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Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali
Reading Guide

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Timeline of the Empire of Mali

Adapted from *The Empire of Mali* by Carol Thompson

1076	Almoravid Berbers defeat Empire of Ghana
Early 1200s	Sumanguru rules the fragmented Empire of Ghana and attacks Kangaba, but spares Sundiata's life
1230	Sundiata becomes king of Mali
1235 - 1255	Sundiata builds Empire of Mali; gold from Mali becomes source of gold for Muslim and European currency
1255 - 1270	Reign of Mansa Wali, Sundiata's son; expansion of empire; growth in agricultural production
1307 - 1332	Reign of Mansa Wali, Sundiata's son; expansion of empire; growth in agricultural production
1312	Mansa Musa makes Islam the official religion of Mali
1324	Mansa Musa begins his pilgrimage to Mecca
1332	Mansa Maghan begins to rule; Timbuktu is later raided
1375 - 1400	Songhay asserts independence
1400 - 1480	Empire of Mali pressed by the Songhay and Tuareg; northern province breaks away; Jenne and Timbuktu assert independence; decline of Mali's power; empire raided by the Mossi
1471	Portuguese arrive in West Africa
1493 - 1495	An ambassador of the Portuguese king visits Mansa Mamudu
1509 - 1600	Collapse of the Empire of Mali

Character List

Griot	Djeli Mamadou Kouyate, son of Bintou Kouyate and Djeli Kedian Kouyate
Sundiata	father of the Bright Country Other names: Maghan Sundiata Mari-Djata Sogolon Dhata Nare Maghan Djata Djata Manding Diara Lion of Mali Sogo Sogo Simbon Salaba

Ancestors

Bilali Bounama	ancestor of the Keitas
Lawalo	oldest of 7 sons of above, left Mecca for Mali
Latal Kalabi	son of above
Damul Kalabi	son of above
Lahilatoul Kalabi	son of above, first black prince to go on Hajj; robbed in the desert, returned after 7 years
Kalabi Bomba	oldest son of above, reigned
Kalabi Dauman	younger son of Lahilatoul, preferred fortune, ancestor of traders
Mamadi Kani	son of Kalabi Bomba, hunter king, inventor of the hunter's whistle, communicated with the jinn of the bush, loved by Kondolon Ni Sane
Kani Simbon, Kamignogo Simbon, Kabala Simbon, and Bamari Tagnogokelin Simbon	the four sons of above, Bamari Tagnogokelin held on to the power
M'Bali Nene	son of above
Bello	son of above
Bello Bakon	son of above

Family

Maghan Kon Fatta or Frako Maghan Keigu	son of above, "Maghan the handsome," father of Sundiata
Sassouma Berete	first wife of above, daughter of a great divine, mother of King Dankaran Touman and Princess Nana Triban
Sogolon Kedjou	second wife of Maghan mother of Sundiata, Princess Sogolon Kolonkan and Princess Sogolon Djamarou
Namandje	third wife, one of the Kamaras, mother of Manding Bory, (also Manding Bakary) best friend of Sundiata

From the Court at Niani

Hunter/Soothsayer	mysterious visitor from Sangaran
Gnankouman Doua	King Maghan Kon Fatta's griot
Oulamba and Oulani	hunter brothers from the land of Do, but of the Malian tribe of Traore (Do Mansa-Gnemo Diarra, king of Do)
Buffalo Woman	also known as Sogolon Kedjou or Sogolon Kondouto
Nounfairi	blacksmith seer of Niani
Balla Fasseke	Sundiata's griot, son of Gnankouman Doua Farakourou master of the forges, son of Nounfairi, soothsayer
Soumosso Konkomba	the eldest, most powerful of the nine witches of Mali
Mandjan Berete	Sassouma's brother

Other Kings

Soumaoro Kante	powerful king of Sosso, also a man of great cruelty
Fakoli Koroma	chief general and nephew of above
Keyela	wife of above, magician, superior cook
Mansa Konkon	King at Djidiba, a great sorcerer

King of Tabon and his son, Fran Kamara	one of the companions of Djata
Soumaba Cisse	King of Ghana, in Wagadou
Moussa Toukara	King of Mema, cousin of above, brother of Massiran who becomes friends with Sogolon
Kita Mansa	powerful king under the protection of the jinn of the pool of water in the mountain
King Kamandjan	prepared the town of Ka-ba for celebration

Comprehension Questions

Introduction

- What are the current occupations of griots? What were the former responsibilities of griots?
- How does a griot acquire the title "Belem - Tigui?"

The Words of the Griot Mamadou Kouyate

- Who is Djeli Mamoudou? Who is his family?
- Where does he get his knowledge? How does he praise himself?
- Why should we listen to him?

The First Kings of Mali

- How was Sundiata described? Originally, Mali was a province of what?
- Where was the homeland of the Mandingo?
- Why would the griot list the lineage of Sundiata's family?

The Buffalo Woman

- Where is Maghan Kon Fatta's palace, Canco, located? What is Maghan Kon Fatta's capital city?
- What kind of tree does the king sit under?
- Who seems to have considered the hunter to be one of his favorites?
- How can you tell?
- Where was the hunter's "homeland"?
- What are the pros and cons of being left-handed? What are the two predictions that the hunter makes? How must the king win the ugly woman?
- The two hunters come from which land?
- Why was the hunter rewarded with the opportunity to kill the buffalo? How was the hunter supposed to use the distaff and the egg?
- Describe your favorite part of the wedding ceremony.
- What was its purpose?
- How did Nare Maghan trick Sogolon into becoming a wife?

The Lion Child

- Who did Sassouma Berete enlist to help her kill Sogolon? How was Sogolon protected?
- How did nature react to the birth of Sundiata? When is the naming-day?
- What is Sundiata's name? How was the feast arranged?

Childhood

- How was Sundiata unusual at age three? What was the reaction of the first wife? What was the king's reaction?
- During his childhood, Sundiata gains a brother, two sisters, and a stepsister, who are they?

The Lion's Awakening

- After the king's death, what was the role of the council? Why was the queen mother all powerful?
- How did she persecute Sogolon?
- Why?
- How was the baobab leaf the last straw for Sogolon? What did Sundiata need to walk?
- What do the number of forges tell you about the importance of iron in this culture?
- How did the smith know that this was a day of importance?
- How did Sundiata's ability to walk change the popularity of Soussouma Berete? Who was responsible for the education of Sundiata?
- Why did the nine witches hesitate to kill Sundiata? What does Soussouma promise the witches?
- How did Sundiata confound the witches?
- How did Sundiata compensate the witches for the bribes that Soussouma had promised?
- What was the final promise of the witches?
- What do we discover to be a skill of Sogolon Kolonkan, Sundiata's youngest sister?

Exile

- Why did Djata accept exile? Who was Sundiata's best friend?
- What happened to Sundiata's griot?
- Why did Sogolon say it was OK for Balla Fasseke to be sent away as an ambassador?
- How old is Sundiata when he leaves? How long are his travels?
- Why did Songolon and her family leave the court of Mansa Konkon?
- Why did the king of Tabon suggest that Songolon and her family go to the court of Ghana?
- What role does Sundiata intend for Fran Kamara when he returns? How was Wagadou in Ghana different from Niani?
- What was Soumaba Cisse's view of Sundiata?
- Where was Sogolon and her family sent after she became ill? Why?
- What did Sundiata learn from the caravaneers? Who received Sogolon in Mema?
- What does king Moussa Tounkara bring back with him to Mema? Who first takes Sundiata on a campaign?
- Describe Sundiata as a warrior.
- What title was given to Sundiata after three years of Moussa Tounkara's tutelage?
- When Sogolon has finished the task of raising Sundiata, what advice does she give her son?

Soumaoro Kante, The Sorcerer King

- Who was the new master of Mali? Where did 'the Untouchable king' live? What skills were attributed to him?
- What was required of Dankaran Touman to prevent the destruction of Niani? How else did he do to cement the relationship?
- Describe the secret chamber of the palace.
- What is a balafon? What was the special connection between it and the king? How did war between Sundiata and Soumaoro become inevitable?

History

- What is the difference between a griot and a seer? What is wrong with a written history?
- Why does the griot once again declare his bona fides?
- In what way could the war against Soumaoro be seen as a holy war? What sorts of evil deeds illustrate Soumaoro's demonic nature?
- What did Soumaoro do to alienate his chief general, Fakoli Koroma? Who joins Fakoli Koroma's uprising against Soumaoro?
- What is the fate of Niani?
- What was the reaction to Soumaoro's claim to Mali by right of conquest?

The Baobab Leaves

- Who took over the responsibilities of the household as Sogolon aged?
- Why do you think it was considered scandalous for the viceroy's sister to be seen running across the marketplace?
- How did the baobab leaves help reunite Sogolon's family with the deputation from Mali?
- Why did Sundiata pray for his mother's death? Why was the king upset with Sundiata's departure?
- How did the old Arab advisor interpret the "rubbish" that Sundiata offered the king in payment for his mother's burial land?

The Return

- How had exile benefited Sundiata?
- What did Moussa Tounkara give Sundiata? Who had formed the calvary?
- Why did the army first ride to Wagadou?
- What did the king of Wagadou do to abet the enterprise, aside from donating half his cavalry?
- Why did Sundiata return to Tabon? Which tales enlivened the trip?
- How was the policy of Fran Kamara different from his father's?
- Because he was still busy fighting his nephew Fakoli, who led the detachment that Soumaoro sent to block Sundiata?
- Why did Sundiata want to attack immediately?
- What happened to Sosso Balla, the son of Soumaoro? Strategically, what was Sundiata's plan after the battle of Tabon? Where did Soumaoro and Sundiata first meet in battle?

- Did Sundiata doubt himself after Soumaoro's escape?
- What broke the will of Soumaoro's sons, after their surprise attack near Kankigne?
- Why was this battle not considered a glorious victory?

The Names of the Heroes

- Who were the sons of Mali, gathered at Sibi?

Nana Triban and Balla Fasseke

- What did the soothsayers advise Sundiata to do?
- Why did Sundiata think that the escape of Nana Triban and Balla Fasseke indicated that Soumaoro will lose?
- What was the secret that Nana Triban learned about from Soumaoro?
- Who had the key to the gate through which Nana and Balla escaped? How important was it for Sundiata to be reunited with his griot?
- How did the heroes, inspired by Balla Fasseke, demonstrate their strength?

Krina

- How did the king/sorcerers send their declarations of war?
- In our own society, do you know of times when a war of boasting precedes a conflict?
- Why was Sundiata concerned about delay? What do the men do the evening before battle?
- Why did the griot remind Sundiata of the history of Mali?
- What had Sundiata prepared for the confrontation with Soumaoro? What was the advice of Nana Triban before the battle?
- Why did Soumaoro's powers leave him? How would you describe the battle of Krina?
- Who accompanied Sundiata as he chased after Soumaoro and his son Balla? Who did Fakoli capture?
- Where did Soumaoro hide?
- Who sent his daughter in marriage to Sundiata? Who was directing the defence of the city of Sosso?
- The defenders of Sosso hoped to defend against a siege. What really happened? How had Soumaoro's magic chamber been changed since last seen by Balla Fasseke?
- What happened to the city of Sosso?

The Empire

- After attacking Sosso, which ally of Soumaoro?
- What happened to the young men of that town?
- After the division of Sundiata's army, who led the war in Bambougou?
- Who led the war in the mountains of Fouta? Who led the war against the city of Kita?
- By what sign did Sundiata know that the jinn had replied favorably to his sacrifices?

- How did Sundiata treat the citizens of Kita differently from those in towns that he had previously defeated?
- Why did Djata want to drink the magic water? Where did he go after Kita, and who had lived there?

Kouroukan Fougan of the Division of the World

- What new title did the twelve kings of the bright savanna country give to Sundiata?
- What song did Balla Fasseke compose?
- Describe the celebration in your own words.
- What did Sundiata do with the kingdoms he had received from his allies? By the divisions of the land and power at Kouroukan Fougan, what qualities appeared to be valued by this society?
- What is Balla Fasseke's reward?

Nianli

- Why were so many people attracted to the food at Ka-ba?
- How did the fishing tribe of Somono express their gratitude to Sundiata? How was Sundiata greeted on his triumphal march across Mali?
- Who became Sundiata's Kankoro Sigui, or viceroy?
- What task did Manding Bory take on after Niani was rebuilt?
- How did Sundiata balance the concerns of the kings and the notables in their kingdoms?
- What happened to Fakoli, the nephew of Soumaoro? How does the griot defend Sundiata as a ruler?

Eternal Mali

- How did Sundiata die?
- Why is it important that Mali be seen as eternal?
- Do you think the griot would approve of archeologists?
- How does the griot's emphasis on knowing more than he is telling give him an advantage?

Direct Quotations

Since time immemorial the Kouyates have been in the service of the Keita princes of Mali; we are vessels of speech, we are the repositories which harbour secrets many centuries old (1).

I will give you my father's words just as I received them; royal griots do not know what lying is (1).

In his capital of Nainiba he loved to sit often at the foot of the great silk- cotton tree which dominated his palace of Canaco (4).

The left hand is the hand of evil, but in the divining art it is said that left- handed people are the best (5).

Oh, who can recognize in the little child the great king to come (5)?

You will choose her for she is my wraith (8).

Sogolon, I must sacrifice you to the greatness of my house (12).

A wife quickly grows accustomed to her state (12).

Soon, dark schemes took form in the mind of Sassouma Berete; she determined to kill Sogolon (13).

The name was given the eighth day after his birth (14).

Sogolon's son had a slow and difficult childhood (15).

Whenever his mother went out he would crawl on all fours to rummage about in the calabashes in search of food, for he was very greedy (15).

Besides, Songolon Djata would brain the poor little things with his already strong arms and none of them would come near him any more (15).

The silk-cotton tree emerges from a tiny seed (16).

It was of no use Doua's defending the king's will which reserved the throne for Mari Djata, for the council took no account of Nare Maghan's wish (18).

As men have short memories, Sogolon's son was spoken of with nothing but irony and scorn (18).

The queen mother, Sassouma Berete, was the source of all this gossip (18).

Then she laughed derisively with that fierce laughter which cuts through your flesh and penetrates right to the bone (19).

The waters of the Niger can efface the stain from the body, but they cannot wipe out an insult (20).

In a great effort he straightened up and was on his feet at one go - but the great bar of iron was twisted and had taken the form of a bow (21).

The multitude loves and fears strength (22).

Each is the child of his mother; the child is worth no more than the mother is worth (22).

The snake has no legs yet it is as swift as any other animal that has four (22).

He also listened to the history of the kings which Balla Fasseke told him; enraptured by the story of Alexander the Great, the mighty king of gold and silver, whose sun shone over quite half the world (23).

He already had that authoritative way of speaking which belongs to those who are destined to command (23).

The snake seldom bites the foot that does not walk (24).

But nothing can be done against a heart full of kindness (26).

You cannot choose your relatives but you can choose your friends (27).

I will go and finish my days among my kinsfolk and I will say that I had a son who was afraid to rule (27).

He would reign alone for power could not be shared (28).

Our action is not us for it is commanded of us (28).

His body became sturdy and his misfortunes made his mind wise (28).

Men's wisdom is contained in proverbs and when children wield proverbs it is a sign that they have profited from adult company (29)

Fear enters the heart of him who does not know his destiny, whereas Sundiata knew that he was striding towards a great destiny (29).

God is the guest's tongue (29).

There's one that will make a great king. He forgets nobody (34).

Modesty is the portion of the average man, but superior men are ignorant of humility (34).

It is destiny that sent you to Mema. I will make a great warrior out of you (37).

Those who did not love him feared him and his voice carried authority. The king's choice was approved of both by the army and the people; the people love all who assert themselves over them (37).

The griot always has a weakness for music, for music is the griot's soul (39).

Kings are only men, and whatever iron cannot achieve against them, words can (40).

Every king wants to have a singer to perpetuate his memory, for it is the griot who rescues the memories of kings from oblivion, as men have short memories (41).

But whoever knows the history of a country can read its future (41).

Other peoples use writing to record the past, but his invention has killed the faculty of memory among them (41).

The prophets did not write and their words have been all the more vivid as a result (41).

With them (peoples with a written history) everybody thinks he knows, whereas learning should be a secret (41).

The fortified town of Sosso was the bulwark of fetishism against the word of Allah (41).

Sooumaoro was not like other men, for the jinn had revealed themselves to him and his power was beyond measure (41)

His greatest pleasure was publicly to flog venerable old men (41)

Oh! How power can pervert a man (42)

Whatever rank you may hold here, leave all these honors and come and deliver your fatherland (45).

Sundiata got up and all the envoys stood up while Djata went out. He was already king (46).

How ungrateful, thought the king, the son of another is always the son of another (46).

Give him the land for if he reconquers his kingdom he will deal gently with you, your family, and his will be forever allied (47).

The snake, man's enemy, is not long-lived, yet the serpent that lives hidden will surely die old (47).

No matter how small a forest may be, you can always find the sufficient fibres to tie up a man. Numbers mean nothing; it is worth that counts (48).

The battle of Nogueboria showed Djata, if he needed to be shown, that to beat the king of Sosso other weapons were necessary (52).

As usual, the men grouped themselves by tribes and busied themselves cooking their food (53).

In the same way as light preceded the sun, so the glory of Sundiata, overleaping the mountains, shed itself on all the Niger plain (54).

I have come back, and as long as I breathe Mali will never be in thrall - rather death than slavery (56).

With scrupulous care, Sundiata had made his preparations at Sibi (56).

In order to defeat Soumaoro it was necessary first of all to destroy his magical power (56).

You know that he has never thought ill of you, and besides, all that was in his destiny (57).

I knew how to flatter him and make him jealous (57).

Oh son of Sogolon, I am the word and you are the deed, now your destiny begins (58).

There would not be any heroes if deeds were condemned to man's forgetfulness, for we ply our trade to excite the admiration of the living, and to evoke the veneration of those who are to come (58).

Balla Fasseke mentioned all the chiefs by name and they all performed great feats; then the army, confident in its leadership, left Sibi (59).

Those fighting should make a declaration of their grievances to begin with (60).

After the war of mouths, swords had to decide the issue (61).

I defend the weak, I defend the innocent, Fakoli. You have suffered an injustice so I will render you justice, but I have my lieutenants about me and I would like to know their opinions (61).

Justice had to be granted to the man who came to implore justice (61).

Sixteen generations have consolidated their power (62).

I would have you know, son of Sogolon, that there is not room enough for two kings around the same calabash of rice (62).

When a new cock comes to the poultry run the old cock picks a quarrel with him and the docile hens wait to see if the new arrival asserts himself or yields (63).

Strength makes a law of its own self and power allows no division (63).

You have the strength and majesty of the lion, you have the might of the buffalo (63).

By what distinguished actions will our sons be brought to regret not having lived in the time of Sundiata (63)?

But words are nothing but words; power lies in deeds (63).

A great black bird flew over above the fray and he understood. It was a bird of misfortune (65).

Sosso is now a spot where guinea fowl and young partridges come to take their dust baths (69).

Sosso the Proud is nothing but a memory in the mouths of griots (70).

After the destruction of Soumaoro's capital the world knew no other master but Sundiata (70).

The arms of Sundiata had subdued all the countries of the savanna (72).

One by one all the kings received their kingdoms from the very hands of Sundiata, and each one bowed before him as one bows before a Mansa (78).

I give the Kouyates the right to make jokes about all the tribes, and in particular about the royal tribe of Keita (78).

Sundiata pronounced all the prohibitions which still obtain in relations between the tribes (78).

A year of war had emptied all the granaries so each came to take his share of the king of Sosso's reserves (79).

With Sundiata peace and happiness entered Niani (81).

He was feared, but loved as well. He was the father of Mali and gave the world peace (82).

Mali keeps its secrets jealously (83).

But never try. Wretch. To pierce the mystery which Mali hides from you. Do not ever go into the dead cities to question the past, for the spirits never forgive. Do not seek to know what is not to be known (84).

Everywhere I was able to see and understand what my masters were teaching me, but between their hands I took an oath to teach only what is to be taught and to conceal what is to be kept concealed (84).

Use of Sundiata Quotations

The quotations at the end of the study questions are intended for use in multiple ways, depending on the abilities of the students and the time that is assigned to study Sundiata.

1. The quotations could be used in class to start conversations after a section of the epic has been read.
2. A selection of the quotations could be cut out and shuffled. Then students could be asked to place the quotations in the story line.
3. They are useful as starters for a response paragraph. Choose a particular quotation, or have each student choose a favorite quotation, and have that be the topic sentence when working on paragraph development.
4. Students could decide upon categories, and label each quote by a key letter. For example:
 - S = important to the story line
 - C = provides insight to a cultural value
 - H = provides historical insight
 - G = provides insight into the role of the griot