Flag # 93 Expedition Report

Niani Expedition 2: Rites of Origin

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Figure 1. The Donzo of Niani, Mali Koura at Niani and the AfricaWrites team

The Rites of Origin

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Abstract

The Rites of Origin is a study by the Africa Writes research team of Malinke ceremonial sacrifices and continuing rituals of hunting and praise originating in West Africa during the mid-thirteenth century. This paper provides an overview of the respective Malinke traditional practices commemorating the mortuary rites of Mansa Sundiata Keita, Manding Mory, and medicines of early Malinke hunting traditions before and after the rule of the Mali Empire.

The Rites of Origin

Documentation of the Rites of Origin at ceremonial sites in Niani and Sassambaya followed years of research at locations in Guinea and Mali by the Africa Writes team. During research at Niani and Sassambaya our team consisted of Africa Writes Logistics Chief Idrissa Feindouno, Africa Writes Field Coordinator Robert Saa Millimono, Africa Writes Correspondent Abdoulaye Feindouno and myself. At Niani and Sassambaya Village, the Africa Writes team conducted interviews with Niani elders, traditional singers of praise and members of the Malinke hunting and healing professions. During this expedition, historical artifacts and ancient sites were identified, the rituals of Mansa Sundiata Keita and Manding Mory were photographed and recorded in high-definition video.

I stood motionless in the darkness across from the serewa, the traditional singer of praise for the assembled hunters, watching intently as they danced the dance of hunters, the donzo don. Through the deafening booms and sporadic flashes of their gunfire, I glimpsed the Kondolon, one of several ancient mystic adornments worn by the crimson-garbed serewa, saying the words quietly to myself, noting the type and significance of each traditional medicine displayed by the hunters during the ritual dance. Created long ago by Manding Mory, grandfather of the Malinke hunting tradition, the Kondolon, the fida sin, the powerful five-horn medicine of the buffalo and other medicines would provide valuable insight and perspective about the various hunting rituals and ceremonies created more than eight hundred years ago.
On May 12, 2012, the Africa Writes team traveled to Sassambaya village in southern Guinea to document the rituals and history of Malinke traditional hunters of West Africa known as *donzo* (also pronounced *donso*). Aided by Simbon Woloba, the powerful chief of all donzo of upper Guinea and known as the Donzo Kounti, we first stopped at Sassambaya Village before returning north to Kankan and onward to Niani, the ancient capital of the Mali Empire to document key Malinke rituals originating with the thirteenth-century Donzoya (also pronounced Donsoya), Keita descendants, traditions and hunting practices of Manding Mory (the brother of Mansa Sundiata Keita and first ruler of the Mali Empire). At Sassambaya, with the assistance of the Donzo Kounti of Morigbedu Village and the many donzo invited by the Donzo Kounti, we were given the rare opportunity to document the classifications and roles of some of the oldest of the donzo traditional rituals. On May 13, our work at Sassambaya complete, we returned to Kankan and headed northeast to Niani in preparation for the manifestation of sacred ceremonies created in the wake of the two powerful Malinke brothers Sundiata Keita and Manding Mory, whose contributions to the people, culture and history of West Africa are still felt today.
It has been nearly a year since the discovery by the Africa Writes team of the ancient and sacred Malinke traditional instrument of sixteenth-century origin, the sacred Bala Ba of Maniselia. The celebratory thunderous booms of the Malinke hunters’ traditional rifles, the morfa, have for the moment fallen silent, and the glorious high praise of the traditional singers known as Konkoba Djeli, and the Djeli Tomba—the ancient order of traditional singers that praise sacred Bala Ba—are now but a distant memory. Last July, with the sacred Bala Ba of Maniselia fully restored, the ancient Bala Labo ceremony of the sacred Bala Ba and its many solemn rituals and centuries-old traditions returned to their former historical practice, our attention turned to Niani, site of the ancient capital of the Mali Empire. Aided by the chief of the Djeli Tomba, we were joined at Mandiana by Keita family royal descendent and elder Kassim Keita. At Niani we met and discussed with various Keita elders the history of the Mali Empire, the sacred Bala Ba of Maniselia, the sacred Sosso Bala Ba of Niagassola, Manding Mory, the history of the Donzo, the rule of Mansa Sundiata Keita and the originating rituals and ceremonies from his almost 25-year reign that saw the rise of the newly organized donzo profession.
Donzo Kounti Fadjingba Keita, an elder of Niani, narrates that, at the end of the Kirina War (1225–1235), Sundiata Keita, Mansa and chief of all Malinke peoples and territories, organized the hunters, then known as Fele La, to perform the Dankoun So, the ritual sacrifice of the Donzo in honor of his brother, Manding Mory, the strongest of the ancient hunting profession who was lost in exile before the Kirina War. Instituted by Manding Mory, the Dankoun So is a ritual sacrifice by the donzo to the bush made for their physical and spiritual protection while hunting.

On May 18, with the AfricaWrites team present, Donzo Kounti Fadjingba Keita of Niani and Donzo Kounti Waroba Noman Keita of Kineroba Village, Mali, conducted the Dankoun So at the ancient site and sacred stone of the first Donkoun So sacrifice originally organized by Mansa Sundiata Keita, and conducted by the Fele La for Manding Mory, in Niani nearly 800 years ago.

Earlier this year, the AfricaWrites team traveled to Niani and worked closely with Keita elders and the chief of the Niani Donzo to identify artifacts, establish historical sites and determine the names, practices and origins of the ancient rituals conducted in honor of Mansa Sundiata Keita and Manding Mory. Soon the various rituals and their ceremonial dates were identified. Among the sacred historical sites and their corresponding rituals identified by the Niani elders were the ancient gravesite of Mansa Sundiata Keita and the Sundiata Doun Soli, the seven-year ritual sacrifice made to Mansa Sundiata Keita.
On the morning of May 19, the Niani elders, royal descendants of Mansa Sundiata Keita, together with the AfricaWrites research team, gathered in accordance with Keita traditions in Niani, Guinea, at the Sankarani River to conduct the sacred Sundiata Doun Soli, the ritual sacrifice of Sundiata. According to Keita tradition, the Sundiata Doun Soli is to be performed once every seven years at the sacred site of sacrifice known as the *soli yoro*, representing the final resting place of Mansa Sundiata Keita.

“*It is time,”* AfricaWrites Field Coordinator Robert Saa Millimono says, signaling the presence of the Keita elder who has come for us. In the light of dawn we dress and quickly follow him, passing thatched houses, goats and grain stores, arriving at the forked path along the river leading away from the largest settlement of the village. Further down the path and standing quietly between several small trees are more Keita elders of the village that I had met two days before. After a short blessing and prayers by each of the elders, they take branches from the small trees and offer them to the members of our team. The soft and lowly spoken prayers of the elders rise in unison as a large, shirtless hunter from the village steps forward slowly leading a red cow onto the barely visible path leading to the river. In Maninka, the elders and the shirtless hunter chant, “*Bimba ita fida leni,”* meaning “Grandfather, these are your leaves,” safely tossing the branches one by one into a small pile having performed the important ritual of blessing and protection after
arriving at a small clearing just feet from the water’s edge. Robert’s translation of the elders’ ancient prayers following closely behind, I look east toward the river feeling a cool breeze upon my cheek, noticing the unsuspecting calm of the toura oulen, the sacrificial cow, being slowly led to the altar where the sacred sacrifice is about to take place.

By midday, the ceremony had ended and the sacrificial toura oulen was no more. Its body had been offered to the powerful spirit of Mansa Sundiata Keita and its roasted flesh was consumed in the centuries-old traditions of the Keita royal bloodline and their ancient descendants.

Work by the AfricaWrites team at Niani in conjunction with African Cultural Studies Center (CECA) of Kankan University, the Keita family of Niani, the Donzo Kounti of upper Guinea, the Djeli Tomba and Guinean governmental officials resulted in the successful conduct and documentation of rituals and ceremonies at Niani and Sassambaya Village, Guinea. Research on the rituals, artifacts and historical sites of Niani, Manding Mory, Mansa Sundiata Keita and the Donzoya continues.

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