
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY SABAR DRUMS: INNOVATIONS IN ORGANOLGY AND PERFORMANCE PRACTICES IN SENEGAL AND THE DIASPORA

By

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Abstract: This article examines modifications in the construction of sabar drums and performance practice nearly twenty years into the twenty-first century. Sabar, a drum and dance tradition of the Wolof people, has been an important part of everyday life in Senegal for many centuries, ranging from life cycle ceremonies to holiday celebrations, political and sporting events, and generally for entertainment. The sabar drum itself is unique in its physical appearance, having a goatskin head attached to the body of the drum with a distinct, intricate system of lacing and pegs. Oral and written histories indicate that the sabar drum used a peg lacing system for many centuries until very recently. This article describes how djembe-style sabar heading (foru jembé) has begun to gain traction over the past decade after centuries of traditional peg lacing. Ethnographic research shows that this remarkable shift from peg lacing to djembe-style heading is the result of a complex web of reasons ranging from climate change and timber trafficking to the globalisation of the djembe industry. Also considered is the relatively new use of metal drum stands, a practice which has proliferated alongside the djembe-style sabar heading. These innovations in organology and performance practice reflect a shift toward greater sustainability of instruments, as well as a need to diversify performance techniques.

Keywords: Sabar, drum, Senegal, Wolof griot, djembe, climate change, ecomusicology.

Introduction

Sabar drumming is an integral part of everyday life in Senegal, accompanying baptisms, weddings, circumcisions, Muslim celebrations, political meetings, wrestling matches, and neighbourhood dance parties. Sabar drums are also the rhythmic backbone of the popular music genre known as mbalax, made famous by the world-renowned singer, Youssou N'Dour. The traditional sabar ensemble has gained prominence worldwide through artists such as the late Doudou N'Diaye Rose, who toured internationally for many decades, bringing sabar drumming to audiences in East Asia, Europe, and North America. In 2018, the blockbuster film, *Black Panther*, featured sabar drumming throughout its award-winning soundtrack,

further cementing the global reach of sabar drums and those who play them, like the Wolof *gëwël*, hereditary musicians who have specialised in sabar drumming for many centuries.

This article examines modifications in the construction of sabar drums and performance practice nearly twenty years into the twenty-first century. Played with one hand and one stick, the sabar drum itself is unique in its physical appearance, having a goatskin head attached to the body of the drum with a distinct, intricate system of lacing and seven pegs. Oral histories indicate that the sabar drum has used a peg lacing system for centuries until very recently (Tang 2007: 31). This article describes how djembe-style sabar heading (*foru jembé*) has gained traction over the past decade after centuries of traditional peg lacing. My ethnographic research shows that this remarkable shift from peg lacing to djembe-style heading is the result of a complex web of reasons ranging from climate change and timber trafficking to the globalisation of the djembe industry. Also considered is the relatively new use of metal drum stands, a practice which has proliferated alongside the djembe-style sabar heading. These innovations in organology and performance practice reflect a shift toward greater sustainability of instruments, as well as a need to diversify performance techniques.

Making sabar drums: A collaboration between *lawbe* and *gëwël*

Among the Wolof, the traditional social structure followed a tiered system in which the *gëer* (noble and freeborn) were on the highest rank and *ñeeño* (members of castes) were on a lower rank. The *ñeeño* were further subdivided into the following groups based on occupational speciality: *tëgg* (blacksmiths), *wuude* (leatherworkers), *ràbb* (weavers), *lawbe* (woodworkers) and *gëwël* (griots). Although in post-colonial times, caste no longer necessarily dictates one's professional occupation, woodworkers and carpenters are still primarily from the *lawbe* caste and musicians are mostly of *gëwël* lineage. Wolof percussionists, masters of the sabar drum, are almost exclusively from *gëwël* families as the sabar drumming tradition is a closely guarded tradition, passed down from one generation of *gëwël* percussionists to the next.

Although Wolof *gëwël* percussionists are primarily known for their mastery of sabar drumming, the drummers themselves are also the ones who build sabar drums. Members of the *lawbe* caste carve the basic sabar shells from tree trunks, but the bulk of the sabar construction, which includes the intricate system of pegs and lacing of the goatskin head, depends on the *gëwël*'s artistry and skill.

Drawing upon Roda's work on the tabla industry, the sabar industry can be viewed as an "ecosystem in which artisans, instruments, musicians, workshops and retailers all interact and contribute" (2015: 315). Roda discusses how local tabla ecologies

depend on and are influenced by “tabla makers, material suppliers, retailers, musicians, families, and hired help as well as tools, materials, workshops, trade agreements, and weather patterns” (*ibid.*: 318). Although the sabar industry is not nearly as widespread or global as the tabla or djembe industry, it is nonetheless important to consider the overall instrumental ecology of sabar.

The construction of sabar drums depends on collaboration between members of the *lawbe* and *gévèl* castes. Sabar drummers usually have a long-term relationship with their *lawbe* as well as with the *wuude* from whom they purchase their goatskins. These relationships are built on business but ideally become relationships of mutual understanding and trust. *Gévèl* drummers often have one or two *lawbe* with whom they prefer to work, and from whom they regularly order sabar shells. Sometimes they will purchase pre-existing shells, but more often, they will order shells to their specifications. Since all drums are handmade and there is no standardisation in size, it is important for *gévèl* drummers to have a good relationship with *lawbe* they can trust. Drum shells are individually selected for their size, shape, weight, and thickness, all of which affect the drum’s potential sound. The *lawbe* use strong, high quality wood, and must be capable of carving the shell to the particular shape and thickness that is desirable by the drummer. A drum shell that is too thick may be too heavy, yet a thin shell is more likely to crack, and since the thickness of the wood affects the sound of the drum, the *lawbe* needs to find the sweet spot that will ultimately result in a drum that can produce the *gévèl*’s desired sound.

The trust between *gévèl* and *lawbe* also concerns the quality of the wood. Confidentially, some Dakar *gévèl* with whom I spoke said that when there is a shortage of *dimb* (the preferred wood for sabars), rather than being upfront about the shortage, many *lawbe* will try to sell sabar shells made from other types of wood, yet falsely market them as *dimb*. A few drummers complained they have been sold drum shells that they know is not *dimb*. The colour was different, the sound was different, and the strength was different, yet the *lawbe* insisted it was *dimb*. One drummer shared an anecdote about a *lawbe* with whom he had worked for many years and whose work he liked, but then this *lawbe* sold him a few sabars that were not up to standard and thus broke very quickly. The drummer then refused to buy any more sabar shells from him. The *lawbe* was very upset and came repeatedly to the *gévèl*’s house in tears, as he valued having him as his customer, but for the *gévèl*, the relationship was forever broken as the trust was no longer there.

The *lawbe* mostly make sabars by special order. On occasion many *lawbe* will make a few sabar shells in advance, but there is no “wholesale” industry for sabars in the way there is for tablas or djembes. The “wholesale” industry is more applicable to djembes, which many *lawbe* make for the marketplace, as djembes are commonly

sold in Senegalese markets as tourist items.¹ Lawbe who specialise in making sabars generally also make djembes and mortars and pestles as part of their livelihood. Sometimes sabar drummers will exchange an old sabar drum shell for a new one, turning the *lawbe's* centre into a sort of second-hand shop. But in general, sabars are not available for sale in markets or *lawbe* centres. Since they are played almost exclusively by *gëwël* percussionists, sabars are mostly made to order.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the primary *lawbe* centres from which Dakar-based *gëwël* drummers purchase their sabar shells are in Kolobane, Guediawaye, and Pikine (Guinaw Rail). Kolobane was the main *lawbe* centre for many decades, but recent urbanisation has made the Kolobane neighbourhood (which is in Dakar proper) more congested, and there became less and less open space available for dedicated *lawbe* work. As a result, many *lawbe* have since moved their workspaces to Guediawaye or Pikine, both suburbs of Dakar.

Traditional sabar drum construction (peg style)

Sabars have traditionally been made from *dimb* trees carved by *lawbe*, who transform tree trunks into sabar shells. After obtaining the shells, *gëwël* drummers ultimately make the sabar drums, providing the skilled labour necessary for attaching the goatskin heads through an intricate system of pegs and lacing. According to the late Masikh Mbaye, throughout the twentieth century, *dimb* has remained the preferred wood. As of 2019, the *lawbe* in Guediawaye, Pikine and Kolobane confirm that the best wood for sabars is still *dimb*.

The scientific name for *dimb* is *Cordyla pinnata*, but *dimb* has also been associated with *Cordyla Africana*. Part of the *Fabaceae* family, it is also referred to as bush mango wood, and is of similar durability to teak or mahogany. The *dimb* wood that ends up in the hands of Dakar *lawbe* comes primarily from Kolda and Velingara, both in the Casamance region of southern Senegal; however, other *dimb* also originates from Tambacounda or from other countries such as Cote d'Ivoire or Guinée Bissau.

Typically, the *dimb* that is used for sabars needs to be extremely dry. According to both *lawbe* and *gëwël*, *dimb* trees would rarely be felled specifically for the purpose of making sabar; most often the trees have already fallen or died naturally. Since *dimb* is also used for firewood as well as for making charcoal, in rural areas, people often collect *dimb* wood that has already fallen or died. *Dimb* is sometimes dried by placing it near fire, but most often the wood is dried naturally over time.

The *lawbe* initially cut long logs into the proper lengths of the drums (see Figure 1); they then use adzes to carve the general shape of the drum (see Figure 2).

¹ There is a big difference in quality between professional djembes and djembes made for tourism.



Figure 1.
Dimb log at the *lawbe* centre in
Guediawaye. Photo by Badara Ndione.



Figure 2.
Rough sabar shells in Guediawaye.
Photo by Badara Ndione.

The rough shell is then carved and cut to the proper thickness and filed down to the basic shell (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Finished sabar shells in Guediawaye. Photo by Badara Ndione.

After the *gèwèl* drummer secures the drum shell from the *lawbe*, he needs to purchase goatskins. The selection of skins comes with experience; skins will be examined for defects or for having too much fat, along with a general feel for the thickness of the goatskin. In general, the thinner the skin, the better the sound, but if the skin is too thin, it will break easily. There is a trick to finding the perfect medium-thin skin. For *mbëng-mbëngs* (medium-sized open-bottom sabars) the skin should be a bit thicker. A small skin can be used for heading two sabars, but a large skin can head as many as three sabars. *Mbëng-mbëngs* require less skin than *còls* (egg-shaped closed-bottom bass drums), and the type of drum being headed also determines how many drums can be headed by one skin.

For the open-bottom sabars (such as *mbëng-mbëng*) as well as closed-bottom *còls*, three slits in the skin are made per peg, which allows the peg to attach the skin to the shell. (Pegs are generally made of *niim*, also known as Acacia). Next, a long cotton string (*xiir*) is tightly wound around the skin many times, helping to hold the skin in place. This is the final step for *còls*; the next step is only for the open-bottom drums. Next, a series of small slits are cut between the top of the head and pegs; there are about six slits per peg, each slit being approximately one centimeter apart. A thick string (*fer*) is threaded through the slits using a v-shaped metal threader; then strips of *mees* (wide nylon ribbon) are threaded through the slits between each peg, then looped around the bottom of each peg. (In earlier times, cowskin was used for *mees*.) After the skin dries, the *mees* loops are tightened, and the pegs are bashed in with a large rock until the skin is taut and tight, creating a bright, sharp sound. A final shaving (with a thin razor blade) of the fine hairs of the skin completes the process.² (see Figure 4, right, for typical peg-style sabar heading on a *mbëng-mbëng*.)

The relationship between drummer and drum

In his article on the social life of musical instruments, Bates suggests a paradigm “that encompasses the full range of possible human-object-divine relations, as seen in instrument making, performance, musical healing, and numerous other domains” (2012: 371). In a similar vein, Dawe asks us to consider musical instruments *as* culture, noting that musical instruments should be seen as both material and social constructions (2007: 114). Dawe suggests that “musical instruments can transform minds and bodies, affecting states of mind as much as joints, tendons and synapses, ergonomics and social interaction – the joy of playing musical instruments is a joy that comes from exhilaration felt at physical, emotional and social levels” (2005: 60).

The relationship between *gèwèl* drummers and their sabar drums can indeed be very strong, and at times anthropomorphic. *Gèwèl* drummers often talk about their

² For a greater, detailed description of the drum heading process using pegs, see Tang (2007: 38-41).



Figure 4. Sabars with different headings: djembe-style (left) and peg-style (right).
Photo by Author.

favourite sabars as if they were their offspring, proudly noting which ones have the best sound, especially ones that have been newly headed. The personification of drums is indicated by the naming of drums in the same way that Wolof people name their children. This namesake tradition, called *turando*, dictates that a newborn child is named after a respected family member, friend, or religious figure. (It is a way of paying homage to that relative or friend, and the child is sometimes believed to take on the personality traits of his/her namesake.) Many *gëwël* drummers give their sabar drums names, whether they are painted onto the drums or not. In being named, sabar drums become important markers of a *gëwël* family's identity. If named after family members, the sabar drums themselves become a continuation of a family tradition and are vibrant markers of that family's identity (Tang 2007: 42).

Although sabars may not last as long as, say, violins, sabar drummers do become very attached to specific instruments, and often keep them for decades. Amadou Lamine Touré explains the potential longevity of sabar drums. He says:

Sabars can last a hundred years. They can be much older than a person. Maybe people didn't take care of them but they could keep them for a long time – put palm oil on them and take care of them – they can last a very long time. A few times each year you should oil it with palm oil (*diwtiir*). Some people keep their sabars twenty, forty years. Maybe you sell or give it to somebody else or trade it with another percussionist. But if cared for properly they can last a very, very long time. (Interview 2 March 2019)

According to sabar percussionists from older generations, many *gëwël* percussionists used to name their sabars, even if the names were not written on the drums themselves as they typically are now. For example, the *tambour major* Samba Maissa Seck had a drum called “Degg daw.” In the Wolof language, this translates as “listen and run”, meaning that if you were to hear this drum, it sounds so good that you would run away! Sitapha “Thio” Mbaye’s father, Massaer Mbaye, had a *cól* (closed-bottom bass sabar drum) called Jeri Sadio. It was aptly named after a king for its “royal” sound. Masikh Mbaye had a *cól* named Mbat Sarr that he would play in political meetings; indeed, it seems like every famous griot drummer had their own special *cól* with a name.

Although successful *gëwël* drummers often had their own *batterie* (set of drums), many younger drummers do not initially have the capital to own their own drums, so they usually play the drums that collectively belong to the griot family. Amadou Lamine Touré remembers how difficult it was when he was younger and would have to rent or borrow sabars from other people until he started playing with a successful mbalax band. Then only he had the capital to buy his own drums:

Before – people didn't have their own drums. But they would use the family drums, sharing the drums within the griot family. That's why you wouldn't have to buy sabar. Not everyone had a *batterie*. You have to have enough people in the family troupe to be hired but before – when I was young in Kaolack – I didn't have my own sabar. (Interview 2 March 2019)

Whether sabar drums are part of a *gëwël* family's *batterie* or are owned by individual drummers, it is clear that these instruments are highly valued by their players. However, much of their value has to do with how good they sound, which is a direct result of their heading. Of course, drums sound different every time they receive a new head, so every new heading is an opportunity to experience a drum

with an excellent sound. What makes one drum sound “good” over another one? Lamine Touré explains:

Sometimes it’s the skin. You can have a nice *cól* and put a different skin and it will have a different sound. Some skin is really nice. Sometimes you can touch the skin and know from the thickness if it will be good. You want to touch the skin to see how heavy it is – you can just tell from touching. You want the skin to be light – skin should not be too thick for a *cól*. For *mbëng-mbëng* a bit thicker than *cól*. But a skin that is too thick will eat the sound. If you go to serrage get a skin not too thick but not too thin.
(Interview 2 March 2019)

As Dawe states, musical instruments “are ‘vibrant materials’ made of wood, for instance, [which] indeed vibrate at the atomic level, but they were also once alive and growing in the forest, were cut and lumbered by various agents and processes, and then taken to the workshop wherein and where-after they continue to breathe, expand, and contract – vibrating as their environments change...” (2016: 118). Although sabar drums are not as sacred as Haitian tambou (Dirksen 2019: 55), for example, there are nonetheless mystical aspects of sabar making, involving the belief that spirits (*jinne*) live inside certain trees such as *dimb*.

In Senegal, drum heading is a specialised skill, to the extent that it is considered auspicious to witness someone heading a drum. Although most of the serious *gèwël* percussionists in Senegal know how to rehead drums, not all of them do it well. It is thus seen as good luck to watch someone putting a head on a sabar, even by accident, and any passersby will customarily place coins on the drum to show their appreciation for this bit of good luck (*barke sabar*).

Twenty-first century modifications to sabar drum heading

The sabar drum’s physical identity is marked by the unique way in which the goatskin head is attached to the body of the drum through a signature system of lacing and seven pegs. Oral histories and ethnographic research indicate that the sabar drum has used the peg lacing system for many centuries until very recently (Tang 2007: 31). Why is it, then, that djembe-style sabar heading (*foru jembé*) has begun to gain traction over the past decade after many centuries of traditional peg lacing? This remarkable shift from peg lacing to djembe-style heading may be the result of a complex web of reasons ranging from climate change and timber trafficking to the globalisation of the djembe industry.

The new method of sabar heading uses the same two-ring clamp/iron technique commonly used for djembes since the latter half of the twentieth century. In

this technique, the goatskin is wedged between two solid iron rings, that is, the so-called “djembe heading.” In this method of heading sabars, two iron rings are used, of which one is wedged into the edge of the skin, and loops of nylon cord are knotted onto the second ring, with a tension cord running through the loops. As with djembe heading, when the tension-transmitting ring is pulled down, it wedges the skin between itself and the reinforcement ring; in this way, the rings serve both as tension transmitter and reinforcement, and as two counterparts of a clamp that holds the skin (Polak 2000: 23). This “iron djembe” or “clamp technique” has been widely used for heading djembes since the 1970s but was not used for sabars until the twenty-first century, becoming commonplace only since around 2010. (See left image of Figure 4 for an example of the new djembe-style sabar heading.)

Interestingly, the sabars which have a djembe-style head are still considered sabars by *gévèl* percussionists but sabars with a different type of heading. (They can be specifically referred to sabar *foru jembé* or *sabaru jembé*, distinguished from *sabaru pegyi*, but generally they are called sabars, and have no differentiating name). The djembe-style heading is a fairly recent phenomenon; some percussionists recall seeing them as experiments in the 1980s-90s but only very rarely, and in those cases they were only used when the wood of a regular sabar was broken beyond repair.³ It did not become a commonly accepted practice for heading sabars until the first decade of the twenty-first century.

The resultant sound of djembe-style heading is markedly different from the traditional peg lacing. Whereas the peg-laced sabars have a “rounder” sound with a greater balance of low and high end, the sabar *foru jembé* have a much “brighter” timbre, bringing out the high end and in general, being louder and “noisier.” According to Charry, a comparison of historic recordings of djembe music shows that the sounds of djembe used to be lower and have become higher over time (that is, the drums used to be tuned less tightly, and are now more and more tight) (2000: 215). Charry’s findings correlate with a similar change in sabar tuning and sounds over the past few decades, culminating in the louder, brighter sound now made possible by the djembe-style heading.

Many *gévèl* percussionists note that the djembe-style heading is a natural progression in this trend towards louder, more highly-tuned sabars. As peg sabars are tuned higher and higher, they are more prone to breaking. When the brighter sound is increasingly sought after, it makes sense to use a system of heading that is less prone to cracking the wood and rendering it unusable. Not only does the djembe-style

³ A sabar drum shell that is cracked can be repaired with glue if re-headed in the djembe-style because the wood will no longer have to withstand the pressure of peg tuning. Sometimes peg sabars even have their holes filled to be repurposed with djembe-style heading.

heading achieve the brighter sound, it also becomes a more sustainable practice, as the wood will presumably last a lot longer than the peg sabars, which would eventually crack from excessive tuning.

Although the sound of the djembe-style sabars is indeed louder and brighter than the peg sabars, in the opinion of percussionists from the older generation, the sound of these new sabars is not nearly as robust or round as the traditional sabars. According to Polak, older drummers have a similar opinion of the younger generation's small and high-pitched djembes. They see the younger generation as changing the musical style, now characterised by faster tempos and more unrestrained ornamentation (2000: 27). This distinct difference in opinion among generations is similarly echoed by Wolof sabar percussionists in Senegal.

An important skill related to traditional peg-style sabar drum heading is tuning. Many younger percussionists recognise that those in the older generation were known for their excellence in sabar tuning skills. There used to be an elder, Moustapha Mbaye, who would help Masikh Mbaye fix all his drums and tune them. Younger drummers fondly remember that when Moustapha Mbaye would put in a peg, it would go, "kak!" and be sitting perfectly, giving the sabar an amazing sound. Of course, it would take time and patience, for example, to whittle down the pegs to a perfect roundness so that it would fit nicely in the holes of the shell; each peg then needs to be wet, rolled in sand, then bashed into the drum with a solid rock. If not bashed in with enough force, the peg will not sit properly; if bashed in too hard, the drum shell may crack and be rendered useless. Nowadays, those in the younger generation tend not to have the patience or want to take the time to carefully whittle down pegs and do "*yeguel*" (tuning up) in the manner practiced by the older generation. The new djembe-style heading is much easier to tune up and maintain than the peg-style sabars. As older generations of sabar players make way for newer generations, the knowledge and skill of peg tuning may be disappearing. Given the globalisation of djembe drumming and the accompanying knowledge of how to fix djembe drum heads, the turn to djembe-style sabar heading may well sustain the care and re-heading of sabar drums in the future.

Géwèl percussionist Badara Ndione notes that when he goes to a *lawbe* to order a djembe-style sabar, it will usually be of thinner wood; if the sabar shell would be used with pegs, the *lawbe* would need to carve the wood more thickly to keep it from splitting during tuning. In a way, the new djembe-style heading is thus a more sustainable practice since the wood will ostensibly last longer than a peg-style sabar. Although the thickness of sabar shells is not standardised at all, the pegged sabars tend to have a thickness of approximately 2 centimeters (or between 1.5-2 centimeters), whereas the djembe-style sabars are more in the range of 1.5 centimeter (or as little as 1.25cm.).

Climate change and illegal timber trade

In order to better understand possible reasons behind the recent modifications to sabar heading, one must turn to ecomusicological considerations. Allen defines ecomusicology as “the study of music, culture, and nature in all the complexities of those terms” (2014). Titon’s interest in sustainable musics, sound, and environmentalism has also helped to define the emerging field of ecomusicology (Dirksen 2019: 45). Dirksen points out that Titon wants to move toward “a more sustainable concept of nature, music and the environment” (2013: 9, in Dirksen 2019: 46). Dirksen’s research shows how centuries-long deforestation and the effects of climate change have meant that acajou (mahogany), which was once the preferred wood for drum makers and drummers, is no longer available in Haiti, and the replacement woods (trumpetwood, breadfruit, gommier, and so on) are increasingly difficult to find. Dirksen looks at how these shifts in the environment trigger shifts that are ultimately altering cultural heritage (ibid.: 46).

In examining the types of wood used for drums in the region, Charry’s research indicates that the wood traditionally used for djembes include *lenke/linge* (*Azelia Africana*), *dugura* (*Cordylla pinata*) [this is the same as *dimb*], and *jala* (*cailcedra*, *Khaya senegalensis*, also known as African mahogany). Wood for *kutiro* and *sabaro* include *dutoo* (*Cordyla Africana*) and *kembo* (a type of mahogany) (2000: 215). According to Sunkett, djembes from Guinea are usually carved from trees in the redwood family; in Mali they have traditionally used tali and coba, but they now use kekho, lingo and bimbekahagna, all of which are less heavy. Senegalese djembes are normally carved from *dimb*, which is one of the heaviest woods; but alternative woods used in Senegal include *mango*, *niim*, *gerte tubaab*, and *kele* (1995: 38).

As discussed earlier, *dimb* (*Cordylla pinata*) has been the preferred wood for making sabar drums since at least the twentieth century. However, various ecological factors such as climate change and timber trafficking have had a negative effect on the availability of *dimb* wood. Climate researcher, Gonzalez’s original field data show that the richness of forest species and tree density in the West African Sahel has declined significantly in the last half of the 20th century, providing evidence for desertification in the West African Sahel due to climate change (2001: 217). According to Gonzalez, the richness of forest species in northwest Senegal fell 33% from around 1945 to 1993, whereas tree density has also declined 23% from 1954 to 1989 (ibid.: 226), all a result of global warming and climate change (see Gonzalez, Tucker, Sy 2012). Climate change and desertification have also reduced rainfall in the twentieth century by as much as 30 percent across the Sahel and raised temperatures by one degree Celcius (Gonzalez 2006: 13). Such changes have contributed to the deaths of productive tree species that require moist conditions, giving way to less productive, thorny species adapted to arid conditions (*ibid.*).

Climate change and desertification have been the primary reason for the decimation of trees in northwest Senegal, in the southern region of Casamance; yet another issue has caused an environmental crisis, that is, illicit timber trafficking (Kane 2019). Although the Casamance region has been known for its rich vegetation and expansive forests, the Casamance has lost over 10,000 hectares to illegal logging, representing a loss of approximately one million trees. In May 2017, ecologist and former environment minister Haidar El Ali sounded an alarm by stating that at this rate, there may be no more forests in Casamance by summer 2019 (*ibid.*). This large-scale illegal logging and timber trafficking has been fueled by the high demand in China of rosewood and African mahogany; much of this timber is first illegally exported to the Gambia, where it is then shipped to China. For example, between 2010-2015, Gambia exported more than \$238 million of rosewood to China, most of which must have come from the Casamance, since the Gambian forests had already been decimated by logging under the presidency of Yahya Jammeh (1994-2017) (*ibid.*).

In response to the illegal logging and timber trafficking, Senegalese president, Macky Sall, instituted a policy in May 2015 to suspend the issuing of permits for woodcutting in Casamance region, specifically in Ziguinchor, Kolda and Sedhiou; in January 2018 Sall halted logging altogether and proposed an overhaul of forestry laws, and in November 2018, a new forest code was adopted by the National Assembly in further support of this measure. However, this ban has proved difficult to enforce (Kane 2019). Unfortunately, corruption and poverty hinder the fight to save Senegal's forests. Another complicating issue is that a low-level conflict between the Senegalese government and separatist rebels in the Casamance, which has been ongoing for four decades, has helped open the door to trafficking by impeding forest surveillance (Farge 2015). Economic difficulty has also prompted many locals to disobey the laws; with one log selling for 10,000 cfa (more than \$15 USD), it is not uncommon for locals in need of money to find, cut and sell logs for profit (Farge 2015). Chinese customs data show that annual imports of timber products from West and Central African countries have increased more than four-fold to \$1.9 billion in 2014 (Farge 2015).

The Guediawaye-based *lawbe* explain that another wood, win, also called *bois rouge* (*Pterocarpus erinaceus*), is used for sabar shells when there is a shortage of dimb. Apparently in the summertime dimb can be difficult to secure because of regulations regarding wood harvesting, but otherwise, *dimb* is still the preferred wood. *Win* is a type of wood that is more commonly used for doors and household furniture such as armoires; it also originates in the Casamance. Because win breaks more easily than *dimb*, if *win* is used for sabars, it is especially used for sabars with djembe-style heading since that style of heading does not have to withstand the bashing of rocks to the pegs.

Globalisation of djembe

In analysing the recent changes to sabar drum heading, it is important to consider the impact of the globalisation of djembe as well as recent changes to djembe drum heading. Unlike any other African musical instrument, the djembe has gained an international standing in recent decades, especially in Europe and North America (Polak 2000: 8).⁴ Instrument sales drumming classes, and amateur-playing (that is, “drum circles”) have taken place in many industrialised countries since the 1990s (*ibid.*: 13). Mamady Keita is perhaps the most successful of these djembe players, having established educational institutes in Brussels, Paris, Munich, Washington and Tokyo, among other cities (*ibid.*: 14). By the turn of the twenty-first century, Conakry, Abidjan, Dakar and Bamako have all become centres for djembe promotion and production. Although there are various reasons contributing to the internationalisation of djembe, Polak suggests that a primary factor in the popularity of djembe is the physical experience of beating a skin with one’s bare hands and being able to create rich timbral qualities in the process (*ibid.*: 18).

Like the sabar, the model of a typical Bamako djembe has changed considerably between 1985 and 2000. The drum body has generally decreased in size, with the average drumhead diminished in diameter; the tension of the skin has increased, and the pitch has risen. The sound with the highest and sharpest timbre, that is, the “slap,” has especially gained brightness. Overall, the sound of the Bamako djembe over the course of this fifteen-year time span has become more “concise, sharply contoured, cleaner, dryer and thinner than it used to be” (*ibid.*: 20).

One reason why this sound has changed is due to the new mode of mounting the skin onto the shell. Whereas drumheads had traditionally been sewn onto the drum in the past, the new technique of wedging the skin between two solid iron rings, that is the so-called “djembe heading” now used on sabars, has become the norm. In this iron ring style, there are two rings of which one iron ring is wedged into the edge of the skin; loops of nylon cord are knotted onto the second iron ring, and a tension cord runs through the loops. When the tension-transmitting ring is pulled down, it wedges the skin between itself and the reinforcement ring; in this way, the rings serve both as tension transmitter and reinforcement, and as two counterparts of a clamp that holds the skin. This “iron djembe” or “clamp technique” was developed in the 1970s, when it is believed to have reached Dakar, and become the expected standard for an export drum (*ibid.*: 23-25). This is, of course, the same technique now used for sabar heading.

⁴ In this article I will use the spelling “djembe” but this instrument is also spelled jembe (Charry 2000), jenbe (Polak 2000) and djimbe (Sunkett 1995).

One obvious factor favouring the iron djembe (over the sewn djembe) is that it is much easier to change the skin; since skins may be changed fairly frequently (as often as every one to three months for active percussionists) it is much easier to change the skins with the rings. A similar argument can be made for the djembe-style sabar headings. Although it does change the sound of the drum, it is much easier to change the skin, and in the case of the djembe-style sabar headings, the skins are more likely to last longer, since they cannot rip near the pegs, and would not be subject to the same force that peg tuning has (that can result in ripped or torn skins). In any case, this adoption of the clamp technique (iron djembe) shows the interaction between local, national, and international markets and artistic genres can be advantageous for the economic and cultural vitality of a local musical tradition (*ibid.*: 31).

Sabar drummers in the diaspora: Babacar “Moha” Seck

The globalisation of djembe-style sabar heading is evident in drums used by griot drummers in the diaspora, of which one such performer is Babacar “Moha” Seck. Both Babacar and his father, Alé Gueye Seck, are known for taking special care of their drums. Family members reminisced how Alé Gueye Seck wiped down the wood of his sabars, decorated them, washed the straps, and even lit incense in the room where he kept his sabars so that they would smell pleasant. Following in his father’s footsteps, Babacar “Moha” Seck especially enjoys decorating his sabars. In this way, the sabar becomes an extension of his own personal style and even fashion sense. (The concept of *sañse*, that is, to be extremely well dressed, is a highly significant value in Wolof culture.) Seck takes great pride in keeping his sabars in good condition, revarnishing or repainting them frequently, and always decorating them. Many of his drums have engravings or are brightly painted. He has added his own “bling”, which includes various belts with faux diamonds and rhinestones on them, as well as *petaw* (cowrie shells) and white diamond-shaped bone inlays, which were put in by a lawbe called Maam Goor in Kolobane (see Figure 5). He has sabars painted by the well-known artist/lawbe Mby in Kolobane. Moha regularly posts photos of his drums on social media. In many ways, his instruments are an extension and representation of his artistry; he takes great pride in the ways in which he has decorated his drums and wants to show them to the world.

Like Amadou Lamine Touré, Moha Seck prefers peg sabars to the newer djembe style heading, but he accepts that the djembe style is becoming more commonplace. He has a number of djembe style drums which he recently acquired from cousins from Senegal who have been on tour in the USA, and have left drums with him (this is a common system by which musicians on tour leave their instruments at their last stop, since their friends or family in the USA can sell them for them, rather than bring them all the way back to Senegal. Roda discusses a similar phenomenon

in his article on tabla.) Moha and other sabar percussionists in the USA note that drums are sometimes traded with other percussionists, whether in the USA or in Senegal. He mentioned that sometimes they trade them back to the lawbes in case other people want them. If taken care of and oiled frequently, a drum shell can have a very long life with many lasting for many decades, up to a century.

Moha has lived in the USA since 2004. Although he has returned to Senegal several times since coming to the USA he does not visit often enough to purchase his drum fixing materials in Senegal on a regular basis. He relies on merchants in New York City to obtain his supplies. For example, he buys his goatskins, pegs and mesh from the African Market in Harlem. Here he can buy anything that is equally available in a Senegalese market.



Figure 5.
Babacar “Moha” Seck’s *cól* decorated with “bling.” Photo by Author.

Moha learned how to head djembes after coming to the USA. He did not have this skill when he lived in Senegal but given the proliferation of djembes in general in the African drum and dance scenes in the USA, he saw the value in teaching himself how to repair djembes. With this new skill, he can now repair his own djembe-style sabars. He learned to play djembe after coming to the USA. Before he was exclusively a sabar player in Senegal but after coming to the USA he branched out and learned to play both djembe and tama very well.

Moha has a particular drum that is his favourite, the *cól*. The *cól* is painted black and has his name on it. Upon showing it to me, he told me fondly that this was the *cól* he brought to the USA when he decided to stay. It is the one he toured with and it has special, sentimental value. He has recently repainted it and always makes sure to take good care of it. He has a *cól* that his father, Alé Gueye Seck, gave him. That *cól* has Alé Gueye’s name carved on it, and it was made by a Kaolack lawbe. It is an “egg shaped” *cól*. Moha said it was built to look more like a tumba or conga. This *cól* has special meaning to Moha since his dad gave it to him and he was instructed to keep it in good condition. (see Figure 6.)



Figure 6. Babacar “Moha” Seck with his favourite còls. Photo by Author.

Drum stands and flashier playing: Making a “spectacle”

Throughout the twentieth century, open-bottom sabar drums were always worn by the drummers during sabar ensemble performance, in a practice known as *gàddukay*. The sabar would be strapped onto the percussionist’s body with a cloth band on his shoulder or waist, depending on the drum size. While sabar drumming itself is already a highly cardiovascular activity, having to stand while carrying the

weight of the drum required additional physical stamina. In the 1990s and early 2000s, many percussionists would occasionally strap their drums to plastic chairs; however, as chairs are not particularly stable, the drums would frequently fall off their makeshift stands. Although various types of drum stands have existed for many decades, drum stands were for the most part used only by percussionists in mbalax bands who needed a way to hold multiple drums at once.⁵

Figure 7 shows sabar drummers at a typical *tànnibéer* (late night sabar dance party) in 2005. In this photo, the three drummers on the right are holding their drums using *gàddukay*; the lead drummer on the far left has his drum propped on a chair, and the *cól* player in the centre is bending over his drum while soloing. *Cóls* are closed-bottom sabars, normally placed on the ground and played while sitting, unlike the open-bottom sabars which must be played while standing. Photos and video footage of other sabar ensembles from the post-Independence period show a similar style of *gàddukay* consistent throughout the latter half of the twentieth century.

Since around 2010, there has been a sudden proliferation of thin metal drum stands. Although drum stands existed in the past, they have not come into frequent use until the second decade of the twenty-first century. Interestingly, the use of these drum stands appears to have coincided with the djembe-style sabar heading. More research needs to be conducted to better understand whether there is a link between these two innovations, as both seemed to have occurred around 2010.



⁵ Recalling his innovative stands from the 1970s, several percussionists mentioned to me that Alé Gueye Seck of Kaolack was one of the early pioneers of inventing sabar drumstands.

As most sabar drums are open-bottom and need to be raised so that the sound can resonate from the bottom of the drum, the new metal drum stands change sabar performance practice in several significant ways. First, the sound itself comes straight out of the bottom of the drum, instead of angling back, behind each drummer; this makes the sound of the drum project in all directions, allowing the sound to reach both the drummers and the audience in more of a “surround sound” fashion. Secondly, since the percussionist is no longer bearing the weight of the drum, he presumably can expend more energy on the actual playing of the drum, also allowing for a louder sound. Finally, since the drum no longer hinders the movement of the percussionist, he can now move his body, dance, and animate more freely during performance. *Géwël* percussionists are thus able to put on more of a “spectacle,” frequently choreographing dance moves and even dancing or walking around the drums while playing them.

With a newfound freedom to dance around the drum while playing in a choreographed fashion, *géwël* drummers have added a new performative aspect to their arsenal of showmanship skills. Especially in a time when sound systems and DJs are competing with live drummers for baptisms and similar events, drummers need to have more tactics to make their shows more entertaining, whether it is through “animation,” comedic MCing, guest dancers, or more choreographed drumming. *Géwël* percussionists are unanimous in agreeing that the “spectacle” is an increasingly important part of their repertoire; they have to know how to put on a good show for business purposes. For example, drummers often talk about how they need to be “spicy” and entertaining to get rehired – it is part of the skillset necessary for successful griot performers nowadays. It is no longer enough to merely be good drummers.

Figure 8 (pp. 70) shows a *tànnibeer* in Kaolack in 2017. The drummers are using the metal drum stands and are playing sabars with djembe-style heading. Notably, the lead drummer has taken the microphone and is MCing the event. This scene reflects a typical sabar performance from the past decade; it is remarkably different from the 2005 *tànnibéer* scene in Figure 7.

Although the drum stands have many advantages related to the easing of physical burden, there are disadvantages. By having a physical separation between the drum and the drummer (that is, when the drum is no longer worn), one could argue that there is a loss of close physical contact between the drummer and his instrument. The position for *gàddukay*, although heavy on the body, has an angle that is more comfortable for playing and allows the human body to feel the vibrations of the drum in a visceral way. According to Amadou Lamine Touré:



Figure 8. Sabar drummers with djembe-style headings and metal drum stands. Photo by Author.

If you are leading the group, *gàddu* gives you inspiration – it gives you a different power than if you put the drum on a chair. If you can *gàddu* – it’s better. The older generation had heavy drums before – they used to be really strong! It’s easier to just put a drum in a stand. But before they didn’t have stands. Now there are stands – people can play more easily, move around, and it’s more fun – you have more liberty to move around – and you can dance. *Gàddukay* is heavy – you’re going to get tired more quickly. But drummers used to be stronger than they are now because it was a good workout to hold your drums! And with *gàddukay* you could feel your drum - it gave better inspiration. (Interview 2 March 2019)

Babacar “Moha” Seck also now uses sabar drum stands, favouring the thin metal stands that are en vogue in Senegal in this time; however, he has also created his own stands, with one stand made out of a modified portable wardrobe hanger! He says he likes playing with the drums on stands because holding the drums through

gàddukay was very heavy and required a lot of strength. But he, like Amadou Lamine Toure, feels that the “younger generation”, himself included, has it easy, and that there is something to be said for being strong enough to stand, play vigorously, and hold the weight of the sabar for two hours straight.

Conclusion

The djembe-style heading of sabars is a recent phenomenon that has become a common way of heading sabars in the twenty-first century. Although this may appear as some sort of “djembification” of sabar, in fact the new style of heading is an innovation that can lead to long-term sustainability of the instrument, making sabars less prone to cracking, and even allowing cracked shells to be repaired and re-used. In the face of ecomusicological factors such as climate change and illicit timber trade which has affected the availability of *dimb* wood, this ability to prolong the longevity of sabar drums will become increasingly important. Through dynamic changes in organology and performance practice, the new style of sabar heading, along with the use of metal drum stands, are examples of the innovations that *gèwèl* percussionists are making every day to help ensure that their artistry thrives in ever changing times.

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