

# Sundiata: an epic of old mali essay



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Sundiata is about the kingdom in Mali. The king of Mali, Maghan, had multiple wives and he had two children by two different wives. Sundiata was his first born child, so he was the one that was suppose to take the throne. Unfortunately, Sundiata could not walk so the second son of Maghan had to take the throne. When Maghan died the second son took the throne and he ended up being very bad to the kingdom and to Sundiata. After Sundiata was treated badly he all of a sudden began to walk and vanished away from the kingdom of Mali with his mother.

Sundiata and his mother went to another kingdom far away where they were accepted and treated nicely. Years after Sundiata has left Mali, news comes to him that Mail is under attack and that the second son, Sundiata's brother, is not doing anything about it. So, Sundiata returns to Mali to win the battle and to take the throne away from his brother. The historical context of Sundiata goes all the way back when Islam was first carried to sub-Saharan Africa by traders and Sufis. The Arab conquest of North Africa in the seventh and early eighth centuries placed an outlook for increasing contacts between Arabs and Black Africans.

The Arabs began to cross the Sahara and when they arrived they found thriving kingdoms in position. Then Ghana (modern Mali), one of the largest sub-Saharan kingdoms, was found about 300 C. E. By the ninth century Ghana was a partner and rival of the northern Berbers for control of Saharan trade; traded thought these routes were gold, slaves, hides, and ivory in exchange for copper, silver, metal goods, horses, dried fruit, cloth, and salt. By the eleventh century traders from the north invited people from the south

to adopt their religion and came to establish new communities of faith and good works.

The common people were not affected until the nineteenth century, leading traders and rulers to begin to convert to Islam. Around 1235 the Keita kings of Mali had greater access to the Niger River so they exceeded Ghana in importance. Therefore, Mali's founding king, Sundiata, encouraged his people to accept Islam and Sundiata became a national epic about the tale of the king, Sundiata. The universal religion that is evident in the epic is Islam. One way that this religion is evident is when Sundiata's mom states that "the fortified town of Sosso was the bulwark of fetishism against the word of Allah" (Sundiata 41).

Throughout the epic sorcery, witchcraft, and prophets were brought up. These two belief systems in Old Mali somewhat overlapped. In Old Mali Islam was the major component and it was used as a myth to justify the heavenly powers of the rulers. Also Sundiata's family ancestry maps out back to Bilali. Bilali was one of the original followers of Muhammad, the founder of Islam. So, by the time of Sundiata Islam was definitely established dating back to all of this. Details in Sundiata that indicate the existence of long distance trade is when Sundiata's sister finds him baobab leaves in a market.

Sologon notices "a woman who was offering for sale nafiola and gnougou, condiments unknown to the people of Mema" (Sundiata 43). So, Kolonkan, Sundiata's sister, recognizes the baobab leaves and many other vegetables that Sologon used to grow in her garden back home in Niani. These leaves

and vegetables being present in Mema show that there was some kind of trade route going on because the people of Mema did not recognize it, only Kolonkan because she was from Niani. The Sahara Desert where Mali extends into is the source of salt, a life charitable substance that provided one of the staple possessions of trade.

It is also the home to the nomads who challenged the farmers and traded with them. The roles that women played in the societies in the epic were gender roles. Women are responsible for raising the children, providing the sauce for the average meal, and tending to the livestock. Women in royal families had a political part to play by marrying into families of other leaders. Women are said to propose to the desires of the men around them. The men in this epic view a woman as weak; Sundiata even says that “ a woman trembles before a man” (Sundiata 32).

In a civilization where hunting and warring are so dominant and physical strength is looked at as favorably, women are looked down upon because of their physical incompetent. In the Islamic religion in the epic the women may be looked down on because of their physical strength, but the value of women is very well respected. Another role is the mental strength of women in the epic. The strength of Sologon is essential and paramount to the success of Sundiata. Sologon remains the center of strength for the family as she was named “ the buffalo woman” and as she brought her family from Mali to Ghana.

Women were able to outwit and find weaknesses of men just as Sologon and Nana did. Women in Old Mali might have been soundless, but they were

significant. Overall, Sundiata has taught me much about West African history. I have learned that Islam first reached West Africa in the 9th century A. D. thanks to the arrival of traders from the north. Islam was useful for these traders because it provided them with a widespread language and gave them access to support from other Muslims wherever they went. I also learned that the society was polygamous for men so children were identified by their mother.

Also that family is essential because it produces new humans and is led by elders; it also provides people with a connection to every individual and to the group as a whole. I also learned that villages formed superior political unions through the use of branch relationships symbolized by tribute.

Therefore, parents provided presents to their children on out of the ordinary occasions and in return the children provided their parents with respect and work. Last, that fearlessness is the associated emotion between hunters and warriors. On the other hand, fear is one of the unraveling circumstances of men and women.