

Act I Scene 1

Snuggled next to her peers, young Charlotte sat spellbound, wrapped in the word-woven tapestry of the loquacious griot, extolling the sights, sounds, and smells of the people of west-central Africa.

Through the eyes of Yimbay she endured the perilous journey across foreboding seas, transported to a land where the esteemed traditions and customs of his Fulani people had little worth, and where reverence for life itself was valued in a much different light, with people treated as less than human, and killed for expressing their need to be free.

She learned that in Africa the family lineage was revered, its accounts etched in the chronicles of village lore, unlike her present surroundings where little regard was given to the heritage of those enslaved. In fact, one's own name was subject to change each time a new 'owner' claimed possession of their 'property'.

(Seated around the evening campfire, Yimbe recounts scenes of his village in Africa to a gathering of captivated youth.)

After one storytelling session, Charlotte's inquisitive nature prompted a question to Yimbay.

Young Charlotte

Yimbe, your name is not like ours. Is it a special name?

Yimbay

Oh yes little one. One's name in the mother land has much meaning. Before the child is born, the father reaches deep inside to find a name worthy of the man or the woman the child will grow to be.

On the banks of the river Niger, the name given me of my father was Binde Ma Yimbe; in the words of your land, Fruit of my People.

But as I grew older, and my love for the Fulani people became known, the village elders chose for me a new name, Ma Yimbe Taali; which means My People's Story. So, to you, I am Yimbay. And I will not cease to tell the story of my people.

But, my brothers, my sisters: in this land that we now call home, we are not our own. We are as chattel, the property of another.

In my homeland, I am sad to say, some of my own people helped the kidnapers who took us from our villages, bringing shame upon their home.

You must remember little one, the honor of your birthright should be cherished. It is a gift from the creator. But for us it has become a burden; our spirits wounded from a life of bondage.

In the land of my birth, I am known as Ma Yimbe Taali.

In time, they will take from me my Fulani name. But, though I am called by another, it will not direct my path; for, I know who I am.

(Light down on Yimbay. Charlotte returns to stage center. Others exit stage left.)

(Voice offstage. Harsh.)

Get back to work. I want that row done before dark.

(Walking back to her cabin, Charlotte stops to look up at the stars, as crickets chirp a coarse refrain. Wondering what, if anything, would be the result of her life in bondage, she vows never to surrender hopes of a brighter day. Surveying the tree lined hills behind the quarters, Charlotte observed the spatial symmetry of fireflies performing an incandescent light show in the evening sky. Surely, she reasoned, the freedom enjoyed by these unfettered beacons of the night was available to all God's creatures. She just had to figure out the way to find it.)

Young Charlotte

Yimbe said the hills where he lived were full of pretty flowers, with big-eared elephants and tall giraffes. I wonder if they have lightning bugs.

Look at 'em, flashin' and floatin' so high in the sky. If that was me, I wouldn't have to work them fields. I could fly wherever I want, free as can be. No bosses tellin' me what to do. Someday, I'm gon' git there. You jus' wait.