

Keita: The Heritage of the Griot (1995)

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OVERVIEW

In the first three decades following the African independences, the *griot*, the ancient African storyteller and depository of the traditions of orality, was a linguistic reference for poets, writers and filmmakers in French-speaking Africa. They emulated his distinctive rhetorical pattern thought to be exemplary of African orality. Pioneers of Francophone African literature, like Leopold Sedar Senghor, Djibril Tamsir Niane, and Francis Bebey, for instance, were convinced to have discovered in the griot's art a narrative technique proper to blackness, which needed to be cultivated and passed on to future generations of African students. In the midst of this exaltation, Tamsir Niane's *An Epic of Old Mali* (1960), which the writer claimed was a faithful rendition of the contents and form a story by an authentic griot, Djeli Mamoudou Kouyate of the village of Djeliba Koro, in Guinea, became the quintessential textual style to emulate. With *Keita: The Heritage of the Griot*, Dani Kouyate, a filmmaker and the son of an African griot, carries on this tradition of curation of style and contents.

A WORD ON OLD MALI 800–1550 C.E.

Sundiata Keïta's great empire to which the griot refers in the film was Old Mali. It is not modern-day Mali with its capital in Bamako. Old Mali was an empire that existed between 800 and 1550 C.E. Its original founders were Mandé-speaking people (Bamana, Sénoufo, Dogon), who today inhabit almost every country in West Africa. At its peak (1200–1300 C.E.), the Mali Empire covered most of today's Mali as well as western Mauritania and Senegal. However, it did not have categorically defined boundaries by Western standards.

The Mali Empire conformed instead to the precolonial African notion of a state as a political organization of people whose cohesion was based less on the boundaries within which they lived than on the languages they spoke, the cultural rituals and the economic activities they practiced, and the sovereign to whom they pledged allegiance, paid excises, and from whom they consequently expected protection. The Mali Empire rose to prominence because of the fall of another great African state, Wagadu (or Ghana as it is often referred to by historians), a gold-rich empire.

After several raids on Wagadu, whose people they saw as too liberal on the precepts of the Koran, Moroccan Almoravids succeeded in subduing the empire in 1076. Though short, the Almoravids' reign in Wagadu heavily taxed the empire, weakened its cohesion, and disbanded its army. Frail, Wagadu fell under the influence of King Sumanguru Kanté from the neighboring Susu Empire, who had been coveting its riches for many years. Later, around 1250 C.E., Sumanguru was himself defeated and executed by Sundiata, the King of Mali, the hero of *Keita: The Heritage of the Griot*.

SYNOPSIS

Mabo Keita (Hamed Dicko), a Burkinabé boy, who lives in the city of Ouagadougou with his parents and goes to a French school, does not know the origin of his name. So, a ghostly ancestral figure sends Djéliba (Sotigui Kouyaté), the family griot from the village of Wagadu, on the mission of instructing Mabo about his ancestor, Sundiata Keita, king of the 13th-century Mali Empire. In the city, where Djeliba carries out his responsibility, he is confronted with the disapproval of Mabo's mother, Sitan (Claire Sanon), and teacher, Mr. Fofana (Abdoulaye Komboudri). The griot's teaching style and the stories that he tells catch the child's attention, so much that the schoolboy starts daydreaming in class, if he is in school at all.

Mabo's mother and his teacher complain that the griot's presence has become disruptive, and they want the child's father to halt the griot's teaching sessions so that he can focus on his conventional schoolwork. The father sees no reason to be alarmed. However, as Mabo repeats his ancestor's epic to his classmates, his excitement rubs on them, and they, too, start skipping school, spending hours in a baobab tree and listening to their friend. Mabo's father, Boicar (Mamadou Sarr), becomes the target of some parents' anger. To avoid any further disruption of Boicar's relationships with his wife and neighbors, Djéliba, who concludes that he has implanted a strong enough seed in Mabo for the child to want to investigate other aspects of his history, returns to Wagadu, insisting that no one can ever stop the course of the story.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Djeliba Kouyaté (Sotigui Kouyaté, real-life father of the filmmaker): A traditional griot or storyteller. He is on the mission of teaching Mabo, a schoolboy, about the history of his ancestors.

Mabo Keita (Hamed Dicko): A young Burkinabe boy who lives in the city of Ouagadougou with his parents and attends a French school.

Sita (Claire Sanon): Mabo's mother. She is a homemaker.

Boicar (Mamadou Sarr) Mabo's father. He works outside of the house.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

DJELIBA Agreeable (Traditionalist – Patriarchal – Flexible)

Djeliba comes into the Keitas' lives as the rectifier of the inadequacies that rig the existence of the French-educated Africans. Their daily realities are inconsistent with the expectations of assimilation into Western cultures that are set for them. His fight is against Western education, which he sees as one of the numerous schemes used by the West to keep the gaze of Africans turned toward Europe as the Promised Land, toward European languages as the quintessential languages, and toward European cultures as the exemplary cultures. For him, the schoolteacher is a local agent of France whose methods he must combat in his objective to restore Africans to themselves.

Traditionalist The very first day Djeliba enters the Keitas' home, he finds Mabo reading a book in which the boy's ancestors are said to descend from apes. From that day onward, Djeliba's mission is to counter conventional, modern history's maxims with traditional oral history, of which he is the depository. Hence, Djeliba teaches Mabo a version of history in which his ancestors appear as people of great accomplishments.

Patriarchal The type of historical truth that the griot teaches Mabo, in agreement with the Mande culture that the griot glorifies, is one that establishes the preeminence of men over women. That perspective determines women's roles and responsibilities in the domestic space, and men's in the public space. The veiled criticisms that Djeliba levels against Sita, when he learns that she has a housemaid and is therefore lazy, emerge from this patriarchal perspective.

Pedagogically flexible One noticeable feature in Djeliba's pedagogical approach, especially as it compares with that of the schoolteacher, is its flexibility. First, his lessons are delivered outdoors, which contrasts sharply with the Western classroom, characterized by the dichotomy between the all-knowing teacher and empty-vessel students, the enclosure between walls, assigned seats, and predetermined national curricula and timeline. Contrary to the schoolteacher's setting, the griot's teaching takes place outdoors; the lessons are not preplanned but unfurl from Mabo's questions; and the lessons can stop and resume anytime

MABO Open (Depersonalized – Ruptured – Deceptive)

Torn between his mother's expectations of a modern upbringing for him and Djeliba and his father's expectations that he bathe in his traditional Malian culture, Mabo experiences the split typical of any postcolonial subject. Unlike the adults who have had the time and support to develop strategies to reconcile their two competing worlds of tradition and modernity, the boy is left to awkwardly improvise

solutions to his depersonalization and rupture. Moreover, his primary supports, his parents, are at odds and cannot have a rational conversation about what counsel to give him.

Depersonalized Mabo is an African boy, living in Africa, within African realities. Yet, his history books tell him that his ancestors are the Gauls and teach him about the exploits of European explorers, like Christopher Columbus. These books say nothing about his African ancestors and civilization. Mabo is thus a depersonalized African boy, alienated from his true self. Mabo's spontaneous welcoming of the griot's teaching reveals his deep anxiety about his depersonalization and his need to reconstitute himself.

Ruptured Mabo's reconstitution as a total African is impossible. The more he seeks Djeliba's traditional teaching, the more he feels the injunctions of his Western school; and the more time Mabo spends at school, the more he feels the lack of his African-ness. The boy is in a rupture that makes it impossible to be either totally African or totally westernized. This is what Mabo realizes as he confides in his mother that he likes school as much as he likes the griot's teaching.

Deceptive Mabo cannot arrange his schedule in such a way as to take advantage of the griot's and his schoolteacher's competing narratives. His young mind does not understand how to tactfully finesse his way between his two worlds. His strategies are bold lies, such as "the teacher is sick, and we have no class today."

SITA Rational (Sensible – Modern)

Sita is a modern African woman confronted with the reluctance of men to see the disappearance of patriarchy. Far from being an excessive and emotional slayer of tradition, she is a rational proponent of modernity and a seeker of compromise against the inflexibility of male traditionalists.

Sensible Sita seems the most sensible of Mabo's parents. She logically argues her opposition to the griot's presence: The boy has his exams to study for. The griot is being a distraction to Mabo at present but can instruct him when classes are not in session. Her explanations seem to be hitting a wall of obtuseness when her husband and the griot make not even the slightest effort to understand her viewpoint.

Modernist As an emergent African woman, Sita is suspicious of an African tradition (in this case the Mande tradition) that has often subjugated women. Sita has her hopes set on modernity as the site of development of new African women and of a new generation of African men, ridden of such deadweights of tradition as polygamy, domestic abuse, and commodification of the woman body.

Boicar Agreeable (Betwixt - Obstinate – Deceitful – Emotive)

There is an image that Boicar would like to project as being proper to his personality, that of a composed, progressive and rational father and husband, who affords his wife moments of respite from household chores, who favours independence and gives his son a Western education. This, in fact, is a false image that unravels with the arrival of the griot, revealing a rather stubborn, dishonest, and emotive man who will not compromise.

Betwixt Boicar is cast in the middle of the tradition versus modernity debate. However, he is more trusting of a traditional culture that has often afforded men more privileges than women. In the struggle between the griot and Sita, or the schoolteacher, Boicar often takes the side of the griot, who, as the archivist of his family's greatness, titillates his emotional fibers.

Obstinate Boicar lacks the faculty to see other people's points of view. He brushes aside his wife's apprehension about the timing of the griot's lessons. He interrupts Sita when she scolds Mabo for putting the griot's teaching sessions above his schoolwork. He dismisses the teacher's concerns about Mabo's sudden lack of focus. For him, the griot is right and his mission noble. Anyone who sees otherwise can only be wrong.

Deceitful Unlike his son Mabo, who lies boldly in his attempt to reconcile the expectations of the griot and those of his mother and teacher, Boicar operates surreptitiously by masquerade and false pretenses. In the presence of the griot, he wears the mask of a fervent Muslim, yet he does not even possess a prayer

rug. To his friends at the wedding, he hides the presence and mission of the griot in order to appear modernist. To his wife and son, he displays the face of a progressive father and husband, yet after a few hours with the griot he reveals himself as a closet orthodox who abhors dissent.

Emotive Boicar is incapable of meeting his wife and the schoolteacher at a negotiated midway point. This is because Boicar does not function rationally, but emotionally. When his wife confronts him for giving the griot his approval to teach Mabo without consulting her, he does not try to understand her point of view. He immediately accuses her of having something against the griot. In bed, where they could have further discussed the issue, he pretends to be sleeping. Boicar has an emotional attachment to the griot's narrative that obfuscates any good sense he might have. He rewards those who, like the woman praise-singer at the wedding, reify that narrative, and he combats all those who even slightly question it.

THEMES

SOCIETY (culture, language, parable/allegory, identity, gender, technology, environment, pharmacology)

Culture In an interview, Dani Kouyaté had this to say about his role as a filmmaker: "I, myself, am a griot by birth. I am thus the guardian of my people's history for the generations to come. I take the theme of this film as a duty. But I am lucky; I belong to the age of cinema, a fabulous instrument for the griot." Thus, Kouyaté considers himself a modern-day griot—a common French name for the West African Djeli, Djeliba, Mabo, Guewel, or Belen Tigui—whose duty, like the traditional griot's, is that of an archeologist of memories. Who, then, is this traditional griot, with whom the filmmaker claims ancestry? Before the advent of alphabetical literacy in Africa, the histories of individuals, families, clans and tribes, were mainly preserved and transmitted to succeeding generations through repetitive narratives by the griot. The griot was primarily a poet, singer, and genealogist. Although the griot was not necessarily a notable, his proximity with chiefs and royalty conferred on him special status. Furthermore, his function as the community's historian was essential, so people respected him greatly and often consulted him about important matters. The griot inherits his trade from his patrilineal relatives. Despite using the moving image as his medium, Kouyaté, nonetheless retains the mode of communication of the griot, characterized by a rhetorical technique dictated by orality.

Language Young Mabo's fidgeting, his impatience that the griot's story is taking too long to get to the point, might translate as the exasperation of any individual educated in the conventional Western school, where the gist, and not the superfluous information, is what matters the most. The griot speaks from memory; therefore, one cannot expect his narrative technique to be the method of literary expression. In fact, to be able to always tell his stories the same way, without too much alteration, this African poet developed a set of mnemonic skills, whereby he never isolates a story or an individual experience. Instead, every story is part of a communal fabric that embeds narratives into one another in such a distinctive pattern that the individual experience becomes an integral part of collective knowledge. This exercise of quilting individual narratives into collective experience requires the griot to shift directions, digress, and repeat: hence, Mabo's annoyance and impatience. Each instance of digression or shift corresponds to one level of individual or familial experience.

Parable/allegory As the filmmaker confesses, he is a griot who works with the new tool of the moving image. From this standpoint, the film is a juxtaposition of several griotic narratives, the most obvious of which are the filmmaker's and Djeliba's. Thus, the film functions as the enterprise of a griot (the filmmaker) telling the story of another griot (Djeliba) telling a story. Since the language of the griot is the quintessential parabolical/metaphorical language, it becomes essential, in order to grasp the richness of the film, that one exploit the griots' parables and allusions to their fullest. While the filmmaker's allusions are image-based, Djeliba's are language-based. These two parabolical approaches are not competing against each other. In fact, they collaborate in reinforcing the same themes.

Identity The multiplicity of levels in the griot's story relates to the juxtaposition of individual, familial or tribal stories. This digression, however, does not impede cohesiveness and understanding. The narrative remains coherent due to the great emphasis on its essential information. The griot repeats the most essential elements in order to maintain cohesion. In the griot's stories, which are meant to be passed on to generations by means of words rather than letters, the juxtaposed stories function as junctions or insertion

points. To the griot, these subtexts act as a reminder, cuing him as to when to insert specific stories, whereas to the listeners they function as *topoi* that verify the various important parts of the narrative. These sub-narratives are not chosen with the sole prospect of functioning as easily discernible *topoi*. They also participate in the symbolic organization of the text, in helping Mabo identify, not just with his story, but also with the stories of the people that constitute his community.

Gender The film also contains a traditional delimitation of public spaces that follows the axis of gender, and which goes hand in hand with a distribution of social roles and responsibilities. It is of that traditional order that the griot is nostalgic when he laments that times have changed. Djeliba does not hide his view to Mabo that the child's mother, who delegates most of her domestic responsibilities to her housemaid, does not fall within his idea of a typical Mandé woman. She might be beautiful and marvelous, as he has complimented her, but she is, nonetheless, a failed traditional Mandé woman. Djeliba has observed Sita in the domestic space, sitting by her husband at the same table, eat and conversing with him on equal footing. Her posture is not consistent with conventional Mande culture. However, it is only in the domestic space that Sita is allowed to cross the gendered boundaries and to coalesce the feminine and masculine spaces. In public, as was the case at the wedding, Sita and Boicar are not allowed to boycott the traditional gendered configuration of space, role, and responsibility: Boicar sits and talks with the men. Sita sits and talks with the women and children.

Technology Keita: The Heritage of the Griot points to great technological inventiveness in Africa, especially metallurgy. This has been proven by recent searches. Indeed, among scholars of African cultures and civilizations, the existence of iron technology in precolonial Africa has never really been at issue. Empirical and archeological evidence in Sub-Saharan Africa tell of intense metallurgical activities on the continent before the arrival of the Europeans. The various accounts one gets from oral literatures about the Mali Empire and the empires that preceded and followed it also point to the existence of African civilizations endowed with technological inventiveness and innovation. One of the recurring observations these narratives make is that of the mastery of metal work, and especially of the techniques of metallurgy in precolonial Africa. Though archeologists have expressed skepticism about the existence of sophisticated iron technology in ancient Africa, several archeological excavations have exposed a variety of ornamental artifacts, among them pottery, ceramic, copper, and iron items; thus, demonstrating the existence of a highly structured iron smithing activity in precolonial Africa. In the movie, the breaking of the iron has less to do with the kind of iron that was produced in Africa than with a metaphorical trope. It is not iron that supports the weight of the prince. It is the little branch of a *sunsun* tree. This metaphorical trope is meant to say that great things sometimes come in small packages; just as great leaders, like Claudius and like Sundiata, might spring from modest, disabled characters.

Environment In ancient Africa, the big urban centers that mushroomed under the impetus of metallurgy must have had some great environmental implications. On his way to Ouagadougou, Djeliba walks through landscapes of mountains, deserts, wetlands, and forests. This cinematic gesture by Dani Kouyaté is meant to agree with Djeliba's oral tale that Old Mali was a variegated land of ecological richness. In fact, that metaphorical ecosystem of the eleventh and thirteenth centuries contrasts with the kind of ecosystem that is present today in the same area. In the movie, when the two hunting brothers corner the buffalo-woman, she gives them some advice and devices to use in their escape after they have wounded her. As the hunters throw the stick, the stone, and the egg, these elements become, respectively, a thick forest of palm trees, a rocky hill, and a muddy swamp, which protect them from the monster. The important information emanating from this episode has to do with the ecological makeup of Old Mali. The environmental picture of ancient Mali that one gets from this section of the film is a very diverse terrain constituted by lush woodlands, swamps, grassy and desert plains, and high plateaus, all coexisting in a proximity that is not recognizable today.

Pharmacology The film also hints at several instances of plant use for pharmacological purpose in ancient Africa. The exponentially growing populations of the big urban centers of ancient Africa had to be protected from the variety of diseases that affected them. The range of the Old Mali Empire—which spread from tropical forests to bushy savannahs, passing through swamps and hilly lands—exposed the area to tropical diseases as well as to infections from semi-desert and desert regions.. In the film, the mother and sisters of the crippled prince rub his paralyzed legs with a concoction of leaves. The exact nature of the plants

used is not explicit to the viewers, which begs the viewers to ask what medicinal resources Sogolon Kédjou, or any 13th century Malian mother for that matter, could have had in her medicine basket. One plant that is at the source of Sundiata's resolve to walk is the baobab tree. It was the humiliation inflicted to Sundiata's mother when she went to Sassouma Bérété for some baobab leaves that triggered the crippled prince's willpower to stand up. Moreover, it was by supporting himself on a *sunsun* branch that Sundiata was finally able to stand up. These two plants are among thousands of other plants with alimentary and medicinal virtues that Africans have been using since times immemorial.

POLITICS (power/leadership)

Power/leadership The mastery of iron technology contributed to developing other areas of specialization in ancient Africa. Metallurgy insured military might to those who mastered it. Certainly, the wealth and longevity of ancient Mali and other great African states had much to do with the mastery of metallurgy. The army of the impressive ancient Ghanaian empire, for instance, was reported to be about two-hundred-thousand-men strong, equipped with bows, arrows, swords, lances, and daggers. The Ghanaian army was so formidable that, when the Almoravids started their attack against the Kingdom of Ghana in 1062, it took them five years to reach its gates and another ten years of fighting to finally subdue the empire, in 1077. Smithing, one of the first occupational specializations in Africa, occasioned other specializations. The need to produce metals, transport them, and exchange them against other goods has also generated other necessities. Iron weapons helped protect the great African empires against jealous neighbors, secured their commerce by making the circulation of people and merchandise safe and efficient, enforced tax rules, and gave the empires political stability. Iron tools expanded agriculture and stimulated the augmentation of food production, which in turn made it possible for populations to settle in one place rather than moving around in search of new resources. The mastery of iron technology led to the burgeoning of large urban centers in Sub-Saharan Africa.

PSYCHOLOGY (schizophrenia)

Schizophrenia There is an element of split personalities in Sita and Boicar that one could easily characterize as hypocrisy. This, however, is the psychological state of the post-colonial subject, tossed between the two powerful tidal waves of tradition and modernity, and yet expected to reconcile them or survive them. Successfully reconciling tradition and modernity demands of the post-colonial subject some skills in pretense and elusion: to behave one way in the domestic space and another way in the public space; to act one way in the absence of the griot, and another way in his presence; like Boicar, who, to Sita's amusement, wants the griot to believe that he is a fervent Muslim and yet cannot locate his prayer rug to pray with Djeliba. At his young age, Mabo, too, is already thrown in the split of tradition and modernity, called upon to reconcile the rigid methods of his schoolteacher and the Socratic approach of the griot, or the Western aspirations his mother has in store for him and his father and Djeliba's traditional expectations.

PAST (memory, transience, environment, ecology)

Memory The griot is an archeologist of memory. Among the things that the griot's narrative unearths for young Mabo are the quality and organization of metallurgy in precolonial Africa. The griot, which he teaches through a metaphor that of the young prince Sundiata attempting to walk by using an iron bar. When Sundiata, the disabled prince, has decided to stand up and walk, he sends his griot to the master smith for an iron rod that easily breaks as the prince attempts to support himself on it. This raises some questions as to the nature of iron technology in ancient Africa. One could rightly ask what kind of iron was produced there that could so easily bend and break under the pressure of human force. The resolution of the enigma of iron technology in Africa will lead to the understanding of many other technological achievements in Ancient Africa.

Transience The tension between tradition and modernity is the most obvious theme in *Keita: The heritage of the Griot*. Djeliba represents inflexible tradition, with its rigid rules. Djeliba is so narrowminded and intolerant that on his very first day in Ouagadougou he takes the liberty of criticizing the way Sita runs her home in front of her child. Through his story, the griot praises a society that is uncompromisingly patriarchal. Obviously, Sita can care less about the griot's story, where women, as is the case with Sogolon

Kedjou, are sexually assaulted inside and outside of the domestic space or offered as rewards to men, when they are not, like the buffalo-woman and the queen mother, simply represented, respectively, as evil or scheming. For Sita, modernity offers prospects to women that are not available in traditional Mande society; prospects that she desires for herself and for her son. For others, like Djeliba, and to some extent Boicar, Sita's expectations might be fueled by desire for passing for Western and passing for white. The griot's remarks that, though she is an adorable woman, Sita lacks traditional values, and Boicar's irritation at her reticence towards the griot's presence intimates this criticism. What Sita's male critics fail to understand is that the stifling grip of tradition on women is throwing women into the embrace of a culture that offers them the possibility of emancipation; that is, Western culture, modernity.

SCENES

GRIOT'S MISSION

Griot travels across deserts, marshlands, and forests Djeliba, a griot from the village of Wagadu, is dozing in his hammock, rehearsing, in a dream-like state, the cosmogony of the Mandé (a tribe from Mali). A ghostly ancestral figure appears, shaking a flywhisk over his face, and gives him a mission: to travel to the Burkinabe capital city of Ouagadougou and teach Mabo Keita, a boy descending from Sundiata Keita, king of the 13th century Mali Empire, the history of his name. Djeliba sets about his mission. After a long trip that takes him through various landscapes of mountains, deserts, marshes, and forests, the griot pushes open the gate of a home in the Burkinabe capital city of Ouagadougou.



The Griot meets Mabo. The griot makes himself at home, sets up his hammock between two of the compound trees to wait for Mabo's parents. As the boy approaches him to inquire about his provenance, the griot starts the first lesson: "I come from Wagadu ... where the world began ... where one day your ancestor rose up to command men."



People do not want the Griot in their town Mabo lies to his parents and distracts his classmates. Mabo's sessions with the griot intensify. The boy even lies to cut school and spend more time with Djeliba. He also causes his classmates to skip school and to listen to him retell the story. The schoolteacher comes to the Keitas' to ask the griot to allow Mabo to focus on his studies and to reserve his story for when school is not in session. Inflexible, the griot asks the schoolmaster to alter his own program instead, and above all, to stop teaching Mabo that his ancestors descend from gorillas. As Mabo retells his story to his classmates, who skip school to listen to him, he gets them in trouble, and he, himself, is expelled. His classmates' parents complain to Boicar, and a fight ensues. Sita threatens to leave if the griot continues to disrupt Mabo's studies.



Griot Djeliba leaves In order to avoid causing any further trouble at the Keitas', Djeliba decides to leave before he has completed the story. He leaves Mabo with an important parable: If the hunter always kills the lion in his stories, it is because the hunter is the one telling the story.



GRIOT'S STORY

The Buffalo-woman A creature in the form of a buffalo-woman has been terrorizing the land of Do and killing hunters. Two hunter brothers come across her and treat her with empathy by offering her a piece of smoked meat, some beer, and some tobacco. Everything must come to an end; so, she decides that the brothers should be the ones to kill her. She tells them that as a reward for their prowess, her nephew, the king of Do, will allow them to choose a woman from his kingdom. They should choose the ugliest, her adoptive daughter Sogolon Kedjou, and give her a child that will rule the Mandé tribe. She also gives them some advice as to how to escape her when she comes charging at them.

Death of the buffalo-woman The hunters agree to her condition that they choose her adoptive daughter as their reward for killing her. She asks them to gather a stick, a stone, and an egg, which they successively throw behind them, as they run away from the fatally hurt buffalo-woman. In their escape, as the hunters throw the stick, the stone, and the egg, these elements become, respectively, a thick forest of palm trees, a rocky hill, and a muddy swamp that traps the buffalo-woman for good and allows them to give her the *coup de grace*.



Sogolon Kedjou: The heroes' reward As their reward for killing the buffalo-woman, the hunter brothers choose Sogolon Kedjou, the ugliest woman of the kingdom of Do and also the adoptive daughter of the buffalo-woman. Keeping to their word to the buffalo-woman, they try to impregnate her. However, she defeats them using her supernatural powers. Having failed, they decide to take her to the Mande king, Maghan Kon Fatta, who marries her in a festive ceremony. For seven months, Sogolon fights the king's assaults by means of sorcery. The humiliated king consults his griot, who advises him that the only way to defeat Sogolon is to frighten her to unconsciousness. It works, and the king impregnates Sogolon. Her pregnancy lasts eighteen months.



The disabled Prince After eighteen months of pregnancy, on a day of intense rain, the drums and horns of the kingdom announce that Sogolon has given the kingdom a boy. However, the prince, Sundiata, will not walk and becomes the laughingstock of the kingdom. Years pass and Sundiata grows into a handsome young man; but he is still crippled and cannot help his mother as much as he wishes, to the delight of the King's first wife (the Queen Mother), who is now certain that the crippled prince will never be picked over her son as the King's successor. Nevertheless, the clairvoyants continue to tell the king that the crippled prince will walk and reign.



Sundiata's resolve to walk When the handicapped prince witnesses his mother's sorrow, he decides that he should stand up and walk and be her protector. So, Sundiata sends his own griot to the palace's master blacksmith to order an iron rod. The prince crawls to the iron bar and grabs it, and with the encouragements of the drummers and his griot's praises, Sundiata supports himself and starts to stand up. The iron rod bends and breaks under the force of the prince's pressure. A hunter advises that a branch from the *sunsun* tree be fetched for the prince in replacement of the broken iron rod. Supporting himself on that branch, the prince stands up and walks to the amazement of the bystanders, and to the great sorrow of Sassouma Bérété, the Queen Mother who had wished never to see Sundiata walk. Then Sundiata goes outside the palace walls and uproots the baobab tree whose leaves the women of the palace pick, and he plants it right in front of his mother's hut so that she no longer has to go far to fetch some leaves.



Sundiata's exile King Maghan Kon Fatta, who had died before he could see Sundiata walk, had ordered that Sundiata be his heir, and that the son of his own griot be Sundiata's griot, to teach him how to govern. Ignoring the king's orders, the Queen Mother maneuvers to make her own son the king's successor, who banishes Sundiata's griot, Sundiata, his mother, and his siblings. Before leaving, Sundiata promises the impostor king that he will return.

