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## The Eternal Country: How an Epic Poem Came to Define an African Nation State

This is about an old poem and an old country, Mali, which is today mired in civil war. In November 2011, weeks before the war started, I trekked from Mali into neighboring Guinea to visit a village on the Sankarani River where legend has it a great sorcerer came to power some eight hundred years ago. The village is called Niani and it sits on Mali's southern frontier, accessible only by all-wheel drive vehicle or on foot. From Mali's capital of Bamako, I traveled by bus and truck over awful roads, then by motorized canoe across the river, followed by a ten-mile walk to the border. That took two days. On the third day, villagers directed me to Niani by a footpath over the border, a two-mile hike. The route wound through flat-topped acacia trees and yellow razor grass. I passed baobabs with knobby trunks as wide as small houses and worried about carpet vipers and scorpions. My short walk became a long one when I had to pick my way around a brush fire a farmer set to clear his fields.

The French drew this border in 1904, separating two colonies that are now the Republics of Guinea and Mali. The line trapped Mali without coastline on terrain of withering heat and little rain. But I was looking for an older country, what the griots—Africa's traditional poet historians—call "Old Mali" or "the eternal country." For centuries griots have traveled Africa in the tradition of the wandering bard, telling stories in song and poetry of a sacred land and a sorcerer king, Sundiata Keita, who united the savanna tribes in mutual respect and desire for peace from the Niger River to the Atlantic and beyond: The Empire of Mali.

In my pack I carried a worn paperback, 96 pages, of the narrative poem, *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali*. The Guinean historian Djibril Tamsir "D.T." Niane recorded it in the 1950s from Djeli Mamoudou Kouyaté, a griot who lived in Guinea and sang about Old Mali in his native Dioula. "We are vessels of speech," Kouyaté said. "Without us the names of kings would vanish... We are the memory of mankind."<sup>1</sup> D.T. Niane translated Kouyaté's words into French. In 1960, the Paris publisher *Presence Africaine* made it a book that has sold tens of thousands of copies in numerous languages and remains in print.

At dusk, I emerged in a clearing and saw a Guinean flag atop a pole and uniformed men sitting on the ground beneath a palm tree. A few hundred yards beyond them stood mud houses, where Niani began. The men jumped to their feet and stared as this tall, thin bespectacled fiftyish white man walked out of the bush in gray hiking pants and blue shirt, hoisting a backpack. I'd been writing about Africa for twenty-five years and was used to hard journeys and negotiating borders. I waved, passport in hand, shouting greetings in French and babbling about how excited I was to be in Niani, capital of the great Mali Empire. The soldiers didn't share my enthusiasm.

"I can't tell you about that," one said icily. "This is Guinea."

His name was Corporal Ismail Camara, a soft-spoken, wiry, compact thirty-year-old, built like a boxer. He wore desert camouflage and a bush hat with the visor folded up on one side like an Australian cowboy. He told me to kneel and unpack my belongings on a plastic sheet one of his men spread out. We had brief tension when a young soldier dropped to one knee and pointed to a pair of my balled up green socks. "Hand grenade!" he said. Gently, I unfolded the socks. Camara laughed.

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<sup>1</sup> Djibril Tamsir Niane. *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali*. (Essex: Longman African Classics, 1986), 1.

I seized on that moment of levity. “I came to see the birthplace of Sundiata,” I said, handing Camara my copy of *An Epic of Old Mali*. “I’m a history professor.”

He declined to look at the book but studied my passport a few minutes before tossing it on the sheet. “Pack up,” he said. “You’re courageous to walk in here.”

“Maybe.” I said. “Or a little stupid.”

“Well, there is that, too.” He squinted. “We will put you up for the night. You can talk with the elders about Mali in the morning. Then you go back over the border. Your visa does not authorize research.”

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The origin of the name “Mali” rests with eleven million West Africans known collectively as the Mandé people who live in a dozen countries. They belong to linguistically related tribes and clans who speak some forty languages and include one of the world’s oldest clan aristocracies, the Keita. Their patriarch is Sundiata. In the Mandé languages Mali means “hippopotamus,” an animal that thrives in the Sankarani and Niger Rivers and is a metaphor for strength. At independence in 1960, Mali’s leaders dumped the colonial label of “French Sudan” and rebranded the country “Mali,” drawing on the glory of the empire and the strength of its founder. The first president claimed to be a descendant of Sundiata.

Mali today is a poor country of sixteen million Sunni Muslims. It rests in the center of West Africa on 480,000 square miles of Sahara in the north and savannah in the south, twice as large as France and Old Mali. But the empire had something modern Mali doesn’t, a coastline along what is now Senegal and The Gambia, allowing it to expand trade with North Africa and Europe and project its identity long after its collapse. Griots still sing of Malian explorers who reached the Americas before Columbus. Old Mali, wrote historian Basil Davidson, was a vast trading enterprise that spread from the Atlantic Ocean to what is now Nigeria “and from the margin of the tropical forests northward into the Sahara.”<sup>2</sup>

On a present-day map, Mali’s southern end is jagged, bordering Burkina Faso, Guinea, Cote d’Ivoire, and Senegal. Broad straight lines frame the much wider north, forming a lopsided anvil that borders Algeria, Mauritania and Niger. The anvil image fits a gold-exporting country where black smiths still work the precious metal as they have for centuries. But like many oddly shaped African countries—there are fifty-four, not including two unrecognized states—it’s hard to look at a map and not wonder how Mali came to be.

D.T. Niane, who still lives in Guinea, believed he found the answer in the words of griots. In his preface to *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali*, he calls himself “nothing more than a translator,”<sup>3</sup> though critics say he transformed the griot’s words into his own ideal of Mali. Scholars have published other griot accounts of Old Mali. (I know of seven). All repeat claims of Sundiata’s strength and magic—his ability, for instance, to see great distances. D.T. Niane, however, took the story out of verse—the form griots favor—and revised it as a prose poem palatable to European readers.

Few facts exist about Sundiata. No one in his inner circle was writing much down during his lifetime, roughly 1198 to 1255. “We can only theorize,” D.T. Niane writes, “because those who guard the oral traditions are in disagreement.”<sup>4</sup> Moreover, to ignore the griots and their

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<sup>2</sup> Basil Davidson. *Africa in History*. (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 100.

<sup>3</sup> Niane, viii.

<sup>4</sup> Djibril Tamsir Niane. “Mali and the Second Mandingo Expansion” in *General History of Africa IV: Africa from the Twelfth to the Sixteenth Century*. (Paris: UNESCO, 1984), 145.

praise of Sundiata—“He whose exploits will astonish men for a long time yet,”<sup>5</sup> to quote the epic—would risk losing an oral history that has survived centuries, a persistent story if not exactly factual.

Mischief is part of the griot mystique. In Niger I once interviewed a Hausa griot in his nineties who was hired in 1944 to sing the praises of a French commandant. Like many colonial officers in Africa, the commandant was widely despised. So, when the Frenchman—who did not speak Hausa—toured the region on horseback, the young griot dutifully rode right behind him, pounding his drum and singing in Hausa about how the commandant was “a truly ugly man.” During our meeting, the old griot smiled at the memory and sang a few lines of his subversive poem: “He is a Christian dog. He is a non-believer. He is a man who has come from France to steal our money and spread venereal disease.”

Sundiata fares much better in *An Epic of Old Mali*: “Listen then, sons of Mali, children of the black people,” the griot says, “for I am going to tell you of Sundiata, father of the Bright Country, of the savanna land...the master of a hundred vanquished kings.”<sup>6</sup> The story begins with Maghan Fon Fatta, king of Mali, a tiny realm of fishers and farmers, holding court beneath a silk cotton tree on the edge of Niani. The king rested against the wide base of this arbor throne for whose shade he thanked the gods. Supplicants came to seek favors and help settle disputes. During this palaver, a hunter from a far-off village emerged from the bush.

In West Africa, hunters are often magicians and seers. This hunter knelt and explained he was seeking permission to hunt game in the kingdom to feed his family. The king offered him food and drink and asked him to “open his pouch of knowledge”<sup>7</sup> and tell the future. The hunter drew cowry shells from his satchel and threw them on a mat. From the pattern he made a prediction: “King of Mali,” he said, “destiny marches with great strides. Mali is about to emerge from the night.” The king would take a fourth wife. “She will be the mother of him who will make the name of Mali immortal forever.” Intrigued, the king bade the hunter tell him more. The hunter scattered his shells. This time he saw that the king’s new wife would have a “disfiguring hump” and “monstrous eyes.” She would give him a son who “will be the seventh star, the seventh conqueror of the earth. He will be more mighty than Alexander.”<sup>8</sup>

The comparison to Alexander the Great startled me. I mentioned my doubts to a friend, Wague Diakite, a Malian artist and writer who is an authority on Mali’s history and the griot tradition. He warned me not to let facts distract from understanding the empire’s early history. “We don’t think about borders and history the way Europeans do,” he said. “Malian culture is not confined by specific dates and lines on maps. Spiritually, Mali has no borders.”

This was helpful given that we have few hard records of what West Africa was like in Sundiata’s time. Islam was new in the region. Spirituality was woven into relationships with the natural world, like the silk cotton trees along the river bank, and the giant baobabs of the plain, the elephants and hyenas, and the shapeless spirits who ruled the rivers and delivered harvests of bass and eel. Sometimes the waters did not yield enough to eat because the spirits took fish for themselves. Or the rains failed and people starved. This was a land of uncertainty, ritual, and worry. A fantastical unifying figure like Sundiata offered hope.

The boy Sundiata overcame clubfoot to become a fine horseman. Later he rallied leaders of twelve kingdoms to fight Soumaoro, murderous king of the Ghana Empire (who may have

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<sup>5</sup> Niane, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Niane, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Niane, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Niane, 5-6.

been Sundiata's brother), a sorcerer who threatened all the kingdoms. According to *An Epic of Old Mali*, around 1235, at the battle of Kirina, near Bamako, Sundiata and Soumaoro faced off from opposing hilltops, their armies arrayed around them. Soumaoro hid "far behind his men, but Sundiata followed him with his eyes. He stopped and bent his bow. The arrow flew and grazed Soumaoro on the shoulder... and Soumaoro felt his powers leave."<sup>9</sup>

With evil vanquished, Sundiata called a meeting of his twelve allies. They agreed on a "Division of the World," the Kouroukan Fougan, which included a code of justice and equal distribution of land for each tribe, like provinces. "Your children and your children's children will grow up at the court of Niani," Sundiata declared, "where they will be treated like princes of Mali."<sup>10</sup> The empire was born.

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All of that—Sundiata's birth and the battles he fought—unfolded across Mali and Guinea. Some griots claim Niani was a thriving metropolis of many thousands of people. Today it's a tiny fishing village on unforgiving terrain beneath relentless sun. In summer, violent rains rake away topsoil, leaving iron rich dirt the color of dried blood, too acidic to be ideal for crops.

Camara would not let me enter Niani until morning. I slept under my mosquito net outside the soldiers' mud brick barracks. They fed me tea and rice and beans. I played checkers in a round-robin tournament with four of Camara's men into the wee hours by the flame of a hurricane lamp. I lost badly. In the morning, after bread and more tea, a gaunt old man in a blue cotton tunic over dirty white trousers and plastic sandals arrived on a battered Kawasaki motorcycle. He studied me, mouth open under furrowed brow as he spoke with Camara, who introduced him to me: Sidi Keita, village elder and a descendent of Sundiata. Sidi confirmed this with a shrug as we shook hands. Most everyone in Niani belonged to the Keita clan.

Camara smirked. "Your taxi is here, professor." He gestured at the motorcycle. "The elders are waiting." He raised his index finger. "No photographs."

My notebook and copy of D.T. Niane's epic poem in hand, I left my pack and climbed on behind Sidi, heir to the emperor, a fisherman and member of what remained of the center of a great African empire. He gunned the engine and we lurched between deep ruts, Sidi balancing the machine with a foot on the earth like a motocross racer. With one hand, I gripped the seat, trying to get a sense of Niani in the early light. We passed enormous baobabs leading into a village of mud homes and grain silos, capped by cones of grass thatch. Niani forms a crescent, its eastern side hugging the river. On the rounded western side are broad fields of peanuts, corn, and millet that end at the forest. In Niani, homes cluster together densely, attached like townhouses with courtyards protected by high mud walls that face narrow pathways. Vegetable gardens grow near the river, deep green bursts of lettuce and tomato plants. Pirogues, wooden canoes that rise high at stern and bow, rest on clay beaches lined by silk cotton trees, the same tree mentioned in the book I clutched against my chest as I tried to keep from falling off Sidi's motorbike.

*Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* names Niani as capital but says little about its location or appearance. This is why a small army of historians, anthropologists and archaeologists from Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas dispute the facts of Mali's birth and its capital. D.T. Niane bet his career and life on Niani. He walked the ground, listened to the griots, and worked with archaeologists on digs around the village he claims served 300 years as government center of a vast trade network in gold, livestock, salt, grain, and slaves. But conclusive evidence eludes him. The historian David C. Conrad threw up his hands after reviewing the tangle of theories for

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<sup>9</sup> Niane, 65.

<sup>10</sup> Niane, 77.

a 1994 article in *The Journal of African History*. “No one has yet succeeded in proving that any presently known site deserves to be recognized as the locus of power in what was one of the most important empires of the medieval world.”<sup>11</sup> And no proof has emerged since he wrote those words.

I was thinking I better keep these doubts to myself as Sidi brought us to a large baobab, what he called “the palaver tree.” Some thirty men had gathered there. Five women sat behind them. The men wore long pastel kaftans and white skullcaps, dirt smudged from blowing dust and fieldwork. The women wore colorful wraps and shawls of white cloth over their heads and shoulders. These were hardworking people, lean and fit, most in their seventies. Sidi took my hand and directed me to a wooden bench at the front. I offered greetings in French and Dioula. Sidi took his place on a stool in the center. Another man gave him a plastic binder that he set on his lap. “Vous etes bien venue ici,” the man said to me. Camara was there with a couple of his men, unarmed.

Sidi opened the meeting in Dioula. Camara stood beside him, translating for me in French. “Many people have come here,” Sidi said. “They have promised many things.” With his sunken cheeks and unblinking eyes, he looked unwell. “Niani has been forgotten. We are the true center of the empire but Mali, our great neighbor, has taken that glory from us. Everyone talks of Timbuktu but Niani was here before Timbuktu was a goat camp.” Sidi reached down and scooped up dirt, letting it fall through his fingers. “This here is the true city of gold, here in this place.”

I nodded and asked, “But how did this happen that Niani was forgotten?” I held up my copy of *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali*. “You know the man who wrote this book. This is your story.”

“Yes,” Sidi said, “but for years we were not allowed to see that book.”

I stood and gave him my copy. “You’ve never seen this before?”

Camara translated and some villagers laughed. “Yes,” said Sidi. “We know all about the book now. Things have changed. We can talk about our history and no one arrests us. Now they just ignore us.” He handed back the book.

One old man with a strong chin and thinning white hair under a red fez spoke in French. “I was born here in 1926,” he said, “during the colony of Guinea and I served in the French army in Algeria.” He held up a plastic pouch holding two gold corporal’s bars pinned on green cloth as proof. “We are all at fault. The French drew the border and we let it stand. This is all Mali,” he said, waving his arm in a sweeping gesture, “and we are all Malians. But Sékou Touré buried our history.” Then Sidi spoke. “Soldiers came to this village several times after the book was published and after Djibril Niane was here. They took men and women we never heard from again. They did not want the story to be told.”

I knew that the late Sékou Touré, Guinea’s longtime leader, outlawed religious worship and traditional rituals in his effort to build a Marxist state from scratch. From 1958 until his death in 1984, he ran a “demythification program” that, writes historian Mike McGovern, “targeted all forms of precolonial practice deemed backward or primitive.”<sup>12</sup> Sékou Touré closed Guinea’s borders and banned study of pre-colonial history or anything that promoted tribal individuality. He outlawed the griots. Some 50,000 people died in his prisons.

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<sup>11</sup> David. C. Conrad. “A Town Called Dakajalan: The Sunjata Tradition and the Question of Ancient Mali’s Capital.” *Journal of African History*. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 355.

<sup>12</sup> Mike McGovern. *Unmasking the State: Making Guinea Modern*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 5.

This is why few have heard of Niani while everyone knows Timbuktu, the city in northern Mali, even if only as a word for an isolated place. Timbuktu, with its ancient mosques and Islamic libraries, became by 1400 the Mali Empire's spiritual center and remains so now. In 1988, the United Nations declared Timbuktu a World Heritage Site, guaranteeing it preservation funding and attention worthy of the pyramids of Egypt and the Taj Mahal. As I talked with villagers in Niani, Timbuktu was getting ready to host a rock concert in the dunes with headliners like the band U2. But civil war and a coup d'état would soon change everything. By April 2012 northern Mali, including Timbuktu, would be under jihadist occupation.

But until now I didn't know what Sékou Touré's rule meant here on the ground in Guinea. I avoided eye contact with Camara, who, in his uniform represented remnants of the old regime. But villagers didn't seem frightened of him. He continued translating, offering no ideas of his own.

"Djibril Niane suffered, too," I said. "He went to prison. He tried to tell the story."

"Yes, but it's like he was never here," Sidi said, "Like he never wrote anything."

Sékou Touré ordered D.T. Niane's arrest in 1965, five years after publication of *An Epic of Old Mali*. A high school history teacher at the time, Niane committed the crime of protesting a salary cut, earning him two years in prison. But the president released him in 1967 to advise a Polish archaeology expedition to Niani. Sékou Touré hoped they'd find evidence of Sundiata, whose reputation for uniting diverse peoples made him an icon of Pan Africanism, the ideal of a united Africa that was a key part of Sékou Touré's agenda. The archaeologists spent ten months in Niani over three years and found many artifacts but no proof of Sundiata's story. D.T. Niane, in the meantime, escaped with his family to Senegal, where he served in the government of the poet-statesman Leopold Senghor and became a distinguished historian. After Sékou Touré's death, he returned to Guinea.

In the end, Mali won the rights (so to speak) to the story of Old Mali. Mali's leaders didn't worry about fact and fiction or proof of Sundiata's existence. They needed a story to rally citizens to a new country. They blended history and myth to reinforce a national identity and wrote the story into secondary school history curriculums. In schools across West Africa—in Ghana, Senegal, The Gambia, and Burkina Faso—children learn about Sundiata. They also learn about him from griots in their villages. But in Guinea, the story of Sundiata returned to schools only after Sekou Touré was gone.

The elders went on for two hours before Camara ended the meeting. He pointed at me and said, "I am sorry but he has to go. He does not have the right papers." Sidi ignored Camara and handed me the binder he'd been holding on his lap, his long fingers pinching it like a cherished object. The binder was thin. Corners of yellowed newsprint stuck out like old teeth. I opened it and found a typed narrative in French, a few pages detailing the work of the Polish dig and a guest register with the signatures of important visitors, including D.T. Niane. Sidi wanted to be sure I listened and saw the evidence, including news articles from French papers. "This is not much," he said. "But these people were here. Why did they come? Why did he write this book if the stories about Niani and the Mali Empire are not true?" He reached over and touched my copy of *An Epic of Old Mali*. "Tell the world about us. Go to the United Nations. They have money. They will send more people to dig."

That afternoon Corporal Camara and Sidi Keita escorted me out of Niani. Along the way Sidi pointed to cornfields where the archeologists dug in the 1960s. Soon we stopped at a shallow ravine. "This is Mali," Camara said. He pointed at the tangled brush off the path. "Have you seen the shea tree?" We walked to a withered tree protected by chicken wire. The tree's two

trunks were only as thick as cucumbers and they grew about eight feet high. Villagers make butter and soap from shea nuts. This tree looked dead.

“We believe Sundiata prayed here before going into battle,” Sidi said in Dioula. Again, Camara translated.

“What god did he pray to?” I asked.

“He prayed to many gods,” Sidi said. He glanced over at Camara.

“He would like you to leave your copy of Monsieur Niane’s book,” Camara said.

I removed the book from my pack and gave it to him. Sidi smiled and nodded. The three of us stared at this odd monument. Camara let me take a photo of him and Sidi beside the tree. We shook hands and I walked back into Mali.

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Months later, Mali, its history and modern democracy were crumbling before my eyes. In the wee hours of May 1, 2012, rival army units, opposing sides in the coup that occurred a month earlier, tore into each other near my hotel in Bamako. I was back in Mali to write about the civil war for a magazine. During a lull in the crackle of small arms I walked out to the street, hoping the shooting I’d been hearing all day was over. But throaty bursts of machine gun fire ripped the night thick with the sweet smell of rain. A streetlight flickered as a diesel engine whined in low gear, growing louder until a white Toyota pickup crawled out of the darkness. A soldier in a green beret stood in the truck-bed, sweaty face reflecting the light as he gripped the stock of a mounted machine gun. I stepped back. As the truck passed, an officer in the passenger seat, beret pulled low over his forehead, studied me. I raised my hand. He nodded. The truck rolled on.

This was the Africa of dictators and violence I hoped was fading. In 1991 Mali traded dictatorship for a democracy that celebrated Sundiata’s empire to become the ideal of Africa—where a free economy, art, music, film, literature, freedom of speech and religion thrived. And yet it was a façade. Malian soldiers were dying in battle against Tuareg separatists and Arab jihadists in the desert north. Then, an army coup swept democracy aside because its leaders—claimed the captain in charge—were corrupt. He accused them of profiting from the fighting by selling arms that should have sent to the soldiers in the north.

Mali had turned to vengeance, a land of street battles and frightened civilians, of soldiers bayoneting soldiers and dumping bodies in mass graves. I returned to my room and fell asleep to be awakened at dawn by a crashing monsoon thunderstorm. Wind, rain and sand pummeled my window, turning the air brown. It appeared Mali had been betrayed, its history and noble name, defaced.

But the coup did not stick and Mali struggles on. The captain who led the rebellion went to prison. The main military barracks in Bamako where the coup was organized retains its name—Sundiata Keita Barracks. French paratroopers liberated the north in early 2013. Later that year a member of the Keita clan, Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (known as IBK), was elected president. His name earned him comparisons to Sundiata as if he could channel the man himself. “IBK shares Sundiata’s sense of justice,” a journalist for *Essor*, Mali’s state newspaper, told me. “With the weight of history behind him, he alone can unite Mali once again.”

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Mythology and politics aside, the Mali Empire did exist and established what David C. Conrad calls a “general sense of political and cultural unity”<sup>13</sup> across a large part of West Africa. Fourteenth century Arab scholars wrote admiringly of Mali, citing reports from merchants and

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<sup>13</sup> David C. Conrad, *Sunjata: A West African Epic of the Mandé Peoples*, (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004), xxviii.

other travelers who'd visited the empire. Ibn Khaldun, who lived in Cairo, catalogued the line of succession of Malian rulers, including Sundiata, in his *Book of Exemplars*.<sup>14</sup> The Moroccan scholar-traveler Ibn Battuta walked across Mali in 1352 at the height of its power and remarked that he was able to complete the journey without concern for thieves. He traveled twenty-four days from the Saharan oasis of Iwalatan on the edge of the empire (now southern Mauritania) to Mali's capital, though his account of its location is not clear. "There is no need to travel with companions because of the safety of the road," he wrote.<sup>15</sup>

So Arabs verified Old Mali as fact and today Arabs are fighting in a rebellion that—despite the French intervention of 2013—still threatens the entire country and West Africa's Sahel region. Tuareg interests are not so religious as nationalistic, motivated by forming their own Saharan state. They've felt excluded from the profits of Mali's democracy. But Islamist rebels—some from Mali and neighboring countries and others from North Africa and the Middle East—want to erase Mali and replace it with a caliphate under strict Quranic law.

The roots of the civil war go back centuries. The Mali Empire and its successor, the 16<sup>th</sup> century Songhai Empire, fought the Arabs and Tuaregs over livestock and gold as well as control of trans-Saharan caravan routes. Tuareg raiders took slaves from the villages of darker skinned peoples—the Songhai, the Dogon, the Bambara, the Bozo, to name a few—and sold them in Arab markets. In May 2012, after Mali's army in the north collapsed, I spoke to Colonel Didier Dacko (now a general), a Bozo tribal member who ordered the army's retreat from the north. "Mali has been fighting these groups for centuries," he said. "This war is nothing new."

Later I visited a refugee camp in Burkina Faso, where thirty thousand Arabs and Tuaregs fled the violence. When I mentioned Sundiata to a group of Tuareg men, they protested in French and Tamashek. I held up a new copy of D.T. Niane's book, which a few of them recognized from their school days. "That story means nothing to us," said one man, a mechanic from Timbuktu. "Mali excluded us. Their soldiers kill our people." He plucked the book from my hand and threw it in the sand.

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<sup>14</sup> Ralph Austen and Jan Jensen. "History, Oral Transmission, and Structure in Ibn Khaldun's Chronology of Mali Rulers." *History in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 17-28.

<sup>15</sup> Said Hamdun and Noel King. *Ibn Battuta In Black Africa*. (Princeton: Marcus Wiener Publishers, 1994), 39.



*Corporal Ismail Camara and Sidi Keita in front of the shea tree outside Niani.*