

Sundiata



INTRODUCTION

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Sundiata was a real person who lived from 1217-1255 CE. While much of the epic is fantastical, it's considered fact that Sundiata was foretold to be a great ruler of the Mali Empire. He indeed had a difficult childhood and didn't walk until the age of seven, and he then fulfilled the prophecy of uniting Mali after the Battle of Krina in 1235. The empire that Sundiata built continued to grow after his death and eventually became the largest empire in West Africa before its fall in 1670. The book's supplementary materials state that one of Sundiata's descendants was the famed Mansa Musa, who put Mali on European maps after making a two-year pilgrimage to Mecca (1324-26).

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Sundiata shares a number of similarities with other epic poems, such as [The Odyssey](#), [The Epic of Gilgamesh](#), and [Beowulf](#). Scholars have noted that, despite the fact that *Sundiata* doesn't come from the Greek traditions that guide the style of European epic poems, it still shares a number of the same hallmarks and qualities of its European counterparts. Epic poems like *Sundiata* exist worldwide.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* (also referred to as *Sundiata Kieta* or *Epic of Sundiata*)
- **When Written:** Sundiata, the founder of the Mali Emperor, lived from 1217-1255 CE, and this oral tale was presumably composed after the Battle of Krina in 1235 CE. The story was traditionally told by griots (professional storytellers) and existed only as an oral story for centuries without any one particular authoritative version existing. A version was first published in "novelistic" (prose) French by Djibril Tamsir Niane in 1960, while the English translation was developed by G. D. Pickett several years later.
- **Where Written:** The historical kingdom of Mali existed in what is now modern-day Guinea and southwestern Mali in northwest Africa. Niani, the capital city of the Mali Empire, still exists and is in Guinea.
- **When Published:** The first written accounts of the epic were in Arabic and existed prior to 1890, but versions of the tale weren't published in Europe until 1898 (in German and French). The English translation used in this LitChart was published in 1965.
- **Literary Period:** Pre-Colonial African Literature
- **Genre:** Epic Poem

- **Setting:** Mali Empire, namely the cities of Niani, Wagadou, Cissé, Mema, Tabon, and Sosso, around 1216-1236.
- **Climax:** When Sundiata defeats Soumaoro at the Battle of Krina and is then crowned Mansa.
- **Antagonist:** First Sassouma Bérété, later Soumaoro, king of Sosso and his allies.
- **Point of View:** Third person omniscient, narrated by the griot Mamoudou Kouyaté. He occasionally addresses the reader directly.

EXTRA CREDIT

A Questionable Death. It's generally accepted that Sundiata died in 1255, although there are differing accounts as to how exactly he died. The most popular and well-accepted cause of death is that Sundiata drowned in the Sankarani River.

The Lion King? While Disney maintains that the 1994 film *The Lion King* was inspired by William Shakespeare's [Hamlet](#), several scholars have drawn a number of similarities between the film and the epic of *Sundiata*. Indeed, one of Sundiata's many names is the Lion King of Mali and he also went by the title Simbon (master hunter), which bears resemblance to the name of *The Lion King's* protagonist, Simba.



PLOT SUMMARY

Mamoudou Kouyaté, a griot and the narrator, says that griots are the vessels of speech and the keepers of history who teach kings their history so they can predict the future. Mamoudou Kouyaté asks the reader to listen to the history of Mali and of Sundiata. At first, Mali was ruled by Bambara kings, and Mamoudou Kouyaté lists the lineage of these kings down to Sundiata's father, Maghan Kon Fatta.

Maghan Kon Fatta spends his time sitting under the great silk-cotton **tree** in Niani, and his first son, Dankaran Touman, sits with him. One day, a hunter approaches Niani with an offering for the king. Maghan's griot, Gnankouman Doua, invites the hunter to sit with them. The hunter is a soothsayer, and as he jumbles his cowrie shells, he tells Maghan that the silk-cotton **tree** grows from a tiny **seed**. He says that if Maghan marries the ugly woman currently heading for Niani, she will bear his successor and this successor will be greater than Alexander the Great.

The brothers Oulamba and Oulani arrive at Niani with a woman between them. They offer her to Maghan as a gift, and tell the tale of how they won her hand by killing the **Buffalo of Do**. Maghan agrees to marry the woman, Sogolon. On their

wedding night, Sogolon refuses her husband's sexual advances. A week later, Maghan tricks Sogolon and impregnates her while she has fainted.

Sogolon, now pregnant, moves freely through the king's enclosure, but Maghan's first wife, Sassouma, is jealous and tries to kill Sogolon. Sorcerers refuse to kill Sogolon, and Sogolon goes into labor. She gives birth to a boy, whom the king names Mari Djata.

By the age of three, Mari Djata still doesn't walk, but he habitually hits his playmates with his strong arms. Sassouma is thrilled about the boy's incapacity. Sogolon has a girl and Maghan takes a third wife, Namandjé, who gives birth to a boy, Manding Bory. Soothsayers indicate that Manding Bory will be the right hand man of a king. Maghan consults a soothsayer who indicates that the "seed" has germinated, but man is simply impatient. All of Niani continues to gossip about Mari Djata, but Maghan bestows upon the seven-year-old boy his own griot, Balla Fasséké. Maghan and Gnankouman Doua die not long after, and Sassouma ensures that Dankaran Touman is crowned king against his father's wishes.

Sassouma banishes Sogolon and her children to a hut behind the palace, where Sogolon plants a garden. One day she finds she's out of baobab leaf and asks Sassouma for some. Sassouma gives her the condiment but insults Sogolon and Mari Djata. Back at her hut, Sogolon hits Mari Djata and asks him if he'll ever walk. Mari Djata calmly asks for an iron rod and declares he'll walk today. He asks his mother if she'd like only the baobab leaves or the entire tree, and Sogolon asks for the entire tree. Balla Fasséké fetches a sturdy iron rod from the smith and offers it to Mari Djata. The boy lifts the bar vertically and draws himself to a standing position, twisting the bar into the shape of a bow in the process. Balla Fasséké composes the song "**Hymn to the Bow**," and Mari Djata takes giant steps. He uproots a baobab tree and throws it at his mother's doorstep.

By age ten, Mari Djata becomes known as Sundiata. He's very popular amongst his peers, and fearing this popularity, Sassouma assembles nine witches and asks them to kill Sundiata. The witches make a show of "stealing" from Sogolon's garden to provoke Sundiata, but Sundiata generously offers them vegetables and meat. The witches, astounded by his kindness, offer to protect the boy.

Sogolon suggests that she and her children leave Niani, as she knows that Sassouma will now turn to hurting Manding Bory and Sundiata's sisters. Sundiata agrees and Balla Fasséké plans for the journey, but Dankaran Touman sends Balla to Sosso to speak with the king Soumaoro Kanté, effectively robbing Sundiata of his griot. When Sundiata returns and realizes what's happened he confronts his brother and vows to return to Mali. Dankaran Touman is shaken, but at his mother's prodding, he decides that if he sees Sundiata and Manding Bory again he'll kill them.

Sogolon and her children travel to Djaba. They stay for two months until the king, Mansa Konkon, calls Sundiata to him to play a game of wori. Mansa Konkon stipulates that if Sundiata loses, Mansa Konkon will kill him. Sundiata realizes that Sassouma has bribed Mansa Konkon, and Sundiata and his family leave the next day. They wind their way through the country and end up in Wagadou, Ghana. The king of Ghana welcomes Sogolon and her children. Sundiata and Manding Bory are treated like royalty and Sundiata accepts this treatment. When Sogolon falls ill a year later, the king of Ghana sends the family to Mema. Moussa Tounkara accepts Sogolon and Sundiata and takes Sundiata on his first military campaign. When Sundiata performs well, the king vows to make Sundiata a great warrior. When Sundiata is 18, Sogolon reminds Sundiata that his destiny lies in Mali.

The narrator describes Soumaoro Kanté, the evil sorcerer king of Sosso. Soumaoro keeps Balla Fasséké at his court and threatens Dankaran Touman if he doesn't submit to Sosso. Dankaran Touman sends his sister Nana Triban to Soumaoro and submits. One day, Balla Fasséké sneaks into Soumaoro's secret chamber of fetish objects. Balla finds a massive balafon (musical instrument) and sits down to play. Soumaoro knows that someone is playing his balafon and he bursts into the room, but Balla improvises a song in honor of the king. Soumaoro decides to keep Balla for himself, which the narrator says made war inevitable between Soumaoro and Sundiata. Soumaoro, emboldened by his power, abducts the wife of his nephew Fakoli. Fakoli, angry, revolts against his uncle. Malian kingdoms try to help Fakoli, but Soumaoro burns their cities, including Niani, to the ground. A group of soothsayers form a resistance group and set out to find Sundiata.

One day, Sundiata's sister, Kolonkan, is in the market of Mema buying vegetables and she finds a merchant selling condiments from Mali. The merchant is interested in Kolonkan and her brother, and asks if Sogolon would speak with them. Kolonkan runs home to ask Sogolon, and Sogolon agrees to see the merchants. When the merchants arrive at Sogolon's quarters, she recognizes them as members of her husband's court. They share the grave news from Mali. Upon hearing the news, Sundiata decides to speak with Moussa Tounkara about returning to Mali. The next day, Sogolon dies. Sundiata approaches Moussa Tounkara, explains that he must return to Mali, and asks to bury Sogolon in Mema. Moussa Tounkara tries to refuse, but an advisor encourages him to grant Sundiata his requests. Moussa Tounkara sends Sundiata with half of his army.

Sundiata heads for Tabon, but finds that Soumaoro's forces, led by Sosso Balla, are blocking the way. Sundiata's forces attack Soumaoro's immediately and win. Sundiata's childhood friend Fran Kamara, now known as Tabon Wana, king of Tabon, rides out to meet Sundiata. They join forces and, not long afterwards, Soumaoro attacks Tabon. Sundiata's army is successful, but

when Sundiata tries to throw a spear at Soumaoro, it bounces off his chest and Soumaoro simply disappears. While Sundiata was technically victorious, he spends his night wondering how to beat Soumaoro's magic.

Sundiata continues recruiting troops, and they all gather at Sibi with Kamandjan, the king of Sibi. Sundiata pledges to take back Mali. He consults soothsayers about Soumaoro's magic, and they advise Sundiata to make animal sacrifices. During the butchering, Sundiata hears that Nana Triban and Balla Fasséké managed to escape Soumaoro. He goes to them, and they explain how they escaped. Nana Triban tells Sundiata how to pierce Soumaoro's magic. Before the great battle, Sundiata's war chiefs perform fantastical feats and pledge allegiance to Sundiata.

Soumaoro and Sundiata properly declare war on each other. Fakoli joins Sundiata's cause and is accepted by the war chiefs. On the day of the battle, Sundiata carries an arrow made of wood and tipped with the spur of a white cock. Balla Fasséké shares that he saw the end of Soumaoro in a dream. As the battle rages, Sundiata shoots the arrow at Soumaoro. Soumaoro feels his powers leave him and turns to retreat. Sundiata and Fakoli chase him. They stop in several villages along the way and learn that Soumaoro is accompanied by Sosso Balla. Sundiata and Fakoli finally catch up to the runaways in the mountains. They capture Sosso Balla, but Soumaoro escapes into a cave.

The following morning, Sundiata attacks Sosso and burns it to the ground. He proceeds to then take the cities of Diaghan and Kita. The king of Kita is protected by the power of an evil jinn, whose powers are concentrated in a pool in the middle of a mountain. After Kita submits to Sundiata, Sundiata decides to travel to the pool and thank the jinn for his victory. Sundiata drinks from the pool and when he returns to his army, he looks exceptionally brilliant. Sundiata and his army travel through Do. When they see a whirlwind, Balla Fasséké says it's time to return to Mali.

Sundiata gathers his forces at Ka-ba. All the kings pledge allegiance to Sundiata, and the sofos perform their war dances. Sundiata creates alliances between his kingdoms and officially grants the kings their new kingdoms. He proclaims Balla Fasséké grand master of ceremonies. Sundiata remains in Ka-ba for several days and then begins the journey to Niani. He finds the city sad and burnt, but he restores it to be larger and more glorious than before. In the new empire, Manding Bory acts as Sundiata's viceroy. Sundiata holds a yearly assembly of kings and dignitaries at Niani, and this assembly allows Sundiata to maintain control and justice. Mali flourishes under Sundiata's rule.

Mamoudou Kouyaté says that many kings ruled after Sundiata, but none were as great as Sundiata. He implores the reader to go to Mali and see the old cities, but cautions that one can't go to the dead cities and question the past. He states where

Sundiata is buried, and explains that he himself acquired his knowledge and this story by traveling around Mali.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Sundiata/Maghan Mari Djata – Son of Sogolon and Maghan Kon Fatta; brother of Manding Bory, Djamarou, and Kolonkon. Sundiata is a famous thirteenth-century West African conqueror, the Mansa (king of kings) who united Mali and built the enormous, powerful, and enduring Mali empire. Even before his birth, Sundiata's destiny to be a great ruler was prophesied, but he proves to be a disappointing child. While he's very smart and appears often to be lost in thought, he doesn't walk until the age of seven. Immediately after he begins walking, though, he becomes a fantastic hunter and earns the title of Simbon (master hunter). Sundiata is exceptionally generous and fair, and he never doubts his destiny. He's very popular wherever he goes and he's loyal to the friends he makes throughout his journey. This loyalty means that when he finally returns to take Mali back from Soumaoro, he possesses a great and skilled army. After he unites Mali, he is a just and fair Mansa.

Sogolon Kedjou – Sundiata's mother, and the second wife of Maghan Kon Fatta. Sogolon, who was prophesied to birth a great ruler, is exceptionally wise and ugly. She has a hump on her back, and is known as the buffalo woman. While she initially cried and resisted her marriage to Maghan Kon Fatta, she soon accepted her role as a wife and mother. She does whatever she can to protect Sundiata, including voluntarily taking him and her other children into exile. She consistently reminds Sundiata of his destiny, and she is a wise and devoted mother.

Manding Bory/Manding Boukari – Sundiata's brother, son of Namandjé and Maghan Kon Fatta. Manding Bory and Sundiata are extremely close and Manding Bory is instrumental in Sundiata's triumph. He's described at times as "artless" and as being uncomfortable with the attention paid to him at kings' courts. As an infant, soothsayers saw that Manding Bory was destined to be the right-hand man of a great king, and he grows up to be Sundiata's viceroy.

Soumaoro Kanté – The sorcerer king of Sosso and Sundiata's adversary. Sundiata must defeat Soumaoro Kanté in order to fulfill his destiny and unite Mali. Soumaoro Kanté keeps many fetish objects, including the heads of kings he has killed, and he wears shoes made from human skin. The narrator indicates that he used the power of evil jinn to develop his own power, and the power made him feel invincible. He has little regard for tradition and propriety, and he is extremely cruel to his subjects.

Sassouma Béréké – Maghan Kon Fatta's first wife, mother of Dankaran Touman. When Maghan Kon Fatta takes Sogolon as

his second wife, Sassouma is extremely jealous of his preference for Sogolon. She wants her son to rule instead of Sundiata, so she makes several attempts on the lives of Sogolon and Sundiata, and eventually arranges their exile. Before her husband's death she makes life miserable for Sogolon and teases her for everything from her ugliness to Sundiata's inability to walk.

Dankaran Touman – Son of Sassouma Béréte and Maghan Kon Fatta. Dankaran Touman is the king of Mali after Maghan Kon Fatta's death, and his weakness as a leader leads to the loss of his kingdom to Soumaoro. While Dankaran Touman is a precocious and successful child, he is a jealous and cowardly king. He's also described as being "colorless" and devoid of personality, although he tries to behave honorably. Several years after banishing his brother, Sundiata, he flees Niani to escape Soumaoro's army and is never spoken of again.

Maghan Kon Fatta Sundiata's father, husband to Sassouma, Sogolon, and Namandjé. Maghan Kon Fatta is described as very handsome and a good king. He often sits with his court and his griot, Gnankouman Doua, under the large silk-cotton tree in Niani and listens to stories. He places a great deal of importance in the hunter's prophecy regarding Sundiata, although Maghan is often impatient to see proof that the prophecy will come to fruition.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Balla Fasséké – Sundiata's griot; son of Gnankouman Doua, the griot of Maghan Kon Fatta. Balla Fasséké is extremely loyal to Sundiata and he encourages Sundiata with his songs and stories, particularly **"Hymn to the Bow."** He's very good at earning the trust of crowds and individuals with his songs and stories.

Mamoudou Kouyaté – The narrator of the story and a modern-day griot. He believes that stories and history are meant to be heard and spoken, not read, and he shows a great deal of disdain for the reader.

Gnankouman Doua – Maghan Kon Fatta's griot, father of Balla Fasséké.

The Hunter – A hunter who visits Maghan Kon Fatta. He's a soothsayer and he foretells that if Maghan Kon Fatta marries an ugly woman, the son from this marriage will be greater than Alexander the Great.

Oulamba – Brother of Oulani; a hunter who brings Sogolon to Maghan Kon Fatta's court.

Oulani – Brother of Oulamba; a traveling hunter who brings Sogolon to Maghan Kon Fatta as a gift.

The Old Woman – An old woman, capable of shape shifting into a buffalo, who tells Oulamba and Oulani how to kill the **buffalo of Do** after they impress her with their generosity. Sogolon is her wraith.

Sosso Balla – Soumaoro's son; an instrumental figure in Soumaoro's military advancements against Sundiata.

Fakoli Koroma – Keleya's husband and Soumaoro's nephew. Fakoli Koroma is initially Soumaoro's chief general, until Soumaoro betrays Fakoli by abducting Keleya. After that, Fakoli allies himself with Sundiata and helps to defeat Soumaoro.

Namandjé – Maghan Kon Fatta's third wife, mother of Manding Bory. She's very beautiful and she dies when Manding Bory is still a young child.

Sogolon Djamarou – Sogolon's youngest daughter with Maghan Kon Fatta; Sundiata's sister.

Kolonkan – Sogolon's first daughter with Maghan Kon Fatta; Sundiata's sister. She's proficient in witchcraft and she watches over Sundiata.

Farakourou – Master of the royal forges of Niani.

Fran Kamara/Tabon Wana – One of Sundiata's best friends; the prince and later king of Tabon.

Kamandjan – One of Sundiata's closest friends, the prince and eventual king of Sibi.

Soumosso Konkomba – The most powerful of the nine witches Sassouma assembles to kill Sundiata.

Mansa Konkon – A sorcerer king of Djedeba. He attempts to use sorcery to kill Sundiata at Sassouma's bidding.

Mansa Konkon's daughter – daughter of Mansa Konkon, the sorcerer king of Djedeba.

King Soumaba Cissé of Ghana – The king of Ghana. He welcomes Sogolon, Sundiata, and the other children to his court, and assures them safe passage to Mema when Sogolon becomes ill. He thinks very highly of Sundiata and sees that Sundiata will one day be a great king.

Moussa Tounkara – King of Mema, and brother to Massiran. He trains Sundiata and Manding Bory to be great warriors and rulers.

Massiran – The sister of Moussa Tounkara of Mema. She treats Sogolon like an old friend.

Nana Triban – Sassouma's daughter and Dankaran Touman's sister. Dankaran Touman sends her to the court of Sosso to appease Soumaoro, but she escapes with Balla Fasséké and joins Sundiata's cause. She exhibits none of her mother's cruelty.

Keleya – Fakoli Koroma's wife.

Mandjan Béréte – Sassouma's brother and a member of Maghan Kon Fatta's court; part of the resistance group of soothsayers who searches for Sundiata.

Singbin Mara Cissé – One of the soothsayers who travels with Sundiata to re-conquer Mali.

Siara Kouman Konaté – Sundiata's cousin.

Faony Diarra – Sundiata's uncle, the king of Do.

Do Mansa-Gnemo Diarra – The king of Do who grants Oulamba and Oulani Sogolon for killing the **buffalo of Do**.

King Kamandjan – The king of Sibi.

Kita Mansa – The king of Kita, whose incredible power stems from the protection of a jinn who resides in the mountain Kita Kourou.

Noumenkeba – A tribal chief who takes over the defense of Sosso after the battle of Krina.

Lahitoul Kalabi – One of the Bambara kings of Mali. On his pilgrimage to Mecca, he was robbed in the desert and nearly died of thirst, but God and jinn saved him and he was able to return to Mali.

Mamadi Kani – One of the Bambara kings of Mali, and one of Sundiata's ancestors.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



STORYTELLING AND MEMORY

It's important to remember that the story of *Sundiata* is a transcription of an epic poem that is part of West African oral tradition—it was intended to be heard, rather than read. Furthermore, the original poem was told in verse, while the written English translation is in prose, and the poem was traditionally accompanied by a balafon, a type of wooden xylophone. Thus, the English translation of *Sundiata* is far from the story's traditional—and intended—form. While characters in *Sundiata* proclaim oral storytelling to be the only true way for a culture to remember its history and connect with the past, these assertions are complicated by the fact that English language readers are receiving this message (and the story overall) via text on the page.

The narrator, griot (professional storyteller) Mamoudou Kouyaté, returns again and again to assertions of the power of stories and, by proxy, the power of the griots tasked with telling stories. Griots don't exist simply to entertain; they carry the memories and the history of their culture, and as such, they are guardians of memory and they are extremely powerful advisors to kings. While griots are in charge of remembering history and relating it to others, they're also tasked with deciding what events and people should become part of stories (and therefore earn a place in cultural memory), and how exactly to tell these stories. Storytelling, then, becomes a way to

memorialize people and influence power. Storytelling can also be used as punishment, in that it can immortalize evil acts or make sure that certain people and places are forgotten. While Soumaoro and his city Sosso are physically wiped from the landscape, Mamoudou Kouyaté makes it clear that Soumaoro's evil shouldn't be forgotten so that it may not be repeated, but the ruins of Sosso must never be remembered or revisited.

Mamoudou Kouyaté is also concerned with the differences between written history and oral history. He asserts that the primary difference lies in how written and oral histories enhance or hinder memory. Mamoudou Kouyaté claims that cultures that record their histories in writing exist separately from their history. Essentially, while he sees that writing makes history more accessible, writing also keeps history at arm's length. Oral history, on the other hand, is treated as living and breathing, and the process of speaking or hearing the stories keeps them fresh and present in modern life. This divide between written and spoken history creates tension, as the reader is never allowed to forget that Mamoudou Kouyaté isn't necessarily a proponent of reading *Sundiata*. His obvious disdain for the written word turns the act of reading *Sundiata* into an almost inappropriate pursuit; the reader must consider what there is to gain from reading the epic, since the narrator is convinced that a reader, by definition, cannot fully grasp the meaning of the story.

However, it's important to consider that *Sundiata* has become a prolific piece of literature worldwide *because* it was transcribed and distributed in its written form. Its audience and readership has expanded many times over, though the story itself has become standardized and devoid of the small changes that inevitably happen when a story is spoken exclusively. Mamoudou Kouyaté clearly sees this a deficit; at the story's close, he implores the reader to actually visit Mali and experience the history and legacy of Sundiata in real time, rather than through the pages and distance of a book.



FATE AND DESTINY

Seers, witches, and soothsayers who can tell the future drive the action of the story, and destiny becomes one of *Sundiata*'s most powerful forces.

No character can escape destiny, and every action has already been foretold. Thus, the role of destiny, and how individual characters interact with what they've been told of the future, becomes a study of power, human nature, and desire.

Djeli Mamoudou Kouyaté, in telling Sundiata's story, continually scorns humans for attempting to outsmart destiny. He asserts that everyone's destiny is already decided, and any attempt to escape or go against fate is still a foretold action. This logic serves to create a sense of certainty for the reader, even when the characters themselves attempt to escape their fate. In this way, readers and Sundiata have a similar sense of

the story unfolding: both Sundiata and the reader have been told by reputable sources (soothsayers and the narrator Mamoudou Kouyaté, respectively) what the outcome of the story is. Thus, the story is not propelled by suspense. Even when misfortune befalls Sundiata, both the reader and Sundiata know that this misfortune only provides him tools or knowledge to use as he continues to fulfill his destiny. This is most apparent when Sassouma exiles Sundiata, Sogolon, and Sundiata's sisters. While Sassouma is intending to beat fate by forcing Sundiata out of Mali, Sundiata knows that this is part of his destiny, since he uses his seven years in exile to gather friends and allies who will be instrumental to his inevitably victorious return to Mali.

Despite the fact that Sundiata's destiny is well known throughout Niani and his father's lands, many people in the story are quick to doubt that Sundiata is the foretold future ruler of Mali. This allows the story to study how individuals handle destiny when they are displeased or confused by its specifics. Sassouma is a perfect case study. As soon as it becomes clear that Maghan Kon Fatta doesn't intend for his first son (with Sassouma) to rule, Sassouma decides to make life miserable or impossible for Sogolon and Sundiata, thereby promoting her own son's power. Ultimately, however, the power of prophecy and destiny is far more powerful than Sassouma or any of the people she enlists to help her. The sorceresses she asks to kill Sundiata, for example, refuse to help because they see that Sassouma is driven by greed and a desire for power, not righteousness, and therefore they cannot justify an attempt to subvert destiny.

The outcome of the novel, then, indicates that destiny is a stronger force than any law set down by people, or any whim of an individual. Sundiata is told throughout his life that he is destined to unite and expand Mali, and he never doubts the truth of the prophecy. On the other hand, those characters that do doubt Sundiata's foretold success are punished when they are conquered, or they simply vanish from the story. They pay for their doubt with subjugation and erasure.



HEROISM

The narrator is frequently concerned with what qualities make a hero, and, as Sundiata is the iconic hero of the story who was destined for greatness from birth, Sundiata comes to stand in for the ideal hero, with his characteristics defining heroism in general. According to the narrator, among the many qualities that make Sundiata a hero are his physical strength, his virtues, his emotional intelligence, and his ability to form lasting alliances.

What initially sets Sundiata apart from his counterparts is his strength. Even as a "stiff-legged" child who cannot walk, he possesses great strength in his arms. Notably, once he does finally walk at age seven, he retrieves Sogolon an entire baobab tree—a heroic and impressive feat for anyone, let alone a child.

Sundiata's displays of immense strength continue into adulthood and make it clear to his friends and allies that he's going to be a successful conqueror. However, while his strength is the first indication of his greatness, Sundiata's power does not rely entirely on strength; he understands that strength has limits, so he is willing to seek power in other forms. For example, Sundiata turns to magic when he realizes that Soumaoro is evading Sundiata's military advances. Rather than simply doubling down on his military strength, Sundiata accepts his limits and tries a new strategy. This indicates that a hero and a good ruler must have flexibility and humility.

In addition to Sundiata's physical strength, his integrity and kindness set him apart from his peers and enemies; it's his virtues, more than anything else, that make him a beloved ruler and a great hero. As a child, Sundiata is exceptionally mature and generous, and this behavior continues throughout his childhood and adolescence, allowing him to fulfill his destiny. For example, when the sorceresses raid Sogolon's garden hoping to infuriate Sundiata and then kill him, Sundiata defies their expectations by offering them produce. This saves his life and earns him powerful protectors. Later, during his battles against Soumaoro, Sundiata succeeds because he has earned the loyalty of the kings and soldiers who support him. This loyalty is particularly fierce because his followers believe in his virtue and know that, as king, Sundiata will restore order and justice to Mali. Thus, Sundiata's legitimacy as a ruler comes, in part, from destiny—but in order for this destiny to be fulfilled, Sundiata must be kind and just enough to be a hero to those who fight for him. Virtue, then, is essential to heroism.

It's important to note that Sundiata, from birth, carries himself as a hero. He doesn't evolve into one—he always knows himself to be a hero, and he acts like a hero and is naturally treated as a hero by others. Sundiata is set apart from the other characters, including his allies like Manding Bory, because he behaves like a hero without having to learn how to be one. Because of this, Sundiata can be seen as a representation of perfect, ideal heroism, as preordained by the gods.



FAMILY, COMMUNITY, AND THE MALI EMPIRE

Sundiata is not only the story of Sundiata's life—it is equally concerned with the Mali Empire and how Sundiata built, conquered, and unified that empire. It's a story about creating community and forming alliances, both on a small scale (through marriage and having children), and on the broad scale of creating a vast empire. In fact, Sundiata's skill at forging personal relationships enables his success at empire building, which implies that the cultivation of family and community is central to successfully uniting broad groups of people.

Marriage (and then having children) is the primary way in which

the epic's characters build their communities. These family units make up the building blocks of the greater society, and they are major animating forces in politics. Since *Sundiata* depicts a patriarchal society, men often use women and marriage as political tools. Men exchange the women in their families through marriage in order to build alliances and consolidate power. Thus, family and politics are shown to be inseparable and essential as Sundiata fulfills his destiny of uniting Mali. For example, Sundiata benefits politically from his father's marriage to Sogolon, as King Faony Diarra of Do, Sundiata's uncle, comes to his aid in the fight against Soumaoro. In a similar vein, Maghan Kon Fatta, Sundiata's father, agrees to marry Sogolon in the first place because of the prophecy that Sogolon's son (Sundiata) will be a great conqueror and unite Mali. The marriage comes about because of a desire to not simply form family ties, but to produce an heir who will expand his father's empire and serve generations to come.

Sundiata is able to build an army capable of taking on Soumaoro primarily because of his ability to form meaningful and lasting relationships with all sorts of people—young and old, kings and soldiers, strong and weak. The narrator, by devoting entire chapters to lists and descriptions of everyone who participated in Sundiata's battles, makes it clear that these people and these relationships are extremely important. Further, after his victory, Sundiata makes sure to honor his friends and allies by developing deeper relationships and ties between the different kingdoms that he now rules. This shows that these ties are not simply important to conquering, but also to ruling successfully.

Similarly, the respect and loyalty Sundiata pays to his mother, Sogolon, stands in sharp contrast with his enemies' relationships with their own families. Sundiata does everything in his power to honor his parents and recognize his siblings, while Soumaoro commits incest and abducts Keleya, the wife of his nephew and chief general Fakoli Karoma. Soumaoro "defiles" families under his jurisdiction, robbing them of their daughters without marrying them and denying them the possibility of proper familial relationships. When Sundiata becomes Mansa of Mali, he does the exact opposite of Soumaoro. He rules with justice and fairness, which allows prosperity to grow from the ground up. This encourages the creation of families and the expansion of trade, and it lays a moral foundation that helps the Mali Empire to remain prosperous for many generations after Sundiata. Thus, *Sundiata* shows that, in order for a large organization of people like an empire to thrive, family and community must be sacred.



MAGIC AND RELIGION

Sundiata was an actual historical figure, and while his story is considered to be reasonably factual, it's also extremely fantastical. The fantastical and magical elements of the story serve several purposes. First, they paint a picture of the relationship between local

spirituality (in the form of jinn and nature spirits) and Islam, which greatly influenced the cultures of West Africa, even when most West Africans weren't actually Muslim in practice. The elements of magic and fantasy also illustrate divides between good and evil, and support the importance of fate and destiny.

Throughout the story, magic is governed by strict rules of conduct. Magic isn't something that sorcerers or witches can use without cause or reason, and the story implies that doing so results in a person's downfall. This idea is first introduced when Sassouma makes an assassination attempt on Sundiata by sending nine witches to kill him. The witches, who have no issue with Sundiata, must devise a plan to expose Sundiata as cruel and unkind before they can justify killing him. When Sundiata proves himself to be exceptionally kind and generous to the witches, they vow to protect him. Sassouma's attempt to wrongfully use magic backfires, which sets up the idea that magic and protection are things that must be earned and deserved.

One of the primary differences between Sundiata and Soumaoro is their relationship to magic and religion. Sundiata, having come of age in the primarily Islamic town of Mema, is well versed in using both Islamic religion and local religion, as necessary. This allows him to relate to diverse groups of people and it gives him a variety of spiritual tools to draw from, which magnifies his power. Soumaoro, on the other hand, is described as an "evil demon" and his city of Sosso is "the bulwark of fetishism against the word of Allah." Essentially, Soumaoro is corrupted by his insistence on only observing local spiritual practices. While Soumaoro's reign is bloody and terrifying for all because of his use of black or evil magic, Sundiata's reign is peaceful because he embraces and honors both Islam and nature spirits. This indicates that a balance between the two belief systems isn't only possible, it's entirely necessary for peace and prosperity.

While Sundiata is undeniably a great hero, magic is described as something that he can't simply possess just by being destined for heroism. Rather, it's something he must earn. One of the primary ways that Sundiata earns favor of the spirits is through sacrifices. Throughout the battles of the story, Sundiata consistently sacrifices cocks, rams, and bulls, and in return, the jinn grant Sundiata brilliance and increased power. While Sundiata is a very powerful man in his own right, the sacrifices he makes to spirits indicate that magic is far more powerful than he is. The favor shown to Sundiata by the spirits reinforces the righteousness of his destiny, but the necessity of his sacrifices establishes that not even Sundiata can conquer everything. Reckoning with some forces in the world requires humility; Sundiata must earn the favor of jinn and spirits like anyone else, and his willingness to do so allows him to experience triumph and greatness.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



TREES, SEEDS, AND GROWING

Trees, particularly the silk-cotton tree, are employed throughout the story as a symbol for the strength and power of the Mali Empire. The silk-cotton tree is covered in defensive thorns and is one of the largest trees in the world; likewise, the Mali empire was enormous and, because of its broad alliances, it was well-defended. In addition, throughout the story, soothsayers often use the growth process of seeds and trees as a metaphor for destiny. In particular, their invocation of a seed's destiny to become a powerful tree refers to Sundiata—who is, himself, also a symbol of Mali. Thus, Sundiata's being and destiny are associated with trees. Notably, Maghan Kon Fatta often sits with his court under the silk-cotton trees in Niani, suggesting early on that his empire, and his son, will become like the great tree if allowed to grow and flourish. The implication of the necessity of time for a great tree to grow serves as a reminder to impatient characters that fate and destiny happen slowly and on a predestined timeline. There's nothing one can do to speed up the growth of a great tree, or the destiny of a great empire. Throughout the novel, Mamoudou Kouyaté also notes where specific trees are planted in relation to landmarks of the past. These trees of today serve as reminders of the empires, cities, and great rulers of the past.



THE BUFFALO OF DO

Oulamba and Oulani kill the Buffalo of Do with a combination of exceptional hunting skills and magic. This combination is later reflected in the way Sundiata must kill Soumaoro, who terrorizes his subjects in much the same way that the buffalo terrorized the people and hunters of Do. The Buffalo of Do, then, stands as an early suggestion that brute strength alone isn't enough to vanquish evil and terror—magic is important, too. Furthermore, it's not enough to simply use magic on its own. The hunter brothers and Sundiata must look outside themselves and consult outside sources (the old woman and soothsayers) in order to determine what type of magic is necessary. Thus, as the slaying of the Buffalo of Do demonstrates, heroes can only emerge victorious once they show humility, accept the terms of their fates, and accept help from those wiser than they are.



HYMN TO THE BOW

Balla Fasséké composes the song “Hymn to the Bow” just after Sundiata, at age seven, wrenches

the iron rod he's using as a cane into the shape of a bow. This song is the first major record of Sundiata's exceptional feats and it follows him throughout his later exploits. The hymn is a symbol of Sundiata's strength, and Balla Fasséké sings it for Sundiata's vast army to keep Sundiata's power fresh in the soldiers' minds. When the hymn is written, it also foreshadows Sundiata's future skill using a bow—it is with a bow that Sundiata will kill Soumaoro, which leads to the unification of Mali and the fulfillment of Sundiata's destiny.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Pearson Longman edition of *Sundiata* published in 2006.

The Words of the Griot Mamadou Kouyaté

Quotes

“The art of eloquence has no secrets for us; without us the names of kings would vanish into oblivion, we are the memory of mankind; by the spoken word we bring to life the deeds and exploits of kings for younger generations.”

Related Characters: Mamoudou Kouyaté (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator, griot Mamoudou Kouyaté, explains to the reader what the role of a griot is. Griots are storytellers in a very simplistic sense, but they have the very important responsibility of remembering the past and relating it to people in the present. Mamoudou Kouyaté casts griots as the keepers of a culture's collective memory. A griot remembers the good and the bad of the past and interprets it so that current and future generations can use it to influence their decisions.

By beginning the story in this way, Mamoudou Kouyaté introduces the idea that griots, and the stories they tell, are extremely important. This serves not only to give this particular story weight, but it also explains why the conflict between Sundiata and Soumaoro turns on a fight over Sundiata's griot Balla Fasséké (though their rivalry has significance beyond this). Essentially, their fight is a fight over history—the person who wins the griot Balla Fasséké will be remembered for generations as a hero.

The Buffalo Woman Quotes

☞ The silk-cotton tree springs from a tiny seed—that which defies the tempest weighs in its germ no more than a grain of rice. Kingdoms are like trees; some will be silk-cotton trees, others will remain dwarf palms and the powerful silk-cotton tree will cover them with its shade.

Related Characters: The Hunter (speaker), Gnankouman Doua, Sundiata/Maghan Mari Djata, Maghan Kon Fatta

Related Themes:     

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

The hunter, a soothsayer, is jumbling his cowrie shells at Maghan Kon Fatta's court and he cryptically explains to Maghan Kon Fatta what he sees in the future. Here, trees are introduced as a symbol for kingdoms and empires. As the hunter says, some become extremely large and powerful, while others remain small and are dominated by more powerful ones. Specifically, the idea that trees take time to grow harkens back to the narrator's insistence that destiny takes time. At this point in the story, Sundiata isn't even born yet. It will be roughly 20 years from this point in time before Sundiata will be able to grow, mature, and help Mali to do the same, and it's impossible to try to rush the process.

☞ The child will be the seventh star, the seventh conqueror of the earth. He will be more mighty than Alexander.

Related Characters: The Hunter (speaker), Sogolon Kedjou, Sundiata/Maghan Mari Djata, Gnankouman Doua, Maghan Kon Fatta

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

The hunter continues to tell Maghan Kon Fatta about his future son's destiny as a great conqueror, and this statement introduces the comparison of Sundiata to Alexander the Great. Alexander the Great will be an important and almost mythical figure in Sundiata's life, as Alexander provides an example for what a great conqueror

can be and can accomplish. Sundiata is, understandably, fascinated by stories about Alexander's exploits, and he uses the stories of Alexander and the story of his own bright future to begin to assemble a picture of what his future will look like. Further, by conflating the two, especially at this point in the epic, the hunter provides a very concrete example of what Sundiata will be and accomplish.

☞ Soothsayers see far ahead, their words are not always for the immediate present; man is in a hurry but time is tardy and everything has its season.

Related Characters: Mamoudou Kouyaté (speaker), Sundiata/Maghan Mari Djata, Gnankouman Doua, Maghan Kon Fatta, The Hunter

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

After the hunter relates Sundiata's prophecy to Maghan Kon Fatta, the narrator reminds the reader that fate and destiny work on their own schedule, and it's impossible for man to change destiny's timing or course. This quote also foreshadows Sundiata's years of powerlessness before he grows into the powerful leader he was always destined to become.

Throughout the epic, characters will attempt to rush events and stand in the way of the destinies of others. Mamoudou Kouyaté sees these attempts as exceptionally foolish, since destiny is far more powerful than any law, desire, or action that a man can take. The narrator shows disdain for the foolishness of the general populace and, by extension, for the reader. This adds to the feeling (which is most commonly conveyed through Mamoudou Kouyaté's belief that the story should be heard rather than read) that the reader isn't necessarily welcome into this story.

Childhood Quotes

☞ God has his mysteries which none can fathom. You, perhaps, will be a king. You can do nothing about it. You, on the other hand, will be unlucky, but you can do nothing about that either. Each man finds his way already marked out for him and he can change nothing of it.

Related Characters: Mamoudou Kouyaté (speaker),

Sundiata/Maghan Mari Djata

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

Mamoudou Kouyaté, addressing his listeners, explains how destiny plays out in everyone's lives. He again indicates that humans have no power to control what happens to them and how they behave; everything that happens is predetermined, and it's useless to fight against it. This belief guides how readers interact with the story, as the characters who do try to meddle with fate are cast as fighting a selfish and purely useless battle. Those characters might be considered the “unlucky” ones, in that their foolishness and futile actions are also their destiny—they cannot choose not to be on the wrong side of history. In this sense, the reader knows to align with characters like Sundiata, who not only know their fate but who wholeheartedly accept it, but the reader also gains sympathy for characters like Sassouma, who can't help their behavior.

Also notable is that Mamoudou Kouyaté is very obviously addressing multiple people who are listening to him tell Sundiata's story. This continues to support the reader's understanding that this story is an oral one, not one that's meant to be read.

●● The child, as if he had understood the whole meaning of the king's words, beckoned Balla Fasséké to approach. He made room for him on the hide he was sitting on and then said, “Balla, you will be my griot.”

Related Characters: Sundiata/Maghan Mari Djata (speaker), Maghan Kon Fatta, Gnankouman Doua, Balla Fasséké

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

Maghan Kon Fatta has just gifted Sundiata his own griot, Balla Fasséké, who is the son of Gnankouman Doua. Sundiata is only seven years old, but he behaves in this situation as though he experiences a degree of understanding well beyond his years. This is one of the many clues that the narrator leaves to support the truth of Sundiata's destiny. Throughout Sundiata's childhood, long

before he can truly accomplish what he's destined to accomplish, he exhibits the hallmarks of a good and just leader. Here, he shows understanding of the king-griot relationship, which is essential to cultivate if Sundiata wants to be remembered. At other points, he demonstrates his strength or generosity, other qualities that a true king must possess in order to be a successful ruler.

The Lion's Awakening Quotes

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

Related Characters: Mamoudou Kouyaté (speaker), Sundiata/Maghan Mari Djata

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

Mamoudou Kouyaté is describing Sundiata at ten years old. Even at this young age, Sundiata is a natural leader, impossibly strong, and inspiring to his peer group. This is another instance in which the narrator provides evidence that Sundiata is destined for greatness. He leaves no room to question the truth that this young boy, who speaks with such authority already, will be king.

These statements also engage with the epic's logic regarding heroes. Notably, Sundiata is born a hero, so he is born already knowing how to rule. While he certainly receives education and guidance from those around him, he knows instinctively how to behave and how to lead, unlike the other children around him.

●● “Listen, Djata,” said Soumosso Konkomba, “we had come here to test you. We have no need of condiments but your generosity disarms us. We were sent here by the queen mother to provoke you and draw the anger of the nocturnal powers upon you. But nothing can be done against a heart full of kindness.”

Related Characters: Soumosso Konkomba (speaker), Sassouma Béréte, Sundiata/Maghan Mari Djata

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

The witch Soumosso Konkomba and eight other witches have been sent by Sassouma to provoke Sundiata. These witches hoped to bring Sundiata to violence and anger, which would justify Sassouma's request that the witches kill Sundiata, but Sundiata responds to the witches with kindness and generosity.

Once again, Sundiata's reaction serves to support the idea that he's a born (and destined) leader. Kindness and generosity are qualities that a good king must possess in order to inspire his people to love him, and Sundiata demonstrates the extent of his generosity here to people who were "stealing" from him. This reasserts the idea that leaders and heroes don't necessarily become heroes; rather, they possess those qualities without having to learn them.

The witches' statement that they can do nothing in the face of such kindness also works to drive home the rules of magic. These witches are not all powerful—in order to use their magic against Sundiata, they need a moral reason to do so. Therefore, this passage suggests that magic can only be used righteously. Since Sundiata's destiny is to lead, and part of being a great leader is kindness, the witches cannot harm him.

destiny cannot be altered, and therefore moving him into exile will do no harm to his future.

☞ Fear enters the heart of him who does not know his destiny, whereas Sundiata knew that he was striding towards a great destiny. He did not know what fear was.

Related Characters: Mamoudou Kouyaté (speaker), Mansa Konkon, Sundiata/Maghan Mari Djata

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

Sundiata has been called by Mansa Konkon to play a game of wori. The king's palace is a dark maze, but Sundiata is unafraid. Here, the reader is reminded that knowing one's fate can be a comfort. Sundiata knows that he's destined to return to Mali as a man, and because he trusts that the prophecy is true, he finds himself unafraid of anything. Despite the fact that Mansa Konkon wants to kill Sundiata, Sundiata wholeheartedly trusts that he's going to make it out of the palace alive and well, because he must grow to adulthood and return to Mali. This reminds the reader that nothing can be done to alter fate. Mamoudou Kouyaté would certainly say that this game of wori was in Sundiata's fate, and Mansa Konkon's attempt to kill Sundiata was certainly a part of Sundiata's destiny.

Exile Quotes

☞ You will return to reign when you are a man, for it is in Mali that your destiny must be fulfilled.

Related Characters: Sogolon Kedjou (speaker), Sundiata/Maghan Mari Djata

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

Sogolon is preparing to take her children into exile, but before they leave she reminds Sundiata that he's destined to return to Mali as an adult. In many ways, the epic equates Sundiata with the actual empire of Mali. During the time of Sundiata's exile, both Sundiata and Mali undergo immense changes. Sundiata learns what he needs to learn to be a good king as an adult, and Mali falls under the rule of Soumaoro, which necessitates Sundiata's return. Sogolon's reminder serves to keep it fresh in Sundiata's mind that he is destined to return to Mali and come of age with the empire. It also shows that part of Sogolon's confidence in taking the children into exile is that she understands that Sundiata's

☞ There's one that will make a great king. He forgets nobody.

Related Characters: King Soumaba Cissé of Ghana (speaker), Sundiata/Maghan Mari Djata

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

Sundiata and his family are greeted at King Soumaba Cissé's court in Wagadou. The king asks Sundiata to introduce himself, and Sundiata introduces not only himself, but his entire family. This shows his love and respect for his family, as well as for those helping him. This event occurs again on a much grander scale as Sundiata unites the Mali Empire. It's extremely important that Sundiata honor every person in attendance, as he must make everyone feel welcome and

important to earn their trust and their armies. In this way, "forgetting nobody" becomes another quality of a great king. The fact that Sundiata possesses this quality as a child once again serves to illustrate that Sundiata a hero is born a hero; he doesn't become one.

☞ They were showered with so many attentions that Manding Bory was embarrassed by them, but Sundiata found it quite natural to be treated like this. Modesty is the portion of the average man, but superior men are ignorant of humility.

Related Characters: Mamoudou Kouyaté (speaker), Manding Bory/Manding Boukari, Sundiata/Maghan Mari Djata

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

At the court of Mema, Sundiata and Manding Bory are treated like princes. The narrator here draws a distinction between average men, like Manding Bory, and superior men, like Sundiata. While Manding Bory is undeniably an extremely kind, supportive, and wholly necessary accomplice to Sundiata, he's still only an average man. Sundiata, on the other hand, is "superior." Because of this, it's wholly natural to him to be treated with this kind of attention. Essentially, Sundiata acts like a great king long before he actually is one, and the fact that he does so is indicative of the fact that he will indeed fulfill his destiny.

☞ "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."

Related Characters: Sogolon Kedjou (speaker), Sundiata/Maghan Mari Djata

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

Sundiata has finally grown up and has been appointed the viceroy for the court of Mema. Sogolon counsels him that

the power and love he experiences in Mema, while certainly wonderful, are not necessarily in his destiny.

Here, Sogolon touches on her own role in Sundiata's destiny. While she resisted her marriage and then her husband's advances, we see now that she accepted her role in her son's destiny and did what it took to keep him safe and raise him to adulthood. This alludes again to the idea that people can do nothing to thwart destiny; essentially, it was in Sogolon's best interest to support Sundiata, as any resistance on her part wouldn't have done her any good. She also touches again on the notion of time. This recalls earlier statements that man is impatient and destiny works on its own schedule. While it's still somewhat unclear what exactly needs to happen before Sundiata begins his return to Mali, Sogolon indicates that the time for Sundiata's return will indeed come, and when it does, Sundiata should be ready.

Soumaoro Kanté: The Sorcerer King Quotes

☞ Kings are only men, and whatever iron cannot achieve against them, words can.

Related Characters: Mamoudou Kouyaté (speaker), Balla Fasséké, Soumaoro Kanté

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

Balla Fasséké is caught playing Soumaoro's balafon, but by improvising a song that praises Soumaoro, Balla Fasséké is able to calm Soumaoro's anger. Remember that Mamoudou Kouyaté doesn't necessarily see regular people as particularly forceful or special in any way. Here, he reminds the reader or listener that most kings are only men who are subject to the same rules and conventions as regular individuals. Essentially, Soumaoro isn't special; he's subject to flattery and the power of words, just like anyone else. This makes it very clear that Soumaoro isn't a great man or a great king, unlike his adversary Sundiata. Mamoudou Kouyaté implies here that Sundiata wouldn't be quite so swayed by words as Soumaoro is. This aligns with Sundiata's destiny to triumph over Soumaoro, and underscores that Sundiata, unlike other men, was born knowing how to lead.

History Quotes

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

Related Characters: Mamoudou Kouyaté (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 40-41

Explanation and Analysis

Mamoudou Kouyaté explains again to the reader the purpose of a griot and why griots are such a desired asset for kings: they are keepers of memory. A griot is the person who gets to decide exactly how to construct the stories of kings and their exploits, and the griot is responsible for passing on the stories they've heard from other griots. Further, it's indicated here that without griots, the memories of kings and what they've done would simply be forgotten. This gets at the power of storytelling. Storytelling isn't just something meant to entertain and amuse; it's actual history, and important history at that.

☝☝ Other peoples use writing to record the past, but this invention has killed the faculty of memory among them. They do not feel the past anymore, for writing lacks the warmth of the human voice. With them everybody thinks he knows, whereas learning should be a secret. The prophets did not write and their words have been all the more vivid as a result. What paltry learning is that which is congealed in dumb books!

Related Characters: Mamoudou Kouyaté (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator continues to flesh out the role of the griot in Malian society, and in this instance, the reader gets a taste of Mamoudou Kouyaté's feelings about someone reading *Sundiata*. Mamoudou Kouyaté holds up oral tradition as the only true way to relate and remember history, because the spoken word is alive—there's nuance, intonation, and performance that simply don't come across when someone reads on the page, and the communal experience of oral storytelling is vital to the experience of understanding the context and importance of history. Notice, too, the use of the word "congealed." The word choice implies that the

written word is stagnant and no longer fluid. This view makes sense considering that in the oral tradition, stories inevitably change and evolve depending on the storyteller, while in written form, stories become standardized and seldom experience change. Mamoudou Kouyaté then proposes that stories are only real and worth consideration when people engage with them in their dynamic oral forms.

The Baobab Leaves Quotes

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

Related Characters: Mamoudou Kouyaté (speaker), Sundiata/Maghan Mari Djata

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

Sundiata has just received word from a resistance group that Soumaoro has assumed control of Mali, and it's time for Sundiata to return to Mali and fulfill his destiny. This moment is the culminating point of all the clues the narrator drops throughout the epic about Sundiata's natural aptitude for leadership. Even before Sundiata has been officially crowned king or Mansa, he already accepts responsibility and plans for what needs to be done for the good of Mali. Further, he already receives the respect that a king should receive from dignitaries and subjects. This all serves to crystallize the idea that, while Sundiata has no choice but to return to Mali because of his destiny, he's not just an unwilling passenger on this fateful ride. He has been a great leader since childhood, and now as a man who has received his call to action, it's apparent that he's ready to accept his destiny and be the hero he needs to be.

The Return Quotes

☝☝ Every man to his own land! If it is foretold that your destiny should be fulfilled in such and such a land, men can do nothing against it.

Related Characters: Mamoudou Kouyaté (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

As Sundiata begins his march back to Mali from Mema, Mamoudou Kouyaté speaks to the reader/listener and again discusses destiny. Here, he begins to open up the idea of destiny to include all lands, not just that of Mali. This points to the fact that the narrator is likely telling this story to a variety of people from a variety of places. While this passage certainly underscores the inevitability of destiny, it also helps to pull in the audience, regardless of background. It allows the listener to feel as though the story is as much for them as it is for those who are descended from Sundiata or his cohorts, as everyone is subject to the same laws of fate and destiny that the hero is.

It was a forced march and during the halts the divines, Singbin Mara Cissé and Mandjan Béréké, related to Sundiata the history of Alexander the Great and several other heroes, but of all of them Sundiata preferred Alexander, the king of gold and silver, who crossed the world from west to east. He wanted to outdo his prototype both in the extent of his territory and the wealth of his treasury.

Related Characters: Mamoudou Kouyaté (speaker), Mandjan Béréké, Singbin Mara Cissé, Sundiata/Maghan Mari Djata

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

Sundiata and his army march towards Mali and gather soldiers along the way. Through the stories that Sundiata hears on his march, he begins to form an idea of the kind of ruler he'd like to be. Alexander the Great provides Sundiata an example to not just live up to, but to surpass—and surpassing Alexander (though Sundiata likely doesn't know this) was foretold by the Buffalo Woman. Thus, this is a moment in which Sundiata's destiny is solidifying. That these stories of Alexander are inspiration as Sundiata moves into the most important phase of his life also gives a sense of the vitality of storytelling. Sundiata is using the story of Alexander in the very same way that young people of today might use Sundiata. This helps to create a sense that Sundiata is indeed human; he, too, needs heroes to look up to.

The Names of the Heroes Quotes

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

Related Characters: Mamoudou Kouyaté (speaker), Sundiata/Maghan Mari Djata

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

Sundiata and his army continue to travel towards Mali, and kings flock to him and pledge their armies to his cause. By comparing Sundiata to the sun, Mamoudou Kouyaté asserts again that Sundiata's destiny is inevitable, just as the sun rising is inevitable. It also continues to add heft to Sundiata's heroism. He's obviously the greatest hero that Mali has seen at this point, and it's mentioned throughout the story that Mali hasn't seen a hero of his caliber since then. This also works to show just how loved Sundiata is by his future subjects. They come from all over the Niger plain to support him in his quest to drive out the darkness of Soumaoro.

There they were, the valorous sons of Mali, awaiting what destiny had promised them. Pennants of all colours fluttered above the sofas divided up by tribes. With whom should I begin; with whom end?

Related Characters: Mamoudou Kouyaté (speaker), Fran Kamara/Tabon Wana, Kamandjan, Faony Diarra, Siara Kouman Konaté, Sundiata/Maghan Mari Djata

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

Sundiata and his armies are gathered in Sibi on the eve of the battle with Soumaoro. Here, before the great battle, Mamoudou Kouyaté mentions all the different tribes and many of the kings by name, paying special attention to the sofas' menacing weapons. This gives the listener an idea of just how popular Sundiata was, to be able to amass such a vast and varied army. It also supports the truth of his destiny that such an improbable number of kings and warriors have come to support him.

In another sense, though, this passage is intended to draw in listeners. Remember that Sundiata is intended to be heard;

this passage alludes to the idea that a griot may be addressing not just descendants of Sundiata himself, but descendants of any of these other kings. In this way, this passage helps to build community in the modern setting, since descendants of the "sons of Mali" participate in the story now, just as they did on the plain in Sibi.

Krina Quotes

☞ You are the outgrowth of Mali just as the silk-cotton tree is the growth of the earth, born of deep and mighty roots. To face the tempest the tree must have long roots and gnarled branches. Maghan Sundiata, has not the tree grown?

Related Characters: Balla Fasséké (speaker), Sundiata/Maghan Mari Djata

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

Balla Fasséké addresses Sundiata and the armies on the eve of the great battle with Soumaoro, inspiring Sundiata and the armies to greatness. Here, the listener is reminded of the early comparisons of both empires and Sundiata to trees. At this point in time, Sundiata has overcome a difficult childhood and years of exile, which have given him the "gnarled branches," while the continual reminders of his destiny and the necessity of returning to Mali have developed the "long roots." The roots also allude to the history and future that Sundiata carries within him as the foretold king of Mali, since his empire will be built on top of what his father and ancestors built and left him. The comparison to trees, then, continues to develop the ideas of family ties and history, as well as Sundiata's great strength and power.

Niani Quotes

☞ There are some kings who are powerful through their military strength. Everybody trembles before them, but when they die nothing but ill is spoken of them. Others do neither good nor ill and when they die they are forgotten. Others are feared because they have power, but they know how to use it and they are loved because they love justice. Sundiata belonged to this group. He was feared, but loved as well. He was the father of Mali and gave the world peace. After him the world has not seen a greater conqueror, for he was the seventh and last conqueror.

Related Characters: Mamoudou Kouyaté (speaker), Sundiata/Maghan Mari Djata

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 82

Explanation and Analysis

Mamoudou Kouyaté describes the peace and prosperity that Mali experienced after Sundiata triumphed over Soumaoro and united Mali. Here, Mamoudou Kouyaté places Sundiata amongst a number of kings with a variety of qualities and powers. This continues to develop the idea of a hero, and what exactly a hero is. Sundiata isn't a hero just because he did the difficult work of uniting Mali, since it's indicated that pure military strength isn't enough to be considered a great king. Sundiata is a hero because, while he possessed a great deal of military power and strength, he used it judiciously and for the good of the empire and its people, not just for his own gain. This, then, is why Sundiata is remembered so fondly in stories.

☞ How many heaped-up ruins, how many vanished cities! How many wildernesses peopled by the spirits of great kings! The silk-cotton trees and baobabs that you see in Mali are the only traces of extinct cities.

Related Characters: Mamoudou Kouyaté (speaker), Sundiata/Maghan Mari Djata

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator situates the cities mentioned throughout the

story in a contemporary setting. Most of them have vanished over the last 800 years. However, despite the fact that the cities themselves no longer exist like they used to, they continue to exist in memory and through the trees, which act as landmarks. This continues to develop the idea of trees as markers of great empires and individuals. The trees denote the places where these great kings, including Sundiata, once lived and ruled. This passage also works to create a sense that the story we've heard is indeed history, as we learn what happened not just to Sundiata and the empire of Mali, but to the individual cities and kings within the empire. Last, this passage seems to bring the tree metaphor full circle. Since Sundiata was the last great conqueror, there will be no more great kings and empires for the trees to represent. Thus, trees no longer represent growth and destiny—they now simply denote the past.

Eternal Mali Quotes

☛ Mali is eternal. To convince yourself of what I have said go to Mali.

Related Characters: Mamoudou Kouyaté (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

In closing, the narrator reiterates that there were no exceptionally great rulers of the Mali Empire after Sundiata, and he implores the reader to visit Mali themselves to experience the legacy of Sundiata. This request works as a final indication that a reader won't truly grasp the story by reading it—it must be heard and experienced in the location where the events took place.

This statement also connects the past with the present, as it indicates that the Mali of today is not so different than the Mali of the past. In fact, since this comparison can only be made because of the information passed down through the centuries by griots, Mamoudou Kouyaté seems simultaneously to be emphasizing and undercutting his own power. While the reader cannot understand the story without going to Mali, Mamoudou Kouyaté's story (and others like it) is the only reason that people can understand Mali at all. This acts as one last reiteration of the idea that stories are powerful, particularly in their spoken form.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE WORDS OF THE GRIOT MAMADOU KOUYATÉ

The narrator, Djeli Mamoudou Kouyaté, introduces himself to the reader. He lists his familial lineage and says that his family has forever served the Kieta princes of Mali. He says that griots are "vessels of speech" and that without griots' stories, mankind would forget his history. Mamoudou Kouyaté says that he teaches kings their history so they can help predict the future. He states that his words are entirely truthful, as the words came from his father and his father's father. Mamoudou Kouyaté implores the reader to listen to the history of Mali and the story of Sundiata, the "man of many names," who surpassed even **Alexander the Great** in his greatness.

It's evident in the first sentences of the story that words, storytelling, and history are immensely important to both Mamoudou Kouyaté and to the story itself. This creates the sense that the reader is engaging with something that is almost sacred. Note the assertion that the story is entirely true. This suggests that historical truth, for this oral culture, is considered to be reflected in the stories told by griots, despite that the story may have undergone small changes as it was passed down from generation to generation.



THE FIRST KINGS OF MALI

Mamoudou Kouyaté again implores the "sons of Mali" to listen to the story of Sundiata, the last of the great conquerors, whose triumphs and exploits are still astonishing today. At the beginning, Mali was ruled by Bambara kings, and Mamoudou Kouyaté lists the lineage of these first kings. One of them, Lahitoul Kalabi, was the first black prince to make a pilgrimage to Mecca. On his way back to Mali he was robbed by brigands, but he was saved by God and a jinn (a local nature spirit) and returned successfully to Mali.

The narrator begins to place Sundiata in a long line of kings to add a sense of history and destiny to the story. Mamoudou Kouyaté will do this throughout the novel to draw in and connect with listeners who may be related to one of these other characters, but not necessarily Sundiata. Listing a lineage becomes a way of building community in the present day through a story from the past.



Lahitoul Kalabi had two sons; the most prolific was Mamadi Kani. He invented the hunter's whistle, communicated with nature jinn, and amassed a formidable army. He conquered a great amount of land. This family line resulted in Maghan Kon Fatta, Sundiata's father. Maghan Kon Fatta had three wives: Sassouma Bérété, Sogolon Kedjou, and Namandjé.

This chapter also introduces the relationship between the indigenous local religions and Islam. Over several generations, kings relied on a combination of Islam and powerful jinn (spirits) to survive and hunt successfully.



THE BUFFALO WOMAN

Maghan Kon Fatta is known for being incredibly handsome and a good king. In his capital city, Nianiba, he often sits at the foot of a silk-cotton **tree**. His first son, Dankaran Touman, regularly joins him. One day, Maghan Kon Fatta sees a hunter coming towards him. The hunter bows to Maghan Kon Fatta and tells him that he's come to give the king the customary leg from the doe he shot outside the city walls. Gnankouman Doua, Maghan Kon Fatta's griot, invites the hunter to sit with the king and courtiers, and asks the hunter to tell the court of the lands he's visited.

Here, the "grandfather" of the Mali Empire (Maghan Kon Fatta) sits at the base of a silk-cotton tree, signaling that his empire is at the beginning of its growth and descent. In this situation, storytelling is cast as a method for getting to know someone and build community. It's an alternative to small talk and it's also a way to hint at how large the empire is.



The hunter sits down and says that he isn't good at telling adventure stories, but he is a great seer. He pulls out a bag of cowrie shells, jumbles them in his hand, and mutters as he arranges them. Gnankouman Doua points out that the hunter is left-handed, which is a desirable trait in soothsayers. The hunter suddenly addresses Maghan Kon Fatta and says that the world is mysterious, and the silk-cotton **tree** grows from a tiny **seed**. He continues that kingdoms are like trees; some grow large and some remain small, and that he sees two strangers coming towards the city. The hunter says that Mali is about to become great. Gnankouman Doua asks the hunter to "make his speech comprehensible."

The hunter tells Maghan Kon Fatta that his successor isn't born yet. He says that two hunters are traveling towards the city with an exceptionally ugly woman, and Maghan Kon Fatta must marry this woman. She will be the mother of the child who will make Mali great, and this child will be greater than Alexander the Great. He instructs the king to sacrifice a red bull before her arrival. The hunter packs his cowries, says his farewells, and leaves the city.

Maghan Kon Fatta and Gnankouman Doua never forget the hunter's words, because soothsayers see far into the future. One day, as the king and his court are again seated under the silk-cotton **tree**, they see two handsome hunters coming towards them with a young girl between them. The brothers introduce themselves as Oulamba and Oulani, and they say that they acquired the maid during their travels in Do. The brothers decided that she's worthy of being a king's wife and wish to gift her to Maghan Kon Fatta.

Maghan Kon Fatta and his courtiers try to look at the girl, but her face is covered with a kerchief. The hump on her back is obvious, however. Maghan is embarrassed. Gnankouman Doua invites the brothers to sit and tell the story of their adventures in Do.

Oulamba and Oulani say that they left their village to hunt game, and their travels led them to Do. On the way they met a wounded hunter who told them that a **buffalo** was terrorizing Do, killing people daily. The king of Do, Do Mansa-Gnemo Diarra, promised rewards to whomever could kill the buffalo, and the brothers decided to test their skills. As they approached Do, they came across an old woman weeping and hungry next to a river. They offered her some food and after she ate, she informed the brothers that she knew they were going to try to kill the Buffalo of Do.

The hunter very bluntly conflates trees with empires, and particularly with the Mali Empire. The relative incomprehensibility of his speech illustrates that fate and destiny aren't always easy or straightforward to understand. Such truths require translation, if one chooses to believe one's destiny at all. We do see, however, that Maghan Kon Fatta and Doua take these words seriously and believe that the hunter is telling them something worthwhile.



Remember that Dankaran Touman, Maghan Kon Fatta's first son, already spends a great deal of time with his father learning how to be a king. This translated speech from the hunter suggests that Dankaran Touman is not the proper heir to the empire. This begins to complicate Maghan's family situation, while necessitating the marriage to the ugly woman.



Notice here that the maid is treated as little more than currency. She's a gift to a king, just as one might gift gold or animals. While the brothers might not know it, she's also a gift that's already highly valued, as it's already been foretold that she will bear the future king of Mali. Thus, she's not just currency; she's a vessel for great men who then do the work of building an empire.



Maghan Kon Fatta evidently feels he has no choice but to marry her because of the prophecy. This again asserts the power of destiny, as it's obviously more powerful than Maghan's emotional desires.



The old woman obviously has magical powers. This initial meeting with the old woman begins to develop the idea that magic and power are things that should be earned, not just taken by brute force. Further, the kindness that Oulamba and Oulani show to the old woman here will mirror the way that Sundiata triumphs later in the epic.



The old woman continues and says that many hunters have died, but because of the brothers' generosity, they will be successful in killing the **buffalo**. She says that she herself is the buffalo. She instructs the brothers on how to kill her, and then tells them to take the buffalo's golden tail to the king of Do. The brothers are joyous, but the woman says there's one condition: though the king has offered the hand of the most beautiful maid of Do to the victor, Oulamba and Oulani must choose an extremely ugly maid, Sogolon Kedjou, for this maid is the buffalo woman's wraith (spirit). The brothers swear and continue their journey.

When Oulamba and Oulani catch sight of the **buffalo**, it charges them, but the brothers do as the old woman told them and they successfully kill the buffalo. They take the tail to the king, who instructs the brothers to choose a maid from the assembled young women. They finally notice Sogolon and take her by the hand. The king laughs, everyone else joins in, and the brothers leave Do to escape the mockery.

Maghan Kon Fatta decides to marry Sogolon with all the usual customs so the resulting son will be legitimate. Oulamba and Oulani are considered Sogolon's relatives, so they receive the traditional gifts. The date of the wedding is set and all of Mali travels to Nianiba to participate in the festivities.

Sogolon stays with an aunt of the king's and doesn't go out until her wedding day. The entire city wants to see her, but they hear nothing but rumors from Sassouma Bérété, Maghan's first wife. On the day of the wedding, drums beat at dawn and griots sing Maghan's praises. Sogolon cries in the lap of a woman braiding her hair. The king's sisters come to tease her, but Sogolon doesn't engage with them. The hairdresser tries to boost Sogolon's spirits.

Maghan Kon Fatta sits in front of the palace and listens to drums and Gnankouman Doua sings of the Mandingo kings. As night falls, Sogolon processes, dressed all in white with a veil over her head. The king's relatives follow her and when one of the king's brothers carries her towards the palace, the crowd cheers. The women dance for a while and disperse after dark.

Again, there are rules, regulations, and deals to be made and followed regarding magic and power. Oulamba and Oulani must do exactly as the woman tells them in order to succeed. The fact that the brothers agree to choose Sogolon from the maids of Do indicates that magic and prophecy shouldn't be taken lightly. There's no indication that they hesitate to agree, suggesting that hesitating in that way is out of the realm of possibility.



While the brothers appear not to have hesitated, the rest of Do finds their choice ridiculous. However, even despite the ridicule, Oulamba and Oulani don't back out on their agreement with the old woman. This continues to support the idea that following through on these agreements is extremely important.



The importance of having a legitimate son points to the fact that while the prophecy may be extremely powerful, the foretold son will still be subject to the laws of man. The marriage, then, will assist destiny by adhering to these human laws.



Despite the fact that Sogolon is the old woman's wraith (and therefore versed in magic), the magic she possesses isn't enough to get her out of a marriage she obviously isn't happy to be a part of. Here, then, both destiny and the importance of building a family are more powerful than magic alone.



At the celebration, Doua regales the king and his subjects alike with tales of past kings. This continues to situate Sundiata within the line of the Mandingo kings. It justifies his later rule both in terms of fulfilling destiny and in terms of continuing the family line.



The narrator reminds the reader that the buffalo woman of Do said that Sogolon would be extraordinary "if you manage to possess her," and explains that Oulamba and Oulani couldn't possess her. Gifting her to Maghan Kon Fatta was an afterthought. That night, Maghan attempts to have sex with Sogolon, but she refuses him. The next morning, Gnankouman Doua finds the king exhausted and defeated. Maghan explains that he's scared of the girl and can't possess her.

This goes on for a week. Maghan Kon Fatta consults sorcerers, but none of their tricks work. One night, when Sogolon is asleep, Maghan rises and spreads sand on the ground and traces signs in it. Sogolon wakes up and knows that "sand talks." Suddenly, Maghan jumps up to grab his sword and tells Sogolon that a jinn told him that he must sacrifice her. Sogolon faints in fear and her wraith leaves her body. When she wakes she's a wife (which means that Maghan had sex with her), and she conceives that night.

THE LION CHILD

The narrator says that a wife becomes accustomed quickly to being a wife. Sogolon now moves through the king's enclosure freely, and people have become accustomed to her ugliness. Sassouma, Maghan's first wife, becomes unbearable, since she's jealous of Sogolon's pregnancy and of Maghan's preference for her. Sassouma decides to kill Sogolon, and she calls sorcerers to her, all of whom state that they can't take on Sogolon. Sassouma decides that she'll wait until after Sogolon's baby is born.

When Sogolon goes into labor, Maghan Kon Fatta calls nine great midwives to attend to her. He acts anxious, as though he's becoming a father for the first time, and the palace is completely silent. The sky suddenly darkens and a thunderstorm rolls in. It quickly passes and a midwife informs Maghan that Sogolon has given birth to a boy.

Maghan stands as though in a daze, and Gnankouman Doua signals to slaves to start the drums that will announce to Mali the birth of the boy. Maghan gets up to leave and Doua sings a song about "the lion child, the buffalo child." Maghan distributes rice among his people and Sassouma grows even more jealous.

Eight days later, the infant is named. Sogolon rests inside while Maghan addresses a crowd. He says that the boy will be named Maghan Mari Djata. Griots shout the name, and the king's aunt whispers the name into the infant's ear. Everyone admires the baby.

This passage might explain some of Sogolon's fear and sadness regarding her marriage, as it's indicated that Oulamba and Oulani already tried to "possess" her by having sex with her. Sogolon's magic is powerful enough here to resist male sexual advances, even in this situation where destiny is involved. For the moment, magic seems more powerful than destiny.



Maghan must reduce Sogolon to being fully human (as opposed to magical) in order to "make her a wife." In this situation, destiny seems to work far more quickly than the reader is led to expect, as Sogolon conceives immediately. It's implied that this first pregnancy will end with the foretold future king of Mali.



Despite the fact that Sogolon never got a say in whether or not she would become a wife or mother, being a wife and mother-to-be affords her privilege and comfort. Further, it protects her from Sassouma's jealousy, as the prophecy is so powerful that the sorcerers refuse to harm Sogolon.



It's obvious that the prophecy is weighing on Maghan's mind as he waits to know if Sogolon's baby will be the foretold conqueror of Mali. This again underscores the truth of the prophecy, as there's evidently no question that if the baby is a boy, he's the foretold ruler.



This song is the first song that will record the existence of Sundiata in history. Moments after birth, even before he's aware that he's destined for greatness, he's recorded and memorialized in the cultural memory.



Again, griots are the ones to shout the name and commit the name to memory, thereby cementing the child in the history and memory of Mali through storytelling.



CHILDHOOD

Addressing his listeners, Mamoudou Kouyaté says that God is mysterious, and that a man may be a king or he may be unlucky, and he can do nothing about that. He resumes the story and says that Mari Djata had a difficult childhood. He wasn't beautiful and by the age of three he still couldn't walk. He was very greedy. People gossiped about how unusual the child was. Sogolon tried to make other three-year-olds come to play with her son, but Mari Djata hit them and the children wanted nothing to do with him after that.

Sassouma is thrilled at Mari Djata's misfortune. Dankaran Touman, her 11-year-old son, already runs and practices archery. Whenever Sogolon passes Sassouma's house, Sassouma underhandedly insults Mari Djata. Maghan begins to lose hope, despite Doua's constant reminder of the prophecy. Sogolon soon gives birth to a girl (Kolonkan), which dashes Maghan's hope for another boy, and Sogolon is disgraced for a time. Maghan marries a third wife, Namandjé, who soon gives birth to a boy. Soothsayers say that the boy, Manding Boukari (Manding Bory), will be the right hand man of a powerful king.

Maghan is perplexed, but Doua continues to remind Maghan of the prophecy. He says that the silk-cotton **tree** comes from a tiny **seed**. One day, Maghan visits a seer. The seer tells Maghan that trees grow slowly, but their roots go deep into the ground. He says that the "seed" has germinated, albeit slowly, but man is impatient. Maghan restores Sogolon to favor and she soon gives birth to another daughter, whom they name Djamarou.

The town, however, continues to gossip about Mari Djata. He's now seven years old and still crawls. Maghan is quite old and feels close to death, so one day he calls Mari Djata to him. He tells the boy that he's going to give him the gift that every king gives to his successor: a griot. The boy's griot will be Balla Fasséké, son of his own griot Doua. He tells Mari Djata to accomplish his destiny and never forget that Niani is the capital, while Mali is the "cradle of your ancestors." Mari Djata calls Balla Fasséké to him and states that Balla Fasséké will be his griot. Balla Fasséké affirms this, and Maghan and Doua exchange a happy look.

THE LION'S AWAKENING

Maghan Kon Fatta dies soon after giving Balla Fasséké to Mari Djata. The council of elders refuses to follow the dead king's wishes to reserve the throne for Mari Djata. Sassouma makes sure that Dankaran Touman is crowned king, and she herself becomes an all-powerful queen mother. Doua dies not long after.

Beginning the chapter by mentioning that man cannot escape destiny provides the reader a sense of comfort, since it implies that despite Mari Djata's misfortune now as a young child, he's still going to fulfill his destiny. Further, the reader begins to see how others think of Mari Djata, since he doesn't look like they think he should. It's implied that these people will be proven wrong.



Sassouma carries herself as though she's above the rules of destiny, though the narrator's tone implies that this is a grave oversight on her part. However, next to Mari Djata, her own son looks far more like a king should look, which only supports her belief that Dankaran Touman is the rightful heir to Maghan's throne. This begins to develop the idea that people are impatient when it comes to destiny, and unwilling to accept that destiny doesn't always look like one expects.



After the birth of two daughters and the seer's reminder, it becomes even more obvious to the reader that Mari Djata is the foretold king of Mali. The seer's words remind Maghan that while his son may be destined for heroics, it will take time for the boy to fulfill his destiny. He's still a child; he must grow up first.



Maghan evidently took the seer's words to heart, as gifting Mari Djata a griot is an act that indicates the belief that Mari Djata will have stories written about him. Further, notice Mari Djata's reaction to receiving a griot. Whether he truly understands the gravity of the situation or not, he behaves in an extremely mature way for a child of seven. This maturity is an early clue that he's a born leader.



Here, man's laws are enacted specifically to oppose someone's destiny. Further, Sundiata is no longer protected by individuals who believed in his destiny (Maghan and Doua), which creates tension as the conflict between Sassouma and Sundiata grows.



People speak of Mari Djata with scorn, which the narrator attributes to man's short memory. People say that nobody can rule with powerless legs. All the gossip stems from Sassouma, and she uses her newfound power to banish Sogolon to a small hut at the back of the palace. Sassouma allows everyone who wants to gawk at Mari Djata to do so, and Sogolon cries about the public ridicule. Sogolon does take comfort in Kolonkan who seems wise beyond her years.

Sogolon plants a small garden behind the village. The garden grows well, but one day she finds she must go to Sassouma to ask for some baobab leaf (a condiment). While Sassouma freely gives Sogolon the baobab leaf, she maliciously says that her own son could walk by seven, he consistently fetches her baobab leaf, and he is better than Mari Djata. Sogolon can barely comprehend Sassouma's hatred.

At her hut, Sogolon sees Mari Djata sitting outside eating. Sogolon begins sobbing and she hits Mari Djata with a piece of wood. She asks him if he'll ever walk, and asks God why she's being punished. Mari Djata asks her what's wrong, and Sogolon relates what happened with Sassouma. Mari Djata tries to cheer her up. When he's unsuccessful, he informs his mother that he's going to walk. He requests a heavy iron rod and asks Sogolon if she wants just baobab leaves or the entire **tree**. Sogolon says she wants the tree, roots and all.

Balla Fasséké goes to the master smith and orders an iron rod. Sogolon cries while Mari Djata keeps eating as though nothing happened. Suddenly, they hear laughter behind the hut—Sassouma is telling a serving woman how she humiliated Sogolon. Sogolon hides in her hut where Djamarou tries to comfort her.

Balla Fasséké tells the master smith, Farakourou, that this day is a normal day, but it will see something entirely new. Farakourou is a soothsayer, and in his workshop sits a huge iron bar. He instructs six apprentices to carry the bar to Sogolon's house. They drop the bar in front of Sogolon's house and the noise frightens Sogolon. Balla Fasséké addresses Mari Djata and instructs the "young lion" to roar.

The narrator provides some assurance to the reader/listener that characters like Sassouma are simply forgetful, and will be reminded later that they cannot truly thwart destiny. Sassouma shows herself to be extremely cruel now that she has power. This begins to indicate that power corrupts, and specifically that power obtained through brute force isn't a good thing.



Sassouma's continued jealousy and cruelty suggests that she might place more stock in Sundiata's destiny than she leads us to believe. Additionally, her cruel and petty behavior can be understood as a result of her fear for her own son, who will become useless if Sundiata fulfills his destiny. In that way, her cruelty can be slightly humanized.



Mari Djata makes his first promise of the story, though it seems unlikely that he'll be able to fulfill it. This creates a sense of tension, particularly considering that Mari Djata seems to regard the situation with no special emotion or feelings. However, the fact that this event revolves around a baobab tree suggests that the "seed" is certainly growing and is soon to flourish.



When Sassouma relates the story, she's using it to control Sogolon and further cement her power as queen mother. Mari Djata's indifference can be read as a steadfast belief in his own destiny—he never questions his ability to fulfill his promise.



The lead-up to Mari Djata's first steps continues to build tension. Everything seems entirely fantastical and improbable, since a seven-year-old who can't walk couldn't possibly use a bar that can only be carried by six men.



Everyone watches Mari Djata crawl towards the bar. He effortlessly lifts the bar, holds it vertically, and rises to his knees. Mari Djata, sweating profusely, straightens himself; in doing so, he twists the bar of iron into the form of a bow. Balla Fasséké sings the **"Hymn to the Bow"** and Sogolon sings thanks to God. The entire palace hears Balla Fasséké's song and runs to see. Sassouma's whole body trembles.

After he catches his breath, Mari Djata drops his iron bar and takes giant steps. He walks to a young baobab **tree**, rips it out of the ground, and carries it back to Sogolon. He tosses it in front of the hut and informs his mother that everyone will have to come here to pick baobab leaves now.

The narrator says that from that day forward, Sassouma had no peace of mind, but man can do nothing against destiny and her efforts to thwart Mari Djata were futile. He becomes immediately popular and the town speaks of nothing but Mari Djata. Mothers want their sons to play and hunt with him. Sogolon gains respect, and people compare her favorably to Sassouma; these people reason that because Sogolon has always been modest, a good wife, and a good mother, her son was granted use of his legs, while Dankaran Touman is "colorless" because of his mother's spite and malice.

Mari Djata spends his time with princes whose fathers sent them to Niani's court. Among them are Fran Kamara from Tabon and Kamandjan from Sibi, and Manding Bory joins in the boys' games. Balla Fasséké instructs Mari Djata on proper conduct whenever possible. Mari Djata soon proves himself an exceptional hunter. He and his friends hunt often and he receives the title of Simbon (master hunter) before the age of ten.

Sogolon makes a habit of telling stories to Mari Djata and his friends every evening. She tells them about the animals and family history. She also teaches her son about medicinal plants. Balla Fasséké tells the boys about kings of old, including Alexander the Great.

Mari Djata is obviously a hero as he demonstrates this great feat of strength. When the bar takes on the shape of a bow, it foreshadows Mari Djata's later proficiency using bows as weapons. The song "Hymn to the Bow" is composed specifically for this occasion, and will remind the reader and the characters of Mari Djata's heroics as he moves through the story.



By giving his mother the tree, Mari Djata ensures that he and his mother become the epicenter of Niani, as they now possess something that everyone needs. With this act, the growth of the empire begins with Sundiata at its heart.



Here it starts to become apparent that those people who try to stand in the way of destiny tend to accidentally wind up serving destiny's purpose. This allows the reader an all-knowing perspective, as it's becoming clear that nothing that comes in Mari Djata/Sundiata's way will actually be able to derail him. Note too how the role of a mother is developed: a child's worth is directly influenced by their mother. This again supports Sundiata's destiny and discredits Dankaran Touman.



Already, Mari Djata shows that he has immense strength and maturity to receive the title of Simbon at such a young age. This essentially proves the prophecy to be correct, and continues to suggest that heroes do not have to learn to behave heroically—it is a trait with which they are born.



Stories teach Mari Djata about his place in the world. They allow him to situate himself in the line of Bambara kings similarly to the way the narrator situated Sundiata in the beginning of the epic.



By the age of ten, Mari Djata is known by the name Sundiata. He already possesses commanding authority. Manding Bory is his best friend, along with Fran Kamara and Kamandjan. Dankaran Touman, on the other hand, possesses no authoritative qualities and Sassouma fears for his reign. She summons nine great witches and asks them for help killing Sundiata, as his destiny contradicts her son's. She offers the witches cows and grain in return for their services.

Soumosso Konkomba, the oldest and most dangerous witch, explains that the witches can't justify killing Sundiata, as he's done nothing bad to them. Sassouma instructs them to go to Sogolon's garden tomorrow and pick from it. She says that Sundiata will beat the old women. The witches decide they must go twice to prove Sundiata's meanness.

The next day, Sundiata and his friends decide to spend the day hunting elephants. They return home late and Sundiata insists they check on Sogolon's vegetables. He sees the nine witches picking from the garden, and the witches act like thieves and run away. Sundiata calls after them to stop, tells them the garden belongs to everyone, and he and his friends fill the women's gourds with vegetables and condiments.

The witches are shocked. Soumosso Konkomba tells Sundiata that they came to the garden to test him, as they were sent by Sassouma to provoke him. She asks for his forgiveness. Sundiata offers each woman one of the elephants he and his companions killed that day. They thank him for his generosity, and Soumosso Konkomba says the witches will watch over Sundiata.

After Sundiata returns home, Kolonkan asks Sundiata if he was scared of the witches. Sundiata is shocked she knew about the incident, and Kolonkan explains that she saw the witches planning this trick and knew Sundiata wasn't in danger. The narrator says that Kolonkan is well versed in witchcraft and she watches over Sundiata.

Again, Sundiata exhibits the qualities of a leader and a hero at a very young age, and he's already gathered the young men who will later help him unite Mali. While Dankaran Touman is officially king, the narrator never mentions any of his affiliations or friendships, except for his bond with his mother. This marks a major difference between a true hero and someone who is a king only in name: the ability to earn loyalty and build community.



Sassouma's behavior here seems silly from what the reader knows of Sundiata's character. This helps to discredit her attempts and cast her as even less deserving of power. Notice too that the witches must prove that Sundiata is deserving of death before they can kill him; they cannot simply do as Sassouma asks, despite the fact that she has power. This underlines that magic must be used righteously.



Sassouma's plan backfires spectacularly as Sundiata shows the witches how kind and generous he is (hearkening back to the incident with the Buffalo of Do). Notice too that his friends are equally generous. This begins to suggest that Sundiata has allies who embody the same ideals that he does.



Sundiata didn't just prove that he was worthy of life—he's also worthy of protection and oversight from these powerful women. These early lessons teach Sundiata that protection like this must be earned, and specifically must be earned through kindness and offerings.



Once again, the reader is reminded that Sundiata cannot be harmed. This again reinforces the weight of his destiny. We also see that Sundiata is amassing a number of magical individuals to protect him and provide guidance.



EXILE

Sogolon is wise, and one evening she calls her children together. She suggests to Sundiata that they leave Niani, as she knows that Sassouma will try to harm Manding Bory and Djamarou (who possess no aptitude for protective witchcraft) now that she knows she can't hurt Sundiata. Sogolon tells Sundiata that he'll return to rule when he's an adult, as he must fulfill his destiny in Mali. The narrator explains that following the death of his mother Namandjé, Manding Bory had been living with Sogolon. As Sundiata is very close to Manding Bory, he agrees to the plan to save him.

Balla Fasséké plans for the family's departure, but one morning, Dankaran Touman announces that he wants Balla Fasséké to lead an embassy to the king of Sosso, Soumaoro Kanté. Sundiata is out hunting and doesn't find out that his griot is gone until he returns that evening. Sundiata is filled with rage, but Sogolon counsels Sundiata that it's part of a "higher order." Sundiata and Manding Bory confront Dankaran Touman. Manding Bory addresses his king brother and announces that they're leaving Mali. Sundiata promises to return, which scares Dankaran Touman. The young boys leave.

Sassouma enters and finds Dankaran Touman collapsed. The young king says that he doesn't understand why Sundiata is leaving, and he adds that he fully intends to give Balla Fasséké back to Sundiata. Sassouma berates her son for being scared of threats from a boy, and says she will need to go to her parents' village if Sundiata assumes power so she doesn't have to live with his tyranny. Dankaran Touman decides he wants his brothers to die, and he vows to kill them if they ever return to Mali.

The narrator says that people often think they're doing harm to someone when, in actuality, they're only assisting destiny. Sassouma thinks she's victorious, but the miseries that Sogolon and her family experience on the road are simply part of Sundiata's destiny. Over the next seven years Sundiata grows up and becomes strong, sturdy, and wise, while Sogolon begins to feel old.

Sogolon, Sundiata, Manding Bory, and their sisters find refuge first in Djeba with Mansa Konkon. One night, the king's daughter approaches Manding Bory and tells him that her father is a great sorcerer whose power lies in the game of wori (a game similar to Mancala). Manding Bory replies that Sundiata is also a great sorcerer, but Sogolon calls the children inside.

This passage shows that Sundiata is also motivated by familial love (for Manding Bory). This motivation further differentiates Sundiata and his allies from Sassouma and other antagonists. Sassouma is willing to participate in the destruction of families by killing Manding Bory and Djamarou. Notice, too, that Sogolon justifies her suggestion by reminding Sundiata that it's foretold that he'll return to Mali anyway. Therefore, leaving seems like an obstacle, but actually it will have no negative consequences.



In this moment, Sundiata is allowed to be fully human and experience negative emotions like anger. Sogolon again comforts Sundiata by reminding him of his destiny. This in turn reminds the reader that Sundiata is guaranteed to be successful in spite of these setbacks. Manding Bory already exhibits qualities of a "right hand man" when he takes over speaking with Dankaran Touman. Even now, he's wholly supportive of Sundiata.



This turn of events illustrates the power dynamic between Dankaran Touman and Sassouma. Dankaran Touman is not a naturally cruel or vindictive person, but he has no power to act on his honorable intentions. Instead, he's manipulated by his mother into behavior that is a cruel and misguided attempt to thwart destiny.



The narrator alludes again to the necessity of time. Remember the symbol of the tree. During his time in exile, Sundiata is essentially growing his roots. Exile won't keep him from his destiny; rather, exile prepares him for his foretold victorious return to Mali.



As Sundiata spends his time in exile wandering the lands that will soon become his empire, he makes many important connections and alliances, and he also faces obstacles that help him to grow. This passage foreshadows a conflict between Sundiata and a great sorcerer, which will come to pass later on.



Sundiata teases Manding Bory about liking Mansa Konkon's daughter, and the two swap proverbs. The narrator says that when children use proverbs, it's indicative that they've experienced adult company. Early the next afternoon, Mansa Konkon orders Sundiata to come to his palace. Sundiata isn't afraid, because he knows he's working towards his great destiny. Sundiata notices fantastic weapons on the walls. He compliments the weapons, and begins fencing with a sword.

Mansa Konkon is shocked. Sundiata puts the sword back and asks why he's been summoned. The king says that they're going to play wori, and if he wins, he gets to kill Sundiata. Sundiata, unconcerned, asks what happens if he wins, and the king replies that he'll grant Sundiata whatever he wants. Sundiata asks for the sword and Mansa Konkon sets up the board. The king goes first and recites a poem as he moves pebbles around the board. When it's Sundiata's turn, he recites a poem that indicates he knows the king is being bribed to kill him.

Mansa Konkon is angry that someone betrayed him, but Sundiata explains that he speaks the truth because he's a guest. The narrator explains what's actually happening: Sassouma sent gold to Mansa Konkon to kill Sundiata. The king deems Sundiata the winner of the game, but refuses him the sword and turns him out of the city, instructing him to never return. Sundiata says he'll return anyway.

Sogolon, Sundiata, Manding Bory, and their sisters head for Tabon, where Sundiata's friend Fran Kamara lives. The king of Tabon, however, is old and doesn't want to anger his superiors in Niani, so he helps Sogolon join a band of merchants headed for the court of Ghana. Before their departure, Fran Kamara shows his friends around Tabon. Sundiata promises that on his way back to Mali, he'll stop in Tabon to pick up Fran Kamara. Fran Kamara says that he'll be king by that time and have a great army.

The merchants try to make the long journey to Ghana as comfortable for Sogolon as possible. They tell Sundiata and Manding Bory stories about the past. They also tell them about Soumaoro Kanté of Sosso, where Balla Fasséké is still being kept. Soumaoro is a powerful and cruel king, and even the king of Ghana pays the kingdom of Sosso tribute. The narrator explains that Ghana used to be extremely powerful, as its kings were descended from Alexander the Great, but their power had been declining.

The narrator indicates that Sundiata and Manding Bory are growing up and essentially practicing being adults by using proverbs in this manner. Sundiata's lack of fear is indicative both of his belief in destiny, as well as his heroism. Sundiata already behaves like a hero and as such, he doesn't experience fear in front of a powerful king.



Sundiata continues to seem undaunted by this sudden turn of events. He knows that Mansa Konkon cannot kill him, as the prophecy states that he's going to return to Mali as an adult. Furthermore, local custom states that guests are protected from harm by their hosts no matter what, and Mansa Konkon's obvious intention to break this custom leads Sundiata to reason that Mansa Konkon is being bribed to kill him.



However, once Sundiata acknowledges that he knows about the bribe, Mansa Konkon is once again bound to custom, and thus man's customs work in tandem with Sundiata's destiny.



As Sundiata and his family travel through the countryside, the reader begins to piece together a map of Sundiata's eventual empire. This also works in the oral tradition to provide points of personal connection to individuals who might be from Tabon, or who may be descended from Fran Kamara. Sundiata, and the oral storyteller, are both working to build their connections and communities.



Within the story itself, other stories and legends function as teaching tools much in the same way that the story of Sundiata functions as a teaching tool today. The narrator begins to build the understanding that Sosso is an immensely powerful kingdom, and directly at odds with Sundiata because that kingdom holds Balla Fasséké.



Finally, the caravan reaches Wagadou, Ghana's capital city. Nobody here speaks Mandingo, Sundiata's language, and the architecture is very different. Sundiata also notices many mosques. The king's brother acts as an interpreter and receives Sogolon and her children at the palace. Sogolon explains her circumstances and asks for asylum in Wagadou. The king arrives and surprises the assembly by addressing Sogolon in Mandingo. He warmly welcomes Sogolon and her children.

The king of Ghana asks Sundiata to approach. Sundiata introduces himself and all his siblings. The king says that Sundiata will make a great king, as he didn't forget any of his family members in the introduction.

At Wagadou, Sogolon is treated like a queen. The children receive clothes in Wagadou fashion and Manding Bory and Sundiata especially are showered with attention. Manding Bory is embarrassed, but Sundiata acts as though the attention is normal and natural. He soon becomes exacting, and the king thinks very highly of him.

After a year, Sogolon becomes very sick. King Soumaba Cissé decides to send Sogolon and the children to Mema to live with his cousin, Tounkara, reasoning that the fresh air off the Niger River would help Sogolon's health. The king sends Sogolon and her family with another group of merchants. Sundiata again peppers the merchants with questions.

At Mema, Sogolon and her children are met with a grand reception. The king's sister, Massiran, receives the travelers and talks with Sogolon as if they're old friends. She tells Sogolon that the king has no children of his own. She continues that the king is currently on a campaign against mountain tribes. Sundiata and Manding Bory keep busy hunting with their new friends, who are the sons of vassal kings.

Moussa Tounkara returns when the rainy season starts. He receives Sogolon and her children, and welcomes them formally to his court. Moussa Tounkara is a great warrior and takes Sundiata and Manding Bory on their first campaign. Sundiata performs magnificently for only being 15. The king's sofas (soldiers) say that Sundiata will make a great king. Moussa Tounkara embraces Sundiata and tells him that he'll make Sundiata a great warrior.

Sundiata is beginning to build his fluency and comfort with different belief systems as he encounters the primarily Muslim city. This will later allow him to connect with more people (and higher powers), since he can use both Islam and local religion as needed. Exile evidently isn't turning out to be a bad thing, which shows that Sossouma's cruelty has only aided Sundiata in building his alliances.



Sundiata shows that he recognizes and honors his family by mentioning all of them by name. This recognition shows that Sundiata believes in their importance. Recognizing individuals in this way will be something required of him later as a great leader.



The reader is asked to compare Sundiata and Manding Bory here. Sundiata is set apart from his brother by his belief that his royal treatment is entirely natural, indicating that he's a born ruler. Manding Bory's role as a helper is reinforced, as he's obviously not a born ruler like Sundiata.



The king's decision begins to point to the fact that families can and do exist on a larger scale, and that the greater community of Sundiata's future empire is connected by blood as much as anything else. This creates the sense that everyone that Sundiata meets is somehow connected and part of the same community.



Massiran indicates that there's a space in Mema that needs to be filled, as the king has no sons. This opens the door for Sundiata to go on to fill that role, particularly since he's currently fatherless. Sundiata will begin to amass his chosen family of sorts as he builds these relationships.



Again, Sundiata performs beyond all expectations for a normal 15-year-old, indicating that he's a born warrior. He's already able to inspire trust and awe in soldiers who might one day serve him, indicating that he's not just technically skilled—he has people skills, too. Having both technical and interpersonal skills is what will make him a great ruler.



Sundiata doesn't leave Moussa Tounkara's side. People in Mema begin to suggest that Sundiata was sent to them because the king has no heir. After three years, the king appoints Sundiata his viceroy to rule in his absence. At 18 years old, Sundiata is tall, strong, and powerful. Everyone loves him. The soothsayers reveal Sundiata's destiny to unite Mali, and the soldiers think that anything is possible with Sundiata's leadership.

Now that he's a man, though, Sundiata knows that it's time to fulfill his destiny. Sogolon knows that she has performed her duty. One day she reminds Sundiata that his destiny lies in Mali, not Mema, and counsels him to wait for the right time.

It's suggested here that Mema will eventually become part of Mali once Sundiata sets out to truly fulfill his destiny. Notice that he's loved and adored by his subjects and (maybe more importantly) by his soldiers. This provides evidence that Sundiata will accomplish his destiny with a great deal of support.



Now that Sogolon has raised Sundiata to adulthood, she has fulfilled her role in the prophecy. However, the reader is asked to recall the symbol of trees and the time they take to grow—she implies that the proverbial tree hasn't yet grown big enough to unite Mali.



SOUMAORO KANTÉ: THE SORCERER KING

Mamoudou Kouyaté explains that while Sundiata was in exile, Mali fell to Soumaoro Kanté of Sosso. Upon Balla Fasséké's arrival in Sosso, Soumaoro demanded that Mali pay tribute to Sosso. Soumaoro is a great sorcerer with many powerful fetishes (magical objects) who terrifies all other kings.

Soumaoro kept Balla Fasséké but let the rest of his embassy return to Niani, bearing a threat that Soumaoro would destroy Niani if Dankaran Touman didn't submit. The king submitted and sent his sister, Nana Triban, to Soumaoro.

One day while Soumaoro is out hunting, Balla Fasséké sneaks into Soumaoro's secret chamber. The walls are covered in human skin, while nine human heads form a circle in the center of the room. A massive snake stirs at Balla Fasséké's arrival, but Balla Fasséké himself is a sorcerer and recites a formula to quiet the room. He inspects the strange weapons on the walls, notices three sleeping owls, and realizes the skulls are those of nine kings that Soumaoro killed.

Balla Fasséké notices a huge balafon (a type of xylophone) and sits down to play. The balafon is extremely beautiful. The creatures in the room stir and seem to listen to the music. Balla Fasséké realizes that the balafon has never been touched by anyone but Soumaoro, who comes after his victories to sing his own praises. Further, Soumaoro is connected to the balafon and knows that someone is in his chamber.

Soumaoro is described as absolutely terrifying and extremely powerful. Unlike Sundiata, who inspires love and trust, Soumaoro inspires terror. Keep in mind that even the powerful King Soumaba Cissé of Ghana has submitted to Soumaoro—Soumaoro's physical reach extends as far as Sundiata's travels.



Dankaran Touman shows himself to be cowardly when faced with this threat. He gives up not only his griot, but also his sister in order to protect his own life.



The extent of Soumaoro's power is illustrated through his display of the heads and skins of his conquests, which he uses as magical objects. Soumaoro's clear evil calls into question this use of this magic, since the rules governing the use of magic require righteousness. This hints at Soumaoro's inevitable fall.



Notice here that Soumaoro is a truly solo player. He doesn't need a griot to memorialize his exploits in song and story, because he does that himself. In this way, Soumaoro chooses not to participate in the community aspect of songs and stories, which—in contrast Sundiata's interpersonal skills—spells Soumaoro's demise.



Soumaoro bursts into the chamber in a rage, but Balla Fasséké improvises a song to honor Soumaoro. The narrator says that kings are men like any other and are subject to flattery. As such, Soumaoro listens to the music joyfully. When Balla Fasséké finishes his tune, Soumaoro claims him as his own griot. The narrator states that this act makes war between Sundiata and Soumaoro inevitable.

Here, flattery is powerful enough to push Soumaoro towards making his exploits public in the form of obtaining a true griot. However, Balla Fasséké is necessary to Sundiata's success, as Sundiata's memory won't live on if he cannot retrieve his griot to tell his story. This indicates that Sundiata's goal isn't just the conquest of Mali, it's earning a place in memory.



HISTORY

Addressing the reader directly, Mamoudou Kouyaté says that the story is coming to the great moments of Sundiata's life. He states that griots know the histories of kings, which makes them great counselors. Further, kings want singers to write songs that will perpetuate their memories. He continues that seers see the future of kings, while griots know the past, but by knowing the past one can predict the future. Finally, he says that writing has killed memory, as cultures that write don't feel the past without the "warmth of the human voice."

This passage is somewhat uncomfortable to read, as the reader is specifically made aware that the narrator doesn't believe that someone can understand the story by reading it. A reader doesn't get to experience the sense of community that comes from listening to someone else recite the tale, so a reader's experience of Sundiata is necessarily incomplete.



As Sundiata prepares for his return to Mali, Soumaoro stands as the king of kings. Sosso is the "bulwark of fetishism against the world of Allah." Soumaoro wears shoes made from human skin, and possesses power from several jinn. He's an evil demon and observes no taboos—he enjoys flogging important elders, and habitually abducts young girls but doesn't marry them.

Sundiata has lived in places that observe both Islam and local religion, while Soumaoro appears to reject Islam entirely in favor of worshipping particularly evil jinn. This is linked to Soumaoro's sense of evil, and it explains his enjoyment of destroying families.



Soumaoro despises all people and eventually, his power makes it so there's nothing he won't do. Soumaoro abducts Keleya, the wife of his nephew and chief general, Fakoli Koroma. Fakoli accuses his uncle of incest and vows to gather other tribes to defeat Soumaoro.

The narrator suggests that Soumaoro's absolute power from the evil jinn has corrupted him. Because he has no regard for the individuals he rules, he cannot conceive of respecting the laws and rules they've enacted.



Many men, including Dankaran Touman, answer Fakoli's call. Soumaoro, however, attacks Dankaran Touman. Dankaran Touman flees to forested regions and Soumaoro burns Niani. After this, Soumaoro crowns himself king of Mali. The general populace refuses to recognize him and organizes a resistance. Soothsayers indicate that the "rightful heir" will save Mali, and they remember Sundiata. They set up a search party to look for the heir. The party is composed of a number of soothsayers and diviners.

Dankaran Touman gets the opportunity to potentially end his story on the side of good, but instead he retreats when faced with conflict. This is the last time Dankaran Touman is mentioned, and he fades out of the story because he has no griot to perpetuate his memory. Sundiata now has no family members to fight against; his only adversary is Soumaoro and his evil.



THE BAOBAB LEAVES

Sundiata learns that Soumaoro has invaded Mali and that Fakoli is putting up a good fight against him. Sogolon is still sick, Manding Bory is a lively 15-year-old, and Kolonkan is of marriageable age and takes care of cooking now that Sogolon is ill. At the market one day, Kolonkan notices a woman selling condiments and vegetables—ones that she recognizes from Niani, but are foreign to Mema. Kolonkan shares with the vendor that she's from Mali and her brother used to pick baobab leaves.

The vendor asks Kolonkan her brother's name, and Kolonkan gives it. A man joins the vendor and asks Kolonkan if Sogolon would receive the vendors. Kolonkan rushes to her mother, gives her the Malian condiments, and says the merchants would like to speak with her. Sogolon asks Kolonkan to fetch the merchants.

Manding Bory and Sundiata return from a hunt and Sogolon shows them the condiments from the market. Kolonkan returns with the merchants and Sogolon recognizes them as members of Maghan Kon Fatta's court. Mandjan Béréké, Sassouma's brother, explains that they left Mali two months ago to search for Sundiata. He says that Soumaoro has razed Mali and that Dankaran Touman fled Niani, leaving it without a leader. He continues that jinn have told soothsayers that only Sundiata can save Mali, and he implores Sundiata to return to Mali and fulfill his destiny.

Silence follows this speech. Sundiata breaks it and decides to speak with Moussa Tounkara about leaving the court of Mema as soon as the king returns from a visit to a neighboring village. The narrator says that Sundiata "was already king."

Moussa Tounkara returns at nightfall, but Sundiata doesn't attend his reception. Sundiata visits Sogolon before going to bed and finds her sick and feverish. In his own room, Sundiata asks God to allow him to bury his mother in Mema if he's going to succeed in retaking Mali. Sogolon dies the next morning, and Sundiata explains to the king that he must return to Mali after burying Sogolon.

Here, the baobab leaves, and the baobab tree by extension, act as a symbol for the Mali kingdom. In Mema, far from Mali, the baobab leaves act as a reminder of home and a call to Sundiata to return.



Sogolon is certainly aware that the baobab leaves are Sundiata's call to return to Mali. This means that she's truly coming to the end of her role in Sundiata's prophecy.



The "merchants" are proof that Sundiata's community is widespread and supportive. Sundiata is reminded again of his destiny, and this marks the point at which enough time has passed for him to return to Mali. Sundiata, the proverbial tree, has grown and flourished in his seven years of exile. Soothsayers continue to repeat Sundiata's destiny, which reinforces its importance.



By accepting his destiny, and going about it in this particular way, Sundiata exhibits all the hallmarks of a great king. He must first acknowledge Moussa Tounkara, just as he once acknowledged his family.



The fact that Sundiata is calling on God illustrates his flexibility with religion; he can call upon God or jinn as the situation dictates. Further, higher powers obviously listen to Sundiata, as evidenced by Sogolon's timely death following Sundiata's call for divine help.



Moussa Tounkara thinks that Sundiata is being ungrateful and tries to make Sundiata either take Sogolon's body with him to Mali or pay for the gravesite land. Sundiata offers to pay when he reaches Mali, but the king refuses. Sundiata leaves the king and returns a while later with a basket filled with pottery shards, feathers of birds, and straw. He offers it to the king and says that it's the price of the land.

Moussa Tounkara brushes the basket away, but one of his advisors implores the king to give Sundiata the land for burial. He says that the contents of the basket indicate that Sundiata will declare war on Mema if he's not granted the land, and the town site will be recognizable only by shards of pottery. Moussa Tounkara grants Sundiata the land, and Sundiata buries Sogolon.

THE RETURN

Mamoudou Kouyaté exclaims "every man to his own land!" He explains that Moussa Tounkara couldn't keep Sundiata in Mema because it was destined for Sundiata to return to Mali. Sundiata is now strong enough to face Soumaoro. Moussa Tounkara grants Sundiata half of his army, and Sundiata and Manding Bory leave Mema dressed in traditional Muslim garb. They head for Wagadou, where the king grants them half of his own army.

Sundiata and his army continue south towards Tabon. The soothsayers who accompany him, Singbin Mara Cissé and Mandjan Béréte, tell Sundiata stories of past heroes. Because Soumaoro is a great sorcerer, he knows that Sundiata is coming and decides to attack Sundiata before he reaches Mali. Word of Sundiata, however, has already reached Tabon. Fran Kamara is the king of Tabon and is now known as Tabon Wana; he's already resisting Soumaoro.

When Sundiata arrives at the valley that leads to Tabon, he sees that Sosso Balla, Soumaoro's son, has already assembled troops in the valley to block Sundiata's path to Tabon. Sundiata laughs and instructs his war chiefs to attack Sosso Balla now. The Sosso army is surprised and can barely fight back. Sundiata tries to cut down Sosso Balla, but a Sosso soldier comes between the two men and Sosso Balla retreats. Sundiata takes several prisoners.

Moussa Tounkara is now attempting to stand in the way of Sundiata's destiny, and Sundiata, having faith in his destiny, remains unbothered. His basket of seemingly random things functions as a riddle. Perhaps the land is not worth much to him, since it is fated to be his regardless, and perhaps the gesture is something more mysterious.



Sundiata's insistence on burying Sogolon before he leaves stands as a final recognition of his mother, which is absolutely necessary before he can truly move on to the rest of his destiny. This continues to assert that honoring his relationships is extremely important.



The reader begins to piece together what Sundiata's empire will look like based on where kings grant Sundiata military assistance. These kings will also form Sundiata's greater community. The narrator's initial exclamation reinforces the idea that Sundiata's final destination (Mali) is truly Sundiata's "own land."



Sundiata is going to follow through on his promise to Fran Kamara as he heads for Tabon, indicating that Sundiata is trustworthy and capable. Further, by returning for Fran Kamara/Tabon Wana, Sundiata is going to honor and recognize his friend as he builds his empire.



Detailed accounts of battles are a common hallmark of epic tales. In Sundiata, the accounts work to set Sundiata apart from other storied military leaders. Sundiata is a fantastic military strategist in addition to possessing great strength, which only adds to the evidence that he's a born leader and warrior.



Tabon Wana arrives as the battle ends, and the armies of Sundiata and Tabon celebrate all night. News that Soumaoro's forces ran from Sundiata spreads throughout Mali. Soumaoro learns of the prophecy regarding Sundiata, but remains confident that Sundiata won't win. When Sosso Balla tells his father that Sundiata is "worse than a lion," Soumaoro chastises him but decides to attack Tabon with an even larger force.

Soumaoro and Sundiata's forces meet at Néguéboria. Sundiata's innovative style of deployment destroys the Sosso forces as Soumaoro watches from the top of a hill. Sundiata attempts to attack Sosso Balla, but Sosso Balla slips away.

Soumaoro joins the fray. Sundiata throws a spear at Soumaoro, but it simply bounces off his chest. An arrow has a similar effect. Sundiata furiously charges Soumaoro with a spear, but as he gets close, Soumaoro disappears. Manding Bory points to Soumaoro, now sitting far up on a hill. Sundiata stops to watch his enemy as his forces destroy the Sosso army, and Soumaoro suddenly disappears.

While Sundiata is victorious, he spends the night brooding and wondering how to beat Soumaoro. He realizes that he'll need other weapons, and that all the gossip he's heard about Soumaoro's shape shifting abilities must be true. Sundiata climbs the hill and inspects the dirt where Soumaoro disappeared, wondering about the jinn who must protect Soumaoro. Meanwhile, a celebration begins in the camp as people from a nearby village bring food out to the armies. Sundiata receives the village chief, but doesn't join in the celebration. The next day, Sundiata's army follows the rumors of Soumaoro's army's whereabouts, and they again make camp.

Sundiata and his men suddenly hear war horns, and the Sosso army launches a surprise attack. Sundiata's forces successfully fend off the Sossos with flaming arrows. It isn't necessarily a great victory for Sundiata's forces, but it serves to demoralize the Sossos.

Soumaoro is already being set up for failure, particularly now that he knows about the prophecy and actively chooses to ignore it. Regardless of Soumaoro's magical powers and military strength, the reader has been told time and again that resisting destiny is foolish and useless.



Again, the narrator pays detailed attention to Sundiata's military style to further mark Sundiata as a hero. Note, too, that Sundiata fights alongside his sofas, while Soumaoro watches his troops from afar.



Sundiata's military strength is finally challenged. It becomes obvious here that Sundiata's strength has limits, which points to physical strength not being the most important quality of a hero. Sundiata must turn to other methods to beat Soumaoro now that his strength isn't going to work.



While Sundiata is obviously experiencing some conflicted emotions about his realizations about Soumaoro, notice that he's not necessarily bogged down with emotion. Rather, he's thinking and calculating. Notice, too, that even though Sundiata isn't technically participating in the celebration, he still makes sure to recognize the village chief. This is how Sundiata builds trust and respect from the people who will be his future subjects.



Soumaoro's army attempts to match Sundiata's military cleverness with disastrous results—they only reinforce Sundiata's own skill and strength, and the reader is reminded that these wins are all a part of Sundiata's destiny.



THE NAMES OF THE HEROES

Soumaoro and his forces return to Sosso, while Sundiata recruits soldiers from every village he passes. Rebellious kings gather at Sibi with Kamandjan, who is now the king of Sibi. Fakoli also continues to gather troops. As they travel, Sundiata begins to recognize **trees** as being native to Mali. The armies gather on the savanna, and Mamoudou Kouyaté lists the gathered groups.

Sundiata's cousin, Siara Kouman Konaté, is there, along with Faony Diarra, the king of Do and Sundiata's uncle. All the "sons of Mali" are in attendance and when Sundiata arrives, drums start beating. Sundiata salutes the sons of Mali and vows to the assembled to take back Mali. The griots sing Balla Fasséké's **"Hymn to the Bow."**

Trees begin to transition from symbols of Sundiata's destiny to symbols of a specific place and what happened there—a memory device for oral storytelling. By listing the different groups, the narrator again gets to connect with and pull in listeners who may be related to one of the kings.



By referring to the gathered individuals as the "sons of Mali," the narrator indicates that these people are the ones who are going to make up Sundiata's empire. Sundiata fully accepts his destiny, and "Hymn to the Bow" boosts everyone's spirits and trust in Sundiata.



NANA TRIBAN AND BALLA FASSÉKÉ

Both Sundiata and Soumaoro prepare their armies. Sundiata knows that he must figure out how to destroy Soumaoro's magic, and he consults famous soothsayers. The soothsayers advise Sundiata to sacrifice 100 white bulls, white rams, and white cocks. During the sacrifice, Sundiata hears that his sister, Nana Triban, and Balla Fasséké had escaped Soumaoro and have arrived at Sundiata's camp. Sundiata remarks that if they've been able to escape, Soumaoro has lost.

Sundiata goes to greet Nana Triban and Balla Fasséké. He asks them to describe how they escaped, but Nana Triban just cries and apologizes for her mother Sassouma's cruelty to Sundiata (Nana Triban never thought ill of Sundiata). Balla instructs Nana Triban to tell her story, and reminds her that everything that happened was in Sundiata's destiny.

Nana Triban explains that while she initially cried upon her arrival at Soumaoro's court, she was nice to him and soon became the favorite among his wives. He began confiding in her, and she pretended to hate Sundiata to earn his trust. One night, Nana Triban asked Soumaoro to share the name of the jinn who protects him so that she too could worship the jinn. This flattered Soumaoro and he showed her his secret chamber and revealed its secrets. All the while, Nana Triban and Balla Fasséké were planning their escape, and they managed to slip out one night while Soumaoro was away. Balla Fasséké tells Sundiata that when they heard what had happened in Tabon, he understood that Sundiata was ready to fulfill his destiny.

Rather than consider the problem alone, Sundiata turns to others with greater or different knowledge. This is indicative of his humility. He understands that a great ruler needs help and outside insight in order to successfully rule, and he takes these soothsayers' advice without question. Notice too that the sacrifices are in line with local religion, which is another reminder that Sundiata is well rounded spiritually.



The reader is never told exactly what happened to Sassouma. Because of her poor behavior, she's erased from the story and now only exists in the tale through characters' memories. Thus, she reaps what she has sown: she is forgotten for everything but her cruelty.



This story works as a teaching tool for Sundiata, just like the stories that Sogolon or the soothsayers told him. The information here, however, is far more concrete, as Nana Triban knows exactly how to beat Soumaoro. Notice that during her captivity, Nana Triban was able to use her lack of power because of her sex to actually obtain and transfer power between men. She doesn't necessarily get to use the power herself, but she does get to participate as a useful advisor to Sundiata, rather than just a commodity.



Sundiata is thrilled to have Balla Fasséké back, as now he has the person who will compose the songs of his life so he'll be remembered. Mamoudou Kouyaté asserts that there wouldn't be heroes if nobody remembered their deeds.

Mamoudou Kouyaté's statement here makes up the primary thesis of Sundiata: that stories are entirely necessary for heroes to truly exist. Deeds are nothing if nobody knows about them.



Before Sundiata moves his troops to meet Soumaoro, he assembles them in front of Balla Fasséké so that he can boost their morale with stories. Balla Fasséké tells stories of the heroes of Mali, and then asks all of Sundiata's war chiefs, one by one, to show the soldiers what they're capable of. Tabon Wana and Kamandjan perform fantastical feats and pledge their allegiance to Sundiata, and then the group leaves Sibi.

Stories here function as propaganda and encouragement for the sofas. Balla Fasséké continues to place Sundiata in this line of kings, which supports the truth of Sundiata's destiny. Sundiata appears to truly be a king as the war chiefs pledge their allegiances and prepare to fight for Sundiata and Mali.



KRINA

The narrator says that in order to properly make war, the fighters must state their grievances and officially declare war. Because both Sundiata and Soumaoro are sorcerers, they send each other owls to carry their words. Sundiata states that it's his destiny to take Mali. Soumaoro refuses to give up his throne, and war is officially declared.

The reader is again asked to consider Soumaoro foolish for attempting to overpower Sundiata's destiny with military strength. However, all this opposition is certainly a part of Sundiata's destiny. Soumaoro's resistance provides Sundiata a story of overcoming tremendous obstacles worthy of a true hero.



Sundiata's army assembles and Fakoli Karoma arrives. He tells Sundiata what Soumaoro has done to him and offers his men to Sundiata's cause. Balla Fasséké invites Fakoli to join the cause, and Sundiata states that he defends the weak and innocent. He promises to right the injustice and Sundiata's war chiefs accept Fakoli as one of them.

We begin to understand that Sundiata isn't just fighting because his destiny tells him to, he's fighting because it's the right thing to do. Sundiata seeks to correct the injustices Soumaoro has carried out on the people of Mali (abducting girls, burning Niani, etc.).



Sundiata moves his army to the site of the battle at Krina and sets out a great feast for the soldiers. Balla Fasséké describes the history of Mali. Addressing Sundiata directly, he tells Sundiata that he is Mali, as both have suffered a "long and difficult childhood." He continues and likens Sundiata to a **tree** with long roots and tells Sundiata to assert himself against Soumaoro, but to listen to the past so he knows how to do so. Balla reminds Sundiata of his exceptional parentage. Finally, Balla asks what griots will tell future generations about Sundiata, and reminds the assembled that words are only words; men must perform powerful deeds in order to warrant remembrance and stories.

Balla Fasséké's speech continues to develop the relationship between heroes and stories. This passage also specifically asserts the superiority of stories that arise from actual historical events. This adds more weight to Sundiata's story, as the general plot is considered to be factual. Balla's reminder to "listen to the past" reinforces this further, as the narrator has asserted several times already that the past can be used to tell the future.



Early in the morning, Fakoli tells Sundiata that Soumaoro is moving his sofas onto the plain. Sundiata orders his troops to move out. Manding Bory and Nana Triban enter Sundiata's tent and ask if Sundiata has "the bow" ready. The bow is prepared to shoot an arrow made of wood, with a point made out of a white cock's spur. This spur is the great secret that Nana Triban extracted from Soumaoro. She counsels her brother that Soumaoro won't let Sundiata get close to him, but Balla Fasséké says that a soothsayer saw the end of Soumaoro in a dream.

On the battlefield, Sundiata can spot Soumaoro by his tall headdress. Sundiata sends his men towards Soumaoro, and his forces quickly break through the center of Soumaoro's army. Manding Bory gallops to Sundiata to tell him that Soumaoro himself is attacking Fakoli, and Fakoli's men are faltering. Sundiata angrily gallops to help Fakoli and begins to fight his way towards Soumaoro.

Sundiata draws his bow and shoots the special arrow at Soumaoro. It barely grazes his shoulder, but Soumaoro feels his powers leave him. He looks up and sees a black bird flying, which he knows is a bird of misfortune. Soumaoro turns and retreats, and his army follows. Sundiata pursues Soumaoro all day, accompanied by Fakoli. They stop at a small village for food and then continue galloping through the night. At dawn, Sundiata learns that Soumaoro is avoiding populated areas and travels with only his son Sosso Balla.

Sundiata and Fakoli continue to track Soumaoro and Sosso Balla. After taking a shortcut, they climb a hill and see two horsemen riding along the bottom of the valley. Sundiata and Fakoli chase them. Fakoli manages to capture Sosso Balla. Sundiata wounds Soumaoro's horse, but Soumaoro keeps running on foot and runs into a cave. Sundiata stops outside the cave and Fakoli explains that the cave leads to the river. Mema horsemen arrive and Sundiata commands them to guard the river and the mountain. Sundiata waits in the nearby village for his army.

Mamoudou Kouyaté explains that the victory was "dazzling." Kings sent their submission, and later their daughters, to Sundiata. Sundiata's army marched on Sosso, which is now headed by Noumounkeba, a tribal chief. The narrator explains that the city planned to resist Sundiata for a year. Sundiata vows to take the city the next morning.

The symbol of "Hymn to the Bow" will come full circle now as Sundiata prepares to use his great skill with the bow to triumph over Soumaoro. Again, the power of destiny is reinforced. Despite Nana Triban's worries, soothsayers have seen Soumaoro's defeat and Sundiata believes the soothsayer's dream. This will allow Sundiata to go forward confident in his own victory.



Sundiata continues to show off his great military skill. He's even elevated further above those on his own side as the narrator admits that Fakoli struggled. This works to humanize Sundiata's army, while turning Sundiata himself into even more of an exceptional and heroic figure.



Sundiata's willingness to look outside of his own military strength pays off. Victory now seems imminent, even though the chase isn't over yet. The intelligence that Sundiata and Fakoli obtain from these villages indicates that the villages support Sundiata rather than Soumaoro, which further extends the reader's mental map of Mali.



The chase scene is one in which the reader is reminded that this story is traditionally told orally. This scene would be drawn out and made even more intense by the storyteller's inflection and musical accompaniment. Even in written form, however, it becomes obvious that Sundiata has triumphed. He's well on his way to completing his destiny.



As kings submit to him, it becomes even more apparent that Sundiata's destiny was entirely true. Thanks to the evidence left by the narrator, the reader can almost laugh at Sosso's plan to resist a hero such as Sundiata for a full year.



The next morning, Sundiata's army attacks the town and shoots flaming arrows over the ramparts. The city opens its gates to Sundiata. Noumounkeba tries to fight, but is taken alive by Sundiata and Manding Bory. Balla Fasséké leads Sundiata into Soumaoro's tower. Soumaoro's magic chamber is different now that Soumaoro has lost his powers; the fetishes seem to be dying. Sundiata seizes the fetishes and assembles prisoners and Soumaoro's many stolen wives outside the tower. After evacuating everything, Sundiata orders the final destruction of Sosso.

Mamoudou Kouyaté explains that Sosso disappeared, and now a "ghastly wilderness" exists in its place. Birds take dust baths at the site, and bourein **trees** grow there. Sosso is only a memory, and Sundiata made it so.

Sundiata once again makes good on his promise. The fetishes that Sundiata seizes from Soumaoro will function as symbols of dark magic gone very wrong. Notice too that Sundiata makes sure to evacuate all the residents of Sosso. Even as he enjoys these military successes, Sundiata is obviously not cruel; his sense of justice ensures that the residents are imprisoned, but not killed.



Sundiata erased Sosso from existence. Now, it's marked by specific landmark trees and it exists only as a memory in stories perpetuated by griots. It resembles Sassouma's fate, in that punishment is a combination of infamy and erasure.



THE EMPIRE

After destroying Sosso, Sundiata marches to Diaghan, whose king had been a strong ally to Soumaoro. Sundiata takes the city in a morning. Sundiata divides his army into three parts and takes the largest part to march on Kita, whose king, Kita Mansa, is extremely powerful. He's under the protection of mountain jinn that inhabit a pool of water in the middle of the mountain. The jinn are evil and only Kita Mansa has access to this pool, but whoever drinks the water can become very powerful.

Sundiata demands that Kita submit. Soothsayers advise Sundiata to make sacrifices, so he sacrifices 100 white rams, cocks, and oxen. The jinn reply favorably, as the cocks die on their backs. The sofas advance to the sound of "**Hymn to the Bow**" and take the city relatively peacefully, although Kita Mansa dies. The city allies itself with Sundiata.

The next morning, Sundiata decides to go to the mountain to make sacrifices to the jinn and thank the jinn for the victory. Sundiata and the army traverse all the way around the mountain and accept submission from the villages on the mountainside. Early the next morning, Sundiata sacrifices 100 cocks to the jinn, and then heads off to find the magic pool with Balla Fasséké. When Sundiata finds the pool, he addresses the jinn and thanks them for his victory. He drinks from the pool and when he returns to the army, he seems extremely brilliant.

Sundiata continues to accomplish fantastical feats by taking these cities in hours. This creates even more evidence in support of Sundiata's destiny. Kita Mansa represents another version of Soumaoro, as it's implied that Sundiata won't be able to beat him through military strength alone.



As implied, Sundiata must appeal to local spirits and use magic in order to take Kita. He's rewarded for using magic in this way with a peaceful conquest and an immediate alliance. The jinn will evidently protect anyone if shown the appropriate respect.



Sundiata's relationship with these jinn reinforces again that magic is earned. These jinn are immensely powerful, and they're not anything that Sundiata can simply overpower. They must be shown respect and reverence in the form of sacrifices and thanks, which recalls how Sundiata dealt with the witches as a child. In return, the jinn grant Sundiata even more greatness.



Sundiata and his army travel through several cities, and Sundiata hunts on the mountain with Manding Bory and Kamandjan. They travel to Do, where Sundiata sacrifices a white cock at the site of the **Buffalo of Do's** death. A whirlwind picks up and blows towards Mali, and Balla Fasséké and Sundiata decide it's time to return to Mali. By this time, all of Sundiata's generals had finished conquering neighboring kingdoms and lands, and they all now recognize Sundiata as their king.

By making a sacrifice to the Buffalo of Do, Sundiata pays his respects to the spirits that brought Sogolon to Niani in the first place. By honoring his ancestors and the past in this way, Sundiata continues to demonstrate that this respect for people, living and dead, is absolutely necessary in order to be a true king.



KOUROUKAN FOUGAN OR THE DIVISION OF THE WORLD

Sundiata, Fakoli, and Tabon Wana lead their armies to Ka-ba, a small town in Sibi. Sundiata dresses as a Muslim king and stands on a raised dais, his many armies gathered around him. Balla Fasséké, as the master of ceremonies, addresses the assembly and mentions each group by name. He greets the group in Sundiata's name, and then greets King Kamandjan. Kamandjan mounts his horse and salutes his allies. He asks of the assembled who alone could have taken on Soumaoro, and pledges his allegiance to Sundiata. The crowd cheers, and the other 12 assembled kings repeat Kamandjan's words and swear fealty to Sundiata.

Once again, mentioning the groups by name allows a listener to identify very specifically with the people in the story. Now that Sundiata has conquered his empire, those who fought for him officially pledge to be a part of Sundiata's empire and greater community. Here we see the fruit of Sundiata's lifelong ability to make friends and keep them. Many of these kings played with Sundiata when they were children, and Sundiata inspires the same loyalty now that he did then.



The festival begins. The sofas perform their war dances to **"Hymn to the Bow,"** and the war chiefs show off their horses' maneuvers. Sundiata smiles happily at the sight. In the afternoon, the assembled watch a procession of prisoners and booty. The last to process is Sosso Balla, who rides a horse surrounded by donkeys bearing Soumaoro's fetish objects. The crowd screams in horror and taunts Sosso Balla as he reaches Sundiata's dais. Sundiata gloomily remembers Soumaoro's mysterious disappearance, but Balla Fasséké assures him that "the son will pay for the father."

Sosso Balla will pay for his father's misguided attempt to resist Sundiata's destiny by enduring this public ridicule. In line with other antagonists, Sosso Balla won't necessarily get a neat ending to his story; rather, after the narrator mentions that he accompanies Sundiata to Niani, he's simply erased from the narrative. He presumably fathers no heirs, which then effectively erases him not just from stories, but also from the greater community.



Sundiata rises and the crowd falls silent. Sundiata speaks "as Mansa" (quietly). He greets the assembled and grants King Kamandjan the kingdom of Sibi. He creates an alliance between Sibi and Mema, and he continues to create alliances between other kingdoms of Mali while officially granting the kings their kingdoms. When he's finished with this task, Sundiata grants Balla Fasséké the title of grand master of ceremonies, meaning that Sundiata's Kieta clan will choose their griots from Balla's tribe (Kouyaté). Sundiata's word became law, and Mamoudou Kouyaté says that today in Ka-ba, there's a linké **tree** that commemorates the "division of the world."

Notice here that Mamoudou Kouyaté draws a very deliberate link between himself and Balla Fasséké (of the Kouyaté tribe). This lends historical weight to Mamoudou Kouyaté's story, as it becomes evident that the story truly has been passed down through his family for generations. He's able to place himself in the story and in the family line, just as he places Sundiata in a line of kings and encourages his audience to find their own place within the lineages of the kings.



NIANI

Sundiata remains at Ka-ba for several days and oversees the festivities. When Sundiata and his army begin their journey to Niani, villages along the way shower them with generosity. The army crosses the Niger river on dug-out canoes, and Sundiata sacrifices 100 oxen and rams to thank God upon his return to Mali. All of Mali's residents line the sides of the road, and many lay down carpets in the roads so Sundiata's horse never has to get his feet dirty. Soso Balla, who is untied, follows Sundiata and Balla Fasséké, and the crowd shouts abuse at him as he passes. The troops sing **"Hymn to the Bow"** as they march.

When the caravan reaches Niani, Sundiata looks down from a hill at the burnt city. The residents of Niani are silent except for young women and children, who shout and sing. Sundiata begins to rebuild the city in the ancient style his father preferred, and he destroys the original walls of the town so he can expand it.

Sundiata left Manding Bory at Bagadou-Djeliba as a viceroy. After Niani was rebuilt, Manding Bory went south with the army to win forested land, and the land of Sangaran allied itself with Mali. After a year, Sundiata holds an assembly at Niani of kings and dignitaries from across the empire. Fakoli proves himself to be too independent and leaves the empire. With this yearly assembly, Sundiata is able to maintain justice in the land, as none of the kings want to be denounced at Niani.

The narrator says that Sundiata's justice reached everyone in the empire, and with the peace, the villages became prosperous. Thieves were consistently punished, and traders had plenty of business. The narrator says that some kings are powerful during their lives because of their physical strength, but nobody has good things to say about them after their death. Other kings are simply forgotten, but others are both feared and loved because of their power and insistence on justice. Sundiata was one of these kings, and after him, the world saw no more conquerors.

Mamoudou Kouyaté says that griots used to say that you could find anything you desired in Mali, including a great king (Sundiata). He continues and lists the great cities of the Mali Empire, many of which have since disappeared. The silk-cotton and baobab **trees** exist as reminders of these dead cities.

Sundiata has been Mansa for mere days and already his subjects appear to truly love and respect him. After fulfilling his destiny, Sundiata is treated as a true hero by his subjects. Sundiata, however, retains his modesty as he sacrifices animals in thanks for his victory. This shows an understanding that he didn't win because of brute strength or the power of destiny alone; he received divine help and he must give thanks for it.



Sundiata continues to honor his family and ancestors by restoring and expanding the city in an architectural style that his father loved. In this way, Maghan Kon Fatta lives on in the city of Niani, as well as in this story.



Manding Bory completes his coming of age journey as he is officially made Sundiata's right hand man, per the prophecy surrounding his own birth. Notice that Sundiata continues to use his people skills to maintain justice and order within his empire. Fakoli also is apparently allowed to leave unscathed, reminding the reader that Sundiata is not simply power hungry—he has a deep sense of justice.



Now that justice and order have been restored to Mali, normal people can resume the work of creating families and wealth. The peace that Sundiata brings will continue for several hundred years, as the historical Mali Empire continued to expand and grow until Europeans colonized West Africa. Sundiata stands as one of the best-loved kings, and it appears that he truly earned his place beside Alexander the Great and the other ancient conquerors.



Time has worn on, as evidenced by the trees that remain in place of the dead cities. Discussing the passage of time in this way works to place this story in a historical context and make it feel alive to the reader or listener.



ETERNAL MALI

Mamoudou Kouyaté addresses the reader and states that Mali "keeps its secrets jealously," and griots won't betray these secrets. He says that many kings and Mansas ruled after Sundiata, but none were greater than Sundiata.

Mamoudou Kouyaté implores the reader to visit Mali. He details which cities to visit and what a visitor can see in each location. However, he says, one must not try to discover Mali's mystery, and one cannot go to the "dead cities" and try to question the past or learn what one isn't supposed to learn.

Mamoudou Kouyaté says that men today are small in mind and body compared to their ancestors. Sundiata lies near Niani but remains immortal in Mali. Finally, Mamoudou Kouyaté explains how he acquired his knowledge traveling around Mali. He says that everywhere he learned from his masters, but took an oath to conceal what's supposed to be concealed, and teach what's meant to be taught.

In closing, Mamoudou Kouyaté considers the responsibility of griots for a final time. Griots must keep the secrets of their empires, although what these secrets are is left unsaid.



Here, the narrator implies that a reader specifically isn't privy to the secrets and mystery of Mali, while a native to Mali may be familiar with these secrets. This works as a final reminder of the narrator's belief that oral history is superior to written history.



Sundiata's legacy continues through oral storytelling, and through the transcription and distribution of the story outside of Mali. In this way, he and the other characters are immortal, as they will exist as long as griots exist to tell this story, and people exist to listen to the stories and learn from them.





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