

The Kora & Ghanian Bells

Aisha Gueye

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Whenever I look at an object, it is rare that I view it as anything more. A computer is just a computer and not an advanced piece of technology that aids people in their everyday lives. A camera is just a camera and not a keepsake for remembered and forgotten memories. An instrument is just an instrument and not a musical symbol of culture and life. Even as I write this essay I find it hard to think of what these objects would be if not just merely objects. Why is it hard to view objects as things of active matter? Why can't we as humans recognize the significance of objects? It is not our fault that we have such a close minded perspective on life, it is simply our default setting. But with that said, it's important that we branch out and stray away from the "norm" of our mentality and appreciate all things in the world. I learned this while working on researching my personal object, a Kora, and Ghanaian Bells from the BGC Study Collection. What I've taken away from this process of looking closely is that it's important to value all aspects of objects and push yourself to learn more about them.

The Kora has 22 strings and is played with the fingers. The Kora hangs on the wall of my living room, as though it's a decoration, and not a symbol of years of West African culture. When I took the Kora off of the wall and immediately closed my eyes to shield myself from the vast amount of dust flying off of the Kora. This dust signified the Kora's purpose in my house, merely a decoration. The first thing I noticed were the strings. The rest of the instrument is brown and a beige color, and the strings were green. There was a distinct contrast in the color scheme. Though it's used as a decoration, when I looked at it up close it wasn't exactly picture perfect. The strings, the most important part of the Kora, were sticking out at the sides as if they were made in an arts and crafts class and cut with scissors.

My Kora has eight strings. The way that it's lined up, there were 4 on each side and they

all stood behind each other vertically. The first two in the front looked like they were made with two strings and were twisted together into one. The other six lined up behind these two only have one string; I wondered what the purpose in doing that was. Does it make a different sound? Is it for more stability? The possibilities floated around in my head. The next thing I noticed were the wood pieces at the sides holding the strings together. The biggest part of the Kora is the Calabash, which is the bulbous shaped part of the Kora's body. As I turned it around, the calabash went from a plain bulbous shape, to an instrument with symbols. There is a pattern of circles all around this side, that I assumed were metal until I touched them. They looked and felt rusted. I also noticed the carvings on it, but I didn't know what they represented. The texture of the Kora varied from smooth to bumpy to rough.

When I first looked through all the objects in the study collection, it was very difficult to find one that I could compare to my object. One of historical value, a symbol in culture, and an ethnic origin. At first I thought I could just look for another object from West Africa, but upon further inspection, I realized that there were no objects from West Africa in the collection. The day that we had to choose our objects, I asked if there were any instruments; and there were, just not in the collection. However, I was able to look at three different instruments: Banana Bells, Thumb Bells, and the Gankogui, all from Ghana. As soon as I saw the Gankogui, I knew that was the instrument that I was going to choose. It had all the qualities that I mentioned previously: "one of historical value, a symbol in culture, and an ethnic origin.

Like the Kora, the Ghanaian Bells, more traditionally known as Gankogui also have an interesting shape. When I first held the instrument, the first characteristic I noticed was how heavy it was. Upon further research, I found out that it was made of metal, which explained the weight. I was curious as to how the Gankogui was supposed to be played. Was I supposed to tap

the sides with my fingers? Surely that wouldn't impact the sound of the instrument. However, my confusion subsided once I was handed the wooden stick that accompanies the instrument. . It was instinctive for me to take the stick and hit the metal instrument. The sound that the Gankogui made was not unusual, it sounded similar to what any other bell would sound like. Despite the usual sound, I thought it would be interesting to analyze it in the same way that I analyzed my Kora. As I examined the Gankogui, I wondered what the inspiration behind the design of it was. One bell is perceptibly bigger than the other. Maybe it was a cultural choice; or a choice for a variation of sound? At the very top of the Gankogui there's a hook whose purpose I do not understand. The texture was smooth, similar to that of a blank canvas, waiting for art to be made by the artist. The color was brown and black, though I'm not sure if that's a result of rusting or if it always looked like that.

One thing that the Kora and the Gankogui have in common is that they both originated in West Africa, however, they originated in different countries, and from different tribes. The Kora comes from the Jali people of West Africa and can be found in Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Mali, Senegal and the Gambia. Toumani Diabate, one of the most important Kora players, helped to bring Mali and the Kora to an international audience. On the other hand, the gankogui is a metal percussive instrument from the Ewe people in Ghana and can be found in many different West African countries..

Another analogy between the two instruments is their significance in the musical cultures in their countries and tribes. The Kora is an instrument that is very significant in the musical culture of West Africa. It has deep roots as an instrument of storytelling and folklore in 16th century West Africa. It is also part of oral traditions and is passed down through family generations. Children in the Jali tribes grow up with the history, stories, and music of their

culture and begin to learn how to play the Kora at a young age. The Kora has become popular in many different parts of West Africa and it's been adapted into the cultures of different tribes in West Africa. The Gankogui comes from the Ewe group in Ghana and it's the most important instrument in the culture of the Ewe people. Without it, the entire rhythm and framework of the music is impoverished. The Gankogui supplies the timeline against which all the other instruments play. Both instruments play a vital role in the culture of their tribes and embody generational traditions.

There is much more to an object than just its purpose or physical characteristics. It's important that we take the time to acknowledge the depth of the culture and the significance in the objects that we see and/or use in our everyday lives. I want you to walk away from this essay with the awareness to appreciate objects and see them as more than you usually perceive them as merely objects.