your place in heaven in the next."

Her hair was braided and her skin was oiled and perfumed. Throughout the night before the wedding there was a great feast by the women. It was intended to give the departing maiden a final happy memory that she would be able to fall back upon in moments of anguish during her future life as a wife and mother. Sogolon was weeping alone in the center of a circle of her friends as the rooster crowed that morning. Today she would no longer be a girl and her life as a woman would begin.



screen grab *soundiata keita - l'heritier du griot* (Heritage of the Griot)



Modern wedding with traditional clothing. [www.zawaj.com/fula-wedding3](http://www.zawaj.com/fula-wedding3)

She was dressed completely in white with a large veil over her head. Her **age-mates** sang the bride's departure song **punctuated** with clapping.

Her wedding day had come. She headed a procession down the path towards the palace. Women **flanked** her path and viewed everything and sang; it has always been so. Men had no say in the matter, and were pushed to the back.

As was the custom, during the procession cousins of the **groom** picked the bride up and ran off carrying her on their shoulders to the palace as the crowd cheered. The bride had been delivered to her husband. Outside the palace walls the celebrations continued, and the dancers and singers were rewarded. More gifts were distributed.

The celebration continued throughout the day and night.

But that night Sogolon was reluctant to give herself to her husband. While she slept, again her guardian spirits took over. When the king came near, the hair on her skin again became like the needles of a porcupine. The king wrestled with her sorcery all night. In spite of the great power of his own **totem animal**, the lion, he was unable to conquer the Buffalo Woman's spirit.

The next day King Maghan and his jali went to a blacksmith soothsayer who had great powers. Maghan described his **dilemma**. Looking at the thirty stones that he used **to divine** problems, the soothsayer said, "Within her body she has the power of two spirit guardians, the buffalo and one other. You must find out which other animal is within her. Then you can conquer that spirit."

That night Sogolon's spirits again protected her. The king sprinkled sand into patterns upon the floor. Sogolon fainted and under this spell he was able to pull from her the name of her other spirit: the panther. This was the source of her strength! The king's lion spirit challenged the panther, and in a spiritual battle, the lion won. When Sogolon awoke she was already Maghan's wife. That very night she **conceived**.



Panther photograph by Andrew Garman. Buffalo photograph by On Safari. Lion photograph by Hunt Africa

## Part Eight : Sundjata - Birth & Early Childhood

Sassouma, King Maghan's first wife, **resented** her husband for taking another wife even though the **Qur'an** allowed it. "How could you?" she cried to her husband. "Do you prefer that ugly buffalo to me?"

Maghan said, "Woman! Woman! Don't worry, I love you still. I am only trying to make **an alliance** with the people of Daw. To make up for it, go and take ten cows from my herd. They are yours! But don't **disrupt** my marriage to her."

Sassouma angrily departed, but plotted against Sogolon with few of her closest friends who knew witchcraft. When she heard that Sogolon was pregnant, her jealousy became blind, and she planned to poison the Buffalo Woman and her child. But on the way to the house of Sogolon, she saw three owls descend to the roof to protect the expectant mother. She knew that nothing could be done with the owls as **sentinels**, she **bided her time**. "Very well then," she said. "Let the child be born and we'll see... Her child will be much **more vulnerable** than she."



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African spotted eagle owl of the savanna –  
courtesy of Kielder Birds of Prey site, Discoverit.co.uk

Near the moment of delivery the sky grew dark with clouds even though it was the dry season. The sun was hidden and two cyclones appeared in the sky as if in battle, twisting and confronting each other. Thunder and lightning crackled and everyone ran for shelter. Rain started falling and blanketed the earth. And then the rain stopped suddenly and the sun appeared. It was at the very moment the midwife came out of Sogolon's house to announce to Maghan that he was the father of another boy.



Drums announced the birth of a boy throughout the village and in celebration singers and balafons carried the praises of the king and his new son. The king rejoiced in his new son: child of the lion and child of the buffalo and panther! He opened six granaries and distributed rice throughout the village. Later he went to see his new son and wife along with his jali. They were amazed to see that the child had a full set of teeth and eyes that focused upon whoever was in the room! "Truly this is a **good omen**," the jali said. Both mother and father were so proud.

Photo of modern woman pounding grain with baby on her back.  
Courtesy MANSÁ Photo by David Conrad, Kabaya, Mali 1976

On the eighth day after the child's birth the naming ceremony was held. The jali spoke before the crowd in praise of this child and gave a prayer to Allah: "May Allah grant him long life! ["Amen!"] May Allah grant him good health! ["Amen!"] May Allah make him a good king! ["Amen!"]" Then the female jalis shouted the child's multiple names selected carefully to carry his proud lineage from his great-great-grandfather through his father and mother. But the name which he was called and remembered by was "Sundjata" - the lion king. His many names were whispered in his ear so that he may remember them. The king sacrificed sheep and bulls and distributed their meat along with rice bread to the cheering villagers. The feast was the largest in memory.



from *Mansa Musa : The Lion of Mali* by K. Burns, illustrated by L. & D. Dillon

But Allah has mysteries which no one can understand. Some will be lucky and live an easy life untouched by sorrow. Others will be marked for suffering. You can do nothing about it. Such is the will of Allah.

The infant Sundjata had a slow and difficult childhood. At the age of three he still crawled, dragging himself along the ground like a crocodile crawling on a sandbank. He had none of the beauty of his father: a head so big that he seemed unable to support it, large eyes which stared widely whenever anyone entered his mother's house. He did little other than sit in the middle of the house, except when he was hungry and he would drag himself out **to rummage about** in search of food among the calabashes waiting to be washed. He seemed to be always in a bad mood and scared other children away. He spoke little and his serious little face never relaxed into a smile.

**Malicious** tongues began to wag. What three-year-old has not yet taken his first steps? Why could he not speak? What three-year-old was not the center of attention receiving and returning the love of those around him? Was this the great son prophesied, or was that a cruel joke on the king? Or was there witchcraft involved?



screen grab *keita - l'heritier du griot* (Heritage of the Griot)

The king's first wife rejoiced in Sundjata's **infirmity**. Her own son, Dankaran, was already eleven. He was a fine boy and had even begun his **initiation and manhood training**. Whenever she passed by Sogolon she would make comments like, "I prefer a son who walks on his two legs to a lion that crawls on the ground!" And she would laugh a wicked laugh that went straight through Sogolon.

Sogolon was greatly troubled by her son's **infirmity**. She tried all her talents as a sorceress, but to **no avail**. Nothing she did could strengthen her son's legs: no herbs, no ointments, no magical incantations.

The king himself lost hope in Sundjata. How impatient man is! Perhaps if he had another son? he thought. It was during this time that Sogolon became pregnant again, but brought forth only a daughter.

The years passed and still Sundjata did not walk, nor did he seem to try! The king wondered, "Could Sundjata possibly be the one for whom the hunter had predicted such a glorious future?"

King Maghan and his jali again went to the blacksmith soothsayer. This time he used two flat stones to help him see beyond the mysteries of this world. Feeling the stones he said, "When the seed **germinates** growth is not always easy. Great trees grow slowly, but they plunge their roots deep into the ground. Your son has three guardian spirits in one body: the lion, buffalo, and panther. He is not yet able **to assimilate** them. Be patient."

But the king continued to feel **deceived** and ridiculed on account of Sundjata. He took a third wife at this time, even though he was now old. This wife produced a son. But even this did not make him happy. And sadly, too, this wife died leaving her infant, named Manding Bory, motherless. Sassouma would have nothing to do with him, but Sogolon took him as her own and raised the child as Sundjata's brother.

Maghan died never seeing his son Sundjata walk. And with the death of Maghan, the eldest, the son of Sassouma, was named as king, as was the custom. And Sassouma became powerful in her new position, as well.

Sassouma no longer considered the seven-year-old Sundjata a threat, but her hatred for Sogolon continued **unrelenting**. Sogolon, her daughter and Sundjata, and Manding Bory were driven into the poorest section of the palace. They received only **meager** portions of food, the leftovers from Sassouma's meals.

One day Sogolon tried to be kind to Sassouma and went to her home asking for some baobab leaves to season a stew of chicken feet. Sassouma **smugly** said, "My son, for whom no great destiny was prophesied, but who can walk, run, and jump, brings me

baobab leaves every day! Whereas yours, supposed to be superhuman, drags himself around like a lizard and can't even gather leaves for you! Here, take these. Go and feed your good-for-nothing son! Make him big and fat!" She laughed that **diabolical** laughter which jealous women know how to use so well, and threw the leaves at Sogolon.

Sogolon felt **wretched** and turned saying to herself, "I would rather my children and I starve to death than take the baobab leaves if we must accept her insults with them!" She covered her face to hide her tears and hurried back to her house.



Photos of huts in Burkina Faso, courtesy of Mark Davies. Copyright, 1999

Sundjata, playing on the floor of their house, saw his mother come in. "What's the matter, mother?" he asked sensing her troubled spirit. She said nothing, but her muffled cries told him everything. He felt great pity for her. **Resolutely** he announced, "Today I am going to walk."

Rejoice! Today would be like no other day! Today was a day of destiny. The blacksmith soothsayer knew... a huge iron rod was brought by six blacksmith **apprentices** and dropped outside Sundjata's hut.



Photos of blacksmiths at forge in Burkina Faso - courtesy of Mark Davies Copyright, 1999.  
Above, right - Modern blacksmith warrior. Courtesy MANSÁ, photo by David Conrad: Fana, Mali 1976

Sundjata crawled on all fours to the iron rod. Sogolon followed him out of her hut. A small crowd started gathering near the iron rod. He picked it up with little difficulty and stood it **vertically**. Then he pulled himself up on his knees. "Arise, young lion! Roar! And let the bush know that from now on it has a master!" cried the blacksmith.

Among the crowd was Sassouma who stood with her arms crossed and with a **haughty** smile. Sundjata's sister, and even Sassouma's daughter Nana, encouraged him to stand until she was silenced by her mother! Then a deadly silence gripped all those present.



screen grab *soundiata keita - l'heritier du griot* (Heritage of the Griot)

Sundjata lowered his head as if examining his feet. Then he **riveted** his stare at the rod. The next moment his muscles swelled, and embracing the rod, he hauled himself up, his head thrown back, his eyes half closed, his teeth clenched. His legs pulled under him and they started trembling, like rice stalks whipped by the wind.

In a supreme effort he managed to stretch himself completely upright; then, releasing the rod he found himself planted on his own two legs!

Soon the silence turned to joy. There was chanting and clapping! And with every step the crowd praised him more!

Not far from the palace was a baobab tree. It was toward that tree that Sundjata slowly stumbled, leading a cheering crowd. Once there he turned to his mother and said, "Mother! Did you ask your son for some leaves?" Then with a mighty tug he uprooted the tree, put it over his shoulder, and carried it back in front of his mother's hut where he dropped it. "From this day on, it is from in front of your hut that the women of our town, including Sassouma, shall come to get their supply of leaves!"



Baobab leaves taste like spinach.  
esthergarvi.org

The lion had awakened.

## **Part Nine : The Subas (Powerful Sorceresses)**

Sundjata was now ten and a boy full of strength. His arms had the strength of ten and he inspired fear in grown men. He already had that **authoritative** way of speaking which belongs to those destined to rule.

From his mother he was taught the secrets of the animals and medicinal plants, and of magic. The son of his father's jali, Balla Faseke, became his own jali who taught Sundjata the history of his people and the rules of warrior's conduct. Sundjata grew in popularity from day to day, and he was surrounded by a gang of children the same age as himself.

And every day Sassouma's hatred of Sogolon and Sundjata increased. She became more and more apprehensive about her own son's throne. Even now at the age of eighteen, her son Dankaran was weak and under the influence of his mother. Sassouma really ruled in his name. And she wanted to kill Sundjata.



dancer of afrikylolo.org

One night Sassouma met with the nine great suba sorceresses of Mali. When the nine old hags were seated in a semi-circle around her, she said, "You who rule supreme at night and have **nocturnal** powers, oh you who can put an end to one's life, will you help me? I want to kill Sundjata. His destiny runs counter to my son's."

"Mother of the king," replied one suba. "Sundjata has done us no wrong. Why should we bring about his death?"

"You are wrong. He and his mother are evil and have no respect for you. Tomorrow go to his mother's vegetable patch where Sundjata stands guard. You will see how vicious he is."

"That's a clever idea," said one of the suba sorceresses. They agreed to test Sundjata and the queen gave them a reward of grain from the royal granaries and cows from the royal herds.

Sundjata got up the next morning and met with his companions. They decided to go out hunting for the day. On his way home he passed his mother's vegetable patch. There he found the nine old women stealing vegetables. They pretended to run away like thieves who had been caught red-handed.



Growing vegetables near the desert in Mali. Flickr



Mali boy in orchard by Alexandre Igney Travel with Alexandre

"Stop, stop, you poor old women. Don't run. This garden belongs to all," he said.



Then he and his companions filled the **gourds** of the old hags with vegetables. "Each time you need food," he told them, "come back and take what you need without fear."

The old women stood in amazement. "We came here to test you, Sundjata. We have no need of your vegetables. We can do nothing against a heart full of kindness. Forgive us."

"Beware of the queen mother. She wishes you harm," warned one old woman. Then the nine subas disappeared.

When Sundjata returned home, he told his mother what had happened. Sogolon knew that her son's life was threatened. She would have to be more careful and use more of her magical powers to protect him. That night the guardian owls returned and perched at their doorway to prevent the harmful magic of others.

When Sassouma learned that Sundjata was still alive and protected by guardian owls, she knew that the magic of Sogolon and Sundjata was too powerful. She had to find another way to get rid of him.

## Part Ten : Departure from Niani

Within a year it became time for Sundjata to go into manhood training. For months, Sundjata and boys of his age were **initiated** into the secret knowledge of the master hunters and warriors. With him was Balla Faseke, his jali, who further trained him in the knowledge of leadership and **nobility**. They became closest friends and they knew that their destinies were **intertwined**.

One day when Sundjata was out on a hunting trip, Sassouma once again saw an opportunity to be rid of her son's rival. She told Dankaran, "We will send Balla Faseke, Sundjata's jali and friend, away from him. We can send him to the king of Sosso on a mission. Sundjata cannot question that! And he will be left without his true friend and advisor. Out of anger and humiliation he will leave our village."

"Mother," Dankaran asked, "are you sure? Balla Faseke is known for his wisdom. Is it right to take him away from my brother and send him to Sosso? The king of Sosso is a very cruel man, and Balla Faseke may not survive!"

"You are king now, and don't even know a threat to your rule! When Sundjata grows up, do you think he will not compete with you? Get rid of him now while you still can."

When Sundjata returned and heard about Dankaran's decision, he confronted his half-brother the king. He remained calm, but his eyes flashed angrily. Any other twelve-year-old child would have lost his courage in front of armed guards with drawn swords! But he grabbed his brother by the collar and said, "You have stolen my jali given to me by our father King Maghan. If you needed to send someone to Sosso, why didn't you send your own jali?"

Dankaran was angered and **intimidated** by his question. "I am the king now!" Sassouma had spoken for him so often that he was ashamed to tremble before a youngster. He thought of stamping him out like a beetle. "You must leave here," he finally shouted, and Sundjata left the palace.



screen grab *keita - l'heritier du griot* (Heritage of the Griot)

Sogolon heard the news. "Yes, let us leave here," she said. "Sundjata, you will return to reign when you are a man, for that is your destiny." Then she prepared her daughter and her adopted son, Manding Bory, to leave the next morning.

At the second crowing of the rooster, they left their hut with their possessions on their backs. Sundjata surrounded himself with a wall of silence as they departed. But Sogolon turned toward Sassouma's room in the palace and shouted, "Ever since the death of my husband, my children and I have been the victims of your bullying. You ridiculed my son when he couldn't walk, tried to use magic against him, and now you have taken away his jali. What else do you have in mind? We will never know, because now we will leave. The palace and the whole city of Niani are yours alone!"

In her resentment, Sogolon's voice carried throughout the palace and beyond, but Sassouma stayed silent and fearful within. Sogolon turned her eyes to the heavens and said, "Ever since I was married thirteen winters ago, there has been no end to our suffering and humiliation!"

They left Niani without saying farewell to anyone. Their hearts were too sad for leave-takings.

They tasted the bitterness of **exile**. Their feet plowed up the dust of the path as they walked. They suffered insults from their countrymen. Doors were shut against them and they were chased away from each village. No one dared to help them for fear of the queen. As they **trudged** down the path they were escorted only by a chorus of crickets.



## Part Eleven : Exile - Finding Enemies and Building Allies

Two days' journey downstream on the River Niger, they came to the home of the sorcerer king of Djeliba. They were greeted pleasantly enough in words, but the welcome was full of mistrust. Yet, it is the custom to offer hospitality to travelers, so the king invited them to stay.



The palace had 70 **spacious** rooms arranged in a maze and thick walls. Oil lamps lit the **labyrinth** of this mysterious, dark palace. There were many servants, and Sogolon's family was made comfortable.

It was here they settled. Sundjata and his brother Manding Bory became friends with the other

children of the palace. They enjoyed games and hunting with the other boys. But even with the kindness and hospitality they received in Djeliba, they felt torn between their present and past homes.

Three months later, two messengers secretly came to the palace. They were from Queen Sassouma with a promise of gold if the king killed Sundjata. All this was overheard by a daughter of the king, and a friend of Sundjata and Manding Bory. Early the next day she went to find Manding Bory. "Late last night," she said, "messengers spoke to my father about Sundjata. They came from Mali and offered my father much gold. I didn't hear all they said."

"I can imagine," Manding Bory replied. He knew he had to warn his brother of a **plot on his life**.

"Tonight my father will surely call Sundjata to a **game of wori**," she continued. "He is a great sorcerer and his power is in the game of wori. His skills were **revealed** to him by guardian spirits. Don't tell father anything I have said, or he will kill me!" Then she ran back to the palace.

From a distance Sundjata was watching his younger brother with the princess and teased him. "I see you are fond of the daughter of the king!"



my

Manding Bory responded with a laugh, "If you want to tame the lion, you must be on good terms with the lion cub!"

The two boys continued exchanging **proverbs**, for men's knowledge is contained there. When children use proverbs well, it is a sign they have learned wisely from their elders.

Sure enough, that night Sundjata was called to the king's inner chamber. On the walls were outstanding weapons and magical **fetishes**. In the middle of the room was the king seated on a cow hide. In front of him was a game board with small pebbles. Unafraid, Sundjata entered the dimly lit room. He was moving toward his destiny and did not know what fear was.

"What beautiful weapons you have, sire," he said. He seized a sword and began to **fence** with it against an imaginary **foe**. The king was astonished and watched the skills of the extraordinary child. Then the young prince put the sword back and said, "You sent for me, and I am here."

"Sit down," said the king. "It is my habit to invite my guest to play at wori. But I have an unusual condition. If I win -- and I will surely win -- I kill you."

Without being upset, Sundjata responded confidently, "And if I win?"

"In that case," the king laughed, "I will give you what you wish. But you should know that I always win."

"All I ask for is that sword hanging on your wall," Sundjata replied.



"Very well," said the king and began to put four pebbles into each of the holes. As he did this, he **chanted**:

"Wori is the invention of a hunter,  
I am unbeatable in this game.  
I am called the **exterminator** king."



or Mancala board [San Francisco's DeYoung Museum of Art]

And Sundjata, taking the pebbles from another hole, continued the chant as he took his turn:  
"In the past, guests were honored.  
Gold came only yesterday.  
But I came before."

Wori,

"Someone has betrayed me!" the king roared knowing that Sundjata had learned of his deadly plot.

"No, king. Do not **accuse** anyone," said the child. "It is nearly three moons that I have been living with you and you never suggested a game of wori before. Allah protects the guest."

Confused and shaken by being discovered in a **sinister** plot, the king said, "You have won, but you will not have what you asked for! And I turn you out of my town. Leave at once."

Sundjata rose and bowed politely while staring calmly at the nervous king. "Thank you for your hospitality for almost three months. But I will return," he said glancing again at the sword. Then he turned and left.

So once again Sogolon and her children **trod the path** of exile. Suffering under the heat of day and the chill of night, they finally arrived at Tabon. This region is in the mountains and is **inhabited** by blacksmith magicians and warriors. The king of Tabon was old and wise. He had heard of the family's difficulties. He advised them to seek the protection of a **caravan** of Arab **merchants** who were leaving in a few days for Ghana. In the meantime, they were welcomed into the palace as honored guests.

Sundjata struck up a special friendship with Fran Kamara, the son of the king and **heir to the throne**. Fran Kamara invited the boys on a hunting party. Out **in the bush**, the youngsters talked like men.

"When I go back to Mali," Sundjata said, "I will pass through Tabon and we will go victoriously to Mali together. Between that time and now, we will have grown up."

"The army of Tabon will be under my command by then," Fran Kamara said. "And blacksmiths are excellent warriors."

"I will make you a great general," Sundjata said. "We will travel through many kingdoms and emerge the strongest of all."

The exiled family took to the road again. The king of Tabon had given them horses and the caravan headed north across the savanna to where the sands cover the land.

Tabon was very far from Ghana, but the merchants were very good to Sogolon and her family. It was during this long trip that Sundjata heard about the powerful king of Sosso, Sumangaru, whom he would fight one day. Sundjata knew that his jali, Ballo Fasette, had been sent to Sosso. He learned that Sumangaru was the richest and most powerful king, and even the king of Ghana had to pay him **tribute**. He was also a man of great cruelty.

Once in the kingdom of Ghana, they came to the city of Wagadou. The king greeted them by saying, "Welcome royal family of Mali. My palace is your palace. The

friendship which unites Ghana and Mali goes back to a very distant age. We are cousins."

In the comforts of the palace Sogolon recovered quickly from her **exhaustion**. But after a year she became ill. The king decided to send Sogolon to his cousin, the king of Mema. Mema was the capital of a great kingdom on the River Niger not far from Daw, Sogolon's first homeland. Surely, he thought, the air from the river would restore her health.

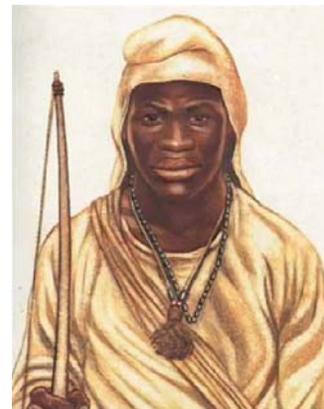
Traveling with merchants by camel caravan, the family **got accustomed to** riding the animals which were unknown in Mali. Always eager to learn, Sundjata asked the caravan travelers many questions. They were well-informed people. Sundjata learned about the lands beyond Ghana, the lands of the Arabs, and of his own ancestor, Bilal, the faithful servant of the Prophet Muhammad. He learned also about Alexander the Great, conqueror of a vast empire. But it was with terror that the merchants spoke of Sumanguru of Sosso who robbed merchants of everything when he was in a bad mood.



Photo courtesy of Adventure Travel Morocco

Before arriving at Mema, a great **escort** was sent out to meet the travelers. **Archers** and spearmen formed in a double line to welcome Sogolon and her family. They were given rooms in a wing of the great palace.

As usual, Sundjata made his presence felt among the young princes of Mema, and he gained their respect and friendship. The king himself could hardly take his eyes off the young prince. He had no son of his own, and was impressed by the greatness and **confidence** of someone so young. Could this be his **adopted heir**?



wangaran tv image of Sundjata

Years passed and Sundjata grew. His body became stronger and he shot up like a young tree. His **misfortunes** had made his mind wise.

The King of Mema recognized in Sundjata great strength and leadership. He asked Sundjata to join him as a warrior. Sundjata was as **agile** as a panther, as noble as a lion, and as ready to attack as a buffalo. By eighteen years of age, Sundjata had already proven himself a great warrior. The King of Mema, who had no son of his

own, thought of Sundjata as his own **successor**.

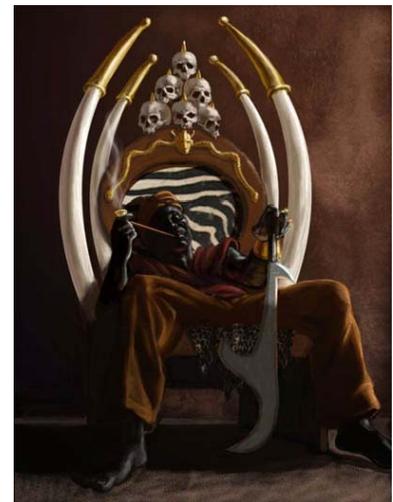
But as Sundjata grew stronger, his mother Sogolon became weaker. One day Sogolon called Sundjata to her bed. "My destiny is finished. Yours is about to begin. Your life lies before you like a beautiful river. It is nearly time for you to return and claim your rightful position as king in Mali. Your destiny is not here. Remember we had to run away like thieves in the night because of Sassouma and her son Dankaran. That is where you must take up the challenge. Better death than shame! Never forget that, my son."

"I shall never forget that, my mother!"

## Part Twelve : Sumangaru - The Sorcerer King

While Sundjata was away from his homeland, all the lands of the savanna had fallen under the domination of Sumangaru - the **invincible** King of Sosso. After defeating the kings of Ghana, no one dared oppose him anymore.

Sumangaru was descended from the line of blacksmiths who first **harnessed fire** and taught men to work with iron. And like all masters of fire, Sumangaru was a great sorcerer.



Sumangaru had **fortified** the town of Sosso with three walls. In the middle of the town was his palace with a seven-story tower that **loomed over** the **thatched huts**. His fetishes had a terrible power and all kings trembled before him. He could deal a swift death to whomever he pleased. Sumangaru felt that he was untouchable, and indeed, no man had the power of this sorcerer king! He was **invulnerable** to arrows. They bounced right off of him! In war he had never known defeat.



Image of the Central Market (Suguba) in Bamako, Mali. Was the tower similar to this? Photo courtesy of David Conrad, copyright, 1984.

Years before, Sassouma and Dankaran had tried to keep their kingdom safe from Sumangaru. They had sent Balla Faseke, Sundjata's jali, to stay in Sumangaru's palace. And Sassouma had sent her own daughter, the beautiful Nana, to him as a bride. They had hoped these gifts of Nana and Balla Faseke would buy them peace.

But Sumangaru recognized that young king's weakness and easily conquered his land. Rather than fight, the cowardly Dankaran **scampered off** into the neighboring forests taking his mother with him. The people of Mali were without a leader.

And what had become of Nana and Balla Faseke? They knew of their people's suffering, but bided their time. They lived in Sosso in the palace of Sumangaru. Even though the king had three hundred wives, Nana had become his favorite. She knew that she must become close to the king in order to learn of his powers. Balla Faseke had also earned the king's respect because of his good advice and wisdom. And so, they waited...

One day when the king was away, Balla Faseke snuck into the most secret chamber of the palace tower. He was amazed at what he saw.

On the walls were human skins stretched like trophies, and one covered Sumangaru's throne in the middle of the room. Nine human heads formed a circle around a huge **sacrificial** clay jar filled with water. There was evidence of **orgies** of blood and knives, and the room was full of **idols**. Perched above the bed were two guardian owls with their eyes partially open, sleepily observing the **intruder** at the door.



Djenne Terracotta Double Anthropomorphic Jar - Central Mali  
Circa 1200 AD to 1600 AD Dimensions: 6" high x 10.25" wide Barakat Collection

As Balla Faseke entered, a huge yellow and white snake lifted its head from the water in the jar. Balla, who was also a master of sorcery, recited magic incantations and the snake safely slid back under the water.

So frightened was Balla Faseke from the horrors of the chamber that he tried to scream, but no sound came from his throat. To keep from shaking, he called out a magic spell and his terror suddenly vanished. It was at that moment that he saw a large **balafon** - his favorite musical instrument, one in which he had been trained and over which he had special powers. The balafon before him was the balafon which the blacksmith and powerful sorcerer king Sumangaru played after each of his victories to accompany his own songs of praise for himself.

Balla could not help feel a surge of joy. He sat down to play a few notes with the little **mallets**. The wooden bars **produced** an extraordinary melody and harmony at the slightest touch. As he played, the guardian owls opened their eyes and moved their heads at the sweet sounds. The nine death heads began to come to life again. Yes! All those heads began to open their eyelids and lifted their lips in smiles.



Even though Sumangaru was absent from his palace in Sosso, he was mystically in touch with the balafon's spirit. He knew that someone had come into his most private chamber.

Furious, he dashed back to his palace and ran up the steps of the high tower. He rushed in the room with his sword drawn, shouting.

*Balafon image courtesy of Zebra Trading Co., Berkeley, CA*

"It is I, Balla Faseke," the jali calmly replied. Then he began to play in honor of the king and his voice rang out in praise. The room filled with the magically sweet sounds.

The king was **flattered** by the praises and **captivated** by the music. (Did he not share the weaknesses of all men?) Sumangaru said, "I shall never touch the balafon again. From now on, you shall be my jali and it shall be your duty to play on this instrument after each of my victories."

In this way Sumangaru stole Sundjata's jali. War became **inevitable**.

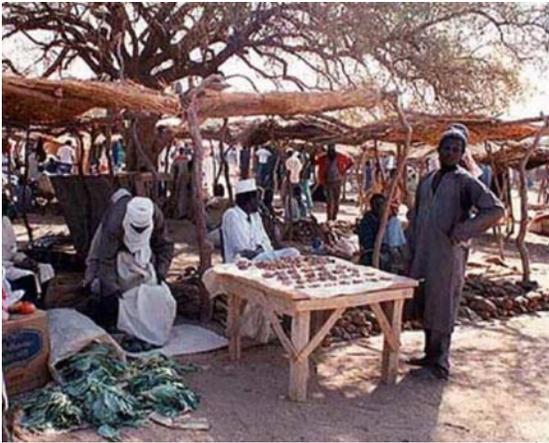


*nok-ind.tumblr.com/balla-fasseke-in-the-palace-of-samaoro-balla by Stephen Hamilton*

## Part Thirteen : Searching for Sundjata

Back in Mali, soothsayers whispered that the rightful heir would save them from their suffering under Sumangaru's rule. But where was the one who fled with his mother, brother, and sister many years before. Some of the elders secretly sent out search parties to find Sundjata, son of the Buffalo Woman. But where could he be found after these six years?

Sundjata was now strong enough to fight his enemies. At the age of eighteen he had distinguished himself in the army of the King of Mema and had a loyal following of young warriors.



Photograph of Filingue market, Niger, 1992, courtesy of Professor Patricia Stoll, Africa Speaks

One day Sundjata's younger sister went to the marketplace in Mema to buy some vegetables. There she saw a woman selling baobab leaves and vegetables from Mali. "How strange," the sister thought. "We have never seen these vegetables this far from home."

She spoke with the vegetable peddler. "It has been so long since we have seen vegetables like these from Mali. I will buy some for our mother, Sogolon, who is ill."

The peddler said, "Thanks to Allah that we have found Sogolon and her children. Our journey is not in vain. Please let us speak to your mother."

That night the search party came to Sogolon and Sundjata. "Alas! We bring you sad news. Sumangaru, the powerful king of Sosso, has heaped death and destruction upon Mali. The king, Dankaran, has fled and Mali is without a master. But the war is not finished yet. Warriors are waiting in the bush for a leader to return. Mali is saved because we have found you, Sundjata. The throne of your father awaits you. You are the cyclone that shall sweep the tyrant Sumangaru from the savanna forever."

Sogolon was overjoyed that her son was being called upon to greatness. She knew that the end of her mission in life **coincided with** the beginning of Sundjata's. That night the great woman who had nurtured Sundjata died.

## Part Fourteen : The Return

The king was furious that Sundjata planned to leave Mema. After all, he hoped that Sundjata would be his heir, the next king. How ungrateful he thought Sundjata was.

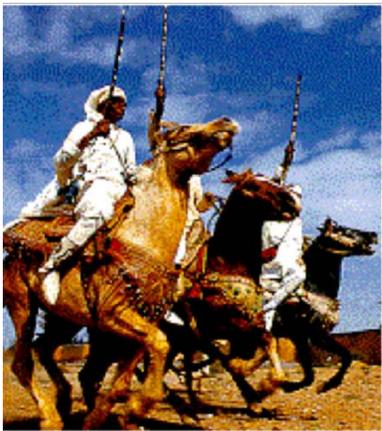
In anger he said, "You cannot leave here until you pay for the land to bury your mother in. If you cannot pay, you will have to take your mother's **corpse** with you!"

Sundjata eyes flamed. "Then I shall get the payment," he said and stalked out of the palace. Moments later he returned with an armload of broken **calabashes**, sand, pieces of pottery and other **debris**. "This is your payment," he said. And Sundjata went to get ready for his mother's burial.

"What does this mean?" the king asked his advisor. "How can this be payment for my land? Has Sundjata lost his mind?"

"It means that if you don't let him bury his mother and go with peace between you, the value of your land will be only this. He will destroy your kingdom. It will be where desert birds come to bathe in the dust."

The king was afraid, and he finally realized that Sundjata must go and fulfill his destiny. He gave in to Sundjata's wishes and held a great burial to honor his mother Sogolon. Then the king gave half of his own army to Sundjata. "We shall always be at peace, your kingdom and mine. I wished that you might be my successor. But this adopted home is not your own. May Allah be with you on your return."



With a small but well-trained **cavalry** dressed in Muslim outfits, Sundjata set out to confront Sumanguru's forces. He wore a white **turban** and a long cape. He rode a magnificent horse at the head of his cavalry. The war drums sounded as they left Mema. The soldiers carried their lances and swords. A **troupe** of archers followed them. But altogether they still were small in number. The people of Mema cheered them as

they left and wished them well.

[Image adapted from Moroccan cavalry photo.]

Sundjata's younger brother Manding Bory rode with him. "Can we hope to win with such a small army, my brother?"

"Numbers mean nothing, it is worth that counts. No matter how small a forest may be, you can always find there enough vines to tie up a man. I shall clear myself a path to Mali." And off they rode.

Not long after they crossed the border they came across an army led by one of Sumangaru's sons. Sundjata prepared to attack that very day. The orders were given and the war drums began to beat. On his horse Sundjata paraded in front of his troops and encouraged them. Then he led the charge, shouting his war cry.



The soldiers of Sosso were surprised by this sudden attack. They expected the battle to begin the next day. The lightning that flashes across the sky is slower than Sundjata's swooping down on the warriors of Sosso. Sundjata was in their midst like a lion among its **prey**. All around him Sosso warriors fell from his sword as ripe fruit falls from a shaken tree. And the son of Sumangaru turned in flight to report to his father about the defeat at the hands of Sundjata. The army of Mali celebrated their first victory.

News of the victory and of Sundjata's triumphal return to the savanna spread as if carried by the wind. Sons of Mali **rallied to him** and **pledged** their loyalty.

Next they were joined by the army of Tabon. Sundjata was greeted by his friend Fran who said, "I renew my oath to you made many years ago. I pledge myself to conquer or to die by your side. We will free ourselves from the tyrant of Sosso!" The warriors of Mema, Tabon, and Mali shouted their approval becoming one great army united in purpose.

Other brave princes came to pledge their loyalty to Sundjata. They performed great **feats** of strength and bravery, and were welcomed under Sundjata's command!

All the rebel princes who came to Sundjata were still in their youth - a time when a human bursts into life like the most brilliant meteor, with bravery, enthusiasm and dedication - a meteor that loses its radiance with age.



Within days, Sumangaru marched out to meet Sundjata. As usual, the son of Sogolon wanted to battle right away. The king of Sosso drew his men across a narrow valley with his troops on the slopes of the hills. Sundjata formed his cavalry in a tight square leading the attack, with his archers at the back. Sumangaru was perched high on a hill. He could be recognized by his helmet with many horns.

*Helmet mask from the Bamana people of Mali. Horns are a sign of power and magic.  
[pinterest] Wood, fabric, animal horns, leather, cowry shells, metal*

The trumpets, drums, and balafons sounded and encouraged the warriors. Soon the

valley disappeared in a cloud of red dust kicked up by thousands of feet and hooves. Without giving an inch, the forces of Sumangaru stopped the wave of attack.

Sumangaru gave a signal from the hill to blacksmith warriors to swoop down into the valley to encircle Sundjata. Without a word, Sundjata's square of soldiers extended themselves into a rectangle. Everything had been foreseen. The change was so quick



that Sumangaru's men halted and could not use their weapons. From the rear, the archers began their task. Arrows fell on Sumangaru's forces like a rain of iron. The forces of Mali continued the attack with new strength.



Sumangaru was still perched high on the hill. Sundjata left his soldiers behind and alone he charged toward his enemy. He shot an arrow at the sorcerer king, but Sumangaru grabbed it in mid-air. He raised the arrow, waved it, and laughed. Then Sundjata threw his metal spear, but that only bounced off Sumangaru's chest. "Ha, Sundjata! I am invincible."

Images from *L'épopée de Sundjata* par Modibo Sidibe et Svetlana Amegankpoe (2005)

Then Sumangaru disappeared! A moment later he was across the valley on another hill. Sundjata could hear his taunting laughter echoing down the valley. He reappeared closer to Sundjata. "Know that I have already killed nine kings whose heads **adorn** my room. Yours shall be put next to theirs. Prepare yourself for your death!" Then he disappeared again before Sundjata's eyes.

Sundjata was amazed at the power of the sorcerer king. "How can I defeat a man who can disappear and reappear where and when he likes? How can I conquer a man **invulnerable** to my iron spear and to my arrows? Clearly other weapons are necessary."

As the sun was setting, Sundjata was master of the valley. And as others began to celebrate their victory, he could only wonder, "How was Sumangaru able to escape me? Why is he invulnerable to my weapons? What is the secret of his power?"

## Part Fifteen : The Secret of Sumangaru

Nana was Sundjata's half-sister and she had grown up to have all the beauty that both her father and her mother were known for. Sundjata had always been a loving

brother to her. Nana shared none of the hatred or jealousy that her own mother and brother had for Sundjata. When her own brother Dankaran sent her to be the wife of Sumangaru, at first she was angry. But when she saw the suffering of her people, she decided that she may be in a position to find the secret of the king's **invulnerability**.

Sumangaru had three hundred wives, but because of her beauty, Nana became his favorite. Through beauty and **guile**, she gained a closeness and a power over the king. She moved around easily in her web of lies - as at home in **flattery** and **deceit** as a fish in water. She would try to catch Sumangaru at his own game.



One evening she dressed herself in a most seductive way and she went up to his tower room. She offered him wine and her legendary beauty inspired the liveliest of passions. "Drink, my love. There is plenty of honey in it, my sweet king," she said.

Sumangaru was in a confident mood and he was eager to hear more compliments. "Oooh, don't look into my eyes, for no woman can bear the brilliance of your gaze," she sighed. "You are the light of my sky."

Sumangaru drank another cupful as he smiled at his **coy** wife. She asked, "Do you find me as good and as sweet as the wine?"

"As sweet as a ripe papaya, with juice that quenches thirst and flesh that satisfies hunger," he said as he pulled her to him.

"Oh, your arms, my lord. Tell me, are you a man, or a supernatural being? Your arms have the strength of ten! What guardian spirit protects you and makes you so powerfully strong?"

Sumangaru's male pride was so flattered that he responded at once. "I don't have one guardian spirit. I have sixty-three **ancestral totems**! I can take the form of sixty-three different animals!"

"So that is why kings tremble before you. How right I was to marry a king as powerful as you."

Next Nana turned away, but not so much as to let her tears go unnoticed. "Why are you crying?" he asked.

"I am crying because I am afraid you will **abandon** me one day. I love you so and I can't live without you! Will you ever send me away?"

"No, my pet." And he raised his cup once again to his lips.

"You are such a great man that I cannot resist you. Tell me if there is anything I should not do in case it might **diminish** your magnificent powers?" Nana had cast her web and waited for what it would bring.

"Don't worry," he smiled. "I can only be hurt by the spur from the foot of a white rooster."



"I am so lucky to have you near me. And I will take good care of all that you have told me," she said as she smiled and put her head on his shoulder.

## Part Sixteen : The Battle of Kirina

Sumangaru's main camp was several days' march to the north on the broad plains of Kirina. As Sundjata and his army advanced to Kirina, more sons of Mali joined him. He gave the people hope that at last the powerful sorcerer king could be defeated and that Sumangaru's kingdom would collapse under him like a horse worn out beneath its rider. Then they would be free.

Two days before the battle, two mysterious visitors came riding up to Sundjata. In disguise were Nana, his half-sister, and his jali, Balla Faseke. "My brother," Nana greeted him. "We have escaped from Sosso and now join you. I am your sister and this is Balla, your jali, returned to you."

"Is this Nana?" he asked. "You have grown so. And Balla, I have missed your advice and friendship as I grew. You both belong by my side!"

Sundjata saw Nana's eyes were bathed in tears, so great was her joy at their reunion. "Oh, my brother. You know that I never wanted you to leave Mali. It was my mother who did all that. I, too, was sent out. Now our homeland is destroyed, its inhabitants scattered. Many of our people have been carried off into captivity."



"Do not cry, Nana," said Sundjata. "What happened was not your fault. Everything that has happened was destined. It was good for me to spend some years in exile. Exile inspires wisdom."

"But Nana, tell him what you have learned," urged Balla Faseke impatiently.

"My brother," Nana said. "I must warn you that the evil king cannot be defeated by your arrows or your spears. But know what I have learned... His magic can only be destroyed by the spur from the foot of a white rooster. Here," she said as she handed him an arrow she had

prepared. "This will bring you victory."

*from L'épopée de Sundjata par Sidibe et Amegankpoe*

"So that is his secret. Mali will always be grateful to you, my sister." And he accepted the arrow with increased confidence.

On the eve of the battle, Sundjata ordered the **slaughter** of oxen to supply a great **feast** to his soldiers. But while the feast filled their bellies, the soldiers were **apprehensive** before this great conflict in which many would die.

Balla Faseke said, "Let me talk to the men. Let my words fill their hearts." And so he began as they gathered around the great campfires:

"Kingdoms and empires have lifetimes like man. They too are born, grow, and disappear. Today a new kingdom rises as one dies. Sosso was the growth of yesterday, whereas Mali is for tomorrow." He reminded them of their great heritage and told of their glorious future. He praised each of the kings who joined forces with Mali. And he told them of the prophecy of their leader, their general - the son of the buffalo, lion, and panther - who would rule the savanna. Then he concluded:

"But these are just words: power lies in deeds. Be men of action. Do not respond with your voice, but tomorrow carry out the deeds that will bring fame and glory to you and your ancestors."

After Balla had inflamed their fighting spirit, each went to rest or to prepare for the morning's task without fear.

Sundjata was alone outside his tent as the moon rose. He heard the flapping of wings and saw an owl perch on a nearby branch. It was one of the owls that Balla Faseke had seen in the chamber of the Sumangaru's tower and it was sent as a messenger. Here is the dialog between Sundjata and Sumangaru relayed by the sorcerer-bird:

Owl: "Behave yourself, little boy. I am the king of Mali. If you want peace, return to Mema."

Sundjata: "I will achieve my destiny here in Mali. It is you who will leave."

Owl: "I am the **wild yam of the rocks**; nothing will make me leave Mali."

Sundjata: "I have **master smiths** who will shatter the rocks. Then, yam, I will **devour** you."

Owl: "I am the red-hot **cinder** on which you will burn the soles of your feet!"

Sundjata: "I am the rain that will extinguish the cinder and wash it away."

Then Sundjata grew tired of the battle with words. "**Diabolical** little bird, go and tell your master that I wish no further speech with him. I am not a jali, I am a man of action. Tomorrow I shall wage war."

The owl flew away into the darkness.

When left alone, Sundjata walked further out onto the plains. There he heard the sounds of animals. He heard the roar of a lion, the snarl of a panther, and the bellowing of a buffalo. Before the battle, other rebel princes heard or saw their guardian spirits, too. Balla Faseke saw the hawk. Another, the eagle. Another, a snake. The totem animals were gathering to give power to the young warriors.

**At first light**, the two great armies gathered facing each other across the plain. The drums sounded and the battle began. Sundjata's cavalry charged as his archers shot a **barrage** of arrows. Sundjata's full army advanced. Swords clashed, hoof beats pounded, and war drums thundered. The battle was in full swing.

Sundjata saw Sumangaru at the crest of a hill. Raising his bow, he shot the arrow fixed with the spur of a white rooster. The arrow flew straight but only **grazed** his shoulder. Immediately Sumangaru felt his powers leave him. Trembling, he let out a great cry. He looked up toward the sun. A great black bird flew over the battlefield and he understood. It was the bird of misfortune. "The bird of Kirina," he muttered. He turned his horse's head and took flight.



from *L'épopée de Soundjata* par Sidibe et Amegankpoe

The forces of Sumangaru saw their king leave, and they fled in turn. It was a complete victory for Sundjata.

Sundjata pursued Sumangaru on horseback up a mountain. He wanted to catch him alive. Throwing his spear, he made Sumangaru's horse fall. The old king picked himself up. Then a wild chase began on foot. Before him appeared a **gaping** cave which seemed to draw him against his will. Sundjata's footsteps sounded close behind. Sumangaru entered the black cave where he disappeared into the mountain. Sundjata could not find him, and he shouted, "Come out, coward!"

A loud "Never!" echoed through the darkness. In spite of his search, Sundjata found no trace of his enemy. He mounted his horse and turned back down the mountain.



Cave in Mali, courtesy of Mark Davies, Copyright, 1999

Sundjata returned to the battle field. His forces had been completely victorious. His troops were rejoicing in their spectacular success.

Days later Sundjata **laid siege** to Sosso, the spectacular city of the sorcerer king. The drums sounded and the tide of soldiers moved forward. Warriors with swords, spears and shields were in the first line. Warriors with ladders were in the second. The main body attacked the single city gate with flaming arrows and battering rams. The city was completely taken in a short time.

Sundjata was now in front of the awesome palace tower. Balla Faseke, who knew every inch of the palace, led him into the king's magic chamber. It had changed its appearance since the sorcerer had lost his power. The snake was **writhing** in pains of death. Two owls were flapping pitifully on the floor.

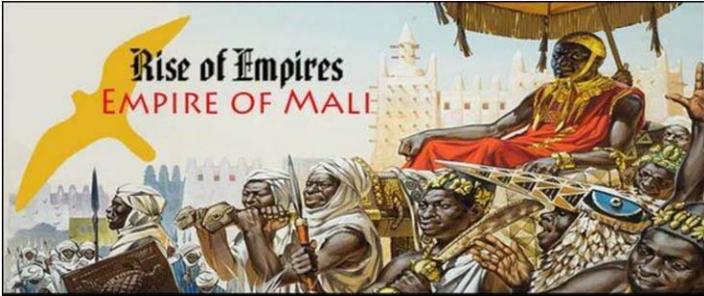
Sumangaru's seven-story tower with all its fetishes and idols was then burned and Sosso was destroyed completely. It is now a place where only birds come to take their dust baths.



actor portraying Fran Kamara, Sundjata's friend and general  
[dreamtime image "Kangba defeats Sosso"]

As Sundjata and his army made their **triumphal march** back to his homeland, the **festivals** began. There was great rejoicing. The Lion King Sundjata was **proclaimed emperor** by the twelve kings of the savanna. Twelve royal spears were stuck in the ground as a **pledge to unity**.

This is the story of the Lion King, Sundjata, my children. Don't doubt my words. I teach you of our time of greatness. The past is only the seed of the future.



afrocentricculturebydesign – by Venta Icenor Um Pictures

## Mali



Map showing Sundjata's exile from Niani to Mema and return.

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*Sunjata: A West African Epic of the Mande Peoples* □ Edited by David C. Conrad and translated with the assistance of Djobba Kamara and Lansana Magasouba □ Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. 2004

*Epic Ancestors of the Sunjata Era: Oral Tradition from the Maninka of Guinea*, □ African Studies Program, University of Wisconsin, 1999.

A collection of seven variants of the Sunjata Epic narrated by Mandinka bards in Guinea. Edited by David C. Conrad.

The story of Sundiata continues to inspire – books for new audiences, movies, dance performances, and even animation:

Wisniewski, David, *Sundiata, Lion King of Mali*, Clarion Books, (Houghton Mifflin Co.), 1992. A beautifully illustrated picture book - even though paper cuts are not an indigenous African art form with 29 pages; it's for elementary school students, or a quick read for middle-high school students.

Video: [Keita: The Heritage of the Griot](#) (film by Kouyate of Burkina Faso, available in the U.S. from California Newsreel, 149 Ninth Street, San Francisco, CA 94103.) This film tells two parallel stories: Sundjata and that of a modern boy of Burkina Faso, Mabo Keita, a descendant of Sundjata, in search

Sundjata – a retelling by Nick Bartel - <http://orias.berkeley.edu/hero/sunjata/>

of the meaning of his name. The legend-story is retold up to the exile of Sundjata and Sogolon. The film contrasts the traditional knowledge and modern schooling of Mabo Keita. Unfortunately, the film is in French and African languages – with subtitles that don't always show well. It is online, but the quality of the copy is not clear.

Short Video clip : Introduces Sundiata with music and pictures [1 ½ min.]  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oQP4gM5Na54&list=PL\\_AEotFXAryV9wzyDAw-dGB\\_9k48lR3ak](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oQP4gM5Na54&list=PL_AEotFXAryV9wzyDAw-dGB_9k48lR3ak)

### **Kennedy Center sites for the classroom**

Lesson plan using Artsedge site.

CD: Jali Kunda: Griots of West Africa and Beyond, Ellipsis Arts. CD and 96-page book contains stunning photos that complement Foday Musa Suso's memoir as well as explorations of the griot's impact on American culture by journalist Robert Palmer and playwright Miri Baraka among others.

There is even a new *Animated Tale of Sundiata : AfrikaToon*

[www.soundiatafilm.com/](http://www.soundiatafilm.com/) (in French)

and *Soundiata Keita fils du Mande*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uOdfHnvyFFU> (trailer; in French)

Music and dance with the [Les Ballets Africains \(clip 3\)](#) on YouTube showing the traditional instruments of griots, many of which were introduced in this story.

Dance troupes sometimes perform a version of the Sundiata story:

Afriky Lolo Dance Group – St. Louis : (1:37 min. trailer)

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZBfX3F5K9oQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZBfX3F5K9oQ)

Sundiata – Script of a play for performing or for readers' theater (for the middle school classroom) by Nick Bartel.

<http://orias.berkeley.edu/hero/sunjata/SundiataScript.pdf>