

SYNOPSIS OF A WORK IN PROGRESS

FIRE FROM TIMBUKTU

Fire from Timbuktu is a revisionist history and a concept for a political and economic ideal for a perfect United African States (U.A.S.). It is influenced by the paradox: “a-marginal-African-man-in-the-West” despite his rich background in natural and cultural resources, hoping to jolt a need for new debates on Africa.

It examines the growth and demise of an African civilization in ancient Ghana, Mali and Songhay Empires and the role of spiritual leaders, monarchs and the people in the developing political and economic ideals in Timbuktu. Simply, it is a fascination with the early history of the African civilization.

Take a close look at the roles of the kings and scholars of the Songhay Empire and the congressional mosques of Timbuktu and Jenne; it will turn out empirical evidence that foreign infiltration obliterated the ancient African civilization right in its cradle, in Timbuktu, before it made an impact on the rest of the continent.

Fire from Timbuktu is a conceptualization that African civilization was on dual tracks of economic and political ideals, which were parallel or preceded capitalism and the Greco-Judeo-Christian Western civilization. This influenced the retrospective envisioning that Africa was on a dual track of a lost civilization: the “Timbuk-Traditionalist African civilization,” leading to the assertion that with the early exposure to Islam, Christianity and Judaism, Africa was on a springboard for a perfect civilization, which was bound to become, “Timbuk-Traditionalist-Islamic-Christian-Judeo African civilization,” independent of international capitalism, socialism and communism on “African Communalism” economic system. And it turned out that Africa’s communalist economy was entirely different from ancient hunter-gatherer communal societies.

Therefore, *Fire from Timbuktu* is a philosophical look at Africa that is different from the works of many proponents of a united Africa because it offers alternative economic and political ideals for Africa in the absence of which, Africa had become a battleground for communism and capitalism, which has been the cause of all or most of the unsustainable economies, conflicts and wars.

WRITING SAMPLE: A SHORT STORY:

HALF A POT FULL

Her name was Yei Fomba, but most people called her Dabuteh, a sobriquet from her father, a humorous man who liked to call his children by nicknames he gave them according to their character or temperament. As a little girl, she was always joyful when her mother's cooking pot was more than half-full of rice, and thus, the name, 'Dabuteh', meaning 'half a pot full.' Half a pot full indicated that rice would be sufficient for everyone on a given day. But those were the only days, in the confines of her parents' home that she enjoyed childhood.

Dabuteh was born into a family of over forty children. Nine of them were her siblings from the same mother, but she called her father's remaining seven wives 'mother' and they treated her as a daughter. Her mother lost a child at birth whose twin sister died of chickenpox two years later. Her mother had told Dabuteh that the twin had called the sister to the heavens, and that was that. Of her remaining siblings, two boys and four girls, five of them attended school. Her eldest sister had married and moved to a distant land. Dabuteh was the only one left to help her mother with domestic work and the petty trading that helped pay school fees for her school-going siblings. She always nagged, “I could have learned the white man's language very well as well.”

She lived in a town called Gbamendo, a big compound situated along the main motor road to a prosperous trading town called Kwendu. At the age of thirteen, she was ready for initiation into the *Bondo* Society, a female circumcision ritual that marked a young woman's passage into womanhood. Most of her sisters had already been initiated. Now, her time had come, but her father was waiting for a man who would shoulder the expense and ultimately become her husband. Such men often earmarked their brides at a tender age. Although she was a beautiful little girl, Dabuteh had a hard time attracting a prospective

husband, because her beauty intimidated them. Normally, a man would have chosen her by now, but.... So, her father encouraged her to dress like a young woman who was ready for the *Bondo* ritual and a husband. Thus, Dabuteh ran around the compound bare-chested, exposing her virgin breasts. She wore beads of various colors and shapes around her neck and waist. Her parents bought a new *lappa* and underwear for her instead of the ordinary underwear she often wore. She played with the *lappa*, knotted and unknotted it, flashing the new underwear at available bachelors or married men who were poised for new brides.

Her mother regularly treated her to the best corn-roll braids, insisting on neatness. Sometimes, she reminded her that, "No man wants a dirty woman."

That dry season Juma (Friday) dawned bright and beautiful. The tropical sun rode high overhead. The rice farms waited ready for harvest and ripened seasonal fruits, like bananas, hung heavy on the trees, beckoning to be plucked. Food was plentiful. The women stood outside in the sun and watched their shadows, awaiting the arrival of midday when their shadows appeared beneath their feet and the time for collecting tilapias and bullfrogs arrived. This delighted young women like Dabuteh who could follow the older women to learn how to fish and make delectable freshwater fish soup for their future husbands. The prospect of adding this soup to their husband's diets that evening filled the older women with excitement. Although tradition forbids them to discuss the effect of freshwater fish on their husbands' sexuality, they knew it improved their sexual performance. And they moved helter-skelter to look for their fishing nets and baskets.

Dabuteh fastened her little fishing basket onto her head-tie and part of the oval wooden frame of her little fishing net under her armpit. She came close to her father and said in a subtle voice, "Father, I am going fishing with my mothers."

The presence of two men sitting and talking with her father mesmerized her. Adorned in huge white gowns and headscarves, the men looked like ghosts. Her father was also dressed in his *Juma prayer* gown, in preparation to go to the local mosque for prayers. This was the only time he could be found home; otherwise, he would be on his farm. The men had stopped in front of their compound to perform *Juma prayers* before proceeding on their long journey home.

"Fetch some water for Kai (Mr.) Alhaji," her father commanded with an unusual show of authority intended to impress his strangers.

"But, Father, my mothers are leaving me behind," she answered.

"Do as I say! And besides, you are not going anywhere today," her father stated firmly.

Dabuteh turned around with her head buried in her chest, biting on the beads around her neck, and walked away to fetch water for her father and his visitors.

"Dabuteh!" Her father shouted.

"*Naamu* (Yes, Sir), Father!" she answered from her mother's room where she had laid down and buried her face in a pillow, weeping in disappointment for being deprived of going fishing. She wiped all traces of tears from her face and ran back outside with the water. Facing her father and the strangers, she stood arms akimbo, her virgin nipples pointed straight at the strangers, and waited for any further instructions from him.

"Go tell Bondu Dahai (the youngest of her father's wives) that I have strangers. Help her prepare some food for the strangers. When you are done, wait here. I am going to the mosque with Kai Alhaji and I will be back soon."

She did not know what her father had discussed with Alhaji, but Alhaji kept coming by the house each time he went to Kwendu. He brought with him many gifts that ranged from clothes, food to money. Besides the merchandise Alhaji bought at Kwendu, he had amassed considerable wealth from mining diamonds. It did not surprise her when her parents started arrangements for her initiation into the *Bondo* society.

Her initiation turned out to be the grandest *Bondo* celebration ever held in the township of Gbamendo and its surrounding towns and villages. Alhaji hired the most famous balladeers from far away chiefdoms to celebrate the momentous occasion. He brought cows, goats and sheep to be slaughtered.

"I have not seen so many animals bound for the abattoir in a ritual rite of passage celebration," an old woman told the *Soko* (*Bondo* Priestess) in glee.

The sacred *Bondo* Society initiation rite began with her mother. She rubbed white clay dissolved in cold water on her daughter's body. Young Dabuteh endured the chill of the *harmattan* wind on her already cooled skin. Her mother admonished her to stay calm and not frit away for the eternal shame of the family. Older women joined the rite by beckoning her and the other would-be initiates to answer the *Bondo* cry: *Ooooohooo! Ooooohooo!* The women snarled, crawling at the initiates, prompting the girls to repeat the *Bondo* cry: "*Ooooohooo! Ooooohooo!*" No sooner repeated, the women continued through the preliminary

process of the rite and urged Dabuteh and the other girls to march to the *Bondo* Bush where the newly made women, resplendent and arraigned for the initiation, emerged and joined in the merrymaking and feasting.

"You have attained womanhood now, Dabuteh," her mother said. "Six moons have passed since the *Bondo* ritual, and you must be well enough to go to your husband's house."

"Yes, Mamma, I don't feel anymore pain," she confirmed her mother's assumption.

"We are going to escort you to your husband at Temasadu today," her mother said.

The older women of Gbamendo were delighted to be part of the convoy that accompanied her to Temasadu. Like the *Bondo* initiation ceremony, Dabuteh's marriage ceremony was glamorous and the envy of all, becoming a topic of gossip in Gbamendo. Every mother wished such good luck for her daughter. Many of them encouraged their children to dress like Dabuteh, spurring a renaissance of neatness and cleanliness for young women in their prime.

In fact, a mother yelled at a lad who usually came by to see her daughter, "She is not in a hurry to marry. Don't come back here any more."

"Kumba!" another mother called upon her teenage daughter. "Go take a bath and come back for a corn-roll braid."

When Dabuteh left Gbamendo, she did not know about the cultural differences that separated the two towns, only forty kilometers apart. She only knew that Alhaji's six wives welcomed her with open arms.

The youngest wife was especially happy when she said, "Welcome... I will show you around. If you have any question about the cooking utensils, let me know. All of them are yours now."

The eldest wife also held her own separate orientation meeting with Dabuteh. "Here, we wake up at dawn to pray. We take three recesses during the day and one at night for prayers. Tomorrow, I will give you your *Hijab* (veil), ablution kettle, a prayer mat and prayer beads. You will also start taking classes at the *madrassa* next week."

Everything Dabuteh did looked bad in the eyes of the other wives before she adjusted to the tradition. The wives had abandoned their religion, tradition and culture under similar pressure when they married to Alhaji. They expected her to do the same.

Although Islam was not new to her, she found practicing it very strange. Her father was the first Islamic convert in her family but did not demand his family to practice the religion. A *Pommassu*, a supreme leader of the *Poro* secret society for men, he went back and forth between his role in the traditional secret society and the newly adopted religion.

Dabuteh did the laundry and ironing, she cooked and served food, she bathed her mates' many little children, and she dressed them and prepared them for school and *madrassa*.

In eleven years, she gave birth to eleven children and always had a newborn and a toddler to care for at the same time. Her knack of balancing her housework and childcare was almost like magic. She could balance a two-foot-water bucket on her head, carry a child on her back and have fresh vegetables she picked from the garden in her hands.

She ran away several times to Gbamendo for various maltreatments, but her parents always encouraged her to return. "A humble wife shall become blessed with successful children," her father always reminded her. Her father sometimes took her back to Temasadu when she ran away.

Finally, to encourage Dabuteh to stay in her marriage, her father sent her younger sister to live with her and to help her with the endless domestic chores. Both sisters did not only work very hard, but also suffered beatings from Alhaji's other wives when they failed to do certain things properly or complete their chores.

One awful afternoon, a piece of charcoal fell on one of the wives' gown and burnt it while Dabuteh was ironing the laundry. She concealed the burnt side of the gown to postpone the dreaded confrontation for another day, but unfortunately, the wife wanted to use the gown that day to wear to a wedding.

"*Allahwhakbal* (God is great)," the wife screamed when she noticed the burnt area on the gown. "Did you burn my gown?" She shook the gown in front of Dabuteh's face.

"Yes, I did by mistake," Dabuteh admitted.

The wife grabbed her by her *Hijab* and dragged her to the ironing table, forcing her head onto the hot iron. Luckily for Dabuteh, the *Hijab* protected her face from direct contact with the hot iron when it trapped between her face and the iron.

"Don't you realize that my gown is worth more than anything you have ever possessed? You deserve to be burnt in punishment." The wife continued to press Dabuteh's head against the hot iron.

But Dabuteh's sister came in on time and grabbed the woman by her hair. She pulled her away from Dabuteh. Emboldened by the surge of anger caused by the incident, she gave the woman a severe beating. Within a week, Alhaji evicted Dabuteh's sister from his household.

Since Alhaji was not ready for another wife any time soon, Dabuteh's role did not change. Now, she saw why the wives had greeted her so warmly when she first came into the family. On top of this, due to Alhaji's reduced drive to succeed, his diamond business declined, and financial hardship took a heavy toll on the family. His children were not used to hard work. Many of them had dropped out of school, a situation that also threatened her children. Dabuteh refused to let this happen. While Alhaji leaned toward the alternative, inexpensive *madrassa*, Dabuteh wanted to ensure her children learned English, even if it meant sending them to a more expensive school. To ensure this, Dabuteh turned to the petty trading she had learned from her mother so many years past. Because of Islamic values, Alhaji would not let her distill *omole*, a local gin, which was an integral part of her trade. They battled back and forth until Dabuteh decided to leave Alhaji and Temasadu for the town of Koidu to distill her *omole*.

Although she did not divorce Alhaji, once out of his house, he would not help her, nor could she return to Gbamendo. Her life became one hardship after another. She worked endlessly, laboring under extended relatives who had settled down and built houses in Koidu. Dabuteh had left some of her teenage children behind in Temasadu. Alhaji and his family cared for them... just. If these children were to survive, she knew she must do everything possible within her power to fetch them.

As a result, she pressed herself harder to succeed. Lines of weariness and fatigue marked her face. She constantly frowned; her brow became furrowed from fighting and haggling in the local market with other traders over petty cash and customers. Soon, her clothes hung on her undernourished frame, and she discarded the outfits and the *Hijab* as they interfered with her ability to move easily through the market place in her hunt for the best deals. She saved every penny she could, scrimping on her meals. Despite this, her mind remained sharp, constantly searching for new ways to escape the hardship.

After many years of struggle, she overcame the odds; built herself a house in Koidu, and retrieved the rest of her children. *Omole* retailers flocked in and out of her house for their supplies.

It was only after she became the most famous *omole* distiller in Koidu and controlled thirty percent of the market that Alhaji started to visit her again. Even his other wives came to Dabuteh with their children for help when circumstances grew too difficult for them at Temasadu. However, even while accepting help, the wives still referred to her *omole* trade as *harram* (sinful).

Dabuteh did not let their comments bother her for their presence made her life bittersweet, reminding her of the cost of the grand *Bondo* initiation ceremony, the long years of struggle and her present achievement despite it all.