



NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

Institute of African American Affairs  
presents

## "Return to Source"

Fall 2016 Film Series and discussion with Directors.  
The series will include films that link identity, authenticity and creativity to the value of returning to the sources.

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## In Search of Finah Misa Kule

Directed by Kewulay Kamara (Sierra Leone, 2015, 42 min.)

**Wednesday, November 30<sup>th</sup>, 2016 / 6:00 PM**

Location: 36 East 8th Street (between University Place and Greene Street) NY, NY

**Discussion with director Kewulay Kamara with moderator Boukary Sawadogo** (Assistant Professor of Film, Dept. of Media Communication Arts, Black Studies Program, The City College of New York-CUNY)

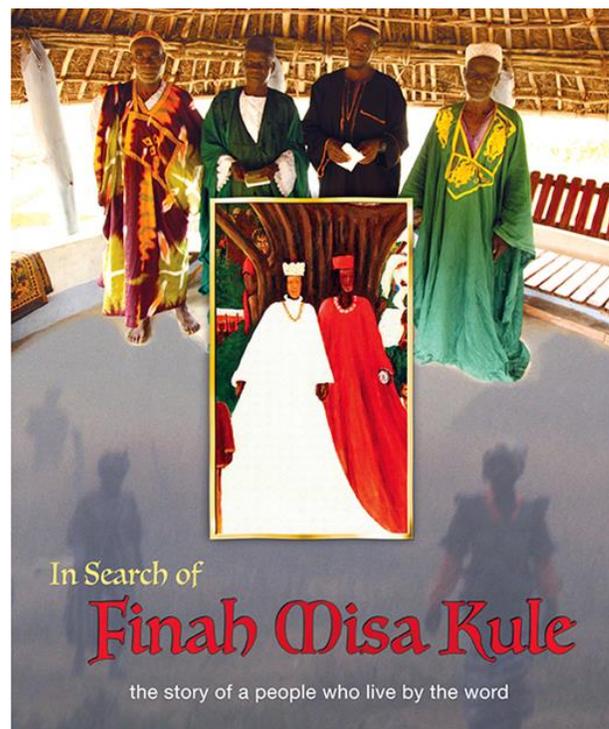
**LOCATION:** Cantor Film Center-NYU / 36 East 8<sup>th</sup> Street (bet. University Place and Greene Street) NY, NY

### ABOUT THE FILM



*In Search of Finah Misa Kule* chronicles the quest of poet Kewulay Kamara to reconstitute an ancient epic handed down in his family. Kamara takes us back to his native Village of Dankawali in northeast Sierra Leone where the epic was written out by his father in the 1960s only to be destroyed when the village was razed during the recent Civil War in Sierra Leone.

The documentary follows Kewulay as he relives his visit to his village during the war to find that “a thousand years of history lay in ashes.” The film then introduces his son, an aspiring hip-hop artist, and the two of them return together to reconstruct and record the ancient stories. Throughout the film, the mythological tales are told through a number of different personae, some voiced by the renowned actor Geoffrey Holder. Still others are told by the blind epic singer, Jali Kulako, and by Kewulay’s brother, Sartan Lansani. *In Search of Finah Misa Kule* is, at its heart, a film about storytelling, introducing viewers to the *Finah*, “a people who live by the word,” and to a little known but powerful Mandeng mythology of Ferensola, the land of twins: the word and the deed.



Kewulay tells the story of his father writing down the ancient oral stories in Kuranko in the Arabic script with a reed pen, concerned that his children would no longer continue to pass them down in the oral tradition. Kewulay tells of his decision to leave the manuscript in the village as an heirloom, and about the breakout of the Civil War and his journey back to his village only to discover that the manuscript was destroyed. “A thousand years of history lay in ashes.”

“I knew what I had to do,” Kewulay says. “Return to Dankawalie village – with my son -- to preserve the stories of the Finah for the next generation.” In Act II, we meet Kewulay’s son, Kalie, performing hip hop songs, and follow them as they pack, fly to Freetown together, and then drive over unpaved roads to Dankawalie Village. We meet the extended family as they sing Kewulay “The Waking Song.” The two of them visit an old, blind epic singer, Jali Kulako and Kewulay’s 90-year-old Auntie Kulako, and hear wisdom stories from each of them. The stories of Yelka Kamara, Kewulay’s niece, about her kidnapping during the Civil War, are brought in as the latest chapter in the ancient epic of Finah Misa Kule.

“Kalie and I were here to collect and reconstruct the ancient stories,” Kewulay says at the beginning of ACT III. “But it was also a chance for me to tell Kalie my own story.” He tells Kalie stories of his childhood, and how he was given a chance to come to America. He tells moving stories of his farewell to his mother. “I don’t even know where this land you are going to is, but when you get there, be humble; make someone else’s mother your mother, make someone else’s father your father.” The film cuts from a beautiful *cappella* village song to Methodist church music in Massachusetts where we meet Ronald and Shirley Jackson, whom Kewulay accepted as father and mother, and their children who adopted Kewulay as a brother.

The film cuts back to Africa, to the memorial for Auntie Kulako. Memorials, called the *kofo*, are occasions when many of the ancient stories are told. We hear Kewulay’s brother performing story of the Finah clan and the prophet Mohamed at a *kofo* memorial.



Kewulay notes that although his ancestors relied on memory alone to tell the stories, his tools now include the computer and the camera. Throughout the film, Madge Scott, a painter who was commissioned to create visuals for the stories, tells the ancient stories in a number of different modalities, some voiced by the renowned actor Geoffrey Holder, and others. Still others are told by the blind epic singer, Jali Kulako, and Kewulay’s brother, Sartan Lansani. *In Search of Finah Misa Kule* is, at its heart, a film about poetry and storytelling, introducing viewers to a little known but powerful mythology. “We are the people of Ferensola,” Kewulay says in closing. We are the children of Misa Kule and Saramba. And we live by the wisdom in these stories.”

The family of musicians that comprise Lasirae, the spoken word and music people of Mandeng provide music in the film. Musical contributors include the Grammy Award-winning kora master Mamadou Diabate of Mali, Fantacee Wiz of Sierra Leone, and King Kalie. The latter two are cousins and provide the continuum: Finaya to hip-hop.

## ABOUT THE DIRECTOR



**Kewulay Kamara**, poet-storyteller, multi-media artist and lecturer, has been the subject of articles in *The New York Times* and has appeared on A&E Television, PBS, and other outlets. Kewulay has performed at St. John the Divine, Symphony Space, City Center, Oxford University, and the Dodge Poetry Festival. He narrated the TBS documentary, *Legends of the Bushmen*. He directed *In Search of Finah Misa Kule: the Story of a People Who Live by the Word*, a documentary of epic poetry, history and music; as well as *Tah Boh Mbareh: Visit My Home* (Dankawalie, Sierra Leone) for the Marcus Garvey Museum in Jamaica.

Mr. Kamara is a senior consultant and expert facilitator for UNESCO. He was recently featured in *A Foresight Storytelling Experience* on TEDx and in Atlanta Interfaith Broadcasting (AIB)'s *Sacred Sounds*. His book of epic narrative poetry, *Word in the Belly of the Word*, is due in 2017.

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## ABOUT THE RETURN TO SOURCE FILM SERIES

The series will include films that link identity, authenticity and creativity to the value of returning to the sources. By "return to the source" we are putting in conversation films that entertain or question the usefulness of returning home as narrative forms. The films will explore such varied narrative forms as the essay film, home-movies, archives, as well as fictional, experimental and documentary approaches. The series will also engage with the ways in which oral traditions and historical documents are deployed in the films. Directors will be present for discussion after the screenings.

For film titles/locations to be announced for spring 2017 please visit: [www.nyuiaaa.org](http://www.nyuiaaa.org)