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The Rise of Kings and Emperors: Sundiata and World Leaders of the 13th Century

By Havilliah J. Malsbury

One of the most inspirational tales of history comes not from ancient texts or scrolls, but from the words of the griots, West African storytellers who have orally passed down centuries of legends and records of Africa's rich and diverse history. This particular tale of perseverance and heroism is none other than the epic of Sundiata, the story of the West African king's rise to power, and how his unique political structure effectively united his people to establish the notorious Mali Empire. His extensive formation of alliances with neighboring warlords and his adroit military tactics helped him succeed in his rise to power and his conquest against the tyrannical sorcerer king Soumaoro. It was through his rise to power and his style of ruling in which he resembled the many different world leaders that ruled during the thirteenth century. Chinggis (Genghis) Khan, the great founder of the infamous Mongol Empire, expanded his kingdom through linked kinship and modern military strategies similar to that of Sundiata's. From their humble beginnings to the last days of their reigns, both Sundiata and Genghis Khan displayed several great and noble feats when it came to the unification of their empires, and by doing so, they formed two of the most celebrated and longest lasting empires in the history of the world. In addition to sharing a similar persona to that of the great Khan, Sundiata illustrated great courage as a leader in battle as well, a custom that was similar to that of the Germanic Tribes that inhabited Northern Europe, whose leaders attained great fame and admiration for leading their armies into the heart of battle. Indeed, it was these shared qualities that led to the success Sundiata in the expansion of the Mali Empire, and his story truly illustrates the importance of being a multifaceted ruler during the precarious times of the thirteenth century.¹

Before he became a great and powerful emperor, Sundiata had a troubled upbringing that would later influence him in his rise to power. Sundiata was the son of the reputable Mandinka king, Maghann Konaté, and was brought up in a very regal and prestigious environment. However, Sundiata's childhood was full of obstacles, for he remained crippled and could not walk for several years. After the death of his father, he was forced to flee with his mother and sisters from the subjection and harassment by the late Maghann's first wife, Sassouma Bereté. In exile, Sundiata travelled east of his birthplace throughout the numerous kingdoms of Western Africa. Along his travels, Sundiata was able to stay and even serve in the company of several kings and warlords whom he befriended. This sense of kinship and loyalty that he established with his powerful associates, who would later become important allies, would greatly benefit him in his future campaigns, for he would need many friends in possession of sufficient armies in order to establish himself as a commanding leader against Soumaoro and his malevolent forces.

Sundiata's style of upbringing was common amongst world leaders of the age, for the Great Khan had a very similar childhood that nearly mirrored that of Sundiata's. Before he attained the honorable title of Khan, the great Mongol leader was born with the name Temujin. His father was a prominent chief who ruled over a large Mongol confederation.

Upon the assassination of his father by enemy Tartars who wanted to break up his father's confederation, Temujin was forced into exile. As a juvenile, he was far too young to rule in place of his father, and so Temujin, along with his mother and siblings, was forced to live in poverty. As an outcast, Temujin travelled throughout Mongolia in destitution. Like Sundiata, Temujin pursued diplomatic relations with powerful leaders and warlords that he met along his travels, and over the years, his reputation grew enormously throughout the land. By extending his kinship with prominent rulers, he began to build his future empire out of a confederation of numerous tribes who would aid him in his future conquests of Asia and the Middle East.²

In their efforts to expand their fledgling empires, both Sundiata and Temujin carried out similar actions in their various campaigns. During the chaotic warring periods of the thirteenth century, the use of cavalry became almost a necessity when it came to conquering and decimating enemy forces, which Sundiata utilized to a great extent in the expansion of the Mali Empire. Sundiata's armies, as well as the Mongol's, employed the devastating effects of mounted horses in battle, which served to be significantly superior against traditional foot soldiers³. The Mongols were renowned for their use of mounted archers, who could shoot with deadly accuracy even at full gallop,⁴ and cavalry soon became a symbol of power and superiority in both the Mali and Mongol Empires.⁵

Aside from his military conquests, Sundiata employed similar tactics of other world leaders when it came to accepting foreign religions of the age. Sundiata was raised to accept the traditional African religion that dominated the area of present day Guinea, and yet he grew to be a devout follower of Islam, a religion that was introduced to Africa in the seventh century by Arab merchants. In an attempt to gain the support of his Muslim subjects, and to interact more between the Arab merchants who provided richly goods from the east, Sundiata accepted the Islam faith in his kingdom. His association with this foreign religion is seen throughout his famous epic, as he more than once described his enemies, like the sorcerer Soumaoro, as enemies of Allah. This tactic of incorporating foreign religions was common during this era, for Mongol leaders also embraced the foreign religions of the countries that they conquered, especially that of Buddhism and Christianity. In the accounts of the famous Nestorian monk Rabban Sauama, who traveled throughout the Mongol Empire, he observed how the Mongols openly accepted Christianity: "Know ye, O our Fathers, that many of our Fathers have gone into the countries of the Mongols... for many of the sons of the Mongol kings and queens have been baptized and confess Christ."⁶ Religion is indeed a powerful factor in empire building, and like many rulers of the era, Sundiata utilized the incorporation of foreign religions to his advantage in the expansion of his great Mali Empire.

Among his large list of traits, the great king Sundiata was also remembered for being a brave and fearless warrior in battle, and was often seen leading the charge of his regimental cavalry units into battle. "Having drawn his sword, Sundiata led the charge, shouting his war cry... in a trice, Sundiata was in the middle of the Sossos like a lion in the sheepfold."⁷ Exhibiting leadership in battle was a common strategy and morale booster for many leaders of the age. Resembling the bravery of Sundiata, the leaders of the Germanic tribes of Europe also displayed their authority on the battlefield by leading their armies into the heat of the fray. In the accounts of the Roman historian Tacitus, he describes how important this practice was amongst the leaders of the Germanic tribes that he witnessed: "These kings have not unlimited or arbitrary power, and the generals do more by example

than by authority. If they are energetic, if they are conspicuous, if they fight in the front, they lead because they are admired.”⁸ And admired they were, like these Germanic leaders who dominated the European landscape, Sundiata gained great fame for exhibiting extraordinary courage in his numerous military conquests.

To the end of his days, Sundiata had become one of the most important figures of the thirteenth century. Through his extraordinary leadership qualities, he had helped establish himself as one of the most prominent leaders in Western Africa, and had helped his empire grow and expand to one of the most influential and prevailing empires in all of Africa. By incorporating and emulating the leadership qualities of other world leaders, from the Great Chinggis Khan to the warring Germanic tribes of Europe, Sundiata’s multidimensional character help propel him to feats of victory. His death to this day remains a mystery, but there is no doubt behind the legacy that he left behind. Sundiata will forever be remembered as the great founder of the Mali Empire, and the story of his rise to power and how he restored peace to the land is still told to this day by the griot storytellers of Western Africa. He is indeed a unique figure in history for how he incorporated the skills and qualities of the successful world leaders of the age, and his story lives on to show how one individual can have the greatest impact on the surrounding world for centuries to come.

Notes

¹ The author, being also an editor, recused himself from the editing process regarding this article. It received no special treatment and was required to conform to all standard requirements.

² Robert Tignor, *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010), 404.

³ *Ibid.*, 371.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 401.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 371.

⁶ *The Monk of Kublai Khan, Emperor of China; or The History of the Life and Travels of Rabban Sauma, Envoy and Plenipotentiary of the Mongol Khans to the Kings of Europe and Markos who as Yahbh-Allaha III Became Patriarch of the Nestorian Church in Asia* (London: The Religious Track Society, 1928), Ch. 7-12.

⁷ Djibril Tamsir Niane and David W. Chappell and Jim Jones, *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* (Harlow, England: Pearson Longman, 2006), 49.

⁸ Tacitus, *The Agricola and Germania*, trans. A. J. Church and W. J. Brodribb (London: Macmillan, 1877), 87- 110.