

Griot(tes): Preservers of History and Shapers of Culture

ABSTRACT

An Exploration of the West African Griotte Tradition

with special attention to women who changed the cultural landscape of what being a griot could look like.

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“I am a singer and an actor. I am primarily an artist. Had I been born in Africa, I would have belonged, I hope, to that family which sings and chants the glories and legends of the tribe -Paul Robeson, 1936.”¹

The family Paul Robeson, legendary African American actor, singer, lawyer, athlete, civil rights activist, linguist, and more, dreamed of belonging to from his home of the United States was a family of griots or jelis, essential workers in preserving and shifting culture through the ways they tell stories. Griots historically belonged to families of griots in Western African or Sahelian societies who took on various titles and wore unlimited hats. Paul Robeson, what some would call a renaissance man of his time but what I would call a modern-age griot coming from the Diaspora, can be explored as a link to what elements of what it means to be a griot survived the transatlantic slave trade and were inherited by those in the diaspora such as African American storytellers such as Robeson and Zora Neale Hurston. The modern-day griots and griottes, across the diaspora, are the preservers of history through their forms of storytelling, and shapers of culture through their artistic voices. To further explore the rich cultural significance of the griot from the familial courts and compounds of Africa to the creative works of griottes today such as Sona Jobarteh, we must first delve into where the name ‘griot’ comes from and how music plays an essential role in the makings of griots.

The word griot can be described as an “umbrella term for an inherited status found in numerous West African societies south of the Sahara, north of the coastal jungles, and west of Lake Chad.”² A student of West African music traditions, journalist Banning Eyre, said this of the word griot or “jelis” who do not simply amuse their listeners but rather who can “persuade the

¹ (Williams 2005, 15)

² (Eyre 2000, ix)

mighty, dignify ordinary lives”³ and many other functions in a society or community. Eyre’s description of *jelis* opens up conversations surrounding the title or position of a griot in society, the tasks and responsibilities they uphold, and the lasting impact of what griots did. Although men and women both served as griots, typically being from the same family by marriage/blood, when researching the significance of griots, women were rarely explored solely for their contributions to the tradition, culture, and art form. For this reason, when referencing griots in this paper, attention should be drawn to the fact that women held the title of griots, were essential in the retelling and choosing of stories to share, and were just as valuable as male griots musically, using their voices as primary instruments. With the exception of a few scholars and articles that detail the impact and importance of women as musical storytellers, the other sources that detail the life, history, and complexities of griots were primarily about men. For the remainder of this exploration when the word griot is used, know that women fall under that category and will later be explored for their unique contributions.

Author of the book *Griots and Griottes* which details the story of “remarkable wordsmiths and performers”⁴ providing a glimpse into the world of the profession, scholar Thomas A. Hale, notes that the place that is richest in the culture of the griot tradition is within the Mande region of West Africa, in the heart of northern Guinea and Southern Mali. The numerous names for people who played similar if not the same roles as griots found within African societies spanning beyond the borders of West Africa, prove that the word griot is as Eyre mentioned an umbrella term for those whose primary purpose included verbal storytelling. People who were Fulbe, also known as Fulani, are said to have helped in the spread of the griot

³ (Eyre 2000, 2)

⁴ 12)

tradition as they moved across several nations from Ghana to Mali. However, they did not belong to the Mande people who are typically associated with having a strong cultural identity with griots. Within the context of how griots are viewed within a society, there is also a hierarchy of griots or jelis that is based on which people of certain ethnic groups were slaves or servants of other ethnic groups despite both groups possessing storytelling musicians. For example, griot Moussa Kouyate explained to Banning Eyre that “Gawlo, Fulani entertainers, were charged with praising jeli and noble alike.”⁵ This differentiation in the social status of these masters of song and story based on what ethnic groups they belong to contributes to the complexity of the status of griots/jelis/gawlo. It is important to note that because the word griot is associated with what the Mande or Mandinka people referred to their verbal wordsmiths as, the term griot has been vastly spread, used, and in some ways has overtaken other names used by different groups across the continent and specifically amongst non-Mande people.⁶ Now that we have explored the complex ambiguity of the word itself from the West African perspective, we will move on to the various career paths of the griot and the significance of music within the lasting legacies of the role of griots.

Within accounts from travelers of modern-day West Africa, from as early as the 14th century, griots or jalis, or djelis, were associated with singing praises, a function that is inextricably linked to their history of incorporating music into their oral traditions.⁶ The music of the griots is one of the most recognizable and longstanding elements of the makings of a griot. Other functions outside of and within the realm of music include their roles as Historians,

⁵ (Eyre 2000, 58)

⁶ (Hale 1998, 15)

⁶ 18)

(Hale 1998,

Genealogists, Advisors to members of society, Spokespersons, Diplomats, Interpreters, Translators, Musicians, Composers, Teachers, Exhortors or Instigators, Witnesses, and Vital parts of ceremonies including namings, initiations, marriages, and funerals.⁷ Although many of these traditional roles are no longer observed in griots of today, what remains essential to the identity of a griot is the relationship they have with stories, through the ones they choose to tell and the methods they employ to reach their audiences. Hale describes griots within the context of the complexities of their roles as “a group that serves collectively as the social glue in a society, inspiring people, mediating conflicts, facilitating important life ceremonies and serving as secular guides to human behavior.”⁸ Griots possess and continually strive for a deeper understanding of the human experience by looking back in time, contributing to the present-day idea of a griot through the stories they share, and ultimately allowing the functions of a griot the space to evolve and impact people in the future.

One of the griot's most well-known methods of exploring human behavior is through performance with music, which has historically been examined through the instruments they use to accompany their voices or spoken accounts. When people outside of the continent of Africa think of griots, the image that arises is of a man playing the Kora, a 21-stringed harp-lute, that dates back centuries as an instrument used by griots. Although the Kora may be the most visible marker of a griot's identity as a musician today, other instruments are associated with griots that predate the kora and that serve as precursors to other popular instruments today. The West African Lute, also known as the koni, molo, hoddu, and ngonni, is an instrument that was played

⁷ (Hale 1998, 19-55)

⁸ (Hale 1998, 57)

in many regions of Africa, and that varies in size, construction, audio quality, and history or legacy depending on the people that were impacted by the instrument.⁹



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The lute has also been linked to the playing of the guitar and banjo due to the similarity in how the instruments are played or rather how the strings are plucked. During Banning Eyre's time in Bamako, the capital of Mali, his friend Dirik Westervelt visited him bringing a banjo, an instrument that ngonni master Adama Tounkara had never encountered but after a few minutes began to play with ease.¹¹ Scholars of music of the diaspora have done research on the banjo, as it serves as a way that African Americans and other diasporans have been able to connect to West African musical traditions, through the legacy of the lute, and the banjo's significance to Black folk music.

Another instrument played by jelis that attracts attention because of its unique sound is the balafon, an instrument comprised of a "series of tuned hardwood bars, or keys, resting on a

⁹ 149-152)

¹⁰ <https://worldmusiccentral.org/2023/12/27/a-brief-dive-into-the-ngoni-west-africas-traditional-lute/>

¹¹ (Eyre 2000, 51)

bamboo frame under which are suspended small calabashes that serve as resonators.¹²” The balafon has historical ties to the Mande people of Mali, specifically due to the instrument's role in the legendary epic Sunjata, derived from the story of Sundiata, the first king of the

¹² 158)

13th-century Malian Empire.¹⁴ The balafon is said to have been created and played by the enemy of Sundiata Keita, Sumanguru, who imprisoned the personal jeli of Sundiata after the jeli began to play the balafon. When Sundiata heard that his jeli was being kept by Sumanguru, he and his army battled and conquered Sumanguru, granting the jeli freedom. The jeli vowed to spread the balafon to the Mande people, thus the Mande people link this story with the origin of such an essential instrument in their musical landscape. What is regarded as the original balafon is stored by the Kouyate jeliw located in Guinea.¹⁵ There are also instruments such as tama and dundun drums and the Karinya bell associated with griots and griottes.



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Although the West African lute and its several names and variations reflect the number of people whose history is linked with the instrument, the kora remains one of the most recognizable instruments that accompany griots, both sonically and visually. As mentioned earlier, the kora comprises 21 strings attached to a calabash base resonator with a neck made of

¹⁴ (Eyre 2000, 2)

¹⁵ (Hale 1998, 159)

¹⁶ Bala Players, 15th—16th century. Mali, Dogon Peoples. Hardwood with organic materials, iron, 17 3/8 x 10 x 7 in. (44.1 x 25.4 x 17.8 cm). Private Collection © Hughes Dubois

wood. The kora continues to attract audiences because of its delicate construction, which

unfortunately causes problems with players who must travel with their instruments as the base can be cracked and the tuning of a kora is quite extensive as well as its unique sound. The kora also connects to the gender divide in the roles of griots. Traditionally, certain instruments were only played by men, and others were only played by women. Instruments such as the balafon and the kora can be described as masculine instruments, reserved for male griots or jelis, while the karinya and ardin (closely related to the kora), were played by griottes.¹³ The lute however existed outside of the gender binary, depicting the ways that the role of griots included men and women from the beginning.

One of the most essential aspects of the griot is the voice, an instrument needed for any type of oral storytelling. Although there are griots who do not sing or employ instrumentation, a griot must know how to use their voice to reach the people they are speaking to.

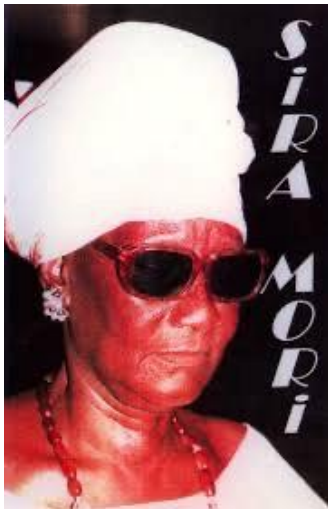
Ethnomusicologist Lucy Duran describes the two kinds of singing done in Mande culture as donkilo or song, “a fixed melody and text which recurs at different intervals of a performance” and sataro or narration that is “improvised text, without any metrical scheme, either spoken or recited to a syllabically set musical line.”¹⁴ Scholar and ethnomusicologist Graeme Counsel described the significance of improvisation as it is an important element within a performance, where “musicians will often insert lengthy improvisatory passages which showcase their musical

¹³ (Hale 1998, 163)

¹⁴ (Hale 1998, 164)

ability.”¹⁵ The power that griots hold comes from their position as people who can change, omit, and rewrite history through their voices, both sonically and culturally.

Women who take on the title and responsibilities of a Griotte (Jali Muso, Djely Mousso), in their respective cultures, will serve as the main focus of the following section of this exploration of the rich and diasporic nature of the griotte/storyteller. These women have changed the landscape of West African music through improvisation within their storytelling and artistic voices as improvisation is, according to an article titled *The Importance of Being a Jali Muso: Some Aspects of the Role and Status of the Women in the Music Life of Today's Gambia*, “one of the basic characteristics of every good jali/jali muso, both in the musical and narrative sense.”¹⁶¹⁷



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Siramori Diabate, one of Mali’s exceptional griottes, exemplified the concept of women in griotte roles taking control over the narratives they chose to sing about from the 1970s and onward. With a voice easily recognizable by Malians, Diabate’s raw and textured tone, contrasts

¹⁵ (Counsel 1997, 45)

¹⁶ (Piškor, n.d., 44)

¹⁷ Album Cover, Sara, Sira Mori Diabate 1986

against the stories of marriage and women's agency within their relationships that Diabate became known for.¹⁸ Her song "Nanyuman" revolves around a girl which the title is named and her situation as a young woman who has been married to a man that she is not excited by. In traditional Mande culture, the wives leave their childhood homes and neighborhoods to live in their husbands' family compound, oftentimes stripping them of agency, close relationships with old friends, and creating a new life where they must earn the respect of the husband's family.

¹⁸ 59)

Nanyuman however decides to act on her own sexual desires and engage in a relationship with a traveling Kola nut salesman, when he stops at her husband's compound. The story explores the common situation of a woman being married away without her feelings being considered, but instead of preaching a message that solely asks women to accept the hardships that are thrown at them and obey their husbands, Diabate allows the main character of this story act in agency through her choice to be with the traveling man.

Diabate walks a careful line of upholding traditional mande cultural narratives while also speaking to problems that the women of her time were facing, mainly the patriarchal control over women's bodies and minds. The story continues to unfold with Nanyuman running away from her husband's compound, leaving her young son behind, with the traveling man who later forces Nanyuman to live with a fate that Diabate's mother dealt with, a man who leaves. Nanyuman is abandoned by her new husband, which audiences may think is the moral conclusion to her infidelity and wrongdoings as a mother. However, Diabate, a master storyteller, continues the story with Nanyuman returning to her old husband's compound. Jan Jenson, Graeme Counsel, and Brahim Camara, researchers of West African Griots and close friends of the late Diabate write, "Siramori solves Nanyuman's apparently hopeless situation by changing the perspective of the narrative and by adding a measure of humor. She closes the door on what has transpired, that of Nanyuman's infidelity, by letting Nanyuman publicly confess that she has done wrong and needs to be punished for her actions."¹⁹

The story ends with the character Nanyuman saying that her husband should spank her bottom with a shoe, an outcome that audiences found humor in that also served as a lighthearted

¹⁹ 63)

consequence of infidelity that women were not typically subjected to. Women would typically face harsh and extreme abuse at the hands of men, which Diabate steers away from and subtly condemns by omitting this violent reaction from the husband's character in the story. Nanyuman also comes to accept that life on her husband's compound will be something that she can look forward to and cherish as she has been reunited with her son, who will one day have children that will fill Nanyuman's days with joy. While Nanyuman's fictional story ends with a sense of dignity and agency in her marital relationship, the laws of the land at that time favored men in terms of divorce, leaving women to endure abuse without any legal action that could protect them. A griotte has the power to shift the narrative, with Siramori recognizing and supporting "the woman's agency in negotiating her sexual desires, thus integrating the modern image of a woman's sexual rights. In "Nanyuman," Siramori thus developed a well-worn storyline by elevating it into an important cultural critique and ideological statement. It is a performance that underscores her position as one of the greatest voices of her generation, while also providing insight into how *griots* can skillfully operate in contexts which formal legislation fails to address."²⁰

As the first Gambian kora-playing griotte to gain international recognition, Sona Jaborteh defies the gender-based norms of a griot, building on the legacy of the family of musical storytellers²¹ she comes from while cementing her place in the West African griot tradition.

²⁰ 64)

²¹ Berklee College of Music



Traditionally griottes did not play the kora, instead, they played other instruments and used their voice as the primary instrument, Sona Jobarteh however began her journey as a griotte as a classically trained musician first. As scholar Mojca Piskor writes, “The family environment, in which music has a prominent role, both in the private and the professional sphere, is the starting point and source of knowledge and skill.”²² Jobarteh comes from a family of griots, the legendary Toubani Diabate her cousin, where her father learned the kora from his father. Although Jobarteh initially studied cello at the university level while she was a teenager, she grew interested in living her destiny as a part of a griot family. Jobarteh mustered up the courage to ask her father to teach her the kora, as typically the tradition is passed down from father to son. As a part of an episode of *60 Minutes* exploring Sona Jobarteh and her artistry, her father said in response to her inquiry about learning the kora, “I would like-- if I close my eyes, I don't have to know the

²² (Piškor, n.d., 52)

difference, is it a man or a woman."²³ Stanjally Diabate encouraged Sona to focus on becoming a good kora player, not a good woman kora player. He believed in his

²³ (Stahl 2022)

(Jensen, Counsel, and Camara 2018,

daughter's musical abilities and trusted her with the family's legacy of telling stories through their musical traditions. Sona Jobarteh later incorporated singing into her music, as at first, she despised it, preferring to speak through her instruments. Today Jobarteh is globally recognized as a kora virtuoso, combining skillful playing of a traditional instrument with new compositions and stories that she brings light to. Outside of her career as a musician, she also opened up a school in Gambia, that provides a space for children to learn traditional instruments like the balafon and kora, as well as learn about other creative outlets.

The roles of a griot will continue to shift just as culture remains an everchanging aspect of the human experience. For people of the diaspora, griots serve as a way to connect with the musical, social, and spiritual elements of cultures that oppressive forces tried to strip away from us when we arrived in new lands due to the trans-Atlantic slave trades. For centuries Black Diasporans, specifically African Americans have continued to build on the traces of the griot tradition that survived the slave trades, the middle passage, and the years of oppression. Some argue that Black writers, theater makers, rappers, and musicians are modern-day artists who come from the storytelling tradition of griots, despite genealogy or geographic location. In September of 2024, legendary rapper LL Cool J released an album that featured Sona Jobarteh showcasing "the fusion of LL Cool J's rap mastery and Sona Jobarteh's exceptional Kora skills."²⁴ This collaboration represents the diasporic ties of African American hip-hop culture and West African griot culture, with innovative modes of storytelling through music being at the center.

²⁴ (The Standard: Gambian National News 2024)



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