

Kewulay Kamara

Sierra Leone: finah poet and storyteller Object:
numu blacksmith's bellows

Sigi tina koe min ban, tama le woe bana.
(Kuranko)

[*What sitting will not solve, travel will resolve.*]

I am descended from the Kamara clan in northeast Sierra Leone. The clan has two branches, the numu (blacksmiths) and the finah (poets) residing in Dankawalie village. An ancestral bellows was given to me by my numu elders. It was used to tend the fire for forging metal into implements, including stirrups. The numu are the keepers of ancient knowledge and spirituality. Their workshop is a living shrine where people exchanged stories to the rhythms of blowing bellows and hammers pounding hot metal into useful shapes on an anvil. So powerful are the numu that oaths were often sworn in courts on the bellows, the symbol of the numu blacksmiths.

When I was leaving for the United States, my mother said, "Your father was a finah, a poet—that is the most noble. But when you go out there, people are not going to know who you are—but you must know yourself and be humble. When you go out there, make someone else's mother your mother and someone else's father your father." As a boy of 14 in the village of Dankawalie, I had watched my finah father write down the ancient stories and genealogies in the Kuranko language using Arabic script with a reed pen. That manuscript was one of the things I did not bring to America—I left it in the village as an heirloom. The manuscript was burned during the civil war in the 1990s. A thousand years of history lay in ashes. With tape recorder and camera, I have tried to recreate those ancient stories through interviews with my family members in Dankawalie, and to practice the way of the finah in America by showing my work, and organizing performances of West African musicians here in New York. In this way, I carry the two traditions with me.



Bio:

Kewulay Kamara is descended from a long line of Mandeng finah (orators, historians, poets) from the village of Dankawalie in Sierra Leone. He performs to music in keeping with Mandenka oral traditions and has performed at the Great Hall of the Cooper Union, The Kitchen, Alice Tully Hall, City Center, Gerald W. Lynch Theater, and the Museum for African Art. He has been featured in The New York Times, the New York Daily News, CNN, and NPR, and directed the documentary, In Search of Finah Misa Kule. In 2007, he led his village of Dankawalie in opening an independent secondary school. For more information, visit: badenya.org