

# The epic of sundiata: historical evidence?



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Upon first inspection, The Epic of Sundiata seems to be a fantastical tale of witches, super human strength, and a man who cannot be deterred from his destiny. While the epic may not contain the classical makings of reliable historical evidence, it is essential to delve deeper into the story so as to explore the many facets of medieval Malian culture that are revealed.

Somewhat like the Iliad and the Odyssey, the Epic of Sundiata was passed down as an oral tradition through generations of Malian people. Thus, there has been artistic license taken with the story, as it was passed from one griot (or storyteller) to the next. However, the epic has more to offer than exciting storytelling techniques. The Epic of Sundiata, while not an exact and verifiable history of medieval Mali, holds historical significance because it reveals aspects of Malian religion, moral values, and beliefs on destiny.

By following Sundiata's life and ascent to power, the epic reveals the various religious beliefs of the time, illustrating how both paganism and Islam existed in unison. In the epic, there are ample references to Allah, for example, when Sundiata finally gains the use of his legs, his mother exclaims,

“ Oh day, what a beautiful day,

Oh day, day of joy;

Allah Almighty, you never created a finer day.

So my son is going to walk!”

In this moment, it is clear that Sogolon is referencing a singular and Islamic god, as she uses the term to refer to God used by Muslims. Presenting a

contrast to The Epic of Sundiata, Ibn Khaldun, a celebrated Arab scholar during the 1400's, gives a much more basic and straightforward account of medieval Mali and the genealogy of the Malian kings. Khaldun's history supplements that of the epic, and highlights the existence of Islam in the region. He writes: " Then Mansa Wali the son of Mari Jata went on the pilgrimage during then reign of the al-Zahir Baybars [1260-77]." This is important to note as Mansa Wali was the son of Mari Jata, or Sundiata, and was ruling only one generation after the founding of the Empire. Thus, Ibn Khaldun's account works to verify the evidence of the existence of Islam in medieval Mali in the epic.

The epic also shows evidence of a belief in supernatural powers that are seemingly unrelated to Islam during the rise of the Mali Empire. Many of the elements of Sundiata's rise to power contain magical and fantastical elements. A prime example of this is the epic's use of " soothsayers", or people who can see into the future. The epic explains the importance of the soothsayer,

" The hunter disappeared but neither the king, Nare Maghan, nor his griot, Gnankouman Doua, forgot his prophetic words; 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 it season"

To the Western eye the presence of super natural components within the the epic may discredit the story as whole. However, it is important to note that these elements reveal important information about the belief, and possible reliance on, such people as soothsayers in medieval Mali.

The Epic of Sundiata contains moral lessons that demonstrate what it means to be “ great” in Malian culture. Sundiata was a celebrated leader, and is a figure in Malian history who is worshipped even today. His character in the epic contains many god-like features, such as his super-human strength and unmatched moral fiber. While it is uncertain whether or not this depiction of Sundiata is historically accurate, it does reveal the Malian standards of an individual considered to have outstanding moral fiber. Within the grander story of Sundiata’s life, there lie other stories which are meant to morally guide the audience. A salient example of this is Sundiata’s reaction to the witches when they attempt to steal from him,

“ There he found the nine witches stealing gnougou leaves. They made a show of running away like thieves caught red-handed. ‘ Stop, stop, stop, poor old women’ said Sundiata, ‘ what is the matter with you to run away like this. This garden belongs to all.’”

The witches reward Sundiata’s kindness by failing to honor his step mother’s wish to harm him. This anecdote within the epic carries a message of generosity, charity, and karma. The story of Sundiata’s treatment of the witches indicates that the aforementioned qualities were important enough within the culture to necessitate their communication to innumerable generations of Malian people.

The Epic of Sundiata demonstrates the importance of destiny in medieval Mali. From the prophecy of the soothsayer through the end of the epic, destiny and Sundiata are inarguably linked. From the moment of Sundiata’s birth he is destined to become a great leader and king, and his father, King

Nare Maghan, does not question this truth even when his son seems incapable of walking. Griot Djeli Mamadou Kouyaté explains this phenomenon simply,

“ 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.”

Sundiata's destiny proves so inflexible that even his step-mother, Soumossou, who wished to kill him because “ his destiny ran counter to that of [her] son”, could not. It is even asserted that at age 10 Sundiata, “ already had that authoritative way of speaking which belongs to those who are destined to command.” As indicated repeatedly, the Epic of Sundiata provides ample evidence that destiny was a central belief of the culture in medieval Mali.

When compared to Ibn Khaldun's account of the Mali Empire, the Epic of Sundiata seems less credible because it is not a meticulous historical account of the time period. However, the epic discloses much more than a simple or straightforward history of medieval Mali. The epic works to reveal the thoughts, beliefs, religions, and motivations of a people. Standing alone the epic cannot definitively inform a precise history of Sundiata's rise to power, but when supplemented with other accounts, such as Khaldun's or the journals of travelers, the Epic of Sundiata becomes invaluable. The Epic of Sundiata is rich with tradition, and to write it off as “ collection of misleading fabrications” is not only naive, but also damaging to the study of medieval West Africa.

## Bibliography

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