

# History Topic of the Month

## The Epic of Sundiata and the Griots

We tend to assume that most societies have been keeping written records for at least a thousand years. However, many societies did not start using written records until the 14th century. These are known as non-literate societies. You can still find societies like this all around the world. But, even though they did not write down their histories and stories, this did not mean that they had no other ways of recording it and passing it along for future generations. Stories were told and passed on for each generation. This is called an oral tradition.

A great example of this is *The Epic of Sundiata*, which tells the story of the creation of the Mali Empire. This story has been passed along by storytellers called Griots since the 12th century.



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In northern Burkina Faso, a group of griots call on a Fulani family to recite family histories through poetry, song, and music.

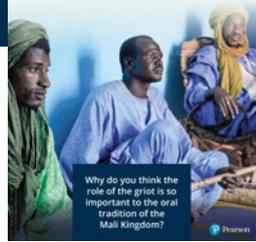
### What was the Mali Empire?

The Mali Empire was established c.1235. At its height, it was not only the wealthiest empire in the world but also the largest empire in West Africa. Like most empires, it began from a single powerful kingdom. The Mandinka Kingdom was in the Mande region (modern-day southern Mali and Upper Guinea). At first, the Mandinka Kingdom was small. But it grew to become the Mali Empire under the leadership of Sundiata Keita.

### What was there before the Mali Empire?

The region where the Mali Empire was located is referred to historically as western Sudan. (This is not to be confused with the modern-day country of Sudan.) Western Sudan spanned from modern-day Guinea Bissau to Chad. Arabic travellers, geographers and historians were the first to write down stories about this area. They gave the region the Arabic name Bilad al-Sudan, meaning *The Land of The Blacks* in English. The western Sudan region became the home of some of the most powerful empires the world has ever seen.

Throughout history, an empire is usually formed when one kingdom, city or country in an area becomes more powerful than its neighbours and conquers their land – for example, the Roman Empire started in the city of Rome before conquering all of Italy, then most of Europe, and parts of Asia and Africa. Western Sudan has seen three great empires over the last 900 years: the Ghana Empire, the Mali Empire and the Songhai Empire.



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The first empire in the area was the Ghana Empire, also known as Wagadou. (Despite its name, it has no connection to the modern-day country of Ghana.) This empire was founded sometime between 300 and 800 AD by the Soninke people. It covered modern-day Mali, Mauritania, and Senegal. The empire was rich, with many local resources such as gold, ivory and salt, and its location helped to encourage trade across North Africa. This helped the Soninke people gain control over many trade routes. The empire was very successful, becoming more powerful and expanding their territory.

But, the Ghana Empire fell in the 11th century. The lack of written historical records makes it very hard to know the reason for this. But we do know the empire split up into lots of smaller chiefdoms. These would later become part of the Mali Empire.

## Who is Sundiata Keita?

Sundiata Keita is the main character of the *Epic of Sundiata*. The poem tells the story of his life and explains how he created the Mali Empire.

Sundiata became ruler of the Mali Empire after freeing the Mande people who had been conquered by King Soumaoro Kanté from the neighbouring Sosso Kingdom.

## What is an epic poem?

An epic poem is a very long poem, as long as a book, that tells heroic people's stories and journeys. It is a type of story-telling poetry and therefore does not always rhyme; instead, it tells a story in short verse, describing the characters and settings. Some of the main features of an epic poem are supernatural forces and universal themes such as the battle between good and evil. All of these can be found in *The Epic of Sundiata*.

## The Epic of Sundiata

The epic starts by preparing the reader to experience the story of a great hero.

*'I am going to tell you of Sundiata, he whose exploits will astonish men for a long time yet. He was great among kings, he was peerless among men; he was beloved of God because he was the last of the great conquerors.'*

It then explains a prophecy made to Naré Maghann Konat, the king of the Mandinka people (a kingdom of people in southern Mali).

A hunter from a foreign land visits the king. He tells the king to take a second wife, because he is destined to have a glorious son with her who shall become a great emperor. The king, already married and the father to a healthy son, only does this years later and marries a woman called Sogolon Kedjou, who gives birth to a son – Sundiata Keita.



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Keita was a weak child and depended on his mother. Despite this, Naré Maghann Konat believed in the prophecy and made him the heir to the throne. However, the king's first son (and Sundiata's half-brother) was furious and seized the throne when their father died. He exiled Keita from the Mandinka Kingdom. But after the Mandinka Kingdom was conquered by the Sosso Kingdom, the Mande people begged Sundiata to free them from the Sosso king, Soumaoro Kanté.

Finally, after some convincing, Sundiata comes back and manages to free the Mande people from the Sosso Empire. From this, Sundiata led the Mandinka Kingdom to become one of the wealthiest empires ever to have existed.

Some of Sundiata's greatest achievements included the establishment of the Manden Charter which was the first ever human rights charter in history! The charter was a part of the oral tradition, meaning it was never written down but passed down through speech. Some of the rights in the Manden Charter included freedom of speech and a right to education.

## How do we know about the epic and what is a griot?

The griot's role is to be a historian, storyteller and keeper of knowledge for a society. Often, great leaders and kings would have griots to narrate their life events and record them, such as Balla Fasséké for Sundiata Keita. Balla Fasséké was assigned to Sundiata before his father's death.

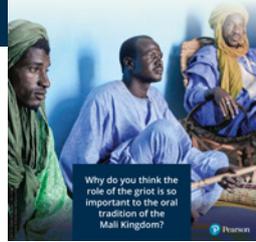
Griots would often be referred to as the king's right hand, showing their importance. You can find griots all over West Africa but mainly in Islamic regions such as Mali, Gambia, and Senegal.



Contributor: © Military PCF / Alamy Stock Photo

Griots of Sambala, King of Medina (Fula people, Mali), 1890.

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The word 'griot' comes from French, but different areas use their own names for griots. In Mandinka, the word is jeli(w). Griot is a hereditary profession. This means a job that is passed from a parent to their child. The next generation of griots are taught from a young age the stories of their ancestors. They continue the tradition by creating new poems and stories about new events in their society.

We know about the story of Sundiata as the griot tradition continues today. The songs and poems about the making of the Mali Empire are still sung on the streets of Mali!

The story became more widely known when material from the epic started being collected in the early 20th century by the French historian William Ponty. In 1960, Guinean historian Djibril Tamsir Niane translated the epic into French and five years later into English. The epic has allowed more people to understand the history of the Mali Empire.

## The influence of the epic

The story of Sundiata Keita is exciting as it has been passed down orally from generation to generation for hundreds of years. It has helped us build our understanding of what we call reliable sources of historical information. It also shows us how important it is to look at indigenous ways of recording history. The Epic of Sundiata is crucial to helping us understand oral history in western Africa.

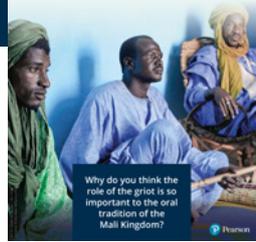
## How accurate is the epic?

However, because the epic has been passed down orally over hundreds of years, many historians have argued that it may not be completely accurate. Imagine if you were told a story by someone who had heard it from someone else, who had heard it from someone else, but a hundred times over! You might not be sure that the version you heard was exactly what happened.



Contributor: © incamerastock / Alamy Stock Photo

Mansa Musa, (1280-1337), sitting on a throne, and holding a gold coin, drawing, 1375. Mansa Musa is one of the most famous Emperors of the Mali Empire.



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Some parts of the epic are very exaggerated, which has made some people doubt its accuracy. However, there are written accounts by the traveller Ibn Battuta referring to Sundiata Keita and his conversion to Islam, so we know he was real. Battuta's account also confirms the existence of one of Sundiata Keita's successors: his great-nephew Mansa Musa. This all helps us believe the epic is a historical story.

## What do epic poems mean for history?

There are questions about how valid and historically accurate the epic was. This can help us think more about what we consider accurate historical records to be. Do we only trust things that are written down? Remember, just because something is written down, doesn't mean it hasn't been exaggerated or that it tells the complete truth.

There is plenty of evidence that suggests much of the epic is true. As well as that, the fact that these songs have been passed down through the generations from the 12th century to today shows their importance to the Mande people.

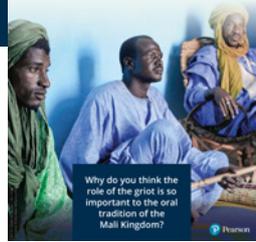
## The griots today

The epic and the griots still play an essential role for the Mande people today. Although their role has changed a great deal over the centuries, their importance in carrying on a famous tradition does not go unnoticed.



Contributor: © Jeff Morgan 08 / Alamy Stock Photo

Kora player Toumani Diabate performing with his band on stage at Hay Festival 2010 Hay on Wye Powys Wales UK. He is part of the continuing Griot tradition.



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Some griots have also become internationally famous. Malian griot Sidiki Diabaté recorded the first-ever Kora album in 1970. A kora is a stringed instrument used by griots. His son Toumani Diabaté continued the griot tradition, even performing at the Glastonbury Festival.

It's safe to say the practice, although it has changed, lives on and helps to change the way we think about history. In the words of the Mande griots, 'We griots are depositories of the knowledge of the past. Other people use writing to record the past... They do not feel the past anymore for writing lacks the warmth of the human voice'.

## Discussion points

- Why do you think the role of the griot is so important to the oral tradition of the Mali Kingdom?
- Why do people consider Sundiata a folk hero throughout history right up to modern day Mali?
- Why do you think epic poems were so widely used in pre-colonial kingdoms of Africa and Asia?
- Oral traditions are often overlooked by many historians. Why do you think this is?
- Why do you think the role of griots has changed as we enter the modern era?
- Why do you think so many strong empires arose from western Sudan?
- The name Bilad al-Sudan which was given to an entire region can be seen as quite controversial. Why do you think this is?
- Do you see any similarities to Sundiata Keita and other powerful West African rulers that succeeded him?

## About the author

This piece was written by Saffa Khalil. Saffa works for [The Black Curriculum](#), a social enterprise which campaigns for the inclusion of Black British history into the National Curriculum.





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## Further reading



Sundiata: The Lion King of Mali  
by David Wisniewski (Houghton Mufflin, 1999)

## Articles



[Sundiata – An Epic of Old Mali](#)

[Sundiata Keita](#)

[Sunjata Keita, founder of the Mali Empire](#)

[Black Past – SUNDIATA KEITA \(1210?-1255?\)](#)

[MY CULTURE – Griot Tradition](#)

[History Topic of the Month: Mansa Musa \(c1280-c1337\) and the Mali Empire](#)

## Videos



[Griots – The West African Storytellers](#)

[The Sunjata epic](#)

Take a look at [Pearson's Diversity and Inclusion in History](#) webpages for more great content.