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| Keita, Fodéba (1921-1969) |
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| Fodéba Keita was a poet, playwright, musician, choreographer, impresario, anti-colonial activist, and statesman. As the leader of several musical bands, author of poems and essays, founder of the Paris-based performance company Les Ballets Africains, and architect of Guinean cultural policy under President Sékou Touré, Keita pioneered modern African traditions in music, literature, theatre, dance, and national arts. He is perhaps best known for having brought African music, dance, masquerade, and oral narratives to the stage, particularly with Les Ballets Africains, which toured internationally during the 1950s before becoming Guinea’s national dance company in 1960. Numerous African countries subsequently adopted the ‘ballet’ form for presenting national cultural heritage. Despite early ties to Lépold Sédar Senghor and other proponents of Negritude, Keita eventually came to reject race-based conceptualizations of African art and culture, writing in 1957 that, ‘it seems…tendentious to try systematically to classify the whole of this vast continent by reference to the colour of its inhabitants. The influence of background upon man is far more important than that of the degree of pigmentation of his skin.’ |
| Summary Fodéba Keita was a poet, playwright, musician, choreographer, impresario, anti-colonial activist, and statesman. As the leader of several musical bands, author of poems and essays, founder of the Paris-based performance company Les Ballets Africains, and architect of Guinean cultural policy under President Sékou Touré, Keita pioneered modern African traditions in music, literature, theatre, dance, and national arts. He is perhaps best known for having brought African music, dance, masquerade, and oral narratives to the stage, particularly with Les Ballets Africains, which toured internationally during the 1950s before becoming Guinea’s national dance company in 1960. Numerous African countries subsequently adopted the ‘ballet’ form for presenting national cultural heritage. Despite early ties to Lépold Sédar Senghor and other proponents of Negritude, Keita eventually came to reject race-based conceptualizations of African art and culture, writing in 1957 that, ‘it seems…tendentious to try systematically to classify the whole of this vast continent by reference to the colour of its inhabitants. The influence of background upon man is far more important than that of the degree of pigmentation of his skin.’ Contributions to Modernism Fodéba Keita was born into a Maninka (Fr. Malinké) family in Siguiri, in what is today the Republic of Guinea. His father, El Hadji **Mory Keita, was an educated medic and merchant, and his mother,** Adja **Awa Diabaté, came from a lineage of musicians and oral historians known as *jeliya* (or griots), but had not pursued that training. Keita learned to sing and play banjo at an early age, and while studying at** the École Primaire Supérieure in Conakry (1937-1940) and École Normale Supérieure William Ponty in Sébikotane in Senegal (1940-1943), he led bands, innovating modern arrangements and integrating local, Cuban, and European influences. At the École Ponty, Keita also participated in an extracurricular program that is often cited as a progenitor of modern African theatre. Additionally, he began writing poems that, in published form, typically included notation for performance.  In 1943-1947, Keita spent two years working as an elementary school teacher in Senegal followed by another year devoted to taking the *baccalauréat* exam, which led to a scholarship to study law in Paris. Upon arrival in the city, Senegalese classmates from Ponty connected him to the literary-political community surrounding *Présence Africaine*. His writings began appearing in the journal in 1948. Four years later, publication of a poetry collection broadened his renown, but the colonial government banned the book as subversive and revoked his law scholarship. Keita then transformed his Paris-based theatre troupe, Le Théâtre Africain (founded in 1949), into a dance company, Les Ballets Africains, which debuted at the Théâtre de l’Étoile in November 1952. It became the first African-led performance company to tour on a global scale. Comprised mostly of students from West Africa and the Caribbean, the company’s production synthesized diverse elements – adaptations of music and dance forms from a range of traditions, as well as theatre and poetry forms originating at Ponty – under the rubric of ‘African’ culture. As of 1954, Keita’s troupe had visited 170 European cities and taken on a manager, Gérard Sayaret, who launched a 1955 tour of French West Africa with the added purpose of recruiting professional talent. The company’s roster was thus renewed for touring in Western Europe, West Africa, Yugoslavia, Turkey, South America, Israel, and North America in 1956-1959.  By late 1956, however, Keita had returned to Guinea to serve as Minister of the Interior, in which capacity he abolished traditional chieftaincy, preparing Guinea to win independence in 1958 under Sékou Touré. In the years that followed, Keita helped to design a national arts system wherein each village and city neighbourhood created performance troupes to compete in local, regional, and national festivals. Within this system – which effectively nationalized and modernized traditional artistic practices by putting them on stage – government-appointed judges identified and recruited the country’s most promising artists for service to a few national ensembles that toured widely as ‘ambassadors’ of Guinean culture. In 1960, Les Ballets Africains became Guinea’s national ballet. The Ballet National de l’Armée (also Keita’s creation) and the Ballet National Djoliba emerged in subsequent years.  During the late-1960s, Sékou Touré came to feel threatened by Keita’s renown in Guinea and abroad. Although Keita had continued to support Touré, he was arrested on March 21, 1969, and detained in the Camp Boiro prison, where he died. Selected List of Works ‘Etrange Destin—Minuit’ (1948)  ‘Chansons Du Dioliba’ (1948)  ‘La Moisson’ (1949)  *Poèmes africains* (1950)  ‘Aube africaine’ / ‘Noël de mon enfance’ (1951)  *Le Maître d’école, suivi de Minuit* (1952)  ‘Préface’ in M. Huet, *Les hommes de la danse* (1954)  ‘African Dance and the Stage = La Danse africaine et la scène’ (1958)  *Aube africaine* (1965)  *Aube africaine et autres poèmes africains* (1994) |
| Further reading:  (Ballets Africains)  (Cohen)  (Fodeba)  (Glaser)  (Institut National de L'audiovisuel)  (Institut National de l'audiovisuel)  (Keita and Keita)  (Miller)  (Straker)  (Kaba) |