

ROOTS OF RHYTHM - CHAPTER 4: THE *DJEMBE* FROM GUINEA

Instrument:

Djembe, a goblet-shaped signal drum

Country:

Guinea



Flag:

The colors are pan-African. Red refers to the spirit of sacrifice, gold represents the sun and also wealth, and green signifies the forests.



Size and Population:

Guinea has an area of 94,926 square miles, with a coastline of 198 miles. It is slightly smaller than Oregon. Its population is estimated at 9,246,462 as of July 2004.



Geography and Climate:

Guinea consists of four zones: the coastal plain, with the capital Conakry; the northwestern Fouta Djallon hill region; the northern dry lowlands; and the hilly, forested area of the southeast. The country is shaped like a boot standing on its toe, and Guinea's shores are on the equatorial North Atlantic near the bottom of the bulge of West Africa. Its neighbors are Guinea-Bissau, Senegal, Liberia, Mali, Côte d'Ivoire and Sierra Leone.

The eastern part of the country is heavily forested, although it is far from virgin forest because of fires and farming. The improving road system is a help for travel, but not good for the forests since timber is now much more accessible for cutting. Forest elephants and other fauna are in decline because of poachers and loss of habitat through logging and the spread of farming.

The climate is tropical and Guinea is one of the wettest countries in West Africa. Its rainy season is from May to October, cool weather falls between November and February, and from December to February the *harmattan* (har-mah-ton) winds blow in from the Sahara and the skies are grey with sand.

Background and History:

People from the Sahara Desert probably migrated to the area of Guinea around 2000 B.C. They hunted and began to grow rice and other crops. The area came under the control of several empires between 1000 and the 1400s including the Mali Empire, founded by the Malinké people. The Portuguese arrived at the coast during the 15th century, and soon after that the slave trade began. The French arrived in this part of Africa early in the 1800s, and by 1849 claimed the coastal region as a French protectorate. An African national hero, Samori Touré, led the fight

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against French rule until his capture in 1898. There was fierce resistance to the French control of Guinea and one of Touré's descendants, Ahmed Sekou Touré, emerged as a leader in this struggle. When Guinea declared its independence as a republic in 1958, Sekou Touré became the first president.

By 1967, under Touré's control, Guinea became a socialist nation based on the systems in Russia and China. Conditions became worse in the country, however, and the United States sent large shipments of food. Touré was not tolerant of his political opponents, and in 1977 there was a popular revolt against his policies, which forced him to relax his restrictions on his adversaries and release political prisoners. Despite his political troubles, President Touré supported the arts for two and a half decades during his rule. After his death in 1984, this support diminished and musicians increasingly sought work outside of the country.

Soon after Touré died, Colonel Lansana Conté led a coup to take over the government. He abandoned the socialism established by Touré and adopted a free enterprise system. Today, Guinea's economy depends mostly on its mining industry and new economic ties to other countries.

Culture:

Most of people of Guinea are black Africans represented by the Fulani, Malinké and Susu groups. While French is the official language, there are many African languages spoken in the country. Many of the languages are named after the various groups of people in different regions, for example, Fula for the Fulani in the central hills, Malinké in the north, and Susu in the south near the capital Conakry. When you visit the country, you can get by if you speak some French, but people certainly appreciate attempts to speak the African languages.

Most houses in the cities are rectangular in shape and made of mud bricks or wood. Those in the country are round huts made of sun-dried bricks with a thatched roof. People who live near the coast eat mostly rice, while those inland eat corn and millet. In the cities, people wear mostly Western-style clothes, but the traditional men's garment is a loose robe called a *boubou* (bu-bu), while women's dress consists of a blouse and brightly colored skirt tied at the waist.

There are many religions practiced in Guinea. The country is about 85 percent Muslim, 8 percent Christian, and 7 percent African traditional religion. Virtually all believe in reincarnation and embrace the existence of a supreme being.

Traditional music that includes *djembé* (gem-bay) drum music remains popular with most of the people in Guinea, despite the rise in popularity of more modern forms like hip-hop, rock and reggae. National and international stars like Talib Kweli, Paul Simon, Mick Fleetwood in America and Sekouba Bambino in Guinea have blended western instruments with African rhythms and instruments, and the two types of music still exist side by side.

Music: Instruments & Rhythms

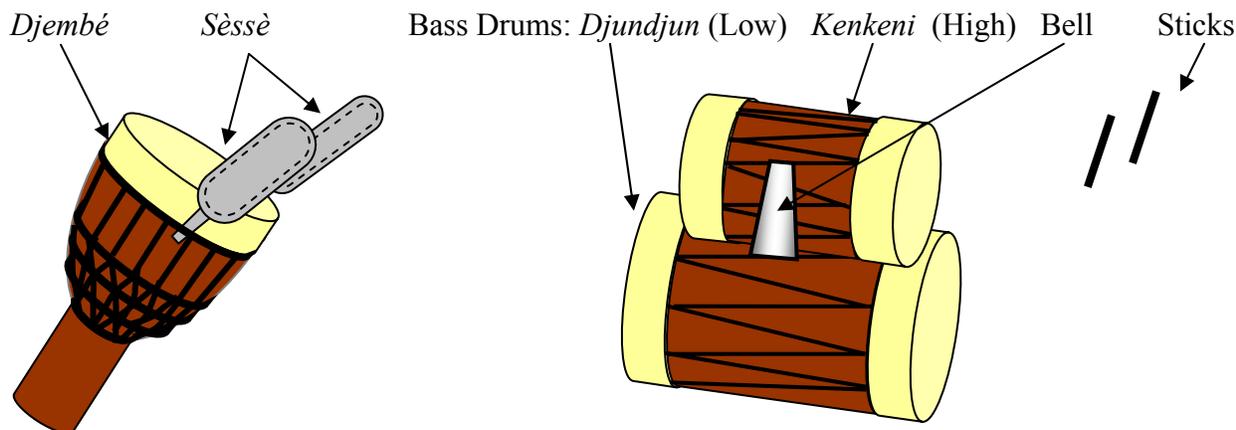
Instruments: There are many types of musical instruments in Guinea and the surrounding countries. They include the *balaphon* (bah-lah-fo), the xylophone, the *kora* (ko-rah), a combination harp and lute, and the single-string fiddle, the *goge* (goh-jay). These instruments are

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often used by *griots* (gree-oh), traditional storytellers who learn the history of a people and sing it along with praise songs at important events. The most important drum, the goblet-shaped *djembé*, is often played in an ensemble with other drums and a bell.

The shape of the *djembé* gives it a variety of tones, from very low to very high and from very soft to very loud. The goatskin or antelope drumhead is stretched over the top and pulled tight with a system of metal rings and rope. The drum is played with the hands, and often carried with a shoulder strap but sometimes is placed on a stand. Another important feature of the *djembé's* sound is that drummers might choose to attach large sheets of tin with loose rings, called *sèssè* (seh-seh), to the drum to change the sound from a pure tone to a buzzing effect when the drum is struck. Usually the *djembé* is played in a drum ensemble, and there are typically four parts:

1. *Djembé 1* – usually the lead drummer
2. *Djembé 2* – this can be the same size as *Djembé 1* but tuned lower
3. Bell - attached to the bass drums and played with a stick
4. *Djundjun* (jun-jun), *Sangba* (song-bah), and *Kenkeni* (keng-keh-knee) – a set of three bass drums played with sticks; this exercise will not use the medium-toned *Sangba*



Rhythms: There are many different rhythms played by the ensemble, but the two that we will use here are *Aconcon* (ah-kong-kong) with eight counts, and *Doundoumba* (doon-doom-bah) with six counts. The identity of a particular rhythm is found in the bass drum parts with its longer pattern. When a performance is about to begin, the lead drummer plays a signal or “call.” This is a rhythmic pattern that brings the drummers together to play. Once it is started, the signal tells other drummers in the area to come and play. They all finish the call and begin the main rhythm.

Listen & Play Along:

Note to teachers: if instruments are not readily available, consider having students make their own (a general activity for making drums can be found in the Roots of Rhythm: Introduction Section) or encourage them to improvise - using everyday items such as buckets, containers, phone books, desk tops, etc., as instruments. Rhythms can also be created with body percussion including hand clapping, foot tapping, finger snapping, etc.

Listen to Tracks 37-38 of the Roots of Rhythm Companion CD to hear the sound of the djembé. Now it's time to play along. If you don't have any of these African instruments, use substitutes

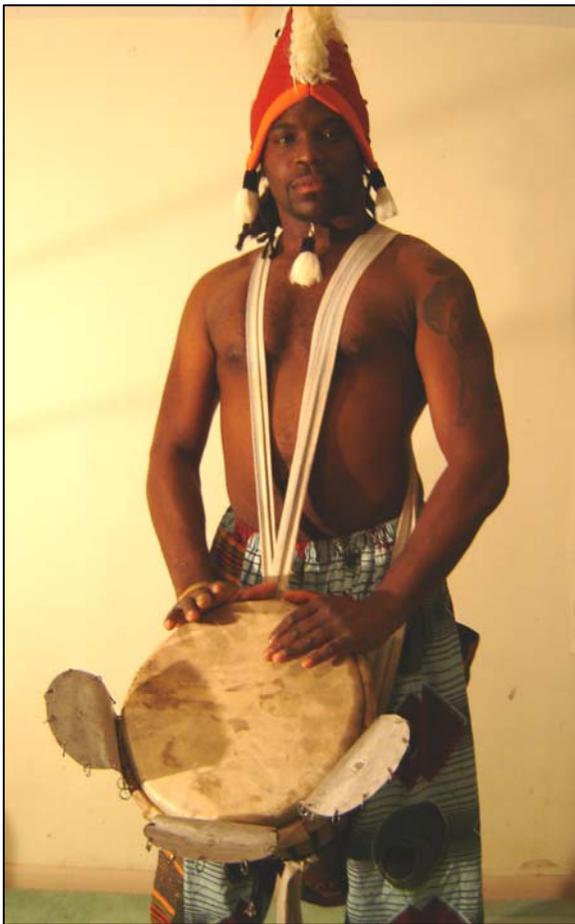
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like conga drums for the *djembés*, small and large tom-toms for the *kenkeni* and *djundjun*, and a cowbell. Or, play along on books or cardboard boxes.

Listen to Tracks 31-41 of the *Roots of Rhythm* Companion CD and play along by improvising some rhythms on your instrument. Listen to the pulse of the bass drums to keep the beat steady. Listen to the beats and copy the sound. Play just one hit of a count to start out. Then add other hits in the rhythm, as you feel comfortable. Remember, these are authentic African rhythms.

Practice the rhythms of the drum as shown in the box notation in the Resources section, and then play along again with some of the rhythms starting with *djembé* 1 in *Aconcon*. To get the right rhythm, say, “I like...to drum...with you. I like...to drum...with you” then add the correct drum hits. Read the notation in the Resources section and play part or all of the *Aconcon* rhythm, and also the *Doundoumba* rhythm, with other drummers. Begin with the Drum Call.

Djembé and Performer:



Olugbala Manns



Photographs by Craig Woodson.

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Resources: Two Rhythms for the *Djembe* Ensemble

Beginning of Drum Call

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
<i>Djembe</i> 1	Now.....let's play.....so.....come on..... get your drum.....															
	R		L	R		L		R	L		R	L	R			

Aconcon Rhythms

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
<i>Djembe</i> 1	I liketo drum.....with you. I like..... to drum.....with you															
	R	L		R	L		R	L	R	L		R	L		R	L

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
<i>Djembe</i> 2	I like..... to play the drum.....I like.....to play the drum.....															
	R	L		R	L	R	L		R	L		R	L	R	L	

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Bell	BellbellI like.....the bell.....															
	R					R			R	R		R	R			

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Bass Drum	Bass.....bass.....I like.....the bass.....															
	I					I			I	I		I	I			

Please note: the Bell is attached to the Bass Drum and is normally played by the same person, but the two instruments could be played by two people.

Doundoumba Rhythm

	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
<i>Djembe</i> 1	Let's play a drum..... Let's play a drum..... Let's play a drum..... Let's play a drum.....																							
	R	L	R	L			R	L	R	L			R	L	R	L			R	L	R	L		

	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
<i>Djembe</i> 2	We.....can play.....now. We.....can play.....now. We.....can play.....now. We.....can play.....now																							
	R		L	R		L	R		L	R		L	R		L	R		L	R		L	R		L

	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
Bell	Ican play.....the bell.....Doun.....doum.....bathe sound.....of A.....fri.....ca.....																							
	R		R	R		R	R		R		R		R	R		R	R		R		R		R	

	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
Bass	Bass.....Doun.....doum.....ba.....the sound.....of A.....fri.....ca.....																							
High							I						I						I					
Low	I												I	I					I	I				

Please note: the Bell and Bass Drums are normally played by the same person, but these instruments can also be played by two people.

Key to notation:

R or **L** = Center Damp - Slap the drum with the fingers apart near the drumhead's center, and keep the hand on the surface for a brief moment.

R or **L** = Rim Tone - Hit the drum with the fingers together near the drumhead's rim, and bounce the hand off the surface. Also hit the bell with the stick.

r or **l** = Center Bass Tone - Hit the drum with the palm or stick on the drumhead's center, and bounce off of the surface, used here only on the bass drums.

1, 2, 3 = Counts in **bold** are intended to separate groups of counts for easier viewing.