

THE PRIMARY GEOGRAPHY

Interview

Seckou Keita



Seckou Keita. Photo © Elly Lucas.

Seckou Keita is a Senegalese kora player and musician who came to the UK in the 1990s. His award-winning music includes work with his own band, plus collaborations with Welsh harpist Catrin Finch, Senegalese singer Baaba Maal and Cuban pianist Omar Sosa. In 2018, he worked with other musicians on 'The Lost Words: Spell Songs', an adaptation of Robert MacFarlane and Jackie Morris's 'The Lost Words.' A follow-up is due out soon. Here he discusses the importance and influence of geography in life and work.

What is your favourite place?

I love travelling around the world, but there is something about home in Ziguinchor, which is really special for me. Not only the landscape but the people, the smell of the food, sharing everything: it brings my childhood to me as a grown-up. That is the reason I released a new single called 'Homeland', which has lyrics about how much I miss home, how much home means to me: that landscape, the space

that you have there, how kids are so free to just do their thing in the street without parents being worried. Every person looks after each other in a way.

The pandemic really helped me look at what is important now. There is all this running after money, trying to make a living and be a star, but it all comes down to family and home. When you die, it is your family that they call.

What are your memories of learning geography as a child?

For me, it was not very correctly taught, because I was learning the geography of France and they were not teaching me the geography of my own area. It was a French school and that was how the curriculum was set.

Recently, I saw a guy walking around in Senegal with a mike and a camera asking people about geography, including university students. He was talking about this new boat from Dakar to Ziguinchor via Tambacounda [inland, to the East of the country] ... but actually there is no waterway linking these places. People didn't realise, simply because they had not been taught about the geography of their own place. But if you asked them about the Tour Eiffel, then they would be able to say it is Paris, it is near such and such a place, it is so many kilometres away, they would know.

When it comes to geography, I know it because I have travelled. That helps me. When I first came to the UK, I would put stickers on the map on the places I had been, so that I could learn my way around. You learn another way because travel helps you see where things are.

Tell us a little about your recent work

Apart from the 'Homeland' single with Baaba Maal, we are recording a second album for 'The Lost Words'. This is a great project. It came to me by luck. I didn't know Jackie Morris, but she often used to listen to my music in her studio while she was drawing. So she came to see me at the Hay Festival.

One thing came into my head when they said about 'lost words'. I was trying to make a song, an oral narrative for the way that I see things. It was clear that there are some words that have been lost in English. But in Senegal they have not been forgotten but buried, overtaken or replaced by the colonial language. So today, if you go to The Gambia and say hello to someone, by the time they have completed their reply, there is some English in it. The word 'kumfaa' for 'shop' is becoming 'shopi'. The word starts vanishing slowly. Sometimes you have to go really deep, talk to elder people, to find the right word.

The other thing I am working in is an album called 'SUBA' with the Cuban musician Omar Sosa. The word means 'sunrise'. It was composed during the pandemic when we couldn't get out. There are songs there with a geographical meaning, about the sea, about water, and then about forced migration, about people who have gone to the US or to Europe because they have no choice. People are going now because there is nothing left where they have come from, so they go onto the sea to find certain things. There are also positive elements, such as seeing a sunrise on a new day and a new hope... goodbye to what we have had for the last two years. A prayer to stay sustainable and carry on. This is a music that travelled from Africa to Cuba and came back. These exchanges help you see how far we are apart but also how there are some similarities between us.

A lot of primary schools teach an 'Africa' topic. What do you think the teachers and the pupils ought to know when they do this?

Like I said, I had to travel to understand the world because they taught me French geography in Ziguinchor. There is nothing better than witnessing or being in the place, either for the teacher or the children. It brings some clarity, but living it is different from explaining it.

In 2011, we brought some young people over from Belfast schools to Ziguinchor to do music workshops and to learn. The kids came from different schools and usually they wouldn't mingle. They witnessed everything, they sat in class with hundreds of kids where you couldn't see who was a Christian or who was Muslim. Some of those kids became good friends. They learned djembe [drumming], they witnessed how we celebrate Eid, they went to the mosque, they couldn't believe what they had seen. Some of those kids had never learned about Africa, maybe they thought people live in trees and so forth. They were saying, this is how life is supposed to be, you don't have to have money to have a good life. For those kids and those teachers, they started to see things differently. So travel is one of the key points.

I have visited a lot of schools in the UK, where you are trying to express things. Some are great and some have no clue. As soon as the bell goes, you lose everything: you become nobody, you are just like a wall. It is a tough job for anyone but for me there are possibilities for some people to understand. Some voices and some images of Africa in reality to show to the pupils.

The real Africa is one that has developed and changed. It is evolving as we are moving. There are washing machines and mobile phones. You can talk about the roots and traditions that you want to see, anywhere in the world, but the real Africa is everything you see. People have to see this and understand.

There is a question for me about how you make a journey in your mind. It can be hard to describe it. You are sitting on a flight to Alaska, for example, which happened to me. I have never been to Alaska before and then I go there. The way I think about Alaska is in my imagination, in my head. Maybe I think that there is snow everywhere; that people kiss with their noses. I don't know why, I have heard it from somewhere and I have it in my mind. When I arrive, I see something slightly different from what I have been thinking. For me, the journey is starting again. It is not what I had been travelling with. It feels a little unreal. My brain has to ask what it is witnessing and to balance that with what I had been imagining in the first place.

Some years ago I went with my uncle to play in Bologna in Italy. We went to eat and asked for spaghetti Bolognese. People laughed at us. In my mind, we were in the land of it. Where else did the name come from? But in real Bologna you have spaghetti with sauce or with tomatoes.

If you were in charge of education, how would you develop it for the future?

From my point of view, education is first of all an open-minded thing. I need to be able to start first of all not to close my mind and make barriers. So that would be my first thing to sort out. To let things in: to realise that what I know from my training is not good enough to take me around. I need to have experience of other things, to let kids teach me as a teacher. Even a newborn child can tell you things you do not already know. Teaching is not just about saying, 'I am the adult, I know more than you.'

Secondly, ask questions, make the balance, go deeply and don't just sit there and accept it because Seckou said so – go and find out what others say and then you will be full of knowledge that you have taken from different angles. Then you can say, 'this is it.'



Web Resources

Seckou's website:

<https://www.seckoukeita.com>

'Homeland' video with Baaba Maal:

<https://youtu.be/k-YTkMaM62w>

Making of SUBA (video):

<https://youtu.be/wHhixOfBapU>

The Lost Words:

<https://www.thelostwords.org>