

## An Introduction To African Instruments

Africa is a vast continent with an immense history and numerous cultures. As such, there are also a great number of different instruments throughout the land. This article will introduce some of the most common ones and their place in African culture. Cabasa (also known as axatse or shekere) - The cabasa is an African instrument made from gourd and is covered with seeds or shells. It is played by striking on the legs and hands in different combinations. Hitting the top of the instrument produces a deep drum-like tone. Because gourds are used to make the instruments, and they all differ in shape, no two cabasas ever produce the same sound. The instrument is used in folkloric music, particularly by the Yoruba people of Nigeria.

Agogô (also known as cowbell or gonkogui) - Like the cabasa, the agogô is an African instrument that has its roots in Yoruba music. The two bells on the agogô differ in size; the smaller bell produces a high tone whilst the larger bell produces a low tone. The agogô is considered to be among the oldest samba instruments and is used in many Yoruba religious ceremonies. Through African slavery, the instrument was introduced into other countries and used in new religions established outside the African continent.

Djembe - The djembe is an African instrument that emerged in the Mali Empire during the 12th Century. The drums vary in size but all have a skin covering which, when beaten with the hands in various rhythms, produces a wide range of tones. Many djembe drums are made from a single carved piece of wood and covered with a toughened goat skin.

Juju - The juju is an African instrument made from dried palm nut shells and wood. The instrument is played very similar to a maraca with the shaking of one producing a percussive sound. Like many African instruments, the Juju is used during many Yoruba ceremonies. Today, it is used very frequently in Nigerian music.

Talking Drum - The talking drum is a West African instrument which is shaped like an hourglass. Both ends of the drum have a head which is beaten with a stick. Tightening the strings of the drum can change the tone to such an extent that some tribes use the differing tones as a means of communication. The Talking Drum originated in the ancient Ghana Empire over one thousand years ago.

Thumb Piano - There are hundreds of different thumb pianos on the African continent. The Mbira (left) is one such instrument. Constructed from hardwood and metal, the instrument is played by supporting the piano with one hand whilst using the thumb and index finger of the other hand to pluck the keys. Thumb pianos hold much religious and social significance in Africa. The Shona people of Zimbabwe have been using the Mbira for over 1500 years during their religious and social ceremonies.

The six instruments introduced above are just a few of the many that are used throughout Africa. There are literally thousands of different instruments used by hundreds of different tribes so obviously, we would be unable to cover every one of them!