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.

INTRODUCTION

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 Kuiyate 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 Kuiyate’s daughters, Fatu Kuiyate, in marriage and settled in the town of Jambur.

Here Bai Konte was born and lived for many years. His wife, Nafi Kuiyate, comes from Sika, a small village near Jufure. After their four sons, Mamadu, Dembo, Bakeba and Aliu, were born, Bai Konte and Nafi Kuiyate 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.

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 kontings, 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.

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.

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 singing 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.
References Cited


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

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SIDE A

1. SUTUKUNG KUMBU SORA/SOLO Alhaji Bai Konte and Dembo Konte (8:03)
2. TUTU JARA Alhaji Bai Konte and Dembo Konte (9:22)
3. JEMBASENGO Dembo Konte and Ma Lamini Jobate (3:44)

SIDE B

1. DARISALAMI AMAD FAL Alhaji Bai Konte and Dembo Konte with Jabu Sau, Yangkui Kuiyate, and Koli-Koli Sambo (10:00)
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 stereo deck using 4 cardioid condenser microphones.

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

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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

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE