

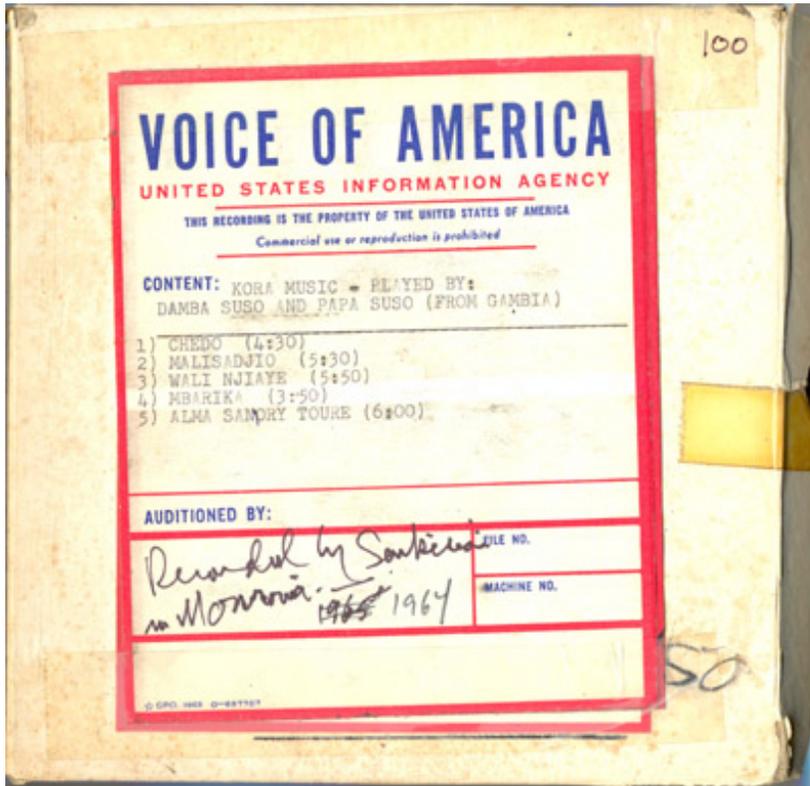
Kora Kings of the N'Gabu

Posted At : August 19, 2008 9:29 PM | Posted By : Matthew LaVoie

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Over the last 30 years, especially since the publication of Alex Haley's *Roots* in 1976, the West African Griot has become one of Africa's most ubiquitous, and clichéd, symbols; in Europe and the United States the term has become shorthand for almost all forms of African and Diaspora cultural expression. (An example that I find particularly lazy and erroneous is the description of African hip-hop artists as 'modern day Griots'. If anything, the appeal of rap music to many African youths is that it is the polar opposite of 'Griotism'; young rappers 'speak truth to power', while modern urban Griots sing the praises of the rich and powerful.) The instrument most often associated with the Griot is the kora, the 21-string harp-lute of the Mandinka people. And although today the most internationally visible korafolas are from Mali (Toumani Diabate), and Guinea (the Marseille-based Ba Cissoko), virtually all of the great korafolas can trace their roots to the Gambia, Southern Senegal and Northeastern Guinea-Bissau (Toumani's father Sidiki Diabate was born in the Gambia, and Ba Cissoko's family came from Guinea Bissau). This region was home to the N'Gabu Empire and gave birth to the kora.

The N'Gabu Empire was a confederation of Mandinka states, formed in the mid-1500s by Mandinka immigrants who migrated west from the Mali Empire. The kora was first conceived, according to the oral traditions of the Mandinka griots, by Jali Madi Wuleng. One story goes that Jali Madi Wuleng heard of a jinn that lived in a mysterious lake who granted all wishes. Jali Madi Wuleng went to the lake and asked the jinn to invent for him an instrument that no griot had ever owned. The jinn agreed to create a new instrument in exchange for Jali Madi's sister. Informed of the bargain, Jali Madi's sister agreed and sacrificed herself for the dreams and glory of her brother. If it is impossible to know exactly when the kora was invented, what is certain, however, is that by the demise of the N'Gabu Empire in the late 1860s, the kora was the primary instrument of the Mandinka griots, and that a century later the greatest korafolas were still in the N'Gabu region.



Between 1964 and 1968 the Voice of America recorded two of the era's greatest korafolas. The VOA's African Program Center in Monrovia, Liberia had just recently opened its doors in 1964 when Leo Sarkisian met Papa Susso from the Gambia. As Papa Susso remembers it, 'I was walking down the street in Monrovia, probably on my way back from school, carrying my Kora, when Leo came up and started talking to me. I didn't know Leo, but it was clear that he was passionate about music and interested in the kora. I invited him over to my house and over the following months we became good friends.'

Papa Susso was born in 1947 in the village of Sutuma Sere, not far from the town of Basse, in Eastern Gambia. (As Papa Susso told me, he was 'born into the kora'.) In the early 1960s a friend of his father offered to sponsor Papa Susso's education, and the young korafola was sent to Liberia to enroll in university. In the late summer of 1964, Papa's fourth cousin Tamba Suso (their fathers were cousins) came to visit him in Liberia. Tamba was also born (in 1936) in Sotuma Sere, and the two cousins grew up performing together. Tamba spend two months with Papa Susso in Monrovia, and in the last months of 1964 they made three trips to the VOA studios.

Papa Susso had just turned seventeen when these tracks were recorded; Tamba Suso was in his late

twenties. Papa Susso confirmed for me that his VOA recordings were his first. On these first three tracks Papa Susso plays the kora and Tamba sings (the Demba on the reel-label should read Tamba). The combination of Papa's biting kora- he plays with an attack that you rarely hear on kora recordings today-with Tamba's warm and raucous voice is sublime. First up is *Ceddo*, a classic of the Mandinka repertoire, which tells the story of the demise of Dianke Wali (the last ruler of the N'Gabu Empire), and the siege of Kansala, the capital of the N'Gabu Empire.

↳ [Papa Susso & Tamba Suso 'Ceddo'](#)

Next up is 'Mali Sajo', another classic of the kora repertoire, which tells the story of a friendship between a young girl and a hippopotamus that ends tragically, when the hippo is killed by a hunter. Papa Susso told Leo that this piece is often performed to honor deceased loved ones.

↳ [Papa Susso & Tamba Suso 'Mali Sajo'](#)

'Waly Ndiaye' is another homage to a warrior. Tamba Suso sings that 'Waly Ndiaye' was so fierce that he fought not only his enemies but his own troops as well.

↳ [Papa Susso & Tamba Suso 'Wali Ndiaye'](#)

These next two tracks, from a different recording session, feature both Papa Susso and Tamba Suso on kora. The first track 'Masana Cisse', tells the story of a Masana Cisse, a wealthy man who wanted to marry a beautiful young girl who was already engaged to another villager. Cisse, through his wealth and power, was able to force the young girl to marry him. But before he could consummate the marriage, Masana Cisse died, the victim of a spell cast by his rival.

↳ [Papa Susso & Tamba Suso 'Masana Cisse'](#)

This final track by Papa Susso and Tamba Suso is called 'Kuruto', and is a praise song for all brave men returning from battle.

↳ [Papa Susso & Tamba Suso 'Kuruto'](#)

Today Papa Susso splits his time between the United States and the Gambia, devoting much of his energy to teaching American and Gambian students. Tamba Suso has retired and currently lives in a suburb of Banjul, the capital of the Gambia.

In late August of 1966, another of West Africa's great korafolas-perhaps the greatest of his era, and definitely the most popular- came to the VOA studios in Monrovia. Soundioulou Cissoko was born in Ziguinchor, the capital of the Casamance region of Senegal, in 1923. His father was Baa Kimintang Cissoko who, when the French colonial authorities send him to the Colonial Exposition in Paris in 1931, became the first korafola to perform in Europe. In an interview he gave the VOA in 1966, Soundioulou says 'although I have been listening to the kora since the day I was born, I didn't start to play myself until 1944'.

In 1954, after ten years of study with his paternal uncle, Soundioulou moved to Dakar, where he quickly became the city's most popular korafola. Ten years later, in 1964, he became one of the founding members of 'l'Ensemble Lyrique Traditionnel', the first Senegalese national traditional music ensemble. By 1966 Soundioulou was known throughout the region as 'Le Roi de la Kora' (the king of the kora), a title that he was given by the late Guinean president Ahmed Seku Toure (many sources give the date as 1967, but in our 1966 interview Soundioulou is already using the honorific 'le Roi de la Kora').

By the late 1970s Soundioulou had retired from the Senegalese national ensemble and for the next ten years performed almost exclusively with his second wife Mahawa Kouyate. Together they recorded at least four lps, and released one CD. All of these recordings are out of print. As far as I know, no solo recordings of Soundioulou Cissoko have ever been released (he recorded a set of eight solo reels for Senegalese national radio).

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CONTENT: AFRICAN MUSIC PERFORMED BY
SOUNDIOULOU CISSOKO, kora player
from SENEGAL.

- 1/ Tiédo Dianké Waly
- 2/ Maba Diakhou
- 3/ Almamy Samory Touré
- 4/ Ahmadou Fadiké
- 5/ Maki, fils de Cheikh Oumar
- 6/ Mali Sadio
- 7/ Sira Bâ Bolo (Kanou)=Continent noir.

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These VOA recordings of Soundioulou are some of the best he ever made. This next track is Soundioulou's version of 'Tiedo Dianké Waly' (the same piece as 'Ceddo'), and is a good example of his virtuosic playing.

↪ [Soundioulou Cissoko 'Tiedo Dianké Waly'](#)

Here is Soundioulou playing 'Mali Sajo'. It is interesting to compare his interpretation to the recording of 'Mali Sajo' by Papa Susso and Tamba Suso. Soundioulou and Papa Susso have very different playing styles.

↪ [Soundioulou Cissoko 'Mali Sajo'](#)

This last Soundioulou recording is also one of his most famous. For many years this piece was used as the opening theme for Radio Senegal. Soundioulou sings, in Wolof (the other two tracks are in Malinké), 'Boy dem yoobale ma', or 'take me with you'.

↪ [Soundioulou Cissoko 'Sira Ba Bolo'](#)

Throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, Soundioulou Cissoko and Mahawa Kouyate were known as the 'Royal Family of Mandinka music'. Two years after Soundioulou first visited the VOA studios in Liberia, he returned to Monrovia with Mahawa. On October 23, 1968 they recorded five songs at the Voice of America's Brewerville studios. Soundioulou's voice is not as strong as it was two years earlier, but Mahawa sounds great, and Soundioulou's kora playing is solid as ever. My favorite of the tracks they recorded that day is 'Kelefa' (a tribute to the warrior Kelefa Sane).

↪ [Soundioulou Cissoko & Mahawa Kouyate 'Kelefa'](#)

Soundioulou Cissoko passed away in 1994. He was 71 years old. His sons Djeor Cissoko and Nana Cissoko—who were both born to Soundioulou's first wife Maimouna Kouyate—and his nephew Ali Boulo Santo are keeping the Cissoko kora tradition alive. All three of them were born in Dakar and are trying to expand the modern kora repertoire. Mahawa Kouyate lives in Dakar and is still performing, with both the 'Ensemble Lyrique Traditionel' of Senegal, and as a solo artist.

Special thanks to Alhaji Papa Susso and Roderic Knight for their generous help with the research that went into this post. If you are interested in the history of kora you should also check out the publications of Eric Charry and Ousmane Sow Huchard; both of their books are essential resources.