



In the blood

Mory Kanté, musician and food campaigner, talks to Alpha Bacar Barry

'MY SONGS ARE ABOUT TODAY AND TOMORROW, BRAVERY AND LOVE, IN FACT LIFE ITSELF,' says Mory Kanté, an artist in a great African tradition. A griot – one of the musician-poet-diplomats often considered to be guardians of West Africa's oral history – he became well known worldwide when his song, *Yéké Yéké*, became an international Number 1, and even more so when it was remixed for the soundtrack of the Leonardo DiCaprio blockbuster, *The Beach*. And now he has another international role as a Goodwill Ambassador of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).

'When your finger hurts, your entire body feels the pain,' he says. 'So, too, with the human family. We must feel solidarity for one another, and remember that a hungry man is not a free one. Food must be available to everyone. We must all unite and work flat out to achieve this, even if it means that some of us have to give up a little.'

From an early age, Kanté was initiated into the responsibilities of the griot tradition by his grandfather. He mastered many instruments including the lute-like *kore* and the *balafon*, a type of xylophone, and learned the history of the Mandingoes, the peoples of his native Guinea as well as Guinea-Bissau, Gambia, Senegal and Mali. 'A griot is defined by *djeli*, meaning blood, the element that irrigates our bodies and knows them best,' he explains. 'In the same way, the griot is in touch with his people. That's why, as well as entertaining, griots have been used to interpret treaties and agreements between different communities, and even acted as counsellors to kings.'

It's much the same in his work for FAO. 'To be human one must develop an empathy with one's fellows,' he says. 'I see my ambassadorial role as telling people about the realities of poverty and hunger. The whole world needs to mobilize to solve these twin scourges.' He has carried this message, through his music, from Africa to North America, from the World Food Day festivities broadcast in 188 countries to the Vatican celebrations for Pope John-Paul II's jubilee.

'Of course I am an artist,' he adds, 'but artists, particularly, speak out when people seem unable to solve the problems that they, themselves, have created. Take the rush for biofuels: can it be right to look for energy from our fields, when so many still go hungry? Feeding ourselves must always be the priority. We talk of democracy, and in Africa we may be politically independent, but we do not have economic independence.'

'The first thing I believe we must do is remove all taxes and subsidies from food as the combination of poverty and hunger is explosive. It is also a question of organization and training. In Africa, for example, we have the land and potential for irrigation. We must develop the way we use our agricultural land, including our pastures.'

Now in his 50s, after more than 30 years at the top of his profession, Mory Kanté is keen to help mobilize the exceptional energy of the young to bring about sustainable development. 'Today's youth are the future of this world and they should not inherit the problems that hunger and poverty bring,' he says, urging young people to 'go back to the land and work to ensure the best possible use of that most precious resource, our soils'.