Name: _____

Date: _____

Sundiata

Sundiata was a West African king who lived in the thirteenth century. We have little direct evidence of who he was because this part of West Africa had not yet developed an indigenous writing system. But we know he founded what became one of the wealthiest empires in history. The story of how we know about Sundiata is almost as remarkable as Sundiata himself.

Sumanguru

By 1200, Ghana still existed, but was no longer the power it had once been. Islam had been present in the region for centuries by this point, carried along trade routes that linked West Africa to North Africa. New power centers emerged as Ghana weakened. One of them was Sosso, ruled by Sumanguru Kanté.

Mandinka oral tradition remembers Sumanguru as a cruel ruler who mistreated the people living under his rule. But that portrait comes from traditions that celebrate the man who defeated him. We have no independent evidence that Sumanguru was the villain those traditions remember.

The Mandinka

Mali was a small Mandinka kingdom along the upper Niger River, near the border of present-day Mali and Guinea. It was not yet the center of a great empire. The Mandinka were farmers and traders, and their homeland lay near routes that carried gold north toward the Sahara. Sumanguru had become the region's most powerful ruler and had gained control of Mali.

The Battle of Kirina

Among the Mandinka leaders who challenged Sumanguru was Sundiata Keita, a prince from Mali. Sundiata gathered an alliance of Mandinka leaders and their armies to fight Sumanguru. Around 1235, the two sides met at the Battle of Kirina, likely in southwestern present-day Mali.

Sundiata won. Sumanguru's power was broken, and the balance of power in West Africa suddenly shifted. A small Mandinka kingdom was about to become an empire.

Mali

Sundiata's victory marked an enormous change in West Africa. Ghana, which had dominated the region for centuries, was fading. Under Sundiata, Mali became the new power. It gained control of important trade routes and gold-producing regions that had once made Ghana wealthy. Sundiata's successors expanded his kingdom into a vast empire that became even wealthier and more powerful than Ghana.

Mandinka lore says Sundiata restored order along the trade routes and welcomed merchants, including Muslims from North Africa. By the time of his death, Mali had become a thriving center of trade and culture. His successors spread the Mandinka language and culture across West Africa.

Facts and Legends

No written account of Sundiata from his lifetime survives. Generations of Mandinka griots preserved his story, passing it from one generation to the next. The earliest surviving written mention of Sundiata comes from the Arab historian Ibn Khaldun, writing more than a century after Sundiata's death, who may himself have been repeating the same Mandinka traditions the griots preserved.

Islam placed a strong emphasis on literacy, since the faithful are encouraged to read the Quran in its original Arabic, and this tradition of literacy traveled with Muslim merchants and scholars across the trade routes.

Later writers confirmed that Sundiata defeated the Sosso and ruled Mali, but they tell us little about the man himself. Sundiata's successors were devout Muslims who studied Arabic, and this growing literacy is what finally allowed written sources to give us a much clearer picture of Mali and its rulers. The historical Sundiata remains hidden behind the legends that preserved his memory.

©Mike Dowling, mrdowling.com. All Rights Reserved.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Fill in the Blanks

Sundiata was a M__n__in__a ruler who lived in West Africa in the t__i__t__e__th century. At that time, the once-powerful kingdom of G__a__a was growing w__a__er. A ruler named S__m__n__u__u gained control of Mali, a small Mandinka kingdom near important gold t__a__e routes.

Around 12____, Sundiata and other M__n__i__ka leaders defeated S__m__n__u__u at the Battle of K__r__na. Ma__i then gained c__n__r__l of valuable trade r__u__es and gold-producing lands. Sundiata's s__c__e__s__rs expanded Mali into a large and wealthy e__p__re.

Much of Sundiata's story comes from Mandinka o_____ tradition. G__i__ts passed stories about him from one g__n__r__t__on to the next. No contemporary w__i__t__n account from Sundiata's lifetime s__r__i__es. Later writers ★c__n__i__m__d that Sundiata ruled Mali and d__f__a__ed the Sosso, but many d__t__i__s about his life remain ★u__c__rta__n.

Answer in Complete Sentences

1. Why do we have very little verifiable knowledge about Sundiata's life?

_____

_____

_____

★2. How did Mali benefit from Ghana's decline?

_____

_____

_____

_____

3. Why can we not be certain that everything we know about Sundiata's story is true?

_____

_____

_____

4. Why were many Muslim traders literate?

_____

_____

_____

★ This is a higher order learning question. You must answer the question to the best of your ability, but any reasonable answer will be graded as correct.

©Mike Dowling, mrdowling.com. All Rights Reserved.