

## CHAPTER 5 | LESSON 3 The Empire of Mali

## Sundiata: The Lion King

*Sundiata (c. 1210–c. 1260) was a weak and sickly child who rose to greatness. He created the Empire of Mali, which lasted about 300 years.*

Sundiata was the first emperor of Mali. He was born around 1210 to Nare Fa Maghan, king of the Malinke, a people of western Africa. Although his father was a king, Sundiata's rise to power was far from easy. With 11 older brothers, Sundiata seemed the least likely to rule. He was a slow child who continued to crawl long after other children his age were walking. He is often described as being disabled.

**The Sundiata Legend** Much of what is known about Sundiata is a mixture of fact and legend. His empire and achievements were real. Yet there are many stories about him that contain elements of myth and magic. These stories are part of the African oral tradition. Once, professional storytellers and historians called “griots” were the main source of news in the villages of western Africa. The griots often recited in marketplaces, where large numbers of people gathered. As stories were passed on from generation to generation, they acquired legendary qualities. The story of Sundiata has grown to epic proportions. In its most complete form, its telling may take as long as 60 hours.

The first magical element in the story of Sundiata's life involves a prophecy. According to legend, a hunter arrived at the court of Nare Fa Maghan. He was able to foretell the future. He told the king that a very ugly woman would soon appear at the city gates. The hunter advised the king to marry her. He predicted that they would have a son who would become more powerful than Alexander the Great. Soon afterwards, such a woman did appear. Her name was Sogolon Koudouma, but she was so ugly that she was nicknamed “Buffalo Woman.” The king took her to be one of his wives. They had a son. This child would

eventually become known as “Sundiata.” The baby was not only sickly but was as ugly as his mother. He didn't talk and instead of walking he crawled.

Sundiata was a big disappointment to his father. Unable to believe that this backward child could ever become a great ruler, Nare Fa Maghan chose another son, Dankaran Touman, to be his heir. Then the old king died.

After Nare Fa Maghan's death, Sogolon ordered her seven-year-old son to walk. To everyone's surprise, Sundiata did so, although with great difficulty. He also spoke for the first time, saying, “I will walk now.” One version of this event tells how he used an iron rod to pull himself up. In the process, he bent the rod. This display of strength was impressive but also worrisome. Dankaran Touman's mother began to fear that Sundiata might be a threat to her son's kingship. Sundiata's mother feared that her son—now viewed as a possible rival to Dankaran Touman—might be in danger.

Sogolon and Sundiata went into exile. Their wanderings eventually led them to the city of Mema, where they stayed for three years. Mema's ruler, Mussa Tunkara, had no children and treated Sundiata like a son. He taught Sundiata the arts of warfare. Sundiata became a mighty warrior, winning battles for Mema. In the meantime, a king named Sumanguru was trying to rebuild the empire of Ghana. He had conquered many kingdoms, including Manding, where Sundiata was born. When Sundiata learned of Sumanguru's conquest, he began raising an army to reclaim his homeland.

In 1235, Sundiata and Sumanguru met in battle at Kirina. According to legend, both were sorcerers and had magical powers. Sundiata is said to have terrified Sumanguru's troops by roaring like a lion. Sumanguru's power was strengthened by eight spirits, who appeared above his head. Nevertheless, Sundiata's magic was stronger. He hit

## HISTORY MAKERS: SUNDIATA CONTINUED

Sumanguru with an arrow that he had specially prepared.

The arrow had the desired result of taking away Sumanguru's power. Although the arrow did not kill him, it caused Sumanguru to flee. Sundiata pursued him and his retreating troops. When he reached Sumanguru's kingdom of Sosso, Sundiata destroyed it by fire.

**Creating an Empire** Following his victory at Kirina, Sundiata created the Empire of Mali. He invited twelve kings of lands in the African savannah to the Gbara, or Great Assembly. There he "divided the world" with his allies. He created a constitution and outlined the Empire's organization. Each king would remain ruler of his own lands, but all would be united within the Empire. Sundiata became Mansa, meaning "king of kings" or "emperor."

Sundiata established the Empire's capital at Niani, a city located on the upper Niger River. He set about improving agriculture. Soldiers cleared land for the planting of cotton, grain, and other food crops. Agriculture became productive.

Sundiata understood the importance of trade. He established Mali's trading center at Niani. Situated on the upper Niger, it was ideally suited for trade. Mali was rich in gold and copper—items that formed the basis of its trade. Merchants and traders from as far away as France and England purchased Malian gold.

Sundiata laid the groundwork for a thriving empire. Although he died around 1260, the Empire of Mali lasted for more than 300 years.

**Review Questions**

1. How has the legend of Sundiata been maintained over the centuries?
2. Why didn't Nare Fa Maghan name Sundiata as his heir?
3. How did Sundiata create the Empire of Mali?

**Critical Thinking**

4. **Evaluating** What was the importance of the Battle of Kirina?
5. **Analyzing Causes** In what ways did Sundiata prove to be a wise ruler?
6. **Recognizing Effects** What effect has African oral tradition had on our knowledge of Sundiata's life?