

Bintou Were, a Sahel Opera

Story

1 A small town in the Sahel. Members of the younger generation are confused because they no longer believe in promises and foresee a destiny captive to natural disasters, wars and dictatorships. In desperation, they decide to leave and assault the defences that divide the Sahel from Europe.

Bintou Were, a former child soldier, is pregnant with a 'natural' child. She decides to confront the barriers at the frontier between Morocco and the Spanish enclave on the African mainland. Will her child's right to citizenship at birth also benefit all the men who claim its paternity? They pin their hopes on the baby not arriving before their perilous assault on the barbed wire of Melilla.

Their plan is simple: to make ladders in the desert and charge! All layers of society mingle in this Odyssey of modern times. Those who have chosen the route of exile cross the path of those returning and who voice their defiance in song. They vary from a Peul herder to a delinquent apprentice with several criminal convictions, and from a woman who is following her husband to the enigmatic people smuggler who is the key to this puzzle...

The tops of the ladders sweep the stars in a long dance interlude. And suddenly, while the 'Ladder People' camp amid the sand dunes, the Paris-Dakar Rally races by.

Choruses and melodies, songs of the Sahel winds, of the desert locust and of water, and a requiem. The wisdom of a glorious past rises to the heavens in notes of crystal transparency or tragic gravity. Will their voices be heard?

Background

The idea for an opera created by artists from Africa that takes place in the heart of Africa was first suggested by Prince Claus (1926-2002) when the Fund for culture and development was created in his name in 1996. Prince Claus believed in the wealth of musical and artistic talent in the vast, largely arid stretch of central-west Africa called the Sahel. He envisaged an opera that would highlight the talents of African musicians, actors and dancers and that would be a spectacle of such quality and originality that it would win the hearts of people throughout the world. He wanted the theme of the opera to include the relation between Africa and Europe and he hoped it would also have a touch of African humour.

A competition was organised. An international jury, chaired by Professor Kwabena Nketia, director of *The International Centre for African Music and Dance* in Accra, Ghana, also including Pierre Audi, artistic director of the Netherlands Opera and of the Holland Festival, Ray Lema, musician/composer from DRC Congo, the Ghanaese author Ama Ata Aidoo, and New York producer and director Robert Wilson, made an initial selection of six composers. Eventually the field was narrowed to one, Zé Manel from Guinea Bissau, who took on the formidable task of composing an opera drawing on the many Sahelian musical traditions. At the same time, an artistic team composed of renowned artists from different countries in the region was selected. They held a series of workshops to help shape the storyline, the music and dance.

Partners join in

The Republic of Mali and Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris joined the Fund as co-producers. Additional financial support came from the Dutch Postcode Lottery, the Ford Foundation and the VandenEnde Foundation, as well as the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Royal Netherlands Embassy in Bamako, Mali. Tryouts for the cast took place in Guinea Conakry, Mali, Senegal and Burkina Faso. Ultimately, an international cast consisting of more than 50 singers and dancers was chosen.

The premiere of *Bintou Were, a Sahel Opera*, took place 17 February 2007, in Bamako, Mali, on a specially built stage overlooking the Niger River. In attendance were an estimated 2,000 invited guests, including both Honorary Chairmen of the Prince Claus Fund, Their Royal Highnesses Prince Friso and Prince Constantijn, as well as the Malian Minister of Culture, Cheikh Oumar Sissoko and many other dignitaries from several countries in Africa and the Netherlands. Meanwhile the Holland Festival expressed a willingness to host the European premiere of the Sahel Opera and Théâtre du Châtelet included it in its fall schedule. An African tour and possible performances elsewhere in Europe and North America are under discussion.

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The Context

The story of Bintou Were touches on a very present theme in Africa. Natural and man made disasters have torn at the social fabric and limited the perspectives for young people. Mali is among the biggest 'export countries' of migrants hoping to make a better life for themselves in Europe. Throughout the Sahel region, nearly everyone knows someone who has risked life and limb to try to cross into Europe by land or sea. The disillusionment of youth is deeply felt, but also the pride in land, culture, ancestors and the continent's vast potential. The Sahel Opera gives a poetic and musical voice to an African perspective of this real life drama.

Dutch Postcode Lottery gave an enormous impetus to the Sahel Opera project in 2005

The Dutch Postcode Lottery donated Euro 1.5 million in 2005 to enable the Prince Claus Fund to produce the Sahel Opera. The Postcode Lottery is convinced that culture and development are inextricably interlinked. Culture can contribute to positive changes for people and communities. The Prince Claus Fund has been one of the 53 beneficiaries of the Dutch Postcode Lottery since 2001 and has received financial support every year. The Dutch Postcode Lottery, which is the largest charity lottery in the Netherlands, contributes 50 percent of its annual profits to selected aid organizations and charities.

Other support

In addition to the Postcode Lottery, the Sahel Opera has received financial support from HGIS – Netherlands Culture Fund, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Royal Netherlands Embassy in Mali, the VandenEnde Foundation and the Ford Foundation.

Synopsis per scene

Act I

Scene 1

A village market in the Sahel, commemorating Independence Day. Traders sell their wares, clients come and go, bustling around. Jéli Kouyaté, the storyteller, appears. He sings of independence evoking the memory of former emperors and famous figures in the history of the Sahel. Local dignitaries arrive for the festival, which includes male and female choirs, traditional dances with the dignitaries themselves dancing, led by Sarzan Ndiaye.

Scene 2

A dismayed Sarzan Ndiaye announces that the big baobab tree has lost all its leaves in one night. The community realises that the locusts have arrived. The alarm is sounded.

Scene 3

Bintou Were (her name means trouble maker), a former child soldier, bursts on the scene. She is accompanied by two young hunters. The crowd is dismayed. Jéli Kouyaté and Sarzan Ndiaye remonstrate with her. An insolent Bintou scorns them, accusing them of raping her when she was younger. The crowd laughs and boos. A mad old lady entertains with a dance mocking the dignitaries. Another wave of locusts brings everyone back to reality. The choir of women wonders why all natural disasters seem to take place in their area. Sarzan Ndiaye blames the modern world whilst Dramane Zié, the soothsayer, defends progress. Opinions are divided.

Scene 4

Baala, the young people's leader, insinuates that there is no future here and that they should emigrate to Europe. Diallo, the people smuggler, appears and offers to take those who want to go to new horizons. Bintou Were begins a seductive dance and Diallo is not immune.

Scene 5

Bintou Were accuses some of the men of having taken advantage of her. She announces that she is pregnant, but does not know who the father is. Diallo the people smuggler makes the most of the situation and claims there would be a right of asylum if the child is born in Europe. They must move quickly before it is too late.

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Synopsis per scene

Scene 6

Bintou Were's suitors claim paternity of the child she is carrying. She rejects them. Meanwhile, the soothsayer Dramane Zié sings the praises of women. Diallo the people smuggler becomes insistent, expounding his strategy. This delights the group of young people who are keen to leave the village. However much Sarzan Ndiaye and Jéli-Kouyaté try to dissuade them, the young people are set on leaving. Diallo leads the procession of emigrants.

Interval

Act 2

Scene 1

The long walk across the desert. The migrants have brought hand made ladders to scale the barriers of the Spanish enclave. Ballet of the Ladder People. They are tired and stop to rest. Diallo offers them ritual biscuits and demands payment for his services. They have very little money left, having given him everything.

Scene 2

Bintou Were is due to give birth. Her suitors watch over her like guards, each in their own way. The ladder people talk, recalling the misadventures of other emigrants. Men and women who have been escorted back to the border appear. They explain how difficult it is to live in Europe and try to dissuade the new emigrants. But nothing puts them off. The woman who is following her husband is categorical - Europe is an Eldorado, a land of plenty.

Diallo, the people smuggler, proposes that those who have been turned away should try again. They refuse. Diallo again asks the Ladder People to pay for his services - a shameless racket to which Bintou Were reacts.

Fata Maya, one of Bintou Were's suitors, gets involved and a violent confrontation between Fata Maya and Diallo ensues. The Ladder People only just avoid a deadly battle.

The Sahel wind blows... and the sand is further stirred by the sudden arrival of cars. It's the Paris-Dakar rally. MC Samafou and Bintou Were are knocked down by the cars. Bintou is left for dead. MC Samafou dies.

Scenes 3, 4 and 5

The Ladder People go into mourning. Different groups pass by, recognisable by their costumes. An animist choir, people wearing masks, Muslim choirs, and catholic rituals of mourning are performed.

Scene 6

A new setting. Out of time. The barbed wire fences can be seen in the distance. The Spanish Civil Guard watches over the border, ready to deter emigrants by any means. The Ladder People see Europe and rush towards the fences. As if in a dream, Bintou Were rises from near death and mounts the highest ladder. There, on the ladder at the border between Africa and Europe, her baby is born. Bintou is faced with a final choice - does she throw the baby into Europe (giving her child right of asylum) or into Africa? She sings a final aria and throws the baby to the African side, where Fata Maya is waiting, and she dies. The Ladder People, led by Fata Maya, pick up the refrain of Bintou's song, abandon their ladders and begin the journey back to their homeland.

Diallo is left alone at the foot of the giant ladder, brooding.

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Djénéba Koné

Bintou Were, Soprano

Ibrahim Loucard (Carlo D)

Diallo, Bass

Kémoko Condé

Sarzan Ndiaye, Baritone

Abdoulaye Diabate

Jéli Kouyaté, Baritone

Ibrahima (Yves) Thiam

Fata Maya, Baritone

Zandiougou Konate

Dramane Zié, Tenor

Issa Sory Bamba

MC Samafou, Baritone

Siaka dit Chacun Koné

Baala, Baritone

and

Abdoulaye Diarra

Assistan Kida

Batio Diarra

Assétou Drame

Salimata Traore

Lébou Diata

also participating

Fatoumata Koné dit Babani

Soprano

Mory Diélie Deen Kouyate

Alto

Dancers

Babacar Ba

Bintou Bakayogo

Ciré Beye

Mouhamed Abdoulaye Kane

Mathieu Cyr Kourouma

Ousmane Ndiaye

Tchébé Bertrand Saky

Adolphe Tembely

Ramatoulaye Sarr

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Crew

Maria Depina
costumes
Mamadou Lamyne Sall
decor
Moussa Diallo
assistant light

Creatives

Wasis Diop
artistic director
Zé Manel
composer
Jean-Pierre Leurs
metteur en scene
Wele Massambou Diallo
musical director
Germaine Acogny
choreography
Flora Théfaine
choreography
Oumou Sy
costume and decor designer
Jean Philippe Delavault
advisor
Vincent Gornet
lighting director
Jeremy Darme
sound designer

Production

Koulsy Lamko
delegated producer

Production Mali

Pape Mbaye Sene
executive producer Sahel Opera
Samba Niare
production
Awa Diarra
assistant production

Sirafily Sissoko
accountancy
Alimata Ba
assistant accountancy
Sirafily Diango
assistant production
Lémmy Mohamed Lamine Sissoko
assistant production
Néïssa Coulibaly
secretariat
Souleymane Malle
secretariat

Production The Netherlands

Els van der Plas
executive producer Sahel Opera,
director Prince Claus Fund
Charlotte van Herwaarden
project coordinator Sahel Opera,
Prince Claus Fund
Edgar Lamaker
budget and technical production
Sabine de Tonnac de Villeneuve
production
Bartel Meyburg
decor
Jan Jaap Zwart
assistant production
The Staff of the Prince Claus Fund
Holland Festival
Jacques van Veen
managing director
Pierre Audi
artistic director
Benien van Berkel
communication & marketing Holland Festival
Dorothea Sinnema
production
Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ
Mechteld Wolff
commercial events manager

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The Artistic Team

Wasis Diop (1947, Senegal), artistic director, librettist

Wasis Diop is one of the most sought after and admired African musicians on the international musical scene today. He is a collaborative artist, known for blending traditional Senegalese folk music with modern pop and jazz. He was born in Dakar, Senegal, the son of a high official and member of the Lebou tribe. Diop left Senegal in the 1970s to study engineering in Paris, but once there turned to music, joining a fellow Senegalese musician, Umban Ukset, to form the band *West African Cosmos*. Diop left the band in 1979 to start a solo career, and over the next decade achieved some success, particularly in partnerships with the Malagashi-French singer Marie-France Anglade and Japanese jazz saxophonist Yasuaki Shimizu. In the early 1990s his career began to take off with the success of his first album, the soundtrack to the film *Hyenes* (directed by his brother, Djibril Diop Mambety). More albums followed: *No Sant* in 1995, *Toxu* in 1998, and the compilation album *Everything Is Never Quite Enough* in 2004, which was featured on the soundtrack to the 1999 film *The Thomas Crown Affair*. Over the years Diop has composed a number of film soundtracks and music for television.

Koulsy Lamko (1959, Chad) librettist and delegated producer

Koulsy Lamko was exiled from his country in 1983. A playwright, poet, actor, writer of short stories and screenplays, Koulsy Lamko is a cultural entrepreneur who has won numerous prizes for his plays and short stories. His works have been performed by theatre companies in Africa, Europe and Canada. In Burkina Faso, Lamko founded the Kaleido Culture Project, a cultural coordinating agency, conducting numerous workshops and conferences in Europe and Africa. For ten years Lamko contributed to the promotion of community theatre in urban and rural neighbourhoods in Burkina. He also founded the International Festival of Theatre for Development. From 1998 till 2002, Lamko was Director of the University Centre for Arts and Drama in Butare, Rwanda and taught Creative Writing and the Performing Arts at the National University of Rwanda while finishing his doctorate. Since 2003, he has been teaching drama and theatre history at the Institute of Arts at the Autonomous University of Hidalgo in Mexico.

Zé Manel (1951, Guinea Bissau) composer

Singer and multi-instrumentalist, Zé Manel is one of the most famous and influential contemporary musicians to emerge from Guinea Bissau, a former Portuguese colony in West Africa. By the age of seven, he was playing drums and acoustic guitar and had become the main attraction of Super Mama Djombo band. During the 1970's, the band played a major role in Guinea Bissau's liberation struggle. In 1982, Manel released his first solo album *Tustumunhos di Aonti* (Yesterday's Testimony), which sounded the alarm over the formation of a new repressive ruling class in Guinea-Bissau. The album was a national event (people

still sing the songs today), but the political environment was heating up and Manel had to flee his homeland, going to Portugal, France and, finally, the United States. Zé Manel's American debut album, *Maron di mar*, released in 2001 became an instant success, receiving award nominations in South Africa and the United States. In his music, Zé Manel draws on many musical influences with lyrics that touch on human issues – love for family and friends, respect for women, compassion for children and social justice. He describes the realities – poverty, prostitution, AIDS, and repressive dictatorships – that block people's development.

Jean-Pierre Leurs (1942, Senegal), mise-en-scene, training

Jean-Pierre Leurs is renowned as an expert in African theatre. It became a vocation early in his life. Before finishing his studies, Leurs was already active in the theatre world. After completing the 'Conservatoire National' in Dakar, Leurs was asked to make a first 'mise-en-scene' for the *Theatre Daniel Sorano* in Dakar, where he became a pioneer in staging. He went on to become director of the *National Theatre Company* and director of the *National Ballet Company* of Senegal. He is considered an African specialist of stage managing 'out of the walls', directing open air sound and light shows as well as live shows.

Germaine Acogny (1944, Senegal), choreographer

Germaine Acogny, both a Senegalese and French national, was artistic director until 1982 of *Mudra Afrique*, a dance center created by Maurice Béjart in Dakar. Later, she worked in Brussels with Béjart and organized international training sessions in African dance, which were highly acclaimed in the European dance world. Acogny is an emissary of African dance and culture, travelling around the world to teach, perform, and choreograph. With her husband Helmut Vogt, she created the 'Studio-Ecole-Ballet-Theatre of the Third World' in Toulouse, providing a meeting place for Africans and Europeans in the practice of dance and music. In 1995, she returned to Senegal to establish the *International Centre for Traditional and Contemporary African Dances* in Toubab Dialaw. The school, *Écoles des Sables*, is a centre for training, cultural and choreographic exchanges between Africa, its Diaspora and the rest of the world. Between 1997 and 2000, Germaine Acogny was artistic director of the dance section of *Afrique en Créations/AFAA* (French Association for Artistic Action). She continues to choreograph and tour with her company, Jant-Bi. Jant-Bi is a network partner of the Prince Claus Fund.

Flora Théfaine (1945, Togo), choreographer

Flora Théfaine left her country of birth, Togo, and settled in France in 1969, giving her a creative distance from her African roots. In her dance form and choreography she continues to be inspired by the ethnic traditions of her homeland, the vitality of African dance and song and by themes such as the

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search for origins, combining them with Celtic and other influences. Théfaine created the professional dance company *Sarabande* in 1986, which toured Europe with a number of her original works. In 1989, she established the dance troupe *Kossiwa* in Nantes. She has toured extensively in France, Africa, Latin America and England and still performs herself. In 2004, Théfaine undertook a tour of the Loire region in France as an 'itinerant resident artist' giving dance workshops and performances. She has collaborated with the poet, musician and singer Melaine Favennec in workshops combining word and dance. Together with Germaine Acogny, she is responsible for the choreography of the Sahel Opera.

Oumou Sy (1951, Senegal), design/costumes

Oumou Sy was born in Podor, Senegal, and raised without formal education. As a child, she liked the feel of fabrics and was always playing with materials, using her fantasy to create many forms. She later became interested in stitching, combining pieces of fabric and sewing to create works of art. Today her skills and talent have developed into a successful fashion business. Her collections have been showcased at international fashion shows in Europe, Asia, Africa and the United States. In 1998 she received the Prince Claus Award. In addition to designing high-class fashion, Oumou Sy is very active in development programs in her home country. She founded the Senegalese school, *Ateliers Leydi*, to provide training in diverse areas of product and fashion design. She went on to open *Macsy*, a school for models, and to create the Dakar fashion week and Dakar Carnival. In 1996, together with her late husband, Michel Mavros, she established *Metissacana*, a meeting place, internet provider, café and arts centre in Dakar.

Massambou Wele Diallo (1948, Mali) musical direction

Massambou Wele Diallo is a native of Mali, where he completed his primary and secondary schooling, followed by seven years of extra-ordinary work in his musical studies at the Higher Institute of the Arts in Havana, Cuba. Returning to Mali, he was named head of the music section of the National Arts Institute in Bamako as well as Artistic Director of the National Instrumental Ensemble of Mali from 1990-2003. An exceptional musician, composer and arranger, Wele Diallo has toured in Africa, Europe and North and South America and the Arab world. His work has received widespread recognition, including a gold medal for the best African melody in Johannesburg. As an arranger, Wele Diallo has worked with many great Malian artists, including Oumou Sangaré, Rokya Traoré and others. As a teacher, he is known for his devotion to the promotion of young talent and Malian music. In addition, he has composed music for various films and theater performances, for instance *Electre et Oreste* performed at the Théâtre National in Angers, France. Currently he heads the Department of Music at the *Conservatoire des Arts et Métiers et Multimédias Balla Fasseké Kouyaté* in Bamako.

Main Characters

Djeneba Koné (Mali), Bintou Were, Soprano

After losing both parents an early age, Djeneba grew to adolescence under the tutelage of her elder brother, a night watchman in a private residence. Faced with the need to earn her own living, she was forced to quit school and launch herself on the world of gainful employment. Her first steps as a performer were in a neighbourhood dance troupe in Ségou, Mali, the city of her birth. At the Cultural Biennial of 2005, she stole the scene and drew an ovation from an audience surprised at her precocious talent. The director of the Regional Troupe of Ségou immediately integrated her into this famous travelling company, the city's pride and joy. She thus started her career as a child prodigy.

The multiple talents of the young dancer and vocal soloist have astonished the artistic team of the Sahel Opera Project. With her unfailingly pure, intense, light soprano voice, her interpretation of the leading role, that of Bintou Were, reaches a height that matches the epic aspirations of the Ladder People.

Fate has practically brought Djeneba Koné back to her roots. She remains a griotte, a traditional travelling performer from the famous Koné family .

Kemoko Condé (Guinea Conakry), Sarzan Ndiaye, Baritone

A Guinean and proud to be so, Kemoko Condé, known affectionately to the artistes of the Sahel Opera as 'le vieux Condé', is a retired member of the National Instrumental Ensemble of Guinea. But how can anyone contemplate enjoying a quiet retirement if he possesses a voice like this, a voice of bronze, a voice whose thunder rends the dense silence of memories, stirring the deepest emotions of the heart? Many times recalled to the stage to render service, this former partner of the famous griot Kouyaté Sori Kandia did not hesitate for an instant when asked to contribute to the Sahel Opera. Before venturing into the Opera he already had considerable performing experience. The Mandé musical tradition which he had served for over thirty years of his career has won him his spurs throughout the world. The languorous rhythms, the evocations of illustrious kings and warriors of bygone times, of the genealogies of a mythical past, and today's appeal for reconciliation, for the need to live together in solidarity, are all ingredients of the rich background that Condé brings to the Sahel Opera. The duty to transmit its artistic values is an irresistible imperative. In the role of Sarzan, Condé sings of his wish and hope that the young candidates for self-exile will instead take pride in their Sahel roots, and abandon the idea of exchanging their native soil for a life of disgrace in unknown lands.

Condé's discography includes a solo album, as well as several albums made together with the National Instrumental Ensemble of Guinea.

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Main Characters

Carlo D (Ibrahim Loucard) (Senegal), Diallo, Bas

The streets of the Arab quarter of Dakar immediately fill with crowds of excited fans when Carlo D hits town. A professional musician and vocalist, this popular artist is one of the refined young generation of famous Senegalese singers which also includes Youssou N'Dour and Ismael Lô. After discovering singing at an early age, and born along by the new wave of young performers who break the confines of traditional and modern Mbalax and seek their inspiration in Rap, R&B and other anti-establishment forms of music, Carlo D was in no way destined to sing opera. But then the opportunity to enlarge his field of vocal activity arose. As though by a miracle, an incomparable profundity and gravity revealed itself in this delicate instrument of enchantment. Carlo D spontaneously seeks out the extremes of sonority inherent to a language rich in vocal colours, Wolof, and supplies a rainbow of hues to the Sahel Opera. Like a true human smuggler, he steers us hither and thither through the depths and heights of the Ladder People's Odyssey, leaving us as perplexed spectators at the foot of the Tree of Tenéré or in the desert dunes.

The mysterious, lanky silhouette of Carlo D will forever engrave itself in the memory of all who hear his voice, which touches every emotional register within us. It is a voice which has undoubtedly discovered a new vocation, inscribing itself for ever in the annals of the world's opera halls.

Libretto

Koulsy Lamko, Wasis Diop

'When you are an African, from a country ravaged by drought, dictatorship or war, you dream of Europe, where life, they say, is not as hard, not even for the poor. You set off; you try to pass the frontiers. You are doing what some of the poorest Europeans did in past centuries to escape their poverty. You leave your country to build a life elsewhere. You are often mistaken, but you have hope.' (La Croix, 6 October 2005)

Principle roles

Bintou Were (soprano)
Diallo (bass)
Jéli-Kouyaté (baritone)
Sarzan-Ndiaye (baritone)
Fata Maya (baritone)
MC Samafou (baritone)
Dramane Zié (tenor)
Baala (bass)

Other roles

The rejected suitor
The woman who is following her husband
The women escorted back to the frontier
The expelled illegal immigrant
The Diva
The Paris-Dakar Rally driver

The Little People of the Savannah
The Ladder People
The Chorus of Men
The Chorus of Women
The Mixed Chorus
The Dancers
The Musicians

For instrumentation, a selection from the traditional instruments of the Sahel is used.

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Libretto

First Act Scene I

Market place

The sound of the tuné, a Guinean trumpet, rends the silence, signalling the presence of notables.

A stall with colourful wax print fabrics, rolls lying on the ground, hanging cloths etc. Sellers and buyers come and go.

The tom-toms sound.

The village notables must cross this hurley-burley to celebrate Independence Day.

Enter Jéli-Kouyaté, the 'griot' (the storyteller), richly clad.

Jéli-Kouyaté

Independence!
What should I say to you
If I must chant your genealogy?
You are born of Mother Courage
Who gave her blood and bounty
On all the altars of liberty!
Independence!
You are born of forced labour
Which perled your brow
With the salt sweat of the cotton fields!
You are a daughter of our struggles,
A daughter of our stubborn hopes!
Today is a red letter day!

(Announcing the notables)

And here are the honoured ones
who lead us
As beautiful as ibis and secretary
birds
Advance, lions and buffalos, elephants
of the savannahs
You, heirs to a hundred virile empires

Advance to pay homage
To this land of your ancestors.

(A ballet of richly dressed notables,
gesturing solemnly)

What do I see?

Those who tamed the fire?
Those who tamed the water?
Those who have stirred
The very womb of the earth?
Leap and dance, warriors and hunters!
Sound the horn, see how excited
Are the fishermen, farmers and herders!

Jéli-Kouyaté, the 'griot' (storyteller), richly clad.

The Chorus of Women

He rises, every day, he rises.
The Sun of yesterday has risen again
in joy.
He has not dragged beneath his wing
That cloud of red dust!
He rises, every day, he rises.
The Sun of today
We carry him in our gourds.
We offer him to you unstintingly;
Offer him to you, hands on hearts.

Jéli-Kouyaté

Sahel, once fertile land of humble humus
Why do you give birth
Only to stillborn dreams?
You brought forth Masan Moussa
He who spread the gold of your womb
To the very threshold of the pyramids
of Egypt!
Aboubakari carved out his barque
on your waters
And sailed, sailed, sailed
To a home on the far side of the world!

Land of Soundjata Keita, Soumaoro
Kanté, Samory;
Land of a hundred virile empires
And of a hundred rebellious queens,
Sarahounia, Yennega
No one will ever forget Ségou
Tombouctou the Glorious, Djenné
on the Salt Road
Djenné of which Ibn Batouta told!
Land of Lat Dior!
You stretch between lakes of blue
and forests
Between lakes of white sand and palm
groves
You will once again bring forth fertile
dreams
You will bring forth...

Scene 2

(Beneath the Council Tree.
Sarzan Ndiaye, a walking stick in hand
walks around the Council Tree, then stands still)

Jéli-Kouyaté

Speak, old sage, speak!
Hero of Independence,
Everyone is listening.

Sarzan Ndiaye

Last night, life departed
From this gnarled old giant.
Only yesterday his roots
Were swollen with sap,
His crown brushed the sky...

Jéli-Kouyaté

Are the spirits offended?

Sarzan Ndiaye

Cries of joy never offended anyone.

Sarzan Ndiaye advances, stick in hand
With a measured gesture, he strikes the trunk
of the Council Tree.
An insistent music is heard as a cloud of
perching locusts rises from its branches.
Looking up to the crown of the tree,
He utters in a voice of desperation:

Sarzan Ndiaye

A visitation of desert locusts!

Jéli-Kouyaté

And that on Independence Day!

The Chorus of Women

It's a conspiracy
Another conspiracy by the world
powers!

Jéli-Kouyaté

Do the mighty of this world possess
even
The power to send these insects
to this very spot?

The Chorus of Women

Those who make the dolphins dance
Are capable of anything.

Sarzan Ndiaye

It is the sun of 'dipenda' that kills all
This land stopped on that day.

(The great sacred drum, the herald drum,
sounds an alarm,
in grave drumbeats that cause the last
dead leaves of the Council Tree to fall. The
people are puzzled, for these drumbeats
are unexpected.)

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Scene 3

Enter Bintou Were, amid much attention.
She is dressed in old clothes a few sizes too
large for her.
She is accompanied by two resolute-looking
youths.

Jéli-Kouyaté

Speak, shameless girl!
Why have you beaten the alarm drum?

Bintou Were, hand on hips, shows a faint smile.
The music climbs: two young hunters, Bintou's
companions begin singing a song in her praise.
The song evokes the courage of the lion.
Bintou Were acquiesces with a smile.
Then at last she can reply to Jéli-Kouyaté.

Bintou Were

I do not speak to 'whited sepulchres'.

Jéli-Kouyaté

I'm not surprised, considering
the loose life you lead!
Have you no shame?

Bintou Were

And you, do you not feel the least
shame
about showing yourself in this
assembly?

Jéli-Kouyaté

I am its leader
As if you didn't know,
You brazen little hussy!

Bintou Were

I'll make you eat your words.

Jéli-Kouyaté

Enough of your insolence.

Bintou Were

Would you like me to tell everyone
here about...

Jéli-Kouyaté

Tell them what you have offered:
Your little buttocks to all comers
Everyone already knows about it.

Bintou Were

About what nobody knows yet...

Jéli-Kouyaté

Be quiet!

(turning to the Little People of the Savannah)

Silence this whore
She is perversion itself.

Bintou Were

What nobody knows yet
Is that it is you
Who was first to touch this little
whore's buttocks
You who was first to fondle my little
breasts
It was you who was first to tear
my hymen
Do you remember my blood mixing
With your semen as it trickled over
my belly...?
My little belly of not yet thirteen years
Do you remember my cry...?

(Little People of the Savannah are visibly
stunned)

Jéli-Kouyaté

(Ashamed, he slinks away towards the group of notables.
He is turned back in ridicule. An old madwoman in rags,
a mango in her mouth, goes up to him and shakes herself in front of him to demonstrate the crowd's disapproval.
Laughter and catcalls.)

Sarzan Ndiaye

Brave little child soldier.
Just fifteen years old
you bore arms
you bore fire into the villages
you set fire to the trees
you burned down the forests
you evaporated the rivers, you scorched the earth
To take revenge on its inhabitants.

Bintou Were

That was yesterday.
I played with fire
It was my future against the tranquillity
Of a chaos too immutable,
A chaos born of self-delusion.
But that was yesterday...
If I played with fire
It was a sacrifice, to give up all:
My childhood, my dreams, my hopes,
my doubts.
To offer up everything, even my ovaries.
But everything was thrown back in my face:
The body blows, the underhand tricks,
the spitting.
They all made me stronger...

(Abdoulaye Diarra, song of Bintou)

Song of Bintou's companions

(Jéli-Kouyaté returns to the scene and approaches Sarzan Ndiaye)

Jéli-Kouyaté

That heavy, purple cloud is threatening us.

The Little People of the Savannah
Desert locusts!

Jéli-Kouyaté

A migrating swarm of locusts!

The Little People of the Savannah
These tough-jawed monsters –
Nothing can stop them, nothing!

Jéli-Kouyaté

These locusts are on an endless pilgrimage.

The Little People of the Savannah
But why do they stray here?
This is not Mecca
Nor is it Rome
Or Jerusalem.

Jéli-Kouyaté

We are the accursed anthill
The halting place of swerving calamity
The sterile land, the delta of miseries.

The Little People of the Savannah
Why, then, don't these locusts fly
To the setting sun, to the east or north?
To those happy countries
Where the dustbins of the wealthy
Already overflow with food?

18

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Jéli-Kouyaté (addressing Dramane Zié)

And you, Dramane,
You who have learned all about this new world
Where they mix oil with water,
iron with wood
Will you tell us your augury?

Dramane Zié

I know how to read the signs
These creatures with sharp-edged jaws
Could well be the benevolent geniuses
Who bring us the Harmattan wind in their bounty.
Perhaps we are rich
In privileges not yet unveiled
Rich in certain secrets
Which they bring to us
Open your eyes, nostrils, ears...

Sarzan-Ndiaye

Yesterday, man listened to the wind;
Nature was tracing the roads
That everyone could take.
Today, the rivers are diverted...

Dramane Zié

Sarzan Ndiaye,
You do not like progress.
You have no faith in human genius.

Sarzan-Ndiaye

Why change the course of rivers
That have always been there?

Dramane Zié

To make light gush forth
And illuminate our nights!
A dam produces energy.
It is better than the prayers

Which people cast into the rivers
Without success.

Sarzan-Ndiaye

He who claims the earth as friend
Is sure never to be betrayed.
But when that earth is in flame
It is the rain that fears.

Bintou Were

I set fire to the trees
And house after house.
Will the earth then abandon me?

Scene 4

(A group of men forms
Baala, one of them, their one-legged apparent leader, lets forth a song that fills the market place.)

Baala the Leader

The earth abandons
Those who are weary of her.
Ever since the earth excluded us
My friends and I have known what must be done
On this Independence Day,
Our future plays out from this moment
There where the pastures are green...

(His whole group agrees with him.)

Let us go to Nantes, to Bordeaux,
To Barcelona, to London
The sweat of our fathers has flowed
To build their liberty.
There'll be jobs for us there.
Onward!! Onward!!

Diallo

(Diallo, hidden in darkness since the beginning, gets up and enters the scene. A turban disguises his face.)

Did I hear correctly?
 So the monkey wants to leave his tree
 Which has lost its leaves and fruit?
 A very good decision!
 Congratulations!
 But, tell me:
 You have already absorbed the
 scorpion's venom
 Your body is lacerated by fine sand,
 Nostrils burnt by the hot winds,
 Are your eyes encrusted and swollen,
 blind to sky and land?
 Have you ever heard agony, its head
 bent over,
 In a dry river bed in the middle of
 the desert?
 Go to Madrid, Bordeaux, Paris, Nantes.
 It's such a long road.
 Do not venture on it unaided if you
 wish to live.
 The barriers of Melilla and Ceuta are
 insurmountable.
 Only I, Diallo the Smuggler, can help
 you pass them!

(Bintou Were calms down, starts acting
 amorously, approaches Diallo and tries to
 seduce him.
 Diallo lets himself to be led on and tries to
 grasp her.
 A collective dance of seduction takes place.
 The dancing grows more and more contagious
 and frenetic to the point of trance.)

Song for Dance of Seduction

Scene 5 (Same location)

Bintou Were

Listen to me, everyone!!!

(The music fades)

You who have possessed me
 I wish to announce that I am pregnant
 That is why I struck the initiatory drum
 I am expecting a child even if it
 doesn't show yet
 But I do not know who the father is
 Not surprisingly, since you have all
 possessed me.

(She advances to the middle of the men
 and grasps someone by the collar)

What are you looking at, white-collar?
 With your rolling like one possessed
 Those rolling eyes will be your undoing
 Right there in your empty, misshapen
 head
 I would have preferred it if you had
 more down there
 At your centre of gravity.

She advances to Fata Maya

You too have possessed me
 You hurt me, you hurt me badly
 With your thrusting blows
 With your huge donkey's member
 No doubt your mother massaged
 it well
 When you were an infant
 I cried in pain, and that excited you
 all the more.

(She claps her hand on Fata Maya's underbelly)





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Het Prins Claus Fonds en de Postcode Loterij.



Bijvoorbeeld:

een opera in de Sahel.

Naar een idee van Z.K.H. Prins Claus (1926 - 2002) is een opera gecomponeerd en uitgevoerd in Afrika. Mensen uit verschillende landen in de Sahel-regio voeren de opera op. Het verhaal gaat over migratie. Een vrouw, Bintou Were, is met een groep Afrikanen op weg naar Europa waar zij een beter leven hoopt te vinden.

De Sahel Opera is een initiatief van het Prins Claus Fonds. Het is een prachtig en kwalitatief hoogstaand spektakel met een duurzaam karakter. Nieuw talent kan zich ontwikkelen en er wordt hen een internationaal podium geboden. De opera levert directe werkgelegenheid op en de betrokkenen kunnen, als het project is afgelopen, met groter gemak nieuwe culturele samenwerkingen aangaan. Bovendien zal de opgebouwde infrastructuur,

zowel in culturele als in logistieke zin, na de productie blijven bestaan. Door al deze voordelen sluit dit project perfect aan bij de doelstellingen van het Prins Claus Fonds; het vergroten van het inzicht in culturen en het bevorderen van de wisselwerking tussen cultuur en ontwikkeling.

De opera is te zien op 7, 8 en 9 juni in Amsterdam op het Holland Festival. Het Prins Claus Fonds ontving in 2007 0,7 miljoen euro van de Postcode Loterij. In 2004 was er een speciale bijdrage van 1,5 miljoen euro voor de Sahel Opera. Sinds 2001 werd het Prins Claus Fonds in totaal met 4,8 miljoen euro gesteund. Met z'n allen werken we aan een betere wereld.



Samen maken we het verschil.

De Postcode Loterij steunt 53 goede doelen. Ga naar www.postcodeloterij.nl

Libretto

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A rolling stone gathers no moss,
does it?

Diallo

Marvellous news
That this child is on its way!
Have you ever heard of the 'right to
citizenship at birth'?
As long as Bintou's child is born
On the far side of the frontier
It's mother, it's father
Are protected by the law.
It's true a baby only has one mother
But it can have several fathers,
If you follow my meaning.
Companions of Bintou Were,
I promise you we will all get residents'
permits.
And other privileges, all over
Europe
But let's hope the child is not born
Before we cross the frontier!
It depends on you.
Diallo continues
The point is, who is the father of
the child
That this little lady is carrying?

(Several men advance as though in concert.
Paternity Claim Dance
Baala pushes in front of them to lay
his claim to paternity.)

Baala

Do you remember, Bintou Were
One night you were pursued
By soldiers no older than yourself
Who were after your skin, during
our dirty war.
You took refuge in my hut
And we made love, you remember?

I am the father of the baby you are
carrying.

Popular Love Song

Scene 6 (Same location)

Bintou Were

I know you are all cowering
In the secrecy of the night
So what do you want of me?

Chorus

If you were a bird
I would fly away with you, higher
than the sky.

Dramane Zié

(Advances to his audience, recites them an
ode to the glory of woman and follows it with
remarks on the calamities of the Sahel)

Woman,
What does woman mean to us?
Without woman, we are nothing.
She is Mother Perseverance
She is Mother Protection
She is Mother Country
She is Mother Future
A king, brave though he is, is born
of woman
She is it who gives life to the brave
She is it who gives life to the coward
Nothing equals the blessing of our
mothers.
Locusts, I swear I will fight you
I swear to you I will make the rain fall!
Fata Maya
Bintou Were,
I never suspected you were an
adulteress.

Bintou
Were
a Sahel
Opera

Bintou Were
I have never belonged to anyone

Fata Maya (strikes the tomtom)
And yet you said you loved no one
but me.

Bintou Were
That was just the game of seduction
Only a half-wit would believe...

Fata Maya
Give me the child! It's mine!

Bintou Were
Come then, kill me, tear me open
If you want to have the foetus.

Fata Maya
You are mad, depraved
I hate you.

MC Samafou
Exactly, Bintou
Tell us the truth
Reveal the father of this child
You are carrying.

Bintou Were
I do not know any better than you.

Diallo (to Bintou Were)
Let those who claim to be the father
of the child
Follow us.
I will take you across the Sahel and
the desert
Which I know like my own shadow
You will carry your child all the way
to Spain
He shall be born in sheets of gold,

beyond Melillaaaa...!
But take care!
The barriers of Melilla are so high
They will make you dizzy.
You must walk in front
Towards the barbed wire
The guards will not dare shoot
At a woman heavy with child.
Here is the miracle baby. A future
citizen of Europe!
But it's also true that none of us can
see the future,
He still sleeps warm in his mother's
belly.
His mother carrying him in her womb
can barely drag herself forward.
But of course, she's not unique in that
respect
For if the tortoise or the snail drags
itself forward,
It's because it carries an enormous
house upon its back.

Bintou Were
He who would be the father, let him
show himself worthy of it!

Sarzan-Ndiaye
It is shameful to flee
Ones homeland and the affections of
ones relatives
Merely for the fear of dying of hunger.
Go, flee, you will think only of that.
Where is your courage, your dignity?
Far away are the songs of bravery
Which accompanied your ancestors
All the way to their final home.

Baala
The elephants' graveyard does not
exist.

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When elephants depart to die, it's
Because they can no longer find a
place to live.

Sarzan-Ndiaye
The poor man who fears the sun
Fears a benefactor.
Europe is not the country for you!

Diallo
The Europeans conquered America
To flee the famines and epidemics.
And as for us, must we wait until
The slave ships again cast anchor on
our beaches
And invite us aboard?

Sarzan-Ndiaye
So you would go to conquer Europe?
Where are your weapons?
Where are the great empty spaces?
Do not listen to this charlatan
Who would ensnare you in his net.
To sweep the pavements of Europe's
cities –
Is that the future you dream of?
The desert used to be green
Each tree planted
Was the work of a man.
If it is liberty you seek
You will not find it in flight.
Stand up, till the soil,
That's your only salvation.

Diallo
The pavements of Paris
Are no dirtier than elsewhere.
I will open up the desert
For those who would escape poverty.
Diallo the Smuggler!!! Diallo the
Smuggler...

I am not a charlatan!
Confide in me and you will see!

Jéli-Kouyaté
Do not listen to this deceiver
Every charlatan is gifted with the
power of words
But he speaks only lies
He wants to snare you in his net.
Not until he transforms rods into
serpents,
Will he be credible in my eyes!
There was once a wise man in this
country
Djitoumou Bala, a true magician
He did some extraordinary things
But he was a wise man
He was gifted with incomparable
clairvoyance.
But you, you are just a fraud
A pretentious charlatan.

(Laughter in the crowd)

Diallo
I will transform those sticks, yes, but
into ladders.
They will be more use for climbing
the barriers of Melilla.
Tall ladders to reach the sky!

End of First Act

Second Act

Scene I

(A huge expanse of sand dunes stretching to the horizon.

In the middle of the ocean of sand,

Stands a solitary tree: the Tree of Tenere,

Sole survivor in this desolate space.

Appearing suddenly behind the dunes,

Women and men, each carrying a large ladder.

After a centrifugal movement, the Ladder People join in a slow round dance, a kotéba.

The procession is impressive, for the ladders are so tall they make a hole in the sky.

The Ladder People are scantily dressed in the soiled clothes of travellers

In some cases mere rags. A striking contrast that accentuates the beauty of the ladders.

As the people move, the ladders seem to stir the azure.

The scene, a poetical ballet, lasts a long time.

A way off, like the conductor of an orchestra, wearing a turban,

In turns domineering and condescending: Diallo the Smuggler.

Before him is a wicker basket full of Little loaves of mouldy millet bread, made without yeast, round loaves like those used in the ceremony of Taleu Bone, (Wolof, from Senegal) celebrating the passage of time from the old to the new year.

An allegory of interior voyage, of traversing the self

A journey at once personal and collective.)

Diallo

(intones the Hymn of Taleu Bone)

Ladder People

(Continuing the slow round dance, singing a capella. Mystical ambiance and tone.)

Taleu bone...

layoumeu

Tal-taleu bone ... Allayoumeu

Degbobeulé ... Allayoumeu

Sou nou ney y ndey ... Allayoumeu

Theu leu ngou dane nane ...

Allayoumeu

Taleu bone

praise God,

there was once an abundant spring

praise God

where the fathers of our fathers

praise God

where the mothers of our mothers

went to drink.

Praise God

Diallo

Come to me, come to the spring!

Come to the lustral water

From the Pierian spring

At the foot of the granite rocks

The generous spring offers her bounty,

To the thirsty wanderer who ventures here

She quenches and nourishes his soul.

But watch out, O impure one who

would drink.

The guardian spirit of this water

Is a woman with seven breasts

Who will let you drink from only one;

Just only one!

(He signals a command to the Ladder People

to put down the ladders; they comply.

The song resumes more beautifully.

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Then the circle expands. The Ladder People pass before Diallo, who places a little round loaf between each one's teeth.

Expressions and attitudes of profound gratitude, gestures of humility addressed to the sky or earth.

After the procession to receive the

Host of Taleu Bone in each mouth,

the Ladder People pass again in single file

before Diallo. This time it is to give him money).

Diallo

Money, come, give money,

Here, put it here, come, do it!

Fata Maya observes from a distance how

they shake their rags and search their pockets to find a banknote sewn into the lining.

Some of them can find nothing

to satisfy this request.

Scene 2

(Bintou Were is much changed.

She now has a swollen belly.

Her suitors form a close guard around her.)

Fata Maya

Now I am of my father's age

Now I am of my father's size

The only thing in which I lack

Is that I am not well dressed

The only thing in which I lack

Is that I have no work

I get up at the same time every

morning

I meet the same people

Sitting around doing nothing

When someone is generous to me

I respond with a polite word

I always respond with the same politeness

And then I wait

I wait until hope arrives

Unfortunately hope never does arrive...

One day, tired of waiting, I decided to go

I hoisted my bag on my shoulder

And I set off

I had no choice

It was live or die

I had to go, come what may.

After his song, he approaches the group around Bintou Were.

He holds a newspaper in his hand, and reads out an article in an elevated voice.

'Two Senegalese youths were found hiding

In the undercarriage of an Airbus

A330.

The temperature had been minus fifty degrees.

One survived, the lucky one.

He was taken back to the frontier

After a bowl of hot soup.

He tried again three months later

The second time, his luck ran out.

He succumbed to the icy cold in the sky

And fell onto the airport

Frozen solid as a rock.'

Mixed Chorus

What was he thinking of

There in the undercarriage

While in the first-class cabin

They were serving champagne?

Fata Maya

No one suspected
That at minus fifty degrees
Under the wings of the Airbus
A human being was riding.

Mixed Chorus

No one suspected
That at minus fifty degrees
Under the wings of the Airbus
A human being was riding.

MC Samafou

Oh! A human being, you say.
He was superhuman!
His name will be written in gold letters
In the Guinness Book of Records.

(Men and women arrive carrying empty,
half-open luggage on their heads.
It is a ballet which strangely recalls a departure,
a sort of line of porters, and refers at the same
time to the simplistic drawings of teams of
porters in the days of explorers
and colonists.
In actuality they are returnees,
who have been expelled from Europe.
The put down their empty luggage.)

Diallo

Welcome to our halting place! Poor
travellers!
I bet you didn't know the ropes there.
Put down your bags, make yourselves
comfortable.
You are among friends.
If you would like to make another
attempt, I am at your service
You need a good foothold: the ladders.
After all, to reach heaven
You need a ladder

To find eternal life
Is a perpetual quest.
Turn back the way you were going,
Turn back!

The Woman escorted back to the Frontier

Go back there? Never again!
When a sack of grass is weighing
you down,
You have to get rid of it!
They expelled us after we lived there
three years
While we believed we were sitting
pretty, not creeping!
One day there was a crackdown,
a police raid.
'Your papers! Where are your papers?'
And up you go! We found ourselves
on a charter flight
Without the time to pack our
underwear.

The expelled Illegal Immigrant

A rotten existence, this fumbling life!
A faded horizon of false promises!

(Dance of the woes of the emigrant)

And to think I was so close to my
objective
I didn't even get to set my foot
On the rocks of the other side.
I was so close to the goal
I was attacking the second wire fence
And just as I was coming over it
My foot got caught.

The Woman escorted back to the Frontier

Anyway, let them keep their Europe.
Pleasure-seekers and crowds: it's a
dog's life. And they want you to bark.

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Silence is a sound you never hear.
The pneumatic drills hammer away all
day long.
It's cold, people look down on you
and accuse you of bad things.
The white people don't like us...

The Woman following her Husband

Why should they like us?
Are we candy-sweet for their
enjoyment?
Don't be so ungrateful!
They brought us everything and still do:
How many families in our land live
From money earned by migrants over
there.

The Woman escorted back to the Frontier

Go and live there
Then you'll agree with every word I say!

The Woman following her Husband

It's no good living here any more.
That's why people flee the country.

Diallo

(addressing the women escorted back
to the frontier)

Continue on your way if you are so
sure.
Our traces are still fresh,
You only have to follow them.
As long as the wind that rises every
night
Doesn't erase our footprints,
In which case you can forget it!
If you have the least doubt,
You would be better off following me.
And it will cost only a little money
...

(Diallo walks to Bintou Were)

Money, more money!
The child you are carrying
Is not the key
That will open the heavy gates of
paradise.

Bintou Were

You told my friends
They had nothing to fear,
As long as my child is not born
Before the barriers of Melilla.

Diallo

The fact remains that the meter
is running.
We have been wandering these
burning sands for months
In every territory we cross, a chieftain
expects his dues.
You are lucky that I feel pity on you,
For otherwise I would have
abandoned you long ago.
Bintou Were has something to pay
her debt with.
It's not the same for the rest of you.
Bintou Were keeps her promise,
For the child is still in her belly.
Those of you who have nothing in
your bellies,
Empty your pockets! Give money!
Come on!

Bintou Were

Master of the dunes and the endless
spaces
They have nothing.
Their bones are sticking through
their rags
There's nothing but what you see.

Diallo

(Refusing some banknotes in CFA Francs that someone offers him)

Useless paper. Worthless!

It's worse than toilet paper, that CFA stuff

Not even rags to blow your nose on, Faded, tawdry, devalued CFA Francs.

I want my fee in US dollars
It's the green stiff, greenbacks
You must pay me in.

Bintou Were

Have pity!

Master of the dunes and tracks
They cannot give you what they do not have.

Diallo

Let them borrow from their companions
They can pay it back tomorrow
Once they have reached paradise.

Bintou Were

They have nothing left
You have taken everything.

Diallo

No money, no crossing.
Let the women fish out
What is hidden in their hair.

Bintou Were

There is nothing left in their hair.

Diallo

Let them search between their breasts.

Bintou Were

Search between our breasts yourself
– you will see.

Diallo

Let them search between their thighs and buttocks.

They are all deceivers

Bintou Were

Search yourself
Between their thighs and buttocks.
You will find some relief there, if you are a man!

Diallo

You are provoking me, Bintou Were!
You abuse your position as a fragile woman
Which no man may violate.
You are trying to blackmail me.
But watch out! Your sort...
I am the one who decides...

Bintou Were

I know what you want.
You plan to get me across the frontier
And claim my child
So you will have the papers
Which you can sell on to others.

Diallo (losing his temper)

That's a lie!!!
If I wanted to live on the other side
I could have done so long ago.

Fata Maya

It's said that those who have failed
Several times, become swindlers
Before making the grade as people
smugglers.

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Man in the turban, what do you want?

Diallo

You tell me, grumbler,
Who are you sticking up for?

Fata Maya

For someone who has paid the price
several times
Without knowing where the train
is going.

Diallo

Did you ever hear of Hell?
That's where I'm taking you, smart-ass!
You fled one morning to escape the horror
And all you found on your road
Was another train to hell...
I'm sorry to tell you
That I am not the guardian of Hell.
If you want to die in silence,
I'll wish you bon voyage.
If you want to die in silence,
I'll wish you bon voyage.

Fata Maya

Life is made up of choices
And he who plunges his foot into
the marsh
Is someone who is not afraid of mud.
But the truth is that
You are duping us, you are robbing us.

Diallo

You dare to insult me, you insolent
little low-life!

Fata Maya

Now I am of my father's age
Now I am of my father's size

The only thing in which I lack
Is that I am not well dressed
The only thing in which I lack
Is that I have no work
I get up at the same time every
morning
I meet the same people
Sitting around doing nothing
When someone is generous to me
I respond with a polite word
I always respond with the same
politeness
And then I wait
I wait until hope arrives
Unfortunately hope never does
arrive...
One day, tired of waiting, I decided
to go
I hoisted my bag on my shoulder
And I set off
I had no choice.
Whether I live or die,
I had no choice.

Diallo

I've had enough of this.
Anyone who does not want to pay
up –
Let him go back and suffocate in his
own slimy life
I'll leave you all here to sort it out for
yourselves!

Fata Maya

(Takes hold of a ladder and threatens Diallo
with it.

Diallo pulls his sword.

The tension mounts. A clash seems inevitable.
A ring forms around the confronting protagonists
After a moment, some people detach themselves
from the group of Ladder People, some moving

to the side of Diallo, and others to that of Fata Maya and confront one another in a gestural choreography inspired by Senegalese pre-battle rituals.

A moment of intense animosity, which the drums take up in a furious, frenetic rhythm.

The wind blows. A continuous noise which rises up into the air.)

You will not take one step more, nor one less.

MC Samafou

Stop this quarrel, stop this violence and hatred!

Silence! Listen! Don't you hear something?

The wind is rising, listen to its song!

Wind of the Sahel, lift our spirits

To the limits of the skies!

Let the rain plunge down

To slake its wells.

Let water stream at every street

corner.

(In the distance, the roar of engines.

Perhaps also the throbbing of a helicopter.)

Diallo

Smile everyone! You're on camera. It's the Paris-Dakar Rally!

(Underscored by the music, the rising noise of a fantastic cavalcade. A large white cloud plunges the scene into mist.

MC Samafou and Bintou Were are struck to the ground.

The helicopter noise continues at full volume for a moment, then fades, as does the sound of the cavalcade.)

A rally driver, overwhelmed by the accident, seeks his way back to the rally route.

Diallo helps him get his bearings.)

Scene 3

(Mourning has taken hold among the Ladder People.

The scene opens on a body wrapped in a white shroud, placed at the centre of the space.

Not far away, Bintou Were is injured and lying on her back.

Her belly is such a burden on her body that it keeps her still.

Her head rests on the knee of a seated man.

Her face is turned to the heavens imploring their grace.

Diallo walks in circles, visibly tormented and thwarted in his plans.

An animist liturgy. Fata Maya officiates in the mourning rites.

A distant chant approaches little by little and joins the scene.

Men and women, superbly dressed in traditional costumes, enter and take up position.)

Babany sings 'The Adventurers'

Scene 4

Another song rises.

Voice of Dramane Zié

Dramane Zié

**Nothing is more terrible than death
Why do you destroy,**

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**O Death, who takes all on your path!
Why are you so cruel?
Who can resist the hand of Death?**

Scene 5

Several people lift the body of MC Samadou, wrapped in a white shroud, and carry it off stage.

Fata Maya

Song started by Fata Maya and taken up by the Ladder People

**Sambay Bayaanè,
N'juféé, bur balay nian
Kén du jèkè nangu jël jox Sambay
mbayaan
Xaré ma ca tiorcior, kufa yobu buméeé
Tiarga ca lan lay yééw Sambay
mbayanéé, Sambay Mbayan.**

Scene 6

A different setting. We are outside time.

A new moon rises behind the scene, climbing in the sky. Barrier of barbed wire.

Frontier guards, perching on their watchtowers.

Searchlights sweep the night at regular intervals.

The two companions of Bintou Were begin a song dedicated to her.

Bintou Were gets up abruptly.

Her hair is completely white, as if outside time.

She advances slowly, followed at a distance by the Ladder People, ready for their onslaught on the barbed wire.

The Guardia Civil, some armed with rifles, others handling huge searchlights, are on their guard. A grim atmosphere.

Not far away, a group of Red Cross workers are carrying stretchers.

Bintou Were

Look, there! It's Europe!

At the end of their march, the rising moon unleashes the emotions of the Ladder People who raise a chorus of joy:

The Ladder People

Europe! Europe! Europe! ...

(Bintou Were advances and starts climbing the barbed wire, with bare hands, alone, under the watchful eye of Diallo the Smuggler. Like an acrobat, she enthrones herself at the top. A searchlight guided by a guard follows her every movement.

After bending over for a long interval, Bintou Were slowly straightens up.

With a cry of deliverance, she raises her newborn child like a sacrifice.

Part of her body seems caught up in the spiny metal of the barbed wire.

She is preoccupied solely with the fate of her baby, which she cradles in her arms.

Should she cast it to the African side of the frontier or to the other side, into Europe?

Diallo

Bintou Were, the long awaited moment has come.

You have heard the agony of the traveller,

Head bowed, in the dried-up wells of the desert.

**You have made a gift of your body to
The dear friends who accompany you.**

**Here we are at the gates of Europe
Madrid, London, Paris, Nantes,**

What roads have we travelled!
Throw your baby to the other side
So that I can launch our attack.

Bintou Were

(in reply, starting a song which
all the Ladder People take up in chorus.)

Go, feel the burning sand beneath
your heels
You will cross the morning mist, and
feel the dew,
You will stumble on ruined remnants
of bygone lives
You will sleep beneath the city walls
and ancient palaces.

You will walk in the hoof prints of
warrior horses
The tracks of the Soumaoro,
Soundjata, Samory.
Their footsteps, pearly with blood
and bravery,
Recalling adventures of the people
of the desert gateway.

There, where the sun deflowers the
hymen of the scarlet oil
The earth moans deep within
Its nourishing crust ravished, scoured
by the raging winds
Leached out, left gasping, by the storm.

The soil of the persistent Dogon
farmer brings forth millet.
Defence against adversity,
desperation, cowardice.
There, the zebu drowse in the
shadow of a dune,
And quench their muzzles in the
oasis mud.

The sparkling pool mirrors the lowing
heifers
On the whirring of the herder's staff.
You will walk again in the dust clouds
of the Peul herds,
On tracks that scale the flanks of the
earth.

To meadows far and green
Or perhaps you must soon go
To the okume forests of Lambaréné,
To the lands of the Baluba or Zulu.

Perhaps you must vanish into the
rising sun
Beyond the Pyramids of Egypt.

(As the singing ends, Bintou Were throws her
child into the arms of Fata Maya at the foot
of the ladder.

She collapses onto the barbed wire.
Her lifeless body rests, picked out by a single
white light.
Profound silence.)

(The Ladder People abandon their ladders
And, as one, turn back the way they came.
In a final gesture,
they sing in very high, very loud voices)

Chorus of Women and Men

Go, set your feet on the road
Twisting roads that lead to the
unknown
Roads that pass, by turns, by joy and
sadness
Roads of tears and laughter
Roads of fears and follies
Meandering roads, roads of hope
You will meet the night, may it
embrace me

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You will meet the stars, may they
greet me
You will encounter fire, may it
caress me
You will encounter dew, tell it of my
love.

Wolof Chorus

Démaal, téggal sa tank sa yoon
Yoon yobu le fo xamul
Yoonu mbékté yoonu naxaar yoonu
yakaar.
Yoonu joy ak réé, yoonu réé ak naxar.
Yoon wu lëndum yoon wu léér
Yoon wu dëngë, yoon u yakaar
Bo dajéék gudi nuyul ma ko
Bo dajéék bidééy nuyul ma ko
Bo dajéék safara rayal ma ko
Bo dajéék suba néko yéwuna.

(On the other side, the Spanish Guardia,
are moved to join in with the song, to show
despite all
their solidarity with those whom it is their duty
to repel.
Indifference is impossible!
Diallo alone remains standing, as the Ladder
People move off
in the direction of Africa.)

End of Second Act

The Prince Claus Fund

The objective of the Prince Claus Fund is to expand insight into cultures and to promote interaction between culture and development.

The Prince Claus Fund is a platform for intercultural exchange. Working with individuals and organisations primarily in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Fund organises activities and publications that contribute to the positive interaction between culture and development.

The Prince Claus Fund stimulates and initiates artistic and intellectual excellence in the form of debates, creative processes and artistic productions.

The Prince Claus Fund views culture as a basic human need.

The Board of the Prince Claus Fund

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Sadik Harchaoui, chair of the Executive Committee of Forum, Utrecht

Els van der Plas, director of the Prince Claus Fund

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Prince Claus Fund

The Prince Claus Fund instigated both the Opera's concept and the project itself. The Fund is the initiator, impetus and producer of the Sahel Opera. The Sahel Opera Project was managed by director Els van der Plas and project co-ordinator Charlotte van Herwaarden.

www.princeclausfund.org

The Sahel Opera Foundation

The Sahel Opera Foundation is responsible for the implementation of the production, the tour and the exploitation of the Sahel Opera. The Foundation is housed at the offices of the Prince Claus Fund in The Hague. Martijn Sanders, the former director of the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, is the Foundation's chairman. Its members are: Tom de Swaan (treasurer), the chief financial officer of ABN AMRO; Pauline Kruseman (secretary), the director of the Amsterdam Historical Museum; Lilian Gonçalves-Ho Kang You, chair of the International Executive Committee of Amnesty International, London, former vice-chair of the Board of OPTA; and Morris Tabaksblat, the former chairman of the Board of Unilever former chairman of the Supervisory Board of AEGON, TNT and Reed Elsevier, Amsterdam, and former board member of the Prince Claus Fund.

www.sahelopera.com

Republic of Mali

The Republic of Mali became a co-producer of the project and the capital Bamako, hosted the world premiere of the Opera in February, 2007. The Republic of Mali will coordinate the African tour. The Association Opéra du Sahel, installed by the Republic of Mali, is responsible for the production in collaboration with the other producers. Cheick Oumar Sissoko was a Malian filmmaker when he received the Prince Claus Award in 1999. As Minister of Culture of Mali, he participated enthusiastically in the creation of the Sahel Opera.

Théâtre du Châtelet, Paris

Théâtre du Châtelet first opened its doors as an opera house in 1862. It now offers a wide range of opera, dance and music performances. Two hundred thousand people visit the opera house each year. The new director, Jean-Luc Choplin, has created a programme which focuses on diversity in both music and audience. He stimulates innovative projects such as the Sahel Opera and, with performances like these, works to promote a dialogue between cultures.
www.chatelet-theatre.com

The Royal Netherlands Embassy in Bamako, Mali

The Royal Netherlands Embassy in Bamako, Mali, supports the Sahel Opera Project. Former Dutch Ambassador in Mali His Excellency Harry Buikema was in close contact with the Dutch and Malian producers and mediates where necessary. Marlène van Asten at the Royal Netherlands Embassy was responsible for organisation and coordination in connection with the production and premiere in Bamako.
www.mfa.nl/bam

Holland Festival

The Holland Festival is the annual trend-setting, innovative and adventurous high point of the cultural season in Holland. Since it was founded in 1947, the Holland Festival has aimed to present international, topical and innovative achievements in the dramatic arts - music, opera, theatre, dance – both in the most classical sense and experimental. This formula leaves room for productions and makers who have demonstrated their abilities and already made their name, as well as audacious and unknown artistic expressions by theatre makers who are often young and (still) undiscovered.

This year's 60th anniversary is celebrated from 29 May until 24 June. It is an opportunity to unveil a special festival season, on which, in the direct line of Holland Festival tradition, one does not lose sight of its connections with the social and political realities of our society worldwide.

Pierre Audi, artistic director of the Holland Festival, was member of the jury that selected the composer of the Sahel Opera. Now the Sahel Opera is part of the 2007 Festival.

www.hollandfestival.nl

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The Jant-Bi Company

The first Sahel Opera workshops took place at L'École des Sables dance school in Toubab Dialaw, Senegal. L'École des Sables has been home to The Jant-Bi Company since 1998, when artistic director Germaine Acogny organised the first professional workshop for traditional and contemporary African dance. The school's objectives involve educating African dancers and functioning as a platform for dancers and choreographers from the African Diaspora and from different cultures throughout the world. *Jant-Bi* endorses the school's objectives and propagates them by inviting choreographers from all corners of the globe to fuse their culture and dance styles with the essence of African dance. *Jant-Bi*'s objectives consist of: developing an international network and discovering new artistic approaches; setting up exchange programs with other dance institutions throughout the world; creating 'fusion projects' that link dance with other art forms such as theatre and organising international conferences to discuss dance as it is deployed in the fields of the arts, society, education, health and research. The dancer and choreographer Germaine Acogny and manager Helmut Vogt from Jant-Bi are part of the Sahel Opera artistic team.

www.jantbi.org

Jury and advisors

The Opera Sahel Jury (2004-2005)

Professor Kwabena Nketia, Prince Claus laureate and director of the International Centre for African Music and Dance in Accra, Ghana

Ama Ata Aidoo, author, Accra, Ghana

Pierre Audi, artistic director of the *Netherlands Opera Foundation*, the Netherlands

Ray Lema, musician/composer, the Democratic Republic of Congo/Paris, France

Robert Wilson, theatre-maker, New York, the United States

Special advisor to the Jury: *Achille Mbembe*, professor of history at the *Witts University*, Johannesburg, South Africa

The First Phase Advisory Committee (2001-2004)

During the first phase, the Prince Claus Fund was assisted by an advisory committee that supervised the concept and working method. This committee consisted of:

Pierre Audi, director of the *Netherlands Opera Foundation*, the Netherlands

Martijn Sanders, former director of the *Concertgebouw*, the Netherlands

Morris Tabaksblat, former chairman of the Board of Unilever, former chairman of the Supervisory Board of AEGON, TNT and Reed Elsevier, Amsterdam, former member of the Board of the Prince Claus Fund, the Netherlands

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The Sahel Opera wishes to thank:

Damien Pwono, ethno-musicologist, policy officer at the *Ford Foundation*, Congo/Dubai

John Studzinski, founder of the *Genesis Foundation*, United Kingdom

Mel Cooper, co-ordinator of the *Genesis Foundation*, the United Kingdom

Peter Geschiere, cultural anthropologist, the University of Amsterdam, member of the Board of the Prince Claus Fund, the Netherlands

Pedro Pimenta, film producer, Mozambique/ South Africa

Aminata Traoré, cultural entrepreneur, former Minister of Culture, Mali

Stan Rijven, music journalist for the *Trouw* newspaper, the Netherlands

Baaba Maal, composer and musician, Senegal

Salif Keita, singer/ musician, Mali

Franz Patay, the *International Music Centre*, Austria

Robert Loder, director of the *Triangle Arts Trust* and organiser of *Africa 1995*, the United Kingdom

Huib Haringhuizen, ethno-musicologist and music consultant, the Netherlands

John Collins, musicologist, Ghana

Charles Eason, *African and Diaspora Music Organisation*, United Kingdom

Samuel Sibidé, director National Museum Bamako, Mali

Pieter Hofman, director of Programming, Muziektheater Amsterdam

Otto Romein, former director of the *Soeterijn Theater*, Amsterdam

Idi Boudewijn, advisor

Jaap Dieleman, vocal coach

Jan Hoekema, director International Cultural Policy Division (DCO/IC)

Netherlands' Ambassador for International Cultural Cooperation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The Netherlands

Monique Korzelijs, International Cultural Policy Division (DCO/IC) Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The Netherlands

Harry Buikema, former Netherlands Ambassador in Bamako, Mali

The Sahel Opera would not have been realised without the efforts and commitment of:

Cheick Oumar Sissoko

Lilian Gonçalves-Ho Kang You

Morris Tabaksblat

Els van der Plas

Pape Mbaye Sene

Charlotte van Herwaarden

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The Staff of the Holland Festival, the Staff of Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ, the Staff of the Royal Netherlands Embassy in Bamako, Mali, the Staff of Bureau Opéra du Sahel, Bamako, Mali.

Photo's page 21, 22, 23, 26, 27

Premiere of Bintou Were, a Sahel Opera, on 7 February 2007 in Bamako, Mali

Photographers: Diango Cisse and Olivier Verstraeten, Bamako, Mali

© Prince Claus Fund

Photo page 24/25

Artistic team (back row) and cast of Bintou Were, a Sahel Opera,
during repetitions in Segou, Mali

© Prince Claus Fund

Colophon

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