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FSU Professor Completes Comprehensive Study of N'ko, a West African Writing System

Historian Dianne White Oyler, an associate professor at Fayetteville State University in North Carolina, has completed her much anticipated study on N'ko, a writing system used by the Mande people of West Africa. Its founder, Souleymane Kanté, was born near Kankan, Guinea in 1922. Dr. Oyler's The History of N'ko and its Role in Mande Transnational Identity: Words as Weapons was published November 2005 by Africana Homestead Legacy Publishers and is available for purchase from booksellers in the United States and overseas.

Cherry Hill, NJ(PRWEB) February 1, 2006 -- In her seminal work, Dianne White Oyler carefully documents the history of N'ko, a West African writing system based on the languages of the Mande people. Numbering about 5 million people, Mande speakers reside mainly in Guinea, Mali, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Sierra Leone, and Liberia.

Dianne White Oyler gives a level of detail on N'ko not previously available. Because there were few published accounts and written primary sources, she gathered its rich oral history through meticulous field work in Guinea, Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, and Egypt from 1991 to 1994 and 2000 to 2001. Saidou Mohamed N'Daou, Associate Professor of History, Chicago State University and former National Deputy Director for Higher Education in Guinea, stated that, "Oyler's study of the N'ko language has been helped by her observation participation approach, use of documents produced by home-based African scholars, and her close collaboration with the producers and teachers of the N'ko, who rightly perceive her as their cultural ambassador."

Souleymane Kanté, the founder of N'ko and the son of an Islamic scholar, Amara Kanté, was born near Kankan, Guinea in 1922. Oyler's research revealed that Souleymane created the alphabet in response to derisive remarks about the nature of African languages made by a foreign journalist who visited his country in 1944. "As if such monumental endeavor can be reduced to one day, Souleymane Kanté is credited with inventing the N'ko alphabet on April 14, 1949" (p. 1). He died from diabetes in Guinea in 1987.

In creating his writing system, Souleymane Kanté graphemes that represent the vowels, consonants, and tonality of the Mande languages, something that Roman and Arabic scripts cannot do. He also recorded and published a body of knowledge in N'ko for speakers of Mande languages. Souleymane Kanté committed himself to helping the speakers of Mande languages achieve literacy in his writing system. As a result he authored works on many subjects—the history of the Mande people, science, healing arts, mathematics, religion, and more.

Dianne White Oyler also documented that N'ko has and continues to shape a growing transnational identity movement of the Mande, related ethnic groups who live across national boundaries. "Since its invention the alphabet has acquired a life of its own. A grassroots movement promoting literacy by using the N'ko alphabet has blossomed across West Africa from Gambia to Nigeria, wherever there are speakers of Mande languages, despite the fact that these countries use French and English as official languages."

Grassroots and academic organizations carry on the legacy of Souleymane Kanté in preserving and disseminating N'ko through French, English, and Arabic resources. The ICRA-N'Ko Association (l'Association pour l'Impulsion et la Coordination des Recherches sur l'Alphabet N'Ko) in Conakry, Guinea is foremost among these institutions in teaching and disseminating N'ko. Mamadi Baba Diane, who resides in Egypt, is the principal publisher of N'ko books, and the N'ko newspaper Yelen. The N'ko Institute of America in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, hosts a website published by Mamady Doumbouya. MANSAs, the Mande Studies Association, a multidisciplinary group with interests in the Mande region of West Africa, publishes the Mande Studies Journal.

Dianne White Oyler received financial support for her study including a Fulbright Institute of International Education Award (1992–1993), an M. Margaret Stroh International Scholarship from the Delta Kappa Gamma Society International (1991–1992), a West African Research Association Fellowship (1994), Fayetteville State University's Sponsored Research (literacy survey in 2000) and a Fulbright Group Projects Abroad to Ghana and Guinea (2000).

The History of N'ko and its Role in Mande Transnational Identity: Words as Weapons (ISBN 0-9653308-7-7, hardcover, November 2005) was published by Africana Homestead Legacy Publishers, Cherry Hill, New Jersey. It is available for purchase from booksellers in the United States and overseas for US \$40. To receive a 20% discount and reduced shipping between February 1, 2006 and June 30, 2006 readers should download and print the offer by AHL Publications posted at <http://www.ahlpub.com/uploads/NkodiscountFeb06toJun06.pdf>.

Individuals may also preview the contents of this outstanding title at http://www.ahlpub.com/History_Nko_Alphabet.html or read a secure copy of Chapter 1 at this url: <http://www.ahlpub.com/uploads/Oyler0965330877ch1secure.pdf>.

Professor Dianne White Oyler is available for book signings and to give lectures on N'ko. Interested parties may reach her by telephone at 910-672-1946 to schedule her appearance.

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