



THE GRIOT

All across Africa since the first Africans began developing kingdoms on the continent the transmission of knowledge, stories, information, traditions, and history between generations has been extremely important. In western Africa since the founding of the great Empire of Mali in 1235 AD, the griot has been used as one such transmission mechanism.



The territory of the Empire of Mali included the modern-day countries of southern Mauritania, Senegal, Mali, northern Burkina Faso, The Gambia, western Niger, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, the Ivory Coast and northern Ghana. Now, the griot is a west African historian, storyteller, poet, singer and musician. The griot were also known in west Africa as the 'jali' or 'kewel'. They would tell stories of well known west African kings and famous heroes. Many of the stories of the griot were used to illustrate moral messages and guidance to increase the strength and cohesiveness of the requisite villages under their jurisdiction.

Family histories are also memorized and conveyed by the griot as well as stories for the children of the villages and kingdoms. Traditionally, most griots were men but there were some female griots known for their beautiful voices who specialized in singing. Griots also served as mediators between villages whenever issues or disagreements arose and they provided wise counsel to both sides until a resolution was secured. Each large village would have their own griot assigned to them. Some griots could tell the ancestry of every villager going back centuries. Griots were known to speak for hours, and sometimes even days.



THE KORA

The role of the griot is typically hereditary being passed down from generation to generation and many griots are also trained to play the 'kora'. The Mandika ethnic group developed the kora which is a west African instrument. Specifically, the Kora is a long-necked harp lute and is typically constructed from a calabash. The Kora has 21 strings with each one playing a different note and the sound of a Kora resembles that of a harp. Storytelling is often accompanied with the playing of the Kora. The griots also use other instruments such as the 'balafon'. The balafon is a gourd-resonated xylophone. A balafon can be either fixed-key, where the keys are strung over a fixed frame, usually with calabash resonators underneath or free-key, where the keys are placed independently on any padded surface. The balafon usually has 17–21 keys. The griot also use the 'ngoni'. The ngoni is a small lute, it is a string instrument, a traditional guitar from the region of ancient Mali. Its body is made of wood or calabash with dried animal skin stretched over it.

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In addition, to serving as the historians and storytellers of their people, griots have also served west African kings and rulers as diplomats and advisers. Griots traditionally at the request of the royal families would tell stories of famous battles, marriages, achievements of individuals and groups, spiritual matters and traditions.

THE MALI EMPIRE

Within the Empire of Mali every royal family had a griot or group of griots assigned to them who would be responsible for the collection and communication of knowledge via poems, songs, speeches, history and stories of the empire. Such close proximity to the elite allowed the griot to become wealthy in many instances and also to have a high degree of influence in society. Lengthy stories were sometime recited as poems by the griots. One such well-known poem in western Africa is 'Gassire's Lute' which tells the story of a prince that becomes a griot. Long poems such as these are sometimes referred to as an 'epic'. Another famous west African story told by griots is the Epic of Sundiata which details founding of the Empire of Mali. The tradition of the griot has continued in western Africa until the present day.

