



# WAGADU GROOVES

The Soninke collective consciousness finds its origins in a founding myth, a blood pact: the legend of Biida and the decadence of the empire of Ghana or WAGADU (evoked by LÉOPOLD SÉDAR SENGHOR as a land of plenty in his poem *Le Kaya Magan*). In the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD, gathered in the region of Sahel, on the edge of the Sahara desert, the Soninko ruled over their kingdom and its capital Kumbi Saleh. It is said that they were blessed with abundant rain and that nuggets of gold could be picked directly from the ground. They owed this prosperity to a providential but cruel protector: the Wagadu Biida, a seven-headed serpent who lived at the bottom of the Kumbi well. Every year, as a reward for his favours, the Biida demanded an offering: the life of the most beautiful virgin woman in the community. Sacrifices took place for generations, until the 13<sup>th</sup> century AD, when fate chose Siya Yatabéré, Maamadi Sehedunxote's sweetheart.

When the dreadful day came, no one seemed surprised to find the young man armed on his stallion, facing the beast's lair alongside Siya Yatabéré. The Biida always came out of the well three times before taking his victim. And so it went, until the third apparition when the sky darkened, the thunder rumbled and the wind blew. Maamadi charged at the Biida and cut off its head with his sword. In turn, six other heads appeared and were immediately cut off, each landing on what would become the sites of West Africa's seven great gold mines.

From the seventh severed head arose a curse: «With my end begins a period of calamity for you and your people. For seven years, seven months and seven days, not a drop of water will fall on Wagadu and your gold will turn to dust».

According to oral tradition, the murder of Biida symbolises the ethnic group's abandonment of ancestor worship and adoption of Islam. With the empire in its death throes, the dispersion of the Soninko became inevitable.

Nomads at heart, always wanting to go beyond their borders, the Soninke first criss-crossed the sub-region or Central Africa (the two Congos), then kept on moving from one area to another in West Africa (mainly Mali, Senegal, Mauritania), not only to trade and farm, but also to reach out to others, gather knowledge and gain autonomy. In these remote and culturally alien areas, a certain literate fringe of the Soninke (the marabouts) engaged in trade. They were joined by other West African ethnic groups to take part in the construction of the railway system in Central Africa. In big cities like Dakar, Bamako or Nouakchott the Soninke have always been considered peaceful, hard-working and very reserved people, even protectionists. Despite a high level of endogamy, many marital unions have been sealed with other ethnies, facilitating a peaceful coexistence with their Bambara, Wolof and Peulh cousins (there are over 80 languages spoken in Mali alone, but only Soninke and Bambara are represented in this music selection).

Growing groundnuts in sub-Saharan Africa (and more specifically in the Senegambia basin) was a financially attractive activity. Strong men would return to the groundnut basin for a few months during the rainy season to cultivate the plant. Often single, these men hired out their labour to landowners by the day or week. Generally housed and fed by a family in return for two or three days' work a week, they were free to work for other families the rest of the time. They were also free to cultivate their own plots of land, so they could sell their crops to make ends meet, in preparation for their weddings or for dowry. This is how the song *TIGA SANDAN SEGE* (the value of groundnuts is rising) came about around 1923 in Niore and encouraged many young people to migrate to these promising and fertile areas.

The first Soninke migrants arrived in mainland France with the French army under the name of «tirailleurs sénégalais» (although, as we know, not all of them came from Senegal, this name is due to the fact that the first regiment of black riflemen in the colonial army had been created in Senegal by an imperial decree on the 21<sup>st</sup> of July 1857).

During the First World War, some 200,000 black Africans enlisted in the French army, and around 135,000 of them fought on European soil. During the Second World War, tens of thousands of them joined the Free French Forces and played an important role in the fighting carried out by the Resistance. After 1945, some of these soldiers settled in mainland France, forming the basis for the Soninke diaspora. These were pendular migrations however: these men stayed in France for a few years before returning to their country, only to eventually come back to France some time later, and so on.

In the 1960's, following the independence of African countries, France made extensive use of foreign labour, much of it from its former colonies. This recruitment encouraged immigrants to settle more permanently in France, a country with harsh climatic conditions for Africans. Immigrant communities often regrouped together in migrant housing centres, generally according to their villages of origin which are major landmarks for them and for which they represent a considerable financial windfall, transferring a large part of their income to their relatives back home.

The great drought that hit the Sahel region in the early 1970's accentuated this migratory phenomenon.

1974 marked the beginning of a restrictive immigration policy and the shape of Soninke immigration changed enormously. No longer able to come and go as they pleased, migrants were forced to follow new administrative procedures in order to legalise their situation in France and be able to visit their families in their country of origin. This essentially male immigration had to adapt to these new rules, and the Soninke ended up repatriating women and children to France, which led to the beginning of the feminisation of Soninke immigration in France.



It was around this time that GAYE MODY CAMARA, a pioneer of Soninke culture, landed in France in June 1977.

Born on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 1958 in Abidjan, the young Gaye was sent by his father at the age of 3 to his native village of Khalignoro, in the Kayes region where he received a traditional education from his grandmother. When he came of age in 1976, he joined his father on a business trip to Bamako and flew with him to the Ivorian capital.

With the aim of introducing him to commerce, the patriarch handed over the sum of 15,000 CFA francs (around €23) to his son. With this money, young Camara bought bracelets and chains, which he then sold on the sly. The business was a great success and he was soon noticed by some of his father's friends who suggested he joined the famous circle of currency traders. A business consisting of supplying the market with foreign currency for traders travelling to certain English-speaking countries such as Ghana and Cameroon.

But Gaye was still eager to go to France. Redoubling his efforts, he managed to get to Accra from where he left for Paris in June 1977. His father was already sending merchandise (mainly Wax and Kola nuts) to his local partner (with whom business was flourishing) but his son's arrival in the capital could only help the man who naturally took him under his wing. Unfortunately, this relationship didn't last and young Camara's destiny took a new turn. His father now sent him all sorts of goods, which he sold easily and successfully on the Parisian market.

He moved from rue Bellot to boulevard d'Aubervilliers, still in the 19<sup>th</sup> arrondissement. In 1979, to gain greater independence, he set up shop in new premises, at 45 rue Marcadet, an address he still occupies today. In October 1981, he travelled to Abidjan to celebrate his marriage with the utmost discretion, before returning to France with his wife a week later.

Despite some difficulties with the immigration authorities, the newlyweds managed to re-enter the country and business picked up again.

As luck would have it, he then met BONKANA MAÏGA, an internationally renowned Guinean musician and producer. To help the young Soninke prosper, he introduced him to IBRAHIMA SYLLA, the famous M' K7, owner of SYLLART RECORDS and main distributor of tapes at the time.

Until then, he had been buying from the producer's brothers and reselling the cassettes in his establishments, but as the saying goes, «better dealing with God than with his saints». On Mr Sylla's recommendation, Camara began ordering directly from the factory, with no intermediary. From salesman to distributor, he didn't stop there. The adventure of music led him to unravel the mystery of audio cassette production.



His first breakthroughs, two albums produced for DEMBA JAARE TIRERA and Malian diva HAWA DRAMÉ, were distributed in Mali by SAMASSA RECORDS and met enormous success. When the time came to design a logo, Camara chose to include the famous Kola nut on his cassettes, a symbol of his success and commercial talents. At the same time, he developed relationships with other producers in Guinea, Ivory Coast and Mauritania, receiving tips on upcoming artists with whom he could collaborate.

His musical adventures took many forms. Now identified by Soninke and Bambara artists, word of mouth began to spread and many stars in the making called on his services as a producer. He discovered a number of rising stars at the FISO (Festival International Soninke, the largest Soninke gathering in Africa), which he unfailingly supported and systematically attended. But for Camara, encounters with artists often happened through fate:

MOHAMED TANGOUDJA was introduced to him one day, by his landlady in Nouakchott, Mauritania's capital city. Seduced by the young man's singing skills, he financed a trip to Bamako to record an eponymous album in 2007. In one of the record's stand-out tracks, *KORI* (Poverty), Tangoudja calls on the people of Mali, Mauritania, Senegal and Gambia to show solidarity, unite in the fight against poverty and avoid being ostentatious in success. He also mentions Camara's name to whom he pays tribute (like many other artists before and after him), thanking him for his support and generosity. In 2009, DIOBO FODÉ, another Mauritanian musician came to his attention through Bouthié Dioumassy. Diobo sent him one of his tracks at the end of 2009, and recording sessions took place in June 2010 at Baaba Simakha's studio in Bamako. The result was an album named *Tegue Khane*. Inspired by the stories of an elder, Diobo wrote *YEXU*, a song in which he evokes the institution of marriage, exorbitant dowries and the fact that certain human values dear to the Soninke are forgotten.

Camara forged many lasting relationships with his artists. One day, the husband of a certain HALIMA KISSIMA TOURÉ brought him a cassette containing his wife's recordings, insisting that he take charge of her career. The recording of the album *Diade* in 2004, in which Camara played an active part in Bamako, was the first consecration of a fruitful collaboration.

In one of the album's cuts, *ALLAH DA FO NIA*, Halima explores one of the recurring themes in her work. She urges Soninke parents not to interfere in the upbringing of their counterparts' children and to express gratitude to God for his benevolence. In *BOUROUGNE* (an extract from her eponymous album released in 2016), Halima emphasises the fundamental nature of fraternal ties and puts into perspective the conflicts that can arise within siblings. With *DUNA* (Life), she evokes certain values of Islam, the need to live in accordance with these precepts and reminds her audience that all life will one day come to an end.

In some cases, a fusional relationship that goes beyond the professional framework develops with the musicians. One of these was GANDA FADIGA, a leading figure in Soninke music in Paris, whom he met through another eminent griot, BABA KONÉ. The latter mentioned the name of his musical master and Ganbare virtuoso to Camara during a car ride from Ivory to Paris one evening. A meeting took place, several albums were recorded over the years and the artist remained faithful to the producer until his passing in 2009 (Ganda had two requests: that he be buried according to Islamic customs and that Camara agreed to conduct his funeral).

Another time, he heard about a young Soninke by the name of LASSANA HAWA CISSOKHO, a resident of a Parisian migrant housing centre, whose feminine voice appealed to the producer. An agreement was reached and sessions for the 2006 album *Tenere* were scheduled at the Diane Music studio (formerly Rue de Clignancourt). On *NOGOME* (Camel), a poignant song in which Lassana recalls the passing of his mother in a metaphorical way (describing a scene where the prophet's camels crouch), one of the musicians hired by Camara stood out. A certain JEAN-PHILIPPE RYKIEL who showed up to the studio to record his keyboards, striking up a friendship with Lassana in the process.

Son of fashion designer Sonia Rykiel, this influential player on the Parisian scene fell in love with Africa, its music and people during a trip to Ghana in 1982 with percussionist Fredua Agyeman. On his return to France he met the man who would change his life, a certain PROSPER NIANG from the group XALAM who introduced him to Senegalese legends like YOUSSEU N'DOUR, OMAR PÈNE and SALIF KEÏTA (for whom he arranged three tracks on *Soro*, his first album recorded in France and produced by FRANÇOIS BRÉANT).



«At the time there were two great producers in Paris, Camara and Syllart (who had produced Salif's album I mentioned earlier). I met Mr Camara through SAKI KOUYATÉ, a guitarist I'm still very close to, who played on albums by other musicians from Mali, Mauritania and Guinea. So one day I found myself working with a Guinean artist by the name of KANIBA OULÉ KOUYATÉ. I don't recall exactly when I first met Kaniba.



She came to see me with the band to preview the songs before we recorded them. She hardly spoke any French, was reserved, almost self-effacing and it was mainly through the other musicians that we managed to communicate.

But when she sang, she was another person, a lioness.  
She had incredible power.

At the time, I didn't have much equipment at home where this album was recorded. A few drum machines, a few synthesisers, two stereo tape recorders and a mixing desk. We couldn't record everything at the same time. Initially, I programmed a drum machine (unfortunately there's no drummer or percussionist on this album), then I took over the keyboard, Saki on guitar, MORIBA KOITA on the N'goni and LANSANA KOUYATÉ on the balafon. We recorded the basic rhythms live on one of these tape recorders (Sony PCM-F1 which worked with Betamax cassettes). Then I'd play back the first track on a second tape recorder, which was plugged into the mixing desk, and I'd record the following tracks on the first tape recorder. And so on. I could repeat the operation as many times as I wanted. In other words, you couldn't remix or change anything once the take had been recorded. Nevertheless the core of the album was in the can after a couple of days. Then I worked on several extra keyboard parts, one after the other, before the backup singers came in.»

Jean-Philippe Rykiel also crossed paths with one of modern Soninke music's originators and star of Camara's roster: DIABY DOUA. «He died too soon and was a fabulous singer. He was part of a band called SONINKARA. I first came in contact with the Soninke community through a gentleman called GOUDIA MANDIOU KOUYATÉ who introduced me to the group. Diaby played the Molo, a small single-stringed instrument he made himself, consisting of half a calabash and a wooden handle, which you can hear coming into *BOLI NĀAME* just after the tick of a clock. I've included this sound in the introduction to this track, in which Diaby laments the disappearance of certain traditions, globalisation and the fact that a growing number of Soninke are adopting the city lifestyle.»

(The artist also mentions the *MANGU* caste, who play a fundamental mediating role within Soninke communities).  
“We recorded at home. I didn't have a computer yet, but I did have a multitrack recorder this time. The recording of *Faba N'dambe* lasted two weeks, in two distinct phases. First we recorded only the two of us, then with the musicians. He sang and played his Molo while I programmed basic rhythms on the keyboard using drum machines and sequencers.

I really liked the way he sang. He had power but also a softness, and was undeniably professional. On one particular track, the basic rhythm I'd programmed was too slow for his taste. We didn't have all the possibilities that computers have these days, so Diaby asked me to simply speed up the tempo, without changing anything else. I was worried that he wouldn't be able to settle his singing (knowing most African singers improvise a lot and sometimes find it difficult to stay within a rigid framework). He sang the song from beginning to end, falling impeccably back into time at the end of the piece, I was blown away”.

Attached to his community and diaspora, Camara forged strong links with the *Association pour la Promotion de la langue et de la culture Soninké* (A.P.S), headed at the time by the late Diadié Soumaré (may he rest in peace). This illustrious man, Mamadou Kaba's brother, led the association for nearly forty years and it was under his leadership that in December 2009 an international Soninke music festival called FISO was created.

With a first edition taking place in February 2011, in Kayes, Mali, it gathers Soninke from all over the world and mostly from the six countries in West Africa where communities are the strongest. The last edition took place in February 2023 in Mauritania. To organise this major event, the association needed help: human, financial, intellectual, logistical.

Gaye Camara provided Diadié Soumaré and his steering committee with a whole team to guarantee an audiovisual coverage of FISO 2011 and its next three editions. An active supporter of A.P.S, Camara continues to serve and

support the association with endless energy. He also provides financial and material support for most events organised by village development associations.

On November 29<sup>th</sup> 2018, Camara Production acquired SAMASSA RECORD'S catalogue, from which two songs in this selection come from: *Nteri Diaba* and *Ayebo* originally released on HADJA SOUMANO's 1989 album *Nteri Diaba* (a malian diva and daughter of the eminent Bambara female Griot FANTA DAMBA). Based in Bamako, the label was created by ABDOULAYE SAMASSA, one of Camara's first allies, with whom he remained close throughout his career.



These days, many Soninke from different parts of the world live together in migrant housing centres. In these places, where sanitation borders on the unbearable, life is based on village traditions to ensure greater cohesion.

Despite these precarious living conditions, the immigrants remain concerned about the future of their people in the villages. They have set up village development associations, have built schools, mosques, health centres, wells and boreholes. All these actions were initially carried out with their own funds. It was only many years later that they were able to benefit from subsidies.

Furthermore, aware of the threat to the Soninke language and culture, we have set up cultural associations to promote and popularise our language and culture in a world where certain values are tending to disappear. The association for the promotion of the Soninke language and culture (A.P.S) was created in 1979 on the initiative of a number of intellectuals from the diaspora. It was set up to help migrants integrate into French society, assist them with administrative formalities and act as a social mediator. As good Soninke, the association's wise men still ensure that good social relations are maintained at all levels.

The A.P.S., a new type of association, experienced enormous financial and human difficulties. In the absence of premises, the hard-working members used to hold their meetings and classes in cellars. Despite these difficulties, we didn't give up and in the early 90s, the association was given a new lease of life, thanks to the arrival of new members full of potential.

Under the impetus of DIADIÉ SOUMARÉ, an astute strategist and charismatic leader, the APS has made a name for itself in France and beyond. Before his death on 23 June 2019, he asked the entire community to build a socio-cultural centre here in Île-de-France: the WAGADU CENTRE. Led by first vice-president DIABI GANDEGA, its funds are provided by a large number of Soninke villages around the world.

A visionary, President Diadié Soumaré has always had the ambition of raising Soninkaaxu and the Soninke language to the highest level. He approached UNESCO with the idea to give our beautiful language a prominent place. After his death,

the new president Ousmane Bocar Diagana and his team carried on the good work of the old lion. The fruits of their labour were reaped on the 14<sup>th</sup> of October 2023, the date on which UNESCO declared the 25<sup>th</sup> of September INTERNATIONAL SONINKE LANGUAGE DAY.



My dear sisters and brothers, yesterday we were immigrants. We were new arrivals after the tirailleurs known as Senegalese.

We fought on the side of the coloniser to liberate ourselves. Many of us lost our lives on the battlefields and were buried in unmarked graves or mass graves. Those who survived returned to the fold. We, their offspring, live here in a «foreign» land that has become «ours». We work here and have started our families, some of our children became lawyers, teachers and politicians. It is our duty to maintain good neighbourly relations, based on respect for others and for ourselves, to ensure better integration.

*“When you’re happy, you listen to music.  
When you’re unhappy, you understand the lyrics.”*

African proverb

**DAOUDA N’DIAYE**

