

Sundiata Keita: the Lion King

A traditional tale

in a new verse version by Robert D. Shepherd



Prereading. Sundiata Keita (circa 1217 CE to circa 1255 CE), known as “The Lion King,” was the founder of the Mali Empire of West Africa. He was the son of a chief of the Mande people, who were ruled at the time by a tyrannical king of the neighboring Susu, or Soso, people. A physically weak child, he nonetheless grew up to be a mighty warrior who gathered together an army and successfully defeated the Soso. He then established a federation of local peoples, the empire of Mali,

which was notable for its political tolerance and prosperity. The story of Sundiata’s life is told and retold in West Africa by traditional storytellers known as griots, often to the accompaniment of a harplike instrument known as a kora. This story, often referred to as the Sundiata, is an example of oral epic literature. An **epic** is a long narrative that tells the story of heroes and/or gods and that embodies the ways of life of a people.

“I teach kings the history of their ancestors
so that the lives of the ancients might serve
them as an example, for the world is old,
but the future springs from the past.”

—Griot¹ Mamadou Kouyate

Invocation

Listen that you may learn of the great king,
Sundiata, whose name lives forever
in the songs of griots
and in the hearts of men.
Listen and learn what courage is,
and wisdom, too,
for this man had both in abundance,
great Sundiata, the lion of Mali!

1. **Griot.** Traditional West-African storyteller.



Lion Roaring. Photo by Antonio Ramirez.

I: The Hero's Childhood

There once was a Mande king,
a brave man, of brave men descended.
With him, whose name was Naré Maghann Konaté,
this story begins.

Maghann the Handsome,²
some called him, for he was a *comely* man, *comely: attractive*
and though his kingdom was small,
he was happy,
for he had what a man might want in this world,
power, wealth, and a son to succeed him.
But one day his destiny took a turn,
and the destiny of a king becomes,
as you know, the destinies of other men.
A divine hunter came unto Maghann
and spoke unto him a prophecy. He said:

2. **Maghann the Handsome.** Translation of Maghann Kon Fatta, name of a twelfth-century king of the Mandinka people of West Africa.

“Two hunters shall bring you a tale strange to hear.
To them you must listen, for they shall speak truth.
They shall tell how they hunted a fearsome beast
that ravaged forests and farms.
This beast was a wondrous creature,
having two forms and two separate but connected beings,
one animal and one human.
The animal, the hunters will tell you, they have killed,
but the human form, they shall claim, still lives.
Then they will bring forth in **shackles** a woman of **loathsome** visage,
and she shall be the human form of this terrible beast,
and being half human, half beast,
she shall be fierce,
as wild as the forest from which she came.
This woman, despite her appearance, you must marry,
for she will bear you a child who will build an empire;
For it is said that as a tiny seed grows into a mighty tree,
So can one man become a nation.”

shackles:
metal bonds,
typically
connected
by chains;
loathsome:
repulsive;
visage: facial
appearance

The king listened to the prophecy,
but was **disinclined** to believe it,
until the events foretold came to pass,
exactly as the hunter had said.

disinclined: not
predisposed toward

The hunters came with their wild story
and their wild captive,
and the king, though already married,
took the buffalo woman as a wife,
And she bore him a son,
whose name was Mari Diata.³
He would be known to all as Sudiata of the Keita⁴ clan,
taking his name from his mother, Songolon Kedju,
the buffalo woman.
And in time he would be known as the Lion King
and be honored among men.

But at first it was not so, for the boy
was lame and sickly and **gluttonous**

gluttonous: inclined
toward overeating

3. **Diata.** A Mandinka word meaning “lion.” 4. **Keita.** The clan name of Sudiata’s father



Mother and Child. Photo by Antonio Ramirez.

and without the lion's beauty or power.
The boy could not even walk, but crawled about, beastlike,
a pathetic thing.
And the king wondered, how can it be
that this is the son foretold by the prophecy?
And his heart was heavy.

Seeing the nature of the boy,
the king's first wife, Sassouma, openly *gloated*,
for she was consumed by jealousy's kin, ambition,
and wished her own son, Dankaran,
to be king,
in disrespect of *destiny* and of the gods.
But King Meghann held fast to the prophecy
and appointed Sundiata his successor,
and on his deathbed appointed his own griot, Balla Fasséké,
to advise the boy and chronicle his deeds.
But Sassouma had no more respect for her husband's wishes
than she had for the gods,

*gloated: expressed
malicious self-
satisfaction*

destiny: fate

and when Meghann died,
she had her son installed in his place.

And Sundiata knew not himself,
knew not the greatness within him,
coiled like a serpent sleeping.
Instead, he wallowed in self-pity,
unrealized,
unawakened.

So things would have continued
but for a woman's *spite*, *spite: hatefulness*
for such is the role of pettiness in the history of the world.
One day Sundiata's mother went to ask Sassouma for leaves of the baobob tree

to use for cooking,
and Sassouma insulted her rival, saying,
"None but a beast like your son can be born of a beast like you."

When Sundiata, where he lay, heard this,
he felt anger and shame
and called for a smith to bring him an iron rod,
and by his will alone,
with the rod as a prop,
raised himself slowly, painfully up,
amazing all who watched,
until, at last, he stood. For it is said,
that the mind is a muscle, and it is said as well
that one should not insult the crocodile
before crossing the water in which it lies.

Great is the power,
greater than that of brutish beasts,
of the man who knows that the spirit is not bound
by earthly constraints.

Balla Fasséké at once composed
a glorious hymn
extolling this feat,
the first of many songs
of praise for the deeds
of the Lion King.

II: The Hero's Journey

Now there lived a sorcerer, Soumaoro Kanté,
king of Sasso,

who threatened to engulf the world,
and Dankaran, the wrongful king,
was sorely afraid of Soumaoro's power,
for Soumaoro was the son of a mighty jinn,⁵
with seven heads
and could not be defeated in battle,
so Dankaran sent the half-sister and the griot of Sundiata
to Sosso on a mission
to win the sorcerer's favor,
and Sundiata's mother knew by this act
that the **usurper** Dankaran *usurper: a wrongful king*
had no more respect than did his mother
and begged her son to go into exile.
Sundiata wanted to stay and fight,
but his mother argued against this course.
"The time is not ripe for this harvest,"
she counselled, "for first you must cultivate your qualities
that you may return a man to claim your crown."

And so they set off, mother and son,
into the world, and traveled widely,
and lived among strange peoples in strange lands,
and Sundiata grew in power and wisdom,
and learned proverbs and the ways of the ancestors
and the skills of the hunter and the warrior,
and wherever he went in the wide world
he made friends,
for it is said that a man's wealth and worth
are measured by the friends he has,
and he who has friends
has treasure laid up
against difficult times.

At last, after many years, Sundiata came to the kingdom of Mema,
and there, by chance, in the market, he found a merchant,
selling leaves of the great baobab tree of Sundiata's home country,
and when he inquired about these,
he was told how the sorcerer king Soumaoro

5. jinn. a wizard or genie.



Baobab tree. Photo by Antonio Ramirez.

turned on Dankaran and sacked his kingdom.
It is said that if you invite a snake into your home,
even if you treat it with kindness,
you can expect to be bitten.
So it was with Dankaran.

For Sundiata,
this was the moment for which
he had prepared, the beginning of the harvest.
He set about gathering an army
to reclaim his kingdom.

But his mother, Sogolon, his wise **counsellor** *counsellor: adviser*
was not to see this day,
for as her son prepared to depart,
she passed from this world,
having fulfilled her duty and destiny.

III: The Hero's Return

Saddened by the loss of his mother,
but with a will of iron,

Sundiata made his way back to the land of his birth,
and as he travelled, he gathered a mighty army,
for he had made many friends,
and many were the people who had learned to hate
the cruel sorcerer Soumaoro.
When Soumaoro heard of this approaching army,
he was not afraid,
for he was the son of a jinn, and his power was great.

Soumaoro raised an army from among his subject peoples,
and met Sundiata's smaller force in battle
near the city of Kita.

Two battles they fought, and each time
Sundiata's smaller force **prevailed**,
but Soumaoro escaped each time,
for he had powerful magic
and could disappear from amid the **pitched** battle
and reappear on a far hill,
his evil, gloating laughter ringing over the land.

*prevailed: won,
triumphed*

*pitched: done with
cooperative, forceful
effort*

How can I defeat Soumaoro? wondered Sundiata,
and he consulted his **soothsayers**,
who advised him to make a great sacrifice
of oxen, rams, and **cocks**.

*soothsayers: fortune
tellers*

cocks: male chickens

An honest prayer does not go unanswered,
for as the sacrifice began,
there appeared in the camp of Sundiata
his lost sister, and his griot,
who had escaped from Sosso
while the evil sorcerer was away.

They told Sundiata many things.
Sundiata's griot, Balla Fasséké,
told of stealing into Soumaoro's **chamber** of secrets.

chamber: room

There he found great riches, stolen by the sorcerer
from the lands of the nine kings whom he defeated.

And in this chamber were many owls,
and great **urns** full of snakes,
and the severed heads of the nine kings,
and the largest balafon⁶ ever made by men,

urns: pots

6. balafon. A xylophone-like instrument.

and it was only by playing upon this balafon
that Balla Fasseke was able to charm the snakes
and **retain** his life.

retain: keep

And Sundiata's sister, Nyakhaleng Juma Suukho,
told him of Soumaoro's evil intentions toward her,
of how he had held her prisoner and threatened to have his way with her,
but even he, evil as he was, dared not such a great offense,
for one's deeds return upon one manyfold.

Sundiata consulted with them,
seeking to learn the source of Soumaoro's power,
and he was sorely **wrought**,
for the sorcerer seemed **invincible**.

wrought: upset
invincible: unbeatable,

Nyakhaleng thought about this throughout a long evening,
and the next day, she came to her brother.

"It is true," she said, "that hot water can kill a man,
but cold water can kill him, too." In other words,
there is more than one way to accomplish one's ends.

If Soumaoro could not be killed in ordinary battle,
then they would use against him a **strategem**.

*strategem: a well-
thought-out plan*

Nyakhaleng would go to Soumaoro's camp,
saying that she had reconsidered and would agree to marry him,
and she would get the sorcerer drunk on palm wine,
and using her **wiles**, wring from him the secret of his power. *wiles: tricks*

And the brave sister of Sundiata did as she promised.

She stole away to the sorcerer's encampment
and took with her palm wine
and danced for him

and passion for her rose within him,
and she professed to curse her brother for his weakness
and told the sorcerer that she had long admired his power
which was unlike any the world had previously known.

Drunk with lust and pride and palm wine,
the sorcerer boasted, "Indeed, I cannot be killed in battle,
for I derive my power from my totem⁷ spirit,
from which my people are descended,

7. **totem.** Animal deity from which a people believe themselves to be descended.

the great white cock.”

“Oh, you are mighty, my lord,” said Nyakhaleng.
“Surely nothing in the heavens or on the earth can harm you.”

At this, Soumaoro laughed.

“What, my lord?” said Nyakhaleng.

“How surprised people would be if they knew,”
he said,

“That the mighty sorcerer Soumaoro, son of a jinn,
king of the Sosso, conqueror of kingdoms,
would lose all his power if his father, the jinn,
were but scratched by an arrow fashioned of a white cock’s spur⁸
tipped with ground guinea-corn and korte⁹ powder.”

At this, Soumaoro fell off to sleep with Nyakhaleng in his arms,
and as he laughed in his sleep, she moved his heavy arm from off her breast
and stole away from him.

Nyakhaleng ran back to her brother,
and together they prepared a wooden arrow
with a tip made from a white cock’s spur
and its tip coated with ground guinea-corn and korte powder,
and they waited.

The next day, Soumaoro remembered nothing
but was furious to find Nyakhaleng gone.
He resolved to fall upon Sundiata’s camp and destroy it utterly,
killing everyone. Then he would take Sundiata’s sister by force.
Such were his evil intentions.

He **roused** his archers and horsemen,
and his army was three times the size of Sundiata’s,
and he rode out to battle.

*roused: awakened
or stirred up*

The two armies looked at one another across the plain,
and Soumaoro and Sundiata sent owls back and forth,
carrying messages with which they **taunted** one another:

taunted: mocked

“The numbers of my army are like the numbers of **yams**;
they cannot be counted,” said Soumaoro.

*yams: tuber, or
root vegetable,
similar to a sweet
potato*

“My army will feast upon yours as upon yams,” said Sundiata.

8. **spur**. Hook-like attachment found on the legs of some birds, used for fighting 9. **korte**. Powder made of various ground-up roots

“I am poison to you, like that of the mushroom that steals away **sanity**,”
said Soumaoro.

*sanity:
rationality,
reason*

“I am like the rooster that eats the mushroom but feels nothing,”
said Sundiata.

“I am the hot coal that will burn your foot,” said Soumaoro.

“I am the rain that puts out the fire of the coal and carries it away,”
said Sundiata.

“I am the great tree that looks down upon the others of the forest,”
said Soumaoro.

“I am the vine that creeps up the side of the tree and strangles it,”
said Soumaoro.

Soumaoro's pride was his downfall,
for secretly, Sundiata had sent an archer,
Sankarang Madiba Konte, to the home of the jinn,
Soumaoro's father, and though the jinn had
magically transformed himself into various creatures
in order to slither, then run, then fly away,
Sankarang had fired the wooden arrow with its special poison
and its cock's spur tip
and grazed the jinn's left wing
(for he had transformed himself into an eagle),
and so it was that even as Soumaoro boasted of his invincibility,
he was doomed.
Sundiata drew his own bow
and let loose an arrow
that pierced Soumaoro in the heart,
and then his army poured over Soumaoro's like oil over water,
and it was done.

Sundiata called a great **council** of the twelve kingdoms,
and people came far and wide to see him in the city of Kaba,
and he told them, “The rule of the cruel Soumaoro is ended.
I ask of you to join together under my guardianship,
that we may be a mighty nation
and never again have to submit to despotism.
And all agreed and hailed Sundiata, the great liberator,

*council: group of
people brought
together for
discussion or
debate*

and thus the empire of Mali came to be,
and peace was known throughout the empire
for over two hundred years,
for as skilled as he was as a warrior,
Sundiata was even more skilled in the arts of peace,
and he created a great administrative center,
and he taught the people to grow new crops,
such as beans, rice, and cotton,
and to establish trade routes throughout the empire,
so that no one would have to want,
and for these accomplishments
he is remembered: great Sundiata,
the Lion King,
the liberator who forged an empire
and brought peace and prosperity
to the people.



Lion Roaring. Photo by Antonio Ramirez.

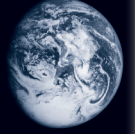


Celebratory Dance. Photo by Antonio Ramirez.

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Viewing the Selection in Context



A Reading of the Selection

The *Sundiata* is one of the great treasures of the world's literature. Like the Hindu epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and the Greek epics the Iliad and the Odyssey, this poem was originally told orally and passed down from generation to generation by skilled storytellers, who recited its verses to the accompaniment of musical instruments. Like these other epics, the *Sundiata* communicates the values of a culture. The primary character, or **protagonist**, of the story is remembered as a liberator, someone who cherished freedom and was willing to fight for it on his people's behalf. *Sundiata* is also notable for his strong will, which enabled him to overcome the physical limitations that he faced as a child; for his courage, which enabled him to defeat his enemies; for the wisdom that he displayed in figuring out how to defeat his enemy; and for the tolerance and justice with which he administered his empire. In many respects, he is the model of the just ruler, of what a man and king should be.

Cultural/Historical Context

The **Mali Empire**, also known as the Manding Empire, dominated West Africa from about 1230 to 1600 CE. At its height, the empire was larger than western Europe. Widely admired, the empire was described by the North African scholar and traveler Ibn Battuta, who visited it in 1352 CE, as being a place where injustice was not tolerated and in which people could be absolutely secure, having nothing to fear "from robbers or men of violence." The empire was originally a loose federation of tribes of the Mandinka people.

About the Author

Like the other great oral epics from the world's literatures, the *Sundiata* has no single author. Instead, it had generations of authors who composed the work orally and then passed it down to other singers, or griots. Becoming a griot was (and still is) a rigorous, daunting undertaking, involving mastering traditional stories and verse forms, memorizing great bodies of traditional material, and becoming an accomplished musician and performer. The *Sundiata* became known to the Western world when it was first collected from traditional storytellers in the early twentieth century.



Lion Roaring. Photo by Antonio Ramirez