Sundiata Plot Summary

This plot summary of the Sundiata epic organizes the tale using the Monomyth structure.

Call to Adventure

The young prince Sunjata has grown so popular in Niani that Queen Sassouma is jealous and fears that the people will prefer him as king to her own son, Dankaran Touman. Determined to rid herself of the young prince, Sassouma orders the nine great witches of Mali to deceive and murder him. However, when they actually encounter Sunjata, they are so impressed with his kindness and generosity that they reveal the queen's plot and promise to protect him.

Helpers/Amulet

Sunjata's mother, Sogolon, fears for his life and recommends that they go into exile in order to protect the family. Manding-Bory, Sunjata's half-brother and best friend, accompanies them.

Crossing the Threshold:

Sunjata, Sogolon, and Manding-Bory cross the Niger river and begin their long exile. They enter a world of long marches, hostile kingdoms, and numerous dangers.

Tests

1. After leaving Niani, Sogolon and her children first stay at Djedeba with king Mansa Konkon who was also a great sorcerer. One night, after they have been there for two months, the king summons Sunjata into his palace. The king lives in a dark labyrinth, and when Sunjata finally finds him, Mansa is sitting in a room filled with beautiful swords. He informs Sunjata that it is his custom to invite his guests to play a game of wori, but that the stakes are very high. If the king wins, Sunjata will die, and if Sunjata wins, the king will grant him any request. However, no one had ever defeated the king. Sunjata knows that the king is setting a trap for him on behalf of Queen Sassouma, and when he simultaneously beats Mansa at the game and reveals the treachery, the king angrily exiles him from Djedeba. Sunjata thanks him for the hospitality, but promises to return.
2. Once again, Sogolon and her children go into exile. They head west toward the town of Tabon whose king has long been an ally of Niani. His son, Fran Kamara, was a close friend of Sunjata. But the king does not want any trouble from Sassouma and her son, and so he advises Sogolon to travel as far away as possible. He suggests the distant court of Ghana, but allows them a few days rest before they depart. During that time, Sunjata and Fran Kamara rekindle their friendship, and Sunjata promises that he will pick up Fran on his way home from exile and that they will win many battles together.
3. The exiles set out on the long journey from Tabon to Ghana in the company of a merchant caravan. After arriving at the imposing palace of the king, Sogolon asks for asylum and is surprised when the king responds in her own language and grants her request. The exiles are given every comfort befitting their rank, and for a while, it seems as if they have found peace. But after only a year, Sogolon becomes very ill. The king decides to send Sogolon to his cousin King Tounkara of Mema on Niger river where the moist air will restore Sogolon's health.
4. The king sends messengers ahead of the exiles so that an escort is sent to meet them and lead them to Mema. They are greeted warmly by the king's sister and are informed that the king himself is away campaigning against mountain tribes. When the king returns he reaffirms the hospitality offered by his sister and takes Sunjata under his wing. When the boy reaches 15 years of age, the king takes him on his first military campaign. He dazzles the entire army with his strength and bravery, and when they return home, the people praise the young warrior. After three years, the king appoints Sunjata his viceroy, and because he has no children, the people assume that Sunjata will also be his heir.

More Tests & A Further Call to Adventure

1. One day, Sogolon's daughter Kolonkan is walking through the marketplace when she notices some merchants offering Baobab leaves for sale. When she reveals that she and her family are from Mali, the merchants ask to speak with her mother. Sogolon asks that they be brought to her immediately, and while she is waiting, Sunjata and Manding-Bory return from hunting. When the merchants arrive, Sogolon instantly recognizes them as high-ranking officials at the court of Niani. After greetings are exchanged, the officials recount how Sumanguru, the sorcerer-king of Sosso, has overtaken Mali and driven Dankaran Touman into exile. Some brave men managed to escape and are waging war against Sumanguru, but they need the strength and leadership of Sunjata in order to regain their homeland. The emissaries ask Sunjata to reclaim his rightful throne and free his people from bondage. Sunjata agrees and decides to take leave of the king and return homeward immediately.
2. That night, Sogolon has a terrible fever and is shivering in her bed. She wishes her son good night, and by morning she has passed away. The whole court of Mema goes into mourning, for the viceroy's mother is dead. Sunjata goes to see the king who offers condolences; but when he informs him of his intention to return to Mali and asks leave to bury his mother in Mema before his departure, the king grows angry and orders him to take her corpse with him. After a moment, he regains his composure and asks for a burial fee instead. Sunjata promises to pay when he returns to Mali, but the king demands immediate compensation. Sunjata leaves the room and returns a short while later with a basket full of potsherds, chicken feathers, and pieces of straw. The king grows angry at this insult, but his adviser explains to him that these scraps symbolize the destruction which Sunjata will bring upon Mema if the burial is not granted freely. The king finall understands, and Sogolon is buried with honor befitting her rank.
3. Sunjata sets out for Mali with half of Mema's army. His first objective is Tabon, for he has promised Fran Kamara that he will pick him up before returning to Mali. However, Sumanguru the sorcerer-king knows that Sunjata has begun his journey. His councilors advise him to attack Sunjata immediately, but he is already waging war against a rebellious faction, so he sends his son Sosso Balla to intercept Sunjata at Tabon. Sosso deploys his troops at the entrance of the mountain pass in order to block Sunjata's advance, and when the young warrior arrives that evening, his men suggest that they rest for the night and attack in the morning. Sunjata prefers the element of surprise and assures his men that the battle will not take long. The war drums begin to beat and Sunjata leads the charge shouting a war cry. The Sossans are taken by surprise, and in a matter of minutes Sunjata cuts through the main flank of the army. Soon he catches sight of Sosso Balla and just as he brings his sword down upon him, a Sosso warrior comes between them and allows Balla to make his escape. Seeing their leader in flight, the Sossans yield the position and hastily retreat.
4. Sumanguru now sees that Sunjata is a formidable enemy and he marches his army out to meet him in battle in the Boure country. Again Sunjata deploys his troops immediately, forcing Sumanguru to draw his men into tthe narrow valley. Sunjata's army advances and using cunning strategy throws the Sossan army into disarray. Sumanguru now enters the battle, and when Sunjata sees him, he immediately rushes forward to try to kill him. Sunjata hurls his spear and it bounces off of Sumanguru's chest and falls to the ground. Sunjata then shoots an arrow from his bow, but the sorcerer-king catches the arrow in flight. Angry at this turn of events, Sunjata grabs his spear from the ground and rushes to charge Sumanguru, but as he raises his arm to strike, he sees that Sumanguru has disappeared. He looks around, and to his surprise, Sumanguru is on top of the hill sitting on his horse. As he watches him, the sorcerer disappears yet again. Sunjata's army completes the rout of the Sossans, but the young hero is greatly distressed at the magic powers of his enemy.

Helpers:

Sunjata now assembles a large army from among the rebellious kings of the land. He enters the land of the Niger River and all the allies assemble in the great plain of Sibi where Sunjata surveys the troops. Sunjata makes preparations for a large-scale invasion of Mali and is offering sacrifices to the gods when he is informed that his sister Nana Triban and the old griot Balla Fasseke have escaped from Sosso and have arrived at his camp. Nana tells Sunjata how she had been forced to marry Sumanguru by her brother Dankaran. She became the chosen wife and deceived him for a long while by pretending to hate Sunjata so that she might learn the secret of his magic power. One night she asked him directly whether he was a man or a supernatural being, and in his pride, Sumanguru boasted to her and revealed that his magic totem is cock's spur. She then escaped Sosso with the help of Balla Fasseke. Sunjata rejoices at having recovered his griot so that the memory of his great deeds will be preserved.

Climax/Final Battle:

Sumanguru now advances to Krina and makes an official declaration of war against Sunjata who responds that he will not back down from the fight. On the evening before the great battle, Sunjata holds an enormous feast for the troops and Balle sings the history of Mali in order to remind Sunjata of his birthright and great destiny. The next morning, the two armies meet in an enormous clash. At first, the battle is evenly fought, but eventually the cavalry from Mema manage to break the enemy center. At this time, Manding-Bory informs Sunjata that Sumanguru has swept down upon the left flank of the army. Enraged, Sunajta pulls the cavalry in that direction but barely manages to withstand the onslaught. He now seeks the Sumanguru, but the sorcerer-king retreats far behind his men. Sunjata fires an arrow with cock's spur on the tip and it grazes Sumanguru's shoulder. As soon as he feels the totem touching him, Sumanguru begins to lose his powers. He begins to tremble and looks up towards the sun where he sees an ominous black bird of misfortune. Realizing his fate, he turns around and flees. With their leader gone, the Sossans give way to the great force of Sunjata's army, leaving the hero free to pursue Sumanguru. They ride all day and night and manage to track the sorcerer's path to the north. Finally the catch up with him at the top of Mount Koulikoro, where Sumanguru vanishes into a black cavern and disappears forever.

Flight:

The remains of Sumanguru's army retreat to Sosso. Sunjata marches on the great city, and although the defenses are formidable, he lays siege to the city and breaches the wall within a day. Sunjata orders his troops to take all the inhabitants prisoner and destroy the city completely.

Return:

Sunjata now meets with his allies at Ka-ba on the Niger where he returns the individual kingdoms to their rightful rulers with great fanfare. After days of celebration, Sunjata assembles his own army and crosses the Niger to enter old Mali. When the whole army has crossed the river, Sunjata orders great sacrifices in order to thank god for a safe return to Mali. The villages give Sunjata an unprecedented welcome. Everywhere the army goes, they are mobbed by the joyous people of Mali. Finally, they arrive at the old capital of Niani which had been greatly damaged by Sumanguru. Sunjata enters his native city and begins the process of rebuilding.

Elixir:

With Sumanguru defeated, all the tribes are free from their long bondage. After a year, Sunjata holds a great assembly of kings and princes at Niani. They all pay homage to the great Sunjata for restoring their lands and making the world a safer more prosperous place.