

# Tanbûr Long-Necked Lutes along the Silk Road and beyond

Hans de Zeeuw



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In memory of my beloved father



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## Preface and Acknowledgements

The title of this book refers to the long-necked *tanbûrs* as probably the most characteristic musical instruments of the Silk Road. Travelling from Persia into the various musical traditions along the Silk Road, an arterial network of trade routes that crisscrossed Eurasia since the 1st millennium BC, *tanbûrs* reveal a great deal of cross-cultural interaction across political and cultural boundaries.

The first part of the book, *The Tanbûr Tradition*, discusses the historical background, construction, and playing technique of *tanbûrs*. The second part, *The Tanbûr Family*, deals with the long-necked lutes of the *tanbûr* family distinguishing a *tanbûr*, *dotâr*, *saz*, *setâr*, *dömbra*, and a *dambura* family. After a short introduction, the construction, playing technique, and musical tradition are discussed. The book concludes with a *Glossary of Musical Instruments*, *Discography*, *Bibliography*, *Illustration Credits*, and an *Index*.

This study benefited from the work of many scholars in various scientific disciplines. It is impossible to credit them all. My intellectual debts are evident from the footnotes and *Bibliography*. I particularly want to acknowledge the work of Henry George Farmer, Laurence Picken, Jean During, Richard Campbell, Fivos Anoyanakis, Scheherazade Qassim Hassan, Mohammad-Rezâ Darvishi, Lloyd Clifton Miller, John Baily, Mark Slobin, Hiromi Lorraine Sakata, Theodore Levin, Tamila Djani-Zade, Walter Feldman, Bonnie Wade, Ameneh Youssefzadeh, Allyn Miner, Ricardo Eichmann, Erol Parlak, Józef Pacholczyk, Razia Sultanova, Azatgul Tashmatova, Zhumageldi Nazhmedenov, and Tursunjan Litip and Ilshat Tursun.<sup>1</sup> For the broader background of my study I have benefited from the work of numerous historians, such as Marshall Hodgson, Jerry Bentley, Joan Aruz, Robert Canfield, Christopher Beckwith, and the late Halil Inalcik, and art historians, such as Stuart Cary Welch, Milo C. Beach, Walter Denny, Norah Titley, Andrew Topsfield, Michael Barry, Banu Mahir, and Filiz Çağman.

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<sup>1</sup> Studies on Islamic art are in general extensive about literature, architecture, miniature painting, and the decorative arts, but largely ignore music and especially musical instruments.

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Apparently, this book is not the definitive study of the *tanbûr* family. It has shortcomings and lacunae, which require updates and point to areas for further research. I believe, however, that this study could not have been written without these shortcomings and lacunae.



## **The Tanbûr Tradition**

**Historical background, construction, playing technique**





# General Introduction

The first large Eurasian civilizations emerged millennia before the Greco-Roman period and extended from Egypt to China. The earliest among them was Mesopotamia, a region situated between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers encompassing nowadays Iraq, north-eastern Syria, and south-eastern Turkey. Since the rise of Mesopotamia in the 3rd millennium BC, these Eurasian civilizations increasingly interacted through networks of trade that initiated cultural interaction.

With the establishment of the Silk Road connecting the Mediterranean with Central Asia, India, and China, the Eurasian civilizations started to interact on a larger scale through long-distance trade since the 2nd millennium (Figure 1). Many important scientific and technological innovations as well as ideas about music and musical instruments, among which the *tanbûr*, travelled along the Silk Road testifying cross-cultural interactions across political and cultural boundaries. With the rise of Europe in the 15th century these interactions unfolded on a growing global scale.<sup>1</sup>

The long-necked *tanbûr*, which appeared as far as we know during the Sâsânian era (c. AD 224-651), diffused into the various musical traditions along the Silk Road, resulting in a variety of closely or distantly related *tanbûrs*. Contrary to the *tanbûr*, the origin and morphological development of the *ûd* is well documented thanks to Arabic, Persian, and Turkish musical treatises on music appearing between the 8th and 15th century including a wealth of iconographic sources. Representations on marble reliefs, miniature paintings, murals, ceramic, wooden, ivory, and metal objects, underline the outstanding position of the *ûd* over the centuries.<sup>2</sup> As an initially small nomadic two-stringed lute, the *tanbûr* left considerably less literary and, especially, iconographical traces. Mentioned earlier in literary sources, more sophisticated *tanbûrs* appeared since the 15th century on Persian, Mughal, Uzbek, and Ottoman miniature paintings. Especially Mughal miniature paintings abundantly depict often beautifully ornamented *tanbûrs* in a mainly courtly and urban environment.

The following centuries shown an increase in literary and iconographical sources. Towards the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century, *tanbûrs* are travelling far beyond the Silk Road, to Western Europe, America, and Canada, where *tanbûrs* are played in diaspora communities, crossover ensembles consisting of musicians with various backgrounds, and by multi-instrumentalists. Moreover, new generations of *tanbûrs* continue to appear due to the changing musical and tonal demands made on them.

In this study, the term *tanbûr* is used as a generic name for the long-necked lutes of the *tanbûr* family.<sup>3</sup> Similar and identical instruments are also known by other names, such as *dotâr*, *saz*, *setâr*, *dömbra*, and *dambura*.<sup>4</sup> While the instrument diffused into the various musical cultures along the Silk Road, indigenous names were applied to modified and different *tanbûr* types, such as the four-stringed Uzbek-Tajik *tanbûr*, the five-stringed Uyghur *tanbûr*, and the multi-stringed Afghan *tanbûr* and Herâti *dotâr*, and Kashmîrî *setâr*, of which not only the number of strings but also the morphology differs significantly.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> According to the broadly used classification system of the German scholars Curt Sachs (1881-1959) and Eric Moritz von Hornbostel (1877-1935), the long-necked lutes of the *tanbûr* family are 'necked bowl lutes' with exception of the in this study discussed eastern Kazakh *dömbra* and the Kalmyk *dömbra*, which are 'necked box lutes'. Box-shaped constructed instruments, by von Hornbostel and Sachs (1914) described as 'aus Brettern zusammengefügt', are uncommon outside Europe and in general an imitation or development of European instruments. See also Wachsmann and M.J. Kartomi. Instruments, classification of: 418-428.

<sup>4</sup> See also Hassan, S.Q., R. Conway Morris, J. Baily and J. During. *Tanbûr*: 61-62; The Persian custom to use *târ* (Persian for string) in combination with a prefix referring to the number of strings to distinguish lutes, such as *setâr* and *dotâr*, was also adopted by other cultures: *dotâr*, *sehtâr*, *çhahârtâr* or *hortâr*, *panjtâr* or *panđtâr*, and *shâstâr* or *sheshtâr* for respectively two, three, four, five, and six-stringed *tanbûrs*. In Anatolia, *telli* (Turkish for string) is also used in combination with a prefix, as in the case of *iki telli* for a two-stringed and *üç telli* for a three-stringed *saz*. Until the last century musicians spoke of *on telli* for a ten-stringed *saz* (3-4-3), *yedi telli* for a seven-stringed *saz* (3-2-2), and *altı telli* for a six-stringed *saz* (2-2-2). The habit of naming lutes after their number of strings has apparently not yet been completely given up until today, judging by *üç telli bağlama* for a three-stringed *bağlama* and *dört telli bağlama* for a four-course *bağlama* (2-2-2-2).

<sup>5</sup> The Persian custom to use *târ* (Persian for string) in combination with a prefix referring to the number of strings to distinguish lutes, such as *setâr* and *dotâr*, was also adopted by other cultures: *dotâr*, *sehtâr*, *çhahârtâr* or *hortâr*, *panjtâr* or *panđtâr*, and *shâstâr* or *sheshtâr* for respectively two, three, four, five, and six-stringed *tanbûrs*. In Anatolia, *telli* (Turkish for string) is also used in combination with a prefix, as in the case of *iki telli* for a two-stringed and *üç telli* for a three-stringed *saz*. Until the last century musicians spoke of *on telli* for a ten-stringed *saz* (3-4-3), *yedi telli* for a seven-stringed *saz* (3-2-2), and *altı telli* for a six-stringed *saz* (2-2-2). The habit of naming lutes after their number of strings has apparently not yet been completely given up until today, judging by *üç telli bağlama* for a three-stringed *bağlama* and *dört telli bağlama* for a four-course *bağlama* (2-2-2-2).

<sup>1</sup> In 2013, the Chinese president Xi Jinping launched an initiative to revive the old Silk Road: *One Belt, One Road* (OBOR). Like China's imperial envoy of Zhang Qian helped to establish the Silk Road, China aims to establish a modern equivalent by creating a network of railways, roads, maritime routes, and pipelines linking China, Central Asia, West Asia as well as parts of South Asia. Although the Chinese *One Belt, One Road* initiative primarily reflects commercial and geopolitical interests, it also includes major military considerations.

<sup>2</sup> Wegner, U. 'ûd: 1089-1102.

The establishment of a nomenclature of the *tanbûr* family lies beyond the scope of this study and has yet to be undertaken. Following the example of biology, a taxonomy hierarchy of the *tanbûr* family nomenclature

could be introduced. The consistent implementation of such a typology would require advanced diagnostic criteria, such as morphology, playing technique, and musical tradition.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See Neubauer, E. Einleitung, in Franke, D. *Museum des Institutes für Geschichte der Arabisch-Islamischen Wissenschaften. Beschreibung der Exponate. Teil 1: Musikinstrumente*: x-xv; Picken, L. Postscript in *Folk Musical Instruments of Turkey*: 557-583.



Figure 1. Map of the Silk Road.  
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