

Study Guide For Teachers

Experiential Theater In **SUNJATA KAMALENYA**

Presented by

Young Audiences

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www.yanj-yaep.org



ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Sunjata Kamalenya brings one of the greatest legends of West African Mande tradition to life. *Sunjata Kamalenya* is a completely interactive program where audiences of all ages participate in an “experiential theater” production that chronicles the struggles of a boy destined to be the savior of the Mande people of West Africa.

Traditional music, costumes, and scenery whisk students away to a village compound where the jelimuso (storyteller) guides them to 13th century Mali.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR STUDENTS

The Mali Empire

The ancient Mali Empire spanned several countries in Western Africa from c.1230 to c.1600. The country of Mali identified as only a small part of the vast empire, although it was the largest country in the empire. The empire was significant in the growth of West Africa, allowing the spread of its language, laws and customs. The Niger River played a monumental role in the expansion as it provided access to trade in bulk the abundant crops they were able to produce. Salt and gold mining were prevalent and lucrative businesses in ancient Mali. All goods traveling into, out of, or through Mali were heavily taxed, enabling the society to sustain a stable economy and simultaneously rise as an empire. Languages in ancient Mali were as diverse as its inhabitants. The land was divided and organized into kingdoms. A leader was established within each kingdom as long as the people swore their allegiance to the mansa, or ruler, of the Mali Empire.

The Story

Diviners prophesied that the boy Sunjata would grow up to save his people from terrible dangers. In a world of spears and sorcery, he must not only overcome the enemies that seek his country's demise, but also the jealousy and pettiness of those around him. Accompanied by his mother, Sogolon, Sunjata stands up to adversity and becomes the greatest Mansa (king) his people have ever had.

The History

The Sunjata epic is based on the real-life 13th century ruler who brought order to the largest empire the continent of Africa ever saw, the Mali Empire. African jeli (storytellers) from Mande' have passed the tradition of this Manden epic through oral tradition for the past seven centuries. Today, the story and the people whose ancestors it celebrates, are as alive as ever. This production brings the tradition and majesty of this ancient story and storytelling tradition to many Americans for the first time.

The Title

The title *Sunjata Kamalenya* is a combination of the title character Sunjata's name and a Mandinka word, Kamalenya, which means youth. During the production, students will learn many words in Mandinka, the native language of the Mande' people living in Mali and Northeastern Guinea.

LEARNING GOALS

Content Area	Visual and Performing Arts
Standard	1.1 The Creative Process: All students will demonstrate an understanding of the elements and principles that govern the creation of works of art in dance, music, theatre, and visual art.
Content Area	Visual and Performing Arts
Standard	1.2 History of the Arts and Culture: All students will understand the role, development, and influence of the arts throughout history and across cultures.
Content Area	Visual and Performing Arts
Standard	1.3 Performance: All students will synthesize those skills, media, methods, and technologies appropriate to creating, performing, and/or presenting works of art in dance, music, theatre, and visual art.
Content Area	Visual and Performing Arts
Standard	1.4 Aesthetic Responses & Critique Methodologies: All students will demonstrate and apply an understanding of arts philosophies, judgment, and analysis to works of art in dance, music, theatre, and visual art.
Content Area	Social Studies
Standard	6.2 World History/Global Studies: All students will acquire the knowledge and skills to think analytically and systematically about how past interactions of people, cultures, and the environment affect issues across time and cultures. Such knowledge and skills enable students to make informed decisions as socially and ethically responsible world citizens in the 21st century.

VOCABULARY WORDS

Amina-Amen-“I agree”, a form of affirmation often given by the naamu-sayer and others in attendance of a jeli/jelimuso oral performance.

Bara Muso-The favorite wife.

Jeli-A jeli is a storyteller, entertainer, praisesinger, usually jeli sing a good portion of their tales. The French word for jeli is griot.

Jelimuso-A female jeli, the French word jelimuso is griotte.

Kamalenya-The Mandinka word, for youth.

Mali Empire-This is the empire established by Sunjata when he defeated Sumaworo

Mandé-An adjective used to describe those people, traditions, beliefs of Manden

Mandinka-The native language of the Mande’ people living in Mali and Northeastern Guinea.

Mansa-Roughly translates to mean chief/leader/ruler.

Manden or Manding- A noun used to refer to the people, language or society of those who dwell in Western African

Naamu-sayer-“It’s true”, “You’re right”, “I hear you”, “Yes”, a word of affirmation that is spoken by a naamu-sayer.

Naamu-The person or people who accompany a jeli or jelimuso.

Sabu-A woman who is responsible for the success of a man, usually a sister or mother, and usually due to some magical intervention.

Tunya-“I agree”, another form of affirmation, often given by the naamu-sayer and others in attendance of a jeli/jelimuso oral performance.

ARTIST INFORMATION

Christopher Parks/Director, Playwright

Prior to his work at the McCarter Theatre, Christopher was co-founder of the New Jersey Renaissance Kingdom, where he served as one of the principal playwrights and directors during the ten years of his involvement. A dedicated Shakespearean Director, Christopher has directed *The Merchant of Venice*, *Twelfth Night*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and *The Tempest* (NJ Renaissance Kingdom); *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *As You like it*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Tempest*, *Hamlet*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Pericles*, *Macbeth*, and *Winter’s Tale* (McCarter Summer Shakespeare); *Henry IV, parts I and II* (Muse of Fire), *Macbeth* (Inclination), *Hamlet* (Muse of Fire), and *The Tempest* (Fordham University). Other playwrighting credits include adaptations of *Snow White* and *Rapunzel*, *Lucky Girl* (co-writer), and editor/writer of additional materials for Jack Gelber’s unfinished last play, *Dylan’s Line*. *Sunjata Kamalenya* was first produced as a reading at New Visions/New Voices at The Kennedy Center in May 2010.

David C. Conrad/Historical Consultant

Dr. Conrad holds a Ph.D. in African History from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. He is retired as Emeritus Professor of History at the State University of New York, Oswego. From 1986 to 2008 he served as President of the Mande Studies Association, an organization of several hundred scholars from thirty countries in Europe, Africa, Asia and North America. Specializing in oral tradition, indigenous religion and early kingdoms of the Western Sudan, he conducts ongoing research in Guinea and Mali, which he visits at least once a year.