

African Origins of the Banjo

Music served as a crucial outlet for self and communal expression among African slaves in the New World, leading to various innovations. One was the development of the modern banjo, a stringed instrument originally made out of gourds and skins, and adapted from several West and Central African communities. There are various theories on the evolution of the name, with some scholars attributing it to the *bandurria*, a Spanish folk musical instrument, while others claim connections to the *bandore* or *bandora*, a stringed instrument that was developed in 16th century England. Notwithstanding prior existence of similar instruments in Europe and, indeed, the Arab world, African slaves did not have access to or the purchasing power to acquire such instruments and subsequently had to create the ones they used, much like their musical talents were largely self-taught. They either built them from scratch or fell back on knowledge transferred from Africa. The gourd-bodied instruments that eventually emerged as the banjo in the US were thus fashioned by slaves mostly in the American South and Appalachia, and would go through a process of being defined variously as *bangie*, *bangoe*, *banjar*, *banjil banza*, *banjer* and *banjar*.

Another theory cites the Quimbundo (also spelled Kimbundu) word *m'banza*, which means *city* or *town*, as another possible source of the word *banjo*. Quimbundo is the language spoken by one of the largest ethnic groups in modern Angola. When Portuguese colonizers and North American slave owners began calling the instrument *banjo*, they may have been influenced by the word *m'banza*. They may also have been influenced by the word *banzo*, which Brazilian slaves generated as an expression of the grief they felt for being held in bondage. Interestingly, Brazilian slaves typically expressed *banzo* when they played the *banjo*. The word *banzo* may have also come from the word *m'banza*.

Even Thomas Jefferson, America's third President and principal author of the Declaration of Independence acknowledged the African roots of the banjo in 1785. According to him, "The instrument proper to them [the Negroes] is the Banjar, which they brought hither from Africa, and which is the original of the guitar, its chords being precisely the four lower chords of the guitar" (Epstein 354).

But the banjo should not be confused as an African instrument. A plucked lute of the New World African Diaspora, it is descended from several related traditional African plucked lutes. It is therefore a New World hybrid, a part of the creolization process of other African social, artistic and religious survivals in the Americas. One of the likely ancestors of the banjo is the *akonting* (also spelled *ekonting*), a folk lute played by the Jola people of Senegal, Gambia and Guinea-Bissau. Variations of this instrument include the *xalam* of Senegal¹ and the *kora*, which is played in Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Mali, Senegal, Burkina Faso and The Gambia. Other African lutes include the *ñopata*, the *busunde*, the *kisinta* and the *kusunde*, all of which are found in Guinea-Bissau; and the *bunchundo*, which is played in The Gambia, Senegal and Guinea-Bissau. The *ngoni*, another such instrument, is common in the Wassoulou region, which covers parts of Mali, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire. Although African slaves developed the modern banjo, in the US it was popularized in 19th century blackface, Euro-American minstrel shows, which, ironically, caricatured the slaves, at best depicting them as buffoons.

Scholars determine that as early as the 17th and 18th centuries, African slaves in the Caribbean and Latin America were playing banjos; this was well before any banjos were reported in the Americas. Banjos were relatively inexpensive and for this reason banjo playing, making and manufacturing became widely popular among working class and poor people in both urban and rural areas, regardless of race. However, as Michael Theodore Coolen also points out, there were other reasons why it was popular among African slaves: “More important, it was an instrument associated with some of the most important aspects of traditional culture: genealogy, rites of passage (personal identity), healing and divining, and other functions which are still a vital part of African culture” (131).

The banjo and banjo family instruments have played a key role in the advancement of indigenous musical forms like jazz, folk, bluegrass, blues and country music, as well as foreign forms like Jamaican *mento*, North African folk pop music and Irish traditional music.

¹The *xalam* exists by different names in a number of other West African countries, including Mali, Gambia, Senegal, Niger, Northern Nigeria, Northern Ghana, Burkina Faso and the Western Sahara.



This photo features Daniel Laemouahuma Jatta, a Jola scholar and musician from Gambia, who pioneered the research and documentation of one of the banjo's principal ancestors, the *akonting*. In this photo he plays the *akonting* against the backdrop of *The Banjo Player*, a painting by William Sidney Mount, as if to reiterate the ancestral connections between both instruments. (Source: "Ekonting: Afro-beat / Roots Music / Folk." *MySpace*. 2003-2009. Web. 20 Jan. 2010)

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