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West African Harps

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THERE EXISTS IN WEST AFRICA a rich, diverse, old, and still vital harp culture. Yet other than the *kora* (a twenty-one-stringed Mandinka harp), West African harps are poorly documented. Their unique construction, wherein the neck is spiked all the way through the resonator, is not found outside West Africa. Earlier scholars called them *harp lutes*, but recently some scholars have argued that, rather than being a hybrid cross of a harp and a lute, they are actually full-fledged members of the larger world harp family. In this article historical documentation, a geographic and ethnic distribution map, morphological features, and brief descriptions of West African harps will be presented as a foundation for the comparative study of harps in West Africa and beyond.¹

Overview

The distributions of musical instruments in West Africa are often bounded within one of three major regions: the coastal forest lands, the inland savannah lands, and the sahel (the transitional latitudinal corridor between the savannah and the Sahara desert). Each of these three regions presents natural barriers to human migration, due in large part to rainfall patterns that have profoundly affected the flora, fauna, kinds of diseases, and lifestyles of the indigenous peoples. West African harps are primarily found in the southern savannah and northern forest regions. In general those in the savannah have calabash resonators and

1. For the purpose of this article, I refer to West Africa as all of the area shown in fig. 1, as well as Niger and Nigeria. The lower Niger river in Nigeria may turn out to be the significant eastern border for West African harps, but further research on the terrain is needed for confirmation. West African bows, lyres, or pluriarcs will not be discussed here. Mande peoples have been the primary focus of my own research, so the reader may detect a certain bias toward them. The Mande trace their origins to the thirteenth-century Mande, or Mali, empire that was founded by Sunjata. (*Mali* is a deformation of *Mande*.) In Guinea and Mali the Mande are known as Maninka, or Malinke, and in The Gambia and southern Senegal as Mandinka (the suffixes *ka* or *nka* denote *person from*). I use the term Mande here to cover both the Mandinka and Maninka (the core peoples of the western Mande branch), as well as other closely related peoples, such as the Bambara and Xasonke of Mali.

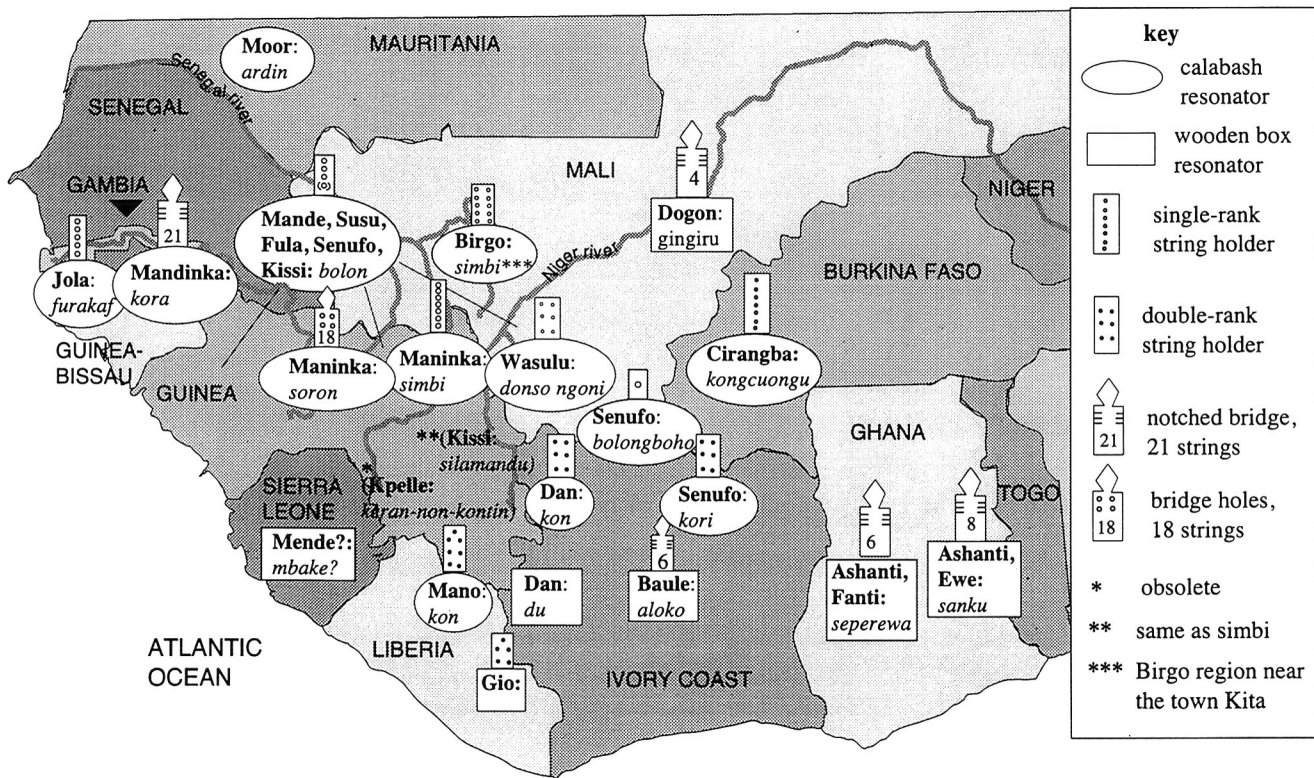


FIGURE 1. Distribution of harps in West Africa. Map by the author.

those in the forest regions have wooden-box resonators. The *ardin* of the Moors is an anomaly. It may be the only harp played in the West African sahel, and most of its features are foreign to the whole region. These factors link it to harps of ancient Egypt and East Africa.

Two major features distinguish West African harps from other harps around the world: the spiking of the neck all the way through the resonator; and string holders or bridges that stand more or less upright on the sound table. A third feature, the use of tuning rings (and possibly nooses), is also unique to West African harps, although some South and Southeast Asian harps have a closely related tuning mechanism.² The absence of the first two morphological features on harps outside West Africa could be taken as evidence of an ancient indigenous harp culture in the region—there is no documented evidence of diffusion from a foreign source. There is a provocative relationship to be explored between West Africa and South Asia (perhaps by way of Mesopotamia) regarding the tuning mechanisms on harps, but serious speculation awaits detailed comparative studies.³

Harps in West Africa may be grouped into families according to various kinds of criteria, such as, the material used for the resonator (calabash or wood), the kinds of people for whom the harps are traditionally played (warriors, hunters, or noble patrons), their tuning systems, and playing techniques. However, only some of these groupings may be relevant to the ways that West African musicians themselves talk about their instruments. Instruments in West Africa are often viewed there according to the status of their players or the performance context. For instance, the *bolon* (a three- or four-stringed calabash harp) is associated with warriors, the *donso ngon* and *simbi* (six- or seven-stringed calabash harps) are associated with hunters, and the *kora* (a

2. For information and further references on harps in South Asia, see Roderic Knight, "The Harp in India Today," *Ethnomusicology* 29, no. 1 (1985): 9–28; for harps in Southeast Asia, see Linda Simonson, "A Burmese Arched Harp (Saung gauk) and Its Pervasive Buddhist Symbolism," this JOURNAL 13 (1987): 39–64.

3. Speculation about instrument diffusion, particularly the kind that suggests foreign influence on sub-Saharan Africa, has in the past led to unsubstantiated claims that have been picked up uncritically by some observers. For a critique of A. M. Jones's claims of foreign origins of xylophones in Africa, see Roger Blench, "Evidence for the Indonesian Origins of Certain Elements of African Culture: A Review, with Special Reference to the Arguments of A. M. Jones," *African Music* 6, no. 2 (1982): 81–93. For a discussion of the problems in Henry Farmer's arguments regarding the Egyptian origins of West African lutes, see Eric Charry, "Musical Thought, History, and Practice among the Mande of West Africa" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1992), 123–41.

twenty-one-stringed calabash harp) is played exclusively by *jalis* (Mande hereditary professional musicians, also known as griots) and is associated with royalty and nobility.⁴ Since these instruments are used in different spheres of music, it is rare to find, for example, a *kora* player and a hunter's harp player in the same family, let alone one person who plays both of them, even though the harps are related types. If there are *kora* players who are interested in hunters' harps, for the most part they have lived or spent much time abroad, outside of the confines of traditional African society. But all players recognize the disjunction between the two instruments. They do not confuse the two kinds of professions, except perhaps in performing or recording for a non-African audience. Therefore, even though the playing techniques and construction of the *kora* and the various hunters' harps are similar, they belong to two different musical and social realms.⁵

Historical Documentation

Appendix I lists much of the early documentation of harps in West Africa. Although the documentation does not go back more than four centuries, oral traditions and comparative organology support speculation that harps have been used much longer than that. Lack of earlier documentation may be due to very few, if any, foreigners coming into contact with the savannah harp lands in West Africa before the fourteenth century. West Africans successfully shielded their gold mines from foreigners; therefore, it is not surprising for indigenous culture to be equally unknown to the outside world. It is plausible that foreign travelers who did reach these areas did not see harps because they were associated with secret hunter or warrior societies. It is unclear why ninth-

4. The English roman *s* will be used to indicate a plural because of the number of different languages and dialects involved. In Gambian Mandinka the plural marker is *lu* (e.g., *kora* becomes *koralu*, but *jali* becomes *jalolu* because the definite-article marker *o* replaces the word-final short vowel *i*). The plural marker is also *lu* in Guinean Maninka. In Bambara, the predominant Mande dialect in Mali, the plural marker is *w* (e.g., *simbiw*, *ngoniw*, *donso ngoniw*). The Moorish *ardin* is *irdiwen* in the plural. The term *griot* has its origin in seventeenth-century accounts written by French travelers to West Africa. It was a French corruption of one or another of the local West African names for hereditary professional musicians and has since gained currency in francophone countries.

5. It is not unusual to find one person who plays, for example, both the guitar and *balafon* (Mande xylophone), or for a *kora* player to have a father who played the *kontingo* (Mandinka lute), because these are all *jali* instruments.

century and later Arabic accounts of the ancient Ghana empire (located in present-day southern Mauritania) do not mention musical instruments other than drums. Hunters' harps may not have been played so far north (they are not played there nowadays). *Koras*, which are associated with royalty and would be expected to have a high profile, are recognized as a recent invention. They may not be much older than their first documentation at the end of the eighteenth century.

What may be the earliest mention of a harp in West Africa, by André Álvares d'Almada in the late sixteenth century, was probably a reference to an instrument of the Mandinka. Almada specifically referred to the Wolof, Serer, and Mandinka, and since neither the Wolof nor Serer have a harp tradition, one can only speculate that he was referring to the Mandinka, who do have one. Not long after, in 1623, Richard Jobson provided what may be the earliest detailed description of a harp in West Africa.⁶ Calabash harps around the Gambia river would most likely have been seen by Europeans earlier than the wooden-box-resonator harps farther down the coast in Ghana. The earliest known drawings of a harp date from the end of the seventeenth century.⁷ The earliest documentation of a harp by a local name, *korro*—a reference to the Mandinka *kora*—appeared at the end of eighteenth century in the writings of Mungo Park. In the nineteenth century several more drawings appeared, and a clear photograph of a *kora* from the early twentieth century shows the instrument as it exists today.⁸

Distribution of West African Harps

The figures and appendixes of this article provide a foundation for the comparative study of West African harps. The map in figure 1 shows the distribution of harps in West Africa along with the name of the ethnic group to whom they are indigenous, the name of the instrument,

6. It is unclear whether Jobson was referring to a Maninka, Jola, or Wasulu hunter's harp.

7. Perhaps the earliest drawing is from a previously unpublished manuscript from 1679, reproduced in John Barbot, *Barbot on Guinea: The Writings of Jean Barbot on West Africa 1678–1712*, edited by P. E. H. Hair, Adam Jones, and Robin Law (London: Hakluyt Society, 1992), 2: 568, no. 13, facing p. 570. Also see Everhard Kikius, "Drawings of American and African Guitars, and of a Mutilated Bust, 1701," BL Addit. 5234, artt. 72, 73.

8. The photograph is in Gerhard Kubik, *Musikgeschichte in Bildern*, vol. 1, no. 11: *Westafrika* (Leipzig: VEB Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1989), 185.

		1. neck			2. string vibration transmission vehicle		3. tuning mechanism		4. resonator		6. tuning	7. strings	8. playing technique (thumbs, index)	
		cork	spoon	spike	5. upright		flat	rings nooses	pegs	calabash	wood			
					bridge	holder								
sahel	ardin		X				X		X			hepta		
	kora			X	notch			hide		X		hepta	nylon	2th, 2in
	oron			X	holes			hide		X		hepta	nylon	2th, 2in
savannah	simbi			X		1 rank		hide		X		hepta	metal	2th, 2in
	furakaf			X		1 rank		rope		X		h. penta	palm	2th, 1in
	donso ng.			X		2 ranks		hide		X		ah. penta		2th, 1in
	kon.			X		2 ranks				X				
	kori			X		2 ranks				X				
forest	bolon			X		1 rank				X				2th
	in			X										
	ranku			X										
	aloko			X										
	deperawa			X		notch								
	gingiru			X		notch							rough	
	shiplike	X												

FIGURE 2. Distinctive features of West African harps. Blanks or question marks in any column indicate insufficient or contradictory sources, respectively.

and various morphological features. Appendix 2 contains short-title bibliographic, discographic, and videocassette references for the instruments shown in figure 1.⁹ Figure 2 is a diagrammatic representation of distinctive features of West African harps. Figure 3 is a photograph of a *kora* with some of its morphological features labeled.

Most of the harps are found in a wider area than the space occupied on the map. The formulation of distribution maps of musical instruments in West Africa can be quite hazardous due in part to much population movement, uncritical reliance on published sources which may be inaccurate, and the inherent compromises involved in plotting fluid diachronic and synchronic processes onto a two-dimensional surface. Therefore, the actual placement of the instruments on this map should be taken only as a general geographic guide. If one makes allowances for a wider distribution of many of the instruments, one can see that harps with calabash resonators are found in the savannah belt extending from the Atlantic Ocean to the western part of Burkina Faso. All of these harps are clearly related to one another (although they may be tuned differently), and some may be seen as more technologically advanced versions. Harps with wooden resonators are found farther south, in the forest regions.

It is difficult to do more than speculate on the significance of the similarity of harps used by different West African societies spread out on the wide savannah belt.¹⁰ There does seem to be a basic unity of musical culture that may have its ancient roots in the *bolon*. The instrument looks uncannily like a calabash drum slipped onto a warrior, or hunter's, bow. The *bolon* is played by several ethnic groups and is associated with the incitement of warriors. Hunters' harps (*donso ngonni*, *kori*, *kon*, *simbi*) look as though they were the result of a slight straightening out of the bow of the *bolon*, with the addition of a few more strings. The *soron* and *kora* (the

9. I suspect that there may be more harps in West Africa than are indicated in fig. 1, but I have not found any more documentation to that effect. Perhaps future research in Africa will further fill in the map. I have tried to include a cross-section of references in appendix 2, but it is by no means exhaustive, particularly regarding recordings. The discographies of Alan Merriam and Nourrit and Pruitt should be consulted, as well as the Africa and related countries sections of recent catalogues of recordings. Much African music is being reissued in compact disc format, and new recordings of traditional instruments are also being made.

10. Early comparative harp studies of much more geographically limited areas may be found in charts and maps in Judith Ann Lamm, "Musical Instruments of Sierra Leone," (M. Mus. thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1968), 26–40; and Hugo Zemp, *Musique Dan: La Musique dans la pensée et la vie sociale d'une société africaine* (Paris: Mouton, 1971), 281–89.

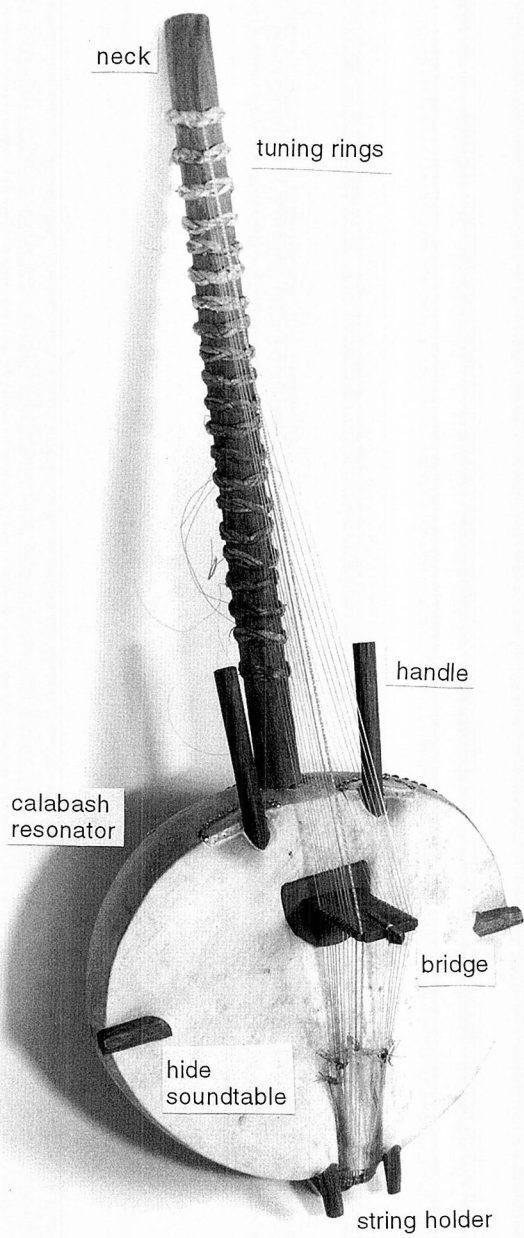


FIGURE 3. Morphological features of a *kora* made by Aliou Suso in Bakau, The Gambia, 1989. Photo by Wendy Hood.

two harps used by the professional musicians known as *jalis*, or *griots*), look as though their necks have been completely straightened out, with many more strings added. The increased tension caused by the additional strings seems to have been the reason why the upright string holder was abandoned in favor of a true bridge, over which the strings pass. They could then be anchored onto an iron ring attached to the end of a stronger, straight neck protruding from the lower end of the calabash. The two functions of the upright string holder—to hold the strings and to transmit the string vibrations to the sound table—are thus separated. The bridge transmits the string vibrations and the iron ring holds the strings. The *bolon*, *simbi*, and *kora* (the three harps used by the Maninka/Mandinka peoples), then, may represent three major stages of West African harp development.

The terms *arched harp* and *bow harp* are inappropriate for some of the harps in figure 1 because of their straight necks. On the other hand, the term *bridge harp* would apply only to some of the harps, because others have a string holder rather than a true bridge. Arched (or bow) harps and bridge harps are mutually exclusive among harps with calabash resonators. The *kora* and the *sonon* are the only calabash harps with bridges and also the only ones which have a straight neck. It appears that all wooden-box-resonator harps have arched or bowed necks and that many of them have bridges.¹¹ Therefore, I prefer the term *spike harp* to describe the most general feature that West African harps share.¹² Calabash harps, wooden-box-resonator harps, bridge harps, and arched harps could then refer to subgroups of West African harps.

Morphology

The essential research that bears directly on the morphology of West African harps is briefly summarized here. In the early part of the

11. Some of the drawings or photographs that show string holders rather than bridges on wooden-box-resonator harps may have been altered museum specimens. A string holder is clearly shown, though, in the photograph and description in George Schwab, *Tribes of the Liberian Hinterland*, Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, vol. 31 (Cambridge: Peabody Museum, 1947), 153 and fig. 80a. The photograph in Smend, "Negermusik und Musikinstrumente in Togo," *Globus* 93, no. 5 (1908): 74, is curious because it appears that the resonator of the Ewe *hasangu* may be a small calabash and that it may have a string holder.

12. The term *spike harp* is taken from Sue Carole DeVale, "African Harps: Construction, Decoration, and Sound," in Marie-Thérèse Brinard, ed., *Sounding Forms: African Musical Instruments* (New York: American Federation of Arts, 1989), 56.

twentieth century, Erich M. von Hornbostel and Curt Sachs classified the *kora* as a cross between a harp and a lute:

Lutes	The plane of the strings runs parallel with the sound table.
Harps	The plane of the strings lies at right angles to the sound table; a line joining the lower ends of the strings would point towards the neck.
Harp lutes	The plane of the strings lies at right angles to the sound table; a line joining the lower ends of the strings would be perpendicular to the neck. Notched bridge. ¹³

Hornbostel and Sachs were evidently unfamiliar with West African harps which had upright string holders instead of notched bridges. Klaus Wachsmann classified African harps into three morphological types according to how the neck fits with the resonator: *spoon-in-a-cup*, *cork-in-a-bottle*, and *shelf-projecting-from-resonator*. He ignored the West African spike harp varieties, apparently considering them to be harp lutes and not full harps.¹⁴ Roderic Knight pointed out the basic problems with the term *harp lute* and proposed *bridge harp* and *quasi-bridge harp*, terms which effectively cover the two West African varieties.¹⁵ Sue Carole DeVale synthesized the findings of both Wachsmann and Knight by noting that Wachsmann's three types of African harps have longitudinal string holders and that West African harps have vertical string holders or bridges, after Knight's observations. Furthermore, DeVale used the term *spike harp*, in effect a fourth type of African harp, and for the first time brought West African harps into the fold of Wachsmann's African harp classification system, which is based on how the neck and resonator fit.¹⁶

13. Erich M. von Hornbostel and Curt Sachs, "Classification of Musical Instruments," trans. Anthony Baines and Klaus P. Wachsmann, *Galpin Society Journal* 14 (1961): 22–23.

14. Klaus Wachsmann, "Human Migration and African Harps," *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* 16 (1964): 84–88.

15. Roderic Knight, "Mandinka Jaliya: Professional Music of The Gambia," 2 vols., (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1973), 19–26.

16. See DeVale, "African Harps: Construction," 54–58, for drawings of the various types of African harps. Hornbostel and Sachs, "Classification," 9, 22–23, laid the groundwork for the term *spike harp* with their category *spike lute*; they reasoned that "when kettledrum and musical bow combine in a spike lute—it must have a place of its own within the system." West African spike harps, still called harp-lutes, were not considered full-fledged harps in the recent *New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments*. They were given their own entry, "Harp-lute," while Wachsmann's three types of African harps were the

DeVale's contrast of vertical and longitudinal string holders conveys an essential difference between West African and other African harps, but I prefer the terms *upright* and *flat* (after a suggestion from Knight). Some string holders, for example, on the *bolon*, are not completely vertical but still stand more or less upright. Longitudinal string holders often run the length of the resonator, but on the Moorish *ardin*, which has a round calabash resonator, the term *flat* may be more appropriate than *longitudinal*. It is the single criterion of whether the string holder lies flat on (or under) the sound table or sits upright on the sound table that is the distinguishing feature.¹⁷

Four basic structural components shared by all four types of African harps have been identified by DeVale in an important article that contains up-to-date comparative research on African harps:¹⁸ (1) a neck fitted with tuning pegs or nooses;¹⁹ (2) a resonator; (3) a sound table, usually animal skin stretched over the open side of the resonator; and (4) either a string holder or a bridge. In addition, DeVale classified African harps into two groups according to whether the string holder is placed longitudinally and lies parallel to the sound table or is stood upright on the sound table. In the latter case a bridge over which the strings pass may take the place of a string holder. She noticed that harps in the first group (longitudinal string holders) are related to harps outside Africa, are direct relatives of ancient harps, have tuning pegs, and are precisely the kinds of harps that Wachsmann classified into three types according to how the neck is attached to the resonator. Harps in the second group (vertical string holders or bridges) are unique to West Africa, have

only ones discussed under the entry "Harp: 6. African Harps." See Knight, "Harp-lute," and Ann Griffiths, Joan Rimmer, and Sue Carole DeVale, "Harp," both in *New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments*, vol. 2. DeVale later disagreed with that separation and corrected it in "African Harps: Construction," 60. Other formulations have been made by Judith Ann Lamm, who distinguished between arched harps with vertical string holders, and harp lutes with bridges ("Musical Instruments," 26, 34), and by Ulrich Wegner in *Afrikanische Saiteninstrumente* (Berlin: Museum für Völkerkunde, 1984), 190–91). Wegner used bridge harp (*Stegharfe*) to distinguish West African harps from other African harps, which he called bow harps (*Bogenharfe*).

17. When referring to DeVale's work in the following discussion, I will use her terminology.

18. DeVale, "African Harps: Construction," 54. The drawings and photographs in figures 3 through 16 should be used as a reference for the following discussion.

19. I would add *rings* here to cover those West African harps where the term *noose* would not be appropriate.

tuning nooses, and are precisely the kinds of harps that Wachsmann excluded from his discussion of African harps because he considered them to be harp lutes.²⁰

Harps in DeVale's second group (vertical string holders or bridges) are also distinguished from those in her first group (longitudinal parallel string holders) in the way in which the neck is attached to the resonator. Harps with vertical string holders or bridges are spike harps, wherein the necks are spiked through the resonators and protrude out from the bottom end. There is one exception: the shiplike harps described by Wachsmann, wherein the necks are of the cork-in-a-bottle type.²¹ Conversely, spike harps have vertical (upright) string holders or bridges, apparently without exception. Since spike harps and upright string holders or bridges on harps are found only in West Africa, one can conclude that these two features are indigenous to the region.

The generalization that West African harps are spike harps has two exceptions: the *ardin* of the Moors (a spoon-in-a-cup neck type) and the shiplike harps (cork-in-a-bottle neck type). Rather than invalidating generalizations pertaining to a remarkably unified West African harp culture, these two exceptions might be considered hybrids with some features clearly West African and others that are found farther east. Having summarized the findings of Wachsmann, Knight, and DeVale, one can posit distinctive features of West African harps by closely examining all spike harp varieties and the two exceptions.

Distinctive Features

At least two features distinguish West African harps from those in the rest of the world:

1. The way in which the neck is attached to the resonator (spiked)
2. The vehicle for transmitting the string vibrations to the sound table (upright string holders and bridges)

As noted above, upright string holders serve a double function. They transmit the string vibrations to the sound table, and they hold and anchor the strings. Upright bridges split this double function because

20. DeVale, "African Harps: Construction," 55–60; and Wachsmann, "Human Migration."

21. Klaus Wachsmann, "A 'Shiplike' String Instrument from West Africa," *Ethnos* 38, nos. 1–4 (1973): 43–56.

they are dedicated to transmitting the string vibrations to the sound table, thus necessitating another piece of equipment to hold and anchor the strings (in this case an iron ring set into the bottom end of the neck). There are two kinds of oppositions in the second feature: (1) upright versus flat vehicles for transmitting string vibrations and (2) string holders versus bridges. West African harps use upright vehicles, some of which also function as string holders. Such upright string holders probably belong to an older technology than do bridges. In the case of calabash harps this difference is clear because the *kora* and the *soron*, the only two calabash bridge harps, are readily recognized in Africa as more recent inventions than the hunters' harps and the *bolon*. There is not enough information available to make the same conclusion regarding wooden-box-resonator harps.

A third feature can also serve to distinguish some (if not most) West African harps from other harps:

3. The tuning mechanism (rings made from braided hide)

There are several different kinds of related tuning mechanisms that must be mentioned here. The braided-hide rings used on the *kora* and *soron* (the two most modern harps) are unique to West Africa and are not found elsewhere on harps.²² Tuning mechanisms on some other West African harps use a related technology. Rather than being wrapped around a separate ring (as on the *kora* and *soron*), the playing string may be tied to rope or leather extensions, which are knotted around the neck, or the playing string itself can even be tied around the neck. In these cases the term *noose* (a single mechanism, even though it may be made of two parts) may be more appropriate than *ring* (a separate and distinct mechanism from the playing string). The exact distribution of tuning rings versus nooses on West African harps is not clear from the available documentation.²³

22. For detailed photographs of how *kora* tuning rings are braided, see Susan Gunn Pevar, "The Construction of a Kora," *African Arts* 11, no. 4 (1978): 70. Hide rings might also be used on East African lyres, but they appear to be braided differently from those on the West African *kora* and *soron*. See the photographs of East African lyres in Gerhard Kubik, *Musikgeschichte in Bildern*, vol. 1, no. 10: *Ostafrika* (Leipzig: VEB Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1982), 104–9.

23. Although the braided-hide tuning rings used on the *kora* and *soron* are clearly indigenous to West Africa, the tuning mechanisms on some of the other West African harps may bear a physical relationship to some South and Southeast Asian harps, which have the playing strings tied onto rope extensions wrapped around the neck. See Knight,

A fourth feature distinguishes harps indigenous to the West African savannah from all other harps:

4. The kind of resonator (calabash resonators)

Four more features can be added to distinguish West African harps from one another:²⁴

5. The kind of upright string holder or bridge
 - a. string holder with single rank of holes (Maninka *simbi* and Jola *furakaf*)
 - b. string holder with double rank of holes (Wasulu *donso ngoni*, Dan *kon*, Senufo *kori*, some of the wooden-box-resonator harps)
 - c. bridge with holes (Maninka *soron*, some of the wooden-box-resonator harps)
 - d. bridge with notches (Mandinka *kora*, most of the wooden-box-resonator harps, shiplike harps)
6. The tuning system
 - a. heptatonic (Mande *simbi*, *soron*, and *kora*)²⁵
 - b. anhemitonic pentatonic (Wasulu *donso ngoni*)
 - c. hemitonic pentatonic (Jola *furakaf*)
7. The strings
 - a. roots of a palm tree (Jola *furakaf*)
 - b. steel (Maninka *simbi*)
 - c. thin strips of finely twisted hide (old Mandinka *koras*)
 - d. nylon fishing line (recent Mandinka *koras*)
8. The playing technique
 - a. both hands hold handles, two thumbs and two index fingers pluck (Mande *simbi*, *soron*, and *kora*)
 - b. one hand holds handle, other hand on neck, two thumbs and one index finger pluck (Wasulu *donso ngoni*, Jola *furakaf*)
 - c. two thumbs percussively strike strings (*bolon*)

Figure 2 presents these eight features in a diagram.

"Harp in India," 19–22; and Simonson, "Burmese Arched Harp," 46–50. Detailed comparative descriptions of the tuning mechanisms on African harps, lyres, and lutes are needed before serious speculation on possible historical relationships can be made.

24. Since wooden-box-resonator harps have not had nearly the amount of documentation that calabash harps have had, the following points do not adequately take them into consideration.

25. Even though the *simbi* and *soron* are primarily Maninka instruments and the *kora* is primarily a Mandinka instrument, I use the more general term Mande (encompassing both sub-groups) to emphasize the heptatonic unity of core Mande traditions in contrast to their harp-playing neighbors. The same applies to the playing technique.

Calabash Harps of the West African Savannah

While calabash harps with bridges are played only by jalis (Mande hereditary professional musical/verbal artisans, also known as griots) and typically for the Mande nobility and royalty, calabash harps with string holders belong to the domain of warriors and hunters. The technological innovation of a bridge could be viewed as a kind of parallel to the social innovation of jalis in Mande society. It has been suggested that jalis have their origin as harp-playing musician/priests associated with savannah hunter societies. With the rise of the Mali empire, musician/priests followed their hunter patrons to the royal courts, and their position was transformed into that of royal court musician/oral historian.²⁶ Their hunters' harps were left behind in exchange for the *ngoni* (lute), *balafon* (xylophone), and later the *kora*. The need for more strings in order to perform the sophisticated music of the jali may have been the impetus behind the bridge.

Most, if not all, of the published sources refer to the *bolon* (called *bolongo* by the Mandinka) as associated with inciting warriors to battle (see references in appendix 2).²⁷ In this respect the *bolon* is distinguished from other calabash harps in that it is associated neither with hunters nor with jalis. It also has the fewest strings of any West African harp (three or four), its neck is the most curved (resembling a hunter's or warrior's bow), and the skin sound table is tied around the resonator in the manner of a calabash drum rather than tacked onto it, as on most other calabash harps. If one can propose an evolution of West African harps according to these features, the *bolon* would be the candidate for the oldest of the calabash harps. It provides a striking visual image of a calabash drum joined to a hunter's or warrior's bow. Its wide ethnic and geographic distribution could also be taken as an indication of its age. Calabash hunters' harps belong to single ethnic groups and single regions, but the *bolon* seems to be an all-savannah phenomenon. This type of harp is strong evidence for the indigenous origin of West African harp culture. The wedding of a bow and a (calabash) drum, with the string holder sitting upright on the drum to transmit string vibrations to the drum head, is not to be found outside West Africa.

26. See Charles Bird, "Heroic Songs of the Mande Hunters," in Richard Dorson, ed., *African Folklore* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), 290–92; and Charry, "Musical Thought," 69–74.

27. The names of some harps have several dialect variants; I have used the forms that are used by those to whom the instrument is indigenous.

The *simbi* (called *simbingo* by the Mandinka) is believed to be indigenous to the Maninka of Mali and Guinea and is an important source of Mande instrumental music (figs. 4, 5, and 6). It is linked with master hunters and their musicians. Oral traditions which go into the ancient history of the Mande refer to the ancestors of Sunjata, the founder of the Mande (Mali) empire, as hunters, and their names often have *simbon* (master hunter) attached to them.²⁸ The hunter ancestry of Sunjata supports the common belief that hunters' societies and their musicians still preserve a pre-Mali empire, pre-Islamic heritage. Two pieces, *Kulanjan* and *Janjon*, played by jalis on the *kora*, *balafon* (xylophone), or *ngoni* (lute), are widely recognized as among the oldest in the repertory and as originating on the *simbi*.

The *simbi* may be the only one of the hunters' harps that is heptatonic. It also may be the only hunters' harp with metal strings.²⁹ In the late eighteenth century Mungo Park noted that the *simbi* had seven strings; it still has seven today in Mali and Guinea. In the late nineteenth century Tellier noted that it had six strings in the region of Kita, Mali.³⁰ Knight has recorded and photographed in The Gambia two *simbingos* with six strings. This may indicate that there is a difference between the Maninka *simbi* and the Mandinka *simbingo*.³¹

The *simbi* is also distinguished from other hunters' harps in Mali. The string holder has a single rank of holes, and the two sticks that come up from the resonator do not curve into the neck as they do on the Wasulu *donso ngoni*.³² The two sticks, placed straight, act as handles, just as they do on the *kora*. The playing technique of the *simbi*, using the thumb and index fingers of both hands while holding the sticks with the rest of the fingers (or just one or two fingers), is similar to that of the *kora* even

28. For example, see Fa-Digi Sisoko, in John William Johnson, *The Epic of Son-Jara: A West African Tradition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 105–7.

29. I do not have any information as to how long metal strings have been used. The three *simbis* which I saw in Bala, Mali, and Niagasola, Guinea, had metal strings, as did a fourth one from Kita, Mali.

30. Gaston Tellier, *Autour de Kita* (Paris, 1898), 179.

31. I thank Roderic Knight for his personal recordings and photographs of these two instruments.

32. The handles and string holder on the instrument are shown in Gilbert Rouget, "Guinea," *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 7: 819–23, photo no. 4; reprinted in Lucy Durán, "Simbing," *New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments*, 3: 386. They indicate that the instrument is not a *simbing* or *simbingo*, but a *donso ngoni*. Depending on the context, harp players might use the names of their own harps to refer to similar harps of their neighbors or use the names of their neighbors' harps to refer to their own.

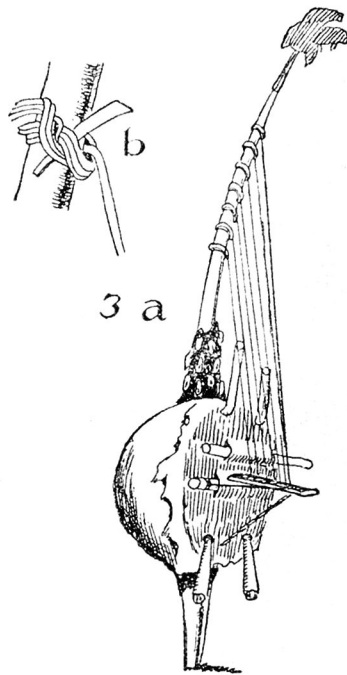


FIGURE 4. Drawing of a Maninka *simbi*. Leo Frobenius, *Spielsmannsgeschichten der Sahel*, facing p. 40. Reprinted with permission.

though the former has a single rank of strings. The similarity of the double ranks of strings on the *kora* and the *donso ngon*i does not extend to their respective playing techniques. The *simbi* player is called *sora*.³³

Among the Kissi in Guinea, André Schaeffner noted an instrument called *silamando* (or *silamandu*). This is probably a local term for either a Maninka *simbi* or a Mandinka *simbingo*, because the accompanying drawing looks like a six-stringed *simbi*.³⁴ *Silam* is the Mande term for

33. See Youssouf Cissé, "Notes sur les sociétés de chasseurs Malinké," *Journal de la Société des africanistes* 34, no. 2 (1964): 189, 209; and Dosseh Joseph Coulibaly, *Récits des chasseurs du Mali* (Paris: Conseil international de la langue française—EDICEF, 1985), 5–6. The most renowned *simbi* player in Mali is Bala Jimba Jakite, the source for Coulibaly's book.

34. André Schaeffner, *Les Kissi: Une Société noire et ses instruments de musique*, L'Homme: Cahiers d'ethnologie, de géographie et de linguistique, no. 2 (Paris: Hermann et Cie, 1951), 68–72.

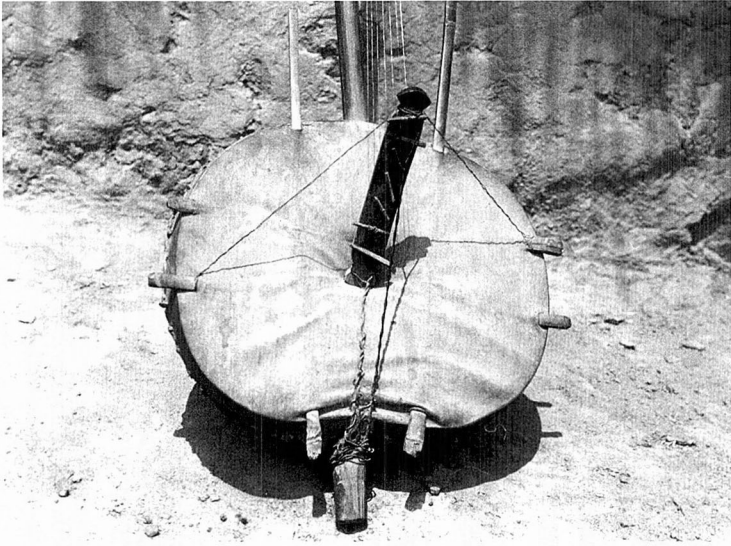


FIGURE 5. The upright string holder of a Maninka *simbi*. Photo by Eric Charry. Niagasola, Guinea, June 1990.

Moslem, and *do* or *du* is a wooden-box-resonator harp found in Liberia and Ivory Coast. Thus, *silamando* would signify a Moslem *do*, or harp, a designation probably used by non-Moslem forest peoples for the harp of Moslem savannah peoples, even though the hunters or their musicians may not be Moslem.

The Jola *furakaf* differs only slightly from the Maninka *simbi*, and it might be easy to confuse the two (figs. 7 and 8). I have not seen any literature indicating that the Jola name for their own harp is *furakaf*, but the two Jola harp players whom I interviewed and videotaped were emphatic about the harp's Jola name when I specifically questioned them about it.³⁵ The Jola have been absorbed into Mandinka culture to a great extent, and many of them are bilingual in the Jola and Mandinka languages. They may therefore call their harp *simbingo* primarily when speaking Mandinka. The instrument has a single rank of strings like the Maninka *simbi*, but the two instruments which I recorded were hemitonic

35. Ansumana Koli and Abasi Jiba, recorded interview, Brikama, The Gambia, May 1990. Perhaps future research will clarify the significance of the name *furakaf*.

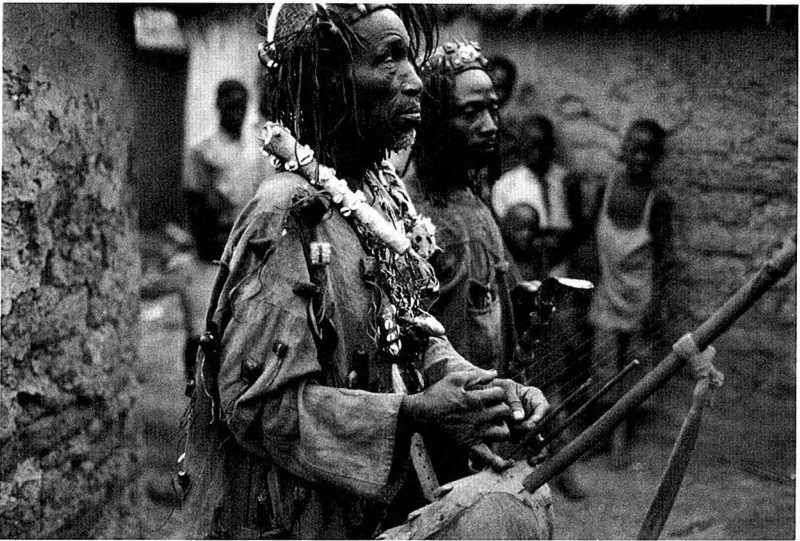
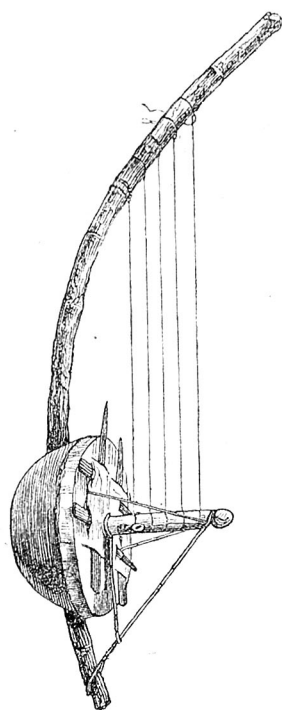


FIGURE 6. Bala Jimba Jakite playing the *simbi* (with apprentice Bakary Samake in the background). Photo by Eric Charry. Bala, Mali, July 1990.

pentatonic and had only five strings. Furthermore, the strings of these two instruments were made from the roots of a palm tree, not from metal, as were the strings on the Maninka *simbi* in Mali. The handles are similar to those of the *simbi*. A description of what is probably the earliest drawing of a Jola *furakaf* reported that it had five strings made of hemp, indicating that the Jola harp may not have changed much in the past one and one-half centuries.³⁶ The harp that Schaeffner called *silamando* also had strings made of raffia (palm), but it was drawn with six strings.

The playing techniques of the Jola *furakaf* and the Maninka *simbi* are different. One hand holds the handle and the thumb and index finger pluck, while the other hand holds the neck higher up and only the thumb plucks. This is the same technique used on the Wasulu *donso ngoni*. The norm for the Jola players whom I recorded was for one of them to play the harp and the other to beat a simple rhythm (often a straight 3 against 2) with two sticks on the calabash of the harp that is being played.

36. "African Curiosities," *Illustrated London News* 9, no. 239 (28 November 1846): 341.



AFRICAN GUITAR.

FIGURE 7. A mid-19th century Jola harp. Reprinted from "African Curiosities," 341.

Even though the Wasulu *donso ngon*i (also called *dunsu ngon*i) has two ranks of strings like a *kora*, it is normally played with one hand on the neck, so that only the thumb of that hand plucks the strings (fig. 9). The other hand holds the handle, which curves in and is attached to the neck, and both the thumb and index finger play. The *donso ngon*i is usually accompanied by someone playing a metal scraper. The name of the instrument presents a historical problem meriting further research that could have important ramifications for the understanding of Islamic influence on local West African culture. I have seen only two references to a local name for the Wasulu *donso ngon*i: *burunuba*.³⁷ I have no other

37. Gilbert Rouget in Ruth Stone and Frank Gillis, *African Music and Oral Data: A Catalog of Field Recordings 1902–1975* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 103;



FIGURE 8. Two Jola harp players: Ansumana Koli and Abasi Jiba. Photo by Eric Charry. Brikama, The Gambia, May 1990.

information on how widely this term is known. The problem is whether the *ngoni* (lute) played by *jalis* received its name from the *donso ngoni* (*donso* means hunter), or vice-versa. The name *ngoni* may derive from the word for finger (*nkoni*).³⁸ There is a hunter's harp called *kon* (clearly derived from the Mande word *nkoni*) among the Dan who live in western Ivory Coast, not too far south of the old Mande and Wasulu regions. It is similar to the *donso ngoni* of the Wasulu, and Hugo Zemp believes that the Dan got it from their Maninka neighbors to the north.³⁹

Commercial cassette recordings of the *donso ngoni* are readily available in Mali. It is the most popular of the hunters' harps, and Toumani Kone is perhaps the most renowned player. The instrument has been well

and Daniela Langer in *Guinée: Les Peuls du Wassolon: La Danse des chasseurs*, OCORA CD, 1987 disc, liner notes: 8–9.

38. Maurice Delafosse, *La Langue mandingue et ses dialectes*, vol. 2: *Dictionnaire mandingue-français* (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1955), 395.

39. Zemp, *Musique Dan*, 54–57, 130. The spelling *kon* is a simplification of Zemp's unwieldy phonetic transcription.

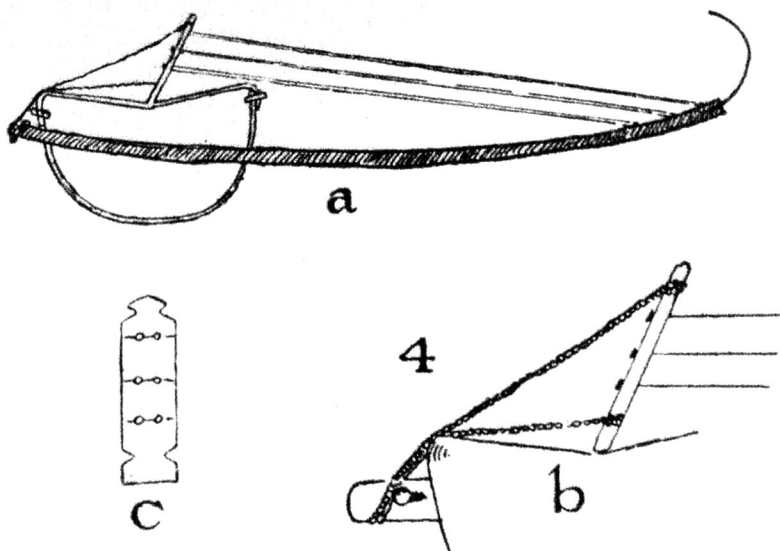


FIGURE 9. Drawing of a Wasulu *donso ngoni*. Leo Frobenius, *Spielsmannsgeschichten der Sahel*, facing p. 40. Reprinted with permission.

integrated into a unique kind of chamber ensemble in recordings by the vocalist Oumou Sangare, who comes from the Wasulu region.⁴⁰

The Birgo *simbi* (from the Birgo region southeast of Kita, Mali) is a curiosity that may not be very old or widespread (figs. 10 and 11).⁴¹ It has ten strings divided into two ranks of five each, is tuned pentatonically, and is played with the thumb and index fingers of both hands, which hold the two handles. The sound-table skin is laced around the calabash resonator, rather than tacked onto it. I have seen and recorded only one of these instruments.

The *ngoni*, an eight-stringed Bambara harp with a rectangular wooden resonator, has been documented by Germaine Dieterlen.⁴²

40. Toumani Kone, *Toumani Kone*, 4 vols., audiocassette, n.d., available in Mali; and Oumou Sangare, *Moussolou*, Syllart/World Circuit, WCD 021, 1990–91 disc.

41. I thank Yusuke Nakamura, who was living and studying in Kita when I visited there, for introducing me to Sekou Diallo, who made and played this instrument.

42. Germaine Dieterlen, *Essai sur la religion Bambara* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1951), 220–25; and in Viviana Paques, *Les Bambara* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1954), 106–7.

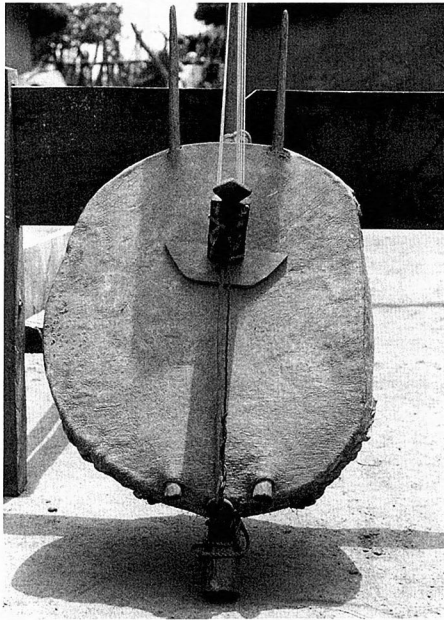


FIGURE 10. The upright string holder of a Birgo *simbi*. Photo by Eric Charry. Birgo, Mali, February 1990.

Capitaine Binger also described a harp, called *nkoni*, with a calabash resonator and five strings.⁴³ His drawing of it is curious because it shows a playing position exactly reversed from all other West African harps, except for the Moorish *ardin*. Like the *ardin*, it is played with the neck close to the player and the strings and resonator facing away from him. I have no further information on either the *ngoni* or *nkoni* harps.

Two other curious instruments must be noted here. I am uncertain whether they are harps or lutes. Indeed, they may straddle the boundaries between these two kinds of instruments and significantly add to our understanding of the relationship between harps and lutes in West Africa. Their calabash bodies, roughly the same size as those on hunters' harps, are unusually large for lutes. An instrument played by the Manjak people of the Senegambia region and Guinea-Bissau looks just like a calabash hunter's harp, but it has a straight neck and an upside-down square U-shaped bridge, on top of which two strings pass. It appears to

43. Capitaine Binger, *Du Niger au golfe de Guinée* (Paris, 1892), 1: 184.



FIGURE 11. Sekou Diallo playing the Birgo *simbi*. Photo by Eric Charry. Birgo, Mali, February 1990.

be played like a lute, with the fingers of one hand pressing down to shorten the string. It might be considered a variant of a West African calabash spike lute, but with a very large calabash. A three-stringed instrument called *kaburu*, played by the Gwari people in northern Nigeria, also has a large calabash, and it too appears to be played like a lute. Its bridge looks very much like that on the northern Nigerian Hausa lute called *molo*. It might be a large version of another Hausa lute called *babar garaya* or *komo*, which is played for hunters.⁴⁴

The Soron

The *soron* (also spelled *seron*) is a curious instrument so similar to the *kora* that it could easily be mistaken for one (figs. 12 and 13). It is

44. Several of the Manjak instruments were played in a delegation to a *kora* festival in Senegal (Djimo Kouyate, personal videotape of *Feskora: 2nd International Kora Festival*, Sedhiou, Senegal, 1991 vid). The Gwari instrument may be seen in "The All-Nigeria Festival of the Arts—1970," *Nigeria Magazine* 107–9 (December 1970–August 1971): 18; and Edith Enem, "Nigerian Dances," *Nigeria Magazine* 115–16 (1975): 97.

localized in northeastern Guinea and has not found the widespread popularity or documentation of the *kora*. There are several features that distinguish the *sonon* from the *kora*.⁴⁵

1. The bridge is pierced with holes through which the strings pass, not over notches as on the *kora*.
2. The metal buzzing-leaf is inserted into the end of the neck, not attached to the bridge as on the *kora*.
3. The bridge usually sits on a long, thin, wooden platform, rather than a square or round platform wrapped in cloth.⁴⁶
4. The way in which the hide sound table is wrapped around the resonator forms a kind of cross.

The fourth feature is provocative, because harps sketched in Laing and Mage show the same kind of cross attachment of the hide to the calabash as is used on the *sonon*.⁴⁷ That method of attachment is not in general use on *donso ngonis* or *simbis* today.

As an indication of the paucity of documentation of the instrument and the people who play it, Joyeux's description and photograph have yet to be surpassed.⁴⁸ Knight has transcribed and analyzed a piece that is one of the few available on commercial recordings.⁴⁹ The *sonon* player recorded by Gilbert Rouget and identified as Mamadi Dioubate (Diabate) was probably the seronfo Mamadi Dibaté, noted elsewhere by

45. Three sources are used: a *sonon* that I photographed in Kankan, Guinea, in 1990; Charles Joyeux, "Étude sur quelques manifestations musicales observées en Haute-Guinée française," *Revue d'ethnographie* 18 (1924): fig. 4, facing p. 180; and Gilbert Rouget, *Musique d'Afrique-Occidentale: Musique des Malinké, musique des Baoule*, Contrepoint MC-20045, 1952a disc.

46. The eighteen-stringed *gora* from the Musée de l'Homme (pictured in Knight, "Mandinka Jaliya," 1: 26) has a *sonon*-type bridge with holes and sits on a *kora*-type rectangular platform; it is an exception. A museum specimen, the instrument may have undergone tampering.

47. Major Alexander Gordon Laing, *Travels in the Timannee, Kooranko, and Soolima Countries in Western Africa* (London, 1825), facing p. 148; and Eugène Mage, *Voyage au Soudan occidental (1863–1866)* (Paris, 1868; repr. Paris: Éditions Karthala, 1980), cover.

48. Joyeux, "Étude," 180–82, 210–11.

49. Roderic Knight, "An Analytical Study of Music for the Kora, a West African Harp Lute," (M.A. thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 1968), 1: 145–57; 2: transcription no. 6. The piece, transcribed by Knight, is recorded on Gilbert Rouget, *Dahomey: Musique du roi, Guinée: Musique Malinké*, Contrepoint MC-20146, 1952b disc. Another *sonon* piece can be found on the disc Rouget, *Musique d'Afrique-Occidentale*.

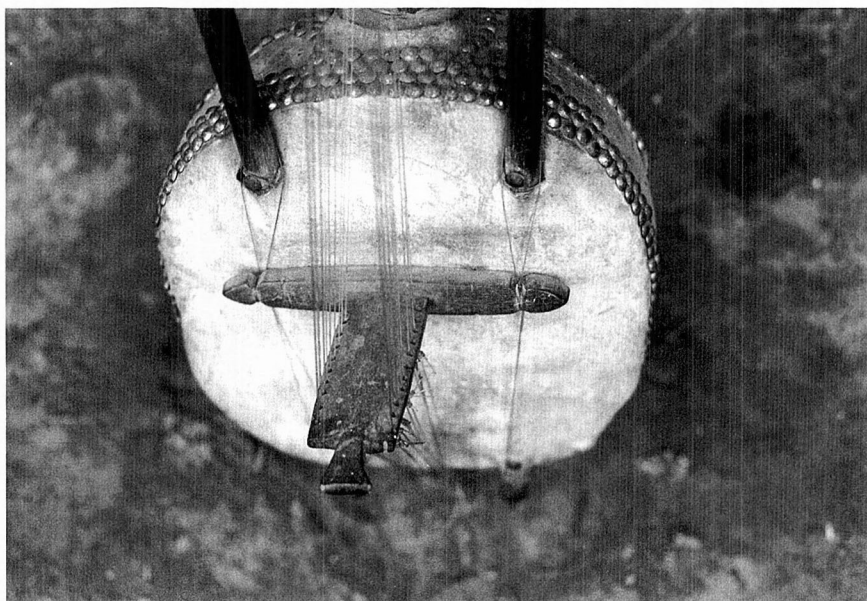


FIGURE 12. The bridge of a *soron*. Photo by Eric Charry. Kankan, Guinea, June 1990.

Rouget, and Mamadi Yamate, mentioned by André Schaeffner. He was one of the most renowned players of his generation.⁵⁰

The historical and geographical relationships among the *soron*, *kora*, and *simbi* are puzzling. Joyeux reported that the *soron* players whom he had seen in Upper Guinea (the regions of Kankan and Kouroussa) claimed that they had come from Futa Djallon, the mountain range in north central Guinea, a Fula stronghold, and that the *soron* was not well known in Upper Guinea.⁵¹ An origin in Futa Djallon would bring the early history of the *soron* geographically closer to Kansala, the seat of the Kabu empire (in present-day Guinea-Bissau), which is associated with

50. Rouget, *Dahomey*; and his "Chroniques musicales," *Présence africaine*, n.s., nos. 1–2 (April–July 1955): 153; and Schaeffner, *Les Kissi*, 72. He is probably the same person who is unidentified on Rouget's disc *Musique d'Afrique-Occidentale*. The instrument that I photographed was from his children's compound in Kankan, Guinea.

51. Joyeux, "Étude," 210–11.

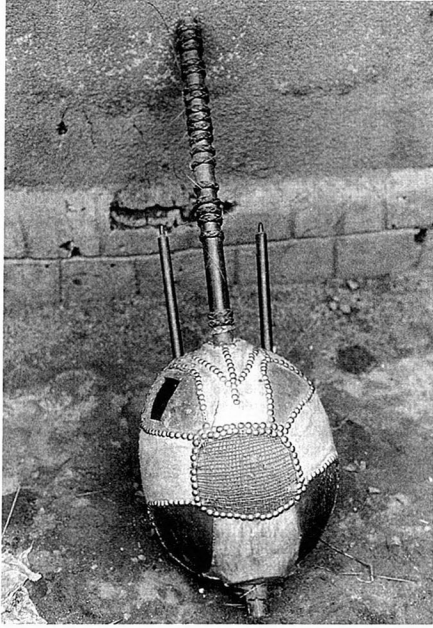


FIGURE 13. Rear view of a *soron*. Photo by Eric Charry. Kankan, Guinea, June 1990.

the origin of the *kora*. But it does not help to explain how one instrument might have influenced the other. Léopold Senghor's definition of the *soron* (*sorong*) points also to the mountainous Fula region in northern Guinea: a "word used by the Peuls [Fula] of Fouta Djalon to designate a kind of *kôra*."⁵²

The Kora

The *kora* is a twenty-one-stringed bridge harp played by Mandinka *jalis* and other Mande *jalis* who would have directly or indirectly picked it up from a Mandinka *jali* (fig. 3).⁵³ Although the *kora* is now found in

52. Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Poèmes* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1964 and 1973), 250.

53. Recordings of the *kora* are too numerous to list in appendix 2, but the interested reader should be able to find commercial recordings of *kora* players from The Gambia (Amadou Bansang Jobarteh, Malamini Jobarteh, Bai Konte, Dembo Konte, Foday Musa Suso, Jali Nyama Suso), Guinea (Jali Musa Jawara, Mory Kante), Mali (Sidiki Diabate,

most corners of Mande West Africa, it originated, according to oral traditions and common belief, with the Mandinka of the Kabu empire (in the area now covered by The Gambia, southern Senegal, and Guinea-Bissau). In particular, Kansala (in present day Guinea-Bissau), the seat of the former Kabu empire, is often cited as the place of origin for the *kora*. The *kora* is unique because, unlike hunters' harps, xylophones, and lutes, it is restricted exclusively to Mande jalis. Neither Mande who are not jalis nor non-Mande peoples play the *kora*.⁵⁴

What may be the earliest drawings of calabash harps, published in 1825, perhaps showed early versions of a *kora* or *sonon*. The instrument illustrated in Major William Gray's account of his travels up the Gambia river has elements of both modern-day *koras* and hunters' harps (fig. 14).⁵⁵ Both the slightly bowed neck and the metal buzzing-leaf inserted into the top of the neck are characteristic of modern hunters' harps (as noted above, the *sonon* also has the leaf inserted into the neck). The bridge with what seem to be notches, the pad on which it sits, and the many strings are all characteristic of the modern *kora*. The actual number of strings is open to interpretation: it could be anywhere from seventeen to more than twenty-five. In addition to the metal buzzing-leaf attached to the neck, there also appears to be one inserted into the top of the bridge, just as on *koras*.

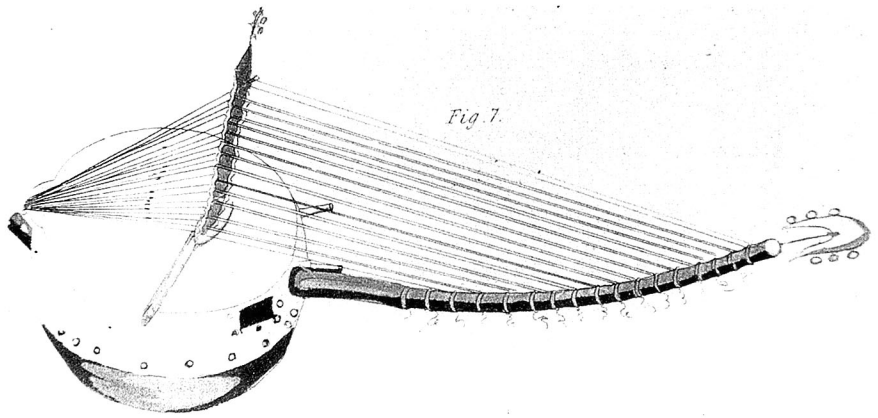
It is unclear whether the drawing from Major Alexander Laing, captioned "Jelleman of Soolimana," depicts a *kora*, *sonon*, or hunters' harp, because only the back of the instrument is shown (fig. 15).⁵⁶ It has the curved neck of a hunters' harp, but the handles, much longer than those

Toumani Diabate, Batrou Sekou Kouyate), and Senegal (Soundioulou Cissokho, Djimo Kouyate, Lamine Konte).

54. A Dogon wood sculpture and an Akan brass figure have been mislabeled as *kora* players in Brincard, ed., *Sounding Forms*, 181 and 189, mistakenly leaving the impression that *kora* is a generic term for harp in West Africa. Marguerite Klobe in "A Dogon Figure of a Koro Player," *African Arts* 10, no. 4 (1977): 32–35, 87, correctly identified the instrument depicted in the wood sculpture as a Dogon *koro* (also known as *gingiru*), a bridge harp with a wooden-trough resonator, not directly related to the *kora*. The brass-figured instrument is probably an Akan *sanku* or *seperewa*. *Kora* classes at the National Conservatory of Music in Dakar, Senegal, are open to anyone. They are a modern exception to the hereditary restrictions on playing the instrument, but this example has had little impact outside the school.

55. Major William Gray, *Travels in Western Africa in the Years 1818, 19, 20, and 21...*, (London, 1825), facing p. 301.

56. Laing, *Travels*, facing p. 148.



MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS.

FIGURE 14. A calabash harp from 1825. Reprinted from Major William Gray, *Travels in Western Africa in the Years 1818, 19, 20, and 21, from the River Gambia . . . to the River Niger*, facing p. 301.

on hunters' harps today, resemble the handles of a *soron*, as shown in an early photograph in Joyeux.⁵⁷ That *soron* photograph also shows a metal buzzing-leaf inserted into the end of the neck, and the harp in Laing's sketch might also be construed as having such a device at the end of the neck. Soolimana, the region to which Laing referred, is farther south than Kabu, the area in which the *kora* is believed to be indigenous, but Laing often noted Mandinka there.

The instrument pictured by Laing resembles the harp on the cover of Mage; the latter appears to be a *simbi* due to its curved neck, rattling device inserted into the top of the neck, and the number of strings (eight) in what appears to be a single rank. Mage noted that a griot named Diali Mahmady, who was a Bambara interpreter and had spent time in Sierra Leone, played a "grande guitare mandingue," but he may have been referring to the large Bambara *ngonis* (lutes), which are played in Segu.⁵⁸

57. Joyeux, "Étude," fig. 4, facing p. 180.

58. Mage, *Voyage*, cover and p. 148.



FIGURE 15. A calabash harp from 1825. Reprinted from Major Alexander Laing, *Travels in the Timannee, Kooranko, and Soolima Countries in Western Africa*, facing p. 148.

Late in the nineteenth century *koras* were acquired by museums outside Africa. A *kora* acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1889 has twenty-one strings made of finely twisted hide, and the one shown in the catalogue of the Royal Conservatory of Music in Brussels, inexplicably labeled *kasso*, also has twenty-one strings.⁵⁹ An early and extra-

59. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Musical Instrument Collection, no. 1889.498; and Victor-Charles Mahillon, *Catalogue descriptif et analytique du Musée Instrumental du Conservatoire Royal de Musique de Bruxelles*, 2d ed. (Ghent, 1893), 1: 420–21.

ordinarily clear photograph of a *kora*, possibly dating from the first decade of the twentieth century, shows the instrument with twenty-one strings and the metal buzzing-leaf attached to the bridge.⁶⁰ Henry Reeve shows a photograph of a *kora*, but it is difficult to see much detail on the instrument.⁶¹ Joyeux reported extensively on instruments in the Kankan and Kouroussa regions in northeastern Guinea but did not mention the *kora*, although he did photograph and report on the *soron*. The *kora* does not seem to have traveled to any significant degree outside its indigenous area (The Gambia, southern Senegal, Guinea-Bissau), before the twentieth century.

Oral traditions of the history of the *kora* agree on general points but diverge according to the family and geographic location of the jali doing the speaking.⁶² Ultimately, my inquiries into the origin of the *kora* led to jinns (genies). The attribution of the origin of musical instruments to jinns is quite common in Africa, and indeed my inquiries into all the instruments played by the Mande inevitably led to jinns.⁶³ The pieces acknowledged to be the oldest composed for the *kora* are not believed to be older than one or two centuries. Therefore, with the available evidence it is reasonable to date the origin of the *kora*, probably the most modern harp in West Africa, to the eighteenth century, although there may have been transitional instruments of the kind pictured in Gray and Laing.

Wooden-Box-Resonator Harps of the Forest Regions

Lack of published documentation on wooden-box-resonator harps has hampered West African harp research, but a few observations may still be made (fig. 16).⁶⁴ Such harps are played in the forest regions

60. Kubik, *Westafrika*, 184–85.

61. Henry Fenwick Reeve, *The Gambia* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1912; repr. New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), facing p. 198.

62. See Charry, "Musical Thought," 158–61, for a more detailed discussion of oral traditions of the *kora*.

63. Zemp, in *Musique Dan*, 93–168, has extensively documented stories relating to the origin of musical instruments among the Dan in Ivory Coast. I have found this subject to be elusive and beyond the interest, or perhaps expertise, of some of my closest teachers in West Africa. Perhaps they were simply unwilling to divulge secrets.

64. On Tomoaki Fujii, ed., *The JVC Video Anthology of World Music and Dance* (Tokyo: Victor Company of Japan, 1990), videocassette 19, no. 1, there is a short performance on what is probably a Baule *aloko*, though the name of the instrument is inexplicably left out.

farther south than the areas of the calabash-resonator harps. The Dogon are the only people so far north to play a wooden-resonator harp (theirs is shaped like a trough, not a box); this may indicate that they had it before migrating north many centuries ago from their geographic origins in southern Mali. The Dogon and the Baule of the Ivory Coast, as well as those groups farther east in Ghana and Togo (Ashanti, Ewe, and Fanti), may have gotten this harp from a single geographic region to which they all had ties in the distant past. Murdock groups Ashanti, Baule, and Fanti under the Akan language family, which is grouped along with Ewe under the broad heading of Twi.⁶⁵ Zemp indicated that the Baule split apart from the Ashanti in the eighteenth century and migrated westward toward their present homeland. This would support speculation about a single source for the instrument.⁶⁶

There are several areas which future research on these kinds of harps will need to address: their ethnic and geographic distribution; the distribution of bridges versus string holders; their tuning systems; their playing technique; their players; and what kinds of pieces are played on them. Examination of these topics may provide important links to West African, East African, and Central African harps.

West African Anomalies: Moorish Ardin and Shiplike Harps

The Moorish *ardin* and the shiplike harps present fascinating puzzles which give some indication of the potential contribution that comparative organology could make to world history. However, informed speculation about possible solutions to these puzzles awaits much needed multi-disciplinary collaboration.

The Moorish *ardin* may have only one feature that is West African: its calabash resonator. Almost everything else about it is foreign to the region. Its longitudinal string holder that sits flat on the sound table,

The two instruments shown have tuning pegs, rather than rings. This is one of the few examples that I have seen of a West African harp with tuning pegs. Other examples are the Moorish *ardin*, a photograph of a *seperewa*, some recent *koras* which were made at *Keur Moussa* (a French monastery outside of Dakar), and others made by Mamadou and Djimo Kouyate in Dakar. The use of tuning pegs on the *kora* dates back several decades; it is not very widespread and is most likely a recent imitation of European instrument technology.

65. George Peter Murdock, *Africa: Its Peoples and Their Culture History* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1959), 252–54.

66. Hugo Zemp, "Comment on devient musicien: Quatre exemples de l'Ouest-Africain," in Tolia Nikiprowetzki, ed., *La Musique dans la vie* (Paris: OCORA, 1967), 1: 81.

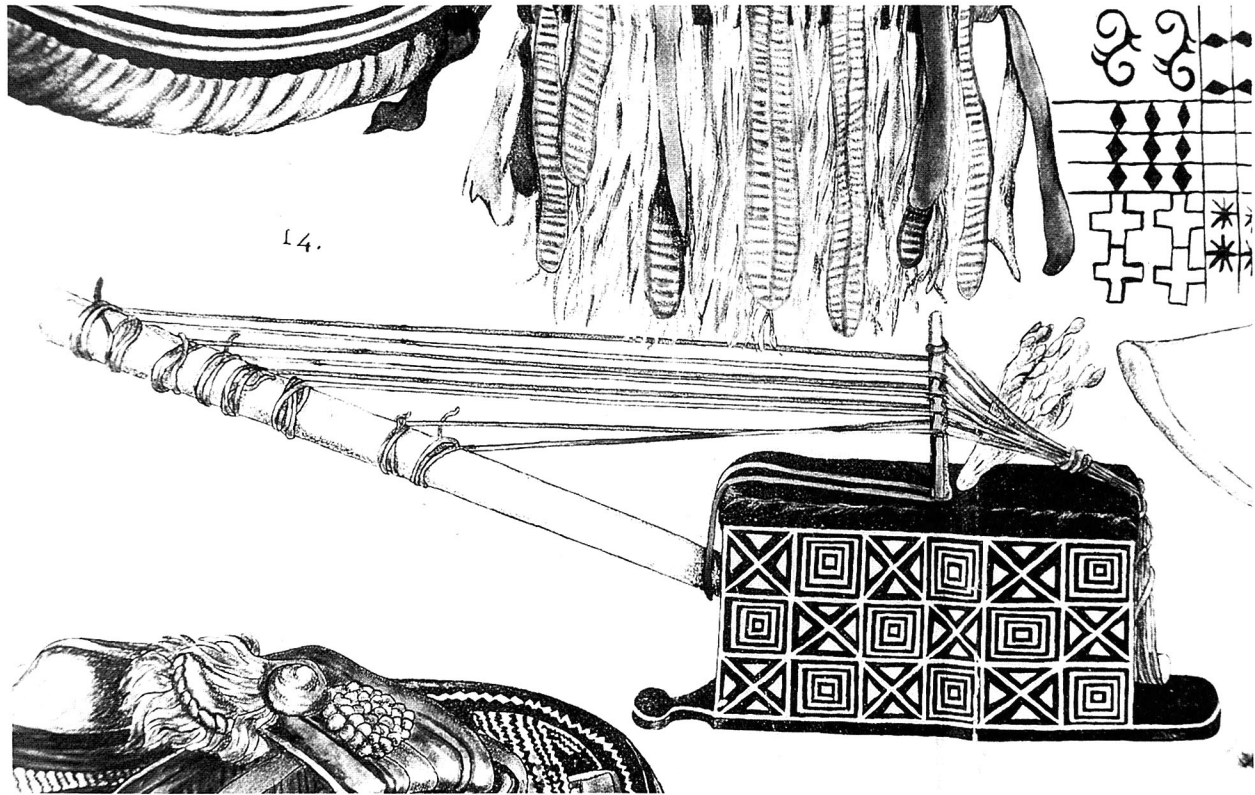


FIGURE 16. A wooden-box-resonator harp from 1821. Plate 14 from T. Edward Bowdich, *An Essay on the Superstitions, Customs, and Arts Common to the Ancient Egyptians, Abyssinians, and Ashantees*.

spoon-in-a-cup type of neck and resonator construction, and tuning pegs instead of hide tuning rings point to other parts of Africa. Two considerations point to ancient Egypt: (1) its playing position, wherein the neck leans on the shoulder of the player and the sound table faces out rather than toward the player—the exact reverse playing position of other West African harps; and (2) the fact that it is played exclusively by women, female griots (called *tiggwiit*).⁶⁷ The Moors, desert nomads of Berber origin in Mauritania, are the northernmost people in West Africa to play the harp. They would be likely candidates to carry influences from farther afield because of their nomadic trans-Saharan movements. Any explanation for the substantial geographic gap between the indigenous area of the *ardin* in Mauritania and other features in parts of Africa much farther east, should be significant for the understanding of the processes of musical and cultural diffusion.

Wachsmann has published the most extensive documentation of what he has called “shiplike harps.”⁶⁸ These harps look West African except for two features: (1) their cork-in-a-bottle type of neck and resonator construction and (2) the extensive sculpting of the wooden resonator to resemble a ship. In general, West African harps are not sculpted to any significant degree, except for the bridge of the Senufo *kori*, which takes the form of a human being, and possibly some of the wooden-box-resonator harps.⁶⁹ One needs to consider several factors when evaluating the significance of these shiplike harps: there are perhaps fewer than ten known instruments of this kind (maybe only five or six), and they are all museum specimens located outside Africa; there may be no photographs, recordings, or descriptions made in Africa of the instruments; the kind of ship that they resemble is European; and there is only one source that specifically names the instrument (*mbake*), the people from

67. Wachsmann, “Human Migration,” 87–88, noted that these two features point to ancient Egypt. He also stated that the placement of the string holder on top of the sound table rather than under it also points to ancient Egypt, as well as the Cameroon-Nigeria border, and contrasts with harps of East Africa.

68. Wachsmann, “Shiplike.”

69. See the photographs of a sculpted Senufo *kori* bridge in Robert Farris Thompson, *African Art in Motion: Icon and Act in the Collection of Katherine Coryton White* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974), 154–55 (photos reprinted in Brincard, *Sounding Forms*, 90). Also see the videocassette of a sculpted Baule wooden-box-resonator harp in Fujii, *JVC Video*, 19, no. 1.

whom it was gotten (Mende), and the area in which it was found (the interior of Sierra Leone).⁷⁰

The instrument combines West African features—an upright bridge (in some specimens it is unclear if it is a bridge or a string holder) and hide tuning rings—with non-West African ones—a cork-in-a-bottle neck construction and the sculpture of a head protruding from the resonator body alongside the neck. Both of these non-West African features are found in harps in Central Africa, particularly the harps of the Fang people of Gabon and Ngbaka people of Zaire.⁷¹ Provocative indeed is the similarity between the word *mbake*, the name of a shiplike harp reported by Staub, and the word Ngbaka, a Zaire people who play a harp featuring the same neck construction with a similarly sculpted anthropomorphic body.

There are several possible lines of speculation here. Firstly, the instrument may have been in use in the past but is now obsolete. An early twentieth-century Mende dictionary defines *mbaka* as “music or any stringed instrument;”⁷² however, this does not really support or refute the position that Staub’s *mbake* was used by the Mende as a musical instrument in the past. Had it been so, a new world of conjecture would have been opened, and the diffusion of the two non-West African features might then be explained. I do not know of any documentation, either contemporary or historical, to clarify the use of this instrument.

Secondly, the instrument may have been made for the tourist trade and not for local usage. Its sculpting in the form of a European ship, the harp’s profusion in museums, and its apparent absence in West Africa would support this contention. Were this so, the feature of the cork-in-a-bottle neck may have an explanation (albeit still a highly speculative one): sea contact between Central and West African coastal peoples, perhaps via the slave or tourist-art trade, may be responsible. If the Mende viewed the harp of the Ngbaka people or the Fang *ngombi* as a commodity desired by Europeans, perhaps they might have tried to integrate the foreign neck construction and sculpture into a local harp

70. The source is Jules Staub, *Beiträge zur Kenntnis der materiellen Kultur der Mendi in der Sierra Leone* (Solothurn: Buchdruckerei Vogt-Schild, 1936; Eng. trans. by Cecil Wood, HRAF FC7 Mende 1: Staub, New Haven: U.S. Government Human Relations Area Files, 1958), 3–5, 93–93a. Staub worked only from Bern museum specimens which were collected several decades earlier.

71. See the photographs in Brincard, *Sounding Forms*, 86–87, 92–93.

72. Migeod in Lamm, “Musical Instruments,” 29.

with the intention of selling it to Europeans. The new hybrid harp would not have had any local cultural significance other than as an item produced for foreign consumption.

Conclusion

West Africa has produced a great diversity of harps, which are consistently uniform in certain respects. From the three- or four-stringed *bolon* that incites warriors to battle and the six-stringed *donso ngoni* or seven-stringed *simbi* which provide music to protect and impassion hunters, to the twenty-one-stringed *kora* that symbolizes the royal synthesis of indigenous and Islamic cultures, all calabash spike harps are a major feature of traditional and even modern music in West Africa. The pentatonic sound of the *donso ngoni* is reminiscent of African American blues tonality, and its use in modern electric ensembles in Mali makes for some of the most fascinating popular music in Africa. Wooden-box-resonator spike harps of the forest regions farther south do not enjoy the widespread distribution nor the documentation of their northern relatives and may be in a state of decline.

The peculiarity of West African harp construction has until quite recently prevented scholars from realizing that these instruments are harps and not hybrid harp lutes. By articulating the distribution of these harps, as well as their morphological features, I hope to have laid the groundwork for future comparative studies which might investigate with increasing sophistication the diffusion of musical instruments.

* * *

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APPENDIX 1

Early Documentation of West African Harps

- 1594 Almada, *Tratado breve*, 25: “harpa.”
- 1623 Jobson, *Golden Trade*, 134. “They have little varietie of instruments, that which is most common in use, is made of a great gourd, and a necke thereunto fastned, resembling, in some sort, our Bandora; but they have no manner of fret, and the strings they are either such as the place yeeldes, or their invention can attaine to make, being very unapt to yeeld a sweete and musicall sound, notwithstanding with pinnes they winde and bring to agree in tunable notes, having not above sixe strings upon their greatest instrument.”
- 1679 Barbot, *Barbot on Guinea*, 2: 568, and no. 13, facing p. 570: Drawing of a box-resonator harp described in a previously unpublished manuscript from 1679 as a “sort of violin [shown with a long neck], with strings made from palm-fronds which they play with their two thumbs, resting the end against the stomach.”
- 1685 Courbe, *Premier Voyage*, 172. Moorish *ardin*: “a kind of harp, with a body made from a calabash covered with leather and with ten or twelve strings.” (une espece de harpe dont le corps fait d’une calbace couverte de cuir avoit dix ou douze cordes).
- 1701 Kikius, *Drawings*: Drawing of a box-resonator harp.
- 1705 Bosman, *New and Accurate*, 140: “a hollow piece of Wood of two hands breadth long, and one broad; from the hinder part of this a Stick comes cross to the fore-part, and upon the Instrument are five or six extended Strings: So that it bears some sort of Similitude to a small Harp, or if you will, is not very unlike the Modern Greek Musical Instruments, and affords by much the most agreeable Sound of any they have here.”
- 1715 Brue, *Voyages*, 439. Moorish *ardin*: “She had her play an instrument made of a calabash covered with a red parchment and with twelve strings, some silver and some brass. The sound resembled that of a harp.” (Elle lui fit toucher un Instrument composé d’une calebasse couverte d’un parchemin rouge, avec douze cordes, les unes d’argent, d’autres de letton, dont le son ressembloit à celui de la harpe.)
- 1788 Matthews, *Voyage*, 105–6: “They have also two kinds of string instruments; one is a sort of guitar, and is the same as the bangou in the West Indies; the other is in the form of a Welsh harp, but not above two feet long: the strings are made of the fibres of a plant and the hair of an elephant’s tail.”
- 1799 Park, *Travels*, 213: “the *korro*, a large harp with eighteen strings; the *simbing*, a small harp with seven strings.”

- 1802 Golberry, *Fragmens*, 2: 417: "They also have [in Sierra Leone?] a kind of harp or rather a large guitar. The strings go over a metal bridge placed perpendicularly on the length of the table of the instrument, the body of which is a great half of a calabash with a neck five feet in length and curved on top in order to hold the strings. The musician, seated on the ground, puts the guitar between his thighs and plays it with his two hands, as one plays a harp. This guitar is called kilara." (Ils ont aussi une sorte de harpe, ou plutôt de grande guitare, dont les cordes sont montées sur un chevalet de fer, placé perpendiculairement dans la longueur de la table de l'instrument, dont le corps est une énorme moitié de calabasse, qui a un manche de cinq pieds de longueur, recourbé par le haut pour recevoir les cordes. Le musicien se place assis par terre, met la guitare entre ses cuisses, et en joue des deux mains, comme on joue de la harpe. Cette guitare s'appelle kilara.)
- 1819 Bowdich, *Mission*, 361–62; musical transcriptions, 364–65: "On the Sanko (see Drawing No. 5 and Specimen in the Museum) they display the variety of their musical talents, and the Ashantees are allowed to surpass all others. It consists of a narrow box, the open top of which is covered with alligator, or antelope skin; a bridge is raised on this, over which eight strings are conducted to the end of a long stick, fastened to the fore part of the box, and thickly notched, and they raise or depress the strings into these notches as occasion requires. The upper string assimilates with the tenor C of the piano, and the lower with the octave above: sometimes they are tuned in Diatonic succession, but too frequently the intermediate strings are drawn up at random, producing flats and sharps in every Chromatic variety, though they are not skilful enough to take advantage of it. . . . The strings are made from the runners of a tree call Enta, abounding in the forests. All airs on this instrument are played very quick, and it is barely possible to make even an experienced player lessen the time, which quick as it is, is kept in a surprising manner, especially as every tune is loaded with ornament. They have a method of stopping the strings with the finger, so as to produce a very soft and pleasing effect, like the Meyer touch of the harp."
- 1821 Bowdich, *Essay*, plate 14: drawing of a sanko.
- 1825 Gray, *Travels*, facing p. 301: sketch of a harp.
- 1825 Laing, *Travels*, 369, facing p. 148: "The principal instruments used are the kora, in sound and shape resembling a guitar;" also has a sketch of a harp.
- 1841 Beecham, *Ashantee*, 168: "The sankú, a specimen of which lies before the writer, consists of a hollow wooden box, perforated with holes, and covered with a skin, to which is attached a long stick or neck; and it has eight strings, in two rows, supported perpendicularly by a bridge. This instrument, though somewhat resembling a violin, is played with the fingers like a guitar, and produces a soft and soothing tone."

- 1846 "African Curiosities": "The next object is a *Guitar* of the singular construction shown in the adjoining column. The frame is of bamboo; the belly is a calabash, covered with hide; and from its middle an upright, to which are fixed five strings, of common hemp. the instrument is held in the left hand, against the hip; and beautiful and varied tones are produced by pressing on the bamboo, and thus varying the tension of the strings. It will thus be seen that the chief novelty is in the mode of playing the guitar." (Harp is shown in fig. 7.)
- 1853 Cruickshank, *Eighteen Years*, 2: 268: "They have also a species of guitar, called a sancho. It consists of a square hollow box with a neck attached to it, having eight strings in two rows, supported perpendicularly by a bridge. It is played with the fingers, and has a soft soothing effect. The instrument is chiefly employed to give expression to the more pensive moods of the mind. The lover and the mourner find consolation in its notes, which they accompany with their voices."
- 1855 Hecquard, *Voyage*, 123: "a guitar with twenty one strings that is played with great taste and renders a very striking sound; it is made with a large calabash that is covered very carefully with a tanned deerskin; into the calabash they fit a neck to which the strings are attached, and the strings are raised up by a hardwood bridge. The strings are made from thin strips of deerskin cut more or less fine, according to the desired thickness. They twist the strips and take out the roughness by rubbing them with sand." (une guitare à vingt et une cordes, qui rend des sons très éclatants et dont ils jouent avec beaucoup de goût; il est fait au moyen d'une grande calebasse qu'ils recouvrent d'une peau de biche tannée avec soin; à cette calebasse ils adaptent un manche sur lequel sont placées les cordes, exhausées par un chevalet en bois dur. Ces cordes sont faites avec des lanières de peau de biche coupées plus ou moins fines, suivant la grosseur qu'ils veulent leur donner. Ils les tordent ensuite et enlèvent les aspérités en les frottant avec du sable.)
- 1868/ Mage, *Voyage*, cover: sketch of a harp with eight strings.
1980
- 1910?/ Kubik, *Westafrika*, 185: *kora* photograph.
1989
- 1912 Reeve, *The Gambia*, facing p. 198: *kora* photograph and a *bolon* photograph.

APPENDIX 2

Chronological Harp References for Figure 1

Dates with *disc* or *vid* appended indicate sound or video recordings; most of the *disc* references also contain photographs. References with no brackets contain descriptions; brackets indicate photograph [p], drawing [d], or number of strings on the instrument [6].

CALABASH RESONATOR

ardin

Courbe (1685), 172; Brue (1715/1747), 438–39; Duvelle (1966 disc); Norris (1968), 63–5 [d].

bolon

Tellier (1898), 178; Reeve (1912/1969), facing 198 [p]; Joyeux (1924), 182; Schaeffner (1936/1980), pl. 21 [p]; Boulton (1939/1957 disc); Schaeffner (1951), 68–70; Béart (1955), 680–83 [d]; *Musical Instruments of Liberia* (1971), 24; Camara (1976), figs. 14–16 [p]; Jenkins (1979 disc); Imperato (1983), pl. 15 [p]; Gourlay & Durán (1984) [p]; Haydon & Marks (1984 vid); Meyer (1985), 59 [p]; Kubik (1989), 184–89 [p]; Knight (1992b vid).

bolongboho (related to ***bolon***)

Zemp (N.d.b. disc); Zemp (1980), 434 [p]; Glaze (1981), 177–78, 240 [p].

donso ngon

MMA (1889), 1889.2032 (bridge w/notches); Frobenius (1921), 40–41 [d]; Joyeux (1924), 182, 194–99; Rouget (1952a disc); Bird, Koita, & Soumaouro (1974); *Guinée* (1987 disc); Sangare (1990/1991 disc); Samake (1991 disc).

furakaf (Jola *simbingo*)

“African Curiosities” (1846), 341 [d].

kon (belonging to Dan, Mano, or Vai peoples)

Ellis (1914/1970), facing 138 (Vai) [p]; Donner (1940), 75 [d]; Schwab (1947), 153, fig. 80e (no name indicated) [p]; Zemp (N.d.a. disc), [p]; Zemp (1971), 54–7, 130–7, 219–22, 286–9, pl. 14.

kongcuongu/konchuhun

NGDMI (1984), 2: 455; Soma (1988), 478–80 [p].

kora

Park (1799/1983), 213; Laing (1825), facing 148 [d], 369; Gray (1825), facing 301 [d]; Hecquard (1855), 123; Mahillon (1893), 420–21 [d]; MMA (1889), 1889.498; Ankermann (1901), 15, 78–79 [d]; Reeve (1912/1969), facing 198 [p]; Boulton (1939/1957 disc); Ministère de l'Information du Mali (1970 disc); King

(1972); Knight (1973, 1984, 1991, 1992a vid, 1992b vid), [p]; Pevar (1978), [p]; Durán (1981), [p]; Kubik (1989), 184–88 [p]; Charry (1992).

kori

Zemp (N.d.b. disc); Thompson (1974), 154–55 [p]; Glaze (1981), 42–45 [p]; MMA (1983), 1983.76.1; Wegner (1984), 179 [p]; Brincard (1989), 90 [p].

silamandu

Schaeffner (1951), 70–72 [d].

simbi

MMA (1889), 1889.4.493 (bridge with holes) [6]; Tellier (1898), 179 [6]; Frobenius (1921), 40–41, 44 [d]; Schaeffner (1946), 25 [p, 7]; Schaeffner (1951), 68–72 [6]; Cissé (1964), 209; Niane (1975), facing 240 [p]; *Festival National* (1979), 10 [p]; Coulibaly (1985), [p].

soron

Tellier (1898), 179 [12]; Mahillon (1909), 117–18 [6]; Joyeux (1924), 180–2, 210–11, pl. 2, fig. 4 [p]; Chauvet (1929), 98–100; Rouget (1952a disc, 1952b disc) [p].

WOODEN RESONATOR

aloko

Zemp (1967), 81–86 [p]; Zemp (1972 disc); Fujii (1990 vid), tape 19, no. 1.

du/luu

Schwab (1947), 153, fig. 80a (Gio people) [p]; *Musical Instruments of Liberia* (1971), 22 (luu) [p]; Zemp (1971), 55–6, 286–89; Zemp (1971 disc).

gingirukoro

Griaule & Dieterlen (1950), [d]; Zahan (1950); Griaule (1954); Klobe (1977).

ngoni (harp)

Binger (1892), 1: 184–85 (with calabash resonator) [d, 5]; Dieterlen (1951), 221–25 [d, 8]; Dieterlen in Paques (1954), 106–7 [8].

sanku

Bowdich (1819; 1966), facing 275, 361–69, 450–1, pl. 5 [d]; Bowdich (1821), pl. 14 [d]; Beecham (1841), 168 (Ashanti people); Cruickshank (1853), 2: 268; Ankermann (1901), 14 [d]; Smend (1908), 72–5 (*kasangu* of Ewe people) [p]; Schaeffner (1936/1980), 191; Hause (1948), 54–55; Wachsmann (1973), 48, 55; Wegner (1984), 175–6, 269 (Tem people) [p].

seperewa

Nketia (1963), 96 [d]; Hood (1969 disc); Nketia (1974), 105; Ewens (1992), 84 [p].

shiplike (cork-in-a-bottle neck)

MH 67.99.1.2; Staub (1936/1958), pl. 18 [p]; Wachsmann (1973), [p]; Bebey (1975), 118 [p].

unidentified

Barbot, (1679/1992), 2: 568, no. 13 facing 570 [d]; Kikius (1701), [d]; Bosman (1705/1967), 140; MMA Todes. Afr 13 (Minianka people? bridge with 10 holes); Stone (1982), 51, 132, xvi (obsolete Kpelle harp); Brincard (1989), 189 (*sanku?* *seperewa?*) [p].