Part I: An Extraordinary Childhood

Naré Fa Maghan ruled over the small kingdom of Mali, beginning in the year 1200. King Maghan was the son of a long lineage of distinguished hunters, known for their bravery, skill and their ability to communicate with jinns, spirits that hold influence over human lives. At this time, Manding rulers like Maghan had adapted the religion of Islam, but the new faith from the north had not altered their belief in the world of spirits. So when a hunter from the north came to Maghan and made a prophecy, the king and his griot took it very seriously. The prophecy said that two hunters would come to the king with a very ugly woman. Despite her ugliness, the hunter said, the king must marry this woman, for she would bear him Mali's greatest king ever.

Sure enough, two hunters later appeared with a hunchbacked woman. They explained to the king that this woman, Sogolon Kedju, was in fact the human double of a buffalo that had ravaged the land of Do, killing hunters and citizens alike. Armed with secret knowledge, these two hunters had felled the buffalo and brought the woman to Mali. Hideous and wild, Sogolon was also endowed with extraordinary powers. She had been the hunter's prize, and now they were offering her to the king of Mali. Honoring the prophecy, Maghan quickly married Sogolon, and they conceived a child.

King Maghan's first wife, Sassouma, was jealous. She has always assumed that her son, Dankaran Touman, would claim the crown of Mali. Now this interloper stood to threaten what she felt was her son's destiny. Sassouma plotted to kill Sogolon, but the buffalo woman's powers were too great, and the boy was born. He was named Mari Diata, but as the son of Sogolon, people later took to calling him Sogolon Diata, and eventually, Sundiata.

Having feared the new arrival, Sassouma was relieved when the new child turned out to be lazy, gluttonous and ugly. At three years old, Sundiata could not walk and rarely spoke. Even at seven, the boy still crawled, spent all his time eating, and had no friends. The king was deeply disturbed. How could this pathetic child become a great king? Still, honoring the hunter's prophecy, the dying king gave his seemingly crippled son a gift that signified his desire that the boy should become king after all. That gift was a griot named Balla Fasséké, the son of the king's own griot.

However, when king died, his first wife saw to it that her son, Dankaran, claimed the throne instead. Sundiata, still on all fours, could do nothing about it. One day, Sundiata's mother needed some leaves from the mighty baobob tree for her cooking, and she asked Sassouma if she could borrow some. Sassouma agreed, taking the opportunity to insult Sogolon's useless son. At last, Sogolon could take no more. She returned to her son, crying and angry, and told him about Sassouma's insult. Looking up, her son then said, "Cheer up, Mother. I am going to walk today." Sundiata then told a blacksmith to make for him the heaviest possible iron rod, and then, with trembling legs and a sweaty brow, he proceeded to lift himself up, bending the rod into a bow in the process. Before a crowd of amazed onlookers, Sundiata thus transformed himself. And his griot composed and sang "The Hymn to the Bow" on the spot. That hymn remains a part of the Sundiata musical epic still sung by griots over eight hundred years later.

Part II: Exile

Now that Sundiata was fit to claim the throne as his father had wished, he represented a great threat to the false king Dankaran, and his plotting mother Sassouma. Sundiata's mother decided to take her son
into exile for their safety, but before they could leave, Dankaran sent Balla Fasséké, Sundiata's griot, and also Sundiata's half-sister, on a mission to the sorcerer king, Soumaoro Kanté. Soumaoro was the king of the Sosso, and he had been threatening all the kingdoms in the region with his growing army.

Sundiata was furious at the loss of his griot, but his mother convinced him that the time to set things right would come later. Promising he would return to claim his crown, Sundiata went into exile with a small entourage, not to return for many years. Sundiata came to manhood while traveling through kingdoms hundreds of miles from his home. Along the way, he learned to hunt, to fight, and to wield proverbs containing the wisdom of his ancestors.

One day, in the far off kingdom of Mema, Sundiata discovered people selling baobob leaves in the market. They had to be from Mali, for there were no baobob trees in Mema. The baobob sellers came to Sundiata's home and told him that the evil Sosso kin Soumaoro had conquered Mali, sending timid Dankaran into exile. At once, Sundiata began to gather a force of fighters, the core of his future army. Sundiata was determined to reclaim his kingdom, Mali. Sadly, on the eve of his departure from Mema, his mother Sogolon, the once powerful buffalo woman, died.

Meanwhile, Sundiata's griot and his half-sister remained captives in Soumaoro's court at Sosso. The brave griot, Balla Fasséké one day dared to enter the sorcerer king's secret chamber while the king was away. There, the griot found poisonous snakes writhing in urns, and owls standing watch over the severed heads of the nine kings Soumaoro had beaten. In the midst of this ghoulishness, stood the biggest balafon that Balla Fasséké had ever seen. Any ordinary mortal would have died instantly in this chamber, but the young griot had sorcery of his own, and even ventured to play the king's balafon, which produced a magnificent sound that charmed even the snakes and owls.

Soumaoro returned livid to find the griot in his chamber, but Balla Fasséké, thinking fast, improvised a praise song to Soumaoro that was so clever it disarmed the evil king. Soumaoro then declared Balla his griot, making war between Soumaoro and Sundiata inevitable.

**Part III: Return of the King**

As Sundiata made his way homeward, he passed through all the kingdoms he had come to know during his exile, gathering fighters, archers and horsemen as he went. At Tabon, near the Malian city of Kita, Sundiata's army launched a surprise attack on Soumaoro's forces. Though a smaller force, Sundiata's side prevailed, sending the Sosso army into retreat. At the next battle, Sundiata and Soumaoro came face to face. Again, Sundiata's forces dominated the field through superior tactics, but Soumaoro escaped using his own formidable magic. One moment, the Sosso king stood before Sundiata on his black-coated horse, his tall helmet bristling with horns. But a mere instant later, Soumaoro stood on a far distant ridge. Sundiata despaired, feeling that his enemy's magic made him invincible.

Even as Sundiata's army grew, he knew he would need more that might to defeat Soumaoro. So he summoned soothsayers to council him on harnessing supernatural powers. Following their advice, Sundiata ordered the sacrifice of 100 white oxen, 100 white rams, and 100 white cocks. As the ritual slaughter began, Sundiata's griot and his half-sister arrived at his camp. They had escaped captivity in Soumaoro's city.

Sundiata's half-sister then told him that she had been forced to be Soumaoro's wife, but that in doing so, she had learned the secret of his magic. Soumaoro's totem, his sacred animal and so the source of his
amazing power, was the cock. This animal had the power to destroy Soumaoro. Like Samson losing his long hair and with it his strength, like Achilles with his vulnerable heel, Soumaoro too had a weakness that his enemy could exploit. Armed with this knowledge, Sundiata fashioned a wooden arrow with a white cock's spur as its tip.

The great showdown between Soumaoro and Sundiata came at the battle of Kirina. On the eve of the battle, the two men observed the ritual of declaring war. Each sent an owl to the other's encampment, and the owls delivered messages of bravado. “I am the wild yam of the rocks,” boasted Soumaoro. “Nothing will make me leave Mali.”

Sundiata replied, “I have in my camp seven master smiths who will shatter the rocks. Then, yam, I will eat you.”

The verbal jousting continued. Soumaoro said, “I am the poisonous mushroom that makes the fearless vomit.”

And Sundiata replied, “I am the ravenous [rooster]. 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 climbs to the top of the forest creeper.”

Having thus declared their intentions, Sundiata and Soumaoro made war at Kirina. In the midst of full battle, Sundiata aimed his special arrow and fired. The rooster's spur grazed Soumaoro's shoulder, and all was lost for the Sosso king. By the time Sundiata's victorious forces entered Soumaoro's city and opened his secret chamber, the snakes there were almost dead and the owls lay flopping on the ground.

Victorious, Sundiata invited the leaders of all the 12 kingdoms of the savanna to come to Kaba, a city in old Mali. There, he told them they could keep their kingdoms, but that all would now join in a great, new empire. From that day forth, Sundiata's word became the law respected throughout the 12 kingdoms. The Empire of Mali was born, stretching from the forests of the south far into the Sahara Desert, north of the great Niger River bend. Sundiata ruled over this massive, thriving empire until his death in the year 1255. His empire survived for more than two centuries.

“Mali is eternal,” says the griot Mamadou Kouyaté, concluding his account of the Sundiata epic. “But never try, wretch, to pierce the mystery which Mali hides from you. Do not go and disturb the spirits in their eternal rest. Do not ever go into the dead cities to question the past, for the spirits never forgive. Do not seek to know what is not to be known.”

Sources:

Banning Eyre/World Music Productions