**World Literature Text Book pp. 128-141**

African Proverbs • *from* Sundiata

African Proverbs and *Sundiata*

Much of West Africa’s rich history is not found on paper. Instead, the history is preserved in the elaborate recountings of the oral historians known as griots . Griots serve as a kind of living library for their communities. As a combined historian, storyteller, and teacher, a griot travels from village to village, retelling ancestral histories and legends. Griots think of themselves as the memory of their people, and many African ethnic groups rely on the memories of their griots to preserve a record of the past.

The Power of Proverbs

Embedded within the stories of the griots are many proverbs, or concise sayings, that reveal a truth about human experience. Proverbs play an important role in cultures with a strong oral tradition. They are the distillation of the culture’s common wisdom. Because proverbs often use fresh or surprising metaphors, they can communicate a complicated idea in a clear, artful, and often diplomatic way. In many African cultures, these sayings have been used for centuries to teach children, settle arguments, and offer advice. Furthermore, using them deftly is often seen as a sign of the speaker’s eloquence and intellect.

Sundiata, An Unlikely Hero

A griot tale that combines the instructive role of proverbs with an entertaining story is the epic of *Sundiata* . In the thirteenth century, Sundiata was a legendary hero-king who ruled a region that included most of what is now the West African republic of Mali. Initially, Sundiata seems an unlikely hero, one who might be considered an “underdog” today. As the story progresses, however, Sundiata’s early childhood struggles lead to later dramatic successes in battle.

For those looking for factual accuracy, it is difficult to tell how much of the original story of Sundiata has been preserved. Over the centuries, Sundiata’s story has become so embellished that it is perhaps just as much fiction as fact. Because the epic is told to instruct and entertain, individual griots have adapted the tale to emphasize particular lessons or details. Sundiata’s story, in particular, was often told to warriors before battle to spur them to greater feats than they thought possible. Like other oral tales told by griots, *Sundiata*recounts the positive or negative results of its hero’s actions in order to instruct listeners in appropriate behavior.

From Griot’s Story to the Printed Page

Folklorist D. T. Niane wrote *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* in his Malinke language after listening to the stories told by Mamadou Kouyate , a griot of the Keita clan. Niane’s work was then translated into English and other languages, enabling the griots wisdom to reach the farthest corners of the globe. In fact, Niane’s own ancestors were griots, and his documentation of ancient oral histories is a direct continuation of their work. In addition to*Sundiata* , he has collected and retold many other legends of Mali.

**Preview**

**Connecting to the Literature**

If someone has ever made fun of you—even over something trivial—you know that the temptation to strike back can be very strong. Sundiata finds a noble way to stop ridicule and, in the process, becomes a hero.

**Literary Analysis**

**Epic Conflict**

An **epic** is a narrative or narrative poem that focuses on the deeds of heroes. At its heart is an **epic conflict,** a challenge in which the hero struggles against an obstacle or a series of obstacles and usually emerges triumphant. The obstacles may include the following:

* menacing enemies
* natural dangers
* moral dilemmas
* problems with society
* difficulties with fate
* challenging decisions

As you read *Sundiata,* notice the conflict that drives the epic’s action.

**Comparing Literary Works**

While epic poems are among the longest literary genres, proverbs are among the shortest. **Proverbs** are sayings that offer cultural wisdom and practical truths about life. Both literary forms express key cultural values by offering suggestions about living correctly. As you read the African proverbs presented here, consider the ways in which the details apply to human experiences. Then, look for the proverbs contained within *Sundiata* . Notice the way these proverbs flavor the epic and direct the characters actions. Then, consider the view of African culture that both selections provide.

**Reading Strategy**

**Rereading for Clarification**

**Rereading passages** can often help clarify characters’ identities, the relationships among characters, the sequence of events, and even puzzling language. Sometimes, earlier passages provide the key to understanding information that seems confusing or unclear. Use a diagram like the one shown to clarify difficult passages that you encounter.



**Vocabulary Builder**

* fathom *v.* probe the depths of; understand
* taciturn *adj.* not given to talking
* malicious *adj.* intending harm; spiteful
* infirmity *n.* weakness; illness
* innuendo *n.* indirect remark or gesture that hints at something bad; sly suggestion
* diabolical *adj.* devilish; wicked

* estranged *adj.* isolated and unfriendly; alienated

 



## Background

Proverbs, or wise sayings, are an important part of the folk literature of many African peoples. Though they may appear to be the shortest of all literary forms, proverbs and the wisdom they convey can be found in lengthy epic works such as *Sundiata.* The proverbs presented here reflect the cultures of seven different tribes, representing nations from all parts of the African continent.

## Uganda: The Baganda

 A small deed out of friendship is worth more than a great service that is forced.

 One who loves you, warns you.

 The one who has not made the journey calls it an easy one.

 Where there are no dogs, the wild cats move about freely.

 Words are easy, but friendship is difficult.

## Liberia: The Jabo

 One who cannot pick up an ant and wants to pick up an elephant will someday see his folly.

 The butterfly that flies among the thorns will tear its wings.

 A man’s ways are good in his own eyes.

 Daring talk is not strength.

 Children are the wisdom of the nation.

 The one who listens is the one who understands.

## Ghana: The Ashanti

 Rain beats a leopard’s skin, but it does not wash out the spots.

 If you are in hiding, don’t light a fire.

 One falsehood spoils a thousand truths.

 No one tests the depth of a river with both feet.

## Tanzania and Kenya: The Masai

 The hyena said, “It is not only that I have luck, but my leg is strong.”

 Baboons do not go far from the place of their birth.

 We begin by being foolish and we become wise by experience.

 The zebra cannot do away with his stripes.

 Do not repair another man’s fence until you have seen to your own.

 It is better to be poor and live long than rich and die young.

 Do not say the first thing that comes to your mind.

## Critical Reading

**1. Respond:**Of the proverbs presented here, which one did you find the most thought-provoking or relevant to today’s world? Why?

**2. (a) Recall:**What does a Baganda proverb say about a person who has not made the journey?**(b) Infer:**Does the proverb imply that the journey is actually easy? Explain.**(c) Generalize:**What does the proverb say about human experience in general?

**3. (a) Recall:**What does a Jabo proverb say about daring talk?**(b) Compare and Contrast:**What is similar about the messages in that proverb and the proverb about lifting ants and elephants?**(c) Connect:**Describe a situation in which one of these proverbs might apply.

**4. (a) Recall:**What does a Masai proverb say about baboons?**(b) Interpret:**What lesson do you think this proverb teaches?

**5. (a) Compare and Contrast:**Give examples of sayings you know that have messages similar to those in some of these African proverbs, explaining what these proverbs have in common.**(b) Generalize:**Why do you think proverbs like these can transcend their culture? Explain.

**Background**

Nearly one thousand years ago, the region of West Africa that included what is now Ghana and Mali was caught up in turmoil as rival kings fought for control of the profitable salt and gold trade. In the Keita clan of the Mandingo, there arose a heroic leader named Mari, or Sogolon, Djata, who united his people, fought off their rivals, and ushered in a glorious period of peace and prosperity. (In the rapidly spoken Mandingo language, “Sogolon Djata” became “Sundiata.”) In this epic, Sogolon Djata’s battle for strength echoes the Mandingos’ struggle for survival.

**Characters in *Sundiata***

* **Balla Fasséké** : Griot and counselor of Sundiata.
* **Boukari** : Son of the king and Namandjé, one of his wives; also called Manding Boukari.
* **Dankaran Touman** : Son of the king and his first wife, Sassouma, who is also called Sassouma Bérété.
* **Djakmarou** : Daughter of the king and Sogolon; sister of Sundiata and Kolonkan.
* **Farakourou** : Master of the forges.
* **Gnankouman Doua** : The king’s griot; also called simply Doua.
* **Kolonkan** : Sundiata’s elder sister.
* **Namandjé** : One of the king’s wives.
* **Nare Maghan** : Sundiata’s father.
* **Nounfaïri** : Soothsayer and smith; father of Farakourou.
* **Sassouma Bérété** : The king’s first wife.
* **Sogolon** : Sundiata’s mother; also called Sogolon Kedjou .
* **Sundiata** : Legendary king of Mali; referred to as Djata and Sogolon Djata, which means son of Sogolon. Also called Mari Djata.

**Childhood**

God has his mysteries which none can **fathom** . You, perhaps, will be a king. You can do nothing about it. You, on the other hand, will be unlucky, but you can do nothing about that either. Each man finds his way already marked out for him and he can change nothing of it.

Sogolon’s son had a slow and difficult childhood. At the age of three he still crawled along on all-fours while children of the same age were already walking. He had nothing of the great beauty of his father Naré Maghan. He had a head so big that he seemed unable to support it; he also had large eyes which would open wide whenever anyone entered his mother’s house. He was**taciturn** and used to spend the whole day just sitting in the middle of the house. Whenever his mother went out he would crawl on all-fours to rummage about in the calabashes**1**in search of food, for he was very greedy.



**Malicious** tongues began to blab. What three-year-old has not yet taken his first steps? What three-year-old is not the despair of his parents through his whims and shifts of mood? What three-year-old is not the joy of his circle through his backwardness in talking? Sogolon Djata (for it was thus that they called him, prefixing his mother’s name to his), Sogolon Djata, then, was very different from others of his own age. He spoke little and his severe face never relaxed into a smile. You would have thought that he was already thinking, and what amused children of his age bored him. Often Sogolon would make some of them come to him to keep him company. These children were already walking and she hoped that Djata, seeing his companions walking, would be tempted to do likewise. But nothing came of it. Besides, Sogolon Djata would brain the poor little things with his already strong arms and none of them would come near him any more.

The king’s first wife was the first to rejoice at Sogolon Djata’s **infirmity** . Her own son, Dankaran Touman, was already eleven. He was a fine and lively boy, who spent the day running about the village with those of his own age. He had even begun his initiation in the bush.**2**The king had had a bow made for him and he used to go behind the town to practice archery with his companions. Sassouma was quite happy and snapped her fingers at Sogolon, whose child was still crawling on the ground. Whenever the latter happened to pass by her house, she would say, “Come, my son, walk, jump, leap about. The jinn**3**didn’t promise you anything out of the ordinary, but I prefer a son who walks on his two legs to a lion that crawls on the ground.” She spoke thus whenever Sogolon went by her door. The **innuendo** would go straight home and then she would burst into laughter, that **diabolic** laughter which a jealous woman knows how to use so well.

Her son’s infirmity weighed heavily upon Sogolon Kedjou; she had resorted to all her talent as a sorceress to give strength to her son’s legs, but the rarest herbs had been useless. The king himself lost hope.

How impatient man is! Naré Maghan became imperceptibly **estranged** but Gnankouman Doua never ceased reminding him of the hunter’s words. Sogolon became pregnant again. The king hoped for a son, but it was a daughter called Kolonkan. She resembled her mother and had nothing of her father’s beauty. The disheartened king debarred Sogolon from his house and she lived in semi-disgrace for a while. Naré Maghan married the daughter of one of his allies, the king of the Kamaras. She was called Namandjé and her beauty was legendary. A year later she brought a boy into the world. When the king consulted soothsayers**4**on the destiny of this son he received the reply that Namandjé’s child would be the right hand of some mighty king. The king gave the newly-born the name of Boukari. He was to be called Manding Boukari or Manding Bory later on.

Naré Maghan was very perplexed. Could it be that the stiff-jointed son of Sogolon was the one the hunter soothsayer had foretold?

“The Almighty has his mysteries,” Gnankouman Doua would say and, taking up the hunter’s words, added, “The silk cotton tree emerges from a tiny seed.”



One day Naré Maghan came along to the house of Nounfaïri, the blacksmith seer of Niani. He was an old, blind man. He received the king in the anteroom which served as his workshop. To the king’s question he replied, “When the seed germinates growth is not always easy; great trees grow slowly but they plunge their roots deep into the ground.”



“But has the seed really germinated?” said the king.

“Of course,” replied the blind seer. “Only the growth is not as quick as you would like it; how impatient man is.”

This interview and Doua’s confidence gave the king some assurance. To the great displeasure of Sassouma Bérété the king restored Sogolon to favor and soon another daughter was born to her. She was given the name of Djamarou.

However, all Niani talked of nothing else but the stiff-legged son of Sogolon. He was now seven and he still crawled to get about. In spite of all the king’s affection, Sogolon was in despair. Naré Maghan aged and he felt his time coming to an end. Dankaran Touman, the son of Sassouma Bérété, was now a fine youth.

One day Naré Maghan made Mari Djata come to him and he spoke to the child as one speaks to an adult. “Mari Djata, I am growing old and soon I shall be no more among you, but before death takes me off I am going to give you the present each king gives his successor. In Mali every prince has his own griot. Doua’s father was my father’s griot, Doua is mine and the son of Doua, Balla Fasséké here, will be your griot. Be inseparable friends from this day forward. From his mouth you will hear the history of your ancestors, you will learn the art of governing Mali according to the principles which our ancestors have bequeathed to us. I have served my term and done my duty too. I have done everything which a king of Mali ought to do. I am handing an enlarged kingdom over to you and I leave you sure allies. May your destiny be accomplished, but never forget that Niani is your capital and Mali the cradle of your ancestors.”



The child, as if he had understood the whole meaning of the king’s words, beckoned Balla Fasséké to approach. He made room for him on the hide he was sitting on and then said, “Balla, you will be my griot.”

“Yes, son of Sogolon, if it pleases God,” replied Balla Fasséké.

The king and Doua exchanged glances that radiated confidence.

**The Lion’s Awakening**

A short while after this interview between Naré Maghan and his son the king died. Sogolon’s son was no more than seven years old. The council of elders met in the king’s palace. It was no use Doua’s defending the king’s will which reserved the throne for Mari Djata, for the council took no account of Naré Maghan’s wish. With the help of Sassouma Bérété’s intrigues, Dankaran Touman was proclaimed king and a regency council was formed in which the queen mother was all-powerful. A short time after, Doua died.

As men have short memories, Sogolon’s son was spoken of with nothing but irony and scorn. People had seen one-eyed kings, one-armed kings, and lame kings, but a stiff-legged king had never been heard tell of. No matter how great the destiny promised for Mari Djata might be, the throne could not be given to someone who had no power in his legs; if the jinn loved him, let them begin by giving him the use of his legs. Such were the remarks that Sogolon heard every day. The queen mother, Sassouma Bérété, was the source of all this gossip.



Having become all-powerful, Sassouma Bérété persecuted Sogolon because the late Naré Maghan had preferred her. She banished Sogolon and her son to a back yard of the palace. Mari Djata’s mother now occupied an old hut which had served as a lumber-room of Sassouma’s.

The wicked queen mother allowed free passage to all those inquisitive people who wanted to see the child that still crawled at the age of seven. Nearly all the inhabitants of Niani filed into the palace and the poor Sogolon wept to see herself thus given over to public ridicule. Mari Djata took on a ferocious look in front of the crowd of sightseers. Sogolon found a little consolation only in the love of her eldest daughter, Kolonkan. She was four and she could walk. She seemed to understand all her mother’s miseries and already she helped her with the housework. Sometimes, when Sogolon was attending to the chores, it was she who stayed beside her sister Djamarou, quite small as yet.



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.**5**One day she happened to be short of condiments and went to the queen mother to beg a little baobab leaf.**6**

“Look you,” said the malicious Sassouma, “I have a calabash 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 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, Farakou-rou, 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, Sog-olon 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 Nounfaïri, and he was a soothsayer like his father. In his workshops there was an enormous iron bar wrought by his father, Nounfaïri. 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, 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 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**7**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.”

**Critical Reading**

**1. Respond:**How did you feel about Mari Djata’s feat at the end of the selection? Why?

**2. (a) Recall:**Up that point, how did most of the community treat Mari Djata?**(b) Infer:**Why was he treated that way?**(c) Generalize:**What does this treatment show about human nature?

**3. (a) Analyze Cause and Effect:**How do the soothsayers’ predictions affect the king’s view of Mari Djata?**(b) Infer:**After the king dies, why do you think his wishes for Mari Djata are not followed?

**4. (a) Recall:**What happens that causes Sogolon to want her son to bring her baobab leaves?**(b) Infer:**How has pressure from Sassouma Bérété and the rest of the community affected Sogolon?

**5. (a) Summarize:**What does Mari Djata do to get the baobab leaves and bring them to his mother?**(b) Speculate:**How do you think the community reacted to this act?

**6. (a) Connect:**Based on the Background on page 132 and the soothsayer’s predictions, what rank will Mari Djata eventually achieve in his community?**(b) Draw Conclusions:**Considering Mari Djata’s past infirmity, what lesson might readers draw from this outcome?

**7. Apply:**What does the selection show about customs and traditions in Old Mali? Explain.

**Quick Review**

An **epic conflict** is the hero’s struggle, or series of struggles, around which an epic centers.

A **proverb** is a wise saying that has been passed down by word of mouth for generations before being written down.

**Rereading passages** can often help clarify characters’ identities and relationships, the sequence or cause of events, and puzzling language.

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### Literary Analysis

**Epic Conflict**

**1.**Think about the **epic conflict** that Mari Djata faces in this part of *Sundiata.***(a)** In what sense is it a conflict with nature? **(b)** In what sense is it a conflict with society?**(c)** In what sense is it an internal conflict that takes place within Mari Djata himself?

**2.**What role do Sassouma Bérété and Sogolon play in Mari Djata’s childhood conflict? Explain.

**3. (a)**How could the Zulu proverb about feet that do not stumble apply to Mari Djata and his conflict?**(b)**How does the Jabo proverb about lifting ants and elephants contrast with or contradict Mari Djata’s experiences?

### Comparing Literary Works

**4.**On a chart like the one below, list and explain at least two of the *proverbs*that appear in *Sundiata.* Also, indicate how they apply to Mari Djata and his situation.



**5.**Choose three African proverbs about nature that you find the most thought-provoking or perceptive. Explain how the lessons they draw from nature apply to human experience.

### Reading Strategy

**Rereading for Clarification**

**6.**The first paragraph of “The Lion’s Awakening” reveals that the king’s will reserved the throne for Mari Djata. **Reread** the first two paragraphs of that section. Which details explain why the king left Mari Djata the throne?

**7. (a)**In the final paragraph of *Sundiata,* why does Mari Djata tear out the whole baobab tree?**(b)**Identify the passages that helped you answer this question.

### Extend Understanding

**8. Science Link:** What do *Sundiata* and the African proverbs suggest about the traditional African knowledge of nature? Explain.