**Keita, Fodéba (b. 19 February, 1921, Siguiri, Guinea; d. [day unknown] April 1969, Conakry, Guinea)**

**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 came eventually 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. Keita’s father, El Hadji **Mory Keita, was an educated medic and merchant. 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, Senegal (1940-1943), he led bands innovating modern arrangements and integrating local, Cuban, and European influences. At the École Ponty, Keita additionally participated in an extracurricular program that is often cited as a progenitor of modern African theatre. He also 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 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:**

Keita, F. (1948) ‘Etrange Destin—Minuit’, *Présence Africaine* 3: 466-69.

Keita, F. (1948) ‘Chansons Du Dioliba’, *Présence Africaine* 4: 595-98.

Keita, F. (1949) ‘La Moisson’, *Présence Africaine* 6 (1): 79-82.

n.a., *Le Théâtre Africain de Keita Fodéba*, Paris: Pierre Seghers.

Keita, F. (1950) *Poèmes africains*, Paris: Pierre Seghers.

Keita, F. (1951) ‘Aube africaine’ / ‘Noël de mon enfance’, *Présence Africaine* 12 (4): 175-81.

Keita, F. (1952) *Le Maître d’école, suivi de Minuit*, Paris: Pierre Seghers.

Keita, F. (1954) ‘Préface’ in M. Huet, *Les hommes de la danse*, Lausanne: Éditions Clairefontaine.

Keita, F. (1958) ‘African Dance and the Stage = La Danse africaine et la scène’, *World Theater* 7 (3): 164-78.

Keita, F. (1965) *Aube africaine*, Paris: Pierre Seghers.

Keita, F. (1994) *Aube africaine et autres poèmes africains*, Paris: Présence Africaine.

**References and Further Reading**

[Keita, B., and S. Keita] (1994) ‘Postface’ to Keita, F., *Aube africaine et autres poèmes africains*, Paris: Présence Africaine: 87-91. (Concise biographical essay authored by, although not credited to, Keita’s brother and son.)

Cohen, J. (2012) ‘Stages in Transition: Les Ballets Africains and Independence, 1959 to 1960’, *Journal of Black Studies* 43 (1): 11-48. (Essay examining Keita’s work with Les Ballets Africains and the company’s North American tours of 1959-60.)

Straker, J. (2009) *Youth, Nationalism, and the Guinean Revolution*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press. (Excellent study of cultural policy and staged performance in Sékou Touré’s Guinea.)

Kaba, L. (1976) ‘The Cultural Revolution, Artistic Creativity, and Freedom of Expression in Guinea’, *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 14 (2): 201-18. (Classic essay addressing Sékou Touré’s politics in relation to arts and culture.)

Miller, C. L. (1990) *Theories of Africans: Francophone Literature and Anthropology in Africa*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (The chapter ‘Ethnicity and Ethics’ contains factual errors concerning Keita’s name and cultural background but offers close readings of his poems.)

**Moving Image Material**

*JT 20H* [television show], 2 February, 1964. RTF/ORTF. “Les Ballets Africains à Paris.” Institut National de l’Audiovisuel (INA), Paris, France. Notice no. CAF97506431. (Good footage, including masks from forest region—*gnamou* and birdmen. There may be sound issues.)

*Discorama* [television show], 24 May 1964. RTF/ORTF. [no title.] Institut National de l’Audiovisuel (INA), Paris, France. Notice # CPF86605587 or # I09068254. (Show alternates between songs and excerpts of ballet performance. Ballets Africains performance includes part of staging of ‘Minuit,’ a poem by F. Keita. Features three performers on stage, including two dancers and a drummer. Good camera angles.)

*JT 13H* [television show], 22 August 1964. RTF/ORTF. “Vincennes et Gala 2eme db”. Institut National de l’Audiovisuel (INA), Paris, France. Notice # CAF97077211. (Performance at Place de la Concorde, Paris; includes famous Baga headdress, D’mba — aka Nimba).

*Moi j’aime* [television show], 8 March 1965, ORTF. Performance by Les Ballets Africains de Guinée (45:54 – 48:55). Institut National de l’Audiovisuel (INA), Paris, France. Notice No. CPF86626689. (This production provides performance footage of Les Ballets Africains de Guinée.)

**Paratextual Materials**

Images have been sent as separate files. Please note that these reproductions are not of publishable quality. They are intended only to show editors at Routledge what the image looks like.

1. ‘Portrait de Keita Fodeba’. Cote : NE-101. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des Estampes et de la Photographie. Contact: Thomas CAZENTRE [thomas.cazentre@bnf.fr](mailto:thomas.cazentre@bnf.fr) [sorry I don’t have this image, but I did find some info on whom to contact for copyright: Harcourt, Archives Photographiques, 78180 Montigny-le-Bretonneux, FRANCE. Tel: +33 130 85 68 81]
2. Affiche, ‘Ballets Africains de Keita Fodeba [titre ?]  Imp : 26 mars, 1954)’. 160x 120 cm, signée Kracht-Samson, dépôt légal 1954. Fonds d'affiches. Dept des Estampes et de la Photographie (Richelieu), Bibliothèque nationale de France. Contact: Anne-Marie SAUVAGE Conservateur des affiches. [Anne-marie.sauvage@bnf.fr](mailto:Anne-marie.sauvage@bnf.fr) [sorry I don’t have this image]
3. ‘Les Ballets Africains (Guinea)’ – box 3, folders 1 & 2. Photographs and Prints Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library. Contact: Thomas Lisanti / Permissions Manager / Premium Services/ The New York Public Library / 476 Fifth Avenue, Room 103/ New York, NY 10018 / phone: (212) 930-0091 / fax: (212) 930-0533 / email: [permissions@nypl.org](mailto:permissions@nypl.org) [sorry I don’t have these images]
4. Folder 1. ‘No date. (20 publicity photos). New York’. # 53666 – [Sundiata]; # 53698 – [Sundiata]; # 53660 – [female dancers with arms raised]; # 24766 – [Mano mask, terrified woman
5. Folder 2. No date (15 photos). [Members of LBA in street clothes, in front of Amsterdam News offices; probably 1970s.] # 53655 – [w/ “banda”]; # 53654 – [namou and other masks]; # 53704 – [malinke masks]; # 53621 – [malinke masks]; # 53618 – [many masks]; [no #] – [guys carrying woman w/ arms outstretched]
6. ‘Les Ballets Africains’ [folder], New York World Telegram and Sun Newspaper (NYWTS) Collection, Library of Congress. Contact Jeff Bridgers, Reference Section, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress. Tel: 202-707-6394. [images attached]
7. Photo of artwork [?]; signed ‘Diarabi’. Text on verso: “ALVIN THEATER. SEP 24 1960 MAGAZINE.”
8. [Photo of dancers with fire.] Text below image (recto): ‘BALLETSAFRICAINS. NATIONAL ARTISTS CORPORATION, 711 FIFTH AVE. NEW YORK 22.’
9. [Photo of two young female dancers]. Text on verso: ‘L-R Aissata Sylla 14 / Nalo Camara 16. / Two of the African belles doing their dance in the lobby of the Belvedere Hotel. / See – L Lyons story.’
10. [Two photos on single page; stage photos including drums, dancers, and masks/headdresses]. Text below image (recto): ‘ADVANCE: FOR PMS OF MONDAY. OCT. 17. WITH THOMAS HOLLYWOOD COLUMN. (Oct 15) …’ [etc]
11. [Photo of men w/ oars in a line.] Text verso: ‘NOV 17 1966.’
12. [Photo of man riding drum carried by others] Text verso: ‘JAN 8 1967/ 2nd EDITION.’
13. [Drawing of dancers]. Signed ‘Norkin.’ Text verso: ‘DRAMA SAT FEB 14.’
14. Ballets de l’Afrique noire à l’Amérique latine, Théatre de l’Étoile, Paris. (1952, November-December). Playbill, Recueil de presse, R Supp 4991. In Ballet Africain [*sic*] de Keita Fodéba: Activités (1952-1956 [*sic*]). Item # 3. Département des Arts du Spectacle, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. [images attached separately]

A. photo of F. Keita [page 3; opposite ‘Chemin de success passe par Paris’]

B. photo of ‘les Tropicals’ [page 9]

1. Ballets Africains: Ensemble National de la République de Guinée [*sic*]. (1953-1989). Dossier d’archives de danse, WNN1268 [includes playbills 1954, 1955, 1956, 1957 [?], and 1957]. Département des Arts du Spectacle, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. [images attached separately]
2. 1955 playbill – [cover is man w/ drum and tree and hut]. Photo: Danse d’incantation [p4]
3. 1955 playbill – [cover is man w/ drum and tree and hut]. Photo: La Danse du Macrou [p6]
4. sdf 1955 playbill – [cover is man w/ drum and tree and hut]. Photo: Le Maitre d’Ecole [p9]
5. 1955 playbill – [cover is man w/ drum and tree and hut]. Photo: ‘Le Féticheur…’ [p13]
6. 1955 playbill – [cover is man w/ drum and tree and hut]. Photo: Danse du possedé [p13]
7. 1956 playbill – (item no. 7. )[cover is two acrobats]. [Photo of dancers, two wearing masks] [p6]
8. 1955 playbill – [cover is man w/ drum and tree and hut].

Joshua Cohen