



## **Toumani Diabaté**

### **The kora: tales of a frontier instrument**

**By Lucy Durán**

#### **Introduction to TOUMANI DIABATE**

Toumani Diabaté is without doubt the world's greatest kora player, and one of Africa's most remarkable musicians. No other kora player can match Toumani in his formidable technique and incredible musicianship. Born into a leading family of Mandé griot musicians in Mali, he is the son of the most celebrated kora player of his time, Sidiki Diabaté (known as the "king of the kora"), (c. 1922-96) and the griot singer Nene Koita (d.1997). During Mali's first decade of independence, they were both members of Mali's prestigious Ensemble National Instrumental and played a major role in creating an indigenous musical identity for the newly formed nation. Toumani grew up in Bamako, capital of Mali, in this heady musical environment. A prodigy on the kora, he was largely self-taught, and developed an original approach to performance, combining his father's flair for virtuosic and fiery accompaniment, with the lyrical, gentle melodies of his mother's singing, all on the solo kora for the first time.

Toumani's debut album, *Kaira* - the first solo recording of the kora - was released in 1988 when he was only 21 years old. On it he showcased, with astonishing virtuosity, some of the classics of the kora repertoire, and put the instrument firmly on the map. Now, after two decades and a prolific career both at home and abroad, including many acclaimed collaborations with artists as diverse as Ketama, Taj Mahal, Ali Farka Toure and most recently Björk, Toumani finally releases his long-awaited second solo album, *The Mandé Variations*.

As always, Toumani derives his main inspiration from the wealth of the Mandé griot tradition, but he also takes the kora into unexpected new musical territories and explores more fully than ever before the true potential of the instrument. He revisits some old favourites such as *Alla l'aa ke* (renamed *Cantelowes*, after the London street where he spent seven months in 1987) with a new maturity and passion, bringing to it a whole new level of complex rhythm and polyphony. On *Si naani*, he weaves two

very different tunes together into a complex tapestry with extensive variations. He pays tribute to the classical style of his father on the 13<sup>th</sup> century piece, *Djourou Kara Nany* – Arabic name for Alexander the Great, whose reputation even reached ancient Mali. And he introduces an original, new, minor-key tuning for the kora (the traditional tunings of the kora are all major key), which he has dubbed his “Egyptian tuning”.

The album also includes two abstract, improvisatory, entirely original compositions that depart radically from anything previously heard on the kora, one of them in honour of his late mentor, Ali Farka Touré - powerful testimony to Toumani’s ability to take the kora into uncharted territory.

To contribute to the different aesthetic of tradition versus invention, Toumani uses two acoustic 21-string koras – one given him by his father, with the traditional tuning system of leather tuning rings, and the other featuring a neck with machine heads (for more details of the construction of the kora see below). On the latter, referred to as the “gold peg” kora (for obvious reasons), he uses the “Egyptian tuning”. Thus pieces like *Djourou Kara Nany* and *Alla l’a ke* feature the traditional kora in hardino and sauta tuning, and the new compositions like *Si naani* and *Ali Farka Touré* feature the gold peg kora with the Egyptian tuning. Another innovation is that (on both koras) he combines harp strings with the usual nylon strings cut from different gauges of fishing line, which gives a more resonant timbre.

In terms of its sound, musical approach, tunings, and creativity, *The Mandé Variations* shows just how far Toumani Diabaté has taken the kora beyond its usual boundaries, while remaining rooted in the Mandé tradition. This unique West African harp has now truly come of age.

## **THE FAMILY OF CALABASH HARPS**

Just how long a journey the kora has been on, from its local origins to the world stage, is best understood by looking at its colourful history and the mythology that surrounds it.

The kora is a uniquely West African instrument. It belongs to a family of calabash harps found exclusively in the West African savannah and is probably of ancient Mandé origin. Many authors have described the kora as a harp-lute. With its half calabash resonator, skin sound table and long wooden neck, it may indeed look

like a lute, but technically it is a harp because unlike lutes, the strings are at right angles to the sound table, and so cannot be stopped against the neck; each string produces only one note. What makes the calabash harp a distinctive instrument type is its wide bridge – known to players as its “bellybutton” (*bato* or *bara*) - that stands upright on the sound table, lifting the strings out in two nearly parallel rows (though some calabash harps, like the *simbin* of south-west Mali, only have a single row of strings).

The *kora* is the most highly developed of the calabash harp family, and by far the best known, with many more strings than other variants. Most calabash harps tend to have a maximum of 7-8 strings. The most widespread of these harps is the *donsongoni* (hunters’ harp from Wasulu, a region that straddles three borders, southern Mali, eastern Guinea and northern Cote d’Ivoire). The *donsongoni* has two parallel rows of 3 strings tuned to a pentatonic scale, and is played by members of hunters’ societies and their specialist musicians, whose ancient traditions are currently enjoying something of a revival in Mali. Another type of hunters’ harp, not as widespread as the *donsongoni*, is the *simbin* (Maninka hunters’ harp) which comes from the area south-west of Bamako, and has one single row of 7-8 wire strings tuned to a heptatonic scale. Salif Keita draws on the repertoire of the *simbin* for musical inspiration, and most recently has produced an album by a *simbin* player, Sina Sinayoko, probably the first CD production of this highly lyrical but not well known hunters’ repertoire, which is the ancestor of several Mandé griot pieces such as *Janjon* and *Jawura*.

Another calabash harp that is fast gaining international recognition is the *kamalengoni* (youth harp), a smaller, secular replica of the more esoteric and ritual hunters’ *donsongoni*. It was either created, or popularised, by a musician called Allata Brulaye Sidibe (c. 1948-1997) from a village deep in Wasulu sometime in the 1960s; he was the first to record on the instrument, in 1983. But it was made famous by Oumou Sangare, following her debut album *Moussolou* (1990), in which the *kamalengoni* is the trademark sound. The popularity of the *kamalengoni* in Mali since then has had a major impact on popular Malian music in general; many musicians with no connection to Wasulu now feature the *kamalengoni* in their music. Even Salif Keita, whose style is not connected at all to Wasulu, now features a *kamalengoni* player in his band – the brilliant virtuoso, Harouna Samake - and it is an important part of the sound of his two most recent albums, *Moffou* and *Mbemba*.

Another of the well-known calabash harps is the *bolon*, a 3-4 string bass harp from Guinea and Mali, played in pre-colonial times to accompany warriors and kings into battle. This association with warfare is probably why, to this day, most Malian musicians refuse to have a *bolon* player as a permanent member of their band, as they say that this will cause the band to split up. The *bolon* is difficult to play in tune, but in the hands of a master such as the Guinean Amadou Sodja, it is an exceptional bass instrument for Mandé music.

One antecedent of the kora that has virtually disappeared, but was clearly once common in parts of upper Guinea, is the *soron*, which had 17-18 leather strings. The French ethnomusicologist Gilbert Rouget recorded the *soron* in 1952 in Guinea (Musique Malinke) in which the contrapuntal interlocking playing style is clearly related to that of the kora, though the tuning is quite different.

The widespread influence of these calabash harps can be seen as far south as Akan country in southern Ghana, where one of the symbols of Asante royalty is an instrument called the *saprewa*, with ten strings in two parallel rows on either side of a wide bride. The calabash resonator, however, has been substituted by a wooden box. The king of the Asante, the Asantehene, has a solid gold *saprewa* as part of his regalia, a reflection of the symbolic importance of this instrument, and testimony of the far-reaching impact of the Mali Empire.

The kora is clearly related to and has developed out of all these calabash harps, but unlike the others, the kora is played exclusively by griots - or to use their own term, *jelis* (in Gambia they say *jali*, in Mali it is pronounced *jeli*) - the hereditary professional musicians' caste of the Mandé peoples of West Africa. Still today, it is very rare to find a kora player who is not a *jeli*.

## **THE FIRST GRIOT**

Just as there are many legends about the origin of the kora, so there are about how the griots first came into being.

As the designated, hereditary musicians/historians/genealogists - one of the four *nyamakala* or artisans, literally, handlers of *nyama* (occult power), it is not surprising that the myths of origin depict the griot in some way as an outsider to society.

Some stories involve the spilling of blood in some way. One well-known story tells how two brothers were travelling together, hunting, but they ran out of food in a barren landscape with no wild game. The younger brother went off by himself, and

came back with some meat. He had secretly cut off part of his leg to keep his older brother alive, but pretended it was the meat of an animal. When the older brother found out, he sang the praises of his sibling, and from then on, became a griot, dedicated to praising the heroic actions of others.

This echoes another legend, explaining how the Diabatés first came to be griots. At around the time of Sunjata Keita's father, the king Nare Makhan Konate, two brothers with the surname Traore were out hunting for a dangerous buffalo who was destroying crops and threatening the lives of people. When the buffalo attacked them in the bush, the elder brother, in fear, climbed up a tree, while the younger brother stood his ground and killed the wild beast. The elder brother, in gratitude, sang out his praises. The younger brother replied, "if you become a praise singer, no one will be able to refuse you" – and that is the meaning of the name Diabaté.

Another myth of how the griot profession came about traces it to the origins of Islam, and goes back to someone called Surakata, the son of an Arab slave who was a contemporary of the Prophet Mohammed. This Surakata was an unbeliever who mocked the Prophet, but each time he did so, the Prophet was able to freeze him to the spot. Finally, after the third time, Surakata had a revelation and understood the true nature of the Prophet and began singing out the shahada ("There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his Prophet"). From then on, the story goes, there have always been griots whose job it is to recognise and call out, in public, the greatness of others. Most accounts agree that the first actual named griot of the Mandé world was Nyankuman Duwa (also spelt Gnakouman Duwa) who was the griot of Sunjata's father, Nare Makhan Konate. And so, in true griot fashion, the two sons were also linked as griot and patron – Sunjata, son of Nare Makhan, the king of Mandé, became the patron of Bala Fasigi Kouyaté, son of Nyankuman. Bala Fasigi was not only a formidable player of the balafon, but a trusted, and brilliant advisor to Sunjata throughout his life. This is why the Mandé say, "no griot is as great as a Kouyaté" (jeli man Kouyaté bo), in recognition of the fact that still to this day, the Kouyatés are the only pure griot family lineage.

Since the time of Sunjata, griots have been both feared and esteemed because of their powers. Instruments could be made to play by themselves, and the words of the master griot could split a door in two, or cause a tree to drop all its leaves. Right up until the colonial period, kings and warriors would be accompanied onto the battlefield by their griots, encouraging them to be brave, and then singing their praises

at the end of the battle. One of the last great pre-colonial warlords, Almamy Samory Touré (who's grandson, Sekou Touré, was the first president of Guinea) was said to have an orchestra of up to 100 griots, who would trek into the battlefield with him, playing their balafons and bolons (four string harps) and making the horses dance – just as Jali Mady Wuleng made the horse of his patron dance (see below).

### **HOW OLD IS THE KORA?**

The kora is, without doubt, the youngest of three *jeli* melody instruments, the others being the *ngoni* (small lute with 5-8 strings) and the *balafon* (xylophone with 18 keys). The latter two both probably date back at least to the time of Sunjata Keita, who founded the Mali empire in c. 1235. West African griot lutes and xylophones must be of some antiquity because they are so widespread: similar instruments are found right across West Africa in different cultures and with a variety of names, all the way from northern Nigeria to Mauritania. This is not the case with the kora, which until the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was confined to a small geographical area, suggesting a more recent origin than either lutes or xylophones in the region. This is corroborated by the fact that there is no written account of the kora until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, even though descriptions of other Mandé instruments can be found as far back as the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

The first written account of Mandé music was by the 14<sup>th</sup> century Moroccan traveller and writer Ibn Battuta (the Marco Polo of the Arab world), who visited the court of Mali in 1355. He describes the balafon being played, backed by a chorus of a hundred women singers. String instruments are mentioned, but nothing that is remotely like the kora. There are many subsequent accounts of music by travellers through the region (see appendix A of Charry 2000), including references to six-string harps, but it is not until 1797 that we find the first specific mention of the kora, by the Scots explorer Mungo Park who, whilst charting the course of the Niger river, came across a large 18-string harp called “korro”.

Detailed and authoritative descriptions of the origins and history of the kora can be found in Knight 1973, Charry 2000, and Huchard 2000. The last named is by far the most extensive, drawing on written sources, museum evidence, and oral testimony. Huchard, a musician, scholar, and cultural activist, was born in Casamance, southern Senegal, where he developed a special love for kora music that led him to write his PhD thesis on the subject, which was the basis for his book. In the 1970s, under his

stage name Soleya Mama, he created a group called *Waatoosita* (the time has come), showcasing Mandinka traditions including the kora. He interviewed many of Senegal and Gambia's most celebrated kora players of a previous generation, providing the most extensive evidence on the oral traditions about the kora.

These traditions differ considerably on how and when the kora first came into existence. Some musicians claim that it is several hundred years old, dating back to the time of Sunjata Keita, who founded the Mali empire in the early 13th century. For example, one epic rendition of the story of Sunjata, by a master *jeli* from Guinea, Tassej Conde, (see Conrad 2004) attributes the creation of the kora, as well as other Mande *jeli* instruments, to Sumaworo Kante, the blacksmith king who usurped the throne from Sunjata. Another oral tradition states that the first kora player was called Koriyang Musa, and that his patron was Sunjata's general, Tiramakhan Traore, which would place its origin as far back as 1300. Bamba Suso, an authoritative Gambian Mandinka *jeli* with a deep knowledge of the Sunjata epic, also claimed that Koriyang Musa was the first to popularise the kora; however, he said that Koriyang Musa was his maternal grandfather (Bamba Suso 1999: lines 1-10), which would give the kora an extremely recent origin, possibly mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

These kinds of discrepancies are not untypical of the Mandé oral tradition, which often collapses centuries into a small time frame or vice versa.

Even within Toumani Diabaté's family, there is some disagreement about how old the kora is and how long it has been in his direct lineage. Toumani's great uncle, Amadu Bansang Jobarteh, from the Gambia, whose half-brother was called Bala Diabaté (Toumani's grandfather), told me many times in interview and conversation that Bala was the first in the family to take up the kora (this is corroborated by Charry 2000: 120). According to Amadu, his father's family, who were originally from Galen, Kita in present day Mali, specialised in the *ngoni* (lute). It was only when they migrated to the Gambia in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that they took up the kora.

This is not, however, quite how it is told by Amadu's nephew Sidiki Diabaté, who was son of Bala, and father of Toumani, and undoubtedly one of the greatest and most innovative kora players of all time. According to Huchard, Sidiki stated during his last ever public performance at the French Cultural Centre in Dakar in May 96, that the kora had been in his family for seven generations, listing the names of the players, right back to *Jali Mady Wuleng*, whom many believe was the first kora player (Huchard 2000: 261). Charry also notes that Sidiki quoted seven and sometimes eight

generations of kora players in his family (Charry 2000: 119-120). If each of these seven generations represents 30 years before they had sons or passed on the kora, that would make the kora c. 210 years old in 1996, dating it back to the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, which tallies with most accounts of when it emerged.

### **THE KORA, DJINNS, & MANDINKA WARRIOR PRINCES**

Most kora players agree on one thing: that the kora emerged out of the Mandinka kingdom known as Kaabu (also spelt Gabu), in present-day Guinea Bissau. The Mandinka are the westernmost of the Mandé peoples, with their own distinctive language and culture. The kora is so closely associated with the Mandinka that it is even said to “speak Mandinka”. The Mandinka share linguistic and cultural traits with other Mande peoples, but they do have their own characteristic music, influenced by the lively dance rhythms and interlocking polyphonic melodies of neighbouring peoples like the Jola, Manjak and Balanta.

The kingdom of **Kaabu**, with its capital in Kansala in the interior of Guinea Bissau, extended as far as the northern banks of the Gambia river. It was conquered by Sunjata’s general, Tiramakan Traore (the ancestor of the Diabate lineage) as an outer post of the Mali empire, and rose to power after the fall of the Mali empire in the late 1400s. It fell in c.1867 when the last Mandinka king, Janke Wali, was defeated by a Fula Muslim warlord, Alfa Molo, and blew himself up with gunpowder. Alfa Molo’s son, Musa Molo, was the last king of the Gambia before British rule; he died (well into the period of colonial rule) in 1931. (see Innes, 1976)

At the time of Kaabu, the Mandinka rulers were animists who had not converted to Islam. They consisted of matrilineal warrior clans – men who plaited their hair, rode horses, drank alcohol, danced, and loved warfare - and music. Inheritance of power and status was through the mother, not the father. There were two main types of warrior, the *nyancho* (surnames Saane, Maane and Wali) who were the most powerful clans, since they inherited their status from their mothers; and the *koringo* (Sonko, Sanyang) who inherited their status from their fathers. Both *nyancho* and *koringo* were patrons of music, and their names are embedded in the early kora repertoire, because this is where the history of the kora begins in earnest.

All the stories about the origins of the kora at some point refer to jinns (Muslim spirits, described in the Koran) as the first creators of the instrument; they would play it deep in the bush, or on an island on a river in the heart of Kaabu. Most



accounts say that a flamboyant griot known as Jali Mady Wuleng ("red" Jali Mady), whose surname was Sissoko, was responsible for discovering and appropriating the kora from the jinns. Walking through the bush, he heard some celestial music, and found a jinn, hidden in a hole in the ground, playing a large string instrument. Jali Mady, the story goes, became bewitched by the sound, and managed to trap the jinn, and steal his kora. So the jinns invented it, they say, and still own it; the kora is a "jinn's instrument, it's just been "on loan" to griots ever since. (see Huchard 2000, Charry 2000).

It is tempting to dismiss this as a bit of colourful folklore, but it is so much at the heart of kora mythology that the presence of jinns and the spirit world keeps coming up as an explanation for any kind of irrational behaviour or unexplained events. Just like the great Blues players who made a pact with the devil on the crossroads at midnight, kora players are believed to get their inspiration from jinns, sometimes even to the point of being driven to madness.

Warfare was the backdrop to the early days of the kora. Red Jali Mady was the favourite musician of a *nyancho* (warrior-prince) by the name of Kelefa Saane, who lived sometime in the late 18<sup>th</sup> or early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Kelefa was a typical *nyancho* - he detested farming, which he considered suitable for cowards, and thought that fighting was the only noble occupation. So every day, he plus fellow warriors, riding on horses, with his retinue, including his musician Jali Mady Wuleng, on foot, moved across the Mandinka kingdom looking for war.

"Kelefa would stop to greet the *alkaalo* (head of the village)" explained one of the most influential kora players of the Gambia, Jali Nyama Suso, at one of his concerts in the UK in the 1980s. "He would say, 'good-day my father, do you have any war for me here?' The *alkaalo* would reply quickly 'no war here my son, no war here! Only peace. Why not try the next village? I've heard they have a quarrel to settle.'"

"So Kelefa would ride on. And all the while, throughout this long trek in search of war, Jali Mady Wuleng walked or ran behind his patron, with the kora tucked into the draw-string of his baggy trousers to hold it upright, and he would play the strings furiously. He sang the praises of Kelefa, and that was the first piece ever composed specifically for the kora –called "Following Kelefa" (*Kuruntu Kelefa*). It was so lively, so rhythmic, so catchy, that Kelefa would dance in his stirrups, and even the horse would prance in time to the rhythm."

Of course, wherever Jali Mady Wuleng went, news spread about this strange instrument, the likes of which had never been seen before, stolen from the jinns, surrounded by legend, with its many strings and celestial sound that entertained warriors and made horses dance. It caught on like wildfire. And suddenly all the *nyanchos* wanted to have their very own kora player. It began to eclipse the other older instruments of the griots.

At last Kelefa arrived in Bariya, a place on the north bank of the Gambia river where there was, finally, a real battle. Predictably, things did not go well for him – the secret of his power was betrayed, and he was killed. This prompted his faithful musician, Jali Madi Wuleng, to compose a second song on the kora, this time a lament, called *Kelefa ba* (great Kelefa). So these were the first two pieces ever written specifically for the kora, and still today are considered the “ABC of the kora”. (see Charry 2000: 119; Innes 1978).

The connection with jinns remains in people’s minds. When kora players suddenly behave irrationally, or are unreliable - a common enough occurrence - it's not their fault, so people say, it's caused by the jinns. Some, you will hear, even have jinn wives, invisible to the rest of the world, but real enough to the kora players who wake in the middle of the night to find themselves next to a "diablesse" (female ‘devil’) of incredible beauty - usually pale-skinned and tall with long black hair down to her ankles, and stark naked.

Amadu Bansang Jobarteh, Toumani’s great uncle, from the Gambia, who lived to the ripe old age of 86, was always full of cautionary tales. “The kora has surpassed all our other instruments in popularity” he would say. “A great player should limit his virtuosity, otherwise things can happen to him – he’ll suffer some terrible misfortune or will die young”. And he would advise against playing after midnight - when the jinns were most likely to appear.

## **THE KORA IN THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY: SYMBOL OF MODERNITY**

Whenever it might have been created, the kora really came into its own during the colonial period in the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, a time of enormous upheaval and social change in the region. Kora players were in great demand in the Gambia, where the British colonial policy of “indirect rule” installed local chiefs into administrative posts. These rulers became the new patrons of griots, and their stories were commemorated in idiomatic, highly contrapuntal, rhythmically dense pieces

composed specially for the kora, such as *Alla l'aa ke*. Some older kora players have also provided another clue for the popularity of the kora: it seems that whilst colonial authorities often banned the balafon and drums, because they were so loud and were believed to “talk”, the kora escaped this ban because of its quiet sound. After independence it became a symbol of modernity and cultural authenticity, with kora players feted by the presidents of Gambia, Senegal, Guinea Bissau, and Mali as well. It was after independence that the kora began truly spreading throughout the region, way beyond its original birthplace.

Though Malian by birth, Toumani Diabaté always pays tribute both musically and philosophically to the Mandinka origins of the kora. Indeed his father was a Mandinka speaker. Toumani’s grandparents were from a village called Galen, near Kita in northwest Mali, but they moved westwards into the Gambia river valley at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in search of new patronage. Bala Diabaté, Toumani’s grandfather, was born in Galen, but grew up in the Gambia.

Toumani’s father Sidiki, son of Bala, was born in c. 1922 in Bansang, a river town in eastern Gambia (where incidentally he also died, whilst visiting family there in the summer of 1996). Sidiki remembered his father’s kora playing as talented, but limited to simple versions of a couple of pieces. This was not unusual; many of the early kora players, right up to the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, apparently played in a very basic unornamented way; the emphasis was on the singing and story-telling that the kora accompanied.

Sidiki was the most outstanding member of a generation of musicians who revolutionised the kora by expanding its repertoire, adapting pieces from the other Mande instruments, and even from the guitar, which was a new arrival in the region. His fiery, highly creative style, though idiosyncratic, was essentially Mandinka. Shortly after the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, Sidiki left Gambia and went back to his ancestral homeland in Mali, along with fellow Gambian kora player Djelimady Sissoko. The kora was not unknown in Mali at this time, but it was Sidiki and Djelimady who established it alongside the other more prevalent griot instruments, counting Modibo Keita, Mali’s first president, as well as Sekou Touré, Guinea’s first president, amongst their many powerful patrons. To this day, the Diabatés and Sissokos live next door to each other in Bamako, and most young Malian kora players have learnt in one or the other of the two households. They helped to develop a Malian style of playing the

kora – more sedate, ornamental, and melodic, and drawing on the techniques of the ngoni lute and balafon.

Travels between the far-flung corners of the Mandé cultural area (from Sierra Leone in the south to north-west Mali in the north) has always been an essential part of the life style of kora players (and Mandé griots in general), and this accelerated greatly from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Koras begin to appear in museums from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and there are photographs and postcards of kora players dating from c. 1905 onwards.

The first known recording of a kora (an unidentified player) dates from the early 1930s – a field recording made by American anthropologist Laura Boulton – and then there is nothing until A. Alberts' recordings of griots in upper Guinea in 1949 (originally released as an album of 78s entitled *Folk, Tribal and Café music from West Africa*). Soon after, recordings begin to proliferate, with the kora becoming a featured instrument in Guinea's celebrated *Ballets Africains* during the 1950s, and following independence, in the national ensembles of Senegal, The Gambia and Mali.

In the years between 1950 and 1970, a number of kora players began to establish formidable reputations both at home and abroad, through radio, state patronage, and eventually through international touring and recording. Several musicians in particular deserve mention here in terms of their influence on the development and popularity of the instrument: Soundioulou Cissoko, who was a favourite of Senegal's first president (1960-80), Leopold Sedar Senghor; Lalo Keba Drame from The Gambia, whose crisp virtuoso playing, bright clear vocals and lively compositions in the Mandinka style have never been surpassed, but who died young (some say poisoned by jealous rivals); Jali Nyama Suso from The Gambia, a fine lyrical player and singer with a wide repertoire, one of the first to record and tour widely in Europe and the USA, and who worked with various scholars such as Roderic Knight (whose PhD thesis on mandinka jaliya, never published, remains one of the most authoritative works on the subject); Alhaji Bai Konte from The Gambia, a highly original player whose eponymous album recorded in 1972 captured the imagination of Pete Seeger and Taj Mahal; Amadu Bansang Jobarteh from the Gambia, a true master who played in the upper-river Mandinka style – as already stated, he was the half brother (they shared the same father) of Bala Diabaté, grandfather of Toumani; and in Mali, three musicians: Batrou Sekou Kouyaté,

Djelimady Sissoko and Sidiki Diabaté, whose 1970 album *Cordes Anciennes* (Ancient Strings) the first recording of instrumental duets and trios, established the kora as a solo instrument in its own right, setting a new precedent for kora technique, and becoming a classic, admired by all kora players throughout the Mandé world. Information on (and photos of) all of these musicians can be found in Huchard's excellent book on the kora.

The esteem in which all these musicians were held in their own countries is reflected in the fact that most of them were invited to perform at the first "Manding conference" held at London University's School of Oriental and African Studies in 1970, bringing together scholars from all over the world. and stimulating important new scholarship on Mande arts and cultures. It was here that the African-American writer Alex Haley, in a booming voice, accompanied on the kora by Jali Nyama Suso playing the "Kinte tune" (*Kinte la julo*), announced that he had traced his ancestry to a Gambian called Kunta Kinte (later he turned this story into his best seller, *Roots*, which was televised around the world). The musicians were even invited by the Prime Minister of the time, Edward Heath, to play at no 10 Downing Street – probably the one and only time a kora has ever been played in the UK prime minister's residence.

(The musicians were also taken to a London studio and recorded by Decca, but the recordings are buried in the Decca archives and were never released. No one could have grasped at the time just what exceptional artists they had in their midst, or what a future the kora had in store).

These pioneers of the kora have been followed by an intrepid new generation of innovators who have taken the instrument into a myriad of genres and styles: Mory Kante introduced his amplified kora into the world of disco; Dembo Konte (son of Alhaji Bai) from the Gambia and Kausu Kouyate from southern Senegal toured festivals around the world; - Toumani credits Kausu Kouyate's astonishing virtuosity in the *yeyengo* style from Casamance (southern Senegal) as a major personal influence, along with jazz griot Soriba Kouyate from Dakar, who for years has played a kora with machine-heads for tuning, and uses guitar pedals and other effects; Foday Musa Suso from The Gambia who moved to the USA in 1977 and brought the kora to the likes of Herbie Hancock and Philip Glass; Ballake Sissoko, (son of Sidiki Diabate's childhood companion Djelimady Sissoko), a traditionalist who is comfortable in any number of collaborations, and in his solo work revives old and almost forgotten kora pieces as well as the old regional tunings like *tomora mesengo*,

– Ballake and Toumani recorded the acclaimed album of kora duets, *New Ancient strings*; - Ba Cissoko from Guinea, who has gone fully electric; and the list goes on. In the past 20 years, since Toumani Diabate recorded his first album *Kaira*, the kora has gone from being an instrument that was virtually unknown outside its region of origin, to one of Africa's best known and most versatile melody instruments, breaking down musical borders and spanning new territories whilst at the same time, remaining deeply rooted in the tradition – as truly befits this instrument of the jinns.

## **THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE KORA**

The kora's journey beyond West Africa has precipitated changes in its construction and tunings, giving it greater flexibility and allowing it to play in bands alongside instruments like electric guitar and keyboards. The original, older and rougher sound of the kora, produced by leather strings (in use until the 1960s), the buzzing of the metal rattle attached to the end of the bridge, and the non-western intervals and scales, have now been largely abandoned for a cleaner, more resonant, and western aesthetic. In fact there is even a purely electric version of the kora called a Gravikora - not however played by Toumani.

Some lament the demise of the traditional kora, with its antelope skin leather strings and noisy rattle; but even musicians like Sidiki Diabate, who was a fierce traditionalist, already had stopped using either the rattle or the leather strings, though his tunings were certainly non-tempered and old-school.

Here follows an account of the traditional construction and tunings of the kora, and a brief overview of some of the innovations it has undergone in the past 50 years.

The kora is a hand-made instrument, originally built entirely from natural materials that grow in the West African savannah: a large calabash cut in half for the resonator; rosewood for the neck, handles and bridge; cowskin – (until the 1950s, antelope skin) – which is used for the sound table, the tuning rings on the neck and originally also for the strings themselves (only substituted by nylon in the 1950s; the bass strings of the kora continued to be made from twisted strips of leather well into the 1970s); and iron, smelted and forged by local blacksmiths to anchor the neck into the bottom of the resonator. Until c. 20 years ago, most kora players made their own instruments to suit their own requirements, but nowadays certain individuals specialize as kora makers, while others are players.

Until the 1970s, most kora players attached a metal rattle (*nyenyemo*) to the end of the

bridge, which acted as a kind of natural amplifier and added a percussive buzzing sound. This can be heard on some older recordings (eg of Alhaji Bai Konte on his Rounder Records CD), but in the past couple of decades it seems to have been dropped completely; it has not been featured on any recording of the kora since the mid 1980s.

The construction process begins with choosing the right calabash (Mandinka: *miirango*; Bamana: *fle*). These are large pumpkin-like gourds that grow in the savannah; they are not edible, indeed their pulpy insides are extremely bitter. They are grown mainly for use as household utensils (for example, they are used as washing-up bowls and for carrying goods, as well as the resonators of musical instruments). The critical factor for the kora is finding a gourd that is symmetrical and with the right shape (heart-shaped being preferred) and with a shell that is durable but not too thick as this dulls the sound.

The gourd grows on the ground like a pumpkin, and is green, but once off the stem, cut in half, cleaned and left to dry in the sun, it turns yellow. When dry and very hard, a hole is drilled in the top and bottom big enough for the neck to be passed through. A piece of cow skin (formerly, antelope skin; never goat or sheep skin) is soaked in brine for a few days, then washed thoroughly and hair scraped away. Whilst still wet, the skin laid on the ground with the (formerly) hairy side down, and rope is threaded in and out around the outside in a circle. The half gourd is laid with its open side on top of the skin, which is then pulled tight across the bulge of the gourd by drawing in and tying the rope. Only when the skin is completely dry will the rope be removed, and then the skin is nailed onto the gourd, and brass drawing pins are placed over the nail heads, for decorative purposes.

Holes are cut in the skin whilst still damp, so that the neck, with its tuning rings (*konso*) in place, can be inserted. The *konso* are made from strips of cowskin plaited tightly around the neck. The neck is prevented from slipping out of the gourd by a piece of looped iron that pierces the neck at the bottom end; that same piece of iron then acts as the place where the strings are anchored. Also before the skin is completely dry, the two vertical and the horizontal handles are pushed through slits cut directly in the skin of the sound table (not in the gourd); their position is critical, amongst other things because they give support to the bridge.

At this point, the “body” of the kora is complete, and it is left to dry for about a week in the sun.

The next step is to put the strings on. They are cut from nylon fishing line, and then wound around the tuning rings on the neck. Then they are slotted through notches in a wide, detachable bridge (*bato*; literally, bellybutton) - and tied, with plenty of slack, to permanent anchor strings at the bottom. The size of the bridge and the distance between the notches can vary enormously, to suit the size of the players' hands, which is why, as they say in Mandinka, "hands are jealous" (meaning, your hands get used to the size of your own kora bridge; if you play some one else's kora, you will play the wrong strings!) The bridge is placed on top of a rectangular cloth-covered pad, which helps take up some of the bridge's pressure on the sound table.

The 21 strings cover a big range - three octaves and a 3<sup>rd</sup>. Musicians from southern Senegal habitually add up to 4 extra bass strings, which change the sound and playing technique of the kora significantly. The extra strings do not run through notches on the side of the bride, but through holes cut into the middle of the bridge, like hunters' harps, and though a "modern" feature, are in reality a throwback to the ancestors of the kora.

The bridge lifts the strings (*julo*; Bamana: *juru* - also the name for "tune") out at right angles to the sound table in two converging rows, eleven strings on the left and ten on the right, tuned so that a scale is obtained by plucking alternately with right and left hands - ie pitches 1, 3, 5 and 7 of the scale are on one side, pitches 2, 4, 6 and 8 are on the other.

This type of pitch arrangement is unique to West African calabash harps, and is most developed on the kora. It contributes a lot to the melodic and harmonic feel of the music, giving it fleeting moments of sounding uncannily similar to many different kinds of music, ranging from Blues guitar and Venezuelan harp to Chinese zither.

Just strumming adjacent strings will make sweet-sounding triad chords, and playing fast scales also falls easily under the fingers because of the ease of alternate motion. The right hand thumb regularly plucks out a kind of blues I-V bass pattern on the 1st and 3<sup>rd</sup> lowest right-hand strings, falling naturally under the fingers, exactly like a guitar blues riff, which is why kora players call them *timbango* and *jinkandango*: "tonic and answering strings".

The strings are brought up to pitch by raising or lowering the tuning rings. If this still does not reach the desired pitch, then the length of the string must be adjusted by pulling them through the tuning rings with an iron needle. This is called *kotoboro*, and is quite a laborious and difficult process. Many a kora student has come seriously



unstuck trying to do *kotoboro*!! In fact, a kora master will not usually let a student even attempt to tune, until he has got to a certain level of playing. While the old leather strings would break easily if tuned too high, the nylon strings from fishing line can take much more tension. As a result, during the 1960s there was a dramatic rise in the overall pitch of the kora from a C to F or G, matched by a far more strident, high-pitched vocal timbre.

A new device for tuning the kora was invented in 1963 in a Catholic monastery called Keur Moussa (meaning House of Moses, in Wolof) in Senegal, not far from Dakar, involving the use of wooden tuning pegs instead of the traditional tuning method of leather rings; these koras were initially designed so that they could be played in the Mass by the Fathers, and tuned more easily to a western scale. As this is very practical for foreign students it has now become quite common. Guitar machine-heads, where affordable (good ones are very expensive) are now sometimes used in place of the wooden tuning pegs. In addition, the Catholic fathers rested their koras against what looked like two legs of a chair placed upside down on the floor, which frees up the hands from having to hold the kora, and thus allows for much greater dexterity. This method of holding up the kora has been adopted by Toumani – a far cry from Red Jali Mady's system of tucking the kora into the drawstring of his trousers! And allows for greater virtuosity, since the hands are no longer supporting the weight of the kora.

Machine-heads require a larger, heavier neck, which in turn demands a larger or different kind of calabash resonator. Therefore such koras are generally lower in pitch, heavier, and – incidentally - much more expensive than the traditional kind, but some players prefer them, because they are so much easier to tune quickly. But it is also seen as a statement of breaking with the “pure” griot tradition. Sidiki Diabate, father of Toumani, who was famously conservative, refused to admit that either the 22-25 stringed kora of Casamance, or the kora with machine heads or tuning pegs, could in fact be called a kora.

Of course, even with tuning pegs, a kora cannot be radically retuned in the middle of a performance, so there is no possibility of modulating or changing key. In a recent trend created by some young kora players working with jazz bands, some koras have two necks, and the two sets of strings tuned a semitone apart so they can be played chromatically; but it is doubtful that this cumbersome instrument will catch on widely. Some of the rituals around the construction of the kora seem to be disappearing; for example, in the old days (that is, until the 1980s), when a kora was newly assembled,

it was customary for the player to “baptize” it by blowing a fine spray of water over it, and smoking it with incense, sometimes even holding a similar type of a party to a child-naming ceremony, with prayers, music, dancing and food. Often they would tie an amulet around the neck to protect both player and instrument (especially from rival musicians who might carry out sorcery on them). A decorative feature now rarely seen is a long strip of colourful cloth attached to the neck, usually a gift to the kora player from a female admirer.

As can be seen from this brief description, the kora has undergone many modifications and adaptations since the early 1970s, when it first began to be well known outside West Africa. In the process, many original sonic features of the kora have either been lost, or are fast disappearing, especially with the new generation of kora players. This is an inevitable consequence of the kora’s trajectory into the international music scene: in particular, older kora tunings (such as can be heard in the recordings of Alhaji Bai Konte or Sidiki Diabate) have been largely abandoned for the western scale; the buzzing rattle has been totally dropped for a cleaner sound; the overall pitch of the kora has drifted upwards nearly a 5<sup>th</sup>, making a brighter, but less haunting sound; the old twisted leather strings, in use at least for the bass strings until the mid 1970s, have vanished completely; virtuosity and speed of runs sometimes occur at the expense of lyricism and melody. Yet this can be seen as the latest trend in a series of developments associated with the meteoric rise in popularity of the kora since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Kora players, it seems, are rebel-artists: the most talented of each new generation has challenged or expanded the established techniques of playing and construction.

Toumani Diabate is following in a long line of extraordinary musicians who have contributed to making the kora Africa’s most versatile and ground-breaking instrument.

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