

SSWH6 Describe the diverse characteristics of early African societies before 1500 CE/AD.



Element C: Understand the blending of traditional African beliefs with new ideas from Islam and Christianity and their impact on early African societies.

AFRICAN RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM

- ❑ Most indigenous religious systems in sub-Saharan Africa focused on animism, the belief that divine forces resided in the elements of the natural world including the flora, fauna and natural geography.
- ❑ Many believed that shamans or witches could harness these powers for good and evil.
- ❑ As Islam spread to North, West and the Swahili Coast of East Africa and Christianity spread to Ethiopia and Egypt these traditions were sometimes replaced and sometimes blended with the new faith systems.
 - While these new faith systems brought major changes to much of Africa like the introduction of written language, the establishment of new educational systems like the madras and monastery, and new moral codes like Sharia law, many native traditions endured.



AFRICAN RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM

- ❑ In West and East Africa the belief in and practice of magic continued despite the objection of orthodox Muslims.
 - This is evident in the Malinke epic Sundiata in which Sundiata and his adversary use magic in battle despite both being Muslim.
- ❑ These regions also saw the modification of many Muslim traditions to better suit native customs.
 - For example, Islamic traditions related to the seclusion and veiling of women did not take hold in West Africa despite their conversion to Islam.
 - The traditional customs that allowed women to move freely in public endured well after the region's conversion.
- ❑ Adaption also occurred as Christianity spread to Egypt and Ethiopia.
 - The Egyptian Coptic Christian belief in the spiritual significance of the Nile is an excellent example.

SUNDIATA KEITA was a West African monarch who founded the empire of **MALI**. During his reign he established the territorial base of the empire and laid the foundations for its future prosperity and political unity. But how he got there has become something of an epic tale enhanced from reality.

Sometimes in history, a person becomes not only a legend, but in the telling of their story over time, also a myth. So it was with Sundiata, whose adventures took on a supernatural light...



A real African king whose semi-mythological tale is told in the **SUNDIATA EPIC OF MALI!**

SUNDIATA

THE LION KING OF MALI (1217 – 1255 C.E.)



- Sundiata was the son of King **Naré Maghann Konaté** and **SOGOLON Condé**, the "buffalo woman", so called because of her ugliness and hunchback. A prophesy stated that they would have a child who would become king.
- Sundiata was crippled from childhood and **Sogolon** was the subject of ridicule among her co-wives. She was constantly teased and ridiculed openly for her son's disability. This significantly affected Sundiata and he was determined to do everything he possibly could in order to walk like his peers.
- With his personal griot (storyteller) **BALLA FASSEKE** as witness, he one day miraculously got up and walked. Among his peers, he became a leader.
- To escape persecution and threats on her son's life, **Sogolon** took Sundiata and his sisters, into exile. **Dankaran** became king.
- King **SOUMAORO** **Kanté** of **Sosso**, who is portrayed as a dark sorcerer, conquers Sundiata's kingdom using ferocity and magic; Sundiata is called upon to free his people.
- Many other groups abused by **Soumaoro** ally with Sundiata in hopes of freeing their homelands of his treachery and dark powers.
- Sundiata discovers the key to defeating **Soumaoro**; white magic in the form of a white chicken claw.
- In the final battle between Sundiata and **Soumaoro**, Sundiata straps the white chicken claw to an arrow and pierces the dark sorcerer, turning him to stone.
- Sundiata was crippled from childhood and **Sogolon** was the subject of ridicule among her co-wives. She was constantly teased and ridiculed openly for her son's disability. This significantly affected Sundiata and he was determined to do everything he possibly could in order to walk like his peers.
- His paternal half-brother, **DANKARAN Touman**, and **Dankaran's** mother, **SASSOUMA Bereté**, were cruel to Sundiata and his mother. Their cruelty escalated after the death of the king. **Sassouma** even attempted to have Sundiata killed through the magic of "the nine witches of Mali," but continually fails.
- This exile lasted for many years, until they reached the kingdom of **MEMA**. Sundiata was admired by the King of **Mema** for his courage and tenacity. As such, he was given a senior position within the kingdom.
- Soumaoro** was notorious for his evil; he supposedly wore shoes made from human skin and drank from a cup made from a human skull.
- Sunjata's** griot, **Balla Fasseke**, steals **Soumaoro's** magical **balafon**, (a xylophone-like instrument) crippling the dark sorcerer's ability to harm his subjects.
- Sundiata becomes the first **MANSA** (king) of the new Empire of **Mali**, ushering in a golden age for Western Africa.



SOUMAORO
The Sorcerer King of Sosso!



MANSA SUNDIATA

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