



DJEMBE

Introduction

A Djembe is a skin covered hand drum, shaped like a large goblet, and meant to be played with bare hands. It is a member of the membranophone family of musical instruments: a frame or shell (in the djembe's case it is a shell) covered by a membrane or drumhead made of one of many products, usually rawhide. The djembe originated in West Africa, and is an integral part of the region's musical tradition and culture. The djembe is now popular all over the world.

Origin

The djembe is a Mandé drum, found in all of West Africa, where it is one of the most common instruments. There is general agreement that the origin of the djembe is associated with a class of Mandinka/Susu blacksmiths known as Numu. The wide dispersion of the djembe drums throughout West Africa may be due to Numu migrations dating from the first millennium A.D.

Some modern players trace the djembe back 3,000 years to the Bamana ethnic group from the Wosolo region of what is now Mali. The Bamana people have a word "jebeara" or "unity drum."

Spelling "jembe" with the "dj" comes from the fact that French has no hard "j" sound like that found in English. The "dj" is used to indicate the hard "j" pronunciation. The French were instrumental in studying and describing African drumming to the world. However, colonization by the French is a sore spot for many West African people, and spelling jembe with the "d" can be a painful reminder of that. Since independence (1958-1960) African governments have been working toward indigenous ways of spelling their local languages in accordance with international standards of phonetic transcription.



Construction

Traditionally crafted djembe drums are carved in one single piece from hollowed out hardwood trees. Specific types of wood depend upon the forests accessible to the drum makers. Some West African hardwoods used for musician quality instruments (carved in Guinea, Senegal, Mali, and Ivory Coast) include dimba (bush mango), lenge, bois rouge, acajou, iroko, hare or khadi, and dugura.

In the mid 1990's furniture makers in Ghana took note of the commercial success being experienced by traditional djembe drum carvers. The crafts people in Ghana began to carve and sell djembes from Tweneboa, a soft wood. Using soft wood required a much thicker shell, which fails to produce the resonant and explosive sound of a hardwood djembe. The commercial savvy of the furniture importers led to a very large number of these soft wood djembes coming into the United States.

Properly made drums are not smooth on the interior but have a spiral channel inside that enhances the tonal qualities. Splinters and rough carving inside is a sign of a hastily made drum. The drumheads are typically made from goatskin, and more rarely can be antelope, zebra, deer or calf. West African goat skins are known to djembe musicians as having a different sound than goats domesticated in the USA. Goats raised in West Africa experience a rougher existence, different climate feed, which apparently toughens and hardens the skins in a way that impacts their sound quality.

Technique

The proper sound is achieved with minimum effort for maximum effect. The key is to either focus or disperse the hand's energy, and position the hand in the correct place. The bass and tone notes require focused energy, while the slap requires dispersed energy. Striking the skin with the palm and fingers toward the drum's center produces a bass note; striking the skin near the rim produces the tone and slap.



Tuning

Djembe drums are tuned by evenly pulling the vertical ropes very tightly so that a system of metal rings brings the skin down over the drum shell. These verticals are tightened all the way around, perhaps taking multiple passes, and using a lever of some sort. Nice even and parallel rows of twists, as low as possible, are the ideal.

When a new skin is being put on a drum, this whole pulling process is preceded by soaking a skin in water until it is very pliable. That wet skin is placed on the drum with the ring system while the rope verticals gently pull the rings down a bit. Then it's left to dry completely before the vigorous pulling and twisting described above happens.

A masterful djembe player may be referred to as a "djembefola," -- "the one who makes the djembe speak."

Spiritual connection

The djembe is said to contain three spirits: the spirit of the tree, the spirit of the animal of which the drum head is made, and the spirit of the instrument maker. The djembe is also known as the magical drum, mushroom shaped drum, and the Devil Drum. It is legend that the djembe and/or the tree from which it is created was a gift from a Jinn or malevolent demigod, male counterpart to the more familiar Genie. Properly crafted djembe drums are carved in one single piece from hollowed out trees called Dimba, or Devil Wood. Drums made from slats or segments of wood glued together are considered by traditionalists to have no soul of the tree. In earlier times and still in some rural areas djembe were used to send messages over long distances.
