

SUNDIATA

Written by

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Based on, the Epic of Sundiata

TITLE SEQUENCE:

SERIES OF SHOTS - AFRICAN PATTERNS

A) As MA FASSEKE(50s-60s) sings, bright patterns flash upon the screen, her voice joined by a full choir and instrumentation.

B) Illustrated images in the style of *Kirikou and the Sorceress* accompany the *jelimuso's* exposition.

MA FASSEKE (V.O.)

Long ago, the great nation of Wagadou ruled over the twelve doors in the light of the Prophet. This was a golden age, and knowledge and wealth increased in abundance.

An image of a king seated under a crescent moon with his arms outstretched. Below him, rays of gold flow down to twelve smaller figures, their arms reaching up.

MA FASSEKE (CONT'D)

But it was not meant to last. The land was stricken by drought and the people were scattered.

An image of crops withering and people on their knees, starving.

MA FASSEKE (CONT'D)

In the midst of this calamity rose two heroes, Kontran and Sanin, who united the twelve doors and founded the Brotherhood of Hunters.

An image of two men, standing tall with hands joined.

MA FASSEKE (CONT'D)

They brought our ancestors to the Manding region, which overflowed with vegetation and game.

An image of the figures leading a group of people into a lush valley.

MA FASSEKE (CONT'D)

But while our peoples were settling in our new home, shadows were gathering in the north.

(MORE)

MA FASSEKE (CONT'D)

Soumaro, an evil sorcerer who shunned the Prophet's message and embraced jahiliyya, raised an army of demons to conquer what was left of Wagadou.

An image of a shadowy figure, surrounded by demons.

MA FASSEKE (CONT'D)

The new king ruled with a harsh hand and subjected the people to forced labor.

An image that mirrors the first, but with the figure of Soumaro at the top surrounded by shadows. Chains emanate from him instead of golden rays and the people below him are bowed in submission.

MA FASSEKE (CONT'D)

Amidst this strife, a child named Sundiata was born. Though the boy could not use his legs, it was prophesied that he would one day reunite the twelve doors and free the people from the sorcerer's grasp.

An image of a baby surrounded by light. He is being held up by his parents in a shot reminiscent of *The Lion King*.

C) Title card.

FADE TO:

EXT. SAVANNA - DAY

KOLONKAN (17) drags SUNDIATA (13) in a makeshift litter. Their figures are silhouetted against the backdrop of a large, red sun. Framed to the right of the screen is an acacia tree.

Kolonkan reaches the tree, sets Sundiata down, and leans against the trunk, catching her breath.

SUNDIATA

Mother's village is not far off. She said she would be waiting for us there.

KOLONKAN

Inshallah.

SUNDIATA

Do you doubt, sister?

KOLONKAN

No, little brother. It's just been a long journey and I'm very thirsty.

Kolonkan reaches for an animal skin pouch and starts to squeeze the last bits of water out into her mouth. A drop is about to fall out of the pouch when Kolonkan stops herself and offers the last bit of water to Sundiata.

KOLONKAN (CONT'D)

Here, have this. I'll drink when we reach the well.

Sundiata takes the pouch and wrings out the last drops of water; the droplets travel like rivers through the canyons of his parched lips.

The pair take one last moment to rest before the final leg of their journey.

SUNDIATA

I miss home.

A beat.

KOLONKAN

Me too.

With that, Kolonkan gets herself up and picks up the litter. It's time to get back on the road.

EXT. WELL - DAY

Kolonkan is visibly exhausted and she drags her brother's litter. Her lips are chapped and her skin is ashy. She's been without water for too long now. But hope flickers for a moment when she catches sight of the well.

KOLONKAN

I see it! We're almost there.

Kolonkan picks up the pace but suddenly slows down as she takes in the scene in front of her.

There is a dead antelope laying next to the well. This is not a good sign.

Kolonkan props the litter against the well and walks around to inspect the antelope.

Its right flank has been eviscerated by what must have been an enormous predator. Kolonkan winces as she spots bits of broken ribs protruding from the beast's gangrenous flesh.

Any hint of hope is finally extinguished when Kolonkan gazes down into the bone dry well. She rolls her eyes and sighs as she slides down to the ground, her back against the well.

KOLONKAN (CONT'D)

Looks like its been dry for months.
I don't see any footprints; people
haven't been this way in a long
time.

Something shifts within Sundiata and a look of apprehension passes over his face.

SUNDIATA

Something's not right here...

KOLONKAN

What makes you-?

Suddenly, a burbling sound emerges from the antelope carcass. Both Kolonkan and Sundiata turn their attention to the body, which is now heaving and contorting as if something is inside of it trying to break free.

Kolonkan grabs her bow from the litter and notches an arrow, pointing it at the dead animal.

The wound in the antelope's side begins to bubble and tumorous buboes begin to emerge from the flesh. Soon, the tumors have grown beyond the size of their host and lesions appear on the growths, bursting forth to reveal a hundred hundred eyes hungrily twitching back and forth in search of their next prey.

Sundiata reaches into a pack and pulls out a handful of millet. He recites an incantation into his cupped hands.

Kolonkan looses an arrow and pierces the creature, which is now oozing a thick, black fluid. The monster undulates in pain and lets forth a bloodcurdling screech. Kolonkan lets fly another volley, again piercing the creature but appearing to do no substantial damage. It does, however, draw the attention of the demon and all of its eyes stare directly at Kolonkan.

The girl is petrified as the creature lurches towards her but her stupor is broken by the voice of her brother.

SUNDIATA

Kolonkan! This way!

Kolonkan doesn't think twice and rushes to her brother's side. Sundiata is done with his enchantment and tosses the millet into the air above them, showering the pair in the grain.

The demon stops in its tracks, its eyes darting back and forth in confusion.

Kolonkan stands stone still as she directs her eyes towards her brother. Sundiata slowly raises his finger to his lips.

The demon is still confused, but seems to have lost interest in its quarry. It begins to slump off in the opposite direction, no doubt searching for another innocent creature to terrorize.

After the demon is safely out of sight, Kolonkan sighs with relief and turns to Sundiata.

KOLONKAN

Are you all right? That was a close call.

SUNDIATA

I'm fine. What about you?

Kolonkan looks away in shame, but holds her tongue.

SUNDIATA (CONT'D)

Sister?

KOLONKAN

We need to get out of here, in case that creature returns.

Kolonkan secures the remaining supplies on the litter and continues the journey.

EXT. FIELD - EVENING

The sun is setting as Kolonkan and Sundiata come upon a field. They recognize this place, but something has changed.

KOLONKAN

We are not far from the village now.

SUNDIATA

Where are the livestock?

KOLONKAN

Probably scared away by the monsters.

(MORE)

KOLONKAN (CONT'D)

(beat)

It's getting dark, we should set up camp.

Kolonkan and Sundiata sit in front of a fire. Kolonkan looks troubled by the events of the day.

KOLONKAN (CONT'D)

My arrows were no use against that creature...

SUNDIATA

It was one of Soumaro's demons, a nightmare incarnate. Normal weapons cannot harm it; it can only be subdued with *dalilu*.

KOLONKAN

I am a girl, Sundiata. The hunters could scarce be bothered to teach me to use the bow.

SUNDIATA

I know Ma Fasseke gave you lessons in secret.

KOLONKAN

Only bits and pieces.

Sundiata looks away. After a moment, he grabs his *fula* and begins playing a tune. Kolonkan is startled, but soon sinks into relaxation. It's been such a long day. The sun has set. She needs rest.

The respite is interrupted by a *whoop* that sounds eerily similar to a laugh. Kolonkan starts and sits straight up, looking around. Sundiata stops playing, but doesn't look as startled. He clicks his tongue, as if to summon a pet.

A hyena emerges from the shadows, its jaws taut in a wan smile. Kolonkan begins to reach for her bow but Sundiata puts a hand out to stop her.

The hyena slowly approaches Sundiata, whose hand is outstretched. He smiles at the scavenger. The hyena nuzzles its snout in his palm and Sundiata begins to make cooing sounds.

Suddenly, he looks the hyena straight in the eye and it seems as if some unspoken communication has passed between them. The hyena trots off, giggling.

Kolonkan is astonished. Sundiata simply smiles at her.

SUNDIATA
For protection. Rest easy.

EXT. FIELD - MORNING

Kolonkan coughs as she wakes up, stirring a cloud of dust from the ground. She does not look well. She is past the point of needing water, but knows that her work is not finished yet.

Sundiata is still asleep while Kolonkan packs up the camp. She doesn't bother to wake him. She has no energy to speak, but she has to keep moving.

EXT. ROAD - MORNING

Sundiata stirs from his slumber as Kolonkan is in the midst of dragging him along. He looks up at her. She is visibly dehydrated, but a look of determination is set on her face.

EXT. VILLAGE OF DO - DAY

Kolonkan and Sundiata finally reach the town. It looks different from how they remember. More impoverished. The people are sluggish in their movements and the few animals that remain look sickly and tired.

Kolonkan reaches the center of town and collapses into the dirt. Sundiata jerks around in his litter, terrified.

SUNDIATA
Sister!

Ma Fasseke rushes over and places her hand on Kolonkan.

INT. HUT - NIGHT

Kolonkan blinks as she comes to and sees Ma Fasseke sitting next to her in the candle light. The *jelimuso* is smiling warmly at her.

KOLONKAN
(weakly)
Ma Fasseke? Am I dead?

Ma Fasseke places her hand on Kolonkan's forehead.

MA FASSEKE
No, child, I managed to escape
Niani, just like you did.

The *jelimuso* strokes Kolonkan's cheek with motherly affection.

MA FASSEKE (CONT'D)
I'm so proud of you for bringing
Sundiata here.

Kolonkan struggles to sit up, she is excited.

KOLONKAN
Is mother here?

Ma Fasseke looks down and frowns. She eases Kolonkan, laying her back down.

MA FASSEKE
No. I lost track of her in the
chaos. I came here, as we had
planned, but she was nowhere to be
found.

Kolonkan looks away.

KOLONKAN
Oh...

Ma Fasseke gives a mischievous grin.

MA FASSEKE
Worry not, child. I think I might
know how to find her.

Kolonkan looks surprised and tries to sit up again. This time her own body stops her and she's forced to lie down again.

KOLONKAN
(excited)
How?! We must leave right away.

Ma Fasseke raises her eyebrows, admiring the youth's vigor.

MA FASSEKE
In time, young one. For now, get
some rest. I will see you in the
morning.

EXT. HUT - NIGHT

Sundiata's litter is propped up next to the door to the hut. He has begun to attract a small crowd of onlookers. They murmur suspiciously amongst themselves.

Ma Fasseke emerges from the hut and immediately shoos the crowd away. She crouches down next to Sundiata, who looks up at her expectantly.

SUNDIATA

Any news? Will my sister be all right?

Ma Fasseke nods.

MA FASSEKE

Yes, I just spoke with her. She'll recover.

Sundiata extends his arms in jubilation.

SUNDIATA

May I speak with her??

Ma Fasseke tries to calm him down.

MA FASSEKE

She needs rest right now, Sundiata.

A more serious look comes across the jelimuso's face.

MA FASSEKE (CONT'D)

Besides, we have pressing business to attend to. Your arrival has attracted attention and the king will no doubt wish to hold an audience with you.

INT. KING'S HUT - NIGHT

A fire burns in the middle of a hut much larger than the one we saw previously. This hut is filled with people murmuring suspiciously. KING CONDE (50s) sits on a raised platform in front of the fire. Sundiata's litter is set before him, on the other end of the fire. Ma Fasseke stands next to him.

MA FASSEKE

Long have the Mande lived in peace, but no longer. King Konate is dead and Soumaro turns his avaricious gaze on the Manding! He has struck a deal with the sorceress Sassouma and has set her son upon the throne as his puppet. You and I both know that Sundiata holds the stronger claim. Should you throw your support behind your grandson, we could yet rally the twelve doors...

The King raises his hand to stop the jelimuso's entreaty.

KING CONDE

The twelve doors are scattered,
Fasseke. The Brotherhood of Hunters
died with Kontran and Sanin.

Realizing this appeal to legalism would be a dead-end, Ma Fasseke tries a different approach.

MA FASSEKE

The king's body had scarce been
buried when Sassouma summoned
demons to eliminate any threat to
Dankaran's rule. Had I not sensed
the sorceress' *wanzo* in time, your
daughter's household would have
shared the same fate as the king's
other wives.

KING CONDE

And where is my daughter? Dead?
Held for ransom by this sorceress?

Ma Fasseke shakes her head profusely.

MA FASSEKE

Nay, sire. I saw the Lady Conde
escape Niani with my own eyes.

King Conde looks furious.

KING CONDE

And yet you lost track of her?

King Conde looks to the elders standing around him.

KING CONDE (CONT'D)

What good has this *bwa* ever brought
to my daughter's house?

The elders nod in agreement. Ma Fasseke looks around and fails to find a sympathetic face in the crowd.

MA FASSEKE

Your majesty, I...

KING CONDE

Enough! You dare lecture me on this
sorceress and her puppet son when
it was your *wanzo* that cursed my
daughter in the first place!

Ma Fasseke is taken aback.

MA FASSEKE

Your daughter is not cursed! Her *ni* was so powerful that it couldn't be contained to one *tana* alone. She is blessed!

Sundiata is surprised to hear this information about his mother. He begins to listen intently to the conversation.

King Conde clicks his tongue in disgust.

KING CONDE

Only a *bwa* would claim that someone is blessed to become a *jelema*.

The King shakes his head and then turns his gaze to Sundiata.

KING CONDE (CONT'D)

And you cannot deny the evidence of her offspring. The "boy of prophecy" is a cripple! Who would ever want to follow such a wretch? Unite the twelve doors? Bah! It would take a greater hero than both Brothers combined to reforge that which was broken.

Sundiata looks away, ashamed. Ma Fasseke gives him a sympathetic look before facing down the king once more.

MA FASSEKE

You of all people should know that looks can be deceiving. The boy's grasp of *dalilu* is stronger than any *djelis'* in this room.

This comment causes an uproar amongst the elders. Booing and hissing assail Ma Fasseke from every corner of the room.

The King has just about had enough.

KING CONDE

You forget yourself, *bwa*. My daughter is not here to protect you.

The King addresses the elders.

KING CONDE (CONT'D)

I will send an emissary to Niani in the morning. Perhaps I can negotiate for the release of my daughter.

Just then, the village DOZOS (17-20s) enter the hut. Each of them is badly wounded. The King is shocked.

KING CONDE (CONT'D)

What is the meaning of this?!

The foremost among the hunters takes a knee and bows his head before the King.

DOZO #1

Your majesty, we come bearing terrible tidings. We were out hunting when we came across tracks that looked different from the others. Whatever this creature was, it left a path of destruction in its wake. Fearing for the village's safety, we followed the trail. My lord, what we found...

Suddenly, a younger hunter bursts forward from the crowd, eyes in a frenzy.

DOZO #2

It was the Buffalo Woman! My mother would tell me stories of how that *bwa* would terrorize the village in the days of her youth. I thought it was just a fairy tale, but she's real!

The other dozos grab their companion and drag him back into their ranks. The elders murmur amongst themselves, processing this new development.

DOZO #1

My apologies for my comrade's outburst; he shall be disciplined. However, he speaks the truth. The demon we encountered took the form of a buffalo, just like the stories. We were no match for her might.

The King looks disturbed and turns his head to face Ma Fasseke. The two share a knowing glance.

Ma Fasseke steps forward and addresses the King.

MA FASSEKE

Your majesty, I propose that you send Sundiata and Kolonkan to subdue this monster.

(MORE)

MA FASSEKE (CONT'D)

Should they fall at the hands of this "buffalo woman", you will be free to negotiate with Dankaran. You may even offer them my head. But, should Sundiata and Kolonkan succeed, that would be proof enough of the boy's readiness to rule. You will throw your support behind his bid for the throne.

The King takes a moment to process these new development. After a moment of reflection, despite the protestations of his elders, he begrudgingly assents.

EXT. VILLAGE OF DO - DAY

It is the next day; Ma Fasseke is addressing Kolonkan and Sundiata before they leave.

MA FASSEKE

This is what you were trained for, Kolonkan. Take these.

Ma Fasseke hands the girl a bamboo shoot, a piece of charcoal, and an egg. Kolonkan nods.

EXT. THE BUSH - DAY

Kolonkan sets Sundiata down under a tree.

KOLONKAN

Stay here, it's too dangerous to drag you around.

SUNDIATA

What are you doing? You'll need my *fula*!

Ignoring him, Kolonkan creeps ahead through the underbrush. Ahead, she spies a large BUFFALO. The beast has glowing red eyes and is thrashing about violently.

Kolonkan notices an arrow sticking out of the Buffalo's thick neck.

Sundiata, bored, begins to play his *fula*. The Buffalo, hearing the flute, perks its head up. It lets out a low bellow and begins charging straight towards Kolonkan!

Panicked, Kolonkan throws the bamboo shoot toward the Buffalo.

The shoot lands right in front of the demon and a thicket of bamboo springs up out of the ground, entangling the monster.

As the Buffalo struggles and writhes in the bamboo, Kolonkan tosses the charcoal into the thicket. The bamboo suddenly bursts into flames, engulfing the Buffalo.

As the beast screams in fury and pain, Kolonkan runs back to Sundiata.

KOLONKAN

What are you doing?! You've ruined everything! I've used almost all of our items just trying to slow it down.

SUNDIATA

Why do you think Ma Fasseke sent me with you? Those items might slow down the demon, but you will need my *fula* to subdue the beast.

As they argue, the Buffalo breaks free from the flaming bamboo. Roaring loudly, it charges toward the pair, its body still engulfed in flame. True to Sundiata's word, the beast does not seem to have taken significant damage.

Kolonkan tosses the egg toward the monster, and the ground in front of it turns into a giant patch of mud. The Buffalo is trapped in the sticky mud, the flames turning to steam.

Kolonkan sighs and pulls out her bow, preparing to shoot the beast. But Sundiata notices something strange about the demon. As Kolonkan prepares to shoot, he motions for her to stop.

SUNDIATA (CONT'D)

Wait!

Sundiata begins playing a tune on his *fula*, an old lullaby from his childhood. Immediately, the Buffalo responds to it, the fire in its eyes die and reveal them to be strangely *human*. The Buffalo is subdued.

KOLONKAN

What's happening?

MA FASSEKE (V.O.)

It was in that moment that Sundiata realized the truth. His mother did escape the castle, but did not escape Soumaoro's curse...

A look of uncanny recognition crosses Sundiata's face.

SUNDIATA

I can't explain it but I'm pretty
sure that buffalo is our mother.