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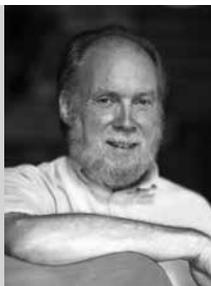
Whether or not this was part of a planned publicity stunt is still debated.

While thinking about the Marx Brothers' connection, I was reminded of another Fredonia story: that Fredonia was once in consideration for the naming of our nation, instead of honoring the 15th-century Italian explorer Amerigo Vespucci. According to a 2015 blog post, "The United States of Fredonia," by Mark Boonshoft, Post-Doctoral Research Fellow, in the Manuscripts and Archives Division of the New York Public Library:

"It was a great oversight" of the Constitution's framers that they did not give the United States a "proper name." So claimed Samuel Latham Mitchill in an 1803 broadside. A doctor by training, Mitchill not only diagnosed this problem, he also proposed a remedy. The land occupied by the United States, he suggested, should be called Fredon, or Fredonia in its more "poetical" form. ([www.nypl.org/blog/2015/11/12/united-states-fredonia](http://www.nypl.org/blog/2015/11/12/united-states-fredonia))

Apparently Dr. Mitchill's suggestion was simply too late. We all know how hard it is to change once something or someone is named. Besides, the Marx Brothers would've had to invent some other mythical kingdom. ▼

Dan Berggren's roots are firmly in the Adirondacks, but his music has taken him throughout the US and abroad. Dan has worked in the woods with a forest ranger and surveyor, was a radio producer in Europe, professor of audio and radio studies at SUNY Fredonia, and owner of Sleeping Giant Records. An award-winning musician and educator, Dan is also a tradition-based songsmith who writes with honesty, humor, and a strong sense of place. Visit [www.berggrenfolk.com](http://www.berggrenfolk.com) to learn more about Dan and his music. Photo by Jessica Riehl.



# A People Who Live by the Word

BY STEVE ZEITLIN

"My village of Dankawali is about the same size as Jackson Heights," Kewulay told me as we walked along Roosevelt Avenue in Queens, with the elevated subway roaring overhead. "But quiet, the only sounds we have in Dankawali are crickets and frogs, a whole symphony of frogs." Kewulay is my "friend and close associate," as we respectfully (and jokingly) refer to one another. For more than a decade, we worked together on the documentary *In Search of Finah Misa Kule*.

Directed by Kewulay Kamara, founding director of the nonprofit cultural center Badnya, the documentary chronicles Kewulay's quest to reconstitute an ancient epic handed down in his family. When he was a boy of 14 in the village of Dankawali in northeast Sierra Leone, Kewulay watched his father, a member of the Finah clan of oral poets and masters of ceremony, writing down the ancient stories in the Kuranko language, in an Arabic script on an animal skin with a reed pen. His father was concerned that his children would no longer continue to pass the stories down in the oral tradition. Kewulay tells of his decision to leave the manuscript in the village as an heirloom after he immigrated to the US. He then tells of the breakout of the Civil War in Sierra Leone and his journey back to his home, only to discover that the manuscript was destroyed when the village was razed. "A thousand years of history lay in ashes," he says.

Kewulay's son, Kalie, is a Queens-based rapper who is reading the dictionary to improve his raps ("I just reached the word 'loaf' in the L's," he told me.) In the film he talks about how he is "holding down 718," his area code. In the documentary, Kewulay returns with his son Kalie to Dankawali to collect and retell the ancient stories, using cameras and computers rather than a reed pen. I was so pleased to travel with them to the village to meet this sweet clan of elders for whom "humility is nobility." Practicing, good-hearted Muslims who live in peace with the

neighboring Christian populations, his brothers and cousins do not drink, but Kewulay and I did spend a magical evening telling each other stories of our very different lives in a bar set up in a veranda in downtown Kabala, the larger town where Kewulay went to school.

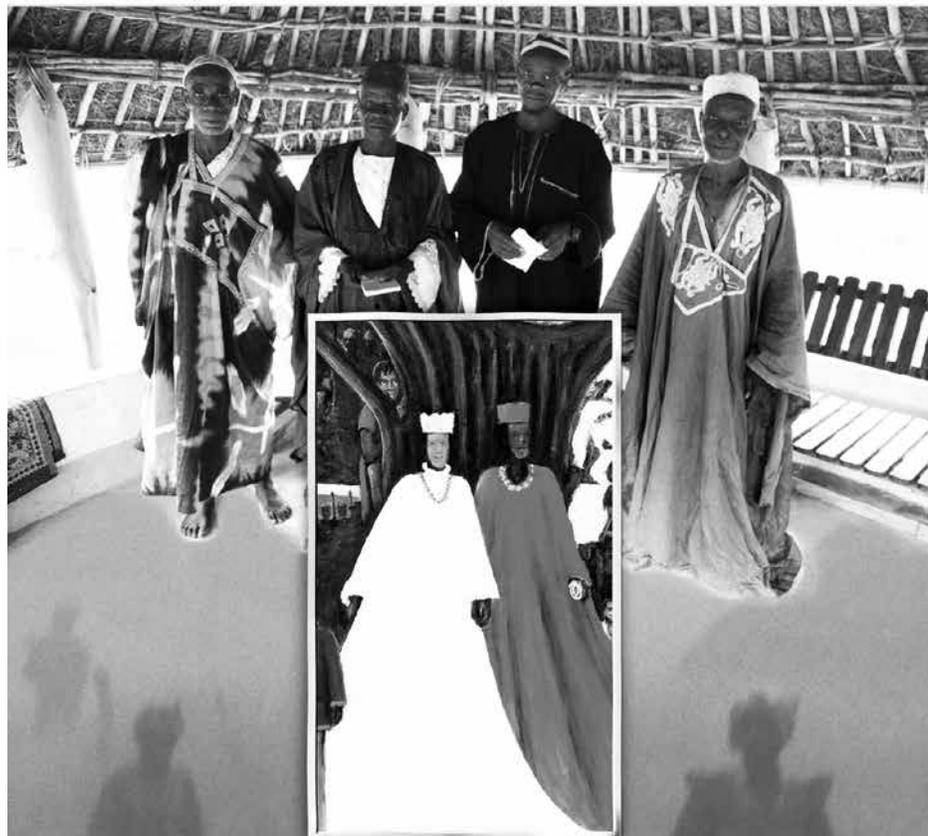
Kewulay's family mythology is of a people who live by the word. "A person who cannot bear to hear," he told me, "will have nothing of value said in their presence." "Words do not rust, words do not rot." His stories come from a time "when what was said was done, and what was done was said." As his cousin Momory Kamara put it,

You are not a Finah because you lie  
You are not a Finah because you slash  
You are not a Finah because you kill  
You are a Finah because  
When the people want a word said  
But the word is hard to say  
Finah, say it!  
The people say.

And the Finah says it. "Each word that a Finah utters," Kewulay says as the film opens, "has his life in them. Each word that the Finah utters is beyond poetry, is beyond history. It's an instrument that can create the whole world." As the film closes, he says, "We live by the wisdom in these stories."

Kewulay brings the humility and the gift for words of the Finah clan of poets to bear on his life in Jackson Heights, Queens, both as a teacher and organizer of *baro* gatherings and Kwanzaa celebrations. He also teaches young people to write praise poems. "If I tell you that my name is Kewulay, that might not mean a lot to you. But if I tell you that I am the son of Kamara and Mara, and I come from the village of Dankawali at the foothills of the great Loma mountains near the mouth of the River Niger, that starts to mean something. All of a sudden I am part of something much greater. A child to be praised may be just a little boy—but pointing

**BADENYA AND CITY LORE PRESENT:**



In Search of

# Finah Misa Kule

the story of a people who live by the word

Cover image of the DVD of *In Search of Finah Misa Kule*. Photo by Kewulay Kamara.

out who his father is and who his grandfather is a praise poem that elevates that person. It's not saying that a person has a lot of money or that he is the president of the United States, but that he is a father or mother or a grandfather or a grandmother—and that's important enough.

Wow. So I am Steve Zeitlin, son of Shirley Stein, grandson of Bella Brodsky from the town of Shpola in the Ukraine by the famed Khovkivka River.

Though we all don't all have Kewulay's direct connection to a mythology of words to live by, we all do tell stories and can think of those stories as a kind of mythology. Like a blessing delivered over a meal—"keep us mindful and responsive to the needs of others," for instance—we cannot always live up to the words and ideals in our stories and poems and prayers. But they provide guideposts and enshrine our daily lives with meaning, whether we live in Dankawali or Jackson Heights. ▼

Steve Zeitlin is the founding director of City Lore in New York City. The 42-minute DVD of *In Search of Finah Misa Kule* is available through City Lore ([steve@citylore.org](mailto:steve@citylore.org)). This essay will appear in Steve's upcoming volume, *The Poetry of Everyday Life: Storytelling and the Art of Awareness*, to be published in September by Cornell University Press. Photo by Martha Cooper.



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