

World Literature

Sundiata

Introduction *The epic of Sundiata, founder of Mali, is part of Africa's long tradition of oral literature. Like the Mahabharata in India or the Iliad in Greece, the Sundiata epic was passed down from memory for many centuries before being written down. This version was translated in the 1960s by Djibril Tamsir Niane, who heard the tale from a griot.*

The epic recounts the efforts of young Sundiata to reclaim his father's kingdom from his enemy Soumaoro (soo mah AWR oh), king of Sosso. In it, details of battle are mixed with praise of Sundiata's courage, his distinguished ancestors, and his supernatural powers. In the following passage, Sundiata and Soumaoro confront each other on the eve of the final battle.

Sundiata went and pitched camp at Dayala in the valley of the Niger. Now it was he who was blocking Soumaoro's road to the south. . . .

Soumaoro advanced as far as Krina, near the village of Dayala on the Niger, and decided to assert his rights before joining battle. Soumaoro knew that Sundiata also was a sorcerer, so, instead of sending an embassy, he committed his words to one of his owls. The night bird came and perched on the roof of Sundiata's tent and spoke. Sundiata in his turn sent his own to Soumaoro. Here is the dialogue of the sorcerer kings:

"Stop, young man. Henceforth I am the king of Mali. If you want peace, return to where you came from," said Soumaoro.

"I am coming back, Soumaoro, to recapture my kingdom. If you want peace you will make amends to my allies and return to Sosso where you are the king."

"I am king of Mali by force of arms. My rights have been established by conquest."

"Then I will take Mali from you by force of arms and chase you from my kingdom."

"Know, then, that I am the wild yam of the rocks; nothing will make me leave Mali."

"Know, also that I have in my camp seven master smiths who will shatter the rocks. Then, yam, I will eat you."

"I am the poisonous mushroom that makes the fearless ill."

"As for me, I am the ravenous rooster, the poison does not matter to me."

"Behave yourself, little boy, or you will burn your foot, for I am the red-hot cinder."

"But me, I am the rain that extinguishes the cinder; I am the boisterous torrent that will carry you off."

"I am the mighty silk-cotton tree that looks from on high on the tops of other trees."

"And I, I am the strangling creeper that climbs to the top of the forest giant."

"Enough of this argument. You shall not have Mali."

"Know that there is not room for two kings on the same skin, Soumaoro; you will let me have your place."

"Very well, since you want war I will wage war against you, but I would have you know that I have killed nine kings. . . ."

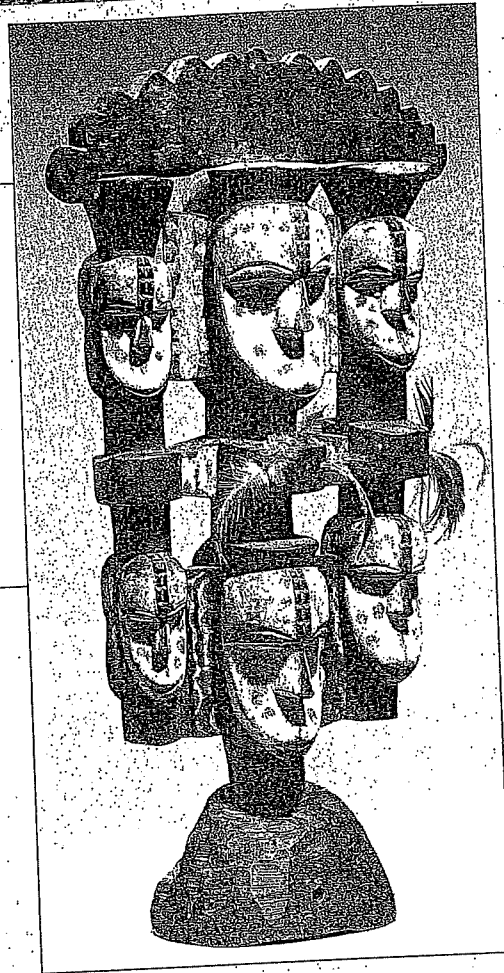
"Prepare yourself, Soumaoro, for it will be long before the calamity that is going to crash down upon you and yours comes to an end."

Thus Sundiata and Soumaoro spoke together. After the war of mouths, swords had to decide the issue. . . .

In the evening, to raise the men's spirits, Sundiata gave a great feast, for he was anxious that his men should wake up happy in the morning. . . . Sundiata's griot, in front of the whole army, called to mind the history of old Mali. He praised Sundiata, seated amidst his lieutenants, in this manner:

"Now I address myself to you, Sundiata, I speak to you king of Mali, to whom dethroned monarchs flock. The time foretold to you is now coming: Sundiata, kingdoms and empires are in the likeness of man; like him they are born, they grow and disappear. Each king embodies one moment of that life. Formerly, the

Ceremonial Headdress Veneration of ancestors played an important role in many traditional African religions. In the *Sundiata* epic, the griot takes great pains to recount the king's exalted ancestry. Elsewhere in West Africa, headdresses like the one at the right were used in religious ceremonies. Through dance and ritual, the people thanked ancestors for successful harvests and honored great warriors of the past. **Religions and Value Systems** Name another culture in which veneration of ancestors played an important role.



kings of Ghana extended their kingdom over all the lands, but the circle has closed and the kings of Ghana are nothing more than petty princes in a desolate land. Today, another kingdom looms up, powerful, the kingdom of Sosso. Humbled kings have brought their tribute to Sosso, Soumaoro's arrogance knows no more bounds and his cruelty is equal to his ambition. . . . The kingdom of Sosso is but the growth of yesterday, whereas that of Mali dates from ancient times. Each kingdom has its childhood, but Soumaoro wants to force the pace, and so Sosso will collapse under him like a horse worn out beneath its rider. . . .

"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. . . . You are the son of Nare Maghan, but you are also the son of your mother Sogolon, the buffalo-woman, before whom powerless sorcerers shrank in fear. You have the strength and majesty of the lion, you have the might of the buffalo. . . .

"Tomorrow, allow me to sing the 'Song of the Vultures' over the bodies of the thousands of Sossos whom your sword will have laid low before evening."

Source: D. T. Niene, *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* (Harlow, England: Longman Group Ltd., 1965).

Thinking About Literature

- Vocabulary** Use the dictionary to find the meanings of the following words: embassy, amends, ravenous, boisterous, torrent, embodies, tempest.
- (a) How do Sundiata and Soumaoro conduct their war of words on the eve of the battle? (b) Describe the nature of their conversation.
- (a) What does Sundiata's griot say about the nature of empires? (b) Why does he predict that Soumaoro is doomed to failure? (c) What importance does the griot give to Sundiata's ancestry?
- Critical Thinking Drawing Conclusions** People went to great pains to memorize lengthy epics like *Sundiata*, the *Mahabharata*, and the *Iliad*. Why do you think they felt it was important to pass down these stories?

THE LEGEND OF SUNDIATA

Part 1 - Read

Directions: Read the excerpt from the epic of Sundiata on page 302-303. Then answer the following questions.

1. What is a metaphor? At what point in the story are metaphors used?
2. How do Sundiata and Soumaoro wage their war of words? Describe the nature of their conversation.
3. To what does Sundiata's griot compare empires? Why does he think Soumaoro's empire will fail?
4. What qualities does the griot consider most valuable in a ruler?

Part 2 - Perform

Directions: Because the story of Sundiata was meant to be heard and performed by the griots, you will now with your quad script an abridged performance of this story.

1. Assign each member of your quad one of the following roles:

Narrator:

Sundiata:

Soumaoro:

Griot:

2. Script your performance. It should be shortened but still be accurate and follow the general outline of the original story. Each member of the group should have at least two lines. If you wish, use the storyboard on the reverse side of this sheet.
3. Your performance will be graded as an in-class activity. An "A" performance will:
 - contain at least two (2) lines per group member
 - follow the same outline of the story
 - be accurate
 - be creative