

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali / Soundjata ou l'épopée mandingue (1960) D.T. Niane (1932-2021)

Sources: Paris: Présence Africaine. translated by G.D. Pickett as *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* (Longman African Series, 1965)

OVERVIEW

Auteur Djibril Tamsir Niane, born on January 9, 1932, in Conakry, grew into a historian whose life bridged Mandé memory and modern scholarship. His education in Guinea and later in France at the University of Bordeaux shaped a thinker who moved with ease between oral tradition and academic inquiry, always attentive to the authority of *griot* knowledge. As his reputation expanded, he was invited to join UNESCO's International Scientific Committee in 1970, a recognition of his ability to bring African voices into global historical conversations. He later served as editor of Volume IV of the *General History of Africa*, a landmark project that sought to restore African historicity by rewriting the continent's past from African perspectives. His international stature led to appointments as Honorary Professor at Howard University and at the University of Tokyo, distinctions that reflected the global reach of his scholarship. Through this work and through his own publications, Niane became a central figure in the effort to affirm Africa's intellectual sovereignty and to secure a dignified place for oral tradition within world historiography. He died on March 8, 2021, in Dakar.

Book *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* presents the life of Sundiata Keita as told by the griot Djeli Mamoudou Kouyaté, offering a narrative where prophecy, exile, and leadership shape the birth of an empire. Niane's transcription preserves the cadence and worldview of Mandé storytelling while making the epic accessible to readers far beyond its original cultural sphere. In Guinea, the book became a symbol of cultural pride and a touchstone for national identity during a period of intellectual awakening. Abroad, it was welcomed as a landmark of African literature, studied for its narrative power and its insight into precolonial political systems. Its reception affirmed the value of oral tradition as a source of historical truth and literary beauty.

Background The epic arises from the thirteenth-century Mandé world, a landscape shaped by shifting kingdoms, ancestral spiritual systems, and the political transformations that led to the rise of the Mali Empire. *Griots* served as custodians of memory, carrying genealogies, victories, and moral lessons through performance rather than written archives. This oral universe produced a narrative where leadership was tied to lineage, character, and the ability to unite diverse peoples. When Niane published the transcription in the mid-twentieth century, West Africa was entering a new era marked by decolonization, cultural revival, and the search for historical foundations that could support emerging national identities. The book therefore stands at the intersection of two moments: a medieval world preserved through oral tradition and a modern world eager to reclaim its past as a source of pride, continuity, and intellectual sovereignty.

MAIN CHARACTERS

<i>Maghan Kon Fatta</i>	The King of Old Mali, with his residence in Niani, who was told to marry a hideous woman that would bear the greatest king of Mali.
<i>Sundiata Keita</i>	The child prophesized to be the greatest king of Mali
<i>Sogolon Kedjou</i>	Maghan Kon Fatta's first wife and the mother of Sundiata Keita
<i>Soumaoro Kanté</i>	The ruthless sorcerer king of Sosso
<i>Balla Fasséké</i>	Sundiata's personal griot

SYNOPSIS

Sundiata recounts the rise of a child born under prophecy who transforms personal trial into imperial destiny, becoming the great King of eleventh-century Mali Empire. Sundiata's early life is marked by physical weakness and social doubt. However, these hardships shape the empathy, discipline, and inner strength that define his character. When court rivalries force his family into exile, Sundiata moves across different kingdoms, learning the arts of diplomacy, warfare, and leadership. Meanwhile, the Mandingo world, which he was prophesized to rule over falls under the grip of Soumaoro Kanté, a ruthless sorcerer king whose rule spreads fear and fractures alliances. Called back by his people, Sundiata gathers the allies he earned during exile, confronts tyranny, and restores balance to the land. His victory becomes the foundation of the Mali Empire, and his story endures through the living voices of the griots who carry his memory across generations.

PLOT

CHAPTER 1: *The Words of the Griot Mamadou Kouyaté*

The Master of Speech Establishes his Credentials: Djeli Mamadou Kouyaté begins with a declaration. *"I am a griot ... I derive my knowledge from my father ... who also got it from his father."* He has a story to tell, but he first wants his audience to understand who he is, why he speaks, and why his words carry authority. His craft comes from a long lineage of masters of the spoken word. He is the heir to generations of traditional historians and genealogists. He carries within him an authentic library that has survived in the memory of those who came before him, that survives now in his own memory, and that he will transmit through the practice of storytelling. He is the guardian of a body of knowledge he will preserve, enrich, and eventually pass on to his sons so that the history of the clan endures. In a single phrase, he is a griot in the true sense of the term.

The Griot's Vow: Djeli Mamadou Kouyaté makes a solemn promise. His tongue will not betray; his mouth will not distort the truth. *"My word is pure and free of untruth. It is the word of my father. It is the word of my father's father."* Through them, he holds the key to the twelve provinces of Mali, the list of their emperors, and the meaning carried in the names of kings and of common people alike. It is through him that rulers learn the history of their ancestors, and through him that families discover the significance of their own names. History keeps no secrets from him, and he vows to recount the true story of the king of Mali whose exploits surpass those of Alexander the Great.

Sundiata, the Man of Many Names: He urges his audience to listen closely, for he is about to tell the story of Maghan Sundiata, of Mari-Djata, of Sogolon Djata, of Naré Maghan Djata, the man of many names. In speaking these names, he activates the memory entrusted to him by generations of griots and prepares his listeners to receive the tale of a hero whose life shaped the destiny of Mali.

The Griot's Call to His People: The griot's style is woven from apostrophe and digression. Time and again, he turns toward his audience and calls them into the story: *"Listen ... listen then, sons of Mali, children of the black people."* While he prepares the stage, these apostrophic digressions do more than interrupt the narrative. They invite the listeners inside it. By addressing them directly, by naming them as *sons of Mali* and *children of the black people*, he tells them that this story is theirs, that they stand both as receivers of the tale and as subjects within it. Recognizing themselves in the griot's hailing, the audience holds its breath and waits.

The Griot Stitches the Audience into the Tale: Through digression, the griot stitches the individual experience of each listener into the fabric of the history he is about to recount. His words bind the community to the narrative, making every member of the audience a participant in the memory he revives and a custodian of the legacy he is about to unfold.

CHAPTER 2: *The First Kings of Mali*

The Lineage of Sundiata: The griot recounts that great Sundiata, *"the father of the Bright Country, of the savanna land, the ancestor of those who draw the bow, the master of a hundred vanquished kings ...,"* is born of Maghan Kon Fatta, also called Maghan the Handsome, a man himself descended from a long line of illustrious kings. Maghan Kon Fatta's household was vast. He was the father of three sons and three

daughters, each child tied to a mother whose lineage and character shaped the future of Mali. His first wife, Sassouma Bérété, was the mother of King Dankaran Touman and of Princess Nana Triban. His second wife, Sogolon Kedjou, was the mother of Sundiata and of the two princesses Sogolon Kolonkan and Sogolon Djamarou. His third wife, Namandjé, bore a son who would become the closest companion of his half-brother Sundiata, a bond that would prove essential in the years to come.

CHAPTER 3: *The Buffalo Woman*

The King Under the Cotton Tree: Maghan Kon Fatta was a handsome king whose generosity, benevolence, and fairness toward his people were known to all. His subjects loved him and respected him deeply. One day, when Prince Dankaran Touman was only eight years old, the king and his court had taken their usual place beneath the great cotton tree that shaded the palace grounds. As they sat there, a master-hunter from the land of Sangaran approached. He had killed a doe on the king's land, and as custom required, he had come to offer the king his portion, the leg of the animal. The king's griot accepted the meat on his master's behalf and praised the hunter for honoring tradition. Because master-hunters were also renowned for their skill in divining the future, the griot asked him to read the kingdom's destiny. The king agreed with a nod.

The Prophecy of the Hunter-Soothsayer: The hunter-soothsayer drew twelve cowry shells from his bag and cast them upon a mat. He did not reveal his predictions at once. Instead, he began with parables, explaining that the largest cotton tree, the one that withstands the fiercest storms, springs from a seed smaller than a grain of rice, just as a great king rises from a small child. Gnankouman Doua, the king's griot, urged him to speak more plainly. The hunter then declared, *"I see two hunters coming to your city ... a woman accompanies them ... she is ugly, she is hideous, she bears on her back a disfiguring hump ... But mystery of mysteries, this is the woman you must marry, sire, for she will be the mother of whom who will make the name of Mali immortal for ever"* (9). He announced that for destiny to bring this woman, the future mother of a child mightier than Alexander the Great, to the king, certain sacrificial rites must be performed; the blood of a red bull must soak the earth. His words puzzled the king and his court, and with that, the hunter-soothsayer took his leave.

A Gift for the King: One day, as the king and his entourage were speaking together under the great cotton tree, they saw two young and handsome hunters approaching with a maid. The girl's face was hidden beneath a veil, yet the hump on her back showed clearly under her clothing. The hunters greeted the king. They explained that they came from the land of Do, though they belonged to the kingdom of Mali, and that the young woman who accompanied them was a gift they believed worthy of becoming the king's wife.

The King's Unease and His Question: Maghan Kon Fatta looked at the girl. Her muscular arms and her broad, powerful chest pressed against her cotton wrapper. The sight displeased him. Nonetheless, he welcomed the hunters with hospitality and asked them how they had come upon this young woman.

The Buffalo Woman's Revelation: The two hunter-brothers explained that they had been tracking a fearsome buffalo that terrorized the land of Do. King Gnemo Diarra, ruler of Do and brother of the buffalo woman, had failed in every attempt to kill the beast and had finally placed a reward on its death. As the hunters entered Do, they encountered a destitute woman who had begged all day without success. After they offered her dried meat, she revealed her true identity: she was the buffalo that had already killed one hundred and seven hunters. She told them she was ready to give them her life and instructed them on how to kill her using an egg and a distaff. Once dead, they were to cut off her tail and bring it to King Gnemo as proof.

You Must Choose Sogolon: The buffalo woman added one final condition. When King Gnemo rewarded them and asked them to choose a maiden from among the girls of Do, they must search carefully. *"You must search in the crowd, and you will find a very ugly maid ... it is her you must choose. She is called Sogolon Kedjou ... you must choose her for she is my wrath"* (13). They promised.

The Hunters' Triumph and Their Unusual Choice: The brothers killed the buffalo and brought its tail to King Gnemo Diarra as proof of their victory. The kingdom celebrated them, and the king invited them to choose the most beautiful maiden of Do as their reward. They chose Sogolon Kedjou, whom they recognized sitting apart from the other girls on a raised platform. *"Oh king Gnemo Diarra, here is the one I*

have chosen from among the young maids of Do. It is her I would like for a wife,” said the elder brother. The king and the entire kingdom thought them foolish for choosing Sogolon. The hunters left the land of Do with her.

The Wedding in Nianiba and Sogolon’s Sorrow: Maghan Kon Fatta decided to make his marriage to Sogolon official so that the child born from her would be recognized throughout the kingdom. On the day of the wedding, the village of Nianiba was filled with guests from the twelve provinces of Mali, all eager to see the bride about whom Sassouma Bérété had spread malicious rumors. Meanwhile, Sogolon, lodged with the king’s elderly aunts who prepared her for the ceremony, wept silently for her lost freedom. When the hour arrived, she appeared supported by two old women of the royal family. At the threshold of the palace, one of the king’s younger brothers lifted her and carried her inside amid the cheers of the crowd. The griot reveals that Sogolon had originally been promised to these two younger brothers. After many failed attempts to possess her, and following the advice of the old woman of Do who had told them, *“she will be an extraordinary woman if you manage to possess her,”* they resolved to offer her to Maghan Kon Fatta instead.

The Conception of Sundiata: Sogolon proved difficult, and Maghan Kon Fatta learned this at his own expense. He confided to his griot that he could not possess her, that she frightened him, and that he doubted she was even human, for *“when I drew close to her during the night, her body became covered with long hairs and that scared me very much”* (18). Sogolon remained unreachable, and the remedies of the king’s sorcerers accomplished nothing. One night, the king woke her by seizing her by the hair, his sword in hand. He told her that the djinns had revealed she must be sacrificed for the good of the kingdom and that he was going to kill her. Terrified, Sogolon fainted, and in her fainting her human appearance settled fully into her body. That night, the king made her conceive a child. When she awoke the next morning, she was a conquered woman.

CHAPTER 4: *The Lion Child*

Sogolon’s New Life in the Royal Household: Sogolon gradually grew accustomed to her condition as the king’s wife, and the people of the kingdom grew accustomed to her ugliness, which now passed unnoticed. The king took pleasure in watching the belly of his new wife grow and covered her with gifts of gold and fine cloth. Sassouma Bérété, the first wife, could not bear the sight of this woman whose child, if he were born, might one day surpass her own eight-year-old son and even seize the succession to the throne. Sassouma summoned every kind of malefice against Sogolon, but none succeeded.

The Birth of Sundiata and the Signs in the Sky: As the day of Sundiata’s birth approached, the king surrounded Sogolon with the nine best midwives in the kingdom. On the day itself, the elements of nature took turns in a terrifying dance. A great rumbling shook the sky, followed by flashes of lightning, then a monstrous storm. Suddenly the rain stopped and sunlight broke through. One of the midwives stepped out of Sogolon’s hut to announce to the anxious king that he was the father of a son. The griot gave a signal, and the drums of the kingdom proclaimed the birth of the prince. Throughout the land, drums, horns, and balafons celebrated the arrival of Sundiata.

The Griot’s Salute to the Lion Child: The king’s griot, Gnankouma Doua, composed a chant of salute for his master. *“I salute you father, I salute you king ... I salute you Maghan Kon Fatta. The child is born whom the world awaited ... the lion child, the buffalo child is born, and to announce him the Almighty has made the thunder peal, the whole sky has lit up, and the earth has trembled. All hail, father, hail king Naré Maghan!”* (22). The kingdom rejoiced, for the child whose coming had been foretold by hunters, spirits, and storms had finally entered the world.

The King’s Generosity and Sassouma’s Hidden Resentment: The king ordered eight granaries of grain to be distributed among his people. Sassouma Bérété also pretended to rejoice and made a show of generosity, although no one in the kingdom was fooled by her intentions. She feared Sogolon’s child, for if he survived, he might one day surpass her own eight-year-old son and even threaten his claim to the throne.

The Naming of the Child: On the eighth day, a name was chosen for the newborn. The king’s griot stepped forward and announced, *“the child of Sogolon will be called Maghan, after his father, and Mari Djata, a name which no Mandingo prince has ever borne. Sogolon’s son will be the first of this name”* (23). The

kingdom received the announcement with solemn joy, for the child whose coming had been foretold now carried a name worthy of prophecy.

CHAPTER 5: *Childhood*

A Prince Who Defied Expectations: The newborn prince had neither the legendary beauty of his father nor his father's patience. Mari Djata developed slowly. He still crawled on all fours at an age when other children ran through the palace. He was impatient and violent, striking any playmate who came near him. His enormous head seemed to crush his neck, and his eyes flashed with a frightening intensity. His appetite was insatiable, and he emptied his mother's cooking pots whenever she turned her back. Gossip spread quickly through the palace, and malicious tongues mocked him openly. Even the king began to suspect that the prophecy surrounding this child might be nothing more than a deception.

Sassouma's Triumph and Sogolon's Despair: While Sogolon despaired over her son's condition, Sassouma Bérété rejoiced. She believed that this child would never become king. Her own son, Dankaran Touman, now eleven years old, already had his first bow and had begun his initiation in the bush. Every time Sogolon passed in front of Sassouma's hut, Sassouma seized the opportunity to mock her. She called her son forward and invited him to show that he was a "normal" child. *"Come, my son, walk, jump, leap about. The jinn did not promise you anything out of the ordinary, but I prefer a son who walks on his two legs to a lion that crawls on the ground."* (25)

The Birth of Kolonkan and the King's Disappointment: A second child was born to Sogolon. The king had hoped for a son, but a daughter came into the world. She was named Kolonkan and was as hideous as her mother. Disappointed, the king moved Sogolon out of his palace and lodged her in a hut outside the royal compound. He then took a third wife, Namandjé, the daughter of one of his allies, a woman of rare beauty. Namandjé gave the king a son, and the soothsayers predicted that this child would one day be the right hand of a powerful king. The king named him Manding Boukari.

The Return of Hope and Sogolon's Restoration: The king's griot, who believed in the hunter's prophecy, reminded him of the words he had once heard: *"the silk-cotton tree emerges from a tiny seed."* The palace blacksmith also encouraged him, saying, *"When the seed germinates, growth is not always easy. Great trees grow slowly, but they plunge their roots deep into the ground."* (27) These words restored the king's confidence, and he reinstated Sogolon in her rights. She bore him a third child, a daughter named Djamarou, much to Sassouma's dismay.

The King's Last Words to His Son: One day, as his strength began to fail, the king summoned Mari Djata and spoke to him. He told him that Balla Fasséké would be his faithful griot, just as Doua had been his own. He entrusted his kingdom and his allies to the young prince. Mari Djata understood the message of succession his father was giving him and accepted his griot at his side. The king's eyes shone with joy, for he had passed his legacy to the child whose destiny had been foretold long before his birth.

CHAPTER 6: *The Lion's Awakening*

The Death of the King and the Rise of Sassouma: The king died. The council of the kingdom rejected his will and appointed Dankaran Touman as king under the regency of his mother, who from that moment held great power. The protests of the late king's griot, who insisted that his master's wishes be respected, had no effect. People said that the kingdom could not be entrusted to a prince who could not even stand on his legs. Soon after, Gnankouma Doua also died. Sassouma turned the disabled prince into a curiosity that people came from afar to see.

The Humiliation of Sogolon: One day, Sogolon needed baobab leaves for her cooking. She went to borrow some from Sassouma, who gave them to her but not without adding a cruel remark. Sassouma told her that her son should get up and run errands for her instead of crawling, because the leaves she was giving her had been gathered by her own son, with his strong legs and arms. Hurt, Sogolon began to cry and turned on her son. *"Oh son of misfortune, will you never walk? Through your fault I have just suffered the greatest affront of my life. Sassouma has just humiliated me over a matter of baobab leaf. At your age her own son could walk and used to bring his own mother baobab leaves."* (31)

The Decision of Mari Djata: Mari Djata answered calmly, *"Very well then, I am going to walk today."* He asked his mother to have the heaviest iron staff made for him. He then asked her whether she wanted only baobab leaves or the entire baobab tree. She told him that only the entire tree could dry her tears of humiliation.

The Iron Staff Brought Before the Lion Child: The blacksmith ordered six of his apprentices to carry the iron rod to Mari Djata. The people of the kingdom watched in astonishment as the massive staff was brought before the prince. It was an object meant for a man of great strength, not for a child who still crawled on the ground. Yet the moment had come, and the kingdom sensed it. Balla Fasséké, son of the griot who had served Mari Djata's father, stood beside him and encouraged him with unwavering confidence.

The Griot's Encouragement and the Gathering Crowd: The crowd gathered around the prince, murmuring with disbelief. They had come to see the crippled child who had been mocked and humiliated, the child whom Sassouma had turned into a spectacle. Now they watched him rise to meet the challenge he had set for himself. Balla Fasséké urged him forward, reminding him of the destiny foretold long before his birth. The griot's voice carried through the air, steady and reassuring, as if calling forth the strength hidden in the prince's limbs.

The Prince's Struggle to Stand: Mari Djata placed his hands on the iron staff. The apprentices stepped back and the people held their breath. The prince who had never stood was about to attempt the impossible. His mother watched, torn between fear and hope, remembering her humiliation and the tears she had shed. Mari Djata leaned on the rod. Under the weight of his effort, the iron staff bent into an arc. His legs trembled but held, and suddenly the prince stood upright for the first time.

Songs of Joy and the First Steps: Balla Fasséké, his griot, launched into the song of the bow. Sogolon began a chant of thanks to God. *"Oh day, what a beautiful day, oh day, day of joy; Allah Almighty, you never created a finer day. So my son is going to walk."* (34) The crowd erupted in cheers as the prince took his first steps behind Balla Fasséké, who parted the people before him.

The Uprooted Baobab and Sassouma's Defeat: Mari Djata then walked toward the young baobab behind Niani, uprooted it, and planted it in front of his mother's hut. He told her that from now on it would be in front of her home that the women of the kingdom would come to gather baobab leaves. Sassouma Bérété's sorrow reached its height. Mari Djata has walked.

The Kingdom Celebrates Djata's Courage: Throughout the kingdom of Mali, people spoke only of Djata's courage. Mothers urged their sons to become his hunting companions and to emulate him. They repeated that Sogolon was the very model of a virtuous woman, and that the more a woman respected her husband and suffered for her children, the more God granted her grace. People compared Sogolon's calm and patience to Sassouma's cruelty, saying that virtue always triumphs in the end.

The Education of the Lion Child: Djata received a fine education from his mother and from his griot. He grew up surrounded by love and by the practice of Mandingo virtues. Balla Fasséké taught him the stories, the values, and the discipline of the ancestors, while Sogolon taught him patience, self-control, and respect. The people saw in him a child destined for greatness, and his reputation spread throughout the kingdom.

Sassouma's Deadly Ambition: Sassouma dreamed only of one thing: Djata's death. She gathered the nine greatest witches in the kingdom of Mali and spoke to them without hesitation. *"I want to kill Sundiata. His destiny runs counter to my son's and he must be killed"* (39). With these words, she set in motion a plot that threatened the life of the prince.

The Witches Agree to Test the Prince: The witches told Sassouma that they had nothing against the prince, and that their powers worked only on those who had wronged them. Sassouma assured them that if they prowled in Sogolon's garden the next day, Sundiata would certainly chase them away with blows. Convinced by her promise, they agreed to test Sundiata the following morning.

The Prince's Kindness in the Garden: As he returned from hunting, Sundiata surprised the nine witches stealing vegetables from his mother's garden. They pretended to flee when they saw him, but he called out to them, reassured them, and told them that the garden belonged to everyone. He invited them to take whatever they needed and filled their baskets with vegetables. The old witches confessed the true purpose

of their visit, which was to provoke him into anger so they could kill him and satisfy Sassouma's hatred. They regretted having accepted grains and the promise of a cow from her. Sundiata bore them no ill will. Instead, he gave each of them one elephant from the ten that he and his hunting companions had killed. The old women thanked him for his generosity and promised to protect him.

CHAPTER 7: *Exile*

Sogolon's Warning and the Decision to Leave: Sogolon gathered her children, along with Sundiata's half-brother Manding Boukari, known as Bory, who was his right hand and closest friend. She told them that Sassouma's hatred knew no limits and that she would always find a way to harm them. For their safety, she urged them to go into exile. While Balla Fasséké, Sundiata's griot, prepared to follow his young master, King Dankaran Touman, acting through the council of elders, urgently sent Fasséké as an ambassador to the powerful king of Sosso, Soumaoro Kanté.

The Prince's Protest and the King's Fear: Sundiata went to complain to the king about this injustice and promised that he would one day return to take revenge. The king grew afraid and asked his mother whether it had been wise to separate the prince from his griot. Sassouma answered sharply. If he trembled before Sundiata and feared making decisions like a king, perhaps he should give up his reign to Sundiata and let her return humiliated to her father's house. Her words stung him, and the king regained his resolve. Dankaran Touman swore that he would kill Sundiata the next time he saw him. Sundiata, his mother, his sisters, and his half-brother Manding Bory departed into exile.

Seven Years of Exile: Seven years had passed since the day Sogolon, her children, and Sundiata's half-brother and friend Manding Bory had left Mali. Sundiata grew into adulthood and Sogolon grew older. Their first refuge was Djedeba, in the kingdom of the sorcerer-king Mansa Kokon. The king had been bribed with gold by Sassouma to rid himself of the fugitives. He challenged Sundiata to a match of *wori*, a game of draughts played with pebbles in small holes, promising that if he won, he would kill the prince. But Sundiata outsmarted him, and the king expelled the fugitives from his land.

Wandering from Kingdom to Kingdom: Their exile led them next to Tabon. The aging king of Tabon did not wish to incur Sassouma's wrath. After welcoming the fugitives politely, he asked them to leave after a few days. But the young prince of Tabon, Fran Kamara, who had once been Sundiata's playmate when the latter's father was still alive, promised Sundiata that they would fight side by side when he became king. The fugitives then traveled to the kingdom of Ghana, where King Soumaba Cissé received them with all the honors due to a princely family. However, Sogolon's declining health forced them to seek better air in the kingdom of Mema, which the king of Ghana recommended. After a journey with camel-merchants, Sogolon and her children were welcomed by Massiran, the generous sister of the king of Mema, in the absence of her brother, King Moussa Tounkara.

Sundiata's Rise in Mema: When Moussa Tounkara returned, he quickly grew attached to Sundiata, for he had no children of his own. He taught the young prince the art of war, and Sundiata accompanied him on his military campaigns. The king was impressed by the courage of the young prince. At eighteen, Sundiata was named viceroy. The king's choice was approved by both the army and the people, and Sundiata now stood at the head of a formidable force. One evening, Sogolon called her son and said, *"Do not deceive yourself. Your destiny lies not here but in Mali. The moment has come. I have finished my task and it is yours that is going to begin, my son. But you must be able to wait. Everything in its own good time"* (61).

CHAPTER 8: *Soumaoro Kanté: The Sorcerer King*

The Fall of Mali and the Rise of Soumaoro: While Sundiata lived in exile, the kingdom of Mali was overtaken by the sorcerer-king Soumaoro Kanté of the Sosso empire. Before Sundiata's departure, Sosso had been only a small vassal province under Mali. Its mastery of ironwork, however, produced a formidable army that gradually subdued Mali's vassal states until the entire empire fell under Soumaoro's control. Soumaoro descended from a lineage of blacksmiths for whom sorcery held no secrets, for *"like all masters of fire, Soumaoro was a great sorcerer"* (62). His command of iron also gave him mastery of architecture. He lived in a massive seven-story palace, and the top floor was reserved exclusively for his occult rites, forbidden to all others.

Balla Fasséké in the Forbidden Chamber: One day, Balla Fasséké, Sundiata's personal griot whom Dankaran Touman had foolishly sent as an ambassador to Sosso and whom Soumaoro now kept as a prisoner, entered the private chamber on the seventh floor. What he saw left him stunned. The walls were covered with human skins. On the floor, at the center, lay another human skin that served as the sorcerer-king's prayer mat. Owls perched in the rafters, half asleep, and in one of the many pots filled with mystical concoctions, a serpent kept watch. Balla saw nine human skulls displayed, which he recognized as the skulls of the nine kings Soumaoro had defeated and killed. In one corner stood an enormous balafon whose notes no one else could decipher.

The Balafon's Power and Soumaoro's Return: Because Balla Fasséké was himself a master of occult knowledge, he approached the balafon and played it. The sounds that emerged were not of this world. They were so melodious that the owls and the serpent began to sway, and the human skulls seemed to come alive. At that moment, Soumaoro Kanté, who was mystically connected to the sound of his balafon no matter where he was, sensed the disturbance. He ran toward his palace and climbed the stairs rapidly to the seventh floor. Balla Fasséké heard him coming.

Balla Fasséké's Praise and Soumaoro's Delight: To calm the fury of the sorcerer-king, Balla Fasséké improvised a chant in his honor. *"There he is, Soumaoro Kanté. All hail to you who sit on the skins of kings ... I salute you, who wear clothes of human skin"* (65). Soumaoro was so pleased by the praise that he told Balla Fasséké he would henceforth be his griot and would never return to Mali. In that moment, the griot whom Maghan Kon Fatta had given to Sundiata was stolen from him once again.

The Inevitability of War: For Sundiata, the loss of Balla Fasséké was a blow, a sign that Soumaoro intended not only to dominate Mali but to erase every trace of Mandingo legitimacy, as a griot is the guardian of a king's memory, his voice, his lineage, his destiny. To take Balla Fasséké was to strike at the very heart of Sundiata's future reign. From that moment, Sundiata understood that war with Soumaoro Kanté was inevitable. The sorcerer-king had seized his griot, conquered his homeland, and humiliated his people. The lion child, now grown, knew that the time was approaching when he would have to reclaim Mali, confront Soumaoro, and fulfill the destiny foretold long before his birth.

CHAPTER 9: History

The Griot's Authority and the Power of Speech: The *griot*, Djeli Mamoudou Kouyate, reaffirmed his authority. *"We griots are depositories of the knowledge of the past."* (68) Because they know the past, griots can foresee the future with ease, unlike kings who act without understanding the consequences their actions may unleash. Griots render history through speech, he claimed, a speech that is pure and more alive than writing, which freezes knowledge in books. What he was about to reveal, he declared, came directly from his ancestors, passed down in its full authenticity, without alteration or untruth. He urged his listeners to hear him well.

Soumaoro at the Height of His Power: At the moment when Sundiata prepared to reclaim the kingdom of his ancestors from Soumaoro Kanté, the sorcerer-king stood at the height of his power and the depth of his folly. His strength seemed limitless because the *jinn*s had revealed themselves to him, and his kingdom had become the epicenter of sorcery. And since *"the tree that the tempest will throw down does not see the storm building upon the horizon,"* Soumaoro believed in his own invincibility and gave himself over to excesses of violence and immorality. Nothing was forbidden to him. He violated young virgins, publicly flogged nobles, and ruled through terror.

Fakoli's Revolt and the First Cracks in Sosso: Soumaoro's arrogance reached its peak when he seized Keleya, the wife of his nephew Fakoli Koroma, the master blacksmith and captain of his armies, and imprisoned her in his palace. Fakoli, himself a master of occult knowledge, confronted his uncle and declared that he was severing all ties with him. From that moment on, he would join Soumaoro's enemies and fight against him. Fakoli left Sosso with the blacksmiths of his clan, marking the first great fracture in the sorcerer-king's dominion.

CHAPTER 10: *The Baobab Leaves*

The Encounter in the Market: One day, Kolonkan, Sundiata's sister, was at the market when she noticed a woman selling baobab leaves, an ingredient unknown in the kingdom of Mema. Curious, she asked the vendor where the leaves came from. The woman replied that they were brought from the kingdom of Mali. Kolonkan revealed that she was Sundiata's sister and that she, her mother, and her siblings had found refuge in Mema. At that moment, several men approached and asked to meet Sogolon, identifying themselves as subjects of Mali. Kolonkan ran to inform her mother, who agreed to receive them.

The Call to Return and the Death of Sogolon: One of the men, Mandjan Bérété, brother of Queen Sassouma, confessed that they had disguised themselves as merchants traveling from kingdom to kingdom in search of Sundiata. As Sundiata and his half-brother returned from hunting, they overheard Mandjan explaining to Sogolon that Mali had fallen into the hands of Soumaoro Kanté, that Dankaran Touman had fled, and that the empire stood leaderless, though a small resistance, supported by Soumaoro's rebellious nephew Fakoli Koroma, still held a few positions. Mandjan begged Sundiata to return to Mali, save the land of his ancestors, and fulfill the prophecy. When the king of Mema returned from his travels, Sundiata went to see him. The viceroy thanked the king for his hospitality, for having made him a seasoned warrior, and for having entrusted him with authority. He explained that he must now return to Mali to reclaim his empire and expressed his lasting gratitude. Sundiata also asked permission to bury his mother, who had just died in Mema.

The King's Anger and His Final Gesture: The king of Mema accused Sundiata of ingratitude and at first refused to allow Sogolon to be buried on his land. Eventually, persuaded by his Arab counselor, who reminded him that he would gain more by having Sundiata as an ally than as an enemy, the king relented. He ordered that Sogolon be buried with full honors. Thus, the mother of the future conqueror of Mali was laid to rest in Mema, and Sundiata prepared to begin the journey that would lead him back to his homeland and toward his destiny.

CHAPTER 11: *The Return*

The Armies Gather for the Return of the Lion: Moussa Tounkara, king of Mema, gave Sundiata half of his army and urged him to seek additional support from the king of Ghana. He sent a messenger ahead to announce Sundiata's arrival, and when the prince reached Ghana, Soumaba Cissé already had half of his own army prepared to accompany him. With this growing force, Sundiata set out toward the kingdom of Tabon, where his childhood friend Fran Kamara, now ruling after his father's death, had long promised to join him once he became king.

The Oath to Surpass Alexander: On the road to Tabon, the soothsayers Singbin Mara and Mandjan Bérété recounted to Sundiata the stories of the great conquerors of the world. The tale of Alexander the Great captivated him. Inspired, Sundiata swore that he would surpass Alexander in wealth and in territory. Meanwhile, Soumaoro Kanté, having learned of Sundiata's advance, sent a squadron under the command of his son Sosso Balla to block the prince's approach to Tabon. Fran Kamara, who now bore the fearsome title Tabon Wana, the Dread One of Tabon, launched his army against Sosso Balla and defeated him, clearing the way for Sundiata and his half-brother Manding Bory to march toward Soumaoro himself.

The First Clash at Néguéboria: The armies met at Néguéboria. What followed was a duel of strength, cunning, and sorcery between Soumaoro and Sundiata. The sorcerer-king appeared and vanished at will, confounding Sundiata, who now witnessed firsthand the magic he had heard so much about. He realized that defeating Soumaoro would require weapons of a different kind. Although the villagers of Néguéboria celebrated Soumaoro's retreat alongside the soldiers of Sundiata and Tabon Wana, the prince withdrew alone into his tent, consumed by thoughts of his enemy. Later, Soumaoro's forces attempted a surprise night attack on the armies of Sundiata and Fran Kamara at Kankigné. They paid dearly for it and retreated once again, demoralized.

CHAPTER 12-13: *The Names of the Heroes*

The Retreat of Sosso and the Rise of Sundiata: The failed night attack shattered the morale of Soumaoro's forces and weakened the Sosso army. Soumaoro withdrew to Sosso to recover his strength. Meanwhile, entire villages came out to greet Sundiata, who advanced "the same way light preceded the sun" (90). His return stirred hope across the land. In Sibi, Kamandjan, another childhood friend of Sundiata, now king, gathered all the rebel chiefs under his roof. One after another, they pledged allegiance to the lion of Mali.

The Gathering of Allies: Sundiata's coalition grew into a formidable confederation. Alongside Tabon Wana, Kamandjan, and Fakoli, the nephew who had turned against Soumaoro, stood Siara Kouman Konaté, Sundiata's own nephew, Faoni Diarra, king of Do, the homeland of Sogolon, and Mansa Traoré, king of the Traoré. When Sundiata finally set foot on the soil of his native Mali, the armies of all these heroes greeted him with thunderous acclaim. The land that had suffered under Soumaoro's tyranny now saw the return of its rightful heir.

The Lion Child's Declaration: Standing before the gathered warriors, Sundiata raised his voice. *"I salute you all, sons of Mali ... I have come back, and as long as I breathe, Mali will never be in thrall, rather death than slavery ... We will live free because our ancestors lived free"* (92). With these words, he bound his destiny to theirs. The armies of Mali, united at last, prepared to march toward the final confrontation that would decide the fate of the empire.

The Sacrifices and the Return of the Griot: Sundiata never forgot that Soumaoro still lived and commanded a large army. His own forces were vast, yet he knew that numbers alone would not defeat the sorcerer-king. He consulted the ancestral spirits of Mali and offered one hundred white bulls, one hundred white rams, and one hundred white cocks. While these sacrifices were being made, Balla Fasséké, Sundiata's griot, and Nanan Triban, his half-sister whom Dankaran Touman had forced into marriage with Soumaoro, managed to escape from the sorcerer-king's palace and rejoin Sundiata. The prince rejoiced at the return of his griot and embraced his sister, who explained how she had pretended to despise him in order to gain Soumaoro's trust, uncover his deepest secrets, and flee.

The Renewed Allegiance: As the armies gathered and the sacrifices were completed, scouts arrived with urgent news. Soumaoro was advancing toward Sundiata's forces. The moment long foretold by griots and seers was drawing near. The lion child, now a seasoned warrior and leader of kings, prepared to face the master of fire in a battle that would decide the fate of Mali. Under Balla Fasséké's words of encouragement, Sundiata's allies renewed their loyalty. They understood that the final confrontation was approaching and that the prince of Mali now possessed the insight needed to challenge the sorcerer-king.

CHAPTER 14: *Krina*

The Night the War Was Truly Declared: A war only truly begins once both sides formally declare it, and until this moment Sundiata and Soumaoro had clashed without ever naming their conflict. That changed when their respective owls carried messages of defiance. Soumaoro proclaimed that Mali belonged to him, that he had conquered it by force, and that Sundiata should return to Mema. Sundiata responded that Mali was his ancestral inheritance, the land of his forefathers, and that he would free it from Soumaoro's tyranny. With these declarations, the two rivals agreed to settle their dispute through arms. On the eve of the battle of Krina, Sundiata hosted a great feast for his allies and soldiers. Balla Fasséké exalted his courage, reminding him that he was the prophesied liberator who would inscribe Mali into the annals of future generations. Fakoli, Soumaoro's own nephew, returned from his campaign to recruit allies, met Sundiata for the first time, and pledged his loyalty.

The Clash at Krina: At dawn, Sundiata took his bow and the arrow tipped with the rooster spur that his sister had stolen from Soumaoro, then placed himself at the head of his troops. At his signal, "An gnéwa," the army surged forward. Soumaoro, determined to punish his nephew, hurled the bulk of his forces against

Fakoli, who was quickly overwhelmed. Sundiata rushed to rescue him and caught sight of Soumaoro fleeing, hiding behind his men to avoid direct confrontation. Sundiata released his enchanted arrow, grazing Soumaoro's shoulder. Even that slight touch drained the sorcerer king's strength. Sundiata and Fakoli pursued Soumaoro and his son with equal fury, one driven by the humiliation of his kingdom, the other by the dishonor inflicted upon his wife. Sundiata wanted Soumaoro alive. Fakoli managed to capture his cousin, Balla Sosso, in a cave where the king and his son had taken refuge.

The Fall of Sosso: The defeated army of Soumaoro retreated behind the ramparts of Sosso, but Sundiata pursued them relentlessly to the very palace of the sorcerer king. His soldiers reduced the great kingdom of Sosso to dust, ending its reign of terror. As for Soumaoro, no one ever knew what became of him. His disappearance marked both the collapse of his empire and the rise of Sundiata as the unchallenged founder of the Mali Empire, sealing the prophecy that had guided him from exile to triumph.

CHAPTER 15: *The Empire*

The Threefold Advance of the Sundiata's Army: Sundiata divided his army into three distinct columns, each deployed in a different direction to encircle and weaken Soumaoro's network of allied kingdoms. Battle after battle, the Sundiata's forces subdued every territory that had pledged loyalty to the sorcerer king. At the foot of a massive rock, Sundiata paused his campaign to offer one hundred bulls, one hundred rams, and one hundred roosters to the *jinns*. The spirits received his offering favorably, and Sundiata drank the sacred *Moghoya dji*, a ritual water that transformed him, sharpening his strength and heightening his destiny.

The Return to Do and the Renewal of Alliances: After this spiritual consecration, Sundiata traveled to Do, the homeland of his mother Sogolon. There, he was welcomed with acclamations, embraced as both a son of the soil and the liberator foretold by prophecy. As he stood on those ancestral lands, a whirlwind rising toward the west reminded him of Mema, the kingdom that had sheltered him during his exile. Interpreting this sign as a call to honor past bonds, he sent gifts to King Tounkara along with an emissary to reaffirm and seal their alliance. This gesture strengthened the political and moral foundation of his campaign, ensuring that the kingdom which had once protected him would now stand beside him in the final struggle.

CHAPTER 16: *Kouroukouan Fougan or the Division of the World*

The Great Convergence at Ka-ba: All of Sundiata's armies converged toward the small town of Ka-ba, a place where no Keita lineage had ever lived before his arrival. From every direction, the Mandinka columns advanced, having already subdued the kingdoms that once stood behind Soumaoro. The day of the great gathering came, and all the peoples of the region assembled behind their respective kings at Kouroukan Fougan. In front of this immense crowd, Balla Fasséké delivered a powerful speech of unity and peace, presenting his master Sundiata as the savior who had restored hope after years of hardship. *"Peoples, here we are, after years of hard trials, gathered around our savior, the restorer of peace and order... I convey to you the greetings of Soumaoro's vanquisher, Maghan Sundiata, King of Mali"* (122-23). One by one, the twelve kings of Mali stepped forward to acclaim Sundiata.

The Ceremony of Restoration: After the acclamations came the procession of prisoners, their heads shaved, followed by the spoils of war and the kings who had refused to rally behind Sundiata. At the end of the line walked Sosso Balla, the son of Soumaoro, closing the circle of conquest. Then Sundiata rose. In a gesture both symbolic and sovereign, he returned to each king his spears, a sign that he restored to them their own realms so they might govern in peace. Sundiata established the rules, the roles, and the intertribal alliances that would bind the empire together. He distributed powers and lands with deliberate balance, ensuring that every lineage and every territory found its rightful place in the emerging Mandinka world.

The Birth of an Empire's Constitution: When the distribution was complete, Sundiata proclaimed Balla Fasséké the grand master of ceremonies, entrusting him with the guardianship of tradition and the voice of

the empire. The principles established that day at Kouroukan Fougan became the constitutional backbone of Mali, a charter of governance, solidarity, and justice. Remarkably, these rules have endured through centuries, still respected today.

CHAPTER 17: *Niani*

The Triumphal Return Toward Niani: Sundiata and his entourage finally crossed the Niger on their journey back to Niani. The trip from Ka-ba to the capital, which normally took only a few hours, stretched into three full days. In every village they passed, crowds formed long human corridors to greet him, expressing gratitude and reverence. Women laid their finest cloths on the ground so that Sundiata's horse might walk upon them.

A City in Ruins, A King with a Mission: When Sundiata reached Niani, he found a dead city, reduced to rubble by years of conflict and oppression. The sight weighed heavily on him, but Balla Fasséké encouraged his master to take heart, reminding him that the task of rebuilding was now his sacred responsibility. Inspired by this counsel, Sundiata set to work. He rebuilt Niani in the architectural style of his father, Maghan Kon Fatta, and expanded it to welcome the many new inhabitants who came to settle there. Once Niani was restored, Sundiata established an annual council of kings in the city, a grand assembly where justice was rendered according to divine law. This council became the institutional anchor of the empire, a place where disputes were settled, alliances reaffirmed, and the moral order maintained.

CHAPTER 18: *Eternal Mali*

The Ruins of Mali and the Shadow of Great Kings: Mali today is but a heap of ruins, a land whose former grandeur survives only in fragments scattered across its plains. The empire once knew great kings, but none possessed the wisdom, the vision, and the passion of Sundiata, whose tomb rests not far from here in Balandougou. The vestiges of everything I have spoken about still exist in Mali. They endure in the stones, in the earth, in the memories carried by the wind. You may see them for yourself if you choose to go.

The Warning of the Ancestors: Yet I must offer a word of caution. These places are charged with the presence of those who shaped them. To walk there without reverence is to risk awakening the displeasure of the ancestors. Their spirits linger in the ruins, in the sacred groves, in the silence of Balandougou. They guard the legacy of Sundiata and the world he forged.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

MAGHAN KON FATTA (*dignified, trusting, benevolent*)

Maghan Kon Fatta is a dignified ruler. His trust in prophecy guides his choices. He is a benevolent king who creates the calm space where destiny can unfold.

Dignified Maghan Kon Fatta carries himself with the dignity expected of a king. His acceptance of the hunter's message shows respect for spiritual authority. He welcomes Sogolon despite her unusual appearance, guided by the dignity of his role. His decisions shape the future of Mali.

Trusting Maghan Kon Fatta trusts the words of the hunter who announces the coming of the buffalo woman. This trust reveals his belief in the invisible forces that guide kingship. He marries Sogolon because he trusts the prophecy that she will bear a great ruler. His trust allows destiny to unfold without resistance.

Benevolent Maghan Kon Fatta governs with a benevolent spirit. He treats his wives with fairness and listens to counsel with patience. His benevolence creates a household where prophecy can take root. He seeks harmony with his vassals rather than domination.

SUNDIATA (*resolute, empathetic, visionary*)

Sundiata is a figure whose resolve grows from suffering and whose empathy shapes his rise. He is a visionary leader who turns inner strength into a path for unity.

Resolute Sundiata's resoluteness appears in the moment he decides to walk. His decision to walk shows a will that rises from suffering and transforms itself into movement. His resolute nature guides him through exile, where he learns discipline and strategy. It is this inner firmness that allows him to return as a leader capable of uniting kingdoms.

Empathetic Sundiata's empathy emerges through his response to his mother's tears. He rises because he feels her humiliation and pain, and his first act of strength is an act of protection. His empathy deepens during exile, where he observes how other rulers govern and how people suffer under tyranny. This sensitivity shapes his leadership and gives moral weight to his decisions. His victories are grounded in an understanding of human pain and human hope.

Visionary Sundiata sees beyond the present moment and imagines a future where justice and unity prevail. His alliances reveal a mind capable of reading political landscapes with lucidity. He understands that strength grows through cooperation and shared purpose. His return to Mali is guided by a vision of restoration rather than revenge. This visionary quality allows him to build an empire that endures in memory and tradition.

SOGOLON (*resilient, devoted, humble*)

Sogolon is a resilient mother whose devotion steadies her through humiliation and hardship. She is a humble presence with an endurance that becomes a moral force in the epic.

Resilient Sogolon's resilience is woven into every stage of her life. She enters Niani marked by prophecy and difference, but she carries herself with dignity. Her suffering deepens when Sassouma mocks her, but she endures with patience that becomes a moral example. Her resilience shapes Sundiata's character, since he learns strength through her tears. She becomes the spiritual anchor of the epic, a woman whose endurance sustains destiny.

Devoted Sogolon's devotion to her children defines her identity. She protects Sundiata even when his disability exposes her to ridicule. Her devotion guides her through exile, where she continues to nurture him with courage and tenderness. She believes in the prophecy even when others doubt it. Her devotion becomes the emotional force that awakens the lion child.

Humble Sogolon's humility appears in her acceptance of suffering without bitterness. She does not seek recognition or status, and her actions arise from duty rather than ambition. Her humility contrasts with Sassouma's pride, revealing the moral difference between the two women. This humility allows her to carry the weight of prophecy with grace. It becomes the foundation of her virtue and the source of her respect in the Mandingo world.

SOUMAORO KANTE (*ruthless, enigmatic, ambitious*)

Soumaoro Kanté is a ruthless sovereign whose ambition feeds the mystery surrounding him. He is an enigmatic presence with a hunger for power that isolates him until his downfall.

Ruthless Soumaoro's ruthlessness appears in the way he uses sorcery to dominate his subjects. His forbidden chamber covered in skins symbolizes a ruler who treats human life as a trophy. He expands Sosso through fear rather than justice. His ruthlessness isolates him and becomes the force that eventually leads to his downfall.

Enigmatic Soumaoro's enigmatic nature is revealed through his lineage of "*masters of fire*." His palace, guarded by owls and serpents, reflects a ruler who hides his power behind mystery. His sorcery creates an aura of fear that confuses allies and enemies alike.

Ambitious Soumaoro's ambition transforms Sosso from a small village into a powerful empire. He uses iron, fire, and sorcery to expand his territory. His massive palace symbolizes his desire for grandeur.

BALLA FASSEKE (*loyal, wise, eloquent*)

Balla Fasséké is a loyal griot whose wisdom shapes memory and action. He is an articulate voice. He turns history into a living force that guides Sundiata's destiny.

Loyal Balla Fasséké's loyalty to Sundiata is unwavering. He follows him into exile and supports him through every trial. His loyalty is rooted in the sacred bond between griot and prince. He risks his life to return to Sundiata when Soumaoro captures him.

Wise Balla Fasséké's wisdom appears in the metaphors he uses to guide kings and princes. His reminder that "*the silk cotton tree emerges from a tiny seed*" teaches patience and faith. He interprets events with discernment and offers counsel that shapes political decisions. His wisdom gives meaning to suffering and direction to action.

Eloquent Balla Fasséké's eloquent speech gives life to history. His words carry rhythm, lineage, and truth. He inspires armies, consoles mothers, and guides rulers. His voice transforms memory into action. Through his articulate presence, speech becomes a living force that shapes the destiny of Mali.

THEMES

The griot: *as master of the word, historian and as sorcerer* The griot appears in this narrative as a sovereign of speech whose authority rests on lineage, memory, and ritual performance. Djeli Mamadou Kouyaté begins by declaring who he is and why he speaks. "*I am a griot ... I derive my knowledge from my father ... who also got it from his father*" (1). His identity is inseparable from the long chain of masters of the spoken word who preceded him. The text describes him as carrying within himself an authentic library preserved through oral transmission. His mastery of the word is therefore not a personal talent but a hereditary charge. He speaks with the weight of generations behind him, and his voice becomes the vessel through which ancestral knowledge survives.

As historian, the griot claims access to the deepest layers of Mandingo memory. He vows that "*my word is pure and free of untruth. It is the word of my father. It is the word of my father's father*" (2). Through this vow, the griot positions himself as the mediator between past and present, the one through whom rulers learn the history of their ancestors and families discover the meaning of their names. His narration is a ritual act that binds the audience to the story. When he calls out, "*Listen then, sons of Mali, children of the black people,*" he transforms listeners into participants. The griot stitches their identities into the tale, making history a shared possession rather than a distant record. His authority rests on his ability to animate memory, to make the past breathe again through rhythm, apostrophe, and invocation. In his voice, history becomes a living force that shapes the consciousness of the community.

The text also frames the griot as a figure whose power borders on the supernatural. His mastery of speech resembles a form of sorcery, not Balla Fasséké, and before him, his father Gnankouman Doua, we are told, were master of the occult. Balla Fasséké was the first one to penetrate the sorcerer-king Soumaoro Kanté's secret chamber and play his huge balafon. However, the griot is a mystical character not just because he manipulates occult forces, but because his words operate with transformative potency. He activates memory as if summoning spirits, preparing his audience to receive the story of Sundiata by speaking the hero's many names: "*Maghan Sundiata, Mari Djata, Sogolon Djata, Naré Maghan Djata.*" His presence in the narrative parallels the sorcerer king Soumaoro, whose magic derives from mastery of fire and iron. However, the griot's power is of a different order. Soumaoro's sorcery bends matter, while the griot's sorcery bends time. His speech revives the dead, restores forgotten genealogies, and reveals destinies hidden from kings. When he proclaims, "*We griots are depositories of the knowledge of the past,*"

he affirms that his authority is anchored in a domain inaccessible to ordinary rulers. In this sense, the griot stands at the threshold between the human and the sacred. His word shapes reality, preserves identity, and guides the community through the mysteries of its origin.

Hero: *enigmatic birth, born from nothing destined to greatness after confronting many obstacles*

The birth of Sundiata is framed as an event emerging from obscurity, strangeness, and forces beyond human comprehension. His origins are deliberately placed outside the realm of ordinary lineage. The hunter-soothsayer announces that the future mother of Mali's immortal king will be "*ugly... hideous... she bears on her back a disfiguring hump*" (9). This prophecy positions Sundiata's beginning in a space of paradox. Greatness will come from a woman who embodies everything society rejects. The narrative insists that the hero's emergence begins in a void of social value, a place where nothing suggests nobility, beauty, or power. Sogolon herself is revealed through the supernatural tale of the buffalo woman, who confesses that she is the beast terrorizing Do and that Sogolon is her wraith (13). Sundiata's conception therefore arises from a fusion of human and spirit worlds, a crossing of boundaries that makes his birth both enigmatic and charged with destiny.

Nature confirms this mystery at the moment of his arrival. As Sogolon gives birth, "*a great rumbling shook the sky... lightning flashed... a monstrous storm*" before sunlight suddenly breaks through (22). The elements perform a cosmic ritual to announce the lion child. The griot proclaims, "*The child is born whom the world awaited... the lion child, the buffalo child*" (22). These titles emphasize that Sundiata's identity is not just human. He is the product of prophecy, animal spirit, and divine intervention. His birth is a rupture in the natural order, a sign that greatness can emerge from what appears impossible.

However, the narrative complicates this destiny by presenting a childhood defined by weakness, humiliation, and doubt. The boy who was foretold to make Mali immortal crawls on all fours long after other children walk. His enormous head, violent temper, and insatiable appetite provoke gossip and ridicule. Even the king wonders whether the prophecy was a deception: "*Naré Maghan was very perplexed. Could it be that the stiff-jointed son of Sogolon was the one the hunter-soothsayer had foretold?*" (26). At this moment of doubt, the king's griot intervenes with a metaphor that reframes Sundiata's slow development: "*the silk cotton tree emerges from a tiny seed*" (26). The blacksmith reinforces this truth, explaining that "*great trees grow slowly, but they plunge their roots deep into the ground*" (27). These words restore the king's confidence and remind the audience that greatness often begins in obscurity and grows in silence.

The turning point arrives when humiliation forces Sundiata to confront his destiny. Sassouma's taunt over baobab leaves wounds his mother, and Sundiata responds, "*Very well then, I am going to walk today*" (31). Sundiata's rise is an act of will. The iron staff bends under his grip, and the kingdom witnesses the awakening of the lion child. The prophecy becomes visible only through struggle. His enigmatic birth sets the stage, but his obstacles reveal the substance of his greatness. The hero emerges from nothing, yet through endurance and resolve he becomes the figure destiny promised.

Spirituality Spirituality in the Sundiata epic is the organizing principle of social life, political legitimacy, and personal destiny. The narrative presents a world in which human action is inseparable from invisible forces, and where belief systems shape every decision, from marriage alliances to war. The griot's opening declaration that "*my word is pure and free of untruth. It is the word of my father. It is the word of my father's father*" (2) reveals that knowledge itself is spiritual inheritance. History is not a secular record but a sacred transmission. The griot's authority comes from his proximity to the unseen, and his speech becomes a ritual that binds the community to its past. Spirituality therefore organizes collective identity by defining who may speak, who may remember, and who may interpret destiny.

Belief in the occult permeates the narrative and shapes the worldview of every character. The hunter-soothsayer's prophecy that the king must marry a woman who is "*ugly... hideous... bearing a disfiguring hump*" (9) is accepted without hesitation because spiritual insight outranks social norms. The buffalo woman's revelation that she is both beast and human, and that Sogolon is her wraith (13), demonstrates that the boundaries between the natural and supernatural are fluid. People live with the certainty that spirits intervene in human affairs that animals may carry human souls, and that destiny is revealed through signs, storms, and sacrifices. This belief system structures behavior: Kings obey prophecies, hunters follow mystical instructions, and families interpret their lineage through spiritual metaphors. Even Sundiata's birth is announced by thunder, lightning, and a sudden break of sunlight, confirming that the arrival of a hero is a cosmic event.

Mastery of the occult is directly associated with political power. Soumaoro Kanté embodies this connection. He descends from blacksmiths, “*masters of fire*,” and therefore “*a great sorcerer*” (62). His palace is built as a seven-story monument to his supernatural authority, and the forbidden chamber covered in human skins, guarded by owls and serpents, symbolizes his domination over both the living and the dead. His balafon responds to mystical vibrations, and the nine skulls of conquered kings displayed in his chamber testify that sorcery is a weapon of rule. Soumaoro’s power is military, but it is mostly metaphysical. He appears and disappears at will during his duel with Sundiata. To defeat him, Sundiata must acquire his own spiritual strength: Sacrifice one hundred white bulls, one hundred white rams, one hundred white roosters, drink sacred water, and align himself with ancestral forces. In this world, political legitimacy depends on spiritual mastery. The ruler is the one who understands the unseen, commands it, and survives its trials. Spirituality thus organizes life by shaping identity, guiding action, and determining authority. Belief in the occult is not superstition but the foundation of social order, and mastery of the occult becomes the ultimate marker of power.

Iron: the mystical instigator Iron appears in the epic as the material that sets destinies in motion. It is the substance through which bodies rise, armies advance, cities expand, and rulers impose their will. The narrative presents iron as the great instigator, the element that transforms potential into action. Sundiata’s awakening begins with iron. When he decides to walk, he asks for the heaviest iron rod forged by the master smith of Niani. Six apprentices carry it with difficulty, and the child who had crawled all his life rises by leaning on the iron rod. Iron becomes the instrument through which destiny reveals itself. Without the iron rod, Sundiata’s body remains bound to the ground. With it, he stands, walks, uproots a baobab, and begins the path that will lead him to build a great army and reclaim his kingdom.

Iron also shapes the military identity of West African kingdoms. During Sundiata’s exile, he is impressed when he enters Ghana. The empire is an organized marketplace where traders feel safe to do commerce. “*The palace of the king of Ghana was an imposing building*” (53). The Ghanaian army appears with gleaming spears and iron weapons that shine with discipline and prestige. Their weapons protect the inhabitants of the kingdom and make commerce possible. Iron defines the strength of Ghana, allowing it to reach its apogee through a force capable of defending trade routes and maintaining order. The brightness of their spears reflects the confidence of a kingdom whose prosperity depends on forged metal.

Soumaoro Kanté represents another dimension of iron’s influence. He descends from blacksmiths, “*masters of fire*” and therefore “*a great sorcerer*” (62). His forge produces weapons infused with occult strength, and his mastery of fire gives him access to spiritual forces that shape his rule. Iron is the foundation of his domination. The Sosso empire grows from a small vassal village into a powerful state because iron tools allow the construction of fortified buildings, the clearing of land, and the expansion of urban spaces. Soumaoro’s “*massive seven story*” palace (62) symbolizes this transformation. Architecture emerges from smithing, and the ability to manipulate iron becomes the ability to manipulate territory. Iron therefore organizes the political and spatial development of the epic’s world. It raises Sundiata from the ground, arms the Ghanaian soldiers, and fuels the rise of Sosso. It carries the power of fire, the force of weaponry, and the tools of urbanization. Through iron, bodies move, armies form, cities grow, and empires rise.

Exile: as initiation In the epic, exile functions as a transformative passage. It is the stage where childhood ends and where destiny begins to take shape. Sundiata’s departure from Mali is the moment when the hero enters a world that will teach him strength, patience, political insight, and mastery of himself. Exile presents itself as the crucible through which greatness is formed.

The epic prepares the reader for this idea long before Sundiata leaves Niani. His early suffering, his delayed development, and the humiliation of his mother create the emotional foundation for initiation. When he rises with the iron rod, he begins a journey that will eventually lead him away from his homeland. His first act of standing is already a symbolic departure. He leaves behind weakness and enters the realm of responsibility.

Sundiata’s family moves from refuge to refuge, and each kingdom teaches him something essential. In Ghana, he encounters the disciplined army and iron weapons that reflect the strength of a well-organized state. This experience shows him how military order sustains prosperity. Exile is a school where he observes how other rulers govern and how armies maintain stability.

In Mema, Sundiata receives the most decisive lessons. King Moussa Tounkara welcomes him and trains him in the art of war. The king grows attached to him and teaches him how to lead men. Sundiata’s rise in

Mema is the heart of his initiation. He learns strategy, discipline, and the responsibilities of command. His appointment as viceroy shows that exile is the place where he becomes a political figure capable of ruling a kingdom. His mother's earlier suffering and his own childhood trials prepare him for this moment. Exile completes the process.

The epic suggests that exile strips the hero of illusions and forces him to confront the world as it is. It exposes him to foreign customs, new forms of authority, and the realities of power. It also teaches humility. Sundiata does not return to Mali as a child who was wronged. He returns as a leader who has learned how kingdoms rise and fall. His initiation is complete when he understands that destiny requires preparation, alliances, and the ability to inspire others. Exile is the path through which the hero acquires the knowledge, discipline, and the moral virtues needed to reclaim his kingdom. It is the stage where suffering turns into wisdom and where displacement becomes the foundation of leadership.

Gender: Womanhood/motherhood The epic constructs womanhood and motherhood as identities shaped through endurance, sacrifice, and moral virtue. Women occupy positions where their influence emerges through the weight of their trials and the dignity with which they confront them. Their suffering becomes a form of spiritual labor that organizes the moral life of the community and reveals the values that sustain Mandingo society.

Sogolon is the central figure through whom this theme unfolds. Her arrival in Niani is marked by strangeness and hardship. The hunter soothsayer announces that the future mother of Mali's immortal king will be repulsive (9). This prophecy places Sogolon at the intersection of destiny and suffering. She enters the royal household already burdened by difference, and her early years in the palace expose her to ridicule and hostility. Her suffering deepens as she raises a child whose delayed development becomes a source of public mockery. When Sassouma taunts her over baobab leaves, Sogolon cries because her son's weakness exposes her to shame. Her tears express the emotional weight carried by mothers whose children are judged by the community.

This suffering becomes the foundation of her virtue. The people of Mali eventually praise Sogolon as the model of a virtuous woman. They say that the more a woman respects her husband and suffers for her children, the more God grants her grace (36). Her patience, her silent endurance, and her unwavering devotion to Sundiata transform her into a moral figure whose strength is recognized by the kingdom. Her suffering is not presented as defeat. It is the ground from which respect emerges. She embodies the idea that motherhood is a sacred duty that requires stoicism, resilience, and humility.

Sassouma represents another dimension of womanhood. Her ambition for her son and her hostility toward Sogolon show how motherhood can become a site of rivalry and political tension. Her cruelty contrasts with Sogolon's patience, and this contrast allows the epic to define virtue through behavior rather than status. Sassouma's suffering is shaped by envy and fear. Sogolon's suffering is shaped by destiny and devotion. Through this contrast, the epic suggests that virtue arises from the way a woman carries her burdens and protects her children.

The moment when Sundiata decides to walk also reveals the moral weight of motherhood. He rises because he sees his mother's tears. His declaration, "*Very well then, I am going to walk today*" (31), shows that maternal suffering has the power to awaken destiny. Sogolon's pain converts into the catalyst for the hero's transformation. Her suffering shapes the future of the kingdom. The epic presents womanhood as a path marked by trials that reveal inner strength. Mothers carry the emotional weight of prophecy, lineage, and social expectation. Their suffering develops as a form of spiritual work that binds families and kingdoms. Respect arises from the way they endure hardship, and virtue emerges from the way they protect life, nurture destiny, and uphold the moral fabric of their world.

Disability: past and present

The epic's treatment of disability offers an instructive lens through which to examine modern discussions about how societies perceive physical and developmental difference. Sundiata's early life presents disability as a condition that shapes identity, social expectation, and emotional experience. His inability to walk is a public spectacle. The community whispers, the king doubts the prophecy, and Sogolon suffers humiliation when Sassouma mocks her. Disability becomes a site where social judgment and maternal pain converge.

This dynamic resonates strongly with contemporary debates. Today, disability scholars emphasize how society often defines disability through the reactions of others rather than through the lived experience of the person. In the epic, Sundiata's condition is interpreted through fear, gossip, and impatience. The

community sees his crawling as a failure to meet expected norms. This mirrors modern discussions about how disability is framed through deficit rather than potential. The griot's metaphor, "*the silk cotton tree emerges from a tiny seed*" (27), challenges this perception. It reframes disability as a stage in growth rather than a permanent limitation. This metaphor anticipates contemporary calls to view disability through the lens of development, possibility, and human variation.

Sogolon's suffering also speaks to current debates about the emotional labor carried by caregivers. Her tears when Sassouma humiliates her reveal how disability affects the family as much as the individual. Modern disability studies highlight the burden placed on mothers who navigate social stigma, institutional barriers, and public misunderstanding. Sogolon's pain is not caused by Sundiata's condition. It is caused by the community's reaction to it. This distinction is central to contemporary critiques of ableism.

Sundiata's transformation further enriches the conversation. His rise is figured as an act of agency. He responds to his mother's suffering and chooses to stand. This moment is often read as miraculous, but it can also be interpreted through modern debates about empowerment. Disability scholars argue that empowerment does not require the erasure of disability. It requires the recognition of agency within the condition. Sundiata's rise does not erase his early struggle. It transforms it into moral strength. His childhood limitation is the foundation of his adult resilience. This mirrors contemporary narratives that view disability as part of identity rather than an obstacle to be erased.

The role of the iron rod forged by the master smith also speaks to modern discussions about assistive technology. The rod is an instrument that allows Sundiata to stand. It is a tool that mediates between the body and the world. Today, assistive devices are understood as extensions of human capability. They do not diminish the person. They enhance participation. The bending of the rod under Sundiata's strength symbolizes the fusion of human will and technological support. This moment anticipates contemporary arguments that disability is shaped through interaction between the body, tools, and environment.

Finally, the epic's narrative development challenges modern assumptions about disability and leadership. Sundiata's early limitation does not prevent him from becoming the founder of an empire. His disability becomes part of his legend. It shapes his empathy, his patience, and his understanding of suffering. Contemporary disability advocates argue that disability can enrich leadership by cultivating resilience, insight, and virtue. Sundiata embodies this idea long before it became part of modern discourse. *Sundiata* offers a profound contribution to today's debates. It presents disability as trial, identity, and transformation. It reveals how social perception shapes experience. It shows how tools support agency. It demonstrates how early struggle can prepare a leader for greatness. The epic invites us to reconsider disability not as a limitation but as a dimension of human life that carries its own form of strength.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does the epic construct the authority of the *griot*, and what does this reveal about Mandé concepts of history?
2. In what ways does Sundiata's childhood disability shape his identity, leadership, and the community's perception of him?
3. How does the epic portray womanhood and motherhood as moral and political forces?
4. What role does spirituality and the occult play in shaping political legitimacy in the epic?
5. How does exile function as an initiation that prepares Sundiata for leadership?