

FOLKWAYS RECORDS FW 8514

GAMBIAN GRIOT KORA DUETS

Featuring Alhaji Bai Konte, Dembo Konte, Ma Lamini Jobate

Recorded in Dakar, Senegal and in Brikama, The Gambia in December 1977 by Marc Pevar



BAI KONTE AND DEMBO KONTE / PHOTOGRAPH BY MARC PEVAR

COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE

SIDE A

- 1. **Sutukung Kumbu Sora/Solo** (8:03)
(Alhaji Bai Konte and Dembo Konte) Tomora Ba tuning
- 2. **Tutu Jara** (9:22)
(Alhaji Bai Konte and Dembo Konte) Sauta tuning
- 3. **Jembasengo** (3:44)
(Dembo Konte and Ma Lamini Jobate) Tomora Ba tuning

SIDE B

- 1. **Darisalami Amad Fal** (10:00)
(Alhaji Bai Konte and Dembo Konte with Jabu Sau, Yangkui Kuigate, and Koli-Koli Sambo) Tomora Ba tuning
- 2. **Yeyengo** (10:55)
(Dembo Konte and Ma Lamini Jobate) Modified Tomora Ba tuning

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INTRODUCTION

THE TWENTY-ONE STRINGED MANDING HARP known as the kora is becoming increasingly familiar to the American listening public not only as a result of the release by several American companies, including Folkways, of recordings of kora music, but also because of the appearance of kora musicians on American concert stages, in university classrooms, and even on national television, notably in the final episode of Alex Haley’s Roots II. Performing for an American audience represents a further extension of the Manding musician’s role, which in the African setting has been somewhat modified in the last generation by changes in the larger society.

While membership in one of various particular families is still recognized in Manding society as a prerequisite for learning to play the instrument associated with the jali, the professional Manding musician, the position he would have held in the past as court historian and musician to a single powerful patron is rarely available today. Instead he typically must depend on a wide group of patrons for his livelihood. And while he is still respected for his ability to recount family and tribal history, he finds himself increasingly in demand as an entertainer.

This is especially true of the kora musician, whose instrument has a particularly great potential for instrumental virtuosity. The kora’s origins probably date back to about 250 to 300 years ago. While in form it appears to be related to the six or seven-string hunting harps of the Manding area, the kora is heir to the musical tradition of the kontingo (plucked lute) and the balo (xylophone) and has always been associated with the jali profession.

The kora has four heptatonic tunings, associated with different geographical regions. Tomora Ba (“Great Tomora”), the closest of the four to a just scale, is probably the original kora tuning; it is associated with the western coastal region south of the River Gambia where the kora is said to have originated (King 1974:16).

Two of the kora’s other tunings, Hardino and Tomora Mesengo (“Lesser Tomora”), are derived from Tomora Ba and can be regarded as symmetrically balanced colorings of the parent tuning: in the Hardino scale the intervals between the second and third and between the sixth and seventh are widened; in the Tomora Mesengo scale they are lessened (King 1974: 16-17). The Sauta tuning is derived from Hardino by raising the fourth to an augmented fourth (Knight 1978:3).

Although Tomora Ba has always sounded most familiar to our ears, Bai Konte labels the Western scale “Hardino,” and this designation is borne out by the actual values of the notes: “Hardino is virtually identical to the western major scale, although the third and seventh are sometimes even higher than in the latter” (Knight 1978:3).

Kora musicians do not necessarily restrict their repertoires to these four primary tunings. They play many highlife tunes, for example, in a modified Tomora Ba tuning that has a slightly lowered seventh. Some also create their own tunings.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

In the time of Samoure Toure, the powerful 19th-century Mandinka king, Ndaba Jali Konte left Mali and settled with his wife Yesa Konte in Fode Kaba’s kingdom in Casamance. One year they travelled to the Gambian village of Gunjur, where Mansa Kombo Silla was king.

Mansa Kombo Silla was so pleased with the kontingo jalo that he wrote to Fode Kaba and said that he wanted to keep Ndaba Jali Konte with him. From that day on, Ndaba Jali Konte lived in Gunjur. He became a Muslim, and when his son Jali Ibrahima was born, took care that he learned to read and write the Koran.

Jali Ibrahima Konte wanted to learn to play the kora instead of the kontingo. He became apprenticed to a kora musician, Fonsa Kuigate from Birif, Wuli, who was living at that time in the village of Jufure. At the end of his apprenticeship, Jali Ibrahima took one of Fonsa Kuigate’s daughters, Fatu Kuigate, in marriage and settled in the town of Jambur.

Here Bai Konte was born and lived for many years. His wife, Nafi Kuigate, comes from Sika, a small village near Jufure. After their four sons, Mamadu, Dembo, Bakeba and Aliu, were born, Bai Konte and Nafi Kuigate relocated their household in the large town of Brikama, where Nafi subsequently

bore three daughters, Ma Nyima, Sirifo Tuti, and Kadi. Bai Konte made the Hajj in 1972 and sent Nafi Kuiyate to Mecca the following year. At the time of this writing (June 1979) he is on his third performing tour in the U.S. and Canada, where he has appeared in such major festivals as Newport Jazz, New Orleans Jazz and Heritage, Mariposa, and the Philadelphia Folk Festival.

Dembo Konte is Alhaji Bai Konte's second son. He learned to play the kora from his father and today lives in his father's compound with his wife, Jabu Sau, and their five children. Dembo is a kora musician in Gambia's national troupe and performed with them and in solo at FESTAC in Lagos,

Nigeria, in 1977. He is currently making his first performing tour of the U.S. and Canada along with Alhaji Bai Konte.

Ma Lamini Jobate, the son of Nafi Kuiyate's sister, has lived with the Konte family since the death of his own parents and regards Bai Konte as his father. He has his own house on the Konte compound, where he lives with his two wives, Yangkui Kuiyate and Koli-Koli Sambo, and their children. Ma Lamini is also a member of the national troupe and has traveled with them to Budapest, Moscow, Tripoli, Baida, Saba, Casablanca, Paris, Las Palmas, and Guinea-Bissau.

Dembo Konte (left) and Alhaji Bai Konte (right)



THE SELECTIONS

SIDE A

1. Sutukung Kumbu Sora/Solo

Alhaji Bai Konte and Dembo Konte play and sing a song composed by Wandifeng Jobate, a contemporary of Bai's father, for Kumbu Sora, a wealthy man living in Sutukung in the Gambian province of Jara. The song names the various villages in Jara where Kumbu Sora lived: Sutukung, Pakali Ba, Jasong, Bureng, and Barokunda. It identifies Kumbu Sora's sons Kalifa, Mama Dinding, and Kausa. It lauds Kumbu Sora's wealth:

Tulo nin subo be Kumbu fe
Melise-meliso be Kumbu ya
Buju-bajo be Kumbu ya
Putu-Pata be Kumbu ya
Tonyala, Sutukungo to, Sutukung

There is oil and beef
At Kumbu's
All the sweet things are
At Kumbu's compound
Truly, at Sutukung, Sutukung

The Kontes adapt some of the verses to address their host, Musa Kamara of Dakar:

N dandam Musa ya
I ban in fa dua Alla
A jabita, Kamara

Come with me to Musa's place
Your mother and father
Pray to God for you
He answers, Kamara

They close with "Solo," which means "The Leopard" and is the nickname for Ibrahima. An adaptation of "Kumbu Sora," "Solo" was composed for Ibrahima Jaju, a customs official who lives in Kombo Katong, but by changing the last line from "Solo fele" to "Solo Kamara," the Kontes have turned it into a praise song for their patron Musa Kamara.

Ya-o-ya, Solo fele (2x)
Ke Jang Jaju dimma
Solo Kamara

Hey, there is Leopard (2x)
Child of Ke Jang Jaju
Leopard Kamara

2. Tutu Jara

Alhaji Bai Konte and Dembo Konte play an ancient tune from Mali commemorating a king named Tutu Jara. Predating the kora, the song was originally accompanied by kontingos, the small plucked lutes played by Mandinka musicians. Bai Konte has wrought many new variations of the traditional tune. Here he leads Dembo through some of them.

3. Jembasengo

Dembo Konte and Ma Lamini Jobate play and sing this popular high life tune by the deceased Jali Mama Suso. Composed during the Second World War, the tune was adapted from the traditional song “Sira Ba Bolo.” The lyrics are notably different from those of a typical praise song.

Duniya , a mu nane, ti
Jongo ma ala bongo long

The world, he is rocking it
The salve (of God) knows not
His destiny

Fankanta man jawiya
Longole mu boro ti

Saving your money is not evil
Knowledge is medicine

Tulo a te ba ko la
Bar’ a ka ba ko kumo mue le

The ear is not beyond the sea
Yet it hears what is said there

Kibaro buka kulungo fu
Bar’ a ka ba ti

The news does not borrow a boat
But it crosses the ocean

Dali subo la a ni’ me ya
Nte kiling ti

Being accustomed to beef
And having it to eat
Are not the same thing

Ba jike nte bambo ti
Bar’ a kanda la mu

The sea is not deeper than crocodile
But he is the ruler

N namata, m bi na boi la
domanding
M bi na to la ba kono

I slipped, I have fallen down
A little bit
I have gone inside the ocean

Kulungo ning jibo
Jiba kilingo ka ta jarlango ti

Canoe and paddle
It takes one paddle to row

Tamba Dibi jalang na
Numolu ka kele
Tankango Sajo Jambang

The idol of Tamba Dibi
The smiths worship him
Tankango Sajo Jambang (a smith)

Tankang bulu tetele
Wole bota kasa
Tankango Sajo Jambang

Tankang claps his hands
He came from Kasa
Tankango Sajo Jambang

Near the end of the song Dembo addresses his patroness Wena Ami Njai, a Wolof woman in Banjul, the daughter of Alaji Njaka Njai and Aja Aida Mbop. He sings to her in Wolof, “Wena Ami, I’m sorry I must go now.”

SIDE B

1. Darisalami Amad Fal

This is an original song by Alhaji Bai Konte in honor of a Mauretanian Sherifa (descendant of Mohamet) living in Sangajor, a village near Darisalami, Gambia. Born in Casamance, Senegal, Amad Fal has resided in The Gambia for some years, having followed his two brothers, who lived and died in the Darisalami region.

Three women, Jabu Sau (Dembo Konte’s wife) and Yangkui Kuiyate and Koli-Koli Sambo (Ma Lamini Jobate’s wives) sing along with the two Kontes, who accompany the singing with their koras.

Sirifo a nene sita Jenyer
Amad Fal
Darisalami Sangajor
Amad Fal

Sherifa has ever lived in Jenyer
Amad Fal
Sangajor-near-Darisalami
Amad Fal

Ali mang Sirifo Kutubo dimma je
Amad Fal
Darisalami Sangajor
Amad Fal

Have you not seen Sherif Kutub’s child
Amad Fal

Sangajor-near-Darisalami
Amad Fal

Serx Malain dimma
Amad Fal (etc.)

Child of Sherif Malain
Amad Fal (etc.)

Serx Mafu dimma
Amad Fal (etc.)

Child of Sherif Mafu
Amad Fal (etc.)

2. Yeyengo

Dembo Konte and Ma Lamini Jobate perform this highlife tune composed by Salif Jobate, a Casamance (Senegal) kora musician about seven or eight years ago. It was first composed as a court- ing song, but Dembo and Ma Lamini here sing it as a praise song, to their President Sir Dauda Kairaba Jawara, to the Bojang family, and to one Sherifa Haidara, among others.

Yangkui Kuiyate (left) and Jabu Sau (center) playing their iron percussion instruments



References Cited

King, A. V. 1974 “Musical Tradition in Modern Africa,” Journal of the Royal Society of Arts, Dec., pp. 15-21.

Knight, Roderic. 1978 Notes to Kora Music from The Gambia Played by Foday Musa Suso, Folkways Records, Album No. FW 8510.

The Mandinka Orthography

Vowels used in the transcriptions have approximately the same values as in the following English words: a either as in “father” or as in “at”; e as in “let” or “fiancée”; i as in “sit” or “fiasco”; o as in “son” or “lore”; u as in “full” or “rule”.

The consonant j represents the sound of “dy-” or “gy-”.

Ng represents the sound of n as in “think”; there is never a “hard” g as in “anger”; this ng sound becomes n before palatal consonants and m before bilabials.

X represents the sound of ch as in “Ach” or “loch”.

Credits

Originally produced by Marc Pevar
Reissue produced by Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 2019
Recorded and mixed by Marc Pevar
Mastered by Jack Sky
Remastered by Pete Reiniger
Original cover design and graphics by Ronald Clyne
Photos by Marc and Susan Pevar with technical assistance from Pat Mikols
Notes by Susan Gunn Pevar
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Bai and Dembo Konte and apprentices making a small kora



SIDE A

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2. TUTU JARA Alhaji Bai Konte and Dembo Konte (9:22)
3. JEMBASENGO Dembo Konte and Ma Lamini Jobate (3:44)

SIDE B

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2. YEYENGO Dembo Konte and Ma Lamini Jobate (10:55)

Field recordings were made in Senegal and The Gambia with a Sony 772 1/2 track stereo deck using 4 cardioid condenser microphones.

Recorded and produced by Marc Pevar
Introductory notes by Susan Gunn Pevar

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DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE