

KEITA: THE HERITAGE OF THE GRIOT

Notes for Viewing the Film

Before the film . . .

Read the essay on [Keita](#).

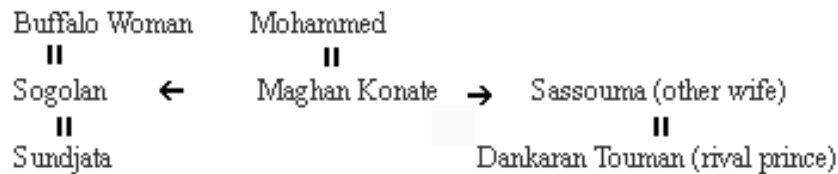
It may be useful to remind viewers that [Keita](#) really tells two parallel stories. The first is taken from the *Sundjata Epic* where the hero, Sundjata Keita, overcomes his disability and discovers his magic powers. The second story concerns the initiation of his distant descendant Mabo Keita, a young, contemporary Burkinabe boy, into this tradition. Both stories are about "learning the meaning of your name," that is, assuming your full adult powers and obligations.

The *Sundjata Epic* is the most celebrated work of West African oral literature. [Keita](#) only retells the first third of the epic (a complete rendition can last 60 hours). The epic describes the legendary founding of the Malian Empire in the 13th century by Sundjata Keita. It is also the epic of the origin of the Mande people who presently inhabit parts of Mali, Burkina Faso and Guinea-Conakry.

The story begins when a traditional storyteller, a griot or *djeliba*, is roused by the appearance of the spirit-like Master Hunter (the elder with the white beard). The *djeliba* senses he must travel to Ouagadougou, the capital of modern day Burkina Faso, to retell the story to a young boy, Mabo Keita, so he will "know the meaning of his name," his destiny or his true character. The Master Hunter reappears at the end of the film signifying that Mabo is now part of the cycle of Mande knowledge.

Mabo and his family are descended from Sundjata Keita, but like many contemporary Africans have become quite Westernized, forgetting their heritage. It may be useful to point out to viewers that Mabo and his family speak an indigenous language, Djula, with the griot, but French with each other and at school. The griot, played by the noted Burkinabe actor Sotigui Kouyaté, the father of the film's director, is also living up to the meaning of his name because the Kouyaté family has traditionally acted as *djeliba* for the Keitas. Thus the filmmaker, Dani Kouyaté, is continuing this family tradition into the age of electronic media.

It is common in West African story-telling to fold one well-known tale within another - which can be confusing to those not already familiar with the legends. Therefore viewers may find it helpful to review the following family tree of Sundjata.



Maghan Konate, a king of the Mande people, was Sundjata's father. He is a descendant of the prophet Mohammed, and represents monotheistic religion and the rule of secular and clerical law. Sundjata's mother is Sogolon who is herself the daughter of "the buffalo woman," an animal spirit. This side of Sundjata's lineage is allied more with the traditional African practices of animist spirit worship and particularly with the secret knowledge or "magic" which plays such an important part in that tradition.

***There are two widely available editions of the *Sundjata Epic* which participants may find in their local public library: *The Epic of Son-Jara: A West African Tradition* by John William Johnson, Indiana University Press, 1992 and *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali*, by Djibril Niane, Essex, Addison, Wesley Longman Limited, 1965.

You might also note that the film counterposes two different styles of learning - represented by the storyteller and the schoolteacher.

After the film . . .

1. Does the legend of Sundjata remind you of other myths and stories where young heroes must overcome handicaps to achieve greatness; for example, Alex Haley's multi-generational story, *Roots*? What about the story of Joseph in the Bible or the myth of Oedipus (who also had a damaged foot)? Why is it important for people to invent a history for themselves? Genealogy (family ties) is a logical way for a pre-scientific group to account for their origins. How do Americans today account for who they are, as a species and as individuals, through such disciplines as evolutionary biology, psychology, history and sociology?
2. Did you think it probable that the griot would be received so readily into Mabo's family's household? Why? Is this an example of traditional African hospitality? Do you think that Mabo's father may already have known the griot from his home village? Could this also be an example of how the logic of the mythic story interpenetrates the present-day story?
3. During the wedding scene a woman follows Mabo's father as he is leaving. She is a "praise singer," a professional musician who receives payment for proclaiming the greatness of a family and to flatter its guests. How does her function both parallel and differ from the griot's relationship to Mabo and his family?
4. Mabo's mother seems to be a "modern woman" living in a fairly affluent home, equipped with many modern conveniences. Could her resistance to the griot's traditional teaching stem not only from her fears that it will ill-equip Mabo for success in the modern world, but also from her rejection of the role of women in traditional societies? For example, what is the griot's attitude to her? At the same time, does she remind you of Sogolon in her ferocious insistence that her son should achieve?
5. The film deliberately contrasts the teaching of the *djeliba* with the curriculum at Mabo's school. Mabo's formal education is made to seem irrelevant to daily life and lacking ethical content. For example, it contrasts the amorality of Darwin's theory of evolution with the defined rights and obligations Mabo inherits as a descendant of Sundjata. What do you think of this approach?

6. The dispute over education in the film also parallels recent discussions in this country about "Afrocentric" curriculum, that is, the idea that African Americans students should be taught history and indeed all subjects from the point of view of Africa not that of the Europe or the United States. Do you agree or disagree that black students would learn more quickly if subjects were taught from an African rather than Western perspective? From what you have seen from the films in this series, how do tradition and modernity actually interact in contemporary African life?

7. What do you suspect is the significance of the fact that Sundjata cannot lift himself with the iron stick but only the sapling? Could this be a way of contrasting reliance on technology with reliance on nature and traditional knowledge?

8. *The Sundjata Epic*, like [Keïta](#) itself, necessarily presents only one version of history. The griot reminds Mabo of this when he asks, "Do you wonder why the hunter always wins against the lion? If lions wrote stories, don't you think they would win some time?" How does this comment refer to the way the history of Africa has been interpreted in non-African literature and media? Of course, the griot is also calling into question the authority of the story he is telling. Should we always inquire into who is telling a story to understand its particular perspective on history? To what extent do you think all history is in essence myth, so that we are left to choose which interpretation is most relevant or even therapeutic to our present situation?

Country facts in brief:

BURKINA FASO

Location: Inland West Africa, north of Ghana

Capital: Ouagadougou

Independence: August 5, 1960 (from France)

Population: 11,266,393 (1998)

Ethnic Groups: Voltic, including Mossi (60%), Mande, , Gourounsi, Senufo, Lobi, Bobo, Gourmantche, Fulani

Languages: French (Official), Mande, Moore, Dioula, Fulfulde

Economy/Labor: Agriculture (80%), livestock, small-scale commerce, gold mining, and migrant labor (approximately 20% of the male labor force migrates annually to neighboring countries).

GDP per capita: \$950 (1997)