



CIRQUE KALABANTÉ

WOW: WORLD OF WORDS



PERFORMANCE RESOURCE GUIDE

THE PARAMOUNT THEATER

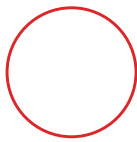
ARTS EDUCATION



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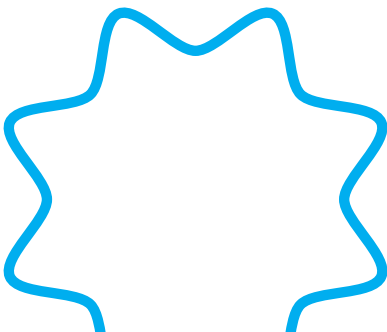
ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This Performance Resource Guide brings together educational materials created by Kalabanté Productions and the Flynn Center for the Performing Arts to help teachers and students prepare for *WOW: World of Words*.

The Flynn Center resource was originally developed for Kalabanté Productions' *Afrique en Cirque*, previously presented at The Paramount. Its exploration of Guinea, West African culture, music, circus arts, and the artists of Kalabanté provides valuable background and context for experiencing *WOW: World of Words*.

Teaching materials created by Kalabanté Productions offer further opportunities to explore the artists, cultural traditions, themes, and ideas that inform their work.

The Paramount Theater gratefully acknowledges Kalabanté Productions and the Flynn Center for the Performing Arts for creating and generously sharing these educational resources.



Originally created by the Flynn Center for the Performing Arts
for Kalabanté Productions: *Afrique en Cirque*

Kalabanté Productions formed in 2007 under the leadership of multidisciplinary artist Yamoussa Bangoura. The word *kalabanté* means “go-getter, ambitious child, with exceptional courage” in Soussou, one of the national languages of the West African country of Guinea, where Bangoura grew up. As a young person, Bangoura was fascinated by the circus performers he would see on TV, and practiced those skills on the beach and around his home. At the age of ten he joined Guinea’s first circus company, Circus Baobab, touring with the company throughout Africa and Europe. In the early 2000s a Montreal-based circus company called Cirque Eloize recruited him to join their company, and he went on to perform with Cirque du Soleil and Cavalia – a circus show that performs with horses!



Yamoussa Bangoura doing some juggling!

[The mission of Kalabanté Productions](#)

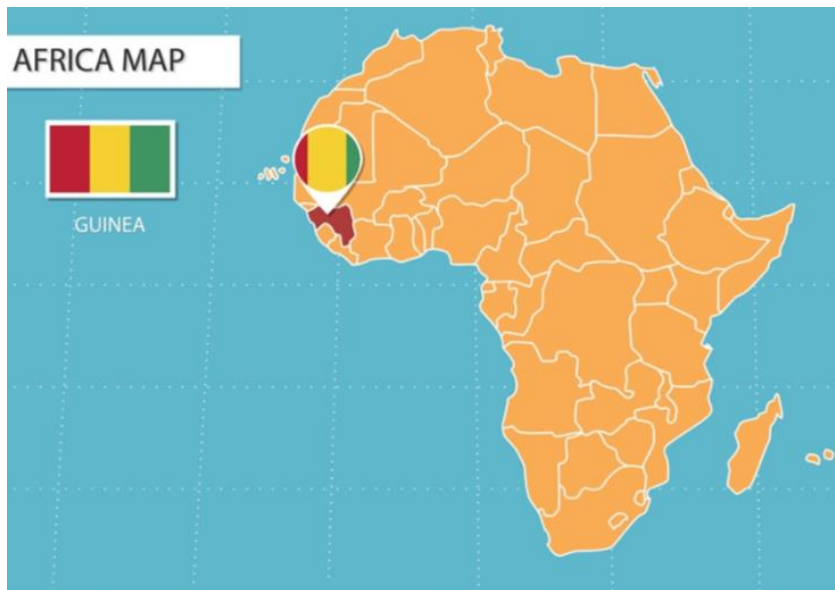
is both to promote African cultural arts and to facilitate humanitarian projects and cultural exchange between Guinea and Canada, where Bangoura has been based since 2002. Since their founding, the company has performed their spectacular original circus, music, and dance shows all around the world. In 2018 they opened a studio and school in Montreal, offering classes in African dance, circus, and drumming.



They are proud to share their incredible work, achievements, and skills to inspire others around the world, and to assist with the humanitarian mission of uplifting the Guinean community which Yamoussa and many other Kalabanté company members come from.

Building a Circus in Guinea

“It’s not the people who come, do some things, and leave, that’s not what is going to change Guinea. It’s we Guineans who will make the change.” -Yamoussa Bangoura



Guinea is a country in West Africa that lies on the coast of the Atlantic Ocean and has a population of about 14 million. The main languages spoken in the country are Malinké, Soussou, and Peul. The colonization language is French, and in 1958 Guinea re-claimed its independence from France through an overwhelming majority vote.

Guinea has a strong tradition of performance including dancing, acrobatics, fire-eating, and music. Every different celebration in the

country is accompanied by a particular rhythm of percussion and a dance or a song. For Guineans, dancing is an important way to invite joy and awaken the senses.

In 1998, French filmmaker Laurent Chevalier came to the country to help start the country’s first circus, Circus Baobab. The company combined traditional Guinean performance with European aerial circus acts. Yamoussa Bangoura was 10 years old at the time, and he was one of 36 young people from Conakry (the capital city) to join. French circus artists came to Guinea and trained the young people for two years in acrobatics and trapeze. The company then went on their first tour in 2000, spending two months traveling around Guinea sharing their performance, “[The Legend of the Drumming Monkey](#).”

After becoming a successful circus performer, Bangoura’s dream was always to return to Guinea and build a circus company and school in his home city of Conakry. In 2010, three years after founding Kalabanté Productions, he formed a circus training school called École Kalabanté in his home city (*école* is the French word for school).



Circus Baobab performing in Guinea in 2001

Like many Guineans, Bangoura grew up in poverty, and he created this school to be a safe place for young Guineans where they can live and learn skills. As one of his students says in the documentary [Circus Without Borders](#), “Whenever someone sees a child doing acrobatics in the streets, they say that ‘the child has been abandoned in the streets.’ So Yamoussa made it his mission that these children would no longer be called ‘The Abandoned Ones.’ Even if they lose their mom or their dad, he makes sure they know that the circus is their father and their mother.”



Members of Kalabanté in Conakry, Guinea

At the École Kalabanté there are no mats on the ground, so training is really challenging. If you fall, you’ll hurt yourself! This means the performers have to learn an incredible amount of control in order to train and develop their skills.

What to Expect: Music, Acrobatics, & More

In this spectacle-filled performance inspired by daily life in Guinea, you’ll see and hear all kinds of music, dance, and incredible acrobatics! The performance features colorful costumes and scenery, and highlights the beauty, youth, and artistry of African culture.



The show is full of live music. Here are just a few of the instruments you’ll get to experience:

Djembe

This goblet shaped drum is traditionally carved from a single piece of African hardwood and topped with a drumhead made of animal skin.

Drummers in Afrique en Cirque. Can you find the goblet-shaped drum in this photo? That’s a djembe!

Kora

A 21-string harp made from a large gourd covered with animal skin. [Check out this video](#) of Bangoura playing the kora for a theater adaptation of the book *Moby Dick*!

Talking drum

This hourglass shaped drum has a special quality – when the player changes the amount of tension placed on the tension cords that connect the drum heads, the pitch of the drum changes too, mimicking the sound and cadence of human speech!

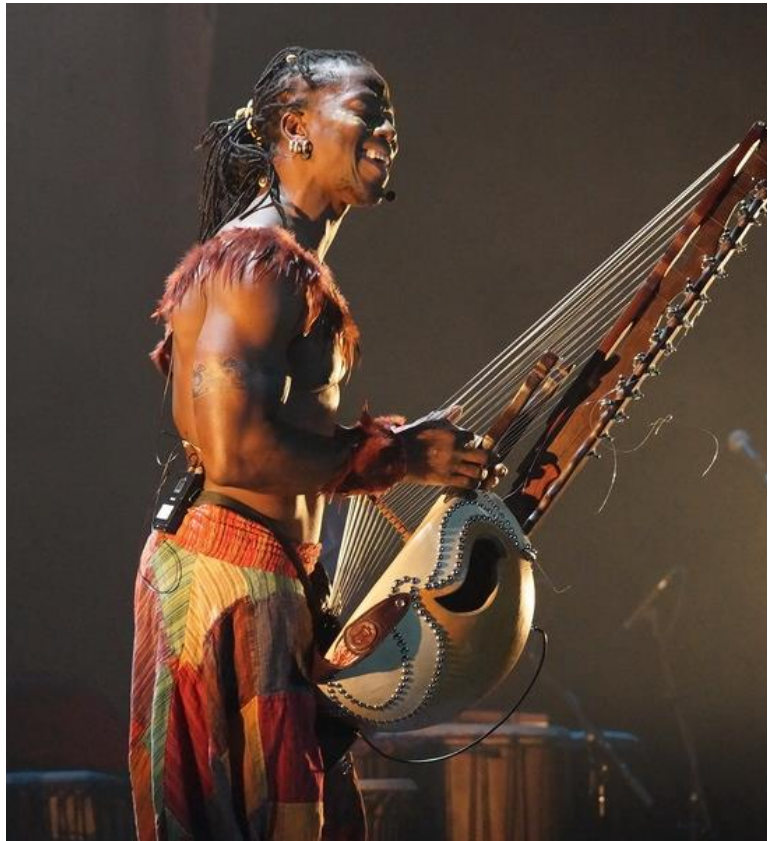
Shekere

A handmade rattle made of a hollow gourd, covered on the outside with a net usually made of seeds, beads, or shells.



shekere covered in cowrie shells. These shells were once used as currency in Guinea!

Another dance you might see is called the [Moribayassa](#), a dance that comes from the Malinké people, another ethnic group in Guinea. The dance was traditionally performed by women as a way to express emotion and get rid of negative energy.



Yamoussa Bangoura playing the kora

Dance

Whenever there are drums in West African cultures, you can be sure there will also be dancing – and this show is no different! Some of the dances you might see come from the different ethnic groups in Guinea. One of the most populous groups is the Fula people. [Check out this video](#) to learn more about the Fula and even try out a couple of moves of the **Fula Fare** (that just means “Fula dance”)!



Dancers performing in Afrique en Cirque

You'll see acrobats perform acts of contortionism, a physical movement practice which involves the dramatic bending and flexing of the human body. Contortion is often part of acrobatics and circus acts. In general, contortionists have a certain degree of unusual natural flexibility, which is enhanced through years of gymnastic training and physical discipline. **You'll also see acrobats create incredible gravity-defying human pyramids!**



Acrobats making a human pyramid in Afrique en Cirque

Reflection Questions:

Here are some example questions to prompt deeper engagement from your students, both before and after the show:

Before the Show:

- Have you ever been to a theater before? What are some ways an audience is expected to behave in a theater that are different from how you behave in other places you go for entertainment, like a movie theater?
- When you think about West Africa, what comes to mind?
- When you think about circus, what do you picture? What kinds of tricks or skills do you think you might see in a circus?

After the Show:

- How did the show meet or expand your expectations of circus?
- How did the show make you feel? Was there a specific moment when it caused an emotional reaction in you? How did it do that? What did the show make you think about?
- What instruments did you see, and what sounds did they make?
- What were some of the most amazing tricks or skills you saw from the performers?
- What did you learn about Guinean or West African culture? Did you learn anything that surprised you?
- If you were to write a review of the show, what would you say? What stood out to you? Would you recommend it to other people? Why?

Resources:

- [Teaser Trailer: Afrique en Cirque](#)
- [Kalabanté Productions: Mission and History](#)
- [Documentary: Circus Without Borders](#)
- [Fula Fare: A Dance and Rhythm of the Nomadic People of Guinea, West Africa](#)
- [Moribayassa Dance](#)
- [Video: Circus Baobab Performs “The Legend of the Drumming Monkey”](#)
- [Yamoussa Bangoura Playing the Kora](#)

Teaching material
December 2021

FOLLOW THE ADVENTURES OF YAMOUSSA BANGOURA

Productions
 *Kalabanté*



Writing and production: Sarah Leclerc-Gendron Graphic design: Creation NetenKena

A dream that originated in the other side of the Atlantic Ocean

Yamoussa was born in Guinea, a coastal country in West Africa. His family lives in Gbessia Centre, a small district of the capital, Conakry, located near the airport. From an early age, he finds himself dreaming of adventure.

He has five brothers and one sister. His parents have 7 children. Yamoussa is the fourth child, right in the middle. During his early childhood, Yamoussa's mother brings in a meager income to the household by selling bread. His dad alternates between unemployment and prison, Guinea being under a repressive political system at the time.

His grandma Sirabinty is very present. As in most African countries, the whole extended family lives under the same roof. Elders also have a special place in the family and they usually pass on their wisdom to their descendants. Sirabinty has a special connection with her grandson Yamoussa, since he bears the first name of her late husband. The bond is very strong between them and Grandma keeps the little gifts she receives to offer them to Yamoussa in secret.



It must be said that the tradition of giving the name of a family member to a newborn baby is pretty widespread in Guinea. It gives a sense of unity to the family and it keeps them close forever. By giving the name of a parent, grandparent, brother or sister to your child, you make sure to perpetuate the memory of this person.



While in North America parental authority normally rests almost exclusively with the mother and father, in Guinea and many other parts of Africa there's a common belief that it takes a village to raise a child. Therefore, many adults play a significant role in the life of every child and they interact with each and every one of them with the purest of intentions.

An extraordinary upbringing

Yamoussa is eleven years old. His dad now works as a community worker. He is contributing to solving problems occurring in the district. His father leaves the house very early in the morning. On his way to school, Yamoussa goes to see him to get some money. He buys himself a breakfast in order to arrive at school with a full stomach. For Yamoussa's dad, education is the key to the world. Yamoussa is brilliant and he excels throughout his education in primary school. Even when he is not first in the class, he is never far behind.

The primary school that Yamoussa attends is called Limanyah, which means courage. Instinctively, it is as if he already knew from an early age that his life story would require a lot of courage.

On his way to his father's workplace one morning, he met a dance and percussion troupe called SAAMATO. He befriends Bobzi who later introduces him to his father, Alya Gigla Sylla. Bobzi's dad has several jobs: He is both a dance teacher and a soldier, a perfect mix of creativity and discipline.

Yamoussa is introduced to traditional dance and music. He is gifted and he becomes aware of everything he can feel and transmit through the movements of his body.

On Sundays, the only television station in Gbessia Center broadcasts shows from European circuses. People gather in front of the TV, captivated by the performers' prowess. Once the retransmission is over, several young people, including Yamoussa, find themselves on the seashore to try to replicate the same movements they just witnessed. This is a place known to acrobats that is commonly called the little Dabondy river. Yamoussa met his first acrobatics master there. His name is Lawless. This man is known to be very enthusiastic and to have no limits. He replicates everything he sees on TV and he then asks his students to do the acrobatics on the asphalt after practicing on the beach. He also only takes under his wing the students he considers to be hard working and courageous. It's in this context and with this weekly training that Yamoussa's passion for acrobatics ends up growing more and more.

Yamoussa's second teacher is called Abass. He too works in the army and he's an example of discipline and both physical and psychological strength. Anytime the teacher goes somewhere, Yamoussa carries his belongings. He also washes his clothes and brings them to him the next day.



An extraordinary upbringing (part 2)

Eventually, an opportunity presents itself. He ends up auditioning for the filming of the movie Circus Baobab. He gets the role! The film is a great success. A show called «The Legend of the Drumming Monkey» is put on and Yamoussa is now part of a troupe of people of all ages promoted for a major tour through Guinea, and later in Europe.

He travels through Spain with the mandate to represent Guinea in Spain with the troupe led by Jordi and Adelaida. He spends six months in Barcelona, a Spanish city. Eventually, he was recruited by Cirque Éloize and he ended up in Canada for the show Nomade. He spent five or six years there.

He also collaborated with Cirque du Soleil for special events. In fact, Yamoussa worked during these years with almost all circuses from Quebec: Cavalia, ArtCirq, Les 7 Fingers, Luna Caballera, Circo de Bakuza, etc.

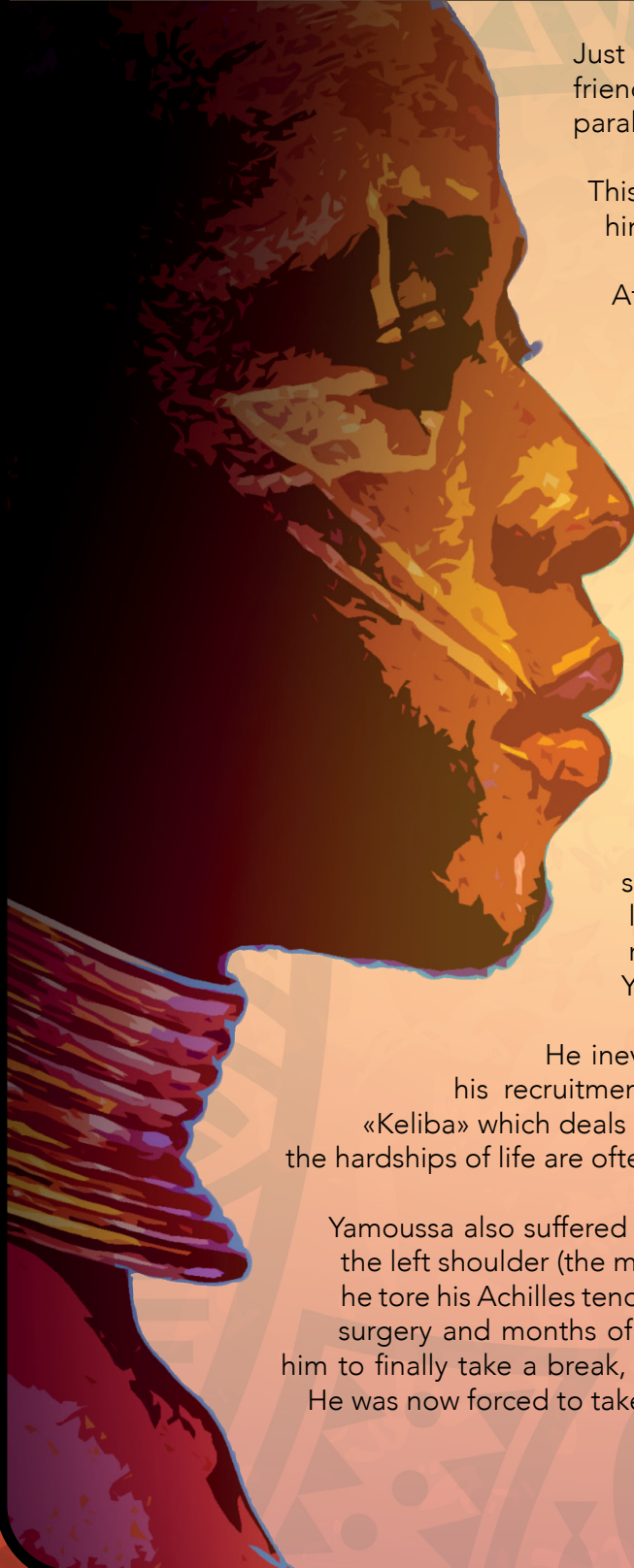
At some point, an idea starts growing in his mind. What if he started his own business? It wasn't long before he created Kalabanté with the support of Guillaume Saladin, a good friend he met at the Éloize circus who is also the founder of ArtCirq. They collaborated together and Yamoussa then gave shows in the north on Innu territory. Ikaluit, Kujuaaq, Yellow Knife, Cambridge Bay, Igloo lik, etc. His shows got him to travel across Canada.

A film crew even decided to follow their cultural collaboration for 7 years, which led to the production of the film Circus Without Border.

He put a stop to Kalabanté for almost three years to work with Cavalia. He eventually decided to stop the tour and to return to Montreal in order to develop Kalabanté. He created his own shows and he decided to hire artists from Guinea and bring them to Canada to train them.



Through hardship, a story of resilience



Just before leaving Guinea, one of Yamoussa's acrobat friends injured himself on the trampoline. His friend is paralyzed, he will never walk again.

This tragedy taught him to be careful and it showed him the importance of respecting his intuition.

After some time, he leaves for a European tour. He is still a child, he is only 12 years old. He sometimes feels far from home as he is away from his family, but he is grateful to have a job and to be with his friends.

Yamoussa has a big curiosity and a great desire to travel the world. He feels a lot of gratitude to be able to learn continuously and to get to know others and their culture.

Years after Kalabanté was created, he felt great disappointment towards Guinean artists who dropped him the day before a show and suddenly disappeared. Yamoussa worked very hard to help them enter Canada and perform on the Canadian and international scene. He has to face the obvious: these people lied to him, since they never had the intention to return to Guinea and to honor their commitment. Yamoussa feels betrayed and manipulated.

He inevitably got up, rolled up his sleeves and changed his recruitment process. He also created a solo show called «Keliba» which deals with abandonment and betrayal. This is proof that the hardships of life are often a great source of inspiration!

Yamoussa also suffered several injuries throughout his career: an injury to the left shoulder (the meniscus) which caused him some difficulties. Then, he tore his Achilles tendon, which meant that he would have to go through surgery and months of rehabilitation. This was a golden opportunity for him to finally take a break, which he otherwise wouldn't allow himself to do. He was now forced to take some time to breathe, slow down and reflect.

Guinea, mystical culture and ancient traditions

Guinea is a coastal country in West Africa divided into 4 regions:

Maritime Guinea, the mountainous region of Middle Guinea, the savannah of Upper Guinea and Forest Guinea. The main languages spoken in Guinea are Malinké, Soussou and Peul. The

colonization language

is French. The capital is called

Conakry and is located in Maritime Guinea where the main language is Soussou. The name of the country, Guinea, could be translated to "Woman" in English and Conakry to "The other side of the shore". Guinea is a country rich in mineral and natural resources. It also has a very rich culture.



In Guinea, adults tell a story to children to scare them so that they do not venture into the forest at night. This tale is about a mystical character, the Dö-ki, who has his feet backwards and whose skull is made of iron. It is said that the Dö-ki, a terrifying character, places baits all around the forest. He wisely attracts the children by placing mangoes on the path which leads them towards the center of the forest. There, the children find a large pile of mangoes not far from where the Dö-ki is camouflaged in the bushes, patiently waiting for them. Suddenly, he gets out of his hiding place and tells them : N'könkön firin n'khi könkön keren! Hit my head twice! Then, I will hit you only once! Threatening them to blow their heads off with his hammer fingers.

Guinea, mystical culture and ancient traditions (part 2)

Another character, named Tambaloumbé, lives in the imagination of Guinean children. This snake is both real (it exists in real life) and mystical. It is said that he guides children throughout their lives and invites them to do good around them. He has a



crown on his head made of cowries (small white shells). The oral tradition of Tambaloumbé tells with great wisdom that when someone does harm around them, they always have the power to make up for it. This person can do wrong once or twice and still be forgiven. At the third offense, their luck is exhausted and the Tambaloumbé is there to remind them. Because this snake looks like grass and hides in the Guinean forest, no one is safe from accidentally stepping on it. The legend says that if you step on its tail you are still at the beginning of your life, if you step in the center of its body you are in the middle of your life and if you step on its head you are at the end of your life.

The musical and cultural tradition of Guinea is very vast. Each celebration is accompanied by a particular rhythm of percussion, a dance and/or a song. Whether it is Mendiani for girls and young virgins, Soli to accompany circumcision rituals or Konkoba (which means great farmer) to encourage farmers to work well, Guinea beats along the rhythm of the drums. Rhythm is very present in everyday life, it's the energy that propels you forward. For Guineans, it is important to dance at all times to invite joy, awaken the senses and flourish.



Guinea, mystical culture and ancient traditions (part 3)

For example, the Yankadi rhythm was accompanying a dance of seduction at the time Yamoussa's mom and dad met. This dance was taking place outside at the center of the village and around a fire when the moon could be seen in the sky. First there was the call, a particular rhythm that the percussionists produced by hitting the drums. The women would then stand on one side and the men on the other side. Men would spot a young woman they found attractive and they would stand in front of her. They would attempt to do daring dance moves, winking or smiling at her.



Every year, Guinean children also participate in a celebration called Yoliolio. It has its own song and rhythm. During Yoliolio, the children go around the village and they give gifts to the grandmothers. They use large metal cans to play. It's not necessary to be initiated (to have taken lessons), since all the children know the rhythm of Yoliolio.

Guinea, mystical culture and ancient traditions (part 4)

The vast majority of Guineans, including those of Muslim or Christian faith, are also animists. They share the belief that a spirit animates all living things, such as plants, animals, the elements (water, earth, fire, air) and even stones. They heal themselves with herbs, love to play cowries and they practice the art of divination.

Cowries are small shells that were used as money in the past. They are native to the Maldives Islands and they were imported to Africa long before colonization.

They are also used in divinatory art by being launched to the ground.

Then, someone interprets them by using their position in space.

Cowries are also used to make jewelry and they are sometimes sewn onto clothing.



During a celebration (of a wedding or of a death), animal sacrifices are frequent. The animal is killed according to a ritual before it gets eaten. Then, craftsmen create doundoun with the skin of the animal. In Guinea it is believed that souls fly away to animate others. This transmission is at the heart of Productions Kalabanté's mission: to pass on the energy of life and the joy of moving and being together, since:

**« If you can walk, you can dance
and if you can talk, you can sing. »**



The honor code for acrobats



Include and share:

The circus is a place where everyone belongs, regardless of their origin. It's a way to get in touch with the different cultures of the world, a way to meet people and exchange, even when you don't speak the same language.

Mutual trust:

Le cirque est un art basé sur le travail d'équipe, la synchronicité et la confiance mutuelle. Quand un artiste monte en haut d'une pyramide humaine, il doit avoir une confiance inébranlable envers les autres personnes qui forment la base de la pyramide, parce qu'une simple négligence peut mettre sa vie en danger.



Transparency:

The art of the circus is also a way to be completely vulnerable and exposed. An artist can brag as much as he wants, it's only when on stage and under the spotlight that we can really see what he's capable of. It's in his movements, through his presence and his strength of mind that he really reveals himself.

Courage :

The journey of a circus artist is full of difficulties and disappointments. No one can be liked by everyone. Giving up or being affected by others is not an option. You have to be courageous enough to be yourself, to believe in your own potential and to make many mistakes, since this is the only way to learn and grow. Remember: a movement may have been repeated a million times before being perfectly performed in front of an audience!



QUESTIONS

A bit of introspection

Name a situation in which you had to be courageous.

Give examples of experiences you've had that pushed you to practice discipline in order to overcome something or to achieve your goals.

What's a difficult situation you went through that taught you the most about yourself?

What surprises you, moves you or shocks you the most about Yamoussa's journey?
Why?

Reading comprehension

Name two peculiarities of Yamoussa's childhood.

Indicate a Guinean tradition with as many details as possible.

Why do Guinean mystical characters exist? What is their purpose?

To find out more about

Productions



kalabanté

Visit:

www.kalabante productions.com

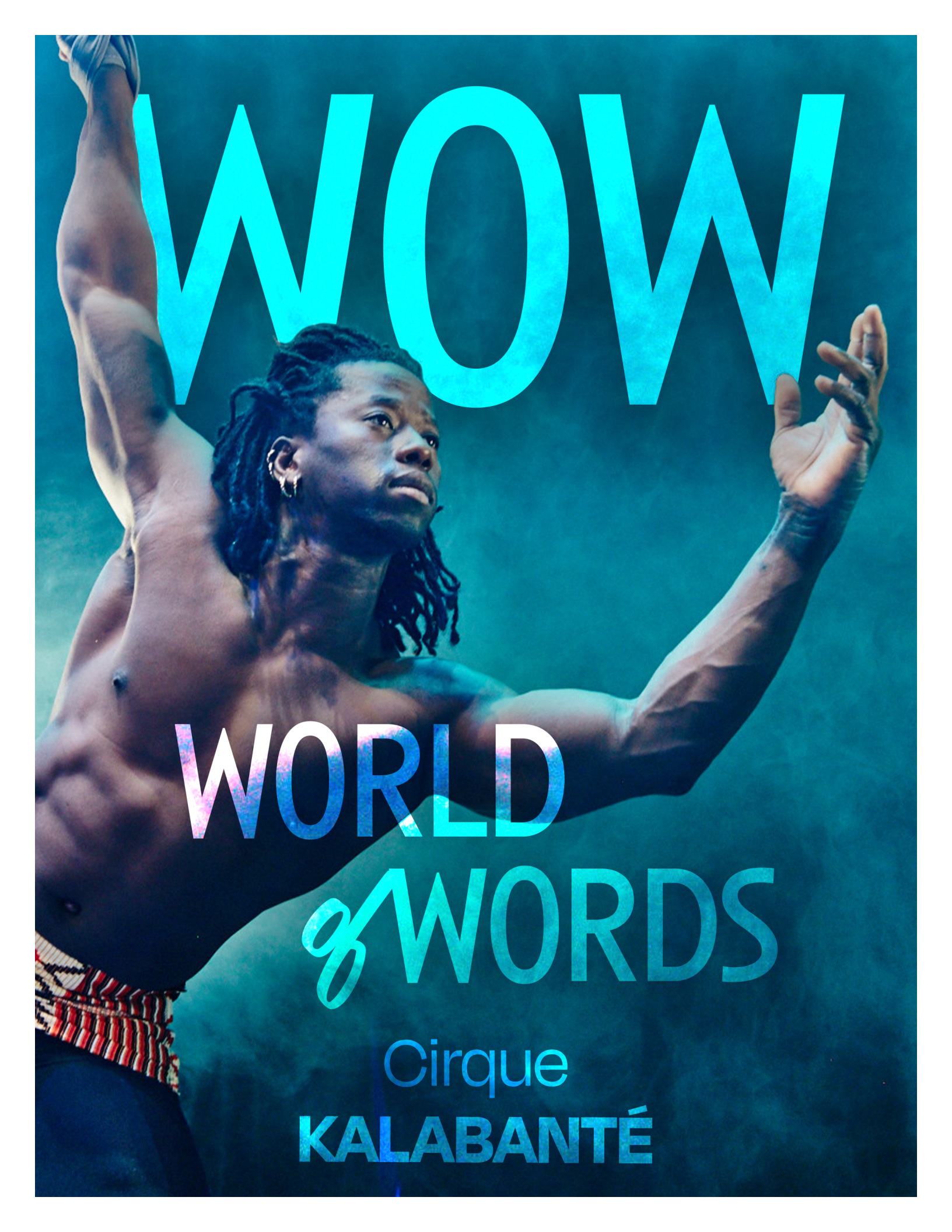


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