

*Learning the Kora in Two Senegalese Contexts:
As a Tradition vs. As a Religion*

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For my family, who continue to surround me with music, love, and support.

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Abstract

The kora, a traditional instrument rooted deeply in the culture of West Africa, was originally only played for nobility by a caste of oral historians called “griots.” In the past few decades the use of the kora has broadened, and among many more modern venues, has been adapted to the Gregorian Chants of the Catholic monks at the Monastery of Keur Moussa, who have not only changed the instrument’s use but its physical makeup as well. As an artist and musician I set out to explore the methods of instruction of the instrument in the two different contexts, to find out possible reasons for any variations, and to experience if and how the different teaching styles would affect my learning of the instrument.

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Introduction

Growing up I was surrounded by numerous different styles and expressions of music. My grandmother taught piano lessons of every genre, I grew up listening to Broadway musicals daily and learning them by heart, my dad enjoyed a variety of styles of music including folk, classic rock, and rock 'n' roll, while my brother constantly played hip hop, alternative, and some classical music. I began taking piano lessons at the age of seven and continued for seven years, I played the flute in our first school band at age 12, I've touched on learning assorted instruments such as the banjo and the harp, and I've been in various singing groups for as long as I can remember. Needless to say, music has played a large part in my life and specifically in my understanding of the arts. I took this abundance of art in my childhood and have continued to add new art forms to my repertoire ever since, attending college to study Interdisciplinary Fine Arts. I chose to come to Senegal to maintain this trend and experience not only completely new and different forms of art, but also the acquirement of these art forms in a culture completely different from my own.

Throughout my stay in Senegal I saw and experimented with a variety of different forms of art. After just over a month I began lessons learning an instrument called the *kora*, a traditional west-African harp-lute with 21 strings. I had seen a demonstration of the mysterious instrument in the first few weeks of my stay and had immediately fallen in love with the sound; taking lessons, for me, was an opportunity not to be missed. Throughout that week of playing the kora with Edouard Manga, a professional koraist in the West African modern music world, I couldn't help but dread the last day of lessons.

This was such a complicated instrument that obviously has cultural significance and much more depth than one can see in merely four days of lessons.

The kora is, as previously mentioned, a 21-stringed traditional West African instrument that is thought to have originated in the Senegambia region by the Mandinka people, and is possibly descended from a hunting tool (Hale 1998, 155). The body of the traditional kora is made from a large half-calabash with a cowhide stretched tightly over the top, and from this body extends a large neck to which the strings (originally made of rawhide, but now nylon), separated into two rows, are attached by leather rings. One tunes the strings by moving these rings up and down the neck of the instrument. The player sits and holds the instrument vertically by its “antennae,” using the index and thumb of each hand to pluck the strings. The body of the calabash is decorated with upholstery tacks, which also serve to hold the cowhide in place (Hale 1998, 153).

Originally, the kora was only played by *griots*, or members of a caste of oral “historians, genealogists, advisers to nobility, entertainers, messengers, praise singers...” (Dilworth 2008, 3) originating in the Mali Empire. The kora was played by only the male griots, and for only noble families. The playing of the kora was passed on from generation to generation. Recently, though, the playing of the kora has expanded: it’s begun to transform into an instrument of the modern music world, and is used in other, non-traditional environments such as contemporary Senegalese *mbalax*, jazz, rap, classical, reggae and techno music (Compton 2003, 4). Among these modern forms of music, the kora is also used by the monks of a monastery in Keur Moussa, Senegal, in prayers. Not only has the use of the kora expanded, but through the past few decades, the monks of Keur Moussa have also revolutionized the physical makeup of the kora in order

to make the instrument more versatile.

The Monastery of Keur Moussa (Wolof for “House of Moses”) is a *Benedictine* monastery founded in 1963 by nine French monks (All Music Guide 2009). Situated about 50 km outside of Dakar on the route to Thiès, the monastery is world-renowned for its liturgical music and, specifically, its use of the kora in prayers and the monks’ physical transformation of the instrument.

In embarking on my mission to study the kora I was fascinated by this transformation of the instrument by Catholic monks. I had seen the kora in a modern context with Edouard so knew it was no longer only a traditional instrument, but the use and physical transformation of a traditional instrument by foreigners, in a completely different context and culture, enthralled me. I set out to, while aiming to increase my proficiency in playing the instrument, find out about this transformation: Why did French monks have the desire to revolutionize a traditional African instrument? What is the purpose of the kora for the monks compared to the purpose it holds for the griots? Specifically, I wanted to find out how their histories with the instrument would affect not only their teaching, but also, as a student of art and music, how the different teaching styles in each of the contexts would affect my experience of learning the instrument.

Methodology

In order to compare these two populations’ histories and relationships with the kora and to experience the different styles of instruction, I needed to immerse myself into both cultures’ teachings of the instrument. Not only would this help me to gain proficiency in playing, but also would establish a relationship with the instrument and I

would be able to experience this cultural aspect instead of merely learn about it. For the first week of my project I stayed in Dakar to study with two griots, and then spent two weeks at the monastery of Keur Moussa to study with the monks. In the end I accumulated 24 lessons: one with a griot named Fa Cissokho, three with his uncle Mamadou Cissokho, and twenty with Brother Jean Baptiste at the monastery. The lessons totaled over forty hours throughout my three weeks of study, and combined with my many daily hours of practicing, proved to be very effective in building a relationship with this instrument.

In choosing a griot kora teacher, I decided to go through someone who already had connections to the SIT program and who was comfortable with the idea of research being done in their household. I talked to Fa Cissokho, who had participated in the Dance and Music workshops earlier in the program and who had set up kora lessons with his family members and SIT students in the past. I traveled to his home in HLM Patte D'oise, Dakar, four times throughout the first week of my study. Upon arriving "chez bambara," or "at the griot household," I entered what seemed like a whole new world: the house was *packed* with people, some watching television, some cooking or dancing or cleaning, and I was welcomed as a guest and given a seat in a small bedroom with a mother and her daughter. I asked the woman a little bit about the household and found out that over 40 people live there and that that number is normal for a griot household in Senegal. When Fa arrived he took me to his personal house (the first was his "family house"), and I was not only seen as a student but also as a musician, almost an apprentice to the trade. I took a lesson the first day with Fa and the three following days with his uncle Mamadou, all in Fa's personal household on a little porch outside his bedroom.

Finding a teacher at the monastery was a little more complicated since SIT didn't already have ties with the monks there. I visited the monastery one morning to see their Sunday Mass and spent the whole day there, inquiring about lessons, housing and logistics. Since each monk is in charge of a different sector of work (i.e., housing, guests, payment for services, etc.), it was difficult to get in contact with all the right people in one day. Also, though the monks do regularly teach kora lessons, they're usually taught in the month of July with a group of students rather than individual lessons, so it was hard to determine whether a monk would be available to teach me and what the price would be. Through many phone calls afterwards I ended up with a place to stay: a calm, secluded room in a house about a 5-minute walk from the monastery where I could practice the kora; a teacher: Brother Jean Baptiste, one of the two monks at the monastery who was most educated in music; and a lesson schedule: one lesson each morning and one each afternoon, at 9am and 4pm, each for up to two hours. The lessons took place in a sitting room in the monastery or in a gazebo in the garden. In this setting my role as seen by most people was first that of a musician, and my role as "researcher" was seen as part of that role: one who learns an instrument should not only know how to play the instrument but should be curious about its past and present as well.

Along with participation in these lessons I chose to use other methodologies to complete this study. I used observation of the two playing styles to relate to the teaching styles: I attended many kora performances, including multiple Masses at Keur Moussa and the convent of Keur Guilaye about 5km away from the monastery, I returned to Dakar for a weekend to observe at the "Day of the Kora" festivities by griots, I saw a short performance by a griot who was visiting the monastery, Mamadou Dramé, and I

also observed the playing styles of each of my teachers as they performed during lesson breaks.

In order to answer my research questions I used two main methodologies: informal interview and text research. Through informal interview I hoped to gather first-hand information and personal opinions, and felt that an informal setting would obtain more honest answers. References to these interviews are directly translated by the author. Through text research I aimed to assemble a base knowledge of each of the two environments/populations, to help formulate questions for my informal interviews, and to attain unbiased information about the histories of the instrument in each environment in order to facilitate connections between my personal findings and established facts. I also ended up using text research to analyze the teaching styles of each of my instructors and to explore why, because of learning styles, I might have been affected the way I was by each teaching style.

In addition to these methodologies, in order to increase my relationship with the instrument, I participated in other kora-related activities: I visited the kora-making workshop at the monastery of Keur Moussa, I went through the process of buying a kora and buying new cords, I attended performances of koraists in populations other than those of my study, I listened to various audio sources, and I performed at a Mass on my last day at the monastery.

Although all of my methodologies provided me with valuable information and allowed me to develop a deep relationship with the instrument, there did exist some disadvantages and limitations to certain aspects of my project. First, because of budget and time limitations, my time was not evenly split between the two populations of study,

and this could have contributed to an unequal understanding of the two cultures, populations and environments. In addition, in using interviews of both populations there may have been biased information, though I attempted to keep obvious opinions separate from factual information. One logistical disadvantage that definitely affected my experience with the griot lessons was transportation and tuning of the kora: for the first two nights I wasn't able to bring the kora home to practice, and I'm sure that decreased the amount I was able to learn and retain within that amount of time. Lastly, one factor on which I did not concentrate in my study but that might have affected the results was the fact that I am a foreign woman studying an instrument traditionally played by only male griots; while I do not feel that this effected my study, the fact remains that very few women play the kora as a profession and that a woman studying the instrument could have had certain connotations for my populations of study.

Results

The History of the Kora in each of the Two Contexts

In the Griot World

Playing the kora, for certain families of griots, is not a chosen occupation: one is born into the position. Originally, only two families were koraists: Kouyate and Cissokho, though through the years more and more griot families became koraists. Every male in a family of koraists was predestined to become a koraist: these griots did not have any education besides the knowledge of the kora, which they learned aurally from their fathers, starting at very young ages (Ba 2009). In pre-colonial times, griots were attendants to kings and nobility, playing the instrument for entertainment and fulfilling

other roles as well, including those of advisors, social counselors, messengers, and entertainers (Dilworth 2008, 3 and Cissokho 2009). Consequently griots were positioned in middle social classes and depended on their audience for every essential in life: a koraist would travel to one home and receive a sack of rice for their services, then to another home to receive meat, and yet another to receive shelter, food, or whatever else they needed in life. The kora was their only means to survive and was therefore very valued throughout the generations (Ba 2009).

Slowly but surely, as is arguably inevitable with every aspect of life, the modernization of Senegalese culture began to affect the lives of these koraists. It became impossible to attain every essential of life by solely playing the kora, and therefore the tradition had to change. The kora was no longer played exclusively for noble families, some sons of koraists took on other occupations besides learning the kora, and although many griot families continue to pass music on with the same traditional sentiments, this hereditary responsibility of a griot has changed (Ba 2009).

At the Monastery of Keur Moussa

The African monks of the Monastery of Keur Moussa, upon the founding of the monastery in 1963 by French monks, wanted to develop a means to express their prayers with their own language and culture. All the prayers that were originally sung in Latin were converted to French, and the monks sought out an instrument that could convey their African roots through its use with their *Gregorian chants*. They considered many different traditional instruments of Senegal: the *tam-tam*, the *balafon*, the *djembe*, and so forth, but found none of these entirely capable of expressing the melodies of the chants (Frère Jean Baptiste, 2009). It was in 1964 that Brother Dominique Catta heard the

distinctive kora on the radio and became infatuated with its beautiful sound; soon afterwards the monks invited two traditional kora players, called *jeeli* of the *Mandinka* ethnic minority, to spend a few days at the monastery and introduce their instruments (Bayle 2007).

The *jeeli* entered the monastery with their koras and began to play, traditional songs that had been passed through generations upon generations of their families, as the monks sang their *Gregorian chants* to the same tune. It was then decided that the kora would be the ideal instrument to combine the monks' cultural roots with their prayers (Bayle 2007); the next step was for the monks to learn the instrument, a step that proved more difficult than expected (Frère Jean Baptiste, 2009).

The monks, having no professor to teach the instrument, acquired a written kora method assembled by Mr. Anumu Petro Santos, director of African Music at *L'École Nationale des Arts* in Dakar (Bayle 2007). This method included information on the three traditional scales used in kora playing along with notation of the author. Besides this written method, the monks relied only on their observation and on recordings by the traditional *jeelis*, and were able to adapt the sounds to their needs, that is, to their *Gregorian chants* (Bayle 2007).

Throughout the years of playing and teaching the kora to incoming monks, the monks of Keur Moussa who had been musically educated in Europe developed a method of written kora music, including a system of indicating notes on a staff, the rhythmic values of notes, the monastery's own "accords" or tunes that accompany certain prayers, and a procedure for the progressive acquirement of the instrument (Frère Jean Baptiste, 2009). The monks also transcribed established songs by ear and wrote their own music,

and have published multiple books of their collection of written kora music and methods of the kora (See Appendix, Figures 1-3). The established method of teaching the Kora at Keur Moussa is progressive. It begins with a chapter on scales, starting with index finger scales and adding in the thumbs, followed by octaves, then independence of the index fingers and thumbs, thirds and fifths, and finally, playing with multiple koras (soprano, alto and tenor) (*Méthode Progressive pour Airs de Kora*, 1987).

Along with the transformation of the instrument by adapting the songs and methods, the monks of Keur Moussa found that alterations were needed in the physical makeup of the instrument as well. The traditional kora was tuned by raising and lowering the leather rings on the neck of the instrument, therefore changing the tension put on the cords; the cords, though, would easily fall out of tune, making it difficult to use the instrument for multiple prayers throughout a service without fully tuning in between (Bayle 2007).

In 1971 Frère Michael Meugniot began to adjust the structure of the instrument for easier tuning, trying not to significantly change the fundamental structure of the traditional instrument. Among many, the most important changes he made were:

- The attachment of the strings and the tuning of the instrument was no longer by leather rings, but instead by violin and cello knobs, later replaced by special wooden knobs fabricated in the workshop of the monastery: cone-shaped knobs inserted into cone-shaped holes
- The neck was elongated to give sufficient space for the 21 knobs
- A “cordier” was added at the base of the calabash, in order to attach the strings more easily

The efforts of Frère Michael were supported by fundamental contributions made by students and professors of the Polytechnic School of Thiès. The first kora of Keur Moussa came out in 1972 (Bayle 2007).

Frère Michael continued to work on the adaptation of the kora until 1982, when he was forced to return to France for health reasons and Frère Luc Bayle took his place. Among other changes, Frère Luc developed the use of metal guitar tuning knobs in place of the wooden cone-shaped knobs that fell out of tune with hygrometric changes (Bayle 2007).

The koras of Keur Moussa today are chromatic koras, fashioned with metal tuning knobs and levers for each of the cords that allow for easy switching between major and minor keys and any number of tunings (Frère Jean Baptiste, 2009). I visited the workshop at the monastery where the koras are made and observed the evolution of the kora; I was told that, even though the previous koras (with guitar mechanics) are still used for lessons and prayer services, the monastery now only fashions the chromatic koras, and that the monastery is the only place in the world to construct these chromatic koras.

I spoke with one monk, Frère Justin, a Nigerian monk who came to Keur Moussa specifically to study the liturgy of the monastery, on the subject of the kora in relation to the monastery of Keur Moussa and to his own monastery in Nigeria. Today ten of the 35 monks living at the monastery of Keur Moussa are established koraists who perform in the prayer services; each monk begins to learn (using the written method of the monastery) but chooses whether or not to continue based on their own experience with the instrument. The methods written by the monks of Keur Moussa are not exclusive to this monastery. Though they originated in this particular monastery, they are now shared

throughout several monasteries and convents in surrounding areas and countries with which the monastery has ties (Frère Justin, 2009).

The Purpose of the Kora in Each of the Two Contexts

The Griot Context

In the context of the griots, the purpose of the kora has changed over time, originally, as previously mentioned, serving as a form of entertainment, folklore and a means of survival. Today, for the griots, the value of musical instruments is still arguably equal to that of life and death. That is, the discontinuation of an instrument would serve to sever the ties linking all past generations of the family to the present. While this sentiment has changed because of the disassociation of the kora with necessities of life such as food and shelter, familial ties remain just as important. I spoke with Fa Cissokho and his uncle Mamadou Cissokho, asking, “What is the mission of a griot with the kora?” To my surprise, I got a very concise answer: “He is born with the instrument. He plays. He has sons. He feeds the sons with the instrument. If today he is dead, he has his sons who continue. Their mission with the kora—that cannot be finished. There is life”¹ (Cissokho 2009). The instrument serves not only to continue the family trade, but also to spiritually continue the life of their father, his father, his father and so forth.

¹ «Il est né avec l’instrument. Il joue. Il a des fils. Il fait nourrir les fils avec l’instrument. Si aujourd’hui il est mort, il a ses fils qui continuent. Leur mission avec la kora—ça ne peut pas être fini. Il y a la vie.»

The Monastic Context

At the monastery of Keur Moussa, the kora serves two main purposes. The first, as Frère Jean Baptiste emphasized time and time again, is “to Praise the lord”² (Frère Jean Baptiste 2009). The kora has been adapted to many of the monks’ traditional *Gregorian chants* and is used in prayer services and Masses to accompany the prayers, or occasionally in solely instrumental tunes. The other main purpose of the kora (and in fact the original reason the kora ever even arrived at the monastery), is to express the African roots of the monks through their prayers; as Frère Jean Baptiste expressed in our conversations, Latin chants and foreign instruments would have no way of representing the true spirit and sentiments of the African monks (Frère Jean Baptiste 2009).

Both Contexts

Aside from the sentimental purposes of the kora in each context, in today’s world, with the modernization of the instrument, of transportation and of culture, it is apparent that the kora would serve another purpose for each population: a monetary purpose. Though I did not go into depth in studying this topic, as I was more interested in how the sentiments of each population towards the kora would affect their teaching styles, it was impossible to avoid the issue.

In a conversation with Fa Cissokho on the purpose of the kora, we discussed the topic of money. He explained to me that, in order to make a living, griots only have one skill: music. They aren’t educated in other subjects, they don’t work in offices— music is their only way of making a living. I experienced the issue of money in taking lessons with the griots, in being charged more than expected for lessons and another rather large

² “Louer le Seigneur.”

sum in order to film one of my lessons for my research. In talking about this issue with my advisor, modern koraist Edouard Manga, he mentioned that this might have to do with race: traditional griots may have the inclination to see people with white skin as an opportunity for monetary gain, as tourists or as foreigners who aren't aware of local prices. Also, as they realize the demand for traditional griot teachers versus the lack of traditional griots available, it is understandable that the price of lessons wouldn't have to be competitive with those of non-griot lessons.

At the monastery, for me, there was much less of an emphasis on price and I was charged barely anything for the two weeks that I stayed there. Apart from my experience, though, the kora at the monastery definitely does have a monetary connotation to it: the monks make the only chromatic koras in the world, the most expensive (and most modern) koras—anyone who wants a chromatic kora must buy it from Keur Moussa (Frère Jean Baptiste 2009). Since the beginning of their unique use of the kora with prayers the monastery has become a tourist attraction, boosting not only kora sales but donations, advertisement, gift shop sales and interest in lessons.

Teaching Styles in Each of the Two Contexts

Fa and Mamadou Cissokho

Upon entering Fa's house on my first day of lessons, I was led up a narrow staircase to a small porch. I set my kora down as Fa moved a pile of clothing and toys from on top of a stack of two plastic chairs, separated the chairs, and wiped them down with a rag. He told me to sit down and went into his bedroom while I took my kora out of its case and began to lightly pluck the strings. When he came back he set my kora aside,

picked up his own and proceeded to play for several minutes. I watched his fingers as they glided across the cords, his thumbs constantly moving, and he ended with a simple note phrase, repeated it several times, and handed me the kora. I copied what I had seen his fingers do, making corrections by ear when I noticed a difference and caught on quickly to the short phrase. Once I had repeated it a few times, he took the kora back, played another complicated melody, ended yet again with a simple note phrase, and handed it back to me.

This trend continued throughout the lesson: Fa would play a complicated melody, break it down to its basic roots, repeat the basic phrase, and teach me by sight and ear, rarely speaking, how to play that basis. If I didn't immediately get the phrase he would come behind me and reach his hands in front of me, so I could see from the right perspective what the hands should be doing. After learning each basic phrase I was left alone for several minutes to repeat the phrase over and over, and when Fa heard from wherever he was (his bedroom, watching television, downstairs greeting someone at the door, in the kitchen etc.) that I had learned the phrase well and knew the rhythm, he would return to add another portion.

Throughout this lesson Fa gave a lot of positive encouragement. When I learned a phrase quickly, he would say, "You are a good student, you have a good ear,"³ or "music is in your blood."⁴ After learning the first note phrase, Fa explained the meaning of the song: it was called *Kayra*, which signifies "peace and happiness". Instead of continuing to progress with that song, I then learned the basis of another song, called *Sonu*, which represents "jewelry" or "something beautiful." At the end of the lesson Fa quizzed me by

³ "Tu est une bonne élève, tu as une bonne oreille."

⁴ "La musique est dans ton sang."

saying the name of one of the two songs and I would have to play the note phrase. He then ended by playing the full songs again, along with some others, singing to some.

When the lesson was over, which was thirty minutes before the time we had planned, I found out that I wouldn't be able to bring home my kora because Fa couldn't tune it; he had to wait for his uncle to tune it, so it would be ready the next day for my lesson. I was surprised that I was not encouraged to practice outside of class but left with two note phrases engrained in my muscle memory from the amount of repetition involved in the lesson.

For the next three days it was no longer Fa who taught the lessons, but his uncle Mamadou. The lessons continued in basically the same manner, with a few differences: While Mamadou used the same method of breaking down songs from their most complicated form to their basis, instead of breaking that basis into shorter phrases of notes and repeating it, he would just play the whole basis once and then hand me the kora. When he saw that I wasn't able to remember or play even the first few notes, he did begin to break down the phrases, but in repeating the phrases, played them in slightly different ways each time. When I tried to repeat what he had done, the second I hit a wrong cord, even if I could simply correct it by ear, he would immediately take the kora back and play the phrase again. At other points where I made mistakes, he would move my fingers to the correct strings or simply pluck the correct strings himself while I played the part I knew. Mamadou also encouraged much more repetition than Fa had. I would play a short phrase over and over again for sometimes fifteen minutes, and when I stopped repeating to show him I was ready for a new phrase, he would tell me to continue. Along with the increase in repetition, Mamadou began referring to *solfege*: he

would, instead of pointing to a string for me to pluck when I was unsure, say a note in *solfege*. For each song I had learned, he went through all the strings quickly naming the notes that were used and not used within the song. I asked if I could write them down and he said it wasn't necessary, I just had to know them.

After one more night of leaving my kora there and not practicing, I went to my lesson and had completely forgotten how to play any of the songs from the previous day. I explained that, in order to remember, I need to practice outside of class; Mamadou asked why I hadn't practiced in my head. I answered that, not knowing the kora very well yet and not knowing by heart the sound that each string makes, it's hard to envision and play the kora without the physical action of plucking the strings. For the next two lessons they let me take the kora home to practice.

The rest of the lessons continued with Mamadou in a similar fashion: me repeating phrases for most of the time, Mamadou taking the kora to play frequently, and the two men explaining the titles of the songs from which the notes phrases were taken or answering my questions about griots and music. Through the four lessons I learned five different note phrases, a couple of which were just variations of the same song, so this included three titles: *Kayra* and *Sonu* from the first day with Fa, and *Kilefa*, which signifies the king of the *Sorcé*, explained to me as a race of people in the Casamance (Cissokho 2009).

On the last day of lessons Mamadou and I played together on our two separate koras, with me playing the basis of each song while he played the intricacies and improvisations of each. When I would lose my place he would continue, and I had to try to come in at the right moment, with the correct rhythm. He wouldn't count for me to

come in, but simply nod his head a few seconds before I was to start playing again; when I got it wrong, Fa would sing my part to help me put it into place with the rest of the song.

Frère Jean Baptiste

My first lesson with Jean Baptiste was, in almost every way, unlike any of my lessons with the griots. The monk at the welcoming office led me to a waiting room, where, after a few minutes, I was met by Frère Jean Baptiste, a young-looking Senegalese monk in a neck brace. He sat down across from me and we had a rather formal introductory conversation about my music background, my intentions in taking kora lessons, and the method taught at Keur Moussa. He informed me that the monastery had a written method and that he would try to find me a book. He asked if I knew the *solfege* of the kora, and when I replied that I didn't he helped me to write it down using a drawing of the wooden bridge and the notches where all the strings attached (See Appendix, Figure 1). Next he asked what I wanted to learn through these lessons. Would I like to learn classical music, maybe some jazz? I told him that I wanted to learn whatever beginner kora students normally learn, not expecting to be given a choice.

After our introductory conversation, in which I had explained the intentions of my project, Jean Baptiste asked me to play something the griots taught me. He talked for a while about the differences in playing styles between griots and monks, and about how differently I would be learning songs here. He played some examples of griot songs versus monastery songs; after the lesson, I wrote in my field journal:

Jean Baptiste kept mentioning and demonstrating the differences in playing styles between the monks and the griots. He would show me a very complicated song, where he would pluck multiple cords at once with the same finger and go very fast and just play pretty

much all the strings, and he said that's how griots like to play. It almost seemed like he was criticizing their imprecise way of playing. He would then play a song I recognized from one of the four prayer services I've gone to and it would completely change the sound of the instrument. It sounds much less "African," I guess you could say.

We then started finger exercises and scales. Jean Baptiste would quickly play a complicated scale or exercise and then slow it down for me to hear the individual notes and to see which cords he was plucking with each finger; then he would hand me the kora and tell me the *solfege* of the cords I was supposed to play. I frequently looked back and forth between the cords and the paper where I had written the *solfege*, and very slowly used this drawing and his words to learn the exercises.

Throughout my two weeks at the monastery I completed 20 lessons with Frère Jean Baptiste. I noticed many characteristics that were repeated in each and every lesson, and also observed a metamorphosis in the mood of our lessons as time went on.

Every single lesson, after greetings, started with the words "Did you work hard? I'm listening."⁵ Jean Baptiste would sit straight across from me, waiting for my performance, to see if I had in fact practiced enough. When I made a mistake with the melody or hit the wrong cord, Jean Baptiste would cringe or gasp, and I would attempt to go back and correct it. When I made a mistake of rhythm he would shake his head slowly, and tell me to go back and try again. He would sing or tap out the rhythm while I tried to adjust, or, if I asked him to, he would take the kora and play it for me. The most frequent tip Jean Baptiste gave me for playing was "You can't hesitate,"⁶ or "there is no

⁵ "Tu as bien travaillé? Je vous écoute."

⁶ "Il faut pas hésiter"

pause there,”⁷ and often he would say that the songs needed to be more “light” or “sure.” He would play the passage quickly, showing me how it should sound without hesitation, and then hand me the kora to continue. After we got through the songs or exercises I had practiced, he would pick out the passages I needed to work on and leave the room for about an hour. When he returned he would ask me to play the passages, and then tell me to work on them for the next lesson. As a trend I noticed that Jean Baptiste was much more critical in the morning lessons than in the afternoon, that I was put on the spot much less in the afternoon, and that any conversations that occurred about anything other than the specific songs I was learning at the moment only happened in the afternoon.

On most days I had a 1-2 hour lesson at 9AM where I would play the songs practiced the previous night, I would be assigned new music at the end of each morning lesson, and then I would play the new music along with all the old music at my 1-2-hour-long lesson at 4. For the most part the learning of a song would progress as follows: Jean Baptiste would play the song and leave me with the written music to learn independently; I would play whatever I could after the set amount of time; He would correct passages; and finally after the song was presentable, usually after a couple days, we would work on nuances: dynamics, how to strike the cords, and small details like *trills* and *diminuendos*. He explained to me that the order in which I was learning the exercises and songs was progressive: the first ones incorporate mostly the index fingers and get the hands accustomed to working together; the next ones exercise the thumbs; then the thumbs become a constant rhythm while the index fingers work separately; and finally there are

⁷ “Il n’y a pas de coup la”

songs where the thumbs and index fingers each play completely separate parts of the melody.

Along with the static characteristics of lessons with Jean Baptiste, there was a definite evolution of atmosphere of the lessons and of his disposition as time went on. In the beginning he was very formal and impersonal, always concentrated on the music at hand and never expressed any positive encouragement. He even addressed me as “vous” instead of “toi,” the French “you” that signifies respect and politeness and is usually used when addressing elders. Little by little, I saw our relationship become less formal, his use of “vous” changed to “toi,” he started giving small bits of positive encouragement, and rigorous music lessons turned to conversations interspersed with more casual playing. He would still give me tips on how to play the pieces—rhythms, dynamics, how to strike the cords for the best sound—but in a much less formal manner.

Effect of Teaching Styles on my Learning

There were many factors that contributed to the amount I learned through my lessons with Fa and Mamadou Cissokho versus those with Frère Jean Baptiste at the monastery.

The first and most obvious for me was the presence of written music. With the griots, everything had to be committed to memory, whether that was muscle memory or ability to recall string numbers and order. I noticed that this made me look at the strings constantly, as knowing the string order visually as well as physically helped me to remember the songs and to remind me of the rhythms. At the monastery, instead of looking at the strings, I constantly looked at the written music and therefore never even

thought about which strings I was hitting or in what order; when I looked at the strings instead of the page of music, I wouldn't know how to play the music. I didn't have to memorize anything through my time there, but after playing the music enough times, through visual memory and muscle memory, I found that the memorization came naturally.

While taking lessons with the griots, learning aurally and from observation instead of with written music combined with my inability to practice at home definitely diminished the amount of music I could learn in a short amount of time. It made it impossible to progress on my own, without my teacher right beside me to teach me new phrases or rhythms. In order to learn something new I had to watch and listen to the phrase; In the context of the monastery, however, since I could take home the books of written music, I could, hypothetically, learn any new song in the book, given that I could associate the written notes with the strings on the kora and count the rhythms independently. I found that this helped me to progress much more quickly in my lessons at the monastery: I would be assigned a whole song, sometimes three pages of music, in one night, and I could refer to this written music in order to play. With the griots, I would be assigned one or two short note phrases and couldn't move on from there until my next lesson.

In the griot context, the positive support through Fa's comments made me feel comfortable in our sessions and encouraged me to take musical risks, but also made me feel as though practicing much outside of class wasn't necessary. With Frère Jean Baptiste I noticed much more nervousness on my part going into the lessons and playing, and this definitely affected the quality of my playing. At the same time, though, it

encouraged me to practice a great deal more outside of class than I felt was necessary with the griots; at the monastery I sought approval in my lessons while with the griots I played for the joy of playing and mistakes were not seen as negative.

In both contexts, the small performances each of the teachers gave during the sessions served to give me inspiration and goals for which to strive. With the griots, hearing what a song could sound like before even learning the basis helped me to put that small note phrase I was learning into the bigger context of real music, which encouraged me to progress and to learn the correct notes, and eventually to take improvisation risks as well. With Jean Baptiste, hearing the full song helped me to correct nuances such as dynamics, tempo, and rhythmic details.

Analysis

The Purpose of the Kora

In a conversation with Gaby Ba, an ethnomusicologist who I talked to in order to try and analyze the data I collected from my fieldwork, we discussed the purpose of the kora in each of the two contexts. We determined that the difference between the reasons for playing the kora was between a spiritual purpose and a religious purpose. The griots have a *spiritual* connection with the kora: from the beginning, the kora was used as a recreational instrument, to entertain and relax the hard-working nobility; the instrument today serves to connect them not only to past generations of their families and to continue the line of heritage, but also to the history of the respected roles of griots. The monks, in addition to a spiritual connection with the instrument through expressing their cultural roots, have a *religious* connection to the kora: the monks use the kora as an instrument of

praise. The connection between the two, spiritual and religion, as Gaby described, is transcendence. The kora is an instrument that transcends: “When you listen to the kora, anywhere, it is transcendent. When you listen to something [played on the kora], you hear something that you put inside yourself”⁸ (Ba 2009). This quality of the instrument applies not only to populations who have a historical connection with the instrument; I experienced it through my learning with Edouard at the very beginning of the program. Whether it is the unique voice of the instrument or the history its sounds convey, the transcendence of the kora today serves many different purposes for populations in every sector of life, from the traditional griots, to monks, to modern musicians, to American college students.

Reasons for Teaching Styles

When I began this project I hoped to find connections between the teaching styles and the histories and purposes of the kora in each of the two contexts in which I studied. While I did find logical connections between these things, I found that the actual source for teaching style was much simpler: one teaches in the same manner in which he or she learned.

The griots learned by observation and by ear. They watched and heard their father play the instrument every day and then experimented by plucking the different cords, improvising and correcting by ear until they were able to play what they heard (Cissokho 2009). This is how the griots taught: they played a piece for me over and over, let me watch and hear what it should sound like, and then they handed me the kora so I could use what I had heard to learn the music. They never used written music in learning and

⁸ “Quand tu écoutes la kora, quelque part, elle est transcendante. Quand tu écoutes quelque chose, tu entends quelque chose que tu mets dans toi-même.”

therefore had no means of using written music for my lessons; they could only learn from what they had heard, as could I, but the difference was that the amount I could hear in a matter of hours was much less than the amount they heard throughout whole days and months and years of their childhood. While I heard short music phrases and figured them out, the griots regularly heard full songs and figured them out. Because of this issue of time, this method was not as effective for me as it would be for someone who lived in a griot household and was around the music constantly.

The monks, originally, learned the basics from a written method, listened to songs, experimented with the strings, developed a method for writing the notes, and formulated a series of progressive exercises in order to familiarize oneself with the kora; ever since these were established, all the monks have learned in the same way: individually, hearing the songs and using written music to learn. This is how I was taught: Jean Baptiste would play the song, and then I would be left to read the music and learn it on my own.

In relating this finding to music teaching in general, I read an article describing music teaching styles and their implications and effects on music students. The article listed eight dimensions of music teaching on which the teacher could focus, and explored the different effects of concentrating more on one than the others. These eight dimensions included: Teacher Authority, Nonverbal Motivation, Time Efficiency, Aesthetic Music Performance, Positive Learning Environment, Music Concept Learning, Student Independence, and Group Dynamics (Gumm 34). I found it interesting that I could apply these rigid dimensions to my experience with each of the two populations since the experiences were so drastically different.

The griots, through their lessons, concentrated most on Teacher Authority, Music Concept Learning and Student Independence. In learning, they had experienced Teacher Authority through the hierarchy of age and gender in a Senegalese family: it was their father who taught them to play the instrument; in my lessons, the act of taking the kora away from the student frequently to play their own music demonstrated the hierarchy of teacher over student. Through Music Concept Learning the griots taught me the names of the songs and what each one signified; in learning the songs as tradition, it was important for them to pass on these stories that have passed through the generations of their families, to continue the line of heredity. Student Independence relates to creativity and improvisation; for griots, no song is ever played exactly the same twice, and therefore in order to learn anything greater than the basis of a song I was encouraged to listen and improvise using what I heard. The griots, hearing their father play, basically taught themselves using this independence.

The monks concentrated on Time Efficiency, Aesthetic Music Performance and Student Independence. Unlike the griots, who spent most of the hours in a day learning the kora since that was their destiny, monks had specific schedules for each day, including prayer services, mealtimes, and other courses or duties. Learning the kora had a timeframe, and, as the music was written, each song was played basically the same way each time—meaning once a song was perfected, it was done and a new song could be started. I was taught in the same way: after a few days a song should be finished, and a new song was started. Aesthetic Music Performance played a large part in the monks' learning of the kora: for each prayer service, every day, one or two monks perform on the instrument. In each of my lessons I was asked for a performance of everything I had

worked on since the very beginning, and at the end of my two weeks there I was asked to perform at Mass with the monks. Student Independence, I found, comes automatically with the written music: because one is able to learn outside of class, it was expected that the monks, as well as myself, would learn the songs independently.

The Effect of Learning Style

Another finding I discussed with Gaby Ba, in relation to the observation that one teaches how one was taught, was that one learns and processes in a way that is already familiar to him or her. I have taken music lessons before, in the United States, and learned using counted rhythms, written notes on a staff, and the technicalities of tempo, dynamics, etc. I found that, during the lessons with the griots, I began to impose my own methods of learning music on their methods of teaching: I tried to count the rhythms and play things similarly every time while they changed the notes, tempos and dynamics that were used each time they played the same song. I also enforced my assumption that practicing at home was necessary, since that's how I had learned in the past, while they encouraged me to leave the kora there and practice in my head. I thought of the notes as set notes on a staff and was frustrated when I couldn't write them; my background in music impeded my learning in this new style. Since the method of teaching at the monastery was so similar to the teaching styles I'd experienced in the U.S., I didn't run into this kind of frustration; I was able to concentrate on learning the music without first learning and adapting to the teaching style.

Conclusion

Studying an instrument in a foreign culture did much more for me than merely teach the instrument. I found that, immediately upon commencement of learning in

another culture, even without words, one learns about the history of that culture. Through the playing and teaching styles of my professors I could determine how they were taught, or what their history was with the instrument. Without words I was able to see what the instrument meant to each person, their sentiments associated with the music they played, and what they were looking for in a student, in the continuation of the instrument. Music became a language and communicated across cultures things that would be difficult to fully experience through words.

Through my study of the kora in two differing environments, I have noticed the instrument's numerous associations with "continuation." The traditional players sustained the lives of their families, literally and spiritually, with the continuation of this instrument; the monks maintained their cultural roots in a new way of life through the kora, and passed the instrument on to each incoming member; the physical adaptation of the instrument to a more versatile, more easily-tuned version allows for the continuation of the instrument's existence in the quickly-modernizing world; the teaching styles of each and every person in the long line of teachers of the instrument are retained through their students and passed on to future students; and now, as I return to the U.S. with a kora of my own, the methods of Fa, Mamadou and Jean Baptiste will compose the basis of anything I play. Though being a foreigner learning this traditional instrument is just one step further from tradition, the roots are maintained.

In future research, I would consider studying the kora in certain environments for which the instrument may have particular connotations, specifically in the context of religion and the context of gender. These are both contexts in which I participated but did not research; I'd be interested to find out the associations of the kora through religion,

since most griots are Muslim, and the instrument was so important to these Catholic monks living in a predominantly Muslim country. In the gender context, it would be interesting to see the evolution and implications of the kora with women since the instrument was traditionally only played by males, and there now exist women who play the kora professionally or who use the kora in other contexts, such as the nuns at the convent of Keur Guilaye that I visited as part of my observation.

The kora, using the language of music and the continuation of sentiments, is an instrument to which anyone can relate. Whether one uses it for money, tradition, religion, entertainment, or even for a research project, the kora, I've found, retains a sense of spirituality and transcendence through its intriguing voice and its rich history.

Music is the universal language of mankind.

~Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Appendix

Formulaire d'Adhésion

Intitulé du Projet:

Apprendre La Kora dans Deux Contextes Senegalais: Dans un Contexte Traditionnel en comparaison au Contexte Religieux

Introduction au projet:

J'étudierai intensivement la kora pendant trois semaines : la première semaine avec un griot à Dakar, et les deux semaines suivantes avec les moines à Keur Moussa. Mis à part le fait d'améliorer mes compétences à jouer la kora, les objectifs de mes études sont :

- d'une part étudier l'histoire de la kora dans les deux environnements et sentiments différents des deux groupes de personnes concernant la kora.
- D'autre part je voudrais observer les différences entre les modèles d'enseignement des deux groupes différents, et enfin, voir comment cela va affecter mon apprentissage de cet instrument.

Avant d'adhérer ou de participer dans l'étude, s'il vous plaît, lisez bien ce formulaire et je suis à votre disposition pour tout autre information complémentaire.

Introduction du chercheur:

Je m'appelle Emily Merkert, et je suis une étudiante de SIT. Vous pouvez me contacter au téléphone : 778012577 ou email : emerkert1@gmail.com.

Données de base:

La kora est une instrumente très importante dans l'histoire du Sénégal, et elle reste aujourd'hui une grande partie de la musique ouest africaine. Pendant longtemps c'était seulement les griots qui pouvaient jouer la kora ; je m'intéresse au fait que les moines de Keur Moussa, qui ne sont pas nécessairement Africains et certainement pas griots, incorporent la kora dans leurs priers. C'est pourquoi je veux voir les modèles d'enseignement différents et les différents sentiments de cet instrument.

Procédures:

Pour mieux voir les différences entre les modèles d'enseignement des deux groupes différents, je voudrais faire des sessions de kora en les filmant avec ma vidéo caméra.

Confidentialité:

Si vous préférez, je peux ne pas faire les sessions vidéo avec vous. Les vidéos pourraient être vues par mes professeurs et par les autres étudiants dans ma présentation.

Caractère volontaire:

La participation est volontaire; vous avez la liberté de participer ou non sans pour autant en subir les conséquences. De même vous pouvez vous désengager sans dommages.

Contacts et questions:

Pour toutes questions ou préoccupations, veuillez contacter le chercheur, *Emily Merkert* :

778012577 ou *emerkert1@gmail.com*, aussi bien que la School for International Training, Rue 5, Point E, Dakar tel. 33-864-0542 ou 33-825-0815 e-mail: *sit@orange.sn*.

Lettre d'Introduction

Emily MERKERT
c/o SIT Study Abroad-Dakar
BP : 16490
Dakar-Fann, Sénégal

Objet : Les Sessions de Kora

Monsieur le Directeur
L'Abbaye de Keur Moussa
BP 721
Dakar

Monsieur,

Je soussignée, Emily MERKERT, étudiante à la School for International Training (**SIT**), sise à la Rue 5, Point E, Dakar, sollicite auprès de vous un stage de Kora qui va commencer le 18 Avril et qui va finir le premier mai.

En effet, je mène un projet d'étude en guise de mémoire dans le cadre de ma formation académique en Arts et Culture au Sénégal. Pour mon projet, j'étudierai intensivement la kora pendant trois semaines : la première semaine avec un griot à Dakar, et les deux suivantes avec les moines de Keur Moussa. Mis à part le fait d'améliorer mes compétences à jouer la kora, les objectifs de mes études sont d'une part étudier l'histoire de la kora dans les deux environnements différents avec les sentiments différents des deux groupes de personnes au sujet de la kora. D'autre part je voudrais observer les différences entre les modèles d'enseignement des deux groupes différents, et enfin, voir comment cela va affecter mon apprentissage de cet instrument.

C'est la raison pour laquelle je sollicite vivement votre assistance et collaboration pour une réussite de mon projet.

Pour plus d'information sur le programme de formation académique, veuillez contacter M. Souleye Diallo, le Directeur Académique de SIT, téléphone 33-864-0542 (bureau) ou 77-546-1243 (portable).

Dans l'attente d'une suite favorable, je vous prie d'agréer, Monsieur, l'expression de mes salutations distingués.

Emily MERKERT

Following Images :

Figure 1: Pictorial representation of *solfege*, using a diagram of kora's wooden bridge from the eye of the player (*Premiere Méthode de Kora*, 7).

Figure 2: Examples of progressive scales in the method of Keur Moussa (*Méthode Progressive pour Airs de Kora* 1987, 7).

Figure 3: Example of written kora music (*Du Desert. D'Ici et D'Ailleurs* 1988, 9).

Glossary of Terms (In order of appearance)

Kora: 21-Stringed West African instrument, sometimes described as a “bridge harp” or “harp lute”

Griot: Member of a caste of oral historians who carry on musical traditions and family geneology

Mbalax: Genre of popular music developed in Senegal and Gambia

Benedictine: A monk or nun belonging to a religious order founded by St. Benedict or following his rule

Gregorian chant: Liturgical chant of the Roman Catholic Church that is sung without accompaniment

Tam-tam: Traditional West African drums, the rhythms of which were often used in villages as announcements

Balafon: West African xylophone using gourds as resonators

Djembe: West African hand drum

Jeeli: Traditional kora players of the *Mandinka* ethnic group

Mandinka: Member of a people originating generally in Senegal, The Gambia, and Sierra Leone

L'École Nationale des Arts: A conservatory of theater, music, dance, fine art, and fashion design located in Dakar, Senegal

Solfège: A system of associating each note of a scale with a particular syllable (do, re, mi, etc.)

Trill: Rapid alternation between notes

Diminuendo: Decrease in volume

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