

West African Drumming: Djembe & Dundun

Origin

The djembe is a hand drum that originates in sub-Saharan West Africa. Its geographic origin, and that of associated instruments like dunduns, is the area known as the Mali Empire which existed from c. 1230 to c. 1600. It is associated with the Malinke people, specifically blacksmiths who made and played the djembe. Modern-day countries with the highest populations of Malinke people are Guinea, Ivory Coast (Cote D'Ivoire) and Mali, with significant populations in neighbouring countries. Traditionally, different rhythms were played to accompany dancers to celebrate events such as birth, harvests, initiation rites, courting, marriage, the end of Ramadan, welcoming visitors to the village, festive occasions, etc.

Before the 1950s, the djembe was only known in its original area. Since the decolonization of West Africa its popularity has spread around the world. Also, the djembe repertoire has come to incorporate many rhythms from other West African ethnic groups such as the Susu, Baga and Manian.



Djembe Construction

The djembe is constructed from a goblet-shaped wooden shell over which a goat skin is stretched to create a playing surface. The skin is held in place with metal rings and is pulled tight with synthetic rope woven around the shell. The weaving pattern allows the skin to be periodically tightened or 'tuned' by adding 'diamonds' or 'knots'. Sometimes decorative carving or ropework is added. By playing different parts of the drum head (skin) and adjusting hand position, a player can produce different sounds from the djembe. The three basic tones are: bass, tone, and slap.



Djembe

Dundun Construction

The dundun is a cylindrical stick drum made with a wooden shell, cowhide (which provides a tougher playing surface), metal rings, and woven rope which tightens the skin in a manner similar to that used on the djembe. Dunduns are made in three sizes, each producing a different pitch when struck with a stick. The names of the individual dunduns, from smallest to largest, are kenkeni, sangban and dununba.



Types of Dundun

Dundun Playing Styles

Typically, a drumming ensemble has three dunduns which are played horizontally on wooden stands with bells mounted on top. The drum is struck with a stick held in the right hand, and the bell is played with a striker held in the left hand. This is called 'traditional style', and is typical of the Hamana region of Guinea. In nearby regions and countries the style can vary slightly.

For example, the number of dunduns in an ensemble can vary from one to five, bells may or may not be used, and the dundun may be worn by the player using a shoulder strap.



Ballet Style

In the 1950s and 1960s, during the period of decolonization, a number of countries created government-sponsored drumming ensembles which greatly popularized West African drumming. This type of group is known as a 'ballet' (e.g., Les Ballets Africains in Guinea). To reduce the number of dundun players required, the three dunduns were placed upright and played by a single drummer with two sticks. This set-up is therefore called 'ballet style'.



Traditional Style

Popularization

When the various West African ballet companies toured the western world, knowledge of the djembe and the West African style of drumming began to spread. In addition, gradual emigration of djembe players to the west helped spread knowledge and understanding of this style of music through performances and teaching. Two djembe performers and teachers who are widely known and who are acknowledged to be among the best djembe players in the world are Famoudou Konate, and the late Mamady Keita.

Famoudou Konate was born in 1940 in the Hamana region of Guinea. He was drumming at festivals by the age of eight and became known as a virtuoso on the djembe. He joined Les Ballets Africains De Guinée and toured the world for over 25 years.



Famoudou Konate

Mamady Keita (1950-2021) was born in Guinea and started drumming as a very young boy and at the age of 14 was asked to join the National Ballet Djoliba, and at age 15 became the lead djembe soloist. After more than twenty years of touring, Mamady established his own independent group, Sewa Kan, and began to release recordings. Subsequently, he established a school of percussion in Belgium called Tam Tam Mandingue. The school is now has branches throughout the world.



Mamady Keita

The fact that both Mamady and Famoudou come from Guinea, and from the Malinke culture, contributes greatly to the popularity their particular style of drumming enjoys today.

Sources:

Famoudou Konate: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Famoudou_Konat%C3%A9

Tam Tam Mandigue Schools: <https://www.ttmda.com/mamady-keita/introduction>

Djembe: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Djembe>

Dundun: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dunun>