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The Kora and Korafolaw: A Treatise on the Musical Instrument and Those Who Play It

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The Kora and Korafolaw:

A Treatise on the Musical Instrument and Those Who
Play It

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Introduction / Study Area / Methodology

“The kora is what they play in heaven” a friend once told me. I agreed with him, easily. Ever since I first heard the kora played in the United States, my interest in it and the culture that produced it has deepened. Being able to carry out research on it has been a blessing and a pleasure.

All of my fieldwork was done in Bamako, the capital of Mali between April 15th and May 7th 2010. I spent most of my time in the company of the venerable *jeli* and *korafola* Dialy Mady Sissoko, who more or less adopted me for a month without me moving in. We worked on koras together, played together, and went to the market to shop for kora components. I went to INA (L’Institut National des Arts) almost every day to meet music students, play with them, and see what they were doing and how they were doing it. Dialy Mady took me to the homes of famous kora players and gave me a glimpse of the wonderful interrelated world that I was working in. I conducted interviews with male and female kora students and professional kora musicians, and I attended as many events with kora players as possible. Near the end of my fieldwork, all the above seemed to morph into one interconnected network, with informants becoming friends, students becoming teachers, and myself playing kora for my homestay family and classmates. All this was supplemented with books by various ethnomusicologists, internet research, and written works by graduates of INA.

This paper seeks to give a glimpse into the life and experience of the kora and those who play it. I will discuss where the kora comes from, how to make a traditional one, and how it’s tuned and played. Then I will talk about who plays the kora and why, and what songs are important. Next, I will show how the kora has developed in the past 50 years and what that has meant for the art of the kora. Finally, I will discuss gender roles and the experience of women who play the kora.

“The kora is an instrument that gives love to humanity.” – Djenebou Kouyate, kora student at INA.

Introduction to the Kora

The kora is a 21-stringed bridge-harp that is played in Mali, Guinea, Senegal, and The Gambia. The body is made of a large half-calabash covered with cowhide to form the sound table. The body is ‘spiked’ or pierced by a strong wooden pole, about 120–130 cm long, which forms both the neck and tailpiece. The player may stand or sit, but optimal resonance is achieved when the tailpiece rests on the floor. Sometimes a specially made stand is used to support the kora and free the hands. The player holds the instrument with the sound table facing him or her, the round calabash dome facing the listeners, and the neck high above him. The cowhide forming the sound table also extends part way over the gourd, and this portion is studded with decorative chrome tacks and cut with a sound hole to the right of the neck. The strings, reaching downwards from rings along the neck, diverge into two rows and pass over notches on either side of a tall bridge mounted on the sound table. Below the bridge the strings are knotted to anchor strings with a weaver’s knot, and the anchors in turn are looped around an iron ring in the tailpiece. From a frontal aspect, the player’s hands are barely visible as he or she holds lightly the dowel-like hand supports parallel to the neck and plucks the strings with index fingers and thumbs.

Origins

When inquiring about the origin of the kora, one can see the effects of oral history at its greatest and its worst: there are many stories, some converging, some contradictory. In this section, I will touch on some of the oral histories, stories and documentation of the kora’s origin.

Early Documentation of the Kora

The kora is often linked to the time of Sunjata Keita's reign (famous emperor of the Mali Empire in the 12th century) in the popular imagination, but most *jeliw*¹ recognize it as an instrument originally of the westernmost branch of the Mande people (i.e. the Mandinka). The Mandinka emerged only as Mali disintegrated after the 14th century and the Mande spread out to form smaller kingdoms (Knight).

The earliest known reference to a kora in western records comes from explorer Mungo Park in the 1790s, but it is unclear where exactly in his travels from the Gambia River to Ségou and up the Niger River that he encountered it. He lived with the Mandinka and noted among their instruments “the *korro*, with eighteen strings” (Knight and Charry). There were drawings of the kora (or kora-like instruments) published separately by researchers Laing, Gray and Dochart who traveled in northeastern Sierra Leone and up the Gambia River, respectively (Charry 116). Lacking more data, an origin for the kora may be projected back from this first reference to perhaps the 16th or 17th century (Knight). Koras began to be listed in catalogs of museums outside Africa in the mid to late 1800s (Charry 116).

Islamic Origins²

One hypothesis on the Arabic origins of the kora comes from a *jeli* from the Dounmaya clan from Biankouma (Ivory Coast). The story states that all griots are descendents of a man called Sourakata. He lived in Mecca but wasn't a Muslim. One day he said “I'm going to follow Mohammed on his trip from Mecca to Medina, kill him, and bring back his head.” On the way, Mohammed immediately saw the bad intentions of Sourakata and prayed that the earth would

¹ *Jeliw* is a plural word in Bambara for *jeli*, a person with special responsibility in Mande societies who play the kora (among other things explained in the section entitled *Role of the Jeli in Malian Society*).

² This section is taken from Keita and reinterpreted by myself from the French.

restrain him. Sourakata then sank into the ground up to his kidneys, unable to move. Mohammed continued on his way and prayed for the earth to release him. Soon, Sourakata was following him again.

This happened three times, and soon Sourakata saw that Mohammed was sent by God. He began chanting: “La iallah ila allah...” (there is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet). Mohammed pardoned Sourakata, and Sourakata began to accompany him, singing along the way. One day Sourakata asked: “in Mecca I promised to kill you and return with your head. How can I go back?” Mohammed responded: “I’ll give you a piece of my turban. Tie it around yourself and nothing will happen to you.” On his way home, Sourakata did as he was told. When everyone in Mecca saw that he was returning with his head wrapped, they said to each other: “Sourakata has already begun to pray like Mohammed. What are we waiting for? Let’s do as he does!”

After some time, Sourakata became a general in Mohammed’s army, and suddenly a war began. He distributed all the weapons to the army until there was none left from himself. He told Mohammed, “I gave away all the guns to the warriors, not one remains. What am I going to do?” Mohammed said “OK, you will stay with me and sing. In the future, the people who pray will not be able to forget you, you or your children. Whoever you address, anywhere, they will give you something; no door will be closed in front of you.” And since no weapons were left, Mohammed gave him a kora, and the role of the *jeli* began (Keita).

Oral traditions of Origin

“Oral traditions agree on general points about the history of the kora but diverge according to the family and the geographic origin of the [*jeli*] speaking. Ultimately, my inquiries into the origin of the kora led to *jinns* (Arabic for “genies”), a common explanation in West Africa...”

(Charry 119). Charry adds that the subject of the origin of instruments remained elusive in his research, and that his teachers just “may have been unwilling to part with such information.”

Among oral traditions gathered by Charry, there is a central figure called Jali Madi Wuleng. He is believed to have first discovered the kora with the aid of a *jinn* during the era of the Kabu (Gabu) empire. He is associated with a famous warrior called Kelefa Sane, and some of Charry’s informants (all *jeliw*) believe that Jali Madi Wuleng was Kelefa Sane’s *jeli* and composed one of the first two songs on the kora: *Kuruntu Kelefa* (“Following Kelefa”). The other song, *Kelefaba* (Great Kelefa), is associated with his death (Charry 119).

Other Legends

There are also other legends that contend that the kora began with Jali Madi Wuleng. One legend relates that while walking in the forest one day Jali Madi heard beautiful music. Seeking its origin, he found a *jinn* playing the kora. The *jinn* agreed to teach him to play if he would marry his daughter and remain in the spirit world forever. Wuleng agreed, but after some years escaped and brought the kora to the Mandinka (Knight).

Another legend recounted from a kora student at INA states that it was a woman devil that gave the kora to someone, and so when the kora plays, the devil is unable to hear it because it only brings love (Kouyate).

Origin Story According to Toumani Diabate

According to Toumani Diabate, the original kora had 22 strings. It was in Gambia by a griot that was running after his fiancée, who suddenly disappeared into a cave. He followed her inside, but when he emerged, he was holding a kora instead of the woman; his fiancée was nowhere to be

found. The griot played the 22-stringed kora in memory of her until his death, and then later one string was removed from the instrument in his honor (Diawara 16).

Evidence of Evolution

Knight speculates that the kora was probably created by adding strings to an existing Mande harp, of which there were several with three to eight strings, among them in northwestern Guinea, the *soron*. Known as spike harps, these are a type unique to West Africa. The curved neck (a feature shared with other arched harps of the world) spikes the body as on the kora, and a string carrier stands upright on the sound table to hold the strings. Straightening the neck and passing the strings over the holder (making it a bridge) enabled the instrument to accommodate the tension of more strings (Knight).

Construction of a traditional Kora³

This section describes in detail how a traditional kora is made, from the gathering of materials to the final tuning adjustments. The process can take about 3 weeks from start to finish.

Description and Materials

In order to make a traditional kora, 10 main components are needed: the neck, the rings, the strings, the hand supports, the bridge, the bridge support, the traverse support, the metal ring, the sound table (gourd and skin), and the tacks.

The sound table (made up of a gourd, skin, hand supports, traverse support and tacks)

³ I participated in two instances of the construction of a kora's sound table with Dially Mady Sissoko and his apprentices. The rest of the information was gathered orally from Dially Mady and from Knight's and Keita's works.

The perfect gourd⁴ is chosen with 4 criteria in mind: 1) It must be between 35 and 50 centimeters in diameter and be as hemispheric as possible. 2) The thickness must be 1.5 centimeters and as uniform as possible. 3) There must be no beginnings of cracks or corrosion. 4) It must be fully dried. The rim of the gourd must be smoothed to ensure that it doesn't cut the skin.

The skin is a cowhide that has been cleaned of all flesh and hair. It is buried in a humid place for 24 hours and then removed, folded and placed in a bucket of water for another 24 hours or more, depending on the thickness. The hand supports and traverse support are sculpted from African rosewood⁵ called *kéno*, and are 2 to 3 centimeters in diameter. The length varies according to the size of the gourd, but the hand supports are generally 60 to 75 centimeters and the traverse support is at least 2 centimeters longer than the width of the gourd. Finally, upholstery tacks are used to hold the skin in place after it dries to the gourd.

The neck is also made from *kéno* wood, and is sculpted into a diameter of 3 to 4 centimeters. The length is typically around 115-130 centimeters, but can vary depending on the size of the gourd. It must be as cylindrical as possible and uniform in straightness.

The bridge and bridge support are made from *kéno* wood as well. The bridge is around 16 centimeters long and 7 centimeters wide. Slits are cut 1 centimeter deep lengthwise and are sanded to prevent the accidental cutting of a string. The bridge support is rectangular and it traditionally covered in red fabric.

The rings are made from the same cowhide as the sound table. Strips 1 centimeter wide and of varying length are cut off and soaked in water. Once soft, they are braided onto the neck with the help of a specially forged iron tool. Usually 22 rings are put on the neck: one for each string, plus one extra at the bottom.

⁴ According to Knight, the gourd is of the "kettle gourd" variety - *Lagenaria siceraria*.

⁵ *Pterocarpus erinaceus*, according to Knight.

The iron ring is specially made by a blacksmith; it is about 1 centimeter thick and has a ring at one end to hold the anchor strings. The other end is drilled through the bottom on the neck and tied to it with plastic rope.

The 21 strings are made from between 3 to 4 different gauges of fishing line, from between 30 and 200-lb test. The lowest bass string is sometimes made of a braided smaller-gauged string in order to obtain the correct low pitch. According to Sidiki Diabate, one of the earliest kora players in Mali, it was a korafola called Burama Soumano who was among the first to use nylon fishing line on his kora in the early 1950s. Formerly, strings were made from finely twisted strands of antelope hide (Charry 118).

Construction

When making a kora, the construction of the sound table is by far the most important and delicate, taking two people to do it properly. The cowhide is brought from the water and laid flat on a mat on the ground. The position of the gourd is determined, and the skin is cut with 10-15 centimeters of extra room around it. The skin is then laced around the edges with plastic rope and placed back in water for 30 seconds. Next, the skin and gourd are laid out again and the edges of the skin are pulled up around the flat part of the gourd and fastened with more plastic rope. While one person pulls up on the skin, the second flattens the skin against the sides of the gourd with the traverse support or another rounded piece of wood to promote adhesion and to rid the skin of wrinkles. After this is finished, the placement of the traverse support is determined either by eye or by measurements with the makers' hands, holes are cut, and it is forced through with a hammer. The same process is done for the two hand supports (see Figure 1 in *Appendix*). The sound table is

then placed in the sun for 1-4 days in order to fully dry, promote adhesion of skin and gourd, and to bleach the skin.

While the sound table is drying, the neck is fitted with the rings. Wet strips of cowhide are braided onto the neck and are left to dry, taking the form of it and becoming tight. When everything is completely dry, tacks are hammered onto the round part of the sound table to fully fasten the skin and to prevent it from moving in the future. Excess skin is cut off with a knife, and a small hole is chiseled in the gourd after determining its precise location and shape. Next, the top and bottom holes for the neck are measured and chiseled out with a knife, and the neck with rings is inserted into the sound table.

The metal ring is inserted into the bottom of the neck and tied with thin plastic rope, and 21 strings of mid-gauge fishing line or plastic rope are tied to the metal ring in order to hold the playing strings behind the bridge. The playing strings are then measured out the length of the neck and are fastened at one end to the anchor strings and at the other to a specific ring on the neck. The playing strings are tightened using a specially made iron tool, and the bridge and bridge support are put in place. The kora is now ready to be tuned, readjusting the rings and strings to specific tensions and lengths. After 5-10 days, the kora will be able to hold its tuning, but continuous readjustments will need to be made. The average length of time for the entire process is 3 weeks.

Systems of Tuning

With only twenty-one notes, the kora has much less versatility than that of a guitar or piano.

Because it is a bridge-harp, once a note is tuned, it cannot be changed during performance. This section describes traditional systems of tuning and looks at an experimental system of notation by kora ethnomusicologist Roderic Knight.

Traditional Tunings

Today, the tuning of a kora is more or less standardized, with the tonic note (1st and 8th strings on both sides) resting at F, and the other notes resting at tempered degrees as in the Western musical system⁶. The tonic note can vary according to the preference of the player and his or her vocal range, and the tonic has been shown to range from a 4th degree below to a 5th degree above F⁷. In addition, players like to be able to play together or with fixed-pitch instruments, favoring a more standardized system of tuning. Studies by Roderic Knight (1971) and Anthony King (1972) show that a significant number of koras are pitched between E flat and G (Knight). Thus, F makes a suitable default standard for the tonic note. The precedent for notating the kora on F was established prior to 1970 by a book of etudes produced for the École des Arts in Dakar by Mamadou Kouyaté (Knight).

According to Charry, there are 4 main tunings in general use: *Tomoraba* (also known as *Silaba*), *Tomora Mesengo*, *Hardino* (see Figure 2 in *Appendix*) and *Sauta*. Local musical dialects are reflected in which tunings are preferred, and some kora players recognize only three tunings and still others play in only two. In 1972, ethnomusicologist Anthony King published a work entitled “The Construction and Tuning of the Kora” in which he analyzed the tunings of 20 kora players in order to find average tunings. With the four tunings named above, many of the strings (except the tonic and its 5th degree) were tuned slightly above or below the western tempered scale equivalent. For example, in *Sauta*, the tuning used most in Mali, the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 6th, and 7th degrees were all 10

⁶ The ‘tonic’ note of a piece is the note that occurs the most, or the note that the melody is based around.

⁷ A ‘degree’ is the number of steps away from a given note in a given scale.

cents flat or sharp⁸. To a western ear, this would translate as being out of tune, but this is the way tunings have developed over generations of players.

Notation

As the kora has been an instrument that has been passed down orally, there was never a notation system until the arrival of outsiders, and notably, ethnomusicologists. Notating kora music with the standard western classical system presented many problems because it failed to adequately capture the playing technique of the kora. Despite many other ethnomusicologists, using western notation for kora music (Charry is an example), Knight invented his own system (see Figure 3 in *Appendix*), utilizing the idea of TUBS⁹ and merging it with a visual representation of the bridge of a kora. This new system shows the interaction and coordination of each finger and thumb for a more complete understanding of kora playing technique.

Elements of Kora Playing

This section describes how a kora is played using traditional techniques and how the music achieves its fullest potential. With only four fingers, an immense polyrhythmic and harmonic fabric of sound is created and then recreated.

⁸ In music, vibrations of pitches are measured in “hertz” and expressed in small increments as “cents.” A difference of 5 cents is barely detectable to the untrained ear.

⁹ TUBS is an acronym for the Time Unit Box System, developed at University of California at Los Angeles in 1962, for didactic purposes in West African drumming. It uses boxes of equal length, put in horizontal sequence. Within a piece of music, each box represents one instance of the fastest pulse. If no sound occurs in a time unit, its box remains empty. The box receives symbols for pitch, loudness, tone quality, and carrying power (Stone 127).

The Intertwining Relationship of *Kumbengo* and *Birimitingo*

There are two main ways to play pieces on the kora, and these are described as *kumbengo* and *birimitingo*. *Kumbengo* is best described as a basic pattern or an accompaniment pattern. *Kumbengo* is the foundation of a piece, and one cycle of *kumbengo* is repeated over and over, usually with variation. Sometimes a *kumbengo* is developed from the vocal melody of the piece (Knight). “Accompaniment-type playing involves an ensemble relationship between the fingers or hands of one or more musicians in which African aesthetics of polyrhythm find full expression” (Charry 167). *Kumbengo* patterns are often disrupted by another way of playing, involving fast descending melodic flourishes which are often highly ornamented. This type of playing is called *birimitingo*, a word possibly of onomatopoeic origins. When pieces are performed, the player alternates between the two styles at his or her will, depending on the demands of the particular situation.

Each kora player has their own set of *kumbengow* (plural for *kumbengo*) as well as *birimitingow* that they prefer to use, and this is often an identifier of who the player’s teacher was or from what region they come from. Sometimes it’s not easy to delineate between what could be called *kumbengo* and what could be called *birimitingo*, and the techniques can bleed into one another. Sometimes a player can take an extended solo section as a *birimitingo*, exploiting its dual function and blurring the lines of the two techniques.

Occasionally the *kumbengo* is punctuated by a knock on the hand support by the right index finger in a technique called *bulukondingo podi*. Another type of knock, *konkong* (Charry calls it “*konkondiro*”), is more common; it is a timekeeping pattern tapped on the round side of the kora by an apprentice or a male singer (Knight).

Techniques and Roles of the Playing Fingers

Generally, the left thumb plays strings 1-8 on the left side, and the left index finger plays strings 6-11. On the right side, the thumb plays strings 1-5, and the right index finger plays strings 2-10. There is quite a bit of crossover between thumbs and fingers on the same side, especially with the technique of *birimitingo*. In addition, there are two predominant ways to pluck a string: open and muted. To create a *kumbengo*, the thumbs play a bass line, while the fingers play a treble melody; the instrument is intrinsically polyphonic. The pitches ascend in 3rds on both sides of the bridge, facilitating the playing of two- to four-note chords, rapid scalar passages (fingers or thumbs in alternation) and octave doubling (Knight and Charry 158).

Names of Strings

Sidiki Diabate gives names to most of the strings. The English translations are that of Eric Charry (Charry 158). The number corresponds to the string from lowest to highest on the left and right sides.

- | | |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 11. Mara lelengo (Left Lelengo) | 10. Lewulewu |
| 8. <i>Kumbengo</i> | 9. Lewulewu |
| 5. Peeru | 8. Lewulewu |
| 4. Dibong Sabanjango (Third Bird) | |
| 3. Dibong Fulanjango (Second Bird) | 3. Jinkandirango (answerer) |
| 2. Dibong Folo (First Bird) | 2. Noomanko (Assistant follower) |
| 1. Timbamba (Big Timbango) | 1. Buluba, Timbango (Right) |

Role of the *Jeli* in Malian Society

“The [*jeli*] is like an air-conditioner.
They warm up the house when it’s cold
and they cool down the house when it’s hot”
—Sidiki Diabate.¹⁰

¹⁰ Translated from the French : “Le griot est un climatiseur : il réchauffe les maisons quand il fait froid et il refroidit les maisons quand il fait chaud” (Keita 33).

The term *jeli* refers to a person of a special caste who fulfills a particular kind of musical and verbal role in society. Ethnomusicologist Eric Charry definitively writes: “[*jeliw*] are musicians, singers, public speakers, oral historians, praisers, go-betweens, advisers, chroniclers, and shapers of the past and present” (Charry 91). They are born into the profession, and it is guarded with endogamous practices (marrying only inside the family) (Kouyate). A *jeli*’s skills are learned over a lifetime and passed down from generation to generation. *Jeliw* usually specialize in one of three fields: song, speech, and instrument playing, but often are strong in at least two (Charry 91). In Mali, male *jeliw* traditionally play one of three melodic instruments: the kora, the *bala* (wooden xylophone), or the *koni* (spiked lute); *jelimusow*¹¹ are only allowed to sing.

The tradition hails from the days of the 12th century Mali Empire and Sunjata Keita. It was the *jeliw* who were the counselors between the king, aristocratic families, and the public. Just as there are many explanations on the origins of the kora, there are also many theories on the origin of the *jeli*¹². Written documentation of the existence of *jeliw* in West Africa goes back to 14th century Arabic texts, continues in Portuguese texts a century later, and shows up in English and French texts starting in the 17th century (Charry 91).

Classic Kora Repertoire

This section discusses six of the most central pieces in the *jeli*’s repertoire, from the old greats to the new greats.

¹¹ Bambara (plural) for a female *jeli* who specializes in singing.

¹² I choose not to expound on these stories in the interest of this paper’s focus.

Most Important Traditional Pieces

Kelefa¹³: “O, Kelefa, Saane of Badora / Joola Kelefa / Kelefa Saane, the great Kelefa / O how your sword fell into Barya!”¹⁴ This piece (or family of pieces) is usually the first one taught to kora students and is dedicated to the great warrior Kaabuke Kelefa Saane (Keita 28). It is played in *Silaba* tuning and is often referred to as the ABCs of the kora (Charry 119). Sidiki Diabate had this to say about the *Kelefa* family of pieces:

“That is why any *jali* [*jeli*] who is playing *Kuruntu Kelefa*, if it pleases them, with Allah’s aid, they can create something from it and offer it to their patron. *Kuruntu Kelefa* is a great ocean. Everyone drinks from it... It [*Kelefa*] is like the alphabet. Much has come from it” (Charry 155).

Alla La Ke (God Has Done It¹⁵): “Man asks and God will arrange it / thus, God wanted it / you can’t change your laws / you simple mortal.”¹⁶ This song is attributed to Jali Madi Wulin (Wuleng). He would have composed it when in the company of Kelefa Saane, his protector (Keita 28). It tells the story of two brothers who lived in the Tumana district in eastern Gambia. When the chieftancy was being passed down, one brother stole it from the other, the rightful heir, and banished him from the seat of the district. Eventually the rightful heir returned and had the chieftancy given to him, and instead of exacting revenge on his brother, he forgave him (Charry 154).

¹³ One of the earliest published recordings of the kora, possibly the first, was made by Laura Boulton during the early 1930s. One of the two kora pieces, *Kelefaba* [“great Kelefa”] is still played the same way today (Charry 118).

¹⁴ Translated from the French: “O Kelefa, Saane de Badora / Joola Kelefa / Kelefa Saane, le grand Kelefa / Ton épée s’est abattue sur Barya!”

¹⁵ Translation of this title is that of Eric Charry

¹⁶ Translated from the French: “L’homme propose et Dieu dispose / Dieu l’a voulu ainsi / Tu ne peux changer sa loi / Toi simple mortel.”

Tiedo: Composed under the reign of the last king of Kaabu, Janke Wali (1850 – 1857), probably by his griot Jali Wali Jabate. It is a song very characteristic of Kaabu, inspired by the laments of the Peul who were rich pastors and farmers subsisting constantly on the displeasure and humiliation of the Kaabunké soldiers who were called “Ceddo” (pagan or animist soldiers). *Tiedo* was used to praise the power and the warriors of king Janke Wali (Keita 29). The piece is used when recounting the history of the Kaabu empire (Charry 156).

Masani Cisse (Man Saane Sisse): “Not far from the road to Bintan / Man Saane Sisse / The bride cries / The husband is lying down / Not far from the road to Bintan / Man Saane is dead”¹⁷ (Keita 29). This is a sad piece about a rich merchant (Cisse / Sisse) who wanted to marry a girl who was already engaged to a very poor man. Cisse offered the girl’s family great bridewealth, and she was forced to marry him. But on the first night of the honeymoon, Cisse died before the marriage could be consummated (Charry 155).

Modern Pieces of Importance

Kaira (“peace” in Arabic): According to Sidiki Diabate, this piece was composed originally on the accordion by Gese Kemo Diabate in Guinea for a Fulbe interpreter named Kaira Barry in Kissidougou. It is thought to have disseminated on the guitar, and by 1949 it was widespread. Sidiki and his son Toumani have done a lot to develop the piece, and it is often used to develop new pieces (Charry 156).

Toubaka (Tubaka): Probably originating in Upper Guinea on the guitar or accordion, this piece is quite different than most other pieces in the *jeli*’s repertoire because it is a love song. It also

¹⁷ Translated from the French: “Non loin de le route de Bintan / Man Saane Sissé / La mariée pleure / Le mari est couché / Non loin de la route de Bintan / Man Saane s’est couché.”

has an extended melodic scheme of four sections that unfold over a relatively long stretch of time (Charry 157).

Development of the Kora and Kora Music

This section is concerned with how the kora has been developed during the last half-century, what innovations are presently being made, and where the kora and its music are going in the next half-century.

Between the birth of the kora and the early 1970's the instrument experienced few changes. The introduction of nylon fishing line had been the biggest evolutionary step that the kora had taken. But beginning in the early 1970's, another evolutionary (and controversial) step was taken. The kora has always been notorious for the instability of its tuning, due to the expansion and contraction of the sound table, the neck, and the rings holding the strings. Perhaps this is why there are only a small number of tunings, often the tuning is not always exact, and some kora players don't mind playing a little out of tune, depending on the circumstances. In this section, I discuss the development of the instrument with tuning keys (wood and machine¹⁸), and then the development of the music with modern technology.

Debut of the Kora with Tuning Keys¹⁹

One of the first (if not *the* first) person(s) to produce a kora with a new tuning system (wooden peg tuners) was Dominique Catta, a French national who helped found and maintain the Keur Moussa monastery just a few kilometers from Dakar, Senegal in 1963. He was schooled in

¹⁸ 'Machine' tuner refers to a common type of metal gear tuner found on the guitar.

¹⁹ Information taken from Keita.

Gregorian music, and after taking a huge interest in the kora, began using it at the monastery. He composed his own music and used the kora to accompany Psalms and hymns.

Between 1969 and 1971, Catta experimented with multiple new methods of tuning, and finally arrived with the KM1, the first model of a new kind of kora. It replaced the round neck and leather rings with a square neck with holes and wooden peg tuners, as that of a cello. He brought the KM1 to Paris in 1972 to show local luthiers, who were all astounded. Since then, many African kora luthiers have begun to construct koras with various methods of tuning pegs (wooden and machine) and many korafola have begun to play them. This has not come without opposition however.

Many kora players and kora traditionalists disagree with the use of tuners. It was seen as a degradation of traditional kora music, and the tonality and timbre of the kora was said to be lost. “Sidiki [Diabate] didn’t like koras with tuners. They give another feeling” says Djenebou Kouyate, his granddaughter who studies the kora at INA²⁰ (Kouyate). Sidiki was also a part of the old guard of kora players that played with L’Ensemble Instrumental National du Mali in Bamako, along with Batru Sekou Kouyate and Nfa Diabate. One day they were giving auditions for a korafola position, and a korafola called Yunussa Sissoko showed up to the audition with a kora with wooden tuners and he was told by the old guard to go find a “real kora” (Keita 46).

Despite plenty of opposition, koras with tuners have become very popular, and many young kora students prefer them (Mounkoro, K. Diabate). At INA, kora students learn on both traditional and modern koras, and modern koras can be seen at traditional events in the hands of young players (see the following section *The Kora in Performance*). One student interviewed said that she preferred to use koras with tuners purely because they are so easy to tune, but she prefers the sound of the traditional models (K. Diabate).

²⁰ I translated “they give another feeling” from the French: “Elles donnent un autre sens.”

Development of Kora Music

Along with the evolution of the instrument itself, the music coming from the kora has also evolved. In a musical world dominated by electronic accessories such as sound effects, electronic tuners, and amplification techniques, the kora is beginning to find a home in all the wires and plugs and buttons.

Mamadou Diabate (son of Sidiki and younger brother of Toumani) is known in Bamako as being one of the most innovative working *korafolaw*. His music uses many technologically-produced sounds, such as synthesized beats, tones, and sound effects. He plays kora through any number of effect pedals, and uses a sampling pedal to compose music (M. Diabate, Sissoko)²¹.

Mamadou started learning kora at the age of two with an 8-stringed kora. As a boy born into a renowned family of *jeliw*, his future had already been determined for him: he was to carry on the kora-playing *jeli* tradition. He spent his childhood and adolescence studying kora with several teachers, learning traditional repertoire and what it means to be a *jeli*. As a young adult, he found himself obligated to try pioneering new paths for kora music. “I do what the milieu demands of me. Sometimes I play without western accessories and sometimes I have to use them” he says. For example, he has toured the world three times, and each time he did so without electronics because that’s not what his audiences wanted (or what was demanded of him). But when he’s in Mali, he uses electronics because that’s what everyone wants. “People even think that if you don’t use them, you don’t know how to really play” he says (M. Diabate).

In a sense, Mamadou is evolving with the changing world of music, but he is making sure to protect the traditions that got him where he is today. “One should truly guard the kora’s

²¹ A sampling pedal, among other things, records musical input and then plays it back. The user can then play over top of it or modify the recorded input.

authenticity; to know what the kora can say and how it can say it” he says (M. Diabate). Kora students Delphine, Djenebou and Kamisa also agree that it is important to know the traditional foundations of kora music if one is to move forward (Mounkoro, Kouyate, K. Diabate). Djenebou continues: “the kora evolves with these experiences and with an evolving world; music must evolve as well. The success of the kora is a result of this: being able to play all types of music, all notes” (Kouyate).

The Kora in Performance²²

While conducting my research, I observed the kora being performed in numerous different situations, traditional and modern, by several different kora players, and by both students and professionals. This section will give a glimpse of what kind of role the kora is serving in Bamako today. Four situations are covered, starting with the more traditional settings and leading to the more modern situations.

The first event is an example of the kora being played in a traditional setting with traditional accompaniment. On April 25th 2010, I attended a baptism of Dialy Mady Sissoko’s son Fallay, and during the evening music sessions, the kora was the featured instrument. It was played by Sidikiba Diabate, grandson of Sidiki Diabate, who used an amplified modern kora with machine tuners for the event. The kora played a supporting role underneath the *jeliw* and *jelimusow* that were singing, and the repertoire was traditional.

The second event is an example of what kind of kora music is being taught to young kora students at INA (L’Institute National des Arts) in Bamako. On April 22nd 2010 I attended an INA-sponsored exposition of music students at the INA secondary campus in central Bamako. During the

²² I realize that my role of observer was relatively skewed; as a foreigner I often found myself in typically touristic musical situations, despite my efforts to the contrary. I was unable to observe the kora in a wide variety of traditional situations, but I will report on what I saw nonetheless.

8-song set, several kora players took turns, all male. The songs played were modern renditions and arrangements of traditional tunes as well as modern tunes. The kora played was traditional ring-tuned, and was surrounded by a full modern band including: a drum set, two guitars, electric bass, vocalists and keyboard. There was also a *bala* and a *jeli ngoni*, the two other traditional instruments taught at INA other than the kora (and the two other melodic instruments traditionally played by *jeliw*). The point was to entertain, and show the work the students had done throughout the year. What it showed me was that kora students are still learning to tune and play traditional koras, and the importance of having knowledge of traditional music as well modern music is being instilled.

The third event is an example of traditional kora music in a modern setting, a new role for kora players. On April 30th 2010 I went to observe Dialy Mady Sissoko play solo kora at San Toro Restaurant in Korofina quartier in Bamako. He was hired to play from 20:00 until 0:00, entertaining the dining guests (who were mostly inattentive foreigners) in the air-conditioned dining room. He played a traditional kora, unamplified, and was up on a stage with a handful of Malian artifacts. This is a good example of a new role for kora players in Bamako: to provide “authentic, traditional” local background music for wealthy patrons. It is also interesting to contrast this situation to the traditional situation of *jeliw* providing roughly the same services (along with praise singing) for their wealthy patron. I must add that on this particular night, there was not much business at San Toro because it was not during the tourist season, and so what I observed was a highly-respected and well-known kora player (and maker) playing to a 90% empty dining room.

The last observation is an example of how far the kora has come in the realm of modern, cutting-edge Malian music. On April 30th 2010, I went to a club called The Diplomat in Bamako to see Toumani Diabate’s Orchestra. They play every Friday evening if they’re not on tour, and Toumani usually shows up around 1:00 to join the band and dazzle the crowd of wealthy Malians

and foreigners alike. The kora being played was modern with machine tuners and was electrified. An electronic tuner was used to tune it to the other western melodic instruments, and an electronic pedal was used to control feedback and enhance the sound coming out of the speakers. The kora was played by Mamadou Diabate, Toumani's younger brother until Toumani himself arrived. I describe the music of Toumani's orchestra as cutting-edge because they have developed a new sound all their own, and they have toured the world with it.

Women and the Kora

This section is an analysis and exposé of gender roles and the experience of women regarding kora music in Mali.

Throughout the history of music in Mali, it has traditionally been forbidden for women to learn the art of the kora. They have always been around it and interacted with it in a number of ways, including praise singing, dancing, listening at events, and playing percussion alongside it; but were never allowed to learn the art of playing. Malian culture has strictly defined gender roles, and this is readily seen in the current music culture in Bamako: most performing musicians, DJs, traditional event (marriage, baptism) musicians, and instructors at institutions such as INA are men. This is not to say that women don't have a power presence: they certainly do. A glance at Malian national television will most likely yield a *jelimuso* singing at a traditional event or in a music video. The most powerful positions that women musicians are allowed to fill are that of *jelimusow*.

According to Mamadou Diabate²³, the reason that women were traditionally not allowed to play the kora was because the kora was considered to be a woman; it was owned by a woman. He

²³ There are many musicians with the name "Mamadou Diabate." This particular Mamadou is the younger brother of Toumani Diabate.

explained that in order for a man to play the kora, it was necessary to undergo a marriage with it, as if you were marrying a woman (and women weren't allowed to marry other women). He commented that in modern times, people can do just about what they want without the same consequences as in the past. "In earlier times, there were things that one couldn't do." (M. Diabate).

Throughout West Africa, there have been a number of successful female kora players, such as Guineans Mama Soumanou, Ma Sanou Diawara, Mama Diabate, the Senegalese Sarah Carrère, the Malian Madina N'Diaye, and the English ethnomusicologist, producer, and African music critic Lucy Duran (Keita 57-8).

Female Kora Students at INA

In order to find out the experience of women who are learning to play the kora, I interviewed three female kora students from INA²⁴. Two of the students came from kora-playing *jeli* families (Kamisa Diabate and Djenebou Kouyate), and the other student (Delphine Mounkoro) came from a non-*jeli* family.

I found that all three kora students had a relatively easy time learning kora. Their families supported them and none of them ran into problems because of their gender. Both Delphine and Kamisa stated that their main problem was due to physics: their hands were too small to easily reach some of the higher-pitched strings. They both also wished to become professional musicians, teaching kora and performing in Mali and abroad. Djenebou, however, stated that she would rather become an international merchant and play music as a hobby "because it's hard to survive as a

²⁴ The students were 2nd (Djenebou Kouyate), 3rd (Kamisa Diabate) and 4th (Delphine Mounkoro) years at INA, Bamako, Mali.

musician; people think musicians are crazy to earn their living as such. It's much more respectable to earn one's living by other means and do music on the side" (Kouyate).

In Kamisa's family, there were kora players but they were all men. The women's job was to sing so she learned that art instead, although she wanted to play kora. It was at INA that she first started learning the kora, and she chose to start studying it at age 19 because she feels like it's the path of her family: it's her destiny. She stated that it's difficult to be a woman and play the kora, but all it takes is courage. More and more women are learning and it's becoming more accepted; she would like to see the day where women can play kora as good as men. At INA, she plays in a women's ensemble of 10 musicians, and she serves as the only kora player (K. Diabate).

The Experience of Madina N'Diaye

Madina N'Diaye is the only female professional kora player and singer in Mali and has recorded two CDs. She lives in Bamako and plays often in Europe. Her experience was quite different than that of the 3 students from INA (although she was also a student at INA as well). She was born to an intellectual family in Tombouctou, and during her youth she came to Bamako each month for her eye exams (she is blind). Around 1993-94, she saw the kora in a dream. This happened two more times, and after the third time, she secretly consulted with her older sister who supported her. She bought her first kora with the help of her cousin Modibo Keita, and soon after that she decided to go to see Toumani Diabate. Toumani had a kora made for her²⁵, and Madina took it to her sister's house that had just died. After that, she took it to her family's house and that's how they found out she was playing kora. Her parents offered benedictions and there were no problems.

²⁵ Toumani had asked Dialy Mady to make him a kora, and when he got it he gave it to Madina as a gift.

Toumani taught her a little but was very busy so she sought lessons with several other kora players including Mamadou Diabate, Mady Kouyate and Toumani's brother Ladji. All were willing to teach her. Later she came to know Dialy Mady Sissoko, and it was through his encouragement that she decided to go to INA for instruction²⁶. At INA, there was an instructor called Souleyman Dembele who created a group of female kora players, and he invited Madina to join (and she did although "it was not an easy thing"). She thinks that women are afraid to play the kora.

Aside from the Diabate family and the teachers at INA, there were other kora players who supported Madina. Barby Djonbana²⁷ taught her how to tune a traditional kora, and Youssouf Diabate showed her how to maintain a kora (if a string broke, etc). Above all, she says, it was Dialy Mady Sissoko who was the biggest force in her kora playing career.

There were also people that didn't like that she was learning kora. She thinks they were jealous; but she never stopped studying the kora. For example, early in her career, she was asked to play at the French Cultural Center in Bamako, and people tried to come up with reasons why she couldn't be a kora player: they said that not only was she a woman, she was also not Malian, that she was Wolof or Guinean, or a Malian "from the outside."

Madina explained that she was in favor of women's rights, but she was not militant about it. She would prefer to see more women playing kora, but it's not something to fight about; it's something to *do*.

Conclusions

It's almost unjust to offer a paper like this without a means to actually hear the sound of the kora. Along with giving the reader a good enough reason to seek out a live kora-listening experience,

²⁶ Madina remembered what Dialy Mady told her: "if you don't go to INA, you will never know the kora."

²⁷ Barby Djonbana once took down all the rings on Madina's kora and said: "il faut l'accorder" (tune it).

what I hoped to have achieved with this paper is to give the reader as complete as possible a glimpse into the world of the kora. What it is, why it is, where it has been and where it may be going in the future.

The last few sections of this paper are devoted to development and gender roles, and I can see these realms as the most important, as they will be continuously evolving, a little each day. More and more women are learning to play the kora proficiently and professionally, and all evidence shows that this will only make the kora and the culture behind it stronger. As the kora becomes more and more popular internationally, the rest of the world will slowly realize that Mali, as one of the poorest countries in the world, has something priceless and has had it for a long time.

Appendix



Figure 1: Dialy Mady Sissoko's apprentices constructing the sound table for a traditional kora (photo by the author).

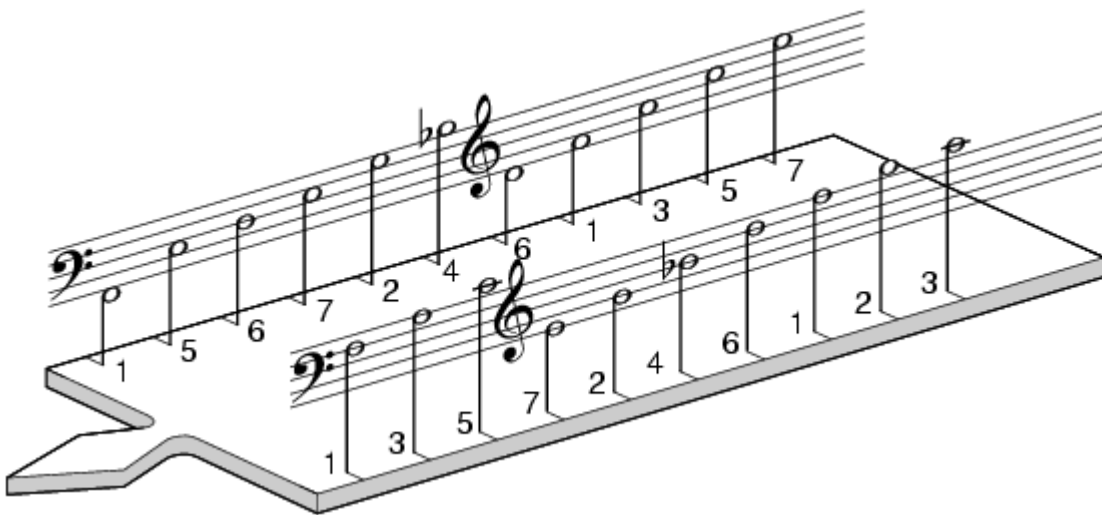


Figure 2: a representation of a kora bridge and western notation for the tuning *Hardino* (Knight).

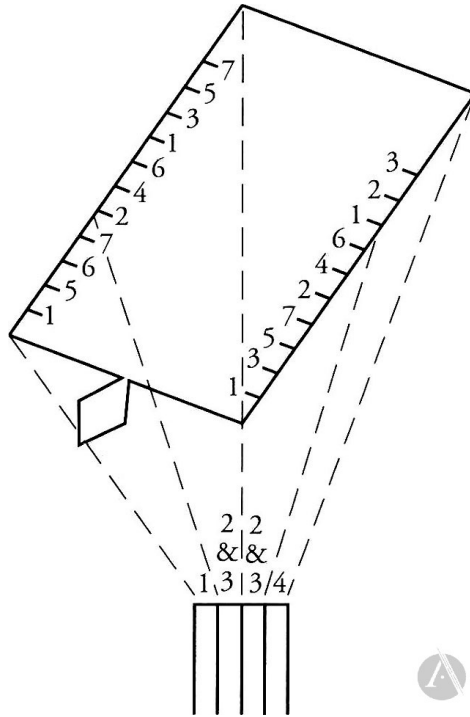


Figure 3: A blank representation of Knight's notation system for kora (Stone 159).



Figure 4: the kora room at INA with traditional and modern koras (photo by the author).

Glossary

Bala – wooden xylophone played by *jeliw*.

Birimitingo – technique of playing kora, involving fast descending melodic flourishes which are often highly ornamented.

Bulukondingo Podi: a timekeeping pattern tapped on the round side of the kora by an apprentice or a male singer.

INA – L’Institut National des Arts in Bamako.

Jeli(w) / Jelimuso(w) – bambara word for griot.

Jinn - Arabic for “genie.”

Kaabu (Kabu, Gabu) Empire – Ancient empire that formed after the Mali Empire; located in present day Guinea-Bissau and Senegambia where the kora is said to have originated.

Kéno – type of wood used to construct a kora’s neck and other wooded components.

Koni / Jeli Ngoni – a spiked lute with 3-5 strings; one of the 3 melodic *jeli* instruments.

Konkong: a knock on the hand support of a kora by the right index finger.

Korafola – a kora player.

Kumbengo – technique of playing kora, characterized by accompaniment-type repeating patterns.

Soron – a Mande harp that is believed to be a predecessor to the kora.

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