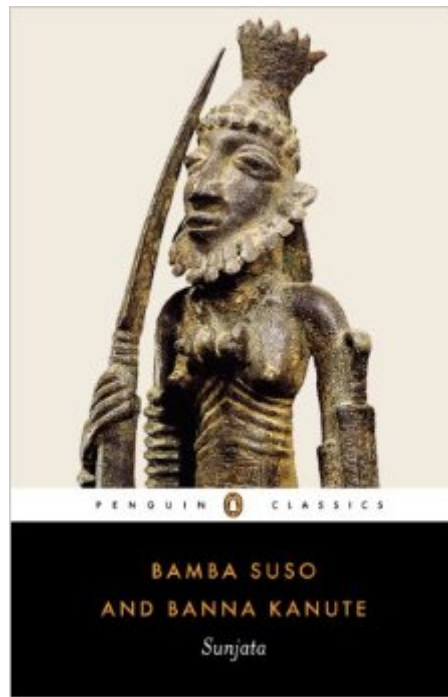


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Sunjata (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

Sunjata Keita was the founder of one of the greatest empires of Western Africa. These two epic accounts of his life portray a greedy, slow-witted child - said to have crawled until the age of seven - who grew up as prophecy foretold to become a mighty warrior, renowned for his bravery and superhuman strength. They describe how, with the help of his sister, who seduced their arch-enemy Sumanguru into revealing his secret powers, Sunjata defeated the Susu overlords and created the Mali Empire which would last for two centuries. Based on events from the early thirteenth century, these tales of heroism and magic are still celebrated across West Africa as part of a living epic oral tradition. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Naturally, I was interested in reading African epic--and in a Penguin Classic, no less (the answer to the inevitable question asked by Penguin obsessives is: green. Just like the Asian ones. BO-ring). And this slim tome was certainly interesting from an anthropological point of view; however, it didn't

work quite as well for me as entertainment. I think the major problem here is that the storytellers who narrated these versions of the story are--naturally--presupposing a certain level of basic familiarity with the story, and so they have no compunctions about downplaying those aspects of it that are less interesting to them personally while highlighting those that they like. This makes for a disorienting experience to someone--like me--who knew nothing about the original legend. The inclusion of two different versions is no doubt, in part, an effort to remedy the problem, but it doesn't really work--the two stories are very different in tone, yes, but that doesn't mean you can just sort of combine them, as it were, to get the whole story. The biggest blame here, however, should go to the woefully inadequate scholarly apparatus. The introduction is short and makes only a token attempt at providing the necessary background information, and annotations--even of things that are totally incomprehensible to the foreign observer--are conspicuously absent. This book might be of interest to established students of Sunjata looking for different versions to study, but for beginners, it ain't much. An underwhelming job from Penguin, I'm afraid.

This short book is a translation of 2 tales about the early life of a major West African king, Sunjata Keita. The tales relate the same events, the childhood and accession to the throne of Sunjata. I think these different versions are actually transcriptions of performances by 2 Gambian griots (bards). The content is interesting but somewhat opaque. The tales seem to presuppose a good deal of knowledge of the Sunjata story and I suspect that there are important performance aspects that can't be captured by these texts. There is no introduction, glossary, or annotations that would have helped readers.

Over the book

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