

A painting of a woman in traditional African attire, holding a spear and a shield. She is wearing a blue shawl with gold trim and a gold necklace. The background features a patterned wall and a plant. The text is overlaid on a white rectangular box in the center.

THE FOUNDERS PROJECT
COMPANION RESOURCE

FOREWORD:

THE FOUNDERS PROJECT IS A MULTIMEDIA INSTALLATION PROJECT HEADED BY BOSTON BASED ARTIST AND EDUCATOR STEPHEN HAMILTON. THE PROJECT RE-IMAGINES BOSTON PUBLIC SCHOOL HIGH-SCHOOL STUDENTS AS THE LEGENDARY FOUNDERS OF WEST AND WEST-CENTRAL AFRICAN ETHNIC GROUPS; SPECIFICALLY, THOSE THAT ARE PART OF THE AFRICAN DIASPORA'S ANCESTRAL BASE.

THE FOUNDERS PROJECT COMES OUT OF A DESIRE TO ADDRESS THE PERSISTENT LACK OF PRE-COLONIAL AFRICAN NARRATIVES IN MAINSTREAM EDUCATIONAL DISCOURSE AND CREATE EMPOWERING VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS OF BOSTON'S BLACK YOUTH. THIS PROJECT BOTH EXPLORES AND INTERROGATES POPULAR CONCEPTIONS OF "THE ANCESTORS" WITHIN THE AFRICAN DIASPORIC IMAGINATION. WE EXPLORE THE PROGENITOR OR "FOUNDER" CONCEPT IN WEST AND WESTCENTRAL AFRICAN LORE AS THE PHYSICAL EMBODIMENT OF A PEOPLE AND THEIR HISTORY. THROUGH THEIR NARRATIVES, WE LEARN IMPORTANT LESSONS ABOUT THE CULTURAL IMPERATIVES, WORLDVIEW, AND AESTHETICS OF THE ETHNIC GROUPS WHO VENERATE AND SOMETIMES WORSHIP THEM AS DIVINE ANCESTORS. EACH PIECE DISSECTS IMPORTANT KEY SYMBOLS ABOUT EACH OF THE HIGHLIGHTED INDIVIDUALS' PERSONAL AND BROADER CULTURAL NARRATIVES, GLOSSING THE HISTORICAL FIGURE AND THE CULTURES THAT CLAIM THEM AS ANCESTORS.

DURING THE TRANSATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE, MILLIONS OF PEOPLE WERE FORCIBLY TAKEN FROM THEIR HOMELANDS ALL OVER WEST AND WEST-CENTRAL AFRICA. EACH OF THESE PEOPLE BROUGHT WITH THEM THEIR OWN STORIES AS WELL AS CENTURIES OF RICH AND COMPLEX TRADITIONS FROM THEIR ANCESTRAL HOMELANDS. THE FOUNDER'S PROJECT DETAILS THE FOUNDATION MYTHS OF NINE OF THE DOZENS OF ETHNIC GROUPS ANCESTRAL TO MILLIONS OF BLACK PEOPLE ACROSS THE AMERICAS.

MOST OF THESE LEGENDS TOOK PLACE BETWEEN THE 11TH AND 16TH CENTURIES WHEN INCREASES IN TRANS-SAHARAN TRADE ENCOURAGED THE EXPANSION OF STATES THAT HAD EMERGED DURING LATE ANTIQUITY. HOWEVER, IT IS ESSENTIAL FOR US NOT TO RELY ON A LINEAR AND MONOCHRONIC VIEW OF TIME WHEN INTERPRETING THESE STORIES. MANY OF THESE LEGENDS BLEND TOGETHER EVENTS FROM THE SPREAD OF ISLAM IN THE 10TH CENTURY TO THE EMERGENCE OF WEST AFRICA'S EARLIEST IRON AGE CIVILIZATIONS IN THE FIRST MILLENNIUM B.C.E AND EVEN FURTHER TO ANCIENT MIGRATIONS DEEP IN PRE-HISTORY. THEIR DESCENDANTS OFTEN DEIFIED THE FOUNDERS OF THESE ANCIENT DYNASTIES IN BOTH AFRICA AND THE AMERICAS. THE STORIES I SHARE WITH YOU NOW HAVE BEEN PASSED DOWN THROUGH COUNTLESS GENERATIONS.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

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SPECIAL THANKS TO NOW+THERE

GIANNA WATSON AS YENNENGA



Yennenga Matriarch of The Mossi People Modern-day northern Ghana and Burkina Faso

“Yennenga, the tree from which the Mossi people grew”
Yennenga was the daughter of Madega, the legendary 12th-century ruler of the kingdom of Dagbon in what is now northern Ghana. A mighty warrior in her own right, Yennenga lead soldiers into battle at the age of only 14. Matchless with the bow and spear, she was a legendary horsewoman who won many battles in her father’s name. When she came of age and expressed the desire to marry, her father refused. In protest, she planted an entire crop of Okra and let it rot in the field to show how she felt her life was withering away, and her time to start her own family was passing by her. Her father was unmoved, so she escaped her father’s compound disguised as a man. Upon leaving her father’s kingdom, she met a young Malinke prince and elephant hunter named Riale. They fell in love and had a son Ouedraogo, who became the first Mogho Naba (king) of the Mossi empire located in Burkina Faso. Though Ouedraogo was their first king, the Mossi credit Yennenga as the founder of their nation and the royal horseman of Mossiland, to this day, still carry her legacy forward.

Yennenga’s story references a very complex time when multiple smaller Kingdoms were vying for power in the West African Savannah. The use of cavalry and the establishment of new dynasties claiming ancestry from legendary rulers (numerous Royal dynasties claim descent from Madega) and merging various groups to create new nations are common themes in foundation myths during this crucial time in history.

DASHAWN BORDEN AS SUNDIATA KEITA



Sundiata Keita First Mansa of The Mali Empire
Modern-day Mali, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Senegal,
Mauritania and Gambia

“The Hungering Lion” “Son of the Lion and the Buffalo”
Sundiata Keita was the first Mansa (Emperor) of the Mali
Empire in modern-day Mali, Guinea, and the Gambia. As one
of Africa’s most legendary kings and warriors, it was
Sundiata that restored stability in the region after the fall of
the once-powerful Ghana empire after its collapse in the 11th
century. Sundiata was born in the late 12th to early 13th
century in the kingdom of Niane (Kangaba) in what is now
Guinea. He was the son of king Nare Mahgan Kon Fatta and
his junior wife, Sogolon Kedjou. Sundiata united the 12
doors (kingdoms) of Mali into an empire after defeating
Soumaoro, the king of the Sosso empire.

The circumstances of his birth and rise to power are
inscribed in Sundiata’s epic retold for centuries by the
Griot (Bards) of the Kouyate clan. A sorcerer-king who
was peerless with the bow and arrow, his story is filled
with magic and heroism. The story of Sundiata’s
struggles includes overcoming being a sickly child,
coming of age in exile after his father’s death, and the
physical and magical battles between him and the armies
of Soumaoro. These tales are part of one of the most
cherished and essential pieces of oral literature from
pre-colonial Africa. He established an empire that would
become one of the most influential states in the world.

JOSEPH LEWIS AS EZE NRI



Eze Nri of the Nri Igbo, First Eze of The Nri Kingdom Modern Day Nigeria

The Nri Igbo of north-central Igboland (currently Southeastern Nigeria) are one of the most ancient groups of the Igbo people, one of Nigeria's three largest ethnic groups. For over 1000 years, the region was under the suzerainty of the Eze's, an order of powerful priest-kings responsible for upholding sacred rites and purifying the land of taboos. According to legend Eri, the first Eze Nri descended into the world from the heavens and found himself standing on an anthill surrounded by wet and marshy land. He complained to the high God Chukwu about his situation, who then sent down a blacksmith, who dried the earth with his bellows. This blacksmith would become the ancestor of the legendary Akwa blacksmiths, who are the most famed metalworkers in Igboland. The place he founded was Aguleri, the capital of what would become the Kingdom of Nri.

Eri bore a son named Nri, who found that the Igbo people were without sustenance as the mystical food provided to them by his father Eri left from the world upon his death. To remedy this, he sacrificed his own two children to the earth. From his son sprouted the yam plant, and from his daughter came the Cocoyam, two of the Igbo people's significant crops. His sacrifices were not enough, though, so to provide more food for humanity, he sacrificed a male and female "slave." From their bodies came the breadfruit tree and the oil palm. In exchange for such a grave sacrifice, the Eze's reserved the right to purify the land of taboos, preside over sacred religious rites and play a significant role in installing title holders.

JAHNAE WYATT AS QUEEN POKU



Queen Poku Of the Baule People Modern day Cote d'Ivoire.

Queen Poku was the legendary queen of the Baule people of what is now Cote d'Ivoire. According to legend, when her people were fleeing the violent expansionist wars of the Ashanti people, they came upon a river that was far too deep and wide to cross. Queen Poku offered her infant son to the river spirit in exchange for her people's safe passage. After giving her child to the river, hippopotamuses emerged from its depths, and her people were able to walk across on their backs. Poku was so broken-hearted after her sacrifice that all she could say was "Baouli," "Baouli," "the child is dead." To honor their queen, her tribe named themselves "Baoule" for her grief. The willingness to offer the ultimate sacrifice and experience terrible loss for one's people is a common theme in many of our ancestors' foundation myths. May it remind us that royalty is not merely about pomp and splendor but also about what we are willing to give for our communities' betterment and survival.

RUTH AYUSO AS THE FIRST NNIMM WOMAN



First Nnimm Woman of the Ejagham Modern Day Nigeria and Cameroon

Among the Ejagham people of southeastern Nigeria and western Cameroon, there existed two powerful ancient magico-religious institutions. These are the ancient orders of Nimm and Ngbe. Divided along the gender lines, Ngbe was and still is a powerful male society representing the leopard's embodied mysteries. Its members held political and spiritual sway over the region. They shared this power with Nnimm's once-powerful Female order represented by water spirits, such as the Crocodile and Snake. Both cults used the ancient Nsibidi script used by the Ejagham, Ibibio, and Igbo peoples in the various Ngbe lodges throughout southeastern Nigeria. The Nnimm goddess represents the feminine powers of the world, such as water, fertility, and the mysteries of life itself. Her knowledge is also tied to important women's initiation ritual spaces, such as the fattening house, where women prepare for marriage and learn of feminine matters.

It is through the priestesses of Nnimm that women exerted spiritual and political influence in the cross-river region. The Nnimm priestess and initiates' splendid regalia are abundant with feathers, shells, bones, beads, and abundant cloth. They are also painted with sacred symbols and patterns using sacred white chalk. This regalia was believed to have been brought down from the heavens by the first Nnimm initiate, who revealed the water and forest spirits' secret to humanity centuries ago. These women were as feared and respected as the Ngbe (leopard/panther) society ruled by their male counterparts and represented the balance between male and female powers necessary in preserving order. Although the ancient Nnimm society no longer exists, many of their ancient practices survive in the traditional dress and regalia of the modern Ejagham, Ibibio, and Aro Igbo peoples. During the Transatlantic slave trade, the mythology and regalia of Nnimm absorbed into the Ngbe leopard society in Cuba to create the Abakua society, which still preserves the ceremony, sacred writing, and mysteries of the ancient orders in their contemporary traditions.

RASHAD CLARKE AS ODUDUWA



Oduduwa of the Yoruba People, First Ooni of Ile-Ife Modern Day Nigeria, Benin Republic, and Togo

“One who Descended to the earth on the Iron Chain” “Lawgiver of The Earth” Oduduwa is the legendary first Ooni (king) of Ile Ife, the ancient center of the Yoruba civilization, located in what is now southwestern Nigeria and the eastern Benin Republic. The identity and even gender of this legendary figure differ depending on where in Yorubaland, you hear the story. Although various legends surround this enigmatic leader, the most commonly recorded legend claims that he was one of the Orisa, ancient spirits of natural and civilizing forces, worshipped by the Yoruba people and their descendants in the Americas. In a popular legend, his brother Obatala was tasked with creating the world but became drunk off palm wine and failed to complete his task. Olodumare, the supreme being, then sent Oduduwa in his stead. Oduduwa descended into the world on the Iron chain holding a snail shell, and accompanying him was the rooster and the Chameleon. When he arrived on the earth, he upturned the snail shell, and sand poured forth. The rooster (akuko) then spread the sand to the four corners of the world, and the chameleon (Oga) tested the stability of the earth with its careful steps.

Yoruba historians have interpreted the legend as a metaphor for ancient conflicts between warring dynasties vying for power over Ile-Ife and its vast resources. The story also mythologizes the consolidation of Ile-Ife into one of Nigeria’s earliest metropolises. His son’s and daughters dispersed from Ife, founding the 16 ancient Yoruba kingdoms. Although there are many legends about Oduduwa, his place in Yoruba history cannot be denied. He is so important that the Yoruba people often refer to themselves as Omo Oduduwa (the children of Oduduwa).

SALAMATA BARRY AS BAJEMONGO



Bajemongo Matriarch Fulani people
Modern-day Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and other places in West Africa

The Fulani people are one of West Africa's Largest and most widespread ethnic groups. There are many diverse oral traditions about the origins of the Fulani people. One such Legend claims that the Fulani people descend from six brothers, all born from a woman named Bajemongo. According to legend, Bajemongo bore four children from mortal men, two from her first husband Yukubu and two more from her second husband, Yukubu's younger brother. These four sons would become the ancestors of the sedentary Fulani clans. It was said that Bajemongo bore her last two sons from a water spirit. Ridiculed for their lack of inheritance, Bajemongo beseeched the water spirit on behalf of her sons to provide the means to gain wealth and prestige. This water spirit gifted his sons with cattle, and their descendants became the nomadic cattle-herding Fulani clans.

The story blends elements of ancient pre-Islamic Fulani folklore and the very devout Muslim present-day Fulani clans' Islamic sensibilities. Millions of Fulbe speakers live in communities all over western, central, and even parts of eastern Africa. This is an incredibly diverse community; this is only one of the many stories about the Fulani people's origins.

DEMAUNI SANKEY AND DEMARRIA LENDER AS BAYAJIDDA AND DAURAMA



Bayajidda and Daurama Patriarch and Matriarch of the Hausa Bakwai
Modern-day Nigeria and Niger.

Bayajidda and Daurama are the matriarchs and Patriarch of the Hausa Bakwai (authentic Hausa Kingdoms) located in northern Nigeria and southern Niger. Bayajidda was a prince from the east who entered the city of Daura, the oldest of the Hausa city-states. Daurama, last of a dynasty of ruling queens, promised half of the town to anyone who could defeat Sarkin (Hausa for king), the great serpent who inhabited the city's well and demanded sacrifice in exchange for its use. Bayajidda slew Sarkin but instead of taking half of the town, he asked for her hand in marriage. Their grandsons (or sons depending on the many versions of the story) founded the ruling dynasties of the seven oldest Hausa kingdoms of (Biram, Daura, Gobir, Kano, Katsina, Rano, and Zaria [Zazzau]).

Scholars have interpreted the story of Bayajidda and Daurama as a metaphor for ancient migrations, the coming of Islam, and the transitions from a matriarchal to a patriarchal society. As with many foundation myths, the story evolves and changes over time, suiting the needs of the different ruling dynasties of the Hausa city-states. The story blends both Islamic and indigenous histories, referencing core elements of the Bori (Hausa animist) traditions that reach far into Africa's pre-history.

**DARRIUS ALLEN AND JASERY DOUMBOUYA AS NDIADIANE N'DIAYE AND
FATOUMATA SALL**



Ndiadiane Ndaiye and Fatoumata Sall, First Brak
and Lingeer of the Wolof Empire.
Modern-day Senegal and the Gambia

Ndiadiane Ndiaye is the famed founder of the Wolof empire located in what is now Senegal. Ndiadiane (born Ahmed Boubakar Ndoeye or Ayarda Ndoeye) was born to Fatoumata Sall, a princess of the Toukolor people of Fouta Tooro (located in what is now northern Senegal and southern Mauritania) and a prince of disputed origin (some version claim he was Arab or Berber, but considering their family name is Ndiaye/ Ndoeye, a totemic name, his father was most likely of indigenous Serer origin). The story begins when a poisoned arrow killed the father of Ndiadiane during a battle with the neighboring Soninke people. His mother, Fatoumata Sall, who would become the first Lingeer (Queen Mother) of the empire, married her former husband's aide Mbarik Bo, much to the anger of Ndiadiane.

Out of his frustration, he fled to a river and resided under its depths for more than three years. When he overhears two fishermen quarreling, he emerged suddenly, democratically dividing the fish among the two of them. After his miraculous, almost supernatural emergence from the water earned him the name N'Diadian N'Diaye" (meaning the expression "calamity" or "extraordinary" in the Serer language. He then set out to unify the then warring Senegambian kingdoms of Saloum, Djolof, Cayor, and Sine, establishing the empire.

SOURCES AND SUGGESTED READING:

THE FOLLOWING SOURCES WERE USED IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE FOUNDER'S PROJECT. THEY ALSO FORM THE BASIS OF THE SUGGESTED READING. AS WITH ANY INFORMATION, WE MUST INTERROGATE AND ASK ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS ABOUT OUR SOURCES.

°WHO IS THE AUTHOR?

°WHEN AND WHERE WAS IT WRITTEN?

°WHAT ARE THEIR SOURCES?

°HOW DO THE ABOVE FACTORS IMPACT THEIR BIASES AND POINT OF VIEW?

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