Fakoly, the Soumaoro Ké and the Worthy

Expedition Date: 4/06/2018 to 5/03/2018

Abstract

Fakoly, the Soumaoro Ké and the Worthy are the subjects of nearly eight years of research in West Africa to locate and document the twelfth-century Sosso archaeological artifacts of Soumaoro Kante and Fakoly
Kourouma, collectively known as the Soumaoro Ké. The heritage of Soumaoro Kante today represents great spiritual, historical and cultural significance to the people of West Africa. This paper is an overview of the discovery of the Soumaoro Ké, its rituals and its guardians and the establishment of the Malinke traditional Soma profession by its founder, Fakoly Kourouma, as documented throughout the course of this expedition.

Fakoly and the Soumaoro Ké

Documentation of the Soumaoro Ké during research at Kantedougou Balandougou, Manfran, Tokounou, Kankan, Kouroussa and Coyah by our team was conducted by Africa Writes Logistics Chief Idrissa Feindouno, Africa Writes Field Coordinator Robert Saa Millimono, Africa Writes Senior Correspondent Faya Michel Ouendeno and myself. At the various sites, the Africa Writes team interviewed various community elders, traditional hunters, traditional healers, traditional singers known as djeli and also the descendents of Soumaoro Kante and Fakoly Kourouma. During this expedition, historical artifacts were identified, and the associated rituals of the Soumaoro Ké and Fakoly were photographed and recorded in high-definition video.

The Djeli Tomba—an ancient order of traditional singers and historians that praise the sacred Sosso Bala Ba and the Mansa Soundiata Keita and are descendents of the djeli Balafasseke Kouyate— recount that at the age of 25 the young Sosso hunter and mystic Soumaoro Kante became the seventh King of the Sosso kingdom in West Africa in the year 1180 A.D., and in 1205 A.D. he acquired the highly sacred artifacts collectively known as the “Bala Na Kan Fellou,” from the Kourou Koroba region in present-day Mali. The Bala Na Kan Fellou were given to Soumaoro during the Takiri feast in special boxes as gifts called djansali by the entities Tassi and Waramba. Inside each box was one of the Bala Na Kan Fellou. Soumaoro opened each box, until arriving at the fourth and final box, which contained the sacred Sosso Bala. The sacred Sosso Bala was given to Soumaoro under the condition that he would give his mother to the entities in exchange for the Sosso Bala. With Soumaoro’s mother deceased, he chose his sister Kosia Kante (also known as Kankouba Kante). Kosia agreed and offered herself to the entities to help Soumaoro gain the sacred Sosso Bala and raise her brother’s power and that of the Sosso Kingdom. After volunteering herself, Kosia went with the entities, became pregnant and gave birth to a son named Fakoly (Kourouma). Soumaouro, now in possession of the Sosso Bala and the other sacred items, kept the artifacts for more than fifteen years, harnessing their power and growing his influence, setting in motion the events known as the Soundiata epic.

Young Fakoly grew through his association with the entities to become the founder of the traditional Soma profession, later becoming the commanding general of his uncle Soumaoro’s armies.

The Soma are Malinke traditional healers and mystics and have a tradition dating back to Fakoly Kourouma; they have standardized and mastered the medicines that he created during his lifetime. At Tokounou, the Africa Writes team worked to learn about an ancient Soma statue found in the region and the Soma profession practiced there. Among the various traditional medicines and classifications created by Fakoly were the very old and rare bambada statues, which represented the most powerful and dangerous members of the Soma profession.
The word *bambada* is a reference to the sacred hat worn by the most prominent Malinke mystics. The curved horns of the hat have special meaning. During Fakoly’s time, the horns were used for communication. When a Soma wears the *bambada*, he can communicate in multiple directions. A Soma’s movements and actions when wearing the *bambada* are a form of communication known only to the initiated members of the Soma society.

Traditional masks utilized by Fakoly and the Soma were observed during key rituals for Fakoly Kourouma, Soumaoro Kante and the Soumaoro Ké. These masks represent different categories of entities believed by the Soma to aid in activities related to traditional healing, war and spirituality within the Soma profession.

Documentation of the various masks located at Tokounou, and Dalabanin from April 17th to April 22nd, 2018, along with others, aided the *Africa Writes* team in the understanding of ceremonies related to the sacred Soumaoro Ké and their accompanying ceremonies. These masks included the Wolaba, Kere Woro (also known as Konkodangba), Wolo Koma, Kolomba Kodo and powerful Gnado mask entity, Koma Koun, and others demonstrated during the Soma Don, the dance of the Soma.
According to Noumoussadjan Kante and in representation of the seven Kante traditional sacred meeting houses, the Bala Na Kan Fellou then provided Soumaoro Kante vast spiritual power and influence that he used to spread military dominance over the region against any kingdom that opposed him. The Bala Na Kan Fellou consisted of the sacred sword Mourou Panparagna, the sacred spear Tamba Maratata, the sacred drum Doundoun Mouloukoutou and the sacred Sosso Bala Ba.

The sacred sword Mourou Panparagna was an invincible weapon revered for its peerless lethality in the hand of its wielder and its use in combat against multiple enemies. When unsheathed and its blade revealed, a sacrifice of bloodshed was required on its behalf. The appearance of the sacred Mourou Panparagna symbolized that the “battle must be won.”

The sacred spear Tamba Maratata was a special weapon used in night operations for gnamilorasan, or gna dan dia, meaning to execute someone from far away without being present. When used, the lethal Tamba Maratata struck its target with a single devastating point of entry upon impact and created nine fatal exit points as it exited its victims.

The sacred drum, Mouloukoutou, was made from half-male and half-female human skin. The Mouloukoutou was played at the approach of impending battle called “Kele Bara Madjon.” The Mouloukoutou was used to accompany the Sosso Bala. The sacred Sosso Bala was at the heart of Soumaoro’s spiritual power and was also played by Soumaoro during the approach of battle, for important rituals and when Soumaoro was happy. When shown publicly, the Sosso Bala was accompanied by the Mourou Panparagna, Tamba Maratata, and the Mouloukoutou during the Keya Tolon
ceremony. It is said by the Kante that, individually, the attributes and abilities of the Soumaoro Ké were unparalleled and uniquely powerful. Combined, the assembled artifacts made Soumaoro unstoppable.

Figure 3: The Sacred Mouloukoutou at Kantedougou

For more than eight hundred years, with exception of the Sosso Bala at Niagassola, the whereabouts of the Bala Na Kan Fellou, which are today referred to as Soumaoro Ké, remained largely unknown to the outside world.
In mid-2011 the *AfricaWrites* team located and restored the sacred Bala Ba of Maniselia, known as the Koro, in the Tokounou prefecture of Guinea. The sacred Bala Ba of Maniselia was created in the late 1500s by Djeli Bourama Kouyate, great-grandson of Balafasseke Kouyate in Niagassola, to rival the power of the Sosso Bala once possessed by Soumaoro Kante. With the discovery, restoration and study of the conduct of the Bala Labo ceremony for the sacred Bala at Maniselia, details that included the location of additional related sites, rituals and elders were soon accessible to *AfricaWrites* team, and we made plans to conduct research at Niani the ancient capital of the Mali Empire.

At Niani, on the morning of **May 18th, 2012,** with the elders Donzo Kounti Fadjingba Keita of Niani and Donzo Kounti Waroba Noman Keita of Kineroba Village, Mali, the *AfricaWrites* team was present for the conduct of the Dankoun So ritual, which was held at the ancient site and sacred stone of the first, nearly eight hundred years ago. The following day, the *AfricaWrites* team documented the sacred Sundiata Doun Soli, the gravesite ritual for Mansa Sundiata Keita. Interviews with the elders followed, and we identified four sacred idols at Niani. This information led us west to Kouroussa, Guinea.
On October 23rd, 2013, in Kouroussa the Africa Writes team was given details concerning components, guardianship and history of the Soumaoro Ké at Kantedougou.

On February 19th, 2014, the Africa Writes team, accompanied by various Kante elders and aided by information provided at Kourala and by Kante griot and historian Noumoussadjian Kante, we traveled northeast to Kantedougou. In 1235, Kantedougou was where Soumaoro’s sacred artifacts and traditional medicines were brought at the end of the Kirina War. At Kantedougou the Africa Writes team was allowed to document the sacred drum, Mouloukoutou. Shortly thereafter, several other personal weapons belonging to Soumaoro Kante were assembled nearby, including various swords and spears. Among them, we were informed, was the sacred Tamba Maratata, which in the past, was placed among the other weapons by Soumaoro Kante himself before each battle. At that time, no one was permitted to know which weapons were Soumaoro’s. After being collectively blessed by Soumaoro, weapons were then given to the warriors.

Figure 4: The Sacred Tamba Maratata

That evening, as we left Kantedougou on the way back to Siguiri, we were pleased by what we had seen and agreed to continue the search for the sacred sword Mourou Panparagna. Days later, the Ebola outbreak in Guinea, which had been quietly raging south of Tokounou in Gueckedou, began to spread and our research in West Africa was temporarily halted.
The Sosso Koly

In late 2016, the Ebola outbreak ended after killing and infecting thousands. Soon after, the AfricaWrites office officially reopened. In late February 2018, we were informed by Sosso historian Bentoura Bangoura of the existence of another sacred sword in Guinea, from the period of Soumaoro Kante which was said to have belonged to Fakoly Kourouma, with strong similarities to the Mourou Panparagna. Plans were then made for an expedition to Guinea to document the sword and also the primary ritual used to escort the Soumaoro Ké and the other sacred artifacts of Soumaoro Kante and Fakoly Kourouma.

The evening of April 7th, 2018, the AfricaWrites team, after having completed cultural surveys of the primarily Baga- and Susu-populated Marara Island, northwest of Guinea, returned to Coyah, where we arrived at a dusty neighborhood street and were soon ushered into a small building by several local government officials and Kourouma family descendents to see the sacred sword of Fakoly. Soon, the blessing was given, and the sword was gently brought into the room wrapped in a white cloth called “Dugi Koli.” As the sword entered the room, we rose, as requested under whispered prayers called “Deera” by the elders present. Standing solemnly in observance of the “Ye Dogi” before the sword, we waited as the remaining rites of entry were performed. Once the elders spoke, slowly the cloth was removed and the sword was placed upon the bench in front of us.
The Susu elders slowly narrated the history of the sacred sword identified as the Sosso Koly. The Sosso Koly sword is believed to promise success in any battle, no matter the odds and no matter the strength of the enemy. The sacred Koly sword is said to have been given to Fakoly’s grandfather, N’Nagan, at the top of the mountain between the two entities Soguetede Guiya and Sogbori Guiya, which represent rain and the light of the sun.

Older than Fakoly, the Sosso Koly sword was used for the first time in the Kaniya battle in 1076 in the mountains of Gangan region of Kindia (located in present-day Guinea) against the Sarakole people. The sword was then used by Fakoly’s grandfather, who was called N’Nagan Koly. According to the family history, each time someone possessed the sword, he carried the title of “Koly,” meaning “general.” In the battle of Tabou in the Labe region, against the Maraca people under the rule of King of Mema, the sword was carried by N’Nagan Na Koly in the name of his father, N’Nagan Koly, in the tradition of the Djalonka people. N’Nagan Na Koly was the father of Namiya Koly, also known as Fakoly by the Malinke djeli. In 1220, after the battle of Kankigne between Mali Yemberin in Guinea against the Bambara, the sword was given to Fakoly after his father’s death. Since that time, we learned, the sword has been passed down through the family for generations.
the Keya Tolon, and those that were, did so with caution and reverence for the various sacred and also dangerous artifacts they praised. Among the Soma medicines revealed by the Doura mystics for the Keya Tolon were the sacred Soumaoro mask entity, the sacred Fakoly mask entity and several ancient medicines of Fakoly and Soumaoro that were previously unknown to us.

For preparation of the Keya Tolon, various livestock were brought the day before the ceremony. Also required for the Keya Tolon were the “gno dolo,” the traditional maize wine, a large calabash and animal skins. These items and others were escorted by the village soma, Baraty Chief Mansa Karenkan, a Donzo traditional hunter, the village Koma Koun mask entity into the bush into a secluded clearance as the ritual began. Later that morning, following various sacrifices and ceremonies and after nearly eight years of research of the Soumaoro Ké, the AfricaWrites team, with the aid of the Soma and Guinea Government officials, was able to successfully document the Sosso Koly and the sacred Keya Tolon. Research on the Soma, Soumaoro Ké and the Sosso Kingdom continues.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the entire AfricaWrites research team for the hard work and effort shown during this expedition. Special thanks to AfricaWrites Field Coordinator Robert Saa Milimono, AfricaWrites Senior Correspondent and Logistics Chief Idrissa Feindouno, AfricaWrites Correspondent Amara Conde, AfricaWrites Correspondent Samuel Milimono, AfricaWrites Correspondent Nantenin Diallo, Kankan University African Cultural Studies Center (CECA), the Djeli Tomba, Noumoussadjan Kante, Mr. Bangoura, Soma Sékouwoulén Keita and everyone who contributed in this effort.