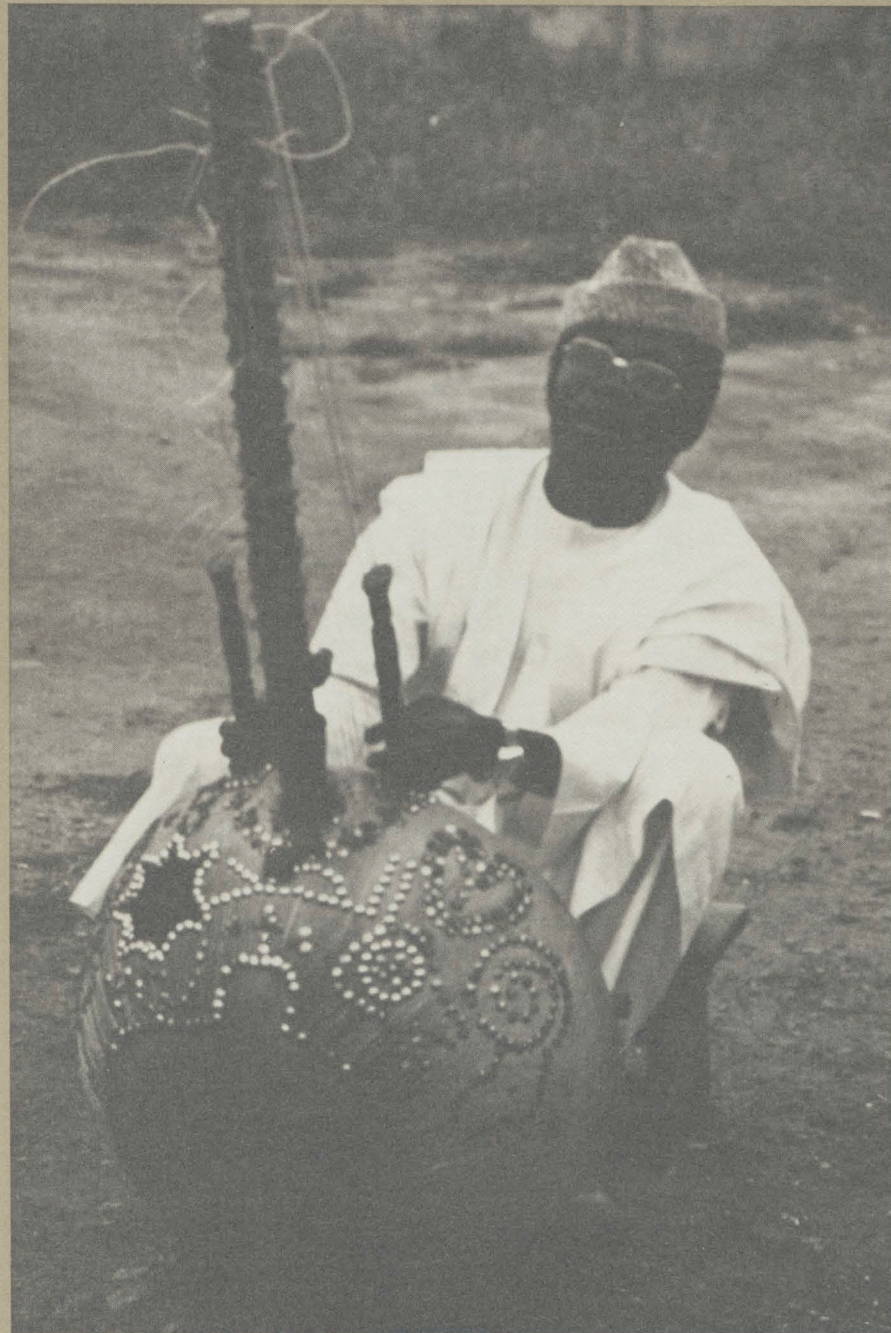


FOLKWAYS RECORDS FW 8510

# Kora Music from the Gambia

Foday Musa Suso



Recorded by Verna Gillis With Ramón Daniel Perez Martinez

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MUSIC LP



FOLKWAYS RECORDS FW 8510

**SIDE 1**

- Band 1 "Kelefaba" and "Kuruntu Kelefa"  
(Tomoraba tuning)  
Band 2 "Sunjata"  
(Sauta tuning)  
Band 3 "Tira Makan"  
(Tomoraba tuning)

**SIDE 2**

- Band 1 "Apollo"  
(Sauta tuning)  
Band 2 "Jula Jekere"  
(Hardino tuning)  
Band 3 "Juku Te Nte Sorola"  
(Sauta tuning)  
Band 4 "Mama Manneh"  
(Hardino tuning)

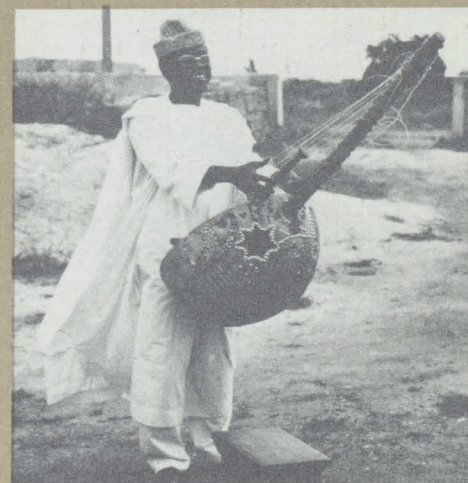
Recorded in Accra, Ghana in July, 1976 by Verna Gillis with  
Ramon Daniel Perez Martinez

Edited by Verna Gillis

Notes by Roderic Knight  
Photographs by Verna Gillis

Special acknowledgment and thanks to Bengt "Bechr" Berger,  
musician and lover of music, for introducing me to Suso, for mak-  
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# Kora Music from the Gambia Foday Musa Suso

Recorded by Verna Gillis  
With Ramōn Daniel Perez Martinez

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE

FOLKWAYS RECORDS FW 8510



# Kora Music From The Gambia Played By Foday Musa Suso

Recorded in Accra, Ghana in July, 1976 by Verna Gillis with Ramon Daniel Perez Martinez  
Edited by Verna Gillis      Notes by Roderic Knight      Photographs by Verna Gillis

Special acknowledgment and thanks to Bengt "Bechr" Berger, musician and lover of music, for introducing me to Suso, for making his home in Accra available in which to do the recording, and for infinite patience and assistance during our correspondence between Accra and New York in clarifying and obtaining information for the liner notes.

In symbolic fulfillment of the destiny of the ancient empire of Mali, the music of the Manding people now looms bigger than the geographical confines of their homeland. All of the countries where the Manding live--Guinea, Mali, Senegal, and Gambia--have had a part in the spread of this music. Probably the first opportunities people in Europe had to see and hear this music were at the Paris Expositions of 1889 and 1900.<sup>1</sup> Much later, in the 1950's, the Guinean Ballets Africains de Keita Fodeba pioneered with worldwide tours, and their example was emulated by similar troupes in Senegal, Mali, and Gambia. Recordings from these same countries have also been issued with increasing frequency (See Discography), and today the smallest of these countries (indeed the smallest in Africa)--the Republic of The Gambia--is becoming one of the best known for its music.

Gambia is the homeland of the Mandinka, who are the westernmost branch of the Manding people, and it is also the homeland today of the kora, a 21-string bridge harp or harp lute that is perhaps the best known of Manding instruments. The kora is played throughout the Manding area, but most of the leading performers can trace their ancestry to Mandinka families from Gambia, Senegal or Portuguese Guinea, and there are more kora players per capita in Gambia than anywhere else in the Manding area. One such player, Foday Musa Suso, is represented on this record. He was born in Pasamasi, Gambia in 1950 and after spending his childhood in Banjul, the capital of Gambia, he was sent back to Pasamasi to study kora with Saikou Suso, a recognized kora master there (This away-from-home apprenticeship is a standard feature of learning music in Manding, being regarded as important for proper discipline and concentration). Unlike most musicians in Manding society, Foday Musa Suso's talents are not limited to one instrument--he also plays the balo or balafon (a xylophone) and the doso ngore, a hunter's harp--but he is best known as a kora virtuoso, and it is this music that is presented here. Suso is typical of many of the younger generation of kora players today in seeking a wide audience and new modes of expression for his music. This is reflected in both his music and his activities. He performs not only pieces from the

1. Edmond Bailly, "Le pittoresque musical à l'Exposition," l'Humanité nouvelle, 1900, 177-192

traditional repertoire but also pieces recently composed and widely popular among his young admirers. In addition to performing in traditional contexts in Gambia, he has taught kora and other instruments at the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana. He has also worked with a group of young musicians in Chicago, experimenting with a blend of Manding and American popular music styles.

The kora is an instrument that easily captures the imagination of western audiences. It is striking to look at, with its large hemispherical body, long neck, and two planes of strings diverging in a narrow fan to cross over notches in the high bridge. The style of playing often sounds reminiscent of blues guitar picking, and the arrangement of strings allows for the easy production of triadic harmonies. Its history is obscure, but it is clearly an instrument of Manding invention, being found nowhere else in the world, and until very recently, played only by Manding people. The first written reference to it was made by Mungo Park in 1799. He described it as "the korro, a large harp with 18 strings."<sup>2</sup> The search for origins leads one to smaller instruments of similar construction with six or seven strings (the doso ngore mentioned earlier, also known as donso ngoni or simbingo) played by hunter's musicians. Some of these instruments have two planes of strings as on the kora, others have only one, but each has the characteristic bridge-like string holder propped upright on the skin face of the instrument. They differ from the kora in that the lower ends of the strings are knotted in holes in this string holder, whereas on the kora this member is not a string holder but a true bridge. The strings are anchored to an iron loop at the base of the instrument, and pass over the bridge, resting in notches on the long vertical sides--hence the designation bridge harp. Another possible ancestor of the kora is the humble gingiru, a healer's instrument played by the Dogon people in Mali. Though small, its construction is very similar to the kora, complete with a high 18-notch bridge. It has only four strings, and these are placed in specific positions on the bridge as determined by the symbolism of each notch and the purpose of the healing ceremony for which the instrument is to be played.<sup>3</sup> The ritual use and heavy symbolism of this instrument argue for its greater age in relation to the kora, an instrument with little symbolism, great importance attached to good quality sound, and a close association with professional music making and entertainment.

A very close relative of the kora is the seron, apparently found only in Guinea and even there only rarely. It has nineteen strings of twisted hide, the characteristic bridge, and a similar playing style.<sup>4</sup>

2. The Travels of Mungo Park, Ronald Miller, ed. New York: Dutton, 1954, p. 213.

3. D. Zahan, "Notes sur un luth Dogon," J. de la société des africanistes XX/2 (1950), 193-207

4. See Vogue recordings from Guinea in discography.



It is rare to see a kora today with twisted hide strings, but as recently as thirty or forty years ago they were still common. Now invariably the strings are made of durable nylon monofilament, imported in graded strengths. This material produces a bright, clear sound that has undoubtedly played a significant role in elevating the instrument to its present position of popularity and versatility. Another more recent change has been the increasing habit of removing the metal "razz" plate or nyenyemo, especially when recording. This plate, with wire loops threaded loosely in holes around the edge, is attached to the bridge of the kora and provides a sympathetically-vibrating "razz" that can cut through the din of a large outdoor gathering more effectively than the sound of the strings alone. Microphones often over-emphasize this sound, and this, combined with static-filled short-wave broadcasts, have led to its frequent removal. It has been removed on these recordings as well.

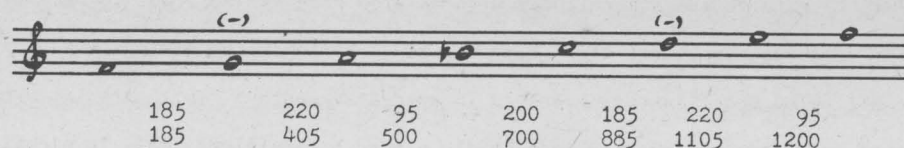
Manding music is heptatonic (seven notes per octave) and several scales are used. The bala or xylophone scale is different from any of the stringed instruments, dividing the octave of 1200 cents into seven basically equidistant intervals of approximately 171.4 cents each, or very slightly smaller than the tempered western whole tone of 200 cents.<sup>5</sup> The kora may be tuned to four different scales, and the choice and use of these scales varies regionally. Suso's repertoire incorporates three of the most common scales: Hardino, Sauta, and one version of Tomora. Hardino is virtually identical to the western major scale, although the third and seventh are sometimes tuned even higher than in the latter. Sauta tuning is derived from Hardino by raising the fourth degree to an augmented fourth. The two versions of Tomora tuning are both characterized by a lowered third and seventh, with the second and sixth sometimes raised as well. Tomoraba or "Big Tomora", is tuned by lowering the third and seventh only slightly, producing intervals still clearly "major," while Tomora mesengo or "Little Tomora," is tuned by lowering the third and seventh to within 100 cents of the slightly raised second and sixth. Tomora mesengo is a common tuning for songs from the more easterly regions of Manding, while Tomoraba is usually regarded as the original and most characteristic kora tuning. It is this version that Suso uses on the recording. Example 1 shows the four kora tunings in simplified form.

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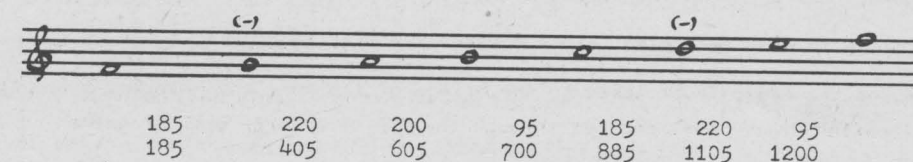
5. The cent system referred to here was devised by A. J. Ellis in 1884 to facilitate the comparison of musical scales from around the world. A cent is 1/100th of a semitone; thus an octave (12 semitones) is equal to 1200 cents. A detailed analysis of the xylophone tunings has been made by Gilbert Rouget: "Sur les xylophones equiheptaphonique des Malinké," Revue de musicologie LX/1 (1969), 47-77.

## HARDINO

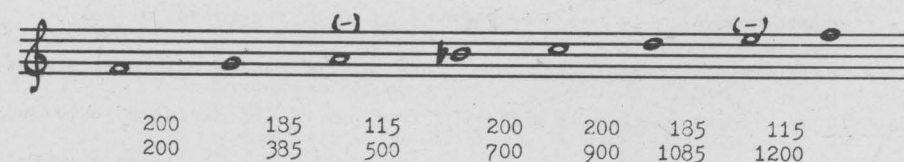
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Cumulative:



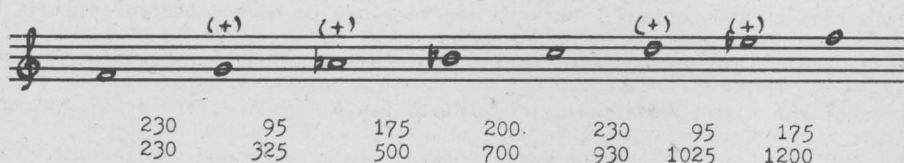
## SAUTA



## TOMORA BA



## TOMORA MESENGO



Example 1. Generalized representations of the four kora tunings, based on studies by King<sup>6</sup> and Knight,<sup>7</sup> and shown at the actual pitch level of the 3rd octave of Suso's instrument.

Music is a professional activity in Manding society, and the proper title for someone of this profession, whether man or woman, is jali. The term "griot" is also occasionally used, but it is less appropriate, being a term used originally by French writers, probably in reference to the Portuguese criado ("servant") or iggiw or gewel, terms for the Mauretanian and Wolof counterparts of the jali respectively. Since long before the unification of the Manding peoples and the formation of the great thirteenth century Mali Empire by Sunjata Keita,<sup>8</sup> the profession of jaliya has been maintained by certain families (kept distinct through endogamous marriage patterns) who specialize not only in music, but in other verbal skills as well--oratory, translation, praise, interlocation, oral history, and genealogy. In the past these other skills were

6. A. King, "The Construction and Tuning of the Kora," African Language Studies XIII (1972), 113-36.

7. R. Knight, "Towards a notation and tablature for the kora," African Music V/1 (1971), 23-36.  
R. Knight, Chapter IV, "Tuning, Intonation, and Mode" in Mandinka Jaliya: Professional Music of the Gambia (PhD diss., U.C.L.A.) Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1973.

8. For a traditional account of these events as told by a jali, see D. T. Niane, Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali, Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press Inc., 1965.



extremely important for the maintenance of the social and political well-being of the state, and music served as a vehicle for many of them. For example, praises and genealogy were incorporated into songs, and oral history was told to the accompaniment of instrumental music. The jalis (Mandinka: jalolu) held important positions next to the various leaders and influential people of the state because of their exclusive knowledge and ability in the verbal arts. They were essentially the personal court musicians of these people and they were highly respected and well paid for their important contributions. It was a great honor to have one's deeds commemorated in a song composed by a jali. At the same time, the jali was often regarded as someone to be treated with caution and even a certain amount of fear or suspicion, because being well versed in the power of words, he or she could just as easily tarnish a person's reputation if there were good reason to do so.

This attitude was and is reflected in the jali's position in the Manding social hierarchy. Along with other professional craftsmen in the society such as the blacksmith, leatherworker, and other entertainers and praisers, the jali, though regarded as being of noble birth, occupies a rank below the person of noble birth who follows no profession, known as a sula. One possible explanation of this ranking is to regard it as a hedge by the sula or ordinary person in the society against what are commonly regarded as the special privileges of the professionals: the privilege of solicitation, of criticism, possession of specialized knowledge (about other people, in the case of the jali), and the privilege of being in close association with the political power structure of the people. Exercising his privilege of solicitation, for example, the jali may demand payment or reward in some form for the performance of any of his skills, whether they were requested or not, but the sula who feels put out or threatened by this may rest consoled by his or her superior rank in the social hierarchy.

Another and deeper explanation is that centuries of craft specialization, the keeping of trade secrets, and endogamous marriage patterns (undoubtedly a result of secret-keeping in the first place) have created a natural suspicion on the part of non-specialists about the activities of the specialists, some of whom are even regarded as having magical or supernatural powers. Add to this the realization that the patron-servant relationship is not at all uncommon in the world of music, and the jali's position becomes easily understandable.

In the past, when most jalis could rely on the permanent patronage of a single person or family for their support, there was little reason for them to exercise any privilege in a way that would annoy a sula, or non-professional. But today it is rare to find a jali who is able to rely on a single patron. In seeking a wider audience the jali runs the risk of opening himself up to the occasional prejudicial remark if he should abuse any of his traditional privileges, but this is usually avoided by choosing one's audience carefully. The jali characteristically supports himself and his family today by cultivating an active friendship with many people whom he visits frequently, whether they be in his home town or farther away. These

people are generally descendants of the very people who patronized his ancestors in the past, and thus can appreciate the songs he sings. This wider audience is not always as easily pleased by genealogical or historical narratives as it is by instrumental and vocal music, however, and thus the musical aspect of the jali's profession has come to predominate in the present day. A large virtuoso instrumental repertoire has developed through the ornamentation and elaboration of instrumental song accompaniments, and the traditional content of song texts, formerly limited to great and important figures in Manding history, is now expanded by most performers to include local personages and even young people whom a jali counts among his friends and patrons. In this way the jalis maintain their hold on an audience that is increasingly lured to various forms of imported music from the west. They are still greatly respected and admired for their exclusive knowledge of songs and praise lyrics, and for their ability to entertain in the traditional idiom.

#### THE RECORDINGS

##### Side A

1. "Kelefaba" and "Kuruntu Kelefa." Tomoraba tuning. These two pieces are often played together. They commemorate Kelefa Sanneh, a famous mercenary who fought in a 19th-century war between the kingdoms of Nyomi and Jokadu on the north bank of the Gambia River. "Kelefaba" is traditionally the first piece that the beginning Kora student learns. "Kuruntu Kelefa" ("Trailing Kelefa") describes the galloping of horses.

The vocal parts that Suso sings exemplify the two styles of singing that are common in Mandinka music: sataro and donkilo. The first is similar to recitative, containing both memorized and extemporized praise lyrics and commentary sung in rapid declamatory phrases. The second is the standard vocal line of the song, to which may be sung any number of standard words or newly composed words to fit a given performance. The donkilo melody is relatively fixed and recognizable each time it is sung. As Suso returns to "Kelefaba" in this performance, he sings a donkilo line:

Mindolo banta, Kelefa la mindolo banta,  
The millet beer is gone, Kelefa's millet beer is gone.

Kelefaba la mindolo banta  
Great Kelefa's millet beer is gone.

As he returns to "Kuruntu Kelefa" at the end, he sings a donkilo line for this section:

Mansa jalo kuma fo бага le, Kari siya jama, a kela man siya (repeat)  
The king's jali (says) Those who talk a lot are many, but those who act are few.

There is no standard balance between sataro and donkilo in a performance, but to master the sataro style requires more skill and facility with words, and a singer's worth is often judged on the basis of his or her ability in the sataro style.

2. "Sunjata." Sauta tuning. This is the standard piece commemorating the greatness of Sunjata Keita, founder of the thirteenth century Empire of Mali. Suso sings only a few lines here, concentrating instead on instrumental ornamentation and variation



-(called birimintingo) of the basic accompaniment part, known as the kumbengo. In this song the kumbengo consists of several sections. As Suso moves from one to the next, he incorporates tempo changes and rhythmic permutations that add considerable interest to the already complex polyphonic texture. This complexity, which is characteristic of kora music, is all the more remarkable when one considers that the instrument is played with only the thumbs and forefingers, the other fingers being used to grip the posts on either side of the neck and support the instrument.

3. "Tira Makan." Tomoraba tuning. Tira Makan was a great warrior living at the time of the old Mali Empire, and according to one account, visited what is now Gambia and married a wife there. The kings of Kabu, in present day Guinea-Bissau, were descendants of Tira Makan. Suso sings only a few words for Tira Makan himself at the end of the song, but includes lines that are well known and used in many songs:

Kele borila, wol' te kuma koi fola (rep.)  
Those who run from the battlefront can't say what went on there.

Kelo se ke, i s'e bambang (rep.)  
The battle approaches; prepare yourselves!

#### Side B

1. "Apollo." Sauta tuning. This song dates from the time of the Apollo moon landings, from which it takes its name, but the content is devoted more to the subject of young women, as is typical of many modern songs. The instrumental part is derived from the traditional song Sori, for Samori Turay, the last Mandinka king to surrender to the French in the late nineteenth century. Some of the words, provided by Suso, are as follows:

Ah, dindin ka nyin, Apollo  
Ah, the young woman (lit. "child") is beautiful, Apollo

Dinding kunsinyi ka nyin, Apollo  
The woman has beautiful hair, Apollo

Dindin kan fala ka jan, Apollo  
She has a beautiful long neck, Apollo

Dindin nyin kese ka ge, Apollo  
She has lovely white teeth, Apollo

Spoken interjections in French can also be heard:

C'est ca? Oui! (Is that so? Yes!)

2. "Jula Jekere." Hardino tuning. This is a traditional and very popular song commemorating a wealthy trader (jula) named Jekere Bayo who lived in The Gambia in the last century. He was so wealthy and powerful that many stories have grown up around him. One relates how he decided that instead of observing the traditional prayers at the end of Ramadan (Muslim month of fasting) he would stage his own prayer service a week later and he sent his jalis to spread this information to the neighboring kings. Another, related by Suso, tells of his extravagant sacrifice for the feast following these prayers of 100 sheep, 100 cows, 100 goats, 100 camels, and 100 horses. Only the intervention of his jali singing this song for him prevented him from sacrificing 100 slaves as well.

3. "Juku te nte sorola." Sauta tuning. This song is well known in Mali. Suso learned it while traveling there with his teacher. The title translates as "My enemies cannot hurt me."



4. "Mama Manneh." Hardino tuning. Like "Apollo" (Band 1) this is a modern piece about a young woman, in this case the woman named in the title. She is an avid patron of the jalis, and lives in Casamance (the region of Senegal that lies south of The Gambia). For this piece, some of the words of which Suso has composed himself, he retunes one of the bass strings on the kora, allowing him to play a bass line that includes pitches one, four, and five. (The string providing the fourth is normally tuned to pitch six instead.) The result is a decidedly western-sounding bass line to complement the already strong harmonic character of kora music.

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Discography of recordings devoted primarily or exclusively to traditional Manding music.

Bärenreiter Musicaphon BM 30L 2501, 2504, 2505, 2506. Première anthologie de la musique malienne. A six-record set, of which these four are devoted to Manding music, both solo and ensemble. Record 2505 is exclusively kora duos without singing. Recorded in Mali by the Ministry of Information.

Ethnodisc (P.O. Box 6721, Tucson, AZ) ER 12102. Kora Manding: Mandinka Music of The Gambia. Kora music recorded in Gambia by Roderic Knight. Accompanying booklet includes complete song texts in Mandinka and English.

Folkways FE 4178. The Griots (2 discs). Kora, xylophone and plucked lute music recorded in Gambia by Samuel Charters.

Folkways. (forthcoming) Gambia's Music (2 discs). Kora and other instruments, recorded in Gambia by Marc and Susan Pevar.

Lyrichord LLST 7308 Sounds of West Africa. One side devoted to kora music by Foday Musa Suso, recorded by Richard Hill.

Ocora (Paris) OCR 70. Gambie: Mandinka Kora par Jali Nyama Suso. Recorded in Seattle, Washington by Roderic Knight.

Rounder Records 5001. Alhaji Bai Konteh. Kora music recorded in Gambia by Marc and Susan Pevar. Notes available separately from them: P. O. Box 129, Kennett Square, PA, 19348.

Tempo International (Hollywood) T 7009, 7010, 7011, 7012. Musique nouveau d'une nation nouvelle. Kora, xylophone, plucked lute, and larger groups recorded in Guinea by Leo Sarkisian. No accompanying notes.

Vogue (Paris) LDM 30.116 Collection Musée de l'Homme: Music from West Africa. One side devoted to Manding music, recorded in Guinea by Gilbert Rouget.

Vogue (Paris) LDM 30.113 Collection Musée de l'Homme: Mandinka Music. Both jali and non-professional music, recorded in Guinea by Gilbert Rouget.