

Part I





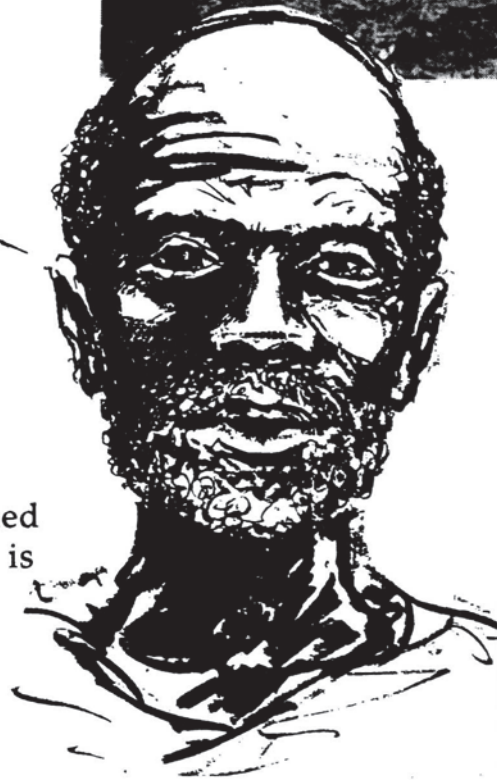
FIRST WORDS


Call me Olagun. I am a **griot**, a master of words and memory, a keeper of the flame and the history of my people who dwell in the rain forests and the deserts, and beyond the distant African plains and savannas. I descend from the immortal griot Mamadou Keita of **Mali** and trace my ancestry back to the first African dawn. Since those primordial days my family has been the village griots, the talking books, who have not forgotten their duty to keep "the keys to the twelve doors of Mali."



Call me Olagun.

Do not take lightly my words because they are recited and not written. What is said, a proverb of my people informs, lives the same eternity as that which is chiseled on a cave wall or scratched upon parchment. A talking book is no less valuable than one whose words are silent. To see history through the eyes of the Whites is nothing when you can hear it from the lips of a griot.





*Remember, a written
note of music from the
kora is but an
approximation of the
actual sound.*



Hear my words, for I am but a vessel, a conduit through which the past is revealed, our history etched on the wind. Listen then, **Children of Africa**, we have had a glorious past and it presages a promising future.


In my generation, the fifteenth in our lineage, the **Mandingo**, the **Bambara**, the **Fulani**, and the **Ashanti** are threatened by a storm gathering in the north. There is much coming and going here in my village of Belandougou near the Sankarani river, within an arrow's flight from the tomb of Sundiata, the greatest of the **Mali** kings.



Already there are murmurs of war and pestilence in the silk-cotton trees and the divination stones foretell of great sailing boats from the north bearing *jinn*s and evil ghosts. The griots, knowing that "*all true learning should be a secret,*" have assembled from the four corners of the continent to make sure the past is secured from the invaders.

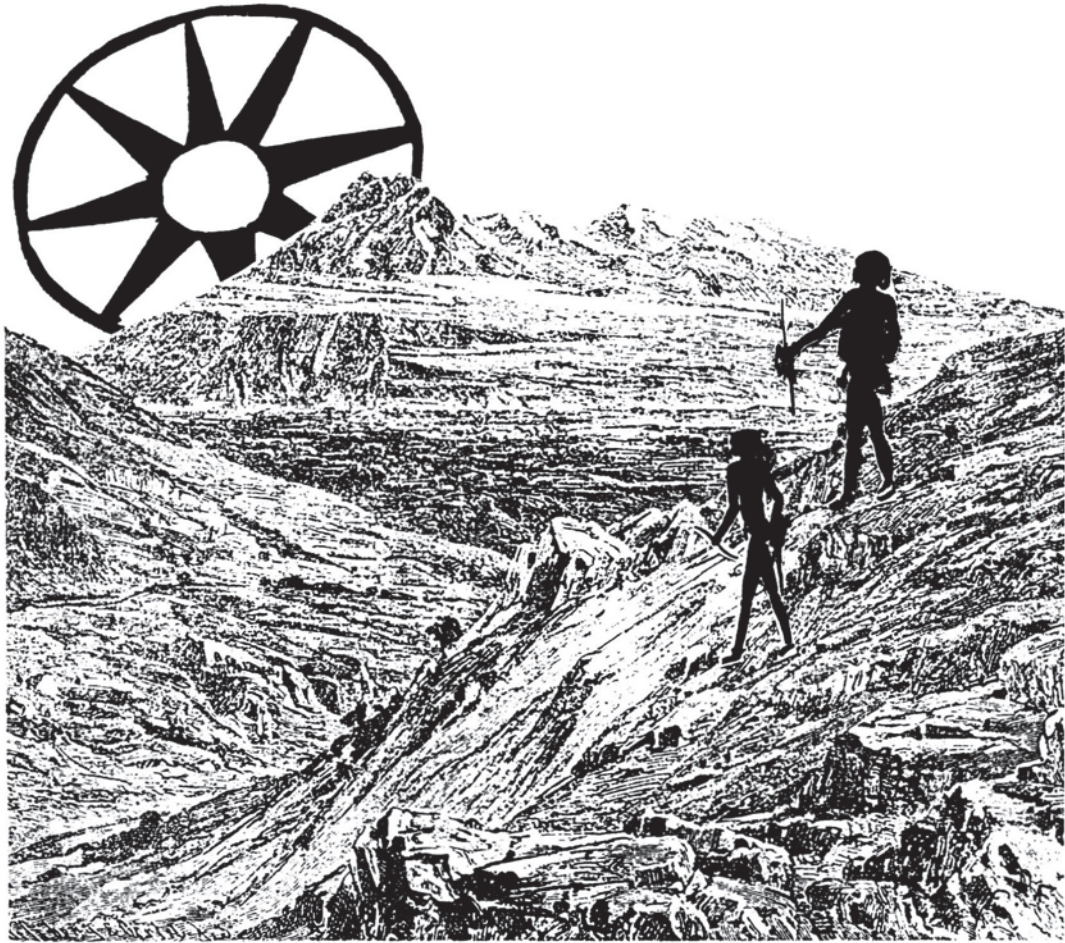
I, Olagun, the son of Omawale, because of my power to invoke the past and to predict the future, have been asked to speak. It is my task to open the first door, to speak of events since the dynasty of the **Almoravids** and the reign of **Tenkhamenin**.





But before the truth can be told of those days—and before it is time for us during this rainy season to feast upon the carcass of the boar—we must remember the first legends and myths, the secrets before the flood and regeneration, before our queen mothers gave us the privilege to play our songs on the balafons and talking drums.

We must return to the land beyond Lake Chad, before the time of pharaohs and pyramids, to the beginning of the talking book when the first word was a whisper.



It was told to me by my father, who was told by his father's father and passed along from the family of **Ogun** and **Shango** that the first breath of humankind occurred in Africa. Thus, my children, our oldest ancestors stepped from the mist and darkness 40,000 harvests ago. These black ancestors ventured from that "ancient Eden," setting out to discover the land beyond the **Mountains of the Moon**, beyond the vast savannas and veld land especially to build major civilizations here and all over the world.

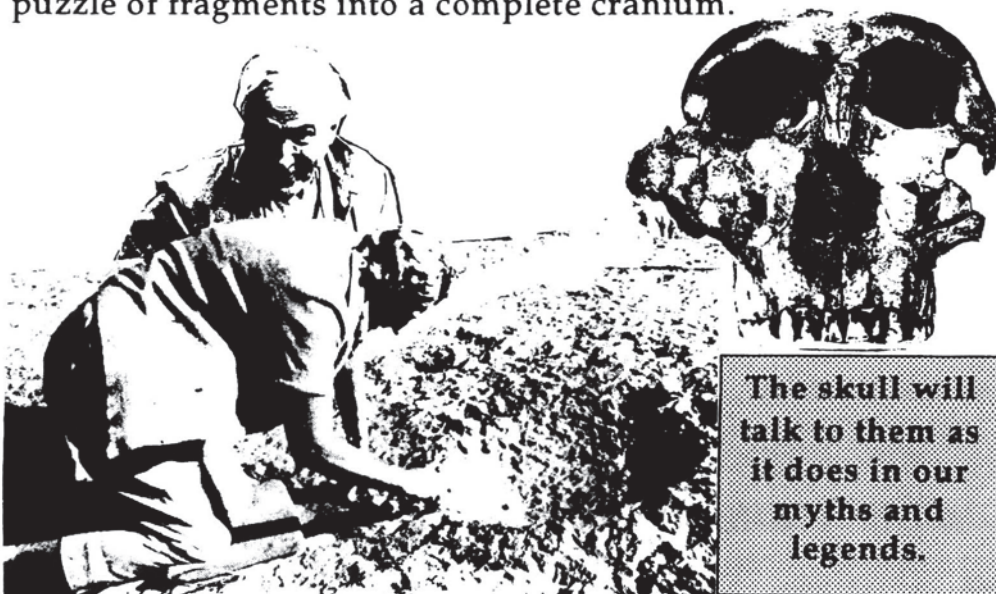


It is more probable that our early progenitors lived on the African continent than elsewhere.

I owe to a gift of prophecy a way of knowing how the first bones will offer hints of the dark past. How, in the coming days the prophets of your time, such as **Charles Darwin**, will write of man's descent.

Listen, for this sage speaks a truth, a truth that has been a part of our legends and songs since the Word was given to us by the gods. It is from our issue that all others are traced. It is part of the same story that the archeologists, **L.S.B.** and **Mary Leakey** will tell in another future generation.

I can envision the moment when Mary Leakey stumbles upon that jawbone of a hominid at Olduvai Gorge and can see how she and her husband will then assemble the puzzle of fragments into a complete cranium.



The skull will talk to them as it does in our myths and legends.

In Nupe, you may have heard, a hunter in pursuit of a water buffalo tripped over a skull. . .



"Ah! What do we have here? And how did you get in my path?"



Talking brought me here.



Amazed at the skull's ability to speak, the hunter ran back to the village to tell of his encounter. The king, hearing of the hunter's tale, was curious to see and hear this talking skull.

The hunter led the king with his retinue of guests to the spot in the forest. The king approached the skull and asked . . .

How did you get here?



But the skull was silent. After several inquiries the skull still refused to speak. Now the king was furious and ordered his soldiers to cut the hunter's head off on the spot.

Later, after the king and his party were gone, the skull spoke to the hunter:

Well, my friend, how did you get here?



The hunter replied:



Talking brought me here.



The skull of myth and proverb teaches us one lesson, while the bones the Leakeys and their team of anthropologists led by Kamoya Kimeu will find imparts another truth. These bones, like the talking skull, will give them a passage to the past and a lighted way into the deep mysteries of my people's history. But hush now and let me tell you what the talking bones told our diviners centuries before the scientists of your day came with their microscopes and telescopes.

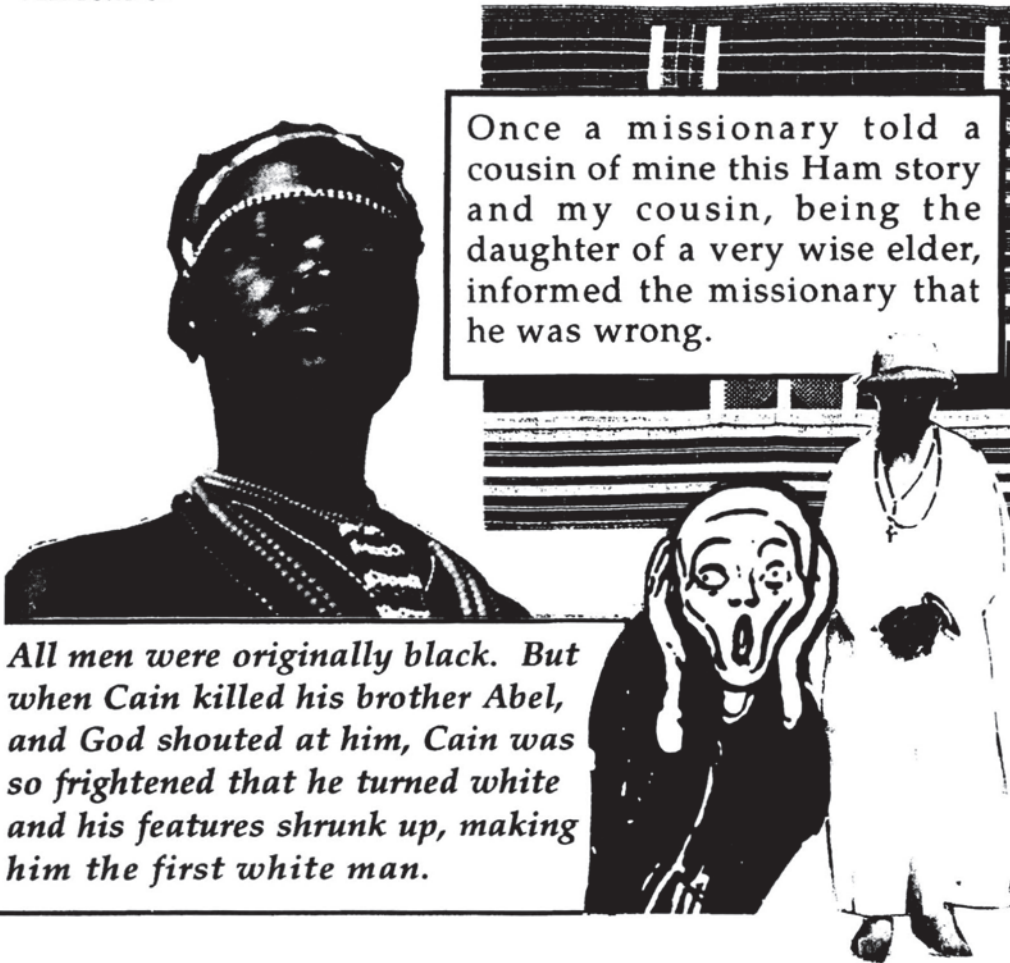
All people have their stories of origins – where they come from and where they are bound.



My children, you must understand the role of myth and cosmology. People have myths to explain where others come from, too, and how they stand in relationship to the whole of humankind. The ancient **Greeks**, to the distant north, not only saw themselves at the center of the universe but had a myth to explain how and why Africans are black. They tell us that Phaeton drove his sun chariot too close to the earth and scorched the people of **Ethiopia**.



There are others who accept the Biblical curse of Ham – that his son Canaan, and all their descendants will be black – as a sufficient explanation for the color of Africans.



Once a missionary told a cousin of mine this Ham story and my cousin, being the daughter of a very wise elder, informed the missionary that he was wrong.

All men were originally black. But when Cain killed his brother Abel, and God shouted at him, Cain was so frightened that he turned white and his features shrunk up, making him the first white man.

From that day forward the missionary never uttered a word from his holy book.