THE STORY KADIATOU'S GRANDMOTHER TOLD

# Wagadu and the snake in the well

Kadiatou is the Water-Keeper in the novel *Songs of Dust and Water*. As a child, she heard this old Sarahule tale from her grandmother at the well. The Sarahule are also called the Soninke.

Sit, if you are going to listen.
This one is long,
and the well will still be here when it is done.

Before this village, before the border,
before anyone had heard of a minister,
there was Wagadu.
Some say it was a city.
Some say it was a people.
The grandmothers say it was both.
Ask them what else it was,
and they will tell you to wait until you are older.

Wagadu was wide.
Its roads ran from the edge of the sand to the edge of the rivers,
and every road came back to the same place,
to a great tree,
and under the tree a well.
The well was old and very deep.
Drop a stone into that well and count with me.
One.
Two.
Three.
Four.
Five.
Six.
Seven.

There. Now you have heard it land.
Some children dropped their stones
and never heard them land at all.

In that well lived Bida.



Bida was a snake, older than the well itself,
and bigger than any you have chased out of the millet with a stick.
Some say it had seven heads.
    The way I heard it, it had one.
    One was plenty.

In the first days of Wagadu,
the founder's son went down to the well to ask for rain.
The snake lifted its head out of the dark water
and looked at him until he had to look away.
Then it named its price.
Every year, ten young women of Wagadu, the most beautiful.

Ten.
The founder's son was young, but he was not a fool.
He told the snake that Wagadu had fields to plant
and pots to fill and marriages to make,
and that a land which gave away ten daughters a year
would soon have none.
They haggled like two traders over a sack of salt,
and when they had finished, the price was one.

One young woman a year.
In return, Bida would send rain on the fields of Wagadu.
And three times a year, the way I heard it,
Bida would send another kind of rain.

*Rain on the roofs of Wagadu,*
*gold in the fields of Wagadu,*
*and the well is deep, and the well is deep.*

Gold.
It came down with the rain and lay in the furrows like seed,
and the children ran out after the storms to pick it up.
Gold, in the fields, for anyone to gather.

So Wagadu grew rich.
Traders came across the sand with salt on their camels,
and they wanted gold for it.
Wagadu gave them gold.
But Wagadu set the price,
and Wagadu chose the place where the trading was done,
and no trader was ever told where the gold came from.
They say some of them asked until they were old men,
and never found out.

Those were the good years, and there were many of them.
The granaries were full.
The drums played at every wedding.
And every year, when the rains were near,
one girl put on her best cloth and walked to the well,
and the people stood back to let her pass,
and the rain came.

In one of those years there was a young woman called Sia.
    You will hear that every girl in a story is beautiful.
    With Sia, it happened to be true.
When she went by, mothers stopped their pounding to watch.

And there was a young man called Mamadi, who loved her.
He was not a talker.
He brought Sia's mother firewood,
and mended the gate of their compound,
and sat outside it in the evenings saying nothing at all,
until everyone knew.

They were promised to each other.
The wedding was set for after the harvest.

Then the elders met, as they met every year,
to choose the girl for the well.
They chose Sia.

Wagadu did not argue. That was the bargain.
Sia's mother hid her face in her hands.
Sia went inside and did not come out.
And Mamadi said nothing.
He got up from his place outside the compound and walked away,
and people shook their heads and said
that even the quiet ones give up in the end.



But Mamadi went to the smith.

He laid his sword on the anvil and asked for an edge.
The smith looked at the sword, and at Mamadi,
and did not ask what it was for.
He worked all night.
By morning the blade was so sharp, they say,
that a hair laid across it fell in two.

That morning the whole of Wagadu came to the well.
The drums played.
Sia, in her best cloth, walked between the people,
and they stood back to let her pass, as they always did.
She stopped at the edge of the well.
And Mamadi was there, waiting, with his sword in his hand.

The water moved, and Bida's head rose out of the well.
It looked at the girl.
Mamadi did not move.
The head went down again.
It rose a second time, higher,
and still Mamadi waited.
The third time, the snake came up out of the well

as far as it had ever come,
and Mamadi struck.

Bida's head flew up over the tree and away to the south,
so high that the children lost sight of it.
And as it went, it cried out to Wagadu.
For seven years, seven months and seven days, it said,
no rain would fall on Wagadu, and no gold.

Far to the south, the head came down at last.
Where it fell, people found gold in the ground,
and they find it there still.
That is the way I heard it.

*No rain on the roofs of Wagadu,*
*no gold in the fields of Wagadu,*
*and the well is dry, and the well is dry.*



So the promise was broken.
The first year, Wagadu shrugged.
Sometimes the rains come late.
The second year, the elders sat longer under the tree and said less.
By the third year, the water had sunk so low in the wells
that the buckets came up half empty,
and what was in them tasted bitter.
The fields went to dust.
The cattle walked further every day to drink,
and some days they came back without drinking.

And when the water went, the families of Wagadu followed it.
One family left, then another, then whole quarters at once.
They went south and they went west, from well to well,
with what they could carry.
Wherever they stopped, they dug,
and where the water was sweet they stayed,
and in time those places became villages.

And Sia and Mamadi?
That depends on who tells it.
In one telling, they ride away together on his horse,
and live long, and are happy.
In another, Sia cannot forgive him for what it cost Wagadu,
and will not look at him again.
    My grandmother told it the first way on good days
    and the second way on bad ones.
    You can choose.



That was not the only time Wagadu was lost.
It has stood four times, and four times it has been lost.
First it was lost to vanity,
then to lies,
then to greed
and last of all to quarrelling among its own people.
    Four times.
And each time it stood, it had a new name.
The singers call out the names.

DIERRA. AGADA. GANNA. SILLA.

    There is no fifth name yet.
    They say that when Wagadu stands a fifth time,
    it will never be lost again.

The families who walked south took Wagadu with them,
well by well,
all the way down to the low ground where a river once ran,
and to this well.
    It is a good well.
    Look after it.

*Wagadu is on the road,*
*Wagadu is in the well,*
*and the road has not yet run out.*

## The story and the novel

The novel is about two villages six hundred kilometres apart, and who will own what they build. It opens in Madina, in the dry north, and in its first chapter a minister tells an engineer, “My ancestors built Wagadu.” Kadiatou’s story begins in Part Two.

Kadiatou has looked after the well at Nafawol, her village in the fictional country of Tekuru, for sixty years, and now the well is failing. One morning, looking down into it, she remembers her grandmother’s story. Dr Arramata, who grew up in the village, has come home with a plan for a machine that draws water from the air, and Kadiatou wants to know who will hold its key.

> “I have never been sure about the snake, but I have believed what she said about the water for years.”
>
> Kadiatou, remembering her grandmother · p. 85

## About this telling

In *Songs of Dust and Water*, Wagadu is the old empire that the Sarahule characters look back to. The other characters have their own stories of where their families came from, such as Kaabu, Jolof and the kingdoms of the Futas. The novel draws on the Sarahule stories of Wagadu but never names the snake. In most versions it is called Bida. In French, Wagadu is spelt Wagadou, with an o before the u. Historians know Wagadu as the Ghana Empire, a different place from modern Ghana.

Griots, who keep history in speech and song, have told the story in many ways, and the lovers’ full names, the number of the snake’s heads and the ending all change from one teller to the next. This telling follows the best-known outline. It takes a few details, such as the bargaining over the price, the four losses of Wagadu, its four names and the hope of a fifth, from the versions that the German scholar Leo Frobenius published in 1921. Among them were parts of what he called the Dausi, an old Sarahule epic. In his versions Mamadi’s full name is Mamadi Sefe Dekote, and Frobenius explains that Sefe Dekote means “he speaks seldom”. Some touches, such as the smith and the counting at the well, were added for this telling.

If you are reading the novel, the Reader’s companion on songsofdustandwater.com has a section on Wagadu that follows it through the book, chapter by chapter.

## For a reading group

If your group reads the story aloud, these questions can start the talk:

- Was Mamadi right to strike?
- Which ending would you tell, and why?
- Who paid for the good years, and who decided?


### Songs of Dust and Water

*Who holds the key,*
*who pays and who decides.*

*Songs of Dust and Water* by M.J. Hydara
is out now in paperback and on Kindle.

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