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The Sundiata epic: Using African literature in Margaret Lo Piccolo Sullivan's classroom introducing high school students to out of cultural experience can be difficult. But as the world history curriculum expands from a European focus to a more global focus, teachers need to find ways to go beyond the names, dates and places approach to non-European research. One way to do this is to introduce students to non-European literature. Finding a good story, as well as historically useful, can arouse student interest. The Sundyata epic is such a fairy tale.¹ The Grassland Empire of Sudan Epic Sundiata tells the story of the rise of the Empire of Mali, one of the three great Sudanese empires² that dominated the meadows of northwest Africa for more than a thousand years. The earliest, the Ghanalan Empire, rose between the main waters of the Senegal and Niger rivers as early as 400 AD, when the Soninke people extended their dominance westward towards the Atlantic and north on the outskirts of the Sahara Desert. Ghana's demise came when the nomadic Berber people of the Sahara, the Sanhaja, converted to Islam, united militarily and plundered their capital in 1076. Sanhaja, better known in European history as the Almoravids, has also expanded its power north to Spain. Sanhaja were better conquerors than the rulers, and the quarrels between the rulers of Almoravid allowed many small kingdoms to regain their independence. One such kingdom was Mali, which was ruled by the Keita dynasty for three hundred years. For some time Mali was under the control of the Kingdom of Soso (Sasso, Susou). When the prince of the Keita dynasty, Sundiata, destroyed the army of the Kingdom of Soso at the Battle of Creen in 1234, he established Mali's supremacy in the region. The struggle of Sundiate Keith to save his people and found the formidable empire of Malinke is the subject of the epic Sundiata. Mali dominated the meadows from the Atlantic to the large bend of the Niger River and from the Sahara to tropical rainforests along the Gulf of Guinea. He reached the height of his power under Mansa (Emperor) Kankan Musa (1312-1335), known for his complex pilgrimage to Mecca. After 1400, Mali began to decline slowly, when Sonhai - a small kingdom washed up next to the great bend of Niger - began its rise to power. Sonhai, who ruled Mali from 1335 to 1375, was the last of the great Sudanese empires to rule wide meadows. For nearly a century, Sonhai fought a shrinking Mali before destroying its army in 1546 and gaining supremacy in the area. But even now changes in international trade are undermining Sonhay's wealth. While the villagers of western meadows were primarily millet farmers, the wealth of the great empires relied on control of the trans-Saharan trade. In this trade, rulers and merchants gold from the south to exchange with the Berbers who carried his caravan of camels across the great desert and returned with salt and luxury goods. When the Portuguese began to explore and trade along the coast of West Africa, the gold-mining regions in the south had a more direct market with the outside world. Trade flowed south to the Portuguese and other Europeans who followed them, not north through the meadows of empires. The last blow for Sonhay came when the ruler of Morocco sent an army south in 1591 to destroy what was left of the empire. Although the meadows empires came and went, they all shared a common culture. Most people followed the traditional African religion, even after Islam was introduced by merchants and the Sanhaja invasion, and gradually became a religion of merchants and ruling classes. In Mali, the first known ruler of keita, Barmandana, reportedly converted to Islam in 1050 after being told that the adoption of Allah would lead to a severe drought. While Islamic religious beliefs and customs seem to be more marginalized to Mali's rulers, the rulers of Songhai are becoming more and more traditionally Muslim. Political practice is another common cultural trait among the inhabitants of the meadows. Rooted in the traditional African religion, kings were the link between their people and the supreme power of the spiritual world. Thus, the ruler had to be morally correct, otherwise his people would lose favor to benevolent spirits. The kings were thus chosen by the Royal Council from among the male members of the ruling dynasty. Each empire, as a result of conquest, the vanquished regions took the form of vassal states, in which one of the members of the native dynasty swore allegiance to the emperor, followed his decrees and regularly sent him taxes, tributes and soldiers. Although theoretically every king or emperor had unlimited power, in fact it was tested by the de facto power of bureaucracy, nobility, army and laws of the kingdom. The epic Sundiata Originally passed down from generation to generation orally, the Epic Sundiata is the story of Sundiate Keith and the construction of Mali's empire in the thirteenth century. Based on history, the epic was undoubtedly decorated to create a dramatic essence. It begins with a prophecy made by Nagan Con Fatta, ruler of the small state of Mali. While Nare Meghan and his courtiers once sit in his yard, hunters appear from a foreign land. They tell Meaghan Con Fattah that he will have a glorious son, but only after he marries an ugly woman. It takes several years before the second set of hunters arrives to tell Magan Con Fattah an even more alien tale. With the support of a magical old woman, they killed a buffalo who scoured the nearby land of Do. The old woman made them promise that when offered any girl in as a prize, a prize, would have chosen the ugliest. They chose Sogloon Keja, a hunchback with huge eyes, but now they don't know what to do with it. So they represent her Meegan Con Fattah. Laga Con Fattah already has a beautiful wife Sussuma Berete and a healthy young son Dankaran Mist. But, remembering the prophecy, he accepts Sololon Keju as his second wife. When Soglon becomes pregnant, Fagan Con Fattah is waiting for a great son to succeed him. But the young Sundiata, whose head is too big for his body, limps and crawls through his mother's hut, eating insatiably. People laugh and watch, especially Sussuma Berete, who wants her own son to become king of Mali. Thinking that the prophecy has not yet come true, Maghan Kon Fatta impregnates Sohalon Keju again, but this time she carries him a daughter. Although disappointed in Sundiata, the aging Maghan Con Fattah appoints his lame son as his heir. But after his death, the Royal Council of Mali cancels the request of Nare Lag and calls Dankaran Tuman the ruler, and Sasso Beret will act as the queen regent for the young prince. She uses this power to constantly humiliate So nakedon Keju and Sundiata. One day, after Sassoom brutally scolds Sogloon Keju because her lame son can't bring baobab leaves, an angry Sogolon strikes her son. Inspired by his mother's desperation, Sundiata sends magical iron bars that have been waiting for this particular occasion. Raising himself and walking for the first time, he plucks from the ground a whole baobab tree and brings it to his mother. Now Sassoom Beret, who sees Sundiata's growing power and popularity as a threat to her own son, is plotting against him. When Sasso as she tries to force the nine witches of Mali to destroy Sundiata, Sogolon Keju decides that it is time to leave Mali. In exile, Sundiat serves other kings. In the Kingdom of Meme, he rises to become the adopted son and heir to the ruler. But while things are going well for Sundiata, the growing power of Sumaoro Kante - the evil King Sossos - overwhelms Mali. He makes the weak Dankaran Touman his vassal, oppresses people and takes hostage Ballu Fassake (the Sundyata griot, or tutor and counselor) and his half sister Nanu Triben. Mali now turns to Sundiath for deliverance. Leading troops from Meme, Sundiata was quickly joined by his old playmates, now the chiefs of Mali. The struggle for Mali is on two levels, spiritual and military. The first will be discussed later. The latter ends with the Battle of Crean, where Sundiata decisively defeats Sumaoro. The epic ends with a gathering of kings near the town of Ka-ba. Here the king after king pays homage to Sundiat as Mali's empire is formed. In the glorious celebration that follows, everyone looks to Sundiata to establish a period of peace, justice and prosperity on vast meadows of northwest Africa. The hero overcame personal and social adversity to fulfill the prophecy made by the original hunters who attended the trial of Nadagan Con Fattah. The significance of Sundiata Epic Sundiata points to the complexities of thirteenth century Sudan. The scholar Nechemia Levson calls it key in the historical traditions of Malinke.³ He outlines a time when many small states struggled to fill the power vacuum left by the fall of Ghana. It also marks the point at which Islam, which is slowly spreading along the Trans-Saharan trade routes, has strengthened in the region as a result of the jihad (holy war) of Sanhaj. Thus, the epic records a time of both political upheaval and religious change. The introduction of Islam into the Sudan has led to the development of a competing ideology and infrastructure into an existing civilization. As trading communities became Islamic, their members followed the law of the Koran and settled their disputes in the courts of the Koran authorized by the ruler. The rulers themselves saw the benefits of using Muslims as literate administrators whose loyalty overshadowed traditional lines. The adoption of Islam has also placed Sudanese kingdoms and empires in a network of Islamic nations and trading patterns. However, this new religious ideology did not replace the old one. Sudanese culture relied not only on the old loyalty to the ancestry, but also on the traditional religion, which continued to attract the majority of the population. The kingdom depended on the spiritual power that came from performing ritual duties, as well as on the origin of the founding ancestors. Thus, in order to maintain his role in traditional Sudanese society, the ruler could not abandon the old ways. Competing ideologies: Islam and the traditional African religion Epic Sundiata can be used on a secondary level to illustrate how two ideologies can exist simultaneously and precisely competing loyalties from the same people. The epic assumes the dominance of the traditional African religion in 13th-century Mali, but at the same time points to the importance of Islam in this changing society. In the dualism that existed, the rulers had to cross a fine line between the two systems to command the loyalty of both the Muslim trading elite and the religiously traditional masses. The epic shows how astute ruler like Sundiata can use Islam and traditional religion as political tools, choosing the right tool at the right time for maximum effect. Since the Sundyata Epic is the story of both the great hero of the Malinke people and the founding of the Empire of Mali, it appeals to the singular spirit of Malinka, or, in more modern terms, to nationalism. Even so, however, Islam was used to link Mali and its ruler to Muslim community and to provide it with a new new factor where old loyalty was not enough. The first connection with the larger Islamic world, which appears in the epic, includes the common practice of searching for Muslim predecessors for Sudanese dynasties. At the beginning of the epic, the Keita clan asserts Bilali Bunam, the companion of the Prophet Muhammad, as its founding ancestor. Scientists note, however, that unlike some other Sudanese ruling families, the Keitas called their ancestor a black African, not a person of Arab descent. The paper also makes many references to the genie,⁴ using the Islamic word for spiritual beings to refer to what are obviously traditional African spirits.⁵ Despite the claim that the Keitas have been Muslims for generations, the epic does not suggest that Sundiata has a Muslim education. He learns the rules of Malinke's behavior from his Vrio, Balla Fassyoke, and the story of his family from his mother, Sogolon Kedjou.⁶ His long exile is also to his education, and perhaps the root of his Islamic beliefs and practices; according to the poem, Sundiata learns about his ancestor Bilali Bunama from merchants in Ghana.⁷ However, only once in sundiat's poem does a Muslim ritual. This comes after he rises into the office of the viceroy and heir-apparent in the Muslim kingdom of Mema, and turns east to pray as his mother dies.⁸ Sundiata's first dons a Muslim dress when leading Muslim troops from Meme to reclaim his kingdom of Mali.⁹ Links to traditional Africa Links to traditional Africa in Epic Sundiata are far stronger than the scattered references to Islam. Although Sundiata is theoretically a descendant of Bilali Bunama, he is also the seventeenth in Keita's line to rule Mali. The epic specifically mentions Mamadi-Kani, the great king of hunters, who, according to scientists, used the power of hunting clans to strengthen Keita's power. In addition, the link between keita royalty and hunting is evident throughout the work. It is the hunters who predict the greatness of Sundiata and bring his mother, Sogolon, to Mali. Sundiata is often referred to as Simbon, or great hunter, and when he wants to emphasize Malinke's nationalism (for example, at the Battle of Creen), he dresses as a traditional hunter-king.¹¹ Epopeia constantly refers to the ancestry of his parents and their respective totems, calling Sundiata the baby lion and the baby buffalo. Finally, Sundiata follows the traditional African religious practice of sacrificing animals to genina. In honor of his victory in Creen, he sacrifices the sacred stone to Budofu and drinks from the sacred pool, which makes him radiate like a star.¹² Yet other traditional African religious elements play a significant role in the history¹³ The meaning of prophecy is evident in the birth of Sundiata and amplified his crippled childhood, linking the hero with the African sense of destiny. As the epic goes: God has secrets that no one can understand... Everyone finds his way marked for him and he can't change anything of it. ¹⁴ In fact, once the greatness of Sundiata was predicted, nothing can hold him back. The traditional African concept of correct action also stands out in this story. The right action brings rewards, while wrong- or evi-151:action reaps ruin. At the beginning of the poem, the hunters who bring Sogolon Keju to Mali give the old woman food. As a result, she reveals the secrets of marauding Buffalo Do, allowing them to kill the buffalo and bring their award to Mali. God gives strength to Sundiata because his mother is a good wife to Maghan Con Fattah, and the child is worth no more than the mother is worth. ¹⁵ When Sassoma Berete appeals to the nine witches of Mali to destroy Sundiata, they answer that he cannot survive unless he commits some evil act and then becomes his protector when he treats them kindly. As their leader says: Here life hangs only a very thin thread, but here everything is intertwined. Life has a cause and death. One comes from the other. ¹⁶ Although at some point the epic casts a struggle between Sumaoro Kante and Sundiata, both involving a bastion of fetishism against the word Allah,¹⁷ traditional African magic permeates the work. Sumaoro Kante is evil because he is an evil sorcerer. Its tower is filled with magical symbols - snakes, silos, skulls and musical instruments that suggest negative force. When Sumaoro disappears just as Sundiata is about to swoop on him at the Battle of Negeboria, Sundiata admits that to defeat King Sasso, another weapon is needed and asks, What is the secret of his power? ¹⁸ In essence, however, the struggle between Sundiata and Sumaoro is a struggle between two great magicians, one associated with evil and the other with good, strength in the spiritual world. Sundiata's magic also comes from his mother, a buffalo woman, before whom powerless sorcerers have shrunk in fear. ¹⁹ At a gathering of their vassal kings in Ka-ba, the victorious Sundiata wears Muslim clothing, indicating a new unity, surpassing the traditional family loyalty of the meadows. However, he acts in the traditional manner: he speaks only through his griot, Balla Fasseke; The constitution it establishes is traditionally Sudanese; and the society he reaffirms in Ka-ba is that the old Ghana.²⁰ Dilemma faced by the Sundiata in bringing together competing ideologies and structures does not end with this great hero. Even after the reign of Mansa Kankan Musa and the arrival of the Songhay Empire, the question of the double religious loyalty of the rulers remained.²¹ v Notes 1. This article was written at the University's Summer Institute in Monticello under the gun of Professors John Short and Richard Corby and with the support of the National Endowment for the Humanities. The work was led by Professor Stephen Harmon of the University of Kansas at Pittsburgh. 2. It is important to note that the Sudanese empires discussed in this article ruled a region no different from that of the present-day State of Sudan. 3. Nechemia Levson, Ancient Ghana and Mali (New York: Africana Publishing Co., 1980), 58. 4. Jinn is a spirit that exists somewhere between angels and people in creation. They have the ability to take human form, can participate in good or evil deeds, and can be saved or cursed. See John L. Esposito, Islam: Straight Path (New York: Oxford University Publishing House, 1991), 27. 5. A brief summary of African religions, useful for both teachers and students, is published by the Center for African Studies at the University of Illinois. Cm. C. C. Steward and Donald Crummy, Religions in Africa (Champaign, Illinois: Center for African Studies, 1984), 5. D.T. Niane, Sundiata: Epic of Old Mali (Hong Kong: Longman African Classics, 1992), 2, 62 and footnote 4 for 85. I used this translation of the poem because it is easily accessible and easy to understand. I would recommend that teachers use parts of the poem, particularly parts about the arrival of Sogolon in Mali, Sundiata's childhood and the fight against Sumaro, rather than trying to maintain student interest throughout the work. 6. Niane, Sundiata, 23, 32-35. Roland Oliver and J.D. Destiny, The Short History of Africa (New York: Viking Penguin, 1988), 70, suggest that Sundiata began life as a pagan. 7. Niane, Sundiata, 48. 8. Ibid., 46. 9. Ibid. 10. Ibid. 2-9. 63. 11. Ibid., 63. 12. Ibid., 6, 56, 70, 72. For a fuller treatment of the traditional African religion, see John S. Mbichi, African Religion and Philosophy (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Press, 1990). 14. Niane, Sundiat, 6-7, 16-17. 15. Ibid. 22. 16. Ibid., 14, 18, 22, 24, 17. Ibid., 41. 18. Ibid., 38-40, 52-53. 19. Ibid., 63. 20. Ibid., 73-78; Left, 73-78. 21. See, for example, D. T. Niane, Mali and the second expansion of Mandingou, in D.T. Niana, while, Common History of Africa, Vol. V (Berkeley, CA: REF,1984), 66. Links Clarke, Peter B. West Africa and Islam. London: Edward Arnold Ltd., 1982. Lapidus, Ira M. History of Islamic societies. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989. Oliver, Roland. African experience. New York: Harper Collins, 1992. Margaret Sullivan is a lecturer and chair of social studies at Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, Missouri. Teaching the activities of the Epic Sundiata is more than a good story. It can bring any number of subjects in the class. The continuous work of prophecy and spiritual forces can illustrate the traditional African religion. His narrative battles lead to a discussion of the war south of the The wary women of the epic can give an idea of the role of women in traditional African society. And the whole epic can lead to an understanding of the Sudanese king and the construction of an empire. One good direction is the comparison between Islam and the traditional African religion. Start by discussing the beliefs and practices of each religion. Then divide the class into groups to explore and communicate the meaning of things like Muslim versus traditional clothing, Islamic prayers against animal sacrifices in the genie, and various fetishes and symbols in the epic. After some background studies, the groups may well draw some conclusions about the use of Sundiat as a traditional African religion and Islam to achieve and maintain power. This group work could lead to more general discussions and poster models of the Sudanese Government. Some issues that should be addressed, may be qgt;which groups or individuals have power in these societies? What were their sources of power? How was the society organized? What dualisms, other than religious ones, existed? Students could illustrate their models of Sudanese government posters with various artworks and corresponding African symbols. The same methods can be applied to other areas of content derived from the poem. Another lesson may include comparing competing ideologies found in the Sundiata Epic with the current history. The teacher may ask questions about competing interest groups involved in some conflicts over public policy in the United States today. For example, what competing ideologies are involved in the conflict? How do politicians try to compromise the interests of these groups? What factors are most important in their success or inability to reach a compromise? Issues related to personal conflict and competing loyalty may be particularly likely to generate interest in multi-religious and multi-ethnic classes. 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