

from **SUNDIATA**  
An Epic of Old Mali

D. T. Niane

translated by

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◆ *These excerpts from Sundiata show the hero in his first childhood triumph and end with his great triumph in adulthood. As you read, note Sundiata's qualities as a leader and hero to his people.*

### CHARACTERS IN THE EPIC

**Maghan Sundiata:** the hero of the epic. He is also called "Mari Djata" and "Sogolon Djata."

**King Maghan Kon Fatta:** Sundiata's father, the king of Mali.

**Sogolon Kedjou:** Sundiata's mother.

**Balla Fasséké:** Sundiata's griot.

**Sassouma Bérété:** the queen mother; the first wife of the king.

**Dankaran Touman:** Sassouma Bérété's son. He is King Maghan Kon Fatta's successor and Sundiata's half brother.

**Soumaoro Kanté:** the sorcerer-king of Sosso; Sundiata's nemesis.

### from The Lion's Awakening

*Maghan Sundiata, also called Mari Djata, is the son of King Maghan Kon Fatta of Mali and his second wife, Sogolon Kedjou. A mysterious hunter has predicted that the boy will one day be a mightier leader than Alexander the Great, the legendary Greek conqueror. Few people believe this prophecy, however, because Mari Djata is already seven years old and has still not learned how to walk. He seems an unlikely candidate for emperor.*

*King Maghan Kon Fatta dies and his first wife, Sassouma Bérété, makes her own son the king. Always jealous of Mari Djata and*

*his mother, she banishes them to the backyard of the palace, forcing them to live a life of poverty.*

Sogolon Kedjou and her children lived on the queen mother's leftovers, but she kept a little garden in the open ground behind the village. It was there that she passed her brightest moments looking after her onions and gnougous.<sup>1</sup> One day she happened to be short of condiments and went to the queen mother to beg a little baobab<sup>2</sup> leaf.

1. **gnougous:** root vegetables.

2. **baobab** (bā'ō·bab'): a tropical tree whose leaves are used as a cooking herb.



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Baobab landscape.

What role does the baobab tree play in the conflict between *Sassouma* and *Mari Djata* (*Sundiata*)?

"Look you," said the malicious *Sassouma*, "I have a calabash<sup>3</sup> full. Help yourself, you poor woman. As for me, my son knew how to walk at seven and it was he who went and picked these baobab leaves. Take them then, since your son is unequal to mine." Then she laughed derisively with that fierce laughter which cuts through your flesh and penetrates right to the bone.

*Sogolon Kedjou* was dumbfounded. She had never imagined that hate could be so strong in a human being. With a lump in her throat she left *Sassouma*'s. Outside her hut *Mari Djata*, sitting on his useless legs, was blandly eating out of a calabash. Unable to contain herself any longer, *Sogolon* burst into sobs and seizing a piece of wood, hit her son.

"Oh son of misfortune, will you never walk? Through your fault I have just suffered the greatest affront of my life! What have I done, God, for you to punish me in this way?"

*Mari Djata* seized the piece of wood and, looking at his mother, said, "Mother, what's the matter?"

"Shut up, nothing can ever wash me clean of this insult."

"But what then?"

"*Sassouma* has just humiliated me over a matter of a baobab leaf. At your age her own son could walk and used to bring his mother baobab leaves."

"Cheer up, Mother, cheer up."

"No. It's too much. I can't."

"Very well then, I am going to walk today," said *Mari Djata*. "Go and tell my father's smiths to make me the heaviest possible iron rod. Mother, do you want just the leaves

3. calabash: a hollowed-out gourd used as a bowl.

of the baobab or would you rather I brought you the whole tree?"

"Ah, my son, to wipe out this insult I want the tree and its roots at my feet outside my hut."

Balla Fasséké, who was present, ran to the master smith, Farakourou, to order an iron rod.

Sogolon had sat down in front of her hut. She was weeping softly and holding her head between her two hands. Mari Djata went calmly back to his calabash of rice and began eating again as if nothing had happened. From time to time he looked up discreetly at his mother who was murmuring in a low voice, "I want the whole tree, in front of my hut, the whole tree."

All of a sudden a voice burst into laughter behind the hut. It was the wicked Sassouma telling one of her serving women about the scene of humiliation and she was laughing loudly so that Sogolon could hear. Sogolon fled into the hut and hid her face under the blankets so as not to have before her eyes this heedless boy, who was more preoccupied with eating than with anything else. With her head buried in the bedclothes Sogolon wept and her body shook violently. Her daughter, Sogolon Djamarou, had come and sat down beside her and she said, "Mother, Mother, don't cry. Why are you crying?"

Mari Djata had finished eating and, dragging himself along on his legs, he came and sat under the wall of the hut for the sun was scorching. What was he thinking about? He alone knew.

The royal forges were situated outside the walls and over a hundred smiths worked there. The bows, spears, arrows and shields of Niani's warriors came from there. When Balla Fasséké came to order the iron rod, Farakourou said to him, "The great day has arrived then?"

"Yes. Today is a day like any other, but it will see what no other day has seen."

The master of the forges, Farakourou, was the son of the old Nounfairi, and he was a soothsayer like his father. In his workshops there was an enormous iron bar wrought by his father Nounfairi. Everybody wondered what this bar was destined to be used for. Farakourou called six of his apprentices and told them to carry the iron bar to Sogolon's house.

When the smiths put the gigantic iron bar down in front of the hut the noise was so frightening that Sogolon, who was lying down, jumped up with a start. Then Balla Fasséké,<sup>4</sup> son of Gnankouman Doua, spoke.

"Here is the great day, Mari Djata. I am speaking to you, Maghan, son of Sogolon. The waters of the Niger can efface the stain from the body, but they cannot wipe out an insult. Arise, young lion, roar, and may the bush know that from henceforth it has a master."

The apprentice smiths were still there, Sogolon had come out and everyone was watching Mari Djata. He crept on all fours and came to the iron bar. Supporting himself on his knees and one hand, with the other hand he picked up the iron bar without any effort and stood it up vertically. Now he was resting on nothing but his knees and held the bar with both his hands. A deathly silence had gripped all those present. Sogolon Djata closed his eyes, held tight, the muscles in his arms tensed. With a violent jerk he

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4. **Balla Fasséké:** Before he died, the king had named Balla Fasséké as Mari Djata's griot. As griots traditionally served kings, this appointment indicated Maghan Kon Fatta's faith in the prophecy that Sundiata would one day become king. Here, Balla Fasséké is playing the role of the town crier for Sundiata.

threw his weight on to it and his knees left the ground. Sogolon Kedjou was all eyes and watched her son's legs which were trembling as though from an electric shock. Djata was sweating and the sweat ran from his brow. In a great effort he straightened up and was on his feet at one go—but the great bar of iron was twisted and had taken the form of a bow!

Then Balla Fasséké sang out the "Hymn to the Bow," striking up with his powerful voice:

"Take your bow, Simbon,  
Take your bow and let us go.  
Take your bow, Sogolon Djata."

When Sogolon saw her son standing she stood dumb for a moment, then suddenly she sang these words of thanks to God who had given her son the use of his legs:

"Oh day, what a beautiful day,  
Oh day, day of joy;  
Allah<sup>5</sup> Almighty, you never created  
a finer day.  
So my son is going to walk!"

Standing in the position of a soldier at ease, Sogolon Djata, supported by his enormous rod, was sweating great beads of sweat. Balla Fasséké's song had alerted the whole palace and people came running from all over to see what had happened, and each stood bewildered before Sogolon's son. The queen mother had rushed there and when she saw Mari Djata standing up she trembled from head to foot. After recovering his breath Sogolon's son dropped the bar and the crowd stood to one side. His first steps were those of a giant. Balla Fasséké fell into step and pointing his finger at Djata, he cried:

"Room, room, make room!  
The lion has walked;  
Hide antelopes,  
Get out of his way."

Behind Niani there was a young baobab tree and it was there that the children of the town came to pick leaves for their mothers. With all his might the son of Sogolon tore up the tree and put it on his shoulders and went back to his mother. He threw the tree in front of the hut and said, "Mother, here are some baobab leaves for you. From henceforth it will be outside your hut that the women of Niani will come to stock up."



Ceremonial headdresses from Mali.

5. **Allah**: the Muslim name for God.

Sogolon Djata walked. From that day forward the queen mother had no more peace of mind. But what can one do against destiny? Nothing. Man, under the influence of certain illusions, thinks he can alter the course which God has mapped out, but everything he does falls into a higher order which he barely understands. That is why Sassouma's efforts were vain against Sogolon's son, everything she did lay in the child's destiny. Scorned the day before and the object of public ridicule, now Sogolon's son was as popular as he had been despised. The multitude loves and fears strength. All Niani talked of nothing but Djata; the mothers urged their sons to become hunting companions of Djata and to share his games, as if they wanted their offspring to profit from the nascent glory of the buffalo-woman's son. The words of Doua on the name-giving day<sup>6</sup> came back to men's minds and Sogolon was now surrounded with much respect; in conversation people were fond of contrasting Sogolon's modesty with the pride and malice of Sassouma Béré-té. It was because the former had been an exemplary wife and mother that God had granted strength to her son's legs for, it was said, the more a wife loves and respects her husband and the more she suffers for her child, the more valorous will the child be one day. Each is the child of his mother; the child is worth no more than the mother is worth. It was not astonishing that the king Dankaran Touman was so colorless, for his mother had never shown the slightest respect to her husband and never, in the presence of the late king, did she show that humility which every wife should show before her husband.

6. The words . . . name-giving day: Doua, King Maghan's griot, had repeated the hunter's prophecy at the infant Sundiata's ceremonial naming.

People recalled her scenes of jealousy and the spiteful remarks she circulated about her co-wife and her child. And people would conclude gravely, "Nobody knows God's mystery. The snake has no legs yet it is as swift as any other animal that has four."

*While still a child, Sundiata becomes a great hunter. He becomes friends with Manding Bory, the son of his father's third wife. When an attempt to kill Sundiata fails, Sassouma and her son Dankaran Touman drive Sundiata into exile. The hero and his family find refuge in the kingdom of Mema.*

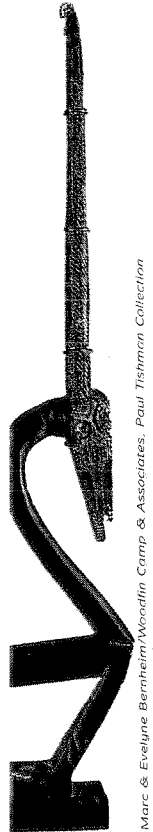
*As Sundiata grows to manhood, the evil Soumaoro Kanté, sorcerer-king of a neighboring kingdom, gains power and conquers many nations. When Sundiata hears that Soumaoro has invaded Mali, he decides to challenge the sorcerer-king and gain control of his rightful kingdom. Sundiata thus makes his way to Sosso, Soumaoro's capital city, to meet Soumaoro face to face. Sundiata fights and wins several battles along the way and becomes a popular leader. Many new soldiers gladly join his ranks.*

### *from Krina*

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. Up till that time, Sundiata and Soumaoro had fought each other without a declaration of war. One does not wage war without saying why it is being waged. Those fighting should make a declaration of their grievances to begin with. Just as a sorcerer ought not to attack someone without taking him to task for some evil deed, so a king should not wage war without saying why he is taking up arms.

Soumaoro advanced as far as Krina, near the village of Davala on the Niger and

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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 Djata's tent and spoke. The son of Sogolon in his turn sent his owl 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;<sup>7</sup> 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 vomit."

"As for me, I am the ravenous cock, 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

7. . . . the wild yam of the rocks: When the vines of these yams grow in boulder-strewn areas, their underground tubers anchor them among the rocks and make them very difficult to uproot.

climbs to the top of the forest giant."

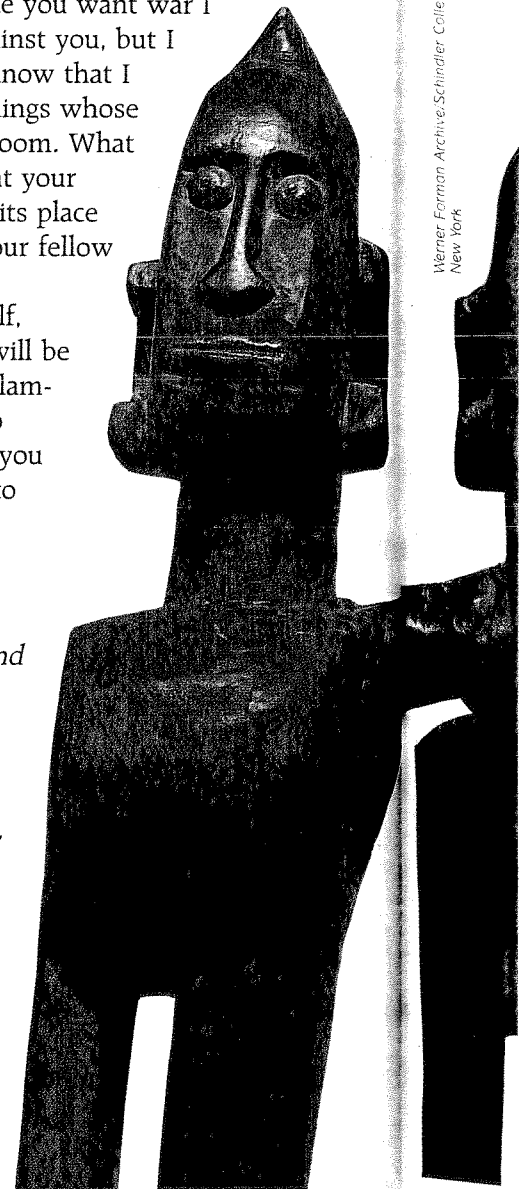
"Enough of this argument. You shall not have Mali."

"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 whose heads adorn my room. What a pity, indeed, that your head should take its place beside those of your fellow madcaps."

"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."

*Balla Fasséké, Sundiata's griot, and Nana Triban, Sundiata's half-sister, have been imprisoned in Soumaoro's palace, but they finally escape. They join Sundiata on the eve of the battle of Krina. Fakoli Koroma, Soumaoro's nephew, also arrives at the camp. Because Soumaoro kidnapped his*



Statue of ancestral couple from Mali.

wife, Fakoli has vowed revenge. Nana Triban and Fakoli pledge their loyalty to Sundiata, and Nana Triban tells Sundiata that the way to insure Soumaoro's defeat is to touch him with a cock's spur. On the morning of the battle, Sundiata and Manding Bory, his half-brother, devise a plan to strip Soumaoro of his power.

"Brother," said Manding Bory, "have you got the bow ready?"

"Yes," replied Sundiata. "Look."

He unhooked his bow from the wall, along with the deadly arrow. It was not an iron arrow at all, but was made of wood and pointed with the spur of a white cock. The cock's spur was the Tana of Soumaoro,<sup>8</sup> the secret which Nana Triban had managed to draw out of the king of Sosso.

"Brother," said Nana Triban, "Soumaoro now knows that I have fled from Sosso. Try to get near him for he will avoid you the whole battle long."

These words of Nana Triban left Djata worried, but Balla Fasséké, who had just come into the tent, said to Sundiata that the

soothsayer had seen the end of Soumaoro in a dream.

The sun had risen on the other side of the river and already lit the whole plain. Sundiata's troops deployed from the edge of the river across the plain, but Soumaoro's army was so big that other sofas<sup>9</sup> remaining in Krina had ascended the ramparts to see the battle. Soumaoro was already distinguishable in the distance by his tall headdress, and the wings of his enormous army brushed the river on one side and the hills on the other. As at Neguéboria,<sup>10</sup> Sundiata did not deploy all his forces. The bowmen of Wagadou<sup>11</sup> and the Djallonkés stood at the rear ready to spill out on the left towards the hills as the battle spread. Fakoli Koroma and Kamandjan<sup>12</sup> were in the front line with Sundiata and his cavalry.

With his powerful voice Sundiata cried "*An gnewa*."<sup>13</sup> The order was repeated from tribe to tribe and the army started off. Soumaoro stood on the right with his cavalry.

Djata and his cavalry charged with great dash but they were stopped by the horsemen of Diaghan and a struggle to the death began. Tabon Wana<sup>14</sup> and the archers of Wagadou stretched out their lines towards the hills and the battle spread over the entire plain, while

8. **the Tana of Soumaoro:** The cock's spur (the spiny projection on the leg of a rooster) is Soumaoro's Tana, that is, the taboo, or prohibition, imposed on him by his ancestors. In breaking this taboo, Soumaoro will incur the wrath of his ancestors who will then withdraw the magic powers that have made him invincible.

9. **sofas:** warriors.

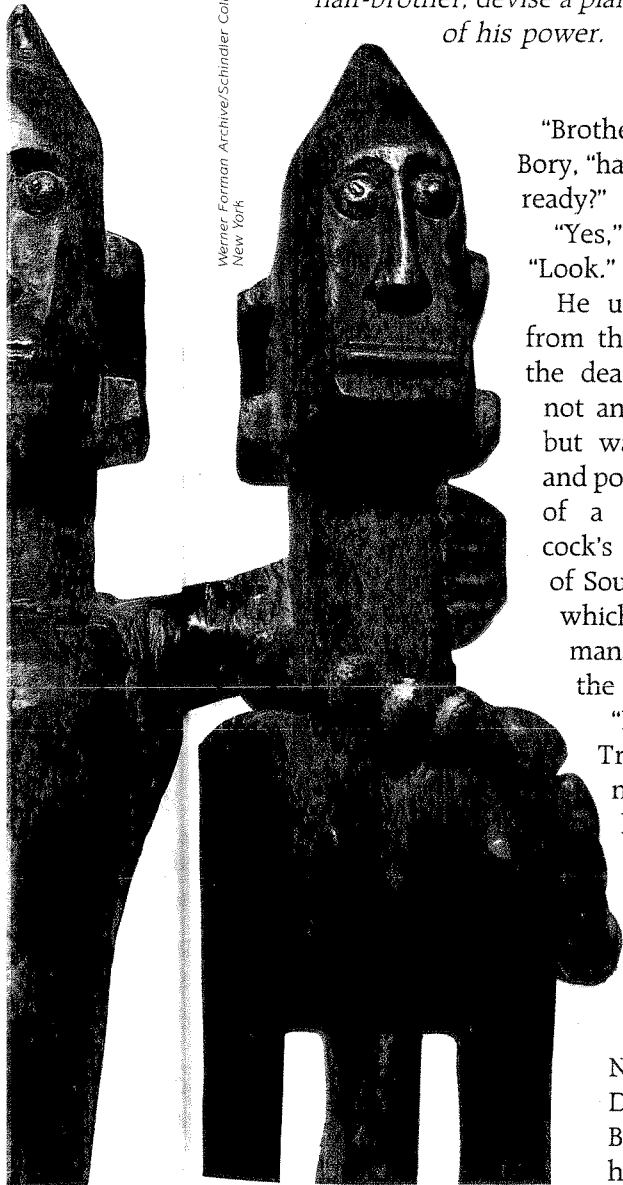
10. **Neguéboria:** an earlier battle fought and won by Sundiata.

11. **Wagadou:** a name for Old Ghana.

12. **Kamandjan:** king of Sibi; one of Sundiata's childhood friends.

13. **An gnewa:** Forward.

14. **Tabon Wana:** King of Tabon; also called Frankamara.



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an unrelenting sun climbed in the sky. The horses of Mema were extremely agile, and they reared forward with their forehooves raised and swooped down on the horsemen of Diaghan, who rolled on the ground trampled under the horses' hooves. Presently the men of Diaghan gave ground and fell back towards the rear. The enemy center was broken.

It was then that Manding Bory galloped up to announce to Sundiata that Soumaoro, having thrown in all his reserve, had swept down on Fakoli and his smiths. Obviously Soumaoro was bent on punishing his nephew. Already overwhelmed by the numbers, Fakoli's men were beginning to give ground. The battle was not yet won.

His eyes red with anger, Sundiata pulled his cavalry over to the left in the direction of the hills where Fakoli was valiantly enduring his uncle's blows. But wherever the son of the buffalo passed, death rejoiced. Sundiata's presence restored the balance momentarily, but Soumaoro's sofas were too numerous all the same. Sogolon's son looked for Soumaoro and caught sight of him in the middle of the fray. Sundiata

struck out right and left and the Sossos scrambled out of his way. The king of Sosso, who did not want Sundiata to get near him, retreated far behind his men, but Sundiata followed him with his eyes. He stopped and bent his bow. The arrow flew and grazed Soumaoro on the shoulder. The cock's spur no more than scratched him, but the effect was immediate and Soumaoro felt his powers leave him. His eyes met Sundiata's. Now trembling like a man in the grip of a fever, the vanquished Soumaoro looked up towards the sun. A great black bird flew over above the fray and he understood. It was a bird of misfortune.

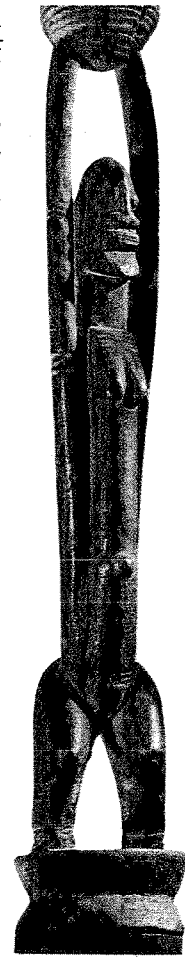
"The bird of Krina," he muttered.

The king of Sosso let out a great cry and, turning his horse's head, he took to flight. The Sossos saw the king and fled in their turn. It was a rout. Death hovered over the great plain and blood poured out of a thousand wounds. Who can tell how many Sossos perished at Krina? The rout was complete and Sundiata then dashed off in pursuit of Soumaoro.

*Sundiata and Fakoli pursue Soumaoro, who has fled with his son Sosso Balla. They succeed in capturing Sosso Balla, but Soumaoro escapes into a cave. He is never heard from again. Sundiata heads for the nearby village of Koulikoro, where he waits for his army.*



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The victory of Krina was dazzling. The remains of Soumaoro's army went to shut themselves up in Sosso. But the empire of Sosso was done for. From everywhere around kings sent their submission to Sundiata. The king of Guidimakhan sent a richly furnished embassy to Djata and at the same time gave his daughter in marriage to



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the victor. Embassies flocked to Koulikoro, but when Djata had been joined by all the army he marched on Sosso. Soumaoro's city, Sosso, the impregnable city, the city of smiths skilled in wielding the spear.

In the absence of the king and his son, Noumounkeba, a tribal chief, directed the defense of the city. He had quickly amassed all that he could find in the way of provisions from the surrounding countryside.

Sosso was a magnificent city. In the open plain her triple rampart with awe-inspiring towers reached into the sky. The city comprised a hundred and eighty-eight fortresses and the palace of Soumaoro loomed above the whole city like a gigantic tower. Sosso had but one gate; colossal and made of iron, the work of the sons of fire. Noumounkeba hoped to tie Sundiata down outside of Sosso, for he had enough provisions to hold out for a year.

The sun was beginning to set when Sogolon Djata appeared before Sosso the

Magnificent. From the top of a hill, Djata and his general staff gazed upon the fearsome city of the sorcerer-king. The army encamped in the plain opposite the great gate of the city and fires were lit in the camp. Djata resolved to take Sosso in the course of a morning. He fed his men a double ration and the tam-tams<sup>15</sup> beat all night to stir up the victors of Krina.

At daybreak the towers of the ramparts were black with sofas. Others were positioned on the ramparts themselves. They were the archers. The Mandingoes<sup>16</sup> were masters in the art of storming a town. In the front line Sundiata placed the sofas of Mali, while those who held the ladders were in the second line protected by the shields of the spearmen. The main body of the army was to attack the city gate. When all was ready, Djata gave the order to attack. The drums resounded, the horns blared and like a tide the Mandingo front line moved off, giving mighty shouts. With their shields raised above their heads the Mandingoes advanced up to the foot of the wall, then the Sossos began to rain large



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15. tam-tams: small drums.

16. Mandingoes: the inhabitants of Old Mali

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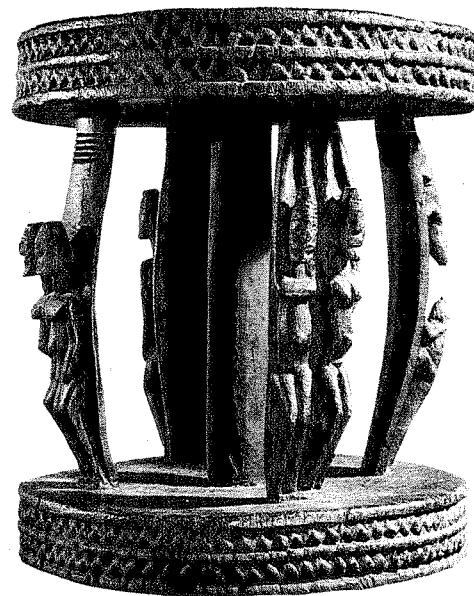
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stones down on the assailants. From the rear, the bowmen of Wagadou shot arrows at the ramparts. The attack spread and the town was assaulted at all points. Sundiata had a murderous reserve; they were the bowmen whom the king of the Bobos had sent shortly before Krina. The archers of Bobo are the best in the world. On one knee the archers fired flaming arrows over the ramparts. Within the walls the thatched huts took fire and the smoke swirled up. The ladders stood against the curtain wall and the first Mandingo sofas were already at the top. Seized by panic through seeing the town on fire, the Sossos hesitated a moment. The huge tower surmounting the gate surrendered, for Fakoli's smiths had made themselves masters of it. They got into the city where the screams of women and children brought the Sossos' panic to a head. They opened the gates to the main body of the army.

Then began the massacre. Women and children in the midst of fleeing Sossos implored mercy of the victors. Djata and his cavalry were now in front of the awesome tower palace of Soumaoro. Noumounkeba, conscious that he was lost, came out to fight. With his sword held aloft he bore down on Djata, but the latter dodged him and, catching hold of the Sosso's braced arm, forced him to his knees whilst the sword dropped to the ground. He did not kill him but delivered him into the hands of Manding Bory.

Soumaoro's palace was now at Sundiata's mercy. While everywhere the Sossos were begging for quarter,<sup>17</sup> Sundiata, preceded by Balla Fasséké, entered Soumaoro's tower. The griot knew every nook and cranny of the palace from his captivity and he led Sundiata to Soumaoro's magic chamber.

When Balla Fasséké opened the door to the room it was found to have changed its appearance since Soumaoro had been touched by the fatal arrow. The inmates of the chamber had lost their power. The snake in the pitcher was in the throes of death, the owls from the perch were flapping pitifully about on the ground. Everything was dying in the sorcerer's abode. It was all up with the power of Soumaoro. Sundiata had all Soumaoro's fetishes<sup>18</sup> taken down and before the palace were gathered together all Soumaoro's wives, all princesses taken from their families by force. The prisoners, their hands tied behind their backs, were already herded together. Just as he had wished, Sundiata had taken



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Stool used in religious ceremonies, from Mali. *The base and seat represent the earth and sky, connected by a central tree. Images of nature play an important role in Sundiata.*

How does the narrator use nature imagery to describe the downfall of Sosso?

17. **quarter:** mercy.

18. **fetishes:** objects believed to have magical powers.

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Sosso in the course of a morning. When everything was outside of the town and all that there was to take had been taken out, Sundiata gave the order to complete its destruction. The last houses were set fire to and prisoners were employed in the razing of the walls. Thus, as Djata intended, Sosso was destroyed to its very foundations.

Yes, Sosso was razed to the ground. It has disappeared, the proud city of Soumaoro. A ghastly wilderness extends over the places where kings came and humbled themselves before the sorcerer-king. All traces of the houses have vanished and of Soumaoro's seven-story palace there remains nothing more. A field of desolation, Sosso is now a spot where guinea fowl and young partridges come to take their dust baths.

Many years have rolled by and many times the moon has traversed the heaven since these places lost their inhabitants. The bourein,<sup>19</sup> the tree of desolation, spreads out its thorny undergrowth and insolently grows in Soumaoro's capital. Sosso the Proud is nothing but a memory in the mouths of griots. The hyenas come to wail there at night, the hare and the hind come and feed on the site of the palace of Soumaoro, the king who wore robes of human skin.

Sosso vanished from the earth and it was Sundiata, the son of the buffalo, who gave these places over to solitude. After the destruction of Soumaoro's capital the world knew no other master but Sundiata.

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19. bourein: a dwarf shrub.

### First Thoughts

Which episode from this epic stands out most clearly in your mind? Why? Did any portion of the epic remind you of any other stories you have read?

### Identifying Facts

1. How are Mari Djata (Sundiata) and his family mistreated after his father dies?
2. How does Mari Djata avenge his mother's humiliation at the hands of Sas-souma?
3. Why do Sundiata and Soumaoro have a "dialogue" at the beginning of "Krina"? What **metaphors** do they use to describe themselves?
4. What is the outcome of the **conflict** between Sundiata and Soumaoro?

5. What does Sosso look like before the battle of Krina? What does it look like afterward?

### Interpreting Meanings

1. The incident in which Mari Djata (Sundiata) begins to walk reveals a great deal about his **character**. From that incident, what can you infer about Sundiata's sense of justice? What does the incident reveal about his physical strength and determination?
2. Three brief songs occur in "The Lion's Awakening." What events do these songs accompany? What purpose do you think these songs serve in the narrative?