

# Voices of Kings: the Dankawali Village Epic

by Kewulay Kamara

In 2004, as part of the People's Poetry Project, City Lore commissioned Kewulay Kamara to return to Sierra Leone to recreate an epic that was destroyed in the recent Civil War. This is an abbreviated prose version of his story.

## Introduction

My name is Kewulay Kamara. Ka — means “to,” *mara* means “keep” — so it means keepers of the culture. I am from a line of orators and poets known in my native Sierra Leone as Fina. The word is king to the Fina. The stories I tell tonight come from a time when “what is said is done, and what is done is said.” The word and the deed are twins. Words do not rust; words do not rot.

I am from the land of the Mandeng, the old empire known as Mali that reached its zenith in the 14th Century, that encompasses not only Sierra Leone and Guinea where Kuranko is spoken, but much of West Africa. At home, we tell the story of an argument between earth and sky over who was more important. The heavens argued that the stars, the moon, and even the sun was in the sky. But earth won the argument for Mohammad bowed his head on the humble earth.

## Ferensola

I must have been about 10 years old in 1964 when a blue Opel pickup truck appeared in Kabala, a trading town adopted by British colonialists as the Koinadugu District's administrative headquarters. The appearance of any new motor vehicle in Kabala sparked conversations around the marketplace, but the blue Opel was unusual. Every commercial vehicle in Sierra Leone carried the name of its owner, and the town of its registration, often painted in bright colors. The first thing that stood out about this Opel was the owner: Karifa Fina Kamara. Who was he? He was the District Council Clerk who never owned a vehicle before. But the conversation centered on the place of registration: Ferensola. Where is Ferensola, what does it mean? Slowly the word went out. Ferensola is the kingdom of the Kuranko before European colonizers, French and the British, carved it out between Sierra Leone and Guinea. Generations of Kuranko who had never heard the name Ferensola, began to know that Ferensola — the land of the twins — extended way beyond the borders of Sierra Leone. It takes, the elders explained, fourteen days of walking to go from one end of Ferensola to the other. The man who had revived all these conversations in the marketplace, offices and homes was my uncle, a cousin of my father. He, like me, was a Fina.

He must have inspired my father to set me on the path of pursuing a Western education, and, as a result, I came to America, settling first in Massachusetts, Upstate New York and eventually then in New York City. I still remember Karifa Kamara now, in his office at the District Council. He was a



heavy man, looking over his reading glasses when the door would open to let father and me in.

It was not long after Ferensola was written on the truck that my father took me on a trip to Tumania, about twenty miles away from Dankawali. It was deep rainy season, probably August when the sun rarely smiled. When it did, my father was ready. He told me he was writing down the ancient stories. He had a book of plain sheets in a folder of furry sheepskin, a blackened multi-chamber ink well, and pens made of straw. He wrote carefully, using Arabic script. When a page was full, he got up from the skin where he sat, went to the courtyard, with his blue indigo robe flowing in the wind around his tall sinewy ebony frame, laid a pebble on each corner of the paper and let the ink dry. He was writing down the ancient story of Fina Misa Kule and the Land of the Twins, Ferensola, because like my uncle he knew that things were changing and children like myself were no longer interested. The Voices of Kings are a series of interrelated stories that tell the genealogy of the family, and tie it to mythical events in our past and legendary events in our long family history going back to before the birth of Mohammad.

I remember some of the stories my father told me. One of the ancient stories was about how Allah created eight skins in this world. He gave two skins to the rulers, two skins to the learned, two skins to the leather-smith, and two to the tool-maker. My father died in 1968, and *Karifa Kamara*, was brought back to Dankawali in the truck on which was written *Ferensola*. He was brought back on the road he and my uncle helped to build. One of the stories I remember is that British colonialists, who promised a road for so many years, refused to make the funds available. When the villagers led by my father began the work, the British bureaucrats were embarrassed and released the funds. They carried his body home on that road.

At his funeral, the family recounted stories about his role as a Fina, and about what it means to be a Fina in Mandeng society. One illustrative story he told me was about how our great ancestor sacrificed himself for the survival of his

people. The story tells about how it came to pass long ago, the enemies of Ferenzola ambushed the king. There was no way out for the king but to go through a gauntlet of archers lined on either side. Defeat for the nation was imminent. Misa Kule, standing besides the king, dismounted his horse and he took off his robe of white cotton, the traditional garb of fighters. The king wore the customary rust red of hunters, and Kule asked the king to descend from his horse. When the king stepped down, Misa Kule bid them exchange garments. Saranba could not and did not resist, for the Fina is married to the king, their lives are intertwined. Misa Kule mounted the dark red horse of King in the King's red cloak. And the king mounted the white horse of the Fina dressed in white. The Fina charged, and died. The enemy, rejoicing that they had killed the King, celebrated and drank, and were defeated and killed by the King and his Guard who surrounded them. The word and the deed exchanged positions. As in life words become deeds and deeds become words.

When my mother died and I returned to her funeral in 1985, I felt things changing in Sierra Leone. The sense of imminent change was palpable in the whole celebration. Before I returned to America, I inquired about a few things. I asked about the manuscript and the talking staff. My brother offered the script and the talking staff for me to take. But I did not take them, wishing for them to stay at home. I cautioned him not to ever let go of it. He agreed.

### **Civil War**

After 1985 Sierra Leone deteriorated economically, socially, and politically. By 1991 a horrible "Civil War" was fought in Sierra Leone, a war fought between the RUF Rebels led by Foday Sanko supported by Charles Taylor from Liberia, and the Sierra Leone government with the help of the West African forces led by Nigerians and various militia. It was a savage conflict, paid for largely by the diamonds mined by captives, modern slaves, working for the DeBeers and other diamond interest protecting their cartel prices. In 1998, Dankawali was burnt to ground by RUF forces and their renegade Sierra Leone army units. The manuscript, too, went up in flames.

I arrived just as the war was ending, the tiny Lungi airplane landing without the help of air traffic controllers. Freetown was dark, roadblocks everywhere. There were Nigerian soldiers in one side could be one side of the a river and Kamajor militia on the other. On the way to the interior, we saw village after village burned to the ground. Fresh graves lined the roads. On more than one occasion, soldiers came from out of nowhere to demand identities the point of the gun. Bullet casing covered the road to Dankawali. We reached Dankawali just before sunset, on April 14, 1998. The zinc roofs that comprised the village landscape, were nowhere to seen. It was one charred and burnt house

after the other. Of two hundred houses in village, only one — the sagging mosque — was left standing.



Everyone we met had a story to tell — and they told it as if their lives depended on it. These stories are now part of our history, part of the epic of our family. Baba Lainsani, killed by his son-in-law. Two brothers each offering to take the others place to get their hands cut off. A Fina from the village who — who in a horribly symbolic act — had his tongue cut out. In one village, I was told, a gang dressed only their underwear came sharpening their machetes on the tarmac. They were ferocious and dreaded, bored and thirsty for blood. A heavily pregnant woman aroused their curiosity. They began to wager about the gender of the unborn: how was this to be settled? They slit her belly open and one declared victory. But the loser was not parting with his loot. So he shot the winner and took his loot too. There is no pleasure in losing. When I left Dankawali, villagers were roofing their homes, starting to rebuild. The war lasted another four years, and death at early age took over. I became keenly aware that our future depends upon what we can salvage from the past. People are born and die, what they leave behind are stories.

### **Baba Lansaraliyu and Mohammad's Camel**

At that moment I knew what I had to do. I had to return to record stories, to write them down — this, I felt was my destiny. I was fortunate to receive a commission from City Lore to return to Dankawali in 2004 to record the stories. With my brothers and cousins I recorded the stories, going all the way back to what I was told was the beginning. I recorded the tale of Fina Misa Kule who sent his son, Baba Lansaraliyu to Makka (Mecca) before the birth of Mohammad. He became blind and lost his way in Makka. He and his wife were destitute and childless. They were driven out of Mecca and moved to Madina.

At this time, Prophet Mohammad began his mission. He fled Makka to Medina. Upon his return to Makka, he was offered many places of lodging. He commanded the release of his prize camel. He said: wherever the camel grows tired there I will lodge. The camel stopped at the home of a poor man. There, Misa Kule's son, old and blind, met him at the door. Mohammad asked for meals and lodging. Misa Kule had only a corn on the cob. His wife cooked it and it fed Mohammad and his entire entourage. They stayed the night and before he left he said, "Baba Lansaraliyou , "Where is your child?" He replied: "I have no child." The Prophet declared: "I will beg Allah to give you a son." Baba Lansaraliyu said, "I am no longer a man. I am old now; my wife is old too." But Mohammad prayed to Allah to make

them young again, to restore their potency, and they had a child. We say: The old man and old woman bore child, that child was born of faith. His name was Fisana, born of faith. That is where the word *Fina* comes from. He continued the line of the Fina, the men of words, so that the descendant became known by the title Fina Misa Kule. This therefore is the story of Fina Misa Kule.

### **Fina Kurya Mory, the Warrior**

The descendants of Fisana eventually returned to West Africa. That is where *Finaye* bore branches — where the line of oneness ended. The clan branched into many houses, and one generation begot another. Fina Kurya Mory, a great warrior, was born in the late 18th Century. It was a time of great turmoil and strife in Africa. The great empires of the Sahel — Gahna, Mali and Songhai — had shattered due to demise of the trans-Saharan trade, upon the control of which each of them grew. They were replaced by the brutal trans-Atlantic slave trade fed by continuous war. Africans were fighting to keep from being enslaved and enslaving each other in the process.

Fina Kurya Mory was a great warrior, wherever he went there was war. He was attached to the warrior king, Manga Medusu Leye of Kirdu. There the Fina were known as *Kirdu fine ani Keme* (the one hundred and one Fina). Fina Kurya Mory waged so much war that the people grew tired of war. But Fina Kurya Mory could not be stopped. One day he prepared to lead the charge from his customary place, a great anthill, teeming with life — a civilization beneath his feet. From there, he prepared to direct the battle. When all the men were in place, Fina Kurya Mory cleared his throat. “Those who run from war will never have anything good to say about war. There is no display of prowess without war.” Duga the four-winged bird hovered in the sky. Duga does not eat grass, but the flesh of warriors. But before he could call the charge, a shot rang out from where he stood. Our ancestor fell into the pit. The anthill had been hollowed in advance. The warrior was dead, but the house of a warrior is never empty. A son survived Fina Kurya Mory. Assana Fina.

### **Fayama, A Captive who Freed Himself**

Assana Fina settled in kingdom of Neya in the town of Kombili, northern Sierra Leone, in the mid-19th Century. He was the Fina of Almamy Samory Turay who waged the fiercest West African resistance against colonialism. Assana Fina had many children by birth, inheritance, and protective adoption. One of his inherited was Fayama. Assana Fina sent Fayama away to study with an itinerant koranic teacher. For many years, Assana did not hear from Fayama. Long absences like these were not uncommon. Behold Fayama had been sold into slavery. Fayama must have understood that present circumstance is not destiny. He proved to be a wily and clever slave to his merchant master. He convinced

his master that moving kola nuts from the forest region to the grassland regions to exchange for livestock would be a lucrative business. The master saw the logic. But the regions where cows and goats were plentiful happened to also be in Neya. Fayama led his captors back to his father's house in Kombili and won his freedom.

Later, Fayama, was recruited into the colonial army. He fought in wars at home and abroad. And he retired to the civilian life of a businessman. His children were educated to serve in the colonial system. The first begotten son of Alhaji Fayama was Karifa Kamara, who wrote *Ferensola* on the truck in my town. Karifa Kamara was a cousin of my father, Karta Assan Fina Kamara. I heard all these stories, but I did not understand the beginning. The narration in 2004 started from a point after *Talleh*, the Great Division before Misa Kule sent his son to Makka. What was the Great Division?

### **Land of the Twins**

It so happened in ancient Mandeng that civil strife and war overcame the land. Everyone was fighting for position and authority and, when it became unbearable, the elders gathered in counsel. The elders approached the King, Mansa Kemah. He had twin sons, and they counseled him to choose which one would inherit the kingdom. He did not choose the elder of the sons as his heir. He chose the younger, Saranba. “The children of Saranba will rule Mandeng,” he declared. Fina Misa Kule became the voice of the King. One inherited the word; the other inherited the deed. Misa Kule and Saranba never parted company. Their domain was known as *Ferensola*, the land of the twins. In the days before Mohammad, Fina Misa Kule was to send his son to Macca, where Islam later blessed *Finaya*.

This was the tale of the twins, a tale that is not yet finished, that tells of Fina Misa Kule and Saranba, of the word and the deed that go together, of the birth of Mohammad and slavery and colonialism and Civil War. And of another set of twins — my father Assan Fina and my Uncle, Karifa Kamara — one taught me the Koran, one inspired my English education — and both told the ancient stories. Both taught me what it meant to be a Fina. Both taught me that a manuscript can burn but the word that is shared will survive any fire: words do not rust; words do not rot.

