

Sundjata

This story is told by a **jali** - or griot - an oral historian of Mali, West Africa. Sundjata (also known as Sundiata) was an actual person, the first King of Mali, born about 1210 A.D. The Battle of Karina (told about at the end of the story) took place in 1235 A.D. This version is abridged and adapted from three written versions of the Epic of Sundjata and with information from Yacine Kouyate from Mali. It is intended for a teenage audience. [Text copyright, 2001 by Nick Bartel]

Part One: The Jali Speaks

I am a jali, master of the art of **eloquence**, descendant of the royal historians. Since time **immemorial** my family has been in the service to the princes of Mali. We are the **vessels** of history and hold in our minds the secrets of many centuries. Through our speech we bring to life the **valiant** deeds of kings to younger generations. I teach kings the history of their ancestors so the lives of the ancients may guide them. I shall teach you your history so you may be guided, too. I shall teach you of our time of greatness. The past is only the seed of the future.

Listen, children of Mali. Don't doubt my words. What I say is what was told to me by my father, as was told by his father to him, and so on through the generations. We are sworn to pass on our stories as we learned them.

Now listen to the story of Sundjata, the Lion King of Mali, as it was told from time beyond memory. Sundjata, the father of the bright country, the master of a hundred conquered kings! Sundjata, great among kings, and **peerless** among men, beloved of Allah for he was the last of the great conquerors! Sundjata, the greatest in a great line of kings.

The first kings of Mali were not **indigenous**. They came from the East and were descendants of a faithful servant of the Prophet Muhammad, may the peace of Allah be upon him. It was this **lineage** that held the power and they were initiated into the arts of hunting and healing. It was through them that their people conquered the neighboring lands and they became kings of a vast empire known as Mali.

From this noble line came Maghan, the handsome, father of Sundjata. Maghan had three wives and six children - three boys and three girls. His first wife was

the beautiful Sassouma. The second wife was Sogolon, the Buffalo Woman, the mother of Sundjata.

Return now to the time before Sundjata the great Lion King was born, before he united the territories and ethnic groups of Mali into a mighty empire. Return to the **savanna** along the river before Sundjata's mother and father had met.



Baobab tree of the Savanna - Photo by [Thadd Jackson](#)

Activity: Write a newspaper Want Ad for a Jali.

Sundjata: Part Two - The Prediction

King Maghan was **renowned for** his good looks in every land, but he also was a good king and loved by all the people. In his capital of Niani he loved to sit under the great shading arms of the silk-cotton tree which dominated the royal yard of his great clay palace. Here he could enjoy the shade and the breeze during the hottest times. Unlike his **subjects**, he could not go down to the river to get cool. As was the custom, the king would only present himself to the people on special occasions, so he was somewhat isolated within the royal fences.

Photo of Jali with three-stringed instrument by David Conrad in Dioila, Mali 1976. [MANSA](#)

His jali was with him singing his praises while playing on a three-stringed guitar. Servants waited upon him and fanned him, chasing away the flies. Maghan's beautiful wife Sassouma was in the palace, pregnant with their second child. His only son Dankaran was already eight years old and often came to sit on the ox-hide beside his father.



As he sat in the shade of the mighty silk-cotton tree, a hunter from far away approached carrying an offering of meat. (Since the hunter had killed an animal on the king's land, he was **obligated** by custom to give the king part of the animal.) His **garments** were covered with cowry shells which showed him to be a master in the art of hunting. He wore a reddish-brown skull cap over his gray hair braided in the fashion of the hunters of that land. These hunters were known as great **soothsayers**, or fortune tellers, as well. The man walked up to the king and bowed. "I salute you, King, and bring you part of the animal I have killed on your land."



The jali of the king spoke for his master. "Welcome stranger, and thank you for observing our customs. You have traveled far, sit and share with us some stories of our neighboring lands."

The hunter came and sat down upon a mat. He said, "I am not a teller of tales. I do not **spin adventurous yarns**, nor trick my listeners with a golden tongue. But I can boast of being a **seer** among the best."

He took twelve cowry shells out of his hunter's bag, raised them to his mouth and murmured an **incantation**. Then he threw the shells before him on the mat. He looked at them for a long time studying the way they fell and the patterns they made. Then he addressed the king. "Oh, great ruler, our world is full of mystery. Great things come from small. This silk-cotton tree springs from a tiny seed. Kingdoms are like trees; some will become like this great silk-cotton tree, and others will remain like dwarf palms. Mighty rivers begin as small streams. And who can recognize in the little child the great king to come? Know this, King Maghan. Your land is about to emerge from the night."

The jali of the king was puzzled and said, "Hunter, your words are strange. Make them as clear to us as the savannas of our land."

"Oh, King. Listen to my message. Your successor is not yet born," he said trying to avoid the eyes of the king who looked **apprehensively** at his son while stroking his beard. "I see two hunters coming to your city. They have come from afar. A woman comes with them. Oh, that woman! She is ugly. On her back is a hump giving her the appearance of a buffalo. Her eyes are **misshapen**, too. But this is the woman you must marry, for she will be the mother of the one who will make the name of your family **immortal**. This son will be mightier than all who have preceded him."

The hunter picked up his cowry shells and returned them to his bag. "I am only passing through, and now I must return."

The king laughed as if to appear that he was not listening deeply to the hunter's words and he said, "Don't you have any other stories for a king?"

The hunter replied, "I have spoken not to entertain, sire. But only after you sacrifice a red bull calf and let his blood sink deep into the soil, will this girl come. Farewell, great king. I am but a passing stranger."

The hunter disappeared down the trail, but the king did not forget his words and later that day ordered the sacrifice of the red bull calf. Gossip of the stranger's words were spread throughout the palace.

News of this prediction were met with fear by Sassouma, the queen and mother of eight-year-old Dankaran, whom she wanted to become the next king. The

seer's words were as disturbing to her as they were attractive to her husband. Did Maghan not want to be remembered as the father of powerful rulers? Did he not want to take more wives and have more children? Such were the thoughts of the king and queen.

Part Three: The Hunters

After the harvest season in a neighboring land, two brothers, Oulamba and Oulani, were eager for traveling and hunting. They were dressed in hunters' narrow trousers and the wide and long overgarment dyed by roots and bark to a reddish-brown. They were barefoot, but able to cross any **terrain**, and each had a hunter's whistle to signal across great distances. They carried a **quiver** of arrows and a bow and their leather hunting bags were covered with cowries, testaments to the kills they had made on behalf of the village. The youths were strong and slender and anxious to prove their skills to the people of their village. As was the custom, the young hunters consulted a soothsayer before traveling abroad.



Dorling Kindersley
Software

Courtesy Iverson

The soothsayer wished them well on their trip and said, "Remember well to befriend the hungry and to keep your word. If you do, great honor will come to you." The two brothers thanked the soothsayer and set out on the trail.

Two days' journey beyond their village they met two other hunters, one of whom was brutally wounded and the young hunters feared that he would not survive. His leg had been torn apart by the sharp horns of a wild buffalo. An amazing buffalo was **ravaging** the countryside of Daw and daily it claimed some victims. The brothers learned that no one dared leave the village after sunset and none of the fields were safe from the destruction of the **marauding** animal. The leader of Daw had promised a fine reward to the hunter who killed the buffalo and rid the village of this curse.

Courtesy Dries Visser Safaris



The two brothers decided to try their luck and therefore advanced deep into the land where the buffalo had caused its destruction. **Warily** they pursued the buffalo and by chance came upon an old woman by the side of a river. She was weeping and **lamenting**. She was thin and frail with white hair and her skin was wrinkled and scaly like a lizard's. She **beseeked** the young hunters for something to eat. Touched by her tears and remembering the advice of the soothsayer, the younger brother approached and gave her some dried meat from his hunter's bag. When she had eaten well, she smiled broadly showing her gums and her few remaining teeth. She said, "May Allah return to you the charity which you have shown me."

They were getting ready to leave when the old woman stopped them. "I know that you are going to try your luck against the Buffalo of Daw, but you should know that many others before you have met their death through their foolishness. Arrows are quite useless against the buffalo because of its thick hide. But, young hunters, your hearts are generous and it is you who will vanquish the buffalo. I am the buffalo you are looking for and your generosity has vanquished me. I have killed a hundred and seven hunters and wounded seventy-seven more. Every day I kill an **inhabitant** of Daw. But now my anger against my brother has run its course. I have punished my brother enough for depriving me of my part of the inheritance from our parents. He has taken my land, my home, all my possessions, and turned me out of the village. And now he will have my life." She spoke and was resigned to her death which would soon come.

"Here, take this staff, this rock, and this egg and go to the plain over there where I **browse** among the king's crops. Before using your bow you must take

aim at me three times with this staff. Then draw your bow and I shall be **vulnerable** to your arrow. I shall fall, but shall get up and pursue you, but you will eventually kill me. As a proof of your victory you must cut off the buffalo's tail and bring it to the king of Daw who is my brother."

Crazy with joy, the brothers seized the staff, the rock, and the egg, but the old woman stopped them with a gesture and said, "There is... one condition."

"What is that?" the older brother asked impatiently.

"The king promises the hand of the most beautiful maiden of Daw to the victor. When all the people of Daw are gathered and you are told to choose among the beautiful maidens of the village, you must search in the crowd until you find a very ugly maiden, uglier than you can imagine, sitting apart on the observation platform. You must choose her for she is my **spirit double**. She will be an extraordinary woman for the man who is able to possess her. Swear to me that you will choose her, hunters."

The young hunters promised and eagerly took the staff, rock, and egg from the old woman. The older brother was suspicious of her, but said nothing until they were out of her sight. "She is only leading us to our death," he said.

"Then I will die like a brave warrior, not a coward," he said. "Let's go!" And the two brothers continued on to the plain of Daw.

Part Four : The Buffalo



Out on the plain of Daw the two young hunters saw a browsing buffalo with black hide and silver horns. The older brother became frightened and didn't trust the old woman's powers and tried to convince his younger brother to turn around. But the younger brother advanced cautiously stooping to hide himself in the tall grass. Then the buffalo raised its head and saw the young hunter. It **bellowed**, lowered its mighty head and charged.

The hunter took the staff and pointed it at the buffalo three times. The buffalo hesitated and the hunter shot an arrow into its **massive** neck. The arrow seemed only to inflame the buffalo, and it charged again. Turning to run the hunter tossed the staff behind him and up sprang a forest of bamboo. The buffalo could not **maneuver** easily through the forest, and the hunter was able to escape to the plain once more. The older brother quickly climbed a tree to avoid being killed.

Once again out on the plain the buffalo pursued the young hunter. With its horns nearly tearing into his body, the hunter tossed the rock behind him and the plain was **transformed** into an immense **labyrinth** of stones. The buffalo was again delayed while the hunter **hurtled** like a meteor across the plain. It was as if rabbit's feet had sprouted, so swiftly did he run.

Then the buffalo once again was able to bear down on the hunter, and almost exhausted, he reached for the egg in his bag and let it fall behind him. The plain was transformed into a muddy marsh and the buffalo fell into the clinging **mire**. The hunter took his bow again and shot the buffalo and this time killed it.

He took his hunter's whistle and signaled his success. His older brother climbed down from the tree and congratulated him. They cut off the buffalo's tail and headed for the village of Daw.

Part Five : The Choice

The brothers arrived at the village of Daw to meet the king. Drums spread the joyful news throughout the land that the buffalo had been slain, and soon fathers accompanied by daughters of marriageable age came to the village.

The next morning everyone was gathered in the main square. Young children perched like grasshoppers on the branches of trees sat gazing at the festivities. A platform had been built for the king's family. The square was filled with the excited throng that circled the carcass of the buffalo that had been brought there. The hunters' names, Oulamba and Oulani, were sung by the crowd in praise of their great deed. Others, whose relatives had been killed by the buffalo, shrieked insults at its **mutilated** body. Drums and eight-string hunter's guitars joined the voices in their praises. The dancing was **punctuated** by foot stomping and clapping.

When the king appeared a deep silence settled on the crowd. Next to him was his jali and the two hunters. The beauty of the two young hunters set every woman day dreaming that she might be the one chosen.

The jali spoke directly for the king who remained silent. "The buffalo is dead, and here is the hunter Oulani who killed it. I promised the most beautiful woman in marriage as a reward. Great hunter, look upon the daughters of Daw and take your pick." The crowd cheered its approval, and the young hunter was **exhilarated** by the beauty which was **arrayed** before him. The maidens wore **festive** dress and gold shone in their hair and their fragile wrists bent under the weight of bracelets. Smiling teeth as white as rice **vied for** the hunter's attention. As he walked among the crowd, he wondered how he could decide among such loveliness.

But overhead a hawk appeared and after circling, **plummeted** three times over a platform. The hunter remembered the words of the old woman and tore his eyes from the smiling beauties.

On the raised platform he spotted Sogolon, with a humped back and bulging eyes partially hidden by a veil pulled shyly across her face. The hunter elbowed his way through the crowd, took her by the hand and pulled her into the middle of the great circle.

The crowd gasped in disbelief. Was the hunter **mocking** them or had he gone mad? He had chosen one of the king's daughters, the girl everyone called the Buffalo Woman because of her misshapened body with its huge hump.

Bringing Sogolon to the King of Daw, the hunter said, "This is the one I have chosen and would like for a wife."

The king could not control his laughter at the hunter's choice made from all the beautiful maidens. Then general laughter spread throughout the crowd. Insults were hurled by the rejected maidens, and **ridicule** was heaped upon them by all. The brothers left that very day pursued by the **mockery** of the people of Daw. As they left they kicked the dust from their feet vowing never to return there again. They escorted Sogolon, the Buffalo Woman, away from Daw and started on their return to their own village.

Part Six : Rejection

On the path home the young hunters slowed their pace to ease the journey for Sogolon, the buffalo woman. She was weeping for she was leaving her home. Even though her villagers and her own family had ridiculed her, she was sad to be leaving the only home she had ever known. But soon her tears dried and she **reflected upon** the moment when the handsome young hunter had chosen her, out of all the beautiful girls on earth! It was the sort of moment that she would always hold precious in her store of memories. But she was a daughter of a king, and she knew that her destiny was partly determined by her spirit double. Was she to become the wife of a mere hunter?

The three spoke along the trail, and Sogolon was put in good spirits by the kindness of the young hunters. As night was about to fall, they began to search for a village where they could stay. **Hospitality** is freely offered to the stranger in Africa, and the two brothers were offered one hut and Sogolon another.

Later that night the older brother said, "Aren't you going to sleep with your wife tonight? You are the one who was victorious over the buffalo."

And the younger brother said, "But you are the eldest. You know that it is not fitting for me to take a woman before you."

So later that night after the village was asleep, the older brother Oulamba went to the hut where Sogolon slept. In spite of her hump, she looked irresistible in her sleep. And Oulamba took off his hunter's garment and lay down beside her.

But in her sleep she was protected by her spirit double. Every hair on her body sharpened and lengthened becoming like **quills** of a porcupine which prevented anyone from touching her. Of course Oulamba called upon his spirit double, too, and the two spirits battled throughout the night. But Sogolon's was much more powerful.

In the morning Oulamba returned to the hut half dead from weariness and rejoined his brother. "I couldn't do anything!" he cried angrily. "You were the one who triumphed over the buffalo, so it is up to you to make her your wife."

"Fine," he answered. "I shall go to her tonight."

They continued on their journey, and at night they again found a village which provided them with huts and food. In the middle of the night the younger brother Oulani slipped into her hut. As he crossed the threshold, he was caught

in her magic spell. He froze in an upright position half in and half out of the doorway and slept that way until the morning. He awoke and returned to tell his brother of his misfortune.

"She is a very powerful sorceress. Her spells are more powerful than any we know. I failed miserably with her, just as you did."

Oulamba bitterly agreed, "Sogolon is not for us."

They decided to try nothing more and continue on their journey. Oulani had been over the moon with joy just a few days before. Now he wished that he had not followed the request of the old woman to choose Sogolon; he could have chosen from the most beautiful women who wanted to be his wife! Now he would be remembered only for his choice of the Buffalo Woman. Never would he have an extra-ordinary son from her who would perpetuate his name. Such was the bitterness he now felt.

Continue on to [The Birth and Childhood of Sundjata](#)