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132
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TOUMANI & SIDIKI DIABATE

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Reviving Ancient Strings

Toumani and Sidiki Diabaté are modern *griots*, revisiting the ancient sounds of the Malian *kora*. Lucy Durán talks to father and son about carrying on their family line

Last November, in a large studio room in North London, father and son sit on low stools facing each other, each one holding a *kora*, the 21-string harp of West Africa, their heritage as Mande *griots*. It's their first day in the studio and they're warming up for a new album. They have played together before, but not as a duo. The atmosphere is charged. There's a lot at stake, and the son has to live up to his illustrious grandfather, after whom he's named – one of the greatest *kora* players of all time.

I'm sitting behind the mixing console, along with co-producer Nick Gold and engineer Jerry Boys, from World Circuit, excited and nervous, as we embark on the third album of *kora* duets ever recorded, all of which have involved this very family. In front of me, scrawled onto sticky tape on the console, are the names 'Toumani' and 'Sidiki,' mapping out faders for the various microphones clustered around the two instruments. These are significant names in the annals of *kora* history.

Toumani Diabaté, now in his late 40s, is widely recognised as the greatest living *kora* player, the person who has taken the instrument further both technically and musically than anyone else. He is a veteran of the world music scene, with many *kora* albums, Grammy awards, and collaborations with the likes of Ali Farka Touré and Björk. This is his first *kora* album since *The Mande Variations* in 2008 (a Top of the World in #51).

Sidiki is Toumani's eldest son, born in 1990, a musical genius with a formidable technique and a distinctive style. He has a huge following among the Malian youth as part of a duo with local hip-hop star Iba One. Sidiki is a 21st-century *kora* player, but he has grown up listening to his father's and grandfather's music, and knows the Mande griot tradition well. He studies at the only music conservatoire in Mali, where he learned music theory and how to sing, though he ran circles around his *kora* teachers.

Sidiki is named after his grandfather – the late Sidiki Diabaté (1922-1996). Sidiki senior was a phenomenal virtuoso and musical pioneer, the greatest player of his generation, and if the *kora* has become Africa's most iconic instrument on the world stage, a large part of that was due to him. He believed in educating his children, and was a brilliant man, with a vast knowledge of oral history. It's a tough act to follow.

In Mande culture, they say that sons are the rivals of their fathers, and must strive to overpass them. Sidiki senior and his son Toumani had a rather distant relationship. Toumani always stresses that he never had a single *kora* lesson from his father, who was too busy with his own career. But Toumani and his son treat each other with tenderness and humour, and young Sidiki is bursting with pride to be involved in this album. "For me to play with my dad is like a dream. Yes

I'm a hip-hop artist, but I love and respect my roots as a *kora* player, I want to know more. It's my chance to learn directly from my father."

This is not an idle statement. I have brought to the studio the *kora* that Toumani used for his debut album, *Kaira*, which I produced back in 1987; it's not been used much since then. Sidiki picks it up with admiration, and although the strings are old and mute, somehow he brings them to life. He plays his father's 'Alla L'aa Ke' exactly as it was on the album, note for note, run for run. Clearly he's listened to it over and over again. He picks out a particular sequence and says, "you hear this? Now I know why it sounded like that," and he demonstrates some extreme subtleties of *kora* technique. He's thought a lot about the aesthetics of the instrument.

In the studio, Toumani and his son, looking very much alike, are hunched over their *koras*. They live together in Bamako, but they have different musical influences and lives, as one would expect of two generations in an urban environment. I can see them listening with fascination to each other; the bemused smiles on their faces can be heard in the intertwining of the music, as they trade riffs and variations. They're using an identical set of mics, and yet their individual sound is so different. The father is more lyrical, contemplative, majestic; his sound clear, brilliant and ringing. The son is more staccato and fiery, his fingers run up and ▶

TOUMANI & SIDIKI

down the strings so fast it's almost hard to believe, sometimes hovering over two or three notes like a hummingbird before taking flight again.

They're working on a version of 'Jula Jekere', a piece in an unusual tuning with lots of punch and drama, dating from the early 20th century. This is one of several tunes they are retrieving from their Gambian heritage. Many of these pieces have been neglected or forgotten in favour of the repertoire from Mali, and it's thrilling to hear them played like this, with such freshness and energy, and a new perspective.

The new album is the third ever to be dedicated to instrumental kora duets. The first was *Cordes Anciennes* (Ancient Strings), a seminal album released in 1970 in Mali, featuring duets and trios, with Toumani's father, Sidiki, as the anchor musician. The second was *New Ancient Strings*, recorded in 1997 and produced by myself. Its concept and title were inspired by *Cordes Anciennes*, with duets by Toumani and distant cousin and next-door neighbour, Ballaké Sissoko. And now this one: *Toumani & Sidiki*, a real testament to the legacy of Sidiki the grandfather, and to the power of the kora to transcend generations and borders.

As the evening progresses in the studio, 'Jula Jekere' unfolds and gradually develops into something completely new, but it still holds a profound connection to the Gambian landscape where it came from, even though neither of the two has ever been there. At home in Bamako, Sidiki the grandfather would sit late in the evening and play pieces on the kora like 'Jula Jekere', and recite the stories of his past. I was lucky enough to share many such musical moments with the family, both in Mali and in the upper-river Gambian town called Bansang. Memories of both come flooding back.

My introduction to the Diabatés came about many years ago through the Gambian kora player Amadu Bansang Jobarteh (Jobarteh is the English spelling of the same surname Diabaté). I had found out about Amadu through recordings of his music by musicologist Dr Anthony King. Amadu was a brilliant kora player, in the upper-river style of the Gambia. His recording of the piece 'Jula Faso' was the signature tune of Radio Gambia for many years. With King's help I wrote to Amadu and he agreed to be my teacher. I packed my bags, and off I went.

Amadu took me to his hometown Bansang. It's a bustling market town some 300km east from Banjul, the capital of the Gambia. It lies on the south bank of the Gambia River, at the point where the river makes a wide lazy loop southwards before winding its way towards the Atlantic. The landscape is classic savannah, with tall yellow grasses, scrubby acacias, baobabs, and groves of mango trees, their leaves neatly clipped by grazing animals.

In the southern part of the town, a hill of black boulders and red earth rises abruptly out of the flat horizon. From its summit, you look down on hot,



and the riverbanks where women wash clothes all day long. I would go up there to watch the sunsets light up the river waters with shimmering colours. In the distance were fields of giant calabashes, lying on the ground like oversized footballs. The most perfectly formed and toughest of them would be cut in half, their insides scraped out, then left to dry in the sun, and eventually turned into resonators of the kora.

Like many other towns along the Gambia River, Bansang was once a meeting point of many local cultures. In the early colonial period, it had a thriving trade, attracting the best griots, who brought with them their regional styles and repertoires from the far-flung corners of the old Mande world, and adapted them to the new environment. It was in this melting pot that the kora came into its own.

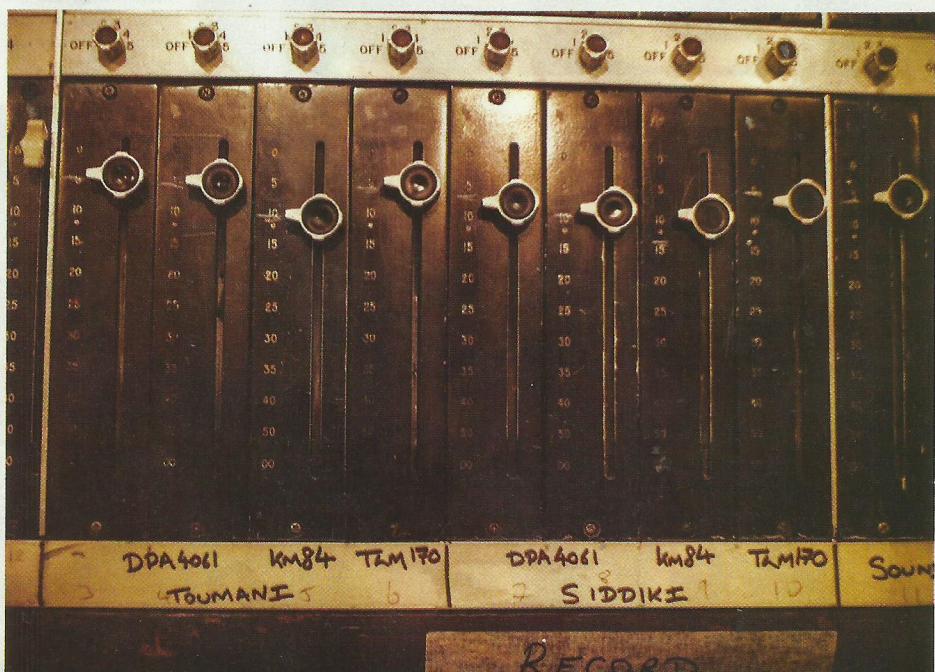
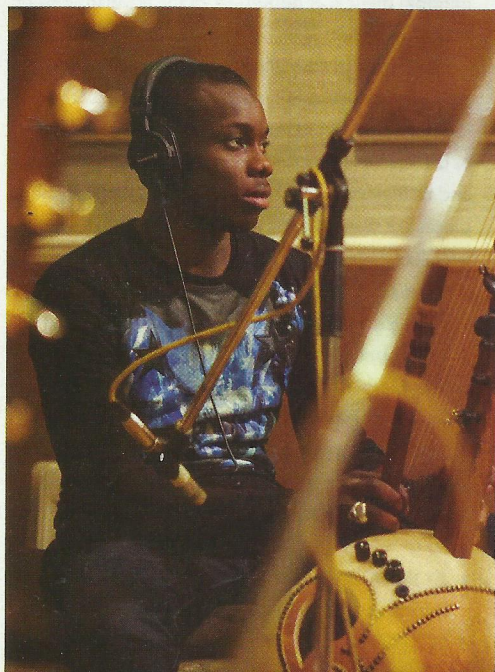
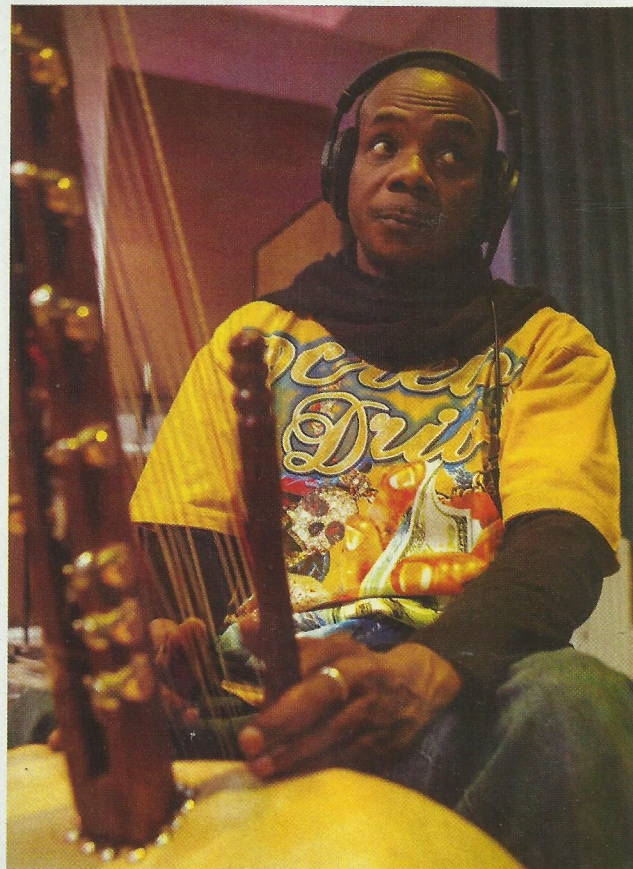
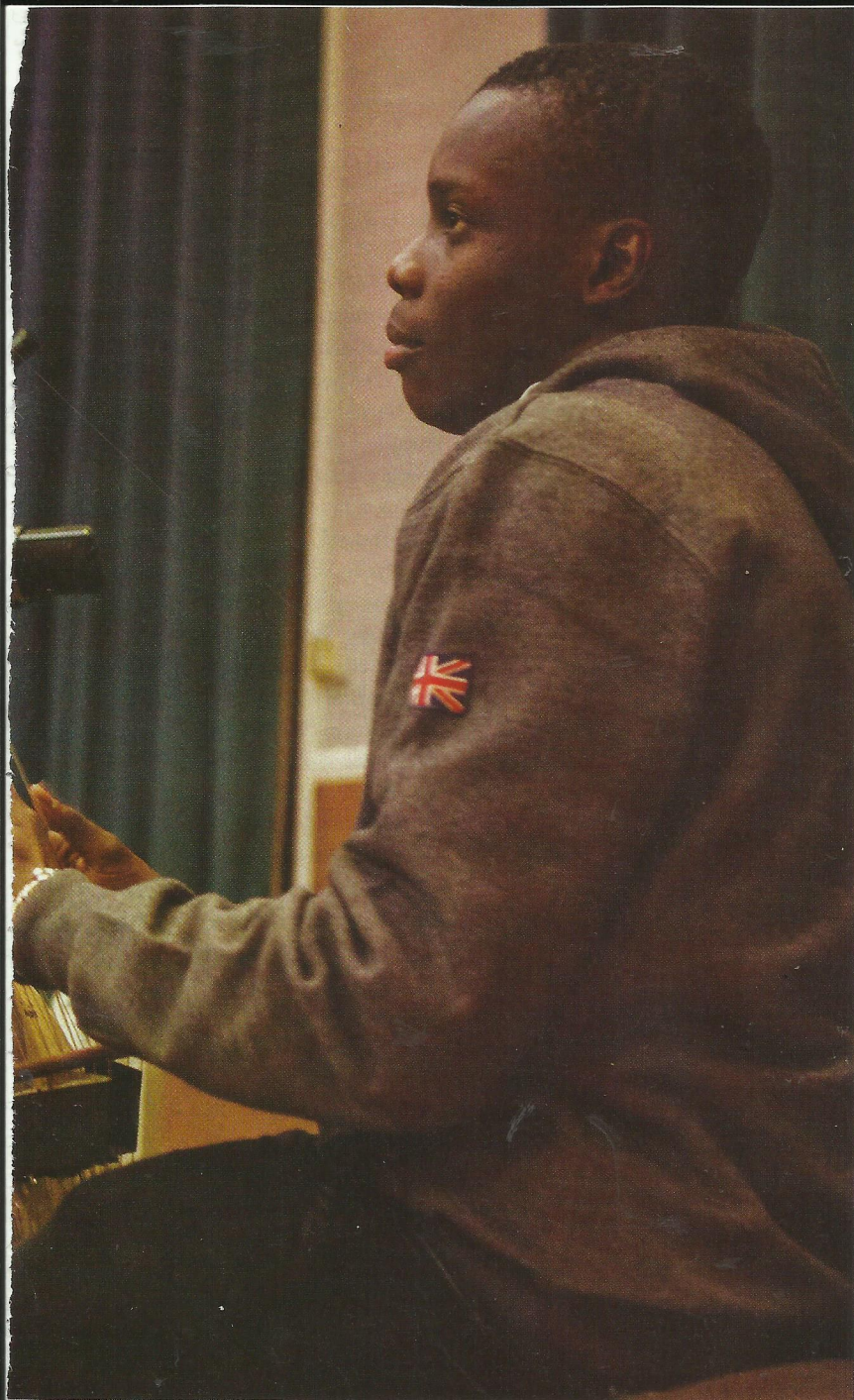
A lot of the big pieces for the kora, like 'Alla L'aa Ke' and 'Jula Jekere', were composed in the early 20th century by kora players in villages and towns like Bansang. It's only about 160km north of Kaabu,

Mandinka Empire. The Gambia was the hub of kora creativity, with its fair share of charismatic players.

Snuggled at the foot of Bansang's hill is the modest compound where the Jobartehs live, several mud brick houses clustered around a central courtyard, encircled by a straw fence. In the cool of the evenings, Amadu Bansang and his brothers would sit playing the kora, their wives and daughters singing with liquid voices, snapping their fingers in time to the bluesy melodies of the upper-river kora style. I was in heaven. But Amadu would wag his finger and say, "you've heard nothing yet. Go to Mali to find my nephew Sidiki. I swear, his fingers are propelled by *jinn*s."

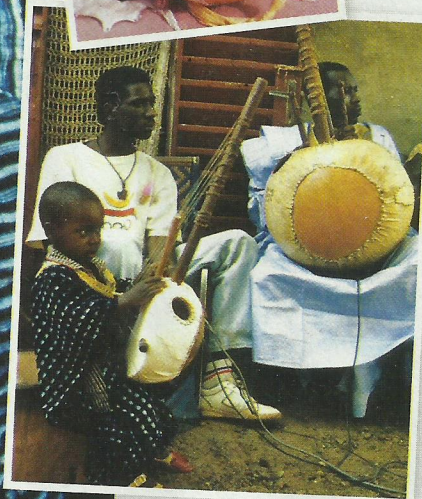
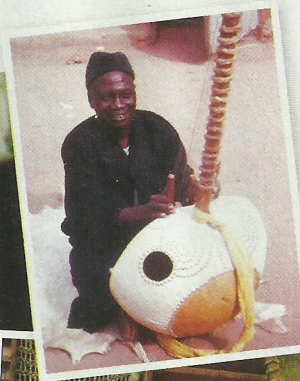
Under the stars, late into the night, Amadu and his brothers would reminisce about the good old days, telling vivid stories about the family, playing some of their favourite old kora pieces like 'Jaka', about a place in Guinea where many learned Mande scholars came from, and 'Nya Wuleng', the only instrumental piece in the kora repertoire. This was

The new album is a testament to the power of the kora to transcend generations and borders



TOUMANI & SIDIKI

Lumpy N'diaye



Clockwise from left: Sidiki senior with Toumani's younger brother Mamadou; Amadu Bansang Jobarteh; Sidiki junior with Djelimady and Ballaké Sissoko. Below: Three generations of the Diabaté family in 1995, Sidiki senior (centre) with Mamadou (left) and Sidiki junior (right), middle row (left to right) includes Fanta Sacko, Toumani's wife, and Sidiki's three wives, Fatou Suso, Mariam Kouyaté and Nene Koita, Toumani's mother, and Toumani is back right.

one of Amadu's favourites. With its free-flowing triple-time rhythm, it sounded like bells ringing. "It means 'red eyes,'" Amadu explained, "because of Musa Molo, the last king of the Gambia. Before the British came, Musa Molo was a ruthless and powerful king. When he got ready for battle, his eyes would go bright red. But the British colonials gave him an injection and he became paralysed. He would lie on a pallet on the ground and listen to this piece being played for him and feel sad. He died in 1931."

'Nya Wuleng' is a piece of oral history that has almost disappeared forever; no one plays it any more, not since Amadu died in 2001. Toumani and his son Sidiki only learned of it through recordings.

The story of the Diabatés is a fascinating window on how griots used to move through the Mande world over many hundreds of miles on foot or horseback, with their families, carrying their instruments and playing for warlords and Muslim clerics along the way, picking up new repertoires and styles.

Sometime in the late 19th century, Toumani's great-grandfather, an *ngoni* player, left Galen, Mali, and moved to the Gambia. Eventually he settled in Bansang, and had several sons, one of whom was Amadu, Toumani's great-uncle. But the family has kept on moving. Amadu left Bansang in his early 20s, and moved westwards towards the Atlantic coast of the Gambia, looking for patronage. Sidiki left Bansang just after World War II, and headed eastwards, eventually settling in Bamako, where he became one of the most celebrated musicians of the early years of Mali's independence. He was dubbed the 'King of the Kora' at the FESTAC Black Arts festival in 1977, and was awarded national medals of honour from the governments of both Guinea and Mali.

The family history, the spirit of adventure, the pain of separation, the journey of the kora between Mali and the Gambia and further afield, are all part of the *Toumani & Sidiki* story, making it a unique and richly textured album, a *tour de force*. The old pieces are reworked, but there are new tunes as well, like 'Lampedusa', a touching tribute to the immigrants who cross the Sahara, risking their lives to get to Europe. It's ancient strings in young hands.

"We're not going backwards, trying to play just how my father and great-uncle did these songs," says Toumani. "We have to do it our way. We're modern griots, we live in the city, we're connected to the world." His son nods vigorously, and lets his fingers fly across the kora, looking just like his granddad. ♦

+ **ALBUM** *Toumani & Sidiki* is a *Top of the World* in this issue, track 3 on the CD

+ **PODCAST** Hear more music from the new album on this issue's podcast

Photo courtesy of Toumani Diabaté

