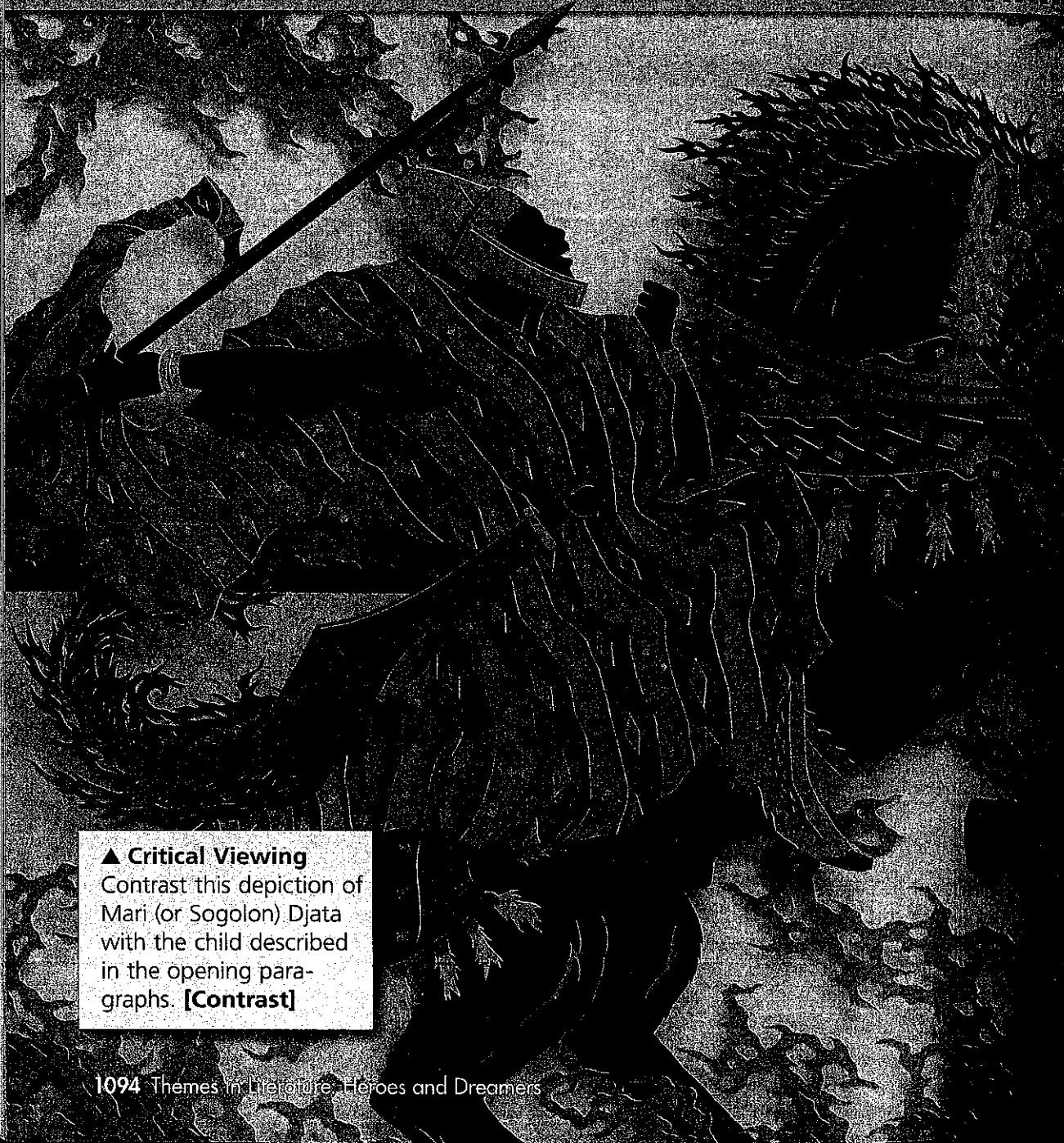


*from*  
**Sundiata**  
AN EPIC OF OLD MALI

D. T. NIAN



▲ **Critical Viewing**

Contrast this depiction of Mari (or Sogolon) Djata with the child described in the opening paragraphs. **[Contrast]**

# CHARACTERS IN SUNDIATA

**Balla Fasséké** (bá' lä fá sá' ká): Griot and counselor of Sundiata

**Boukari** (bōō ká' rē): Son of the king and Namandjé, one of his wives; also called Manding (män' diŋ) Boukari

**Dankaran Touman** (dän' ká rän tōō' man): Son of the king and his first wife, Sassouma, who is also called Sassouma Béréte

**Djamarou** (jä mä' rōō): Daughter of Sogolon and the king; sister of Sundiata and Kolonkan

**Farakourou** (fä rä kōō' rōō): Master of the forges

**Gnankouman Doua** (nän kōō' män dōō' ə): The king's griot; also called, simply, Doua

**Kolonkan** (kō lōn' kən): Sundiata's eldest sister

**Namandjé** (nä män' jə): One of the king's wives

**Naré Maghan** (nä' rā mäg' hän): Sundiata's father; the king of Mali before Sundiata

**Nounfaïri** (nōōn' fá ē' rē): Soothsayer and smith; father of Farakourou

**Sassouma Béréte** (sä sōō' mä be' re te): The king's first wife

**Sogolon** (sō gō lōn'): Sundiata's mother; also called Sogolon Kedjou (kə' jōō)

**Sundiata** (sōōn dyä' tä): Legendary king of Mali; referred to as Djata (dyä' tä) and Sogolon Djata ("son of Sogolon"), and Mari (mä' rē) Djata.

## CHILDHOOD

God has his mysteries which none can fathom. You, perhaps, will be a king. You can do nothing about it. You, on the other hand, will be unlucky, but you can do nothing about that either. Each man finds his way already marked out for him and he can change nothing of it.

Sogolon's son had a slow and difficult childhood. At the age of three he still crawled along on all-fours while children of the same age were already walking. He had nothing of the great beauty of his father Naré Maghan. He had a head so big that he seemed unable to support it; he also had large eyes which would open wide whenever anyone entered his mother's house. He was taciturn<sup>1</sup> and used to spend the whole day just sitting in the middle of the house. Whenever his mother went out he would crawl on all-fours to rummage about in the calabashes<sup>2</sup> in search of food, for he was very greedy.

### Vocabulary

**fathom** (fath' əm) *v.*  
understand thoroughly

### Reading Check

Why is Mari (or Sogolon) Djata's childhood difficult?

1. **taciturn** (tas' ə turn') *adj.* almost always silent; not liking to talk.

2. **calabashes** (kal' ə bash' əz) *n.* dried, hollow shells of gourds (squashlike fruits), used as bowls, cups, and so on.

### Reading Skill

#### Analyze Cultural

**Context** What detail does the background information in footnote 2 help you understand?

### Literary Analysis

**Epic and Epic Hero** In what two ways is Mari (or Sogolon) Djata set apart from other children?

### Vocabulary

**innuendo** (in' yoo en' do) *n.* indirect insult or accusation; insinuation

**estranged** (e stranj'd') *adj.* kept apart; in the condition of having had affection turn into indifference or hostility

Malicious tongues began to blab. What three-year-old has not yet taken his first steps? What three-year-old is not the despair of his parents through his whims and shifts of mood? What three-year-old is not the joy of his circle through his backwardness in talking? Sogolon Djata (for it was thus that they called him, prefixing his mother's name to his), Sogolon Djata, then, was very different from others of his own age. He spoke little and his severe face never relaxed into a smile. You would have thought that he was already thinking, and what amused children of his age bored him. Often Sogolon would make some of them come to him to keep him company. These children were already walking and she hoped that Djata, seeing his companions walking, would be tempted to do likewise. But nothing came of it. Besides, Sogolon Djata would brain the poor little things with his already strong arms and none of them would come near him any more.

The king's first wife was the first to rejoice at Sogolon Djata's infirmity. Her own son, Dankaran Touman, was already eleven. He was a fine and lively boy, who spent the day running about the village with those of his own age. He had even begun his initiation in the bush.<sup>3</sup> The king had had a bow made for him and he used to go behind the town to practice archery with his companions. Sassouma was quite happy and snapped her fingers at Sogolon whose child was still crawling on the ground. Whenever the latter happened to pass by her house, she would say, "Come, my son, walk, jump, leap about. The jinn didn't promise you anything out of the ordinary,<sup>4</sup> but I prefer a son who walks on his two legs to a lion that crawls on the ground." She spoke thus whenever Sogolon went by her door. The innuendo would go straight home and then she would burst into laughter, that diabolical laughter which a jealous woman knows how to use so well.

Her son's infirmity weighed heavily upon Sogolon Kedjou; she had resorted to all her talent as a sorceress to give strength to her son's legs, but the rarest herbs had been useless. The king himself lost hope.

How impatient man is! Nare Maghan became imperceptibly estranged but Gnankouman Doua never ceased reminding him of the hunter's words. Sogolon became pregnant again. The king hoped for a son, but it was a daughter called Kolonkan. She

3. **initiation in the bush** education in tribal lore given to twelve-year-old West African boys so they can become full members of the tribe.

4. **The jinn . . . ordinary** Jinn are supernatural beings said to influence human affairs. They promised that the son of Sogolon would make Mali a great empire.

resembled her mother and had nothing of her father's beauty. The disheartened king debarred Sogolon from his house and she lived in semi-disgrace for a while. Naré Maghan married the daughter of one of his allies, the king of the Kamaras.

She was called Namandjé and her beauty was legendary. A year later she brought a boy into the world. When the king consulted soothsayers<sup>5</sup> on the destiny of this son he received the reply that Namandjé's child would be the right hand of some mighty king. The king gave the newly-born the name of Boukari. He was to be called Manding Boukari or Manding Bory later on.

Naré Maghan was very perplexed. Could it be that the stiff-jointed son of Sogolon was the one the hunter soothsayer had foretold?

"The Almighty has his mysteries," Gnankouman Doua would say and, taking up the hunter's words, added, "The silk-cotton tree emerges from a tiny seed."

One day Naré Maghan came along to the house of Nounfairi, the blacksmith seer of Niani. He was an old, blind man. He received the king in the anteroom which served as his workshop. To the king's question he replied, "When the seed germinates growth is not always easy; great trees grow slowly but they plunge their roots deep into the ground."

"But has the seed really germinated?" said the king.

"Of course," replied the blind seer. "Only the growth is not as quick as you would like it; how impatient man is."

This interview and Doua's confidence gave the king some assurance. To the great displeasure of Sassouma Béréte the king restored Sogolon to favor and soon another daughter was born to her. She was given the name of Djamarou.

However, all Niani talked of nothing else but the stiff-legged son of Sogolon. He was now seven and he still crawled to get about. In spite of all the king's affection, Sogolon was in despair. Naré Maghan aged and he felt his time coming to an end. Dankaran Touman, the son of Sassouma Béréte, was now a fine youth.

One day Naré Maghan made Mari Djata come to him and he spoke to the child as one speaks to an adult. "Mari Djata, I am growing old and soon I shall be no more among you, but before death takes me off I am going to give you the present each king gives his successor. In Mali every prince has his own griot. Doua's father was my father's griot, Doua is mine and the son of Doua, Balla Fasséké here, will be your griot. Be inseparable friends from

## *What three-year-old has not yet taken his first steps!*

### Reading Skill

#### Analyze Cultural

**Context** What does the background information on page 1093 suggest about how powerful Mari Djata will one day become?



What advice does the blind seer give to the king?

<sup>5</sup> soothsayers (sooth' sā' arz) *n.* people who profess to foretell the future.

his day forward. From his mouth you will hear the history of your ancestors, you will learn the art of governing Mali according to the principles which our ancestors have bequeathed to us. I have served my term and done my duty too. I have done everything which a king of Mali ought to do. I am handing an enlarged kingdom over to you and I leave you sure allies. May your destiny be accomplished, but never forget that Niani is your capital and Mali the cradle of your ancestors."

The child, as if he had understood the whole meaning of the king's words, beckoned Balla Fasséké to approach. He made room for him on the hide he was sitting on and then said, "Balla, you will be my griot."

"Yes, son of Sogolon, if it pleases God," replied Balla Fasséké.

The king and Doua exchanged glances that radiated confidence.

## THE LION'S AWAKENING

A short while after this interview between Naré Maghan and his son the king died.

Sogolon's son was no more than seven years old. The council of elders met in the king's palace. It was no use Doua's defending the king's will which reserved the throne for Mari Djata, for the council took no account of Naré Maghan's wish. With the help of Sassouma Béréte's intrigues, Dankaran Touman was proclaimed king and a regency council<sup>6</sup> was formed in which the queen mother was all-powerful. A short time after, Doua died.

As men have short memories, Sogolon's son was spoken of with nothing but irony and scorn. People had seen one-eyed kings, one-armed kings, and lame kings, but a stiff-legged king had never been heard tell of. No matter how great the destiny promised for Mari Djata might be, the throne could not be given to someone who had no power in his legs; if the jinn loved him, let them begin by giving him the use of his legs. Such were the remarks that Sogolon heard every day. The queen mother, Sassouma Béréte, was the source of all this gossip.

Having become all-powerful, Sassouma Béréte persecuted Sogolon because the late Naré Maghan had preferred her. She banished Sogolon and her son to a back yard of the palace. Mari

6. **regency** (rē' jən sē) **council** group that rules instead of the king or queen when the king or queen is still a child or is otherwise incapable of ruling.

### ◀ Critical Viewing

What relationship in the epic might this picture illustrate? Explain.

**[Connect]**

### Reading Skill

#### Analyze Cultural

**Context** What do the details here indicate about the way in which West African society was ruled?



After the king's death, who takes power in the kingdom?

### Literary Analysis

**Epic and Epic Hero** In what way is the honor of Mari Djata's family threatened?

### Vocabulary

**derisively** (di rī'siv lə)  
*adv.* in a mocking and ridiculing manner

**affront** (ə frunt') *n.* open insult

Djata's mother now occupied an old hut which had served as a lumber-room of Sassouma's.

The wicked queen mother allowed free passage to all those inquisitive people who wanted to see the child that still crawled at the age of seven. Nearly all the inhabitants of Niani filed into the palace and the poor Sogolon wept to see herself thus given over to public ridicule. Mari Djata took on a ferocious look in front of the crowd of sightseers. Sogolon found a little consolation only in the love of her eldest daughter, Kolonkan. She was four and she could walk. She seemed to understand all her mother's miseries and already she helped her with the housework. Sometimes, when Sogolon was attending to the chores, it was she who stayed beside her sister Djamarou, quite small as yet.

Sogolon Kedjou and her children lived on the queen mother's leftovers, but she kept a little garden in the open ground behind the village. It was there that she passed her brightest moments looking after her onions and gnougous.<sup>7</sup> One day she happened to be short of condiments and went to the queen mother to beg a little baobab leaf.<sup>8</sup>

"Look you," said the malicious Sassouma, "I have a calabash full. Help yourself, you poor woman. As for me, my son knew how to walk at seven and it was he who went and picked these baobab leaves. Take them then, since your son is unequal to mine." Then she laughed derisively with that fierce laughter which cuts through your flesh and penetrates right to the bone.

Sogolon Kedjou was dumbfounded. She had never imagined that hate could be so strong in a human being. With a lump in her throat she left Sassouma's. Outside her hut Mari Djata, sitting on his useless legs, was blandly eating out of a calabash. Unable to contain herself any longer, Sogolon burst into sobs and seizing a piece of wood, hit her son.

"Oh son of misfortune, will you never walk? Through your fault I have just suffered the greatest affront of my life! What have I done, God, for you to punish me in this way?"

Mari Djata seized the piece of wood and, looking at his mother, said, "Mother, what's the matter?"

"Shut up, nothing can ever wash me clean of this insult."

"But what then?"

"Sassouma has just humiliated me over a matter of a baobab leaf. At your age her own son could walk and used to bring his mother baobab leaves."

7. **gnougous** (nōō' gōōz') *n.* root vegetables.

8. **baobab** (bā' ō bab') *leaf* The baobab is a thick-trunked tree; its leaves are used to flavor food.

"Cheer up, Mother, cheer up."

"No. It's too much. I can't."

"Very well then, I am going to walk today," said Mari Djata. "Go and tell my father's smiths to make me the heaviest possible iron rod. Mother, do you want just the leaves of the baobab or would you rather I brought you the whole tree?"

"Ah, my son, to wipe out this insult I want the tree and its roots at my feet outside my hut."

Balla Fasséké, who was present, ran to the master smith, Farakourou, to order an iron rod.

Sogolon had sat down in front of her hut. She was weeping softly and holding her head between her two hands. Mari Djata went calmly back to his calabash of rice and began eating again as if nothing had happened. From time to time he looked up discreetly at his mother who was murmuring in a low voice, "I want the whole tree, in front of my hut, the whole tree."

All of a sudden a voice burst into laughter behind the hut. It was the wicked Sassouma telling one of her serving women about the scene of humiliation and she was laughing loudly so that Sogolon could hear. Sogolon fled into the hut and hid her face under the blankets so as not to have before her eyes this heedless boy, who was more preoccupied with eating than with anything else. With her head buried in the bedclothes Sogolon wept and her body shook violently. Her daughter, Sogolon Djamarou, had come and sat down beside her and she said, "Mother, Mother, don't cry. Why are you crying?"

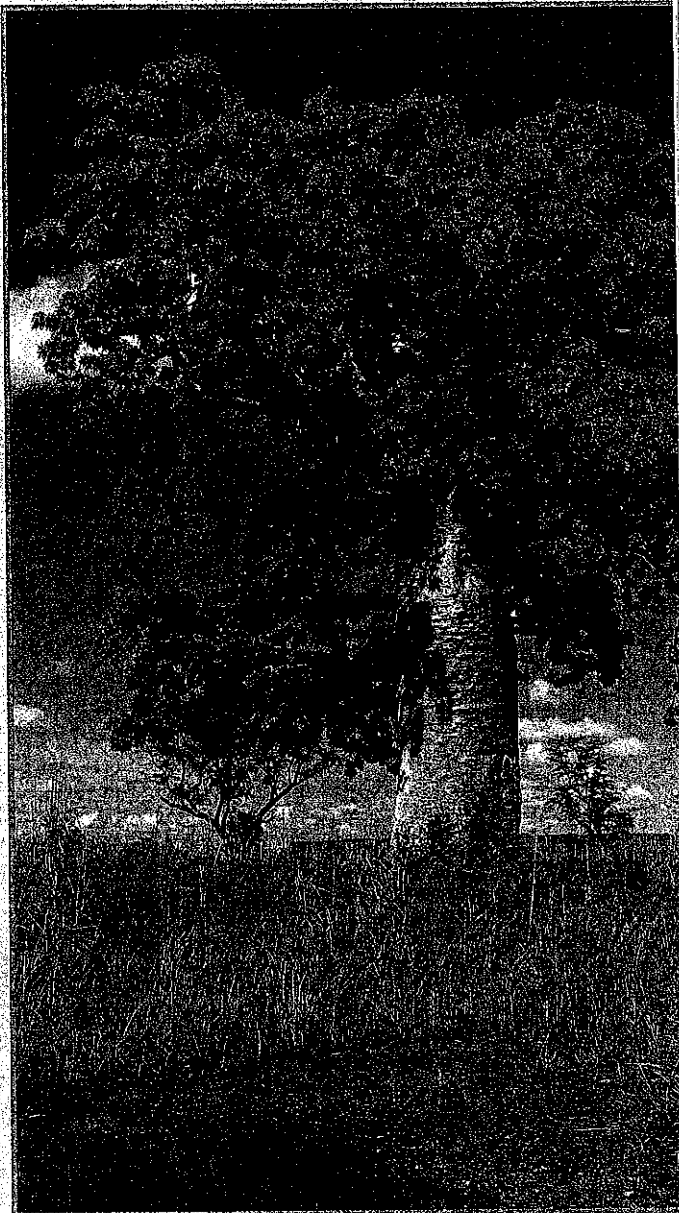
Mari Djata had finished eating and, dragging himself along on his legs, he came and sat under the wall of the hut for the sun was scorching. What was he thinking about? He alone knew.

The royal forges were situated outside the walls and over a hundred smiths worked there. The bows, spears, arrows and shields of Niani's warriors came from there. When Balla Fasséké came to order the iron rod, Farakourou said to him, "The great day has arrived then?"

"Yes. Today is a day like any other, but it will see what no other day has seen."

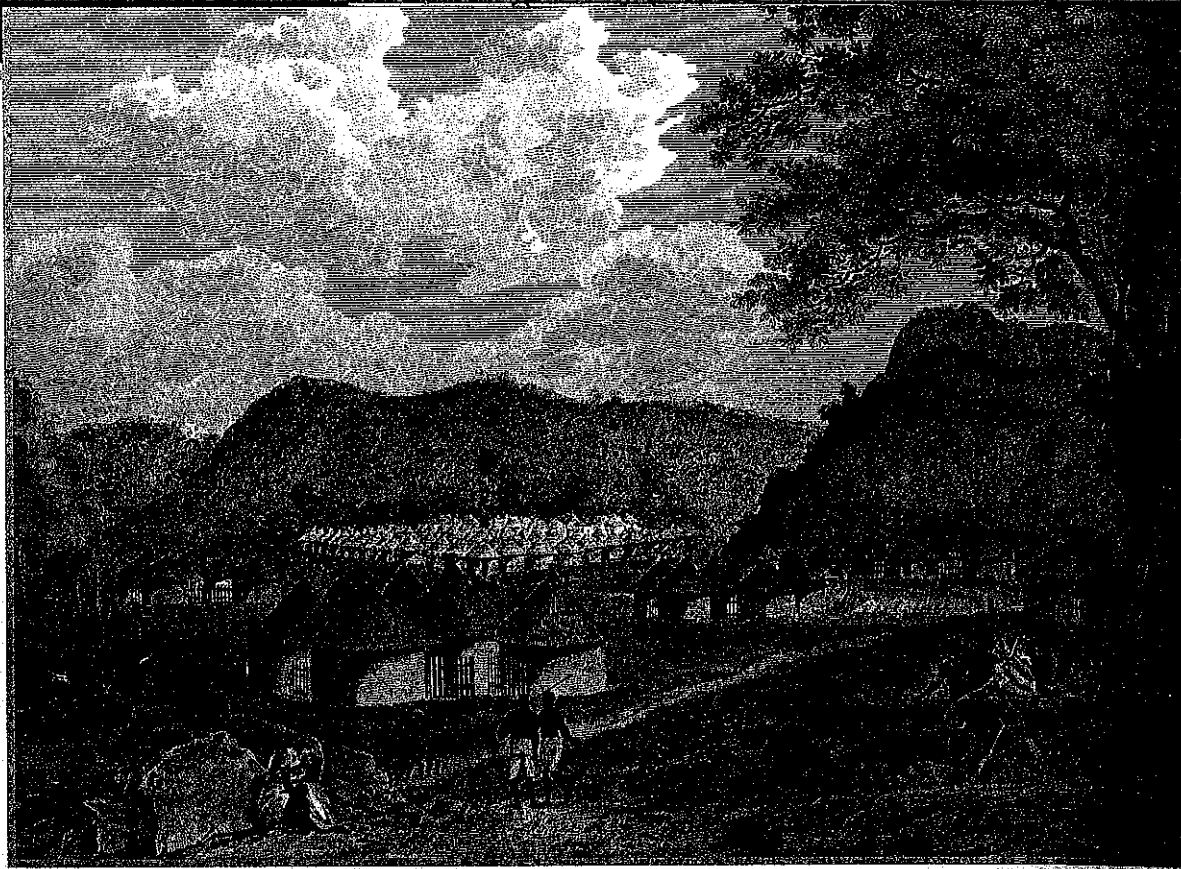
▼ Critical Viewing

Why might Mari Djata have difficulty gathering leaves from a baobab tree like this one? **[Analyze]**



✓ Reading Check

What incident provokes Mari Djata to order an iron bar?



**Reading Skill**  
**Analyze Cultural**

**Context** What do these details suggest about the role of blacksmiths and warriors in West African culture?

**Vocabulary**

**efface** (ə fās') v. rub or blot out

The master of the forges, Farakourou, was the son of the old Nounfaïri, and he was a soothsayer like his father. In his workshops there was an enormous iron bar wrought by his father Nounfaïri. Everybody wondered what this bar was destined to be used for. Farakourou called six of his apprentices and told them to carry the iron bar to Sogolon's house.

When the smiths put the gigantic iron bar down in front of the hut the noise was so frightening that Sogolon, who was lying down, jumped up with a start. Then Balla Fasséké, son of Gnankouman Doua, spoke.

"Here is the great day, Mari Djata. I am speaking to you, Maghan son of Sogolon. The waters of the Niger can efface the stain from the body, but they cannot wipe out an insult. Arise, young lion, roar, and may the bush know that from henceforth it has a master.

The apprentice smiths were still there, Sogolon had come out and everyone was watching Mari Djata. He crept on all-fours and came to the iron bar. Supporting himself on his knees and one hand, with the other hand he picked up the iron bar without any effort and stood it up vertically. Now he was resting on nothing but his knees and held the bar with both his hands. A deathly silence had gripped all those present. Sogolon Djata closed his eyes, held tight the muscles in his arms tensed. With a violent jerk he threw his weight on to it and his knees left the ground. Sogolon Kedjou was all eyes and watched her son's legs which were trembling as though



from an electric shock. Djata was sweating and the sweat ran from his brow. In a great effort he straightened up and was on his feet at one go—but the great bar of iron was twisted and had taken the form of a bow!

Then Balla Fasséké sang out the “Hymn to the Bow,” striking up with his powerful voice:

“Take your bow, Simbon,  
Take your bow and let us go.  
Take your bow, Sogolon Djata.”

When Sogolon saw her son standing she stood dumb for a moment, then suddenly she sang these words of thanks to God, who had given her son the use of his legs:

“Oh day, what a beautiful day,  
Oh day, day of joy;  
Allah<sup>9</sup> Almighty, you never created a finer day.  
So my son is going to walk!”

<sup>9</sup> Allah (al’ a) Muslim name for God.

**Literary Analysis**  
**Epic and Epic Hero**

What qualities of an epic hero does Mari Djata display here?

**Reading Check**

What causes both Mari Djata’s mother and his griot to sing?

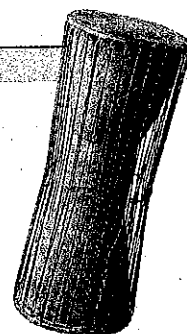
**LITERATURE IN CONTEXT**

**Culture Connection**

**Griot: The Mind of the People**

In West Africa, the griot (pronounced “gree-oh”) was the storyteller and historian of the village. The griot memorized the births, deaths, marriages, hunts, and wars of the people and its ancestors. Sometimes speaking or singing for days, the griot recited these events as stories, often to musical accompaniment. To the Mandinka, the griot was the “mind” of the people, an oral library of history and culture.

Children gather closely around a griot to hear a story.



▲ Many griots use talking drums, like this one, as they tell their stories.



**Connect to the Literature**

Given this information, explain why Nare Maghan’s decision to appoint a griot for Mari Djata shows his confidence in his son.

### Reading Skill

#### Analyze Cultural

**Context** What do the images in the griot's song indicate about the region in which the Malinke live?

Standing in the position of a soldier at ease, Sogolon Djata, supported by his enormous rod, was sweating great beads of sweat. Balla Fasséké's song had alerted the whole palace and people came running from all over to see what had happened, and each stood bewildered before Sogolon's son. The queen mother had rushed there and when she saw Mari Djata standing up she trembled from head to foot. After recovering his breath Sogolon's son dropped the bar and the crowd stood to one side. His first steps were those of a giant. Balla Fasséké fell into step and pointing his finger at Djata, he cried

"Room, room, make room!

The lion has walked;

Hide antelopes,

Get out of his way."

Behind Niani there was a young baobab tree and it was there that the children of the town came to pick leaves for their mothers. With all his might the son of Sogolon tore up the tree and put it on his shoulders and went back to his mother. He threw the tree in front of the hut and said, "Mother, here are some baobab leaves for you. From henceforth it will be outside your hut that the women of Niani will come to stock up."

### Critical Thinking

- 1. Respond:** Did you enjoy Mari Djata's triumph? Explain.
- 2. (a)** What is Mari Djata's main difficulty? **(b) Infer:** How does this problem affect the way people treat his mother?
- 3. (a)** What does the king specify as his wish for Mari Djata? **(b) Analyze Cause and Effect:** How do the soothsayers' predictions help prompt the king's wishes?
- 4. (a)** After the king's death, where does Sassouma Bérété force Sogolon and Mari Djata to live? **(b) Infer:** Why does Sassouma Bérété treat Mari Djata and Sogolon as she does?



#### Can anyone be a hero?

- (a)** What event finally prompts Mari Djata to transcend his own problems for the sake of his mother? **(b)** Why would his actions be considered "heroic"?