

Bird song on a new gut string

A response to an object in the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford. A commission from the [Museum of Colour](https://museumofcolour.org.uk/people-of-letters-exhibition/)



Image: Pitt Rivers Museum

(Yellow bird, up high in banana tree)

African Bard, Lute maker
Had you not been stolen
Or thrown overboard at sea
Had you not been worked to death
Or hung from a poplar tree
You'd be here
To teach me that song
Learned at your mother's knee
That sings
The names of the birds
That nested in the
Baobab tree
Before flying free
To far off lands
To warble on sycamore
branches
Adding their unique voices
To a harmonious world chorus

<https://museumofcolour.org.uk/people-of-letters-exhibition/>

*(But there's sadness in the notes
That come trilling from their
throats)*

The chord is broken,
African Bard
The gut did not survive
The theft
The middle passage
Of time
Like all the Creator's works
It too has gone to dust
In its place is a man-made string
And as I rub the horse hair
across the thin nylon
I know that what I hear
Is not right
Can never be right

But wait...
I see the end of the old gut
string
Wound expertly around the
ebony peg
The coconut, having fed the
ancestors
Yearns, with the goat skin, to
amplify the right sounds

Teach me, African Bard
How to work that chord
That I might sing again
the old song
in a strange land

I listen ... I learn
And I make a new gut string

It stretches unbroken
across the oceans
And the centuries

And with its vibrations
Come the right words and notes
Carrying with them
That new wisdom
That will make us
Once more free



Image: Pitt Rivers Museum

Free as the avian chorus
Free as the myriad birds
In their many bright colours
Singing in the crown
Of the old Iroko tree

*(Awon agbe nwon ki nrahun aro
– Beeni*

*Aluko nwon ki nrahun osun –
Beeni*

*Lekeleke nwon ki nrahun efun -
Beeni)*

Translation:

Awon agbe nwon ki nrahun aro
Beeni

Woodcocks don't want for (lack) violet
That's right

Aluko nwon ki nrahun osun
Beeni

Touracos don't want for purple
That's right

Lekeleke nwon ki nrahun efun
Beeni

Cattle eagrets don't want for white
That's right

©Tayo Aluko, September 2019

Listen: <https://soundcloud.com/tayo-aluko/bird-song-on-an-old-gut-string>

<https://museumofcolour.org.uk/people-of-letters-exhibition/>