

AND...

FOCUS ON SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

The Last King of Kakfontein – Boyzie Cekwana, July 17-23, La Chartreuse de Villeneuve lez Avignon
Kalakuta Republik – Serge Aimé Coulibaly, July 19-25, Cloître des Célestins
Femme noire – Angélique Kidjo, Isaach De Bankolé and their guests Manu Dibango, Dominic James and MHD, July 25 and 26, Cour d'honneur du Palais des papes

TOUR DATES AFTER THE FESTIVAL

- August 30- September 2, 2017, Zürcher Theater Spektakel, Zürich (Switzerland)
- September 22, Le Manège scène nationale, Maubeuge
- November 18, Abbaye de Fontevraud

DREAM MANDÉ – DJATA

"After each royal audience, a griot stands and tells the story of what was just accomplished, so that the decision that was made becomes part of History. His second is the depository of that speech, made as material as leather, iron, or earth. The griot must tell nothing but the truth, nothing but what he has been told by another griot. His role is also to destroy the word so as to create another – that is, another kingdom." Rokia Traoré, in the 21st century, pays tribute to the ancient art of the griots of West Africa: accompanied by two musicians, she tells the epic of Emperor Sundiata Keita in 13th-century Africa. Her tale, in French, is interspersed with scenes performed by actors, classic Mandinka stories and songs, as they were transmitted to her by griots whose families have preserved, from one generation to the next, the immaterial treasure that is the history of a people transmitted through oral tradition. From prophecies announcing the miraculous birth of the man who would unite the Mandé people to the establishment of a charter of rights by an emperor who decided to base his reign on respect and not greed or violence, *Dream Mandé* is an astonishing tale come from the ancient past of Africa, at a time where the continent already developed its own energies and synergies.

ROKIA TRAORÉ

Few artistic careers are at once as free and as rooted in tradition as Rokia Traoré's. Indeed, she has often been called unique, post-traditional, mutant, so easily she seems to find herself at unknown crossroads, at confluences both unpredictable and determined by her personal history. Rokia Traoré's voice is uniquely Malian in its power and tone, folk in its distance and precision, and rock'n'roll in its love for encounters, turbulences, and shock. What left an indelible mark on her? Serge Gainsbourg's *Aux armes et cætera*, which her father played loudly in the morning, but also an Ella Fitzgerald LP, and albums by Joan Baez, Tracy Chapman, Mark Knopfler, and Ali Farka Touré, as well as cassettes she bought from griots later in Bamako, when her friends listened only to rap. If Rokia Traoré is seen as an icon of world music, celebrated for the elegance of a music embodying the culture without borders of a new century, she is also, thanks to her unique career choices – a show written with Toni Morrison and directed by Peter Sellars; her assimilation of the legacy of the griots, even though she isn't part of their caste – the symbol of a changing Mali. At the Festival d'Avignon, she will present a new creation that shows the boldness of her culture and of her career as a singer.

SUNDIATA KEITA

The epic of Sundiata Keita is at once the history and the legend of West Africa. From 1235 to 1255, Sundiata Keita reigned on the Mandé empire, which he unified and pacified after besting Soumaoro Kanté, a deceitful and cruel king. A mixture of indisputable facts and fantastic elements, the story of his life and reign has been transmitted for centuries via the voice of Mandinka griots. Prophecies, magical spells, and war exploits are retold to celebrate a king attentive to his people's rights, as listed in the founding charter of Kouroukan Fouga.

71st
EDITION

In order to bring you this edition, over 1,750 people, artists, technicians, and organisational staff, have worked tirelessly and enthusiastically for months. More than half of them are state-subsidised freelance workers.



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INTERVIEW WITH ROKIA TRAORÉ

Rokia Traoré, you're not coming to the Festival d'Avignon with a traditional concert.

Rokia Traoré: *Dream Mandé – Djata* is a musical story I wrote about the birth of the Mandé empire in the 13th century. This epic sometimes veers pretty close to the fairy tale, but unlike Greek mythology, which we know is about legends, this show is about kings who really existed. It's the story of Sundiata Keita, from his birth to the foundation of the Mandé empire, as we know it through oral stories passed down in griot families. The griots aren't tellers of tales whose job is to entertain people, they are the source of the history of West Africa. It's through them that we know of Sundiata, who put an end to the reign of a totalitarian king, Soumaoro Kanté. He was the child announced by a prophecy, who was to unite the Mandé region and reign without ever resorting to violence to impose his will. His empire, one of the most powerful in the history of Africa, was based on the Kouroukan Fougara charter, which abolished slavery, defined the role of women, codified the alliance of autonomous kingdoms within the empire...

Will you be telling this story alone onstage?

I'm accompanied by an instrument from the Mandé, the kora, and another which arrived later from the north, the n'goni. Those instruments weren't played together at the time, but they are in Mali today. Similarly, I transcribed what the griots performed: the show is in French, but all the songs are in Mandinka. Classic songs, whose texts and music are fixed, could only be sung by griots, like for instance the melody composed after the assembly of Kouroukan Fougara, which has variants in every family that has kept it as part of its legacy. But the story of the birth of Sundiata was certainly already told in his time in the same way I tell it: his mother was the buffalo woman who, according to a prophecy, was to marry the king of Mandé to give birth to the man who would unite the kingdoms. Like a politician bragging about his skills and his foreign connections to be elected, that prophecy was told again and again back then. There are always been works commissioned by the powers that be, but here, their importance is crucial, because in West Africa there was no writing, and oral culture was the only way to preserve History.

Did the story of Sundiata make it to the present day without being altered?

No. There are no written sources about the history of West Africa before the arrival of the Europeans. But the contact was violent, and caused a deep perturbation in that transmission. The oath the griots took for life was lost. What used to be a natural and inherited responsibility found itself threatened by the school. For a long time, the children of griots spent their time learning songs and texts, but colonisation brought another type of knowledge, even the opportunity to become a doctor or an engineer and not to follow the path that had been one's family's for generations. We lost a lot of Africa because of this break in the oral transmission of our history. At my own humble level, I try to transmit what I've heard and understood from the griots I visited, like Bako Dagnon [who

passed away in 2015], who was one of the last to be directly descended from the griots of Sundiata Keita's Mandé. There are still a lot of griots in the Mandé, Bako Dagnon was actually one of the last to defend the ethics and the rules that governed the organisation of the role of the Niamakala (all caste families, each with a specific role to play within society) in general and of the griots in particular.

The story you're telling is also a story for today.

Sundiata's example is a good example for today's governments, a reminder that a great prosperous empire can be created through the will of a ruler with no need to maintain it through the use of violence. That's what a president should be: even if the organisation of the world has become extremely complex, we have to go back to the simplicity of the human. And Sundiata left in exile, only to come back to his country because he was convinced he could do Good. Today, we have to remember that that ambition actually was realised in Africa, remember that a man built the Mandé empire and that other men can succeed in the same way. I also think that we need to maintain our connection to the past. The African political crisis also stems from the fact that Africa sees itself through the eyes of its former colonists, that it no longer has the tools required to know its own history. It will be difficult for Africans to overcome their inferiority complex for as long as there is no cultural and educational engagement in Africa. And the level of education in Mali, for instance, keeps getting worse...

This show is part of the action of your foundation, Passerelle (Footbridge).

We could have created a huge co-production with a lot of musicians. But I only wanted three of us to be onstage, and I wanted to present the show at the Festival d'Avignon, without spending a lot of money for a massive tour. *Dream Mandé – Djata* will then go on tour and, I hope, for a long time, to raise money for the projects of the Fondation Passerelle, and in particular the creation in Bamako of a 250-seat venue. We've already built an open, all-purpose 1,500-seat venue, which allows people to see and hear artists in good conditions, and which I've made available to the neighbourhood, in particular to support projects by women. Since 2009, all of the Foundation's other projects have been intertwined. After *Dream Mandé – Djata*, another show about the history of the Mandé empire will be created with the Foundation's orchestra. At the start of the next school year, our school will become a special primary school, focusing on music and visual arts, and working with the Bamako Conservatory. The fight for culture and art is essential. Today, in Mali, no politician can hope to fill a 1,500-seat room, that's how disappointed people are with political action. My foundation fights all forms of radicalism, against political scepticism, and above all for social cohesion. For the past fifteen or twenty years, politicians have been consistently losing their credibility and the people's trust. To talk about Sundiata is to talk about a desire to organise a complex world, to build lasting solutions that respect diversity and liberty. It's important not only for Africans, but also for Westerners. Because today, the European border is in the Sahara.

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Interview conducted by Bertrand Dicale and translated by Gaél Schmidt-Cléach.