

Ba Cissoko

Guinean culture is very similar to the cultures of the countries closely surrounding Guinea because all of them are descendants of the *Mande* peoples. The *Mande* people lived in Africa long before the Europeans arrived. However, when the Europeans colonized Africa, they divided countries without regard to tribal groups, and the *Maninka* is one of many that are now spread through several countries. Traditionally, rhythm and drumming formed the backbone for music, which could be accompanied by other instruments. However, while each song still displayed a solid rhythm, the group *Ba Cissoko* used the *kora*, a stringed instrument, as the main instrument. In the traditional musical culture of Guinea, *jelis* are from families that studied and performed music as their sole occupation, in order to fulfill their roles as entertainers and story tellers. In recent years, although *jelis* still study music, people of other social classes can also become musicians, as can be seen by watching Ba Cissoko. The group *Ba Cissoko* provides an excellent example of a modern music group in Africa—one that shows the traditional aspects of the *Maninka* culture, but has also integrated Western musical culture into its performance.

Coming straight from Guinea, *Ba Cissoko* consists of four members—three members of a *jeli* family and one musician who learned on his own. The group is named after the leader, Ba Cissoko, similar to the Western groups *Duke Ellington's Orchestra* or the *Glenn Miller Orchestra*. Ba Cissoko and his cousins Sékou and Kourou Kouyaté are members of a *jeli* family. M'bady Kouyaté, Cissoko's uncle and the brothers' father, is a fabulous *kora* player and is often hailed as one of the greatest *jelis* of the *Mandingo* kingdom. The fourth member of the group, Ibrahim Bah, met the other three in a taxi and eventually became the group's percussionist.

Because he came from a very poor family, Bah did not get to travel with the group for a few years.

At the group's Boston debut in Somerville Theater, *Ba Cissoko* allowed audience members to compare the group to traditional Guinea culture. For example, they sang many songs that were each about ten minutes long. In contrast, traditional musical performances in Africa occur at parties or celebrations and last for hours. The music could continue nonstop while people take turns dancing. The songs at the concert were very lively, but did not consist primarily of drums. Bah played a spherical drum that made a different sound or pitch depending on which part he hit. Most of the time, it sounded like a *djembe*, a kind of traditional drum. However, while only one person played percussion for *Ba Cissoko*, in Africa there are entire groups composed of drums because the rhythm of the music is very important to the Guinean people. Many of the songs used call and response as in traditional Guinean songs, but some were similar to jazz in that two or three members would repeat the background while another person soloed. Mostly Cissoko sang or played solos because he was the leader of the group, but Sékou also played and sang a few solos.

A *kora* is a traditional Guinean stringed instrument that is still predominantly played by *jelis*. The instrument consists of a calabash gourd with a long neck and two small pegs on either side of the neck. At various points on the neck, strings are attached that come down and connect to the calabash. Although the *kora* has twenty-one strings, they are close together, so that the musician can reach the strings with both hands. To hold the *kora*, the musician wraps the last three fingers on each hand around the two pegs. Then he uses the first finger and thumb of each hand to pluck the strings. The strings are symmetrical with higher pitched strings in the center of

a triangular shape, and lower strings on either outside edge. Although the description is complex, the *kora* is actually a simple instrument that can be played very quickly and accurately.

Ba Cissoko's concert combined the Guinean culture with elements of Western culture, such as electronic amplification. In Africa, music is performed on the street, at parties, or for weddings and ceremonies. Very few, if any, of these would involve electronics because they are not needed. Drums are very loud, and since the music may or may not be the main focal point, people could stay near the group or walk away from it. In Africa, most performances are rather informal events, where people can walk around, talk, dance, and have a good time. Because *Ba Cissoko* mainly performs in theaters for attentive audiences, they use electronic amplification. Cissoko and Bah used microphones for the *kora* and drums, but Sékou played an electric *kora* and Kourou played an electric bass for most of the concert.

In addition to the *kora*, Kourou and Cissoko also played the *bolon* and the *tamani*, respectively. The *bolon* is a bass instrument with four strings, but unlike the guitar, it is made from a gourd. It has four sticks coming out from the gourd with large strings attaching the sticks to each other, and smaller strings running lengthwise from the sticks. The lengthwise strings are plucked to create the bass rhythm. Cissoko played the *tamani* for about three songs. The *tamani* is a fascinating instrument because it is unlike anything in Western music. It is a small, hourglass-shaped drum with a strap that goes over one shoulder. The drum then sits in the musician's armpit and is played with the corresponding hand and a stick in the other hand. Ropes crisscross the length of the drum, and when the player lowers his arm, it tightens the ropes, causing the pitch to rise. Cissoko introduced the *tamani* to most of the audience members, whether he knew it or not.

Sékou Kouyaté really played to the crowd with his *kora*. At twenty-one years old, he is still very young and responds well to the crowd. His *kora* not only had electronic amplification, it had pedals similar to an electric guitar that allowed him to change the timbre of the notes and bend tones so that he played like Jimmy Hendrix. Clearly, traditional *koras* do not have electronic pedals associated with them because the *kora* is much older than the discovery of electricity. However, the American audience loved the modernized *kora* and after using the pedals once, Sékou discovered this and returned to the pedals again at various points throughout the concert. Unlike many modern electric guitar players, Sékou is a very good musician as evidenced by the musicality he displayed even while using the pedals.

The whole group seemed a little ill at ease at the beginning, but quickly showed their excellence in music. While Cissoko dressed entirely in traditional African garb, the other three members of the group wore traditional shirts with blue jeans. They probably felt out of place on an American stage since they spoke very little English. However, a *jeli* is trained to play music, so once they started playing they seemed more comfortable. When the crowd clapped encouragingly, they became even more relaxed and involved the audience in the concert. In many African songs, call and response plays an important role. At this concert, Cissoko taught the audience two simple phrases and then began a series of calls and responses. He would sing something and then the audience would sing one of the phrases. Since the audience was accepting of new ideas, the members of *Ba Cissoko* seemed to enjoy themselves as they performed.

The audience was surprisingly Caucasian, but still supported the Guinean group. Typically, one would expect a lot of African or African American people to attend an African concert. However, most of the audience at *Ba Cissoko*'s concert was white. Most of the audience

seemed to have no idea what to expect from the group because they did not know anything about African music except that drums are common. Since the whole concert was in a foreign language—probably Mandinka or Susu—most of the audience did not understand any of the songs, and Ba Cissoko could not make many comments other than “thank you.” Nevertheless, music is music in any language, and the audience appreciated the music. Even though they did not understand the *Maninka* traditions, people’s comments after the concert revealed their respect for this group. One woman told her neighbor, “That was amazing!” Another lady was talking about Sékou’s playing as she was leaving. Although I couldn’t understand all her words, she seemed to be awed by his skill on the *kora*. A small group of people were discussing how to buy *Ba Cissoko*’s CD. Clearly, everyone at the concert was surprised by how good the group was. However, if they understood the *jeli* tradition, they would have known to anticipate excellence because music is a *jeli*’s profession.

The community for Ba Cissoko’s concert was nothing like that found in Africa. For example, almost no one in the audience understood the language so the lyrics were meaningless to them. In Guinea, the people would be able to sing along or at least would understand the words. Also, this concert was in a formal theater whereas traditional *Maninka* music is played at street parties or ceremonies. Traditionally, *jelis* can tell a family’s history or can tell a story, but in the United States, people do not understand the words and would most likely not care about a seemingly random family if they did understand. If *Ba Cissoko* performed in Africa, the audience would understand the traditions without thinking about them. However, in the United States, most people do not know the differences between the traditions and the peculiarities of a particular group.

Ba Cissoko represented the merging of traditional Guinean music with Western music. The musical importance of *jeli* families can be understood by watching them perform. As members of such a musical family, they are excellent musicians in every aspect from pitch to performance etiquette. While playing traditional instruments, such as the *kora*, the group incorporated Western elements by amplifying the sound and using electronics to alter the music. However, with everything in a native Guinean language, the audience could not understand any of the words. Even so, they were very supportive of the group as they clapped and cheered when appropriate and participated in the call and response attempt. Although the circumstances for *Ba Cissoko*'s concert were different from those in a traditional Guinean musical experience, the group played fabulously and astonished a novice audience. Many of the audience members will probably be eager to attend another African concert in order to learn more about the rich culture.