**Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali**

**Summary**

The epic of Sundiata is told by the griot (storyteller and keeper of history) Djeli Mamadou Kouyaté. He begins with details of Sundiata's ancestors, as the force of history is important in the tale of the man whose victory will create the Mali Empire.

Sundiata's father, Maghan Kon Fatta, was king of the city of Niani. One day, a soothsaying hunter foretells that he will produce a great ruler through the marriage of an ugly woman. Later, two hunters bring a woman to offer as his wife, and he sees this is the foretold woman, Sogolon. The hunters earned her by defeating a monstrous buffalo that was terrorizing a land far away. Through showing kindness to an old woman, they were taught the secret of the buffalo and then given their choice of woman by the king whose realm was being terrorized. The old woman told them to choose the ugliest maid, and they did. The king takes Sogolon for his wife, but she refuses to let him consummate the marriage until magic powers help him to rid her of a wraith (spirit) that was making her resistant. Sundiata is conceived.

In childhood, Sundiata faces two obstacles: first, because of the prophecy, the king's first wife Sassouma Bérété spreads vicious rumors about him and Sogolon in an effort to elevate her own son's stature; and second, he is crippled and does not walk until the age of 7. Despite his physical limitations, his father sees wisdom in his son and gifts him griot Balla Fasséké, the son of his own griot. The king dies soon afterwards and his eldest son, Dankaran Touman, is given control by the elders, who do not see much future in the crippled boy. One day, when Sogolon is embarrassed by the queen mother, Sundiata uses a rod to help himself stand on two legs and from this day onwards, his strength is unmistakable.

Frightened her own son will lose his control, the queen mother Sassouma Bérété orchestrates exile for Sundiata, Sogolon, and their immediate family. For seven years, they travel from asylum to asylum, sometimes being shown great hospitality and occasionally being mistreated by their hosts. All the while, Sundiata learns of new peoples and customs, while impressing most people he meets. He spends a particularly long time with Moussa Tounkara at Mema, who helps raise Sundiata and teaches him the ways of war so as to potentially groom the boy as his heir.

Sundiata also learns during his exile about the evil sorcerer king Soumaoro Kanté, who is slowly forcing the cities of Mali and beyond under his control through cruelty. When Niani
falls to the sorcerer king, a search party is sent to Ghana to find Sundiata and ask him to claim his mantle as ruler. Though his choice to return to Mali and battle the sorcerer king upsets the Moussa Tounkara, he is ultimately given his blessing and the first of his subservient armies.

Sundiata goes to many cities and lands that he visited during his period of exile, slowly building up his army. Finally, his armies come up against those of Soumaoro. Though Sundiata is successful in his battles, he cannot harm the sorcerer king because the latter has magical protections. Sundiata turns to magic for help, and through sacrifice is able to craft a magical arrow. In their largest battle, Sundiata nicks Soumaoro with the arrow and the sorcerer king loses his power. Soumaoro retreats and escapes.

Accompanied by Fakoli, Soumaoro's nephew who revolted after being betrayed by his uncle, Sundiata pursues Soumaoro for several days. They finally trap him in a cave with nowhere to go; they have won. After his victory, Sundiata defeats the kings who stayed loyal to the sorcerer king. He then returns to Niani and founds the Mali Empire, splitting it up to show respect for all the rulers who promise to serve him.

The griot ends the epic by praising Sundiata and his rule of the golden age of the Mali Empire. He tells the audience that Mali is eternal and that reminders of history are everywhere, but only the griot can know all.

The story of Sundiata recounts the story of the founding of the Mali Empire in West Africa. The Mali empire was one of the three great medieval West African empires (preceded by the Ghana Empire and followed by the Songhay Empire), and was located around the Sudan, the fertile land that lies below the Sahara Desert. The Mali Empire is not the same as the contemporary nation of Mali, though it lies somewhat within its borders. It had a unique geography of savannas, agricultural lands, and the Niger River. The Mali Empire was strongly influenced by Islam, since one of its progenitors had brought the religion from the Middle East. However, Mali remained polytheistic and the religion of Allah was integrated into their belief system, rather than subsuming it.

While the epic is rich in myth and legend about the triumph of Sundiata over Soumaoro, Sundiata is known to have been a real person. Most of our information comes through the generations of re-tellings of his myth through the Mali griots. Griots are oral storytellers, similar to Greek bards, who are responsible for preserving and presenting the old stories. So this story, which recounts the heroism of the ruler while also celebrating the culture and tradition of Mali, has been preserved orally. What is most clearly historical is that the king Sundiata united several independent kingdoms and tribes that were being over-taxed under the tyranny of Soumaoro. Because of his triumph and the confidence he inspired, the tribes united as Mali and so were a new set of customs born and spread throughout the Sudan. While nation lines have obviously complicated allegiances in that region over the centuries, these ancestral bonds still exist. The creation of the Mali empire would have happened sometime around 1230's AD.

This version of the story was recorded in 1960 by D.T. Niane, who documented and translated into French the words of the griot Mamadou Kouyaté. While it follows the basic structure of the tale as most often presented, it should be remembered that as an oral
tradition and a result of translation, many elements are unique to this work. In particular, spellings vary wildly depending on which version of the text or which translation one might consult, which reflects the way that different griots might have pronounced the names differently. Likewise, some details of the story – like the demise of Soumaoro – are often recounted in different ways. It is best to remember that these differences are a natural outgrowth of the Mali commitment to preserving history orally, and do not undercut the "truth" of the story any more than the differences between the Bible's Gospels would dissuade a strong Christian from believing that Christ was the son of God.

Note that griots performed their stories as long-form songs, accompanied by an instrument called the balafon. Professor Niane's transcription of the work, and its subsequent translation into English, present the work as prose rather than in its original lyrical form.
**Glossary of Terms**

An gnewa
"forward"

aubergine
eggplant

balafon
the stringed instrument played by the griots

baobab
a leaf from a particular tree in Mali, used as a condiment

brigand
bandit; highway robber

bulwark
a person, institution or principle that acts as a defense against something

calabash
a gourd used for storing liquid or food

chaff
to mock or tease

cleave
split or sever

cowries
shells used as money for the Mandingo people

craven
fainthearted; without courage

credence
credibility

Daffeké
"a fine charger" (powerful steed)

dais
a raised platform

discomfiture
frustration; lack of ease; defeat

distaff
a staff that holds unspun fibers during sewing

effrontery
impudence; nerve

exchequer
a person or department that maintains a government or court's revenue

extoll
praise highly; exalt

fetish
a physical object that contains a magical power

**flog**
whip

**gibe**
insult

**glade**
an open area in a forest

**gnougou**
a condiment used by the Mandingo, especially common at Niani

**granaries**
large structures intended for the storage of grain

**griot**
A singer, storyteller and historian of old Mali. Griots also serve as counselors to kings, advising rulers based on their wisdom and knowledge of history.

**hecatomb**
Sacrifice to the gods consisting of 100 cattle

**impetus**
moving force; impulse; stimulus

**impunity**
exemption from punishment

**insurgent**
a person who revolts against civil authority

**jinn**
a spirit of nature, common in Mandingo religion

**largesse**
generosity in bestowing gifts

**macabre**
having a grim or grisly atmosphere

**mattock**
a hand tool used for digging or chopping

**mithkal**
an Arab unit of measurement, used in Mandingo to mean the smallest possible amount of something

**morose**
gloomy; sullen

**mosque**
a Muslim place of worship

**n'na**
the Mandingo word for mother

**nafiola**
an unknown botanical
**nascent**
new, just coming into existence

**obsequies**
funeral rites

**opulence**
richness; wealth; abundance

**pagne**
colorful wrapper worn by West African women

**plastron**
turtle shell

**prudence**
caution; discretion

**rampart**
a defensive wall

**rancour**
malicious resentment; spite

**redoubtable**
formidable; dreadful

**savanna**
a grassy plain in tropical or sub-tropical areas, with few trees

**scimitar**
a sword with a curved blade

**Simbon**
title meaning "master hunter"

**sofas**
soldiers in the army of the Mali Empire

**soothsayer**
one who practices divination (the process of telling the future)

**subjugated**
subordinate; under control or domination by conquest

**tabala**
the royal ceremonial drum

**taboo**
a prohibition enforced by magic; the breaker of a taboo often suffers punishment by a magical force.

**taciturn**
silent or uncommunicative

**Tana**
a hereditary taboo

**tempest**
great storm
**trice**
a very short period of time; an instant

**vainglorious**
boastful; prideful; self-important

**veneration**
respect or awe

**viceroy**
a figure of authority who serves under a higher sovereign; a second-in-command

**wori**
a popular game played in Africa involving small stones

**wraith**
a ghost or spirit that possesses humans