

Musical Ancestries: West Africa Script

NARR: Eleven year-old Akisha simply adored her “Nana” (a Ghanaian nickname for grandmother). Nana, a musician, was born and raised in Ghana, West Africa. Later in life, she came to the United States. She had shared many wonderful stories with Akisha about the fascinating music and traditions of West Africa, and now, they were on their way there! Their first stop was the country of **GUINEA**.

NANA: Akisha, do you remember my telling you about a tradition called **Griot**?

AKISHA: Yes, ma’am.

NANA: “Griot” is actually a French word – there’s a great deal of French influence in Africa. The **Griot people** are also called “**Jali**” in most parts of West Africa. They’ve all descended from just a very few families who are the musicians and storytellers. Through these families, *all* authentic traditional music, dances and stories are preserved by “**oral tradition**”, or word of mouth. It’s like the African-American spirituals that were memorized and passed down through many generations, long before they were ever written down.

AKISHA: But Nana, if it’s all done by memory, don’t they ever make mistakes and remember it wrong?”

NANA: Oh my dear, have you ever made a mistake singing “*Row, Row, Row Your Boat?*”

AKISHA: (smiling) No...

NANA: It is much the same thing. These stories, songs and dances are part of *who* the Griot people *are*. Since they learn these things from birth, it would be almost impossible for them to remember them incorrectly or forget them. Watch and listen to my friend **Sibo Bangoura** singing this traditional West African song called “*Nan Fulie*.” It tells the story of the Griot people and their proud tradition of being the “Keepers” of the music, dance and storytelling.

NARR: As Sibou sang, he played a **kora** – an instrument that has a tall bridge in the center that supports 21 strings. It looks a lot like a harp mounted on a gourd-shaped lute.

Then, Sibou played a **djembe** – a goblet-shaped drum with a head that’s tuned with a rope around the top. He played it with his hands only, using many different patterns and rhythms.

NANA: Akisha, you might find it interesting to know that some of these elders have said that the djembe’s name comes from the saying “*Anke djé, Anke bé,*” which means, “Everyone gather together in peace.”

AKISHA: What a nice way to name it!

NARR: From Guinea, Akisha and Nana headed northeast to the neighboring country of **MALI**. There they saw a performance of the **African Classical Music Ensemble** by the banks of the **River Niger**, a crescent-shaped river that touches five West African countries. The **singer**, a legendary Malian vocalist, **Kasse Mady Diabate**, performed a song called, ‘*There was a Time.*’

NANA: He has a lovely voice, doesn’t he, Akisha?

AKISHA: Yes... and he puts so much meaning into the words!

NANA: That is called expression. You know, I’ve met one of the musicians in the ensemble...the **guitarist**, **Sona Maya Jobarteh**.

She's one of members of the five principal Griot families I told you about. She's also very famous.

AKISHA: Really!?! For what?

NANA: For playing the kora. You see, kora playing is reserved to just the Griot families. It is an important element of the **Mandingo** peoples of West Africa. Until Sona, it *had been* a tradition passed down *from father to sons only, by tradition*. She is the very first *female* to become prominent in playing the **kora**, which has made her quite famous.

AKISHA: I guess with all that competition, she must *really* be good!

NANA: Indeed she is – just listen.

NARR: Heading southeast out of the heart of Mali, Akisha and Nana now visited the republic of **BENIN**, where they experienced the traditional music of the **Yoruba** people. Many Yoruba live in southeastern Benin, but the majority of them live in southwestern **Nigeria**, and the music is shared by both countries.

NANA: Akisha, I know you'll *love* this music... it is a unique mixture of both ancient and modern traditions. And the **costumes** are just as colorful as the music! Plus, they have many elaborate **dances**.

NARR: Akisha was fascinated with everything, but her clear favorite was the ***Gáangan*-the talking drum**. Played with a curved mallet, the body of the instrument sits at the waist. The drummer uses arm pressure to change the pitch to sound like words in the Yoruba language. As a result, the ***Gáangan*** has an almost liquid sound, which is how it got its name, "talking" drum.

AKISHA: Nana, that drum's sound is so beautiful – and unusual! Did you see that the drummer imitates the rhythm of the dancers movements?

NANA: Great observation, Akisha!

AKISHA: I also like how the main vocalist sings a phrase, and then the rest of the singers answer him, almost like a chorus.

NANA: Oh, just look at you! You are really learning a lot! That technique is called “**Call and Response**,” and it is central to Yoruba music. But did you know that we also have this in many American music forms, too? Including the blues! Think about it – a phrase (the call), that’s repeated (another call), and then the answer (the response)! See? “Call and Response”... *(laughing)* you might just follow in my footsteps as a musician, after all!

AKISHA: That would be awesome, Nana! I’d love it!

NARR: From Benin, Akisha and her grandmother traveled west, to Nana’s home country, **GHANA**. There they saw a breathtaking performance by a group called **Sankofa**. The word “Sankofa” comes from the **Akan** tribe in Ghana. It is represented by a mythical bird looking backwards, capturing a precious egg.

NANA: The literal translation of the word “Sankofa” is, “*It is not taboo to fetch what is at risk of being left behind.*” Its symbol conveys the same idea, and because of this deep meaning, you’ll find that many groups and organizations use the word “Sankofa” in their names.

AKISHA: I like the symbol... and you’re right, it *does* look like what the word means.

NANA: I think you’ll enjoy the music of Ghana, Akisha. First of all, it includes one of your favorites, the **Gáangan drum** – the “talking drum” of Yoruba.

AKISHA: *Yesss!*

NANA: There are also a number of other **drums** pitched from low to high, and even some with *no* pitch at all! But I suspect you'll find the next instrument to be very interesting – it's called the **balafon**.

AKISHA: It sorta looks like a xylophone or...a marimba! 'Cause it's made of wood.

NANA: Oh, good for you! Yes, it DOES look like a marimba. As a matter of fact, it's an ancestor of *both* those instruments! The balafon is made from rounded wooden bars with gourds underneath, which help the sound to resonate. It's played with mallets.

AKISHA: This is *sooo* cool!

NARR: Balafons are pitched instruments, and they're used to play melodies. Usually having between 16 to 27 bars (or keys), they have different scales, often depending on the country where they come from. For instance, Benin mostly uses a **five-tone (or pentatonic) scale**, but those from Mali tend to use a **6-tone (or whole tone) scale**. There are even some that are tuned to the **tones of the spoken language of the region!**

According to the oral stories from the Griots (or the Jali), balafons originally come from Mali, and have been played in Africa since the 12th century.

AKISHA: OK, Nana, I just found my very fav...it gives me goosebumps! I've just gotta learn how to play the balafon!

NANA: (*smiling*) Oh, I promise you, Akisha, I'll get you one.

AKISHA: REALLY?!?

NANA: Really. I *promise*. Besides, we need to have another musician in this family – I can't be the *only* one!

AKISHA: (*giggling*) No, you can't. I'm *sooo* excited! Thank you, Nana. I love you – I'm so glad you're my grandma!

NANA: Oh, I love you, too, Akisha. Nobody could be prouder of her granddaughter than I am!

NARR: As they headed home, Akisha thought back on all their wonderful experiences together...all the things she'd learned about West African culture and music, in all its variety and beauty. She turned to Nana and gave her a big hug.

AKISHA: Thank you, Nana, for taking me to your home. I feel like I got to know you when *you were my age*.

NANA: (*smiling*) My dear girl, in a real sense, you have. You've heard so many kinds of music, rhythms, and melodies; you've heard ancient stories through songs of the Griot; and seen wondrous instruments invented and crafted by our people. It has been my deep joy to share West African culture with you. From now on, you will hear the voice of Africa singing through *all* kinds of music.

NARR: On the flight home, they heard a lovely piece by Stephen J. Anderson, ***African Skies***. Akisha immediately recognized the West African influences that she'd just experienced. See if *you* can hear some of them....