

## Cultural Dynamism and the Reconfiguration of Gender Roles in African Music: A Case Study of Sona Jobarteh

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**Abstract:** *This study examines cultural dynamism and gender roles in African music through the case of Sona Jobarteh, the first woman from a hereditary griot lineage to gain international recognition as a kora virtuoso. Her career illustrates the negotiation between indigenous musical traditions and shifting gender expectations. Drawing on nineteen sources (2020–2025), the study uses qualitative thematic analysis to explore how women across Africa challenge gendered musical roles shaped by patriarchy and lineage. Findings show expanding female participation in instrumental performance, leadership, dance, and popular music. Jobarteh exemplifies how individual agency can sustain tradition while advancing cultural renewal, education, and social advocacy. The study contributes to discussions of gender equity, cultural continuity, and the evolving nature of African musical heritage.*

**Key-words:** *Sona Jobarteh, Gender Roles, African Music, Cultural Dynamism, Griot Tradition.*

### 1. Introduction

Gender has long been a defining axis in the organization, performance, and transmission of African musical traditions. Across many societies, the allocation of musical roles whether vocal, instrumental, ritual, or ceremonial has historically reflected deeply embedded social structures, lineage systems, and cultural expectations. These gendered divisions are evident in diverse contexts, from the hereditary male lines of griot instrumentalists in West Africa to the ritual responsibilities of women's dance and drumming collectives in Southern Africa. Recent scholarship shows, however, that although these patterns remain significant, they are increasingly reshaped by forces such as global mobility, media circulation, formal education, and cultural activism. Contemporary African music

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therefore offers a rich field for examining how tradition, gender, and identity are continually negotiated.

Within this shifting landscape, Sona Jobarteh stands out as a compelling figure whose work illuminates the dynamic relationship between gender roles and musical heritage. Frequently recognised as the first woman to achieve international acclaim as a kora virtuoso, Jobarteh challenges one of the most symbolically significant gendered boundaries in West African instrumental practice. Her position as a performer, educator, and cultural advocate reveals how individual agency can intersect with broader socio-cultural transformations to influence who participates in musical traditions, how these traditions are presented, and what meanings they carry.

Despite growing research on gender in African music, including emerging studies on women's visibility in popular genres, female drummers reclaiming performance spaces, and the sonic construction of gender in religious or communal settings, there remains a limited body of scholarship that uses a focused case study to explore how cultural dynamism manifests in both traditional and contemporary performance spheres. Jobarteh's career provides an opportunity to bring together these strands of literature and address a gap concerning the lived experiences of women who negotiate historically male-dominated musical systems.

Accordingly, this paper investigates how cultural dynamism and shifting gender roles are expressed through the musical work and public positioning of Sona Jobarteh. It examines how her bicultural identity, training, and performance practice contribute to the reconfiguration of gender norms within a tradition-bound setting, and how her example aligns with broader gender renegotiations documented across African musical cultures. Through a synthesis of recent research and interpretive analysis, the study aims to deepen understanding of the mechanisms through which women enter, transform, and sustain participation in African musical heritage.

## **2. Objectives**

This study aims to examine how cultural dynamism and shifting gender roles manifest within African musical traditions through an in-depth case study of Sona Jobarteh, a pioneering female kora virtuoso. The paper seeks to explore the intersection of gender, performance practice, and cultural heritage, and to analyse how individual agency can contribute to the reconfiguration of historically gendered musical systems.

Specific objectives are to:

1. Investigate the traditional gendered structures that shape musical participation and instrumental practice in African societies.
2. Analyse contemporary processes of cultural change that influence women's roles in African music, including globalisation, education, and popular culture.
3. Examine the musical career, performance strategies, and cultural positioning of Sona Jobarteh in relation to these broader transformations.
4. Synthesize insights from recent scholarship to identify the implications of Jobarteh's work for gender-inclusive cultural policy, music education, and ethnomusicological research.

### **3. Materials and Methods**

This study employs a qualitative, literature-based research design to investigate cultural dynamism and gender roles in African music, with a particular focus on the case of Sona Jobarteh. Owing to the interpretive nature of the research questions, the study adopts an analytical and comparative approach grounded in existing scholarship rather than primary fieldwork.

The material for this study consists of twenty peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, and scholarly essays published between 2020 and 2025, addressing themes such as gendered musical practices, women's participation in traditional and popular African music, cultural regeneration, and sonic constructions of gender identity. These works encompass diverse regional contexts including West, East, Central, and Southern Africa providing a broad analytical foundation for understanding both continuity and transformation in gendered musical roles. Special attention is given to Eyre's (2023) profile of Sona Jobarteh, which provides critical insights into her artistic identity and her role in negotiating gender boundaries within the kora tradition.

The method of analysis is thematic synthesis. First, all selected sources were examined to identify recurring themes related to gender, tradition, musical authority, and cultural change. Second, the themes were grouped into three analytical categories: (1) traditional gender allocations in African music; (2) contemporary processes of cultural dynamism influencing women's participation; and (3) individual agency and gender negotiation through performance. These categories allowed for a structured comparison between the broader literature and the specific case of Jobarteh.

The case-study method is used to interpret how Jobarteh's musical career exemplifies and interacts with the thematic patterns emerging from the literature.

The analysis considers her lineage, training, repertoire, performance practice, public discourse, and educational work. Although the study relies on secondary sources, the inclusion criteria ensured that materials were drawn from reputable academic journals, regional studies, and internationally recognised scholarly publications.

The methods applied enable a multi-layered understanding of the ways in which gender roles and cultural identities are both preserved and reimagined within African musical traditions. They also facilitate a contextualised interpretation of Jobarteh's position as a cultural intermediary whose work reflects broader shifts within African musical landscapes.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

### **4.1. Traditional gender roles in African Musical practice**

Across many African societies, musical roles are historically defined by gendered expectations rooted in lineage, social hierarchy, and cosmology. In West Africa, instruments such as the kora, balafon, and ngoni are traditionally passed down along patrilineal griot lines, restricting women's access to instrumental mastery (Eyre 2023). While women frequently occupy central roles as singers, praise performers, and custodians of oral traditions, their participation in instrumental domains remains limited due to sociocultural beliefs that associate certain instruments with male authority or ritual responsibility (Ozah et al. 2021). Similar gendered patterns are seen in Southern African drumming communities, where drumming may be reserved for men in some contexts, while other societies, such as the Pondo, maintain strong traditions of women drummers who uphold ceremonial functions and communal identities (Pondo Women Drummers 2022).

These divergent patterns illustrate that gender in African music is neither uniform nor static. Some traditions sustain complementary musical roles, such as those described in Ghanaian healing practices, where women initiate vocal structures while men handle specific drums, forming a cooperative musical system rather than a hierarchical one (Asare 2023). In contrast, patriarchal norms in many communities restrict women's musical visibility, marginalising their contributions or framing them as secondary despite their technical or ritual expertise. The reinforcement of such norms is further observed in the domain of performance costuming, where aesthetic expectations of women may reproduce sexist ideals and shape how female performers are perceived and valued (Onyeji et al. 2021).

Overall, these findings suggest that the gendering of musical practice in Africa stems from a complex interplay of cultural inheritance, community expectations, and symbolic associations. These structures, while deeply embedded, are neither rigid nor impermeable. Recent scholarship indicates that they are increasingly being challenged, reworked, or reinterpreted in contemporary musical contexts.

#### **4.2. Contemporary cultural dynamism and shifting gender norms**

The broader literature identifies cultural dynamism as a major driver in reshaping gender roles in African music. Globalisation, digital platforms, and wider educational opportunities have enabled women to enter formerly male-dominated musical spaces (Tamunomiegbam et al. 2024). In Nigeria, for example, female drummers such as Ara and Starblessing demonstrate that mastery of complex rhythmic traditions traditionally reserved for men can serve as a form of cultural reclamation and gender advocacy (Adepegba 2025). These artists challenge assumptions about female physicality, ritual eligibility, and musical authority, demonstrating that cultural roles once framed as immutable are, in fact, negotiable and open to reinterpretation.

Popular music genres, especially Bongo Flava and Afrobeats, also reveal significant shifts in gender representation. Some Bongo Flava songs reverse traditional masculine roles, portraying men in emotional or vulnerable positions (John et al. 2025), thereby destabilising long-held stereotypes. Conversely, Afrobeats music videos often visually amplify women's empowerment through fashion, choreography, and narrative imagery, although critics argue that such portrayals sometimes operate as façades that do not reflect lived gender realities (Rens 2021). These contradictions highlight that visual or musical representations of gender equality do not always translate into structural transformation.

Other studies emphasise the importance of cultural policy and community-led initiatives in fostering gender inclusivity. In Ghana, for example, scholars call for new policy frameworks that recognise and empower women's participation in drumming and other musical domains (Bello 2025). These initiatives challenge historical barriers by promoting inclusive pedagogy, providing institutional support, and reframing gender as a dynamic cultural construct rather than a fixed traditional marker.

Taken together, contemporary African musical cultures demonstrate a landscape of negotiation where gender norms are actively contested, reinterpreted, or reinforced. Cultural dynamism thus provides both opportunities and challenges as communities respond to global influences, internal debates, and generational change.

### **4.3. Sona Jobarteh and the gendered history of the Kora Tradition**

The kora tradition is deeply embedded within the hereditary griot system of West Africa, where musical knowledge and instrumental proficiency are passed along male genealogical lines. The belief that women should not perform the kora stems from centuries of cultural regulation, ritual symbolism, and gendered expectations (Eyre 2023). Sona Jobarteh's emergence as the first internationally recognised female kora virtuoso therefore represents a profound departure from established norms.

Jobarteh's lineage positions her firmly within the griot tradition, yet her entry into kora performance disrupts the gendered logic that has historically governed access to the instrument. Her success highlights the role of bicultural identity in enabling fluid navigation between local expectations and global artistic spaces. As Eyre (2023) notes, Jobarteh's position is not solely defined by her womanhood but by the "bicultural complexity" that allows her to reinterpret tradition while maintaining its authority.

Her mastery of the kora, combined with her technical skills in singing, composition, and multi-instrumental performance, demonstrates that gender-based restrictions are cultural constructions rather than intrinsic limitations. Moreover, her global visibility provides an alternative model of musical inheritance, inspiring younger generations of women to consider instrumental performance as an attainable path.

### **4.4. Performance practice, artistic identity, and cultural representation**

Jobarteh's performance practice reveals an intentional blending of tradition and innovation. Her stage presence—rooted in respect for griot aesthetics—balances classical kora repertoire with contemporary arrangements, new compositions, and collaborative influences. By foregrounding the kora in both traditional and modern contexts, she reshapes how the instrument is perceived and expands the expressive possibilities available to women musicians.

In many performances, Jobarteh adopts visual and musical signifiers of West African identity, such as traditional attire, repertoire linked to her Gambian heritage, and ensemble arrangements reflecting Mandinka musical structures. Yet, she simultaneously incorporates global influences and makes strategic aesthetic decisions that resonate with international audiences. This dual positioning allows her to operate as a cultural ambassador who bridges heritage and modern artistic narratives.

Her public discourse also reinforces her role as an advocate for cultural continuity and gender inclusivity. Through interviews, lectures, and educational initiatives including the Gambia Academy, an institution she founded to promote

African-centred learning Jobarteh actively engages with questions about representation, cultural ownership, and access to musical knowledge. These activities position her not merely as a performer but as a cultural theorist whose perspectives inform contemporary debates on tradition and gender.

#### **4.5. Jobarteh as an agent of cultural negotiation**

The findings of this study suggest that Sona Jobarteh's work exemplifies the dynamic interplay between individual agency and broader structural transformation in contemporary African music. Her artistry demonstrates a remarkable capacity to reinterpret inherited musical traditions while simultaneously retaining their legitimacy and authenticity, reflecting wider trends in African music where artists continually negotiate the complex balance between local expectations and global platforms. In her career, several interconnected dimensions of influence emerge, highlighting her role not only as a performer but also as a cultural innovator and educator.

A central aspect of Jobarteh's impact is her reconfiguration of gendered musical authority. By excelling as a kora player a domain historically dominated by men—she challenges entrenched assumptions about the limitations of women's participation in instrumental music. Her achievements destabilize the conventional notion that mastery and authority over this iconic West African instrument must remain exclusively male, creating discursive space for the reconsideration of gendered access to musical heritage. In doing so, Jobarteh not only asserts her own agency but also inspires a broader reevaluation of how musical knowledge and authority are distributed across gender lines, encouraging more inclusive participation in the preservation and innovation of African musical traditions.

Equally significant is the role of her bicultural Gambian-British identity, which functions as a catalyst for cultural change. Straddling two distinct yet interconnected worlds, she is uniquely positioned to adapt and reinterpret tradition in ways that resonate across multiple cultural spheres. This dual perspective allows her to engage with international audiences while maintaining fidelity to her roots, demonstrating that cultural authenticity can coexist with innovation and cross-cultural dialogue. Her work illustrates how artists navigating bicultural identities can become conduits for both preserving heritage and fostering transformation, creating spaces where tradition and modernity intersect productively.

Beyond performance, Jobarteh's integration of education and artistic practice further amplifies her cultural influence. Through her teaching and outreach initiatives, she extends the reach of her musical knowledge, actively contributing to wider conversations on decolonizing African knowledge systems and expanding access to music education for women and youth. These efforts underscore her commitment

to cultivating new generations of musicians and thinkers, ensuring that the transmission of heritage is both inclusive and dynamic. In this way, her work transcends the concert stage, positioning her as a vital agent of cultural regeneration whose influence resonates in both local and global contexts.

#### **4.6. Synthesis with broader African gender discourses**

The case of Sona Jobarteh aligns with wider shifts documented across African musical scholarship. Studies reveal that women are increasingly reclaiming musical spaces, whether through drumming, band leadership, or solo instrumental virtuosity (Adepegba 2025; Armstrong 2023). Similar to these artists, Jobarteh employs performance as a site of gender negotiation, challenging assumptions about ability, belonging, and legitimacy.

At the same time, contradictions remain within the cultural landscape. Empowered visual portrayals may not necessarily transform structural inequalities; patriarchal norms continue to influence musical participation and representation (Rens 2021; Akpan-Obong 2023). Jobarteh's trajectory, therefore, should not be interpreted as a complete overturning of gendered musical systems but rather as a significant step in an ongoing, multifaceted process of social transformation.

### **5. Conclusion**

This study examined the dynamic relationship between cultural change and gender roles in African music through an analysis of Sona Jobarteh's musical career and public engagement. The findings demonstrate that gendered musical practices in Africa, though historically shaped by lineage, ritual authority, and social norms, are not static. Instead, they are continually renegotiated in response to broader social, cultural, and global transformations. The literature reviewed indicates that women across the continent increasingly challenge conventional restrictions, entering formerly male-dominated musical spaces and contributing to evolving definitions of musical authority.

Within this broader context, Sona Jobarteh emerges as a significant figure whose work illustrates the complexities of negotiating tradition and modernity. As a female kora virtuoso trained within a hereditary griot lineage, she disrupts long-standing instrumental gender boundaries while maintaining fidelity to the cultural values underpinning the tradition. Her bicultural identity, performance strategies, and educational initiatives collectively enable her to operate as both a custodian and innovator of African musical heritage.



The study concludes that Jobarteh's contributions extend beyond musical performance; they highlight the potential of individual agency to inspire structural shifts within African musical cultures. Her example underscores the importance of inclusive educational frameworks, supportive cultural policies, and continued scholarly attention to women's roles in music. Future research may build on this work by incorporating ethnographic field studies, examining emerging generations of female instrumentalists, and exploring how cultural institutions can further promote gender equity within traditional and contemporary musical domains.

## 6. Acknowledgements

The author wishes to express profound appreciation to the scholars whose contributions to African musicology, gender studies, and cultural heritage research formed the intellectual backbone of this work. Sincere thanks are extended to colleagues and mentors for their valuable insights and encouragement throughout the development of this paper. The author also gratefully acknowledges the support of the Technical University of Kenya, whose academic environment and resources have significantly contributed to ongoing research and scholarly growth. Appreciation is further expressed to institutions and communities that continue to safeguard African musical traditions. Finally, the author extends gratitude to the editorial team of the Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Braşov, Series VIII, whose guidelines and formatting template shaped the presentation of this study.

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