

The Shekere



...Make and Shake

The Beaded Gourd: Its history, construction and technique

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THE SHEKERE: HISTORY AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND



The shekere (sometimes spelled “chekere”) is a handmade rattle. It consists of a hollow gourd or calabash, covered on the outside with a net of seeds, beads, shells, or any available material. Although its origins are West African, today it is found in the Americas and Caribbean as well.

The calabash or gourd (as it’s commonly known in the U.S.), is a functional creation of nature with a wide variety of uses and traditions in cultures around the world. A fruit of varied shape and size, it commonly grows on a vine not unlike the squash; but there are also varieties that grow on bushes and trees. In so-called “third world” countries the calabash was historically used as a container for water, and still is an essential utensil in many parts of the world. In rural areas of the U.S., they are often used as birdhouses. Throughout Asia, Africa, the Pacific Islands, the Caribbean and the Americas, gourds are used as resonators for musical instruments.

“Shekere” is a general name to describe the beaded gourd rattle. It comes in many shapes and sizes, is played in a variety of styles, and has many different names. In Africa it is found primarily, but not exclusively, in the countries of Nigeria, Togo, Ghana, Benin, Sierra Leon and Cotê de Ivoire (there are many parts of Africa where you will not here this instrument). Different language groups in each country often have their own names, styles, techniques, and traditions associated with the shekere.

In Nigeria, the very large beaded calabash is called an “agbe”, and traditionally is owned and played only by professional musicians.* It is a personal instrument and never loaned or shared even with family members. However, a son who is a professional

* Olatunji, “Music in African Life”

musician may inherit his father's agbe. Shekeres among the Yoruba of Nigeria are often connected with religion, given great respect, and play a very important role in certain traditional musical forms.

Throughout West Africa you will also hear a smaller gourd, covered with a woven net which is tied off at the bottom, leaving a tail of loose strings. In Ghana and Togo among the Ewe language group it is known as the "acatse", and is often used to accompany a drum or bell orchestra on important occasions. In Sierra Leone you will find a similar type of shekere with a very loose net and long tail, often called a "shake-shake" or "shaburay".

When African slaves were taken to the "New World", they carried with them many of these rich musical traditions, which took root in varying degrees in different parts of the Americas and the Caribbean. In Cuba, Yoruba religious traditions using drums and shekere s are found almost completely intact; with similar rhythmic patterns, names of instruments and accompanying chants. Brazilians sometimes use a beaded (with seeds) coconut called "afuxe" similar in name and style to the Ghanaian "axatse". In the United States the shekere and other African related instruments continue to grow in popularity and are rapidly becoming part of our contemporary musical expression.

Resources for Gourds

American Gourd Society P.O. Box 274 Mt. Giliad, Ohio 43338 (419)946-3302	West Mt. Gourd Farm Fred Hayes Rt. 1 Box 853 Gilmer, Texas 75644
Lena Braswell Rt. 1 Box 73 Wrens, Georgia 30833 (706)547-6784	Cary Gourd Club Mary Ann Rood 4008 Green Level Rd. Apex, NC 27502 (919)362-4357

MAKING THE SHEKERE

Materials:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Gourd (you could also use plastic soda pop or Clorox bottle)• String (nylon is best; it must be thin enough to slip through the beads)• Beads (you can also use seeds shells buttons, etc...anything to create a rattling sound).
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Tools:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Abrasive scrubber and detergent• Hacksaw• Coat hanger or a long stick• Cigarette lighter or a candle• Oil or polyurethane shellac (if a protective finish is desired)
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Finding Gourds

The basis for the shekere is the gourd or calabash. A wide variety of gourds are grown in the U.S. (especially the Southeast) and are usually harvested in the fall. Almost any type can be used to make a rattle; however the larger “birdhouse” or “bottle” gourds are desired for the deep rich tone they produce when hollowed out. Look for gourds in October and November at roadside produce stands where you see pumpkins. When freshly harvested they are green in color and resemble winter squash. It’s best to dry them in a warm dry area (attics are ideal), elevated on a screen or wire so that air can circulate underneath them. Be sure to check them every few weeks and wipe off the mold to avoid rot.

A gourd may take from one to six months to dry, depending on its size and temperature/humidity of the drying area. You will know it’s ready by the brown color, the hardness of the shell, and its lighter weight.

Preparing the Gourd

When the gourd is completely dry, wash it with strong soap and water, using an abrasive scrubber to clean the surface thoroughly. Most stubborn blemish will come off with “elbow grease”.

With a hacksaw, cut off the top of the gourd, leaving enough neck (be generous) to easily hold with your hand. Using a coat hanger or long stick, loosen the seeds and fiber that are inside and shake it all out (save the seeds to plant). Work GENTLY (gourds crack easily) until the inside of the gourd is completely free of fiber. The cleaner and smoother the walls, the more it will resonate.

You can leave the gourd in its natural state, oil or stain it to deepen the color, shellac, polyurethane, or fiberglass the outside and (or) inside for added protection, or create your own finish. I let the thickness and strength of the gourd determine this process.

The Gourd as an Instrument

Your “calabash” is now a musical instrument. Tapping the heel of your hand on the bottom, listen to its tone. How many other tones can you find? Create a repeated pattern using at least three different tones. Play the pattern as a round. Find two or three patterns to string together. Form groups and play the patterns simultaneously. Can you make the tones “talk” to each other? Find a simple phrase to play in unison for the beginning and ending.

Stringing the Shekere

There are a variety of ways to make the net or skirt. The most common method is the following:

1. Cut a piece of string to use as a “collar” around the neck of the gourd. Tie it. It should be long enough to easily tie and hang loosely a little below the curve of the neck. When in doubt, leave extra. Most people prefer to use a thicker string for the collar.
2. Measure 15 to 30 lengths of nylon string depending on the size of the gourd and the desired tightness of the weave. Each piece should be six to eight times the length of the net. It’s better to have too much rather than too little. Burn the ends of each length of string to avoid unraveling (no need for scissors).
3. To attach the strings to the collar, fold each string in half. Take the closed end (formed at the half-way point) and place it underneath the collar. Thread the two loose ends through the loop and tighten. This forms a slip knot. Tie a “loop” knot right below it to secure it (form the shape of a “6”, bring the ends back through hole and tighten). Continue this process with all the strings and place them around the collar at equal distances apart (1/2”—1”). When the strings are in position, tighten the
4. Thread a bead onto one of the strings. Thread another bead on the neighboring string (not the other half of that string). Push the beads to the top towards the

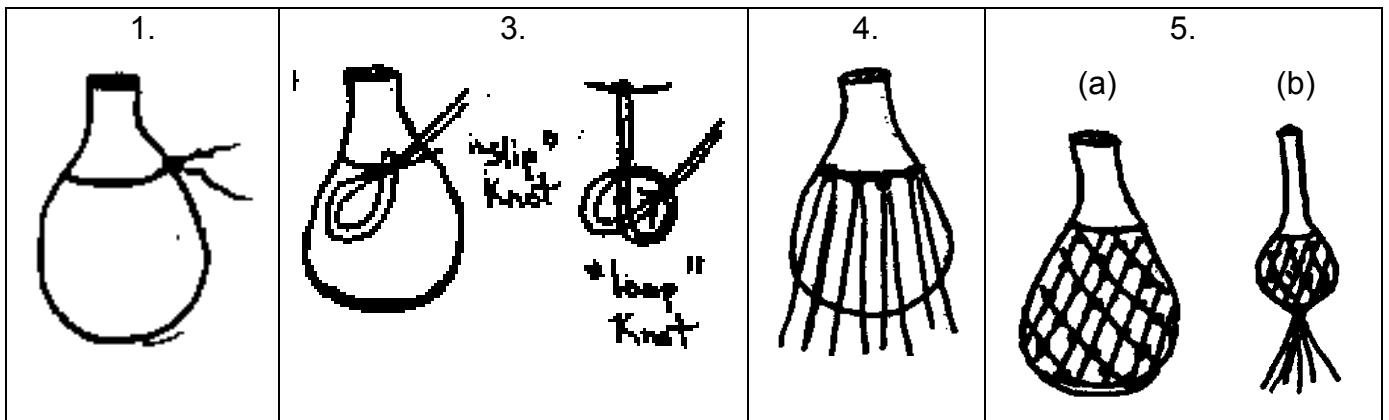
neck, and tie off loosely with a loop knot. Continue this process horizontally around the circle and finish the first row completely before starting on the second.

***There are many variations on beading patterns. You can put two or three beads on each of the strings or on only one string in the pair. Some people put both strings through each bead. Be creative! Be consistent! Make sure the beads hang loosely.

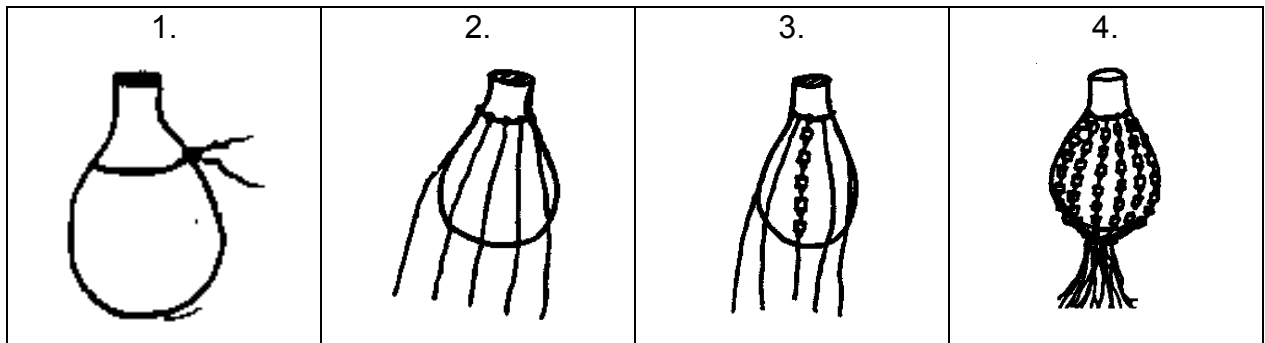
5. When the net reaches the bottom of the gourd, you can finish it in one of two ways:
 - a. Cut another piece of string the length and thickness of the top collar. Tie it to form a "collar" for the bottom. The circle should be about an inch smaller than the bottom diameter of the gourd. Tie each set of double strings to the collar with a loop knot (more than one if needed). When finished and secure, burn the ends off below the knot. Tighten or loosen the top or bottom collar to adjust the tension.

For smaller gourds:

- b. Cut another piece of string about 8" long and tie all the loose ends together forming "tail". The net should hang loosely a few inches below the gourd



The following drawings illustrate a method for making the net that is easier, faster, not as effective musically but great for small children:



PLAYING THE SHEKERE

There are as many different ways to play the shekere as there are names for the instrument (many), sizes of gourds, styles of netting, and personalities of players. Whatever style you adopt, make it “yours”. Be gentle and treat the instrument with great respect.

The most common technique used in the U.S. has origins in Nigeria and Ghana. It uses a medium to large gourd, netted with an open bottom (the strings are tied off around the bottom collar). Rest the bottom of the gourd on the heel of one hand and hold the neck with the other: I use my left hand at the bottom and my right on the neck. Some people prefer the opposite. Hold it the way that’s most comfortable for you. My descriptions of technique involving right/left, are from my perspective. Reverse the directions if you prefer holding the bottom of the gourd with right hand.

Tones

1. “Bass” (B)—holding the shekere upright or at a slight angle, let the weight of the gourd fall on the heel of the hand, releasing a deep, mellow, tone (bass).
2. “Tap” (T)—Using the same hand, lightly slap the bottom of the gourd with the finger-tips, producing a sharp, high, sound (“tap”)
3. “Dee” (De)—Toss the weight of the gourd from the bottom hand to the top hand (left to right), without either hand losing contact (“dee”). The gourd should now be horizontal, with the weight resting mostly in the right hand.
4. “Daa” (da)—toss the weight back to the left hand still maintaining contact with both hands at all times (“daa”). (This stroke is like that of the bass without using the heel of the hand to bring out bottom sounds). The shekere should now be in a diagonal position.
5. “Shaa” (shaa)—Holding the gourd in a horizontal position with the weight resting in both hands, use a sharp wrist action and flip the net away from you in a circular motion (“shaa”).
6. “Ray” (ra)—flip the net towards you (“ray”).

These are some of the basic tones used in one style of shekere playing. The names I’ve given them are not necessarily traditional; they are designed as a tool for communicating clarity of tone and pattern.

****The smaller style shekere with a “tail” involves a different technique. Find your own adaptations of the previous set of tones. In Togo, the neck of the gourd is held in one hand and a pattern is created by playing the gourd between the other hand.

EXPLORING BASIC PATTERNS AND VARIATIONS IN 4/4

1. Standing in a circle, get a slow, easy pulse going by walking in place. The feet will act as our metronome. Step on every ↓ (4/4), with the right foot on the downbeat. Keep the feet going throughout these exercises if possible.
2. Using imaginary shekeres, pantomime the movement of playing while singing the tones. Explore the following page of “patterns and Variations in 4/4”. Start with a leader/echo, repeating each set four times before moving on. Then go back and “play” the patterns in unison, four times each.
3. Using the shekeres, movement and voice, explore the “Patterns and variations in 4/4”.
 - a. Begin by listening to the sound of each instrument individually (bass tone), passed around the circle in rhythm. Gradually, let the passing pattern become more complex. Choose volunteers to start new patterns. Find three of your favorite patterns (one should be simple). Have everyone play each pattern in unison. Create a sequence of these three patterns. Make up a rhythmic signal to start, to change patterns, and to end. Form a marching formation while you do this. Change direction or formation when each pattern changes, and freeze in a shape when you end.
 - b. Explore the page of “Basic Patterns and Variations in 4/4”, starting with a leader/echo and progressing to playing in unison. Repeat each pattern four times and move on to the next.
 - c. Combine two or more patterns to make longer repeated phrases.
 - d. EXPLORE ORCHESTRATION:
 - i. Play (“sing”) one or more of these phrases as a round. Try it with two, three, and then four groups.
 - ii. Forming two groups, play two patterns together simultaneously. Try it with three groups, then four groups.
 - iii. Try combined patterns.
 - iv. Build a “House of Rhythm”. Starting with a simple foundation pattern, gradually layer on more complex parts.

