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David Wisniewski

Sundiata. Lion King of Mali

United States (1992)

TAGS: African Storytelling African Traditions

We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	Sundiata. Lion King of Mali
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	United States, Mali
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1992
First Edition Details	David Wisniewski, *Sundiata. Lion King of Mali.* New York: Clarion Books. 1992, 32 pp.
ISBN	9780395764817
Genre	Biographies, Picture books
Target Audience	Children (4–7 years)
Author of the Entry	Eleanor A. Dasi, University of Yaoundé I, wandasi5@yahoo.com
Peer-reviewer of the Entry	Divine Che Neba, University of Yaoundé 1, nebankiwang@yahoo.com Daniel A. Nkemleke, University of Yaoundé 1, nkemlekedan@yahoo.com. Elżbieta Olechowska, University of Warsaw, elzbieta.olechowska@gmail.com

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Creators

David Wisniewski , 1953 - 2002
(Author, Illustrator)

David Wisniewski was born on March 21, 1953. His family didn't really settle in one particular area because of his father's postings as an air-force master sergeant. He credits his mother for teaching him how to draw in the first grade, which skill contributed to his love for reading Marvel Comics and later his interest in illustration. He attended the University of Maryland College Park, but was not able to afford the tuition, dropped out of school. He joined the Ringling Brothers Circus and Vargas Circus, where he worked as a clown. There, he met Donna Harris, who was his boss at the time and who later became his wife. They had two children; Ariana and Alexander. Since it was not easy for him to tour after his children were born, he settled down to full-time illustrating and writing. The books he illustrated include: *The Warrior and the Wise Man* (1989), *Rain Player* (1991), *Sundiata: Lion King of Mali* (1992), *Golem* (1996). He focused mainly on children's books which won him the Caldecott Medal (an award given to the most distinguished artist of children's picture books published in America) in 1997. He died in his sleep on September 11, 2002 at the age of 49.

Sources:

NYTimes.com (accessed: June 21 2022);

Wikipedia (accessed: June 21, 2022).

Bio prepared by Eleanor A. Dasi, University of Yaoundé I, wandasi5@yahoo.com

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Additional information

Adaptations	Cartoon series.

Summary

There once lived a king in Mali* called Maghan Kon Fatta, who, like a lion, ruled his people with power and grace. One day, two hunters from the land of Do came to his palace. With them was a hunchbacked woman named Sogolon Kedjou. They told Maghan that a buffalo ravaged their countryside and they succeeded in slaying it. In gratitude, the king of Do asked them to give Sogolon to him as a gift. Sogolon was said to possess the spirit of the Buffalo. Balla Fasséké, Maghan's griot, whispered to him that from her, great kings would be born. According to the Balla Fasséké, the spirit of the lion merged with that of the buffalo would indeed be powerful. Maghan heeded the griot's advice and married Sogolon. The following year, she bore a male child and named him Sundiata**. Everybody was happy except queen Sassouma, king Maghan's first wife because Sundiata would be a rival to her son for the throne. However, Sundiata could neither walk nor speak for seven years. He could only drag himself around. Some people ridiculed him while others simply ignored him. This troubled the king, especially that Sogolon had tried in vain to heal Sundiata with herbs and potions. However, Balla Fasséké, the king's adviser, told him to be hopeful and name him heir, for the seed from which a great tree springs is usually very small. The king listened to him and when he saw that his time to leave the world was near, he decided to officially present Sundiata as his heir. He asked that Sundiata be brought before him. Then he spoke to Sundiata, introducing Balla Fasséké, son of Maghan's griot, as Sundiata's griot. Balla had the responsibility of teaching Sundiata the history of his ancestors and the laws of the land. At this, Sundiata beckoned to Balla, stretched himself up and spoke his first words saying, "Balla, you are my griot" (p.10). After the king's death, the king makers ignored the king's will and chose Sassouma's son as the new king. Seeing such injustice, Sundiata was determined to rise and walk, and succeeded in doing so. Hearing that Sundiata could now walk, Sassouma became jealous and insecure because her son's position as King could be threatened. So, she summoned the nine witches of Mali to kill him. Their sorcery worked with anger manifested by their victims but unfortunately for them, Sundiata could not be provoked to anger, even when his mother's spices were all being stolen from her

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garden. The witches could therefore not hurt Sundiata because of his pure heart. Sassouma then exiled Sundiata, his siblings, mother and Balla Fasséké to Sumanguru's court in Sosso. Sumanguru was feared for his sorcery and wickedness. When he discovered Balla's skills, he decided to keep him for his use. This annoyed Sundiata but he could not do anything. His mother asked them to leave Mali and return when Sundiata would be strong enough to fight for his throne. For seven years, they were moving across many kingdoms, some of whom received them, others shunned them, until they were finally welcomed at Mema.

There, Sundiata found favour with the king who admired his great courage and leadership skills. He even decided to make him his successor. Sometime later, Sundiata received a message from his kingdom that Mali was being attacked by Sumanguru the Sorcerer King. The envoys pleaded with him to go back home and save his people since everybody, including Sassouma and her son had fled, and the army lacked leadership. He embarked on a war expedition, taking with him half of the troops of the King of Mema, and recruiting more from the other friendly tribes they met in their exile. He met Sumanguru's army at Kirina, where the battle raged. Balla Fasséké saw Sundiata and went to him. They were happy to see each other again. Then Balla told him that he had only pretended to serve Sumanguru loyally and had discovered his weakness. Sundiata used this knowledge to kill Sumanguru and returned to his palace amid praises both from his people and from the kings who offered him help during his exile and in the battle. He spoke gently to them, promising each one a reward according to their destiny.

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* The story is based on the legend of Sundiata Keita, founder of the Mali Empire. He lived between 1190–1255.

** Also spelt Sondiata, Sundieta and/or Sunjata.

Analysis

The story narrates the struggles of Sundiata, the legendary king of Mali, who was born to lead but had to overcome physical disability and opposition to this destiny. From the African perspective, when someone is destined to be great, all events, whether positive or negative, contribute to the fulfilment of that destiny. That is why even

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the nine witches summoned to kill Sundiata were unsuccessful. The humiliations, disgrace, conspiracy, opposition and rejection that he faced because of his handicaps only helped in motivating him more to overcome these challenges, fight for justice and take back his throne.

The story also brings to light issues of rivalry between co-spouses and siblings born of different mothers, particularly with regard to inheritance and succession. Sassouma would go the whole length to get Sundiata out of the way so that her son could become king. But again, with the strength of character and moral uprightness shown by Sundiata and his mother, such rivalry could be easily neutralized.

The story also reassures those with disabilities that their disabilities do not define them or their futures. They can contribute positively to society if they choose to. They need only courage, determination, self-worth, and moral sense, just like Sundiata.

The illustrations in the book match the cultural landscape of the historical Mali empire in terms of architecture, traditional costume and life in general. The colours, patterns and designs make it easier to reinforce the image of different social groups (the royals and the commoners) in the society.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	African Storytelling African Traditions
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adversity Authority Conflict Disability Historical figures History Parents (and children) Revenge Siblings Witch
Further Reading	Austen, Ralph A., ed., *In Search of Sunjata: The Mande Oral Epic as History, Literature and Performance*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999.

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McKissack, Patricia and Fredrick McKissack, *The Royal Kingdoms of Ghana, Mali and Songhay: Life in Medieval Africa*, New York: H. Holt, 1995.

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