

## **From the Griot of *Roots* to the Roots of *Griot*: A New Look at the Origins of a Controversial African Term for Bard**

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### **Introduction**

The spread of the word *griot* during the last two decades from its role as a regional descriptor for a certain kind of West African bard to global usage in an extraordinary range of media is the result of many factors. The 1976 *Roots* phenomenon introduced 1.5 million readers and 130 million viewers to the image of the griot (Pace 1992, Anonymous 1977). Today, griots perform at a variety of venues in cities such as Paris, London, New York, and Tokyo, as well as at hundreds of universities around the world. They are now having an impact on such diverse musical styles as rock, rap, and even modern symphonic music. The on-line LEXIS/NEXIS Information System available to data users at many sites worldwide lists over 1,500 citations containing the word *griot* in newspapers and other publications. Many of them refer to African American musicians, storytellers, and elders who increasingly are being compared to griots. For example, the National Association of Black Storytellers gave Mary Carter Smith the title “Mother Griot” at the 1994 National Festival of Black Storytelling (Smith 1996). But *griot* is not limited to the African diaspora. The author Studs Terkel, whose writings are based largely on oral interviews, now compares his work to that of a griot (Heinen 1995).

But the positive connotations associated with griots outside of their continent of origin mask an enormous ambivalence to the term for many West Africans, especially those who live in the cities of the Sahel and Savanna region—Dakar, Senegal; Bamako, Mali; and Niamey, Niger. One reason for this ambivalence is fear of the power of words spoken or sung by griots (Hoffman 1990, 1995). Another is an ancient tradition that marks them as a separate people categorized all too simplistically as members of a “caste,” a term that has come under increasing attack as a distortion of the social structure in the region. In the worst case, that difference meant

burial for griots in trees rather than in the ground in order to avoid polluting the earth (Conrad and Frank 1995:4-7). Today, although these traditions are changing, griots and people of griot origin still find it very difficult to marry outside of the group of artisans to which they belong. Finally, griot behavior is marked by a freedom to speak loudly, to sing, dance, and demand gifts of others. To describe a boisterous friend as acting like a griot is to offer an insult.

Yet ever since the first griot was clearly documented in writing by the fourteenth-century Berber traveler Ibn Battuta (French *Batoutah*; 1859), we find that they have served as respected advisors to rulers, as tutors for princes, and as diplomats in delicate negotiations. Today, in spite of the seeming negativity associated with griots, West Africans at home and abroad give them gifts ranging from money to automobiles, houses, air tickets to Mecca, and, if they have nothing else, the clothing off their own backs. In one case, a wealthy fan of a griotte gave the woman a small airplane (Hale 1994). The most talented griots travel with presidents and serve as spokespersons. When a great griot dies, he or she may receive a state funeral or, in the case of Ban Zoumana Sissoko in Mali and Tinguizi in Niger, appear on a postage stamp.

The paradox bound up in the insult and honor associated with the word *griot* generates many questions. For a forthcoming study (1998) of griots and their female counterparts, griottes, I sought answers by focussing on their history, training, social status, verbal art, music, rewards, and use of technology. But at the root of any research on griots lies a deep-seated ambiguity surrounding the term by which they are known around the world today. This ambiguity stems not only from the mixed reception that griots receive at home, but also from two other factors: first, a widespread belief among scholars that the word *griot* is not of African origin, and, second, a lack of knowledge about the geographical extent of the griot world in West Africa. The result for modern researchers is doubt about whether or not to use *griot* or a local word to denote these multi-functional performers. The purpose here is to propose a solution to the problem of which term to use by focussing on both the etymology of *griot* and the local nomenclature for these artisans of the word in the various peoples of the Sahel and Savanna region. The result will be a new theory for the origin of the term, a better understanding of the cultural diversity it represents, and a clearer idea of the geography of the griot world in West Africa.

Often described simply as “praise-singers” because singing praises is the most obvious and audible function they perform, griots and griottes actually contribute to their own societies in so many other ways that “praise-singer” becomes a far too limited description. For example, they

are also historians, genealogists, advisors, spokespersons, diplomats, interpreters, musicians, composers, poets, teachers, exhorters, town criers, reporters, and masters of or contributors to a variety of ceremonies (naming, initiation, weddings, installations of chiefs, and so on). Although griots are born into their profession, they do not all perform all of these functions, some of which are gender-specific or not as actively practiced today as they were centuries ago. Furthermore, many people of griot origin inevitably choose a different path in life (see Panzacchi 1994).

Societies that count griots among their various professions, however, have their own words to describe them: *iggio* (Moor), *guel* or *gél* (Wolof), *mabo* or *gawlo* (Fulbe), *jali* (Mandinka), *jeli* (Maninka, Bamana), *geséré* or *jaaré* (Soninké), *jeséré* (Songhay), and *marok'i* (Hausa), not to mention a variety of other terms. Within a particular language group or culture there are other non-hereditary performers, such as hunters and Muslim clerics, who operate in some ways like griots to meet the needs of certain groups. The multiplicity of terms for hereditary griots across the Sahel and Savanna zones of West Africa reveals individual ethnic identities, cultural diffusion from one people to another over an apparently long period of time, and diversity in the variety of these bards within a particular society. In some cases, this fluid nomenclature leads to considerable ambiguity. This is especially evident where the griot profession overlaps with other activities and also when the notion of profession shades into ethnicity. The simplicity of *griot* and the complexity evident in these other terms is a major source of the debate, more often articulated orally than in print, about which word to use, *griot* or a more specific term such as *jali*.

### **Origins of *griot***

One reason for this debate is that no one has ever clearly documented the origin of *griot* in an African language. Travelers, colonial administrators, and scholars have advanced many theories to explain its etymology in European and African languages. It would require far more space than a single article to describe these different theories. In what follows, however, I will cite briefly most of them before developing in greater detail the one I think is most promising.

The first appearance of the modern ancestor of *griot* was the French word *guiriot*, employed by Alexis de St. Lô, a Capucin missionary monk who traveled along the Senegambian coast of West Africa in 1634-35 and published his *Relation du Voyage du Cap-Verd* in 1637. Michel Jajolet de La Courbe, the French director of the Compagnie du Sénégal, used the term

frequently in a lengthy narrative about the first of his three tours of duty in northern Senegal from 1685 to 1710. At one point, however, *guiriot* shifts to *griot*, but this is perhaps the result of a typographical error generated when the manuscript was edited and published in 1913 by Cultru.

Theories of the origin of the term in French emerged a century later in 1778 when Le Brasseur, a colonial administrator in West Africa, explained in a note in a report to a French admiral that

[a] *grillot* is a species of negro actor whose theatrical costume resembles that of Harlequin. He has two or three hundred rattles [*grelots*] attached to his legs and belt, and makes them move when he is on stage with a variety and a cadence that would not shock the most delicate ear . . . . The *grillots* are liked and despised by people just like actors in Europe. They are not even looked upon as members of society, and they can only marry among themselves. (1778:27, my translation)

Le Brasseur's definition of the term is based on the phonemic similarity of two French words, *grillot* and *grelot*, but, coming as it does 150 years after *guiriot* first appears in the writings of St. Lô, it seems to be an isolated etymology that does not lead anywhere.

In the nineteenth century, Bérenger-Féraud proposed the Wolof term *gueroual* or *gweoual* for *griot* (1882). More recently, the Nigerian scholar Oumarou Watta (1985) suggested that *griot* comes from a Fulbe term, *gawlo*. Both the Wolof and Fulbe terms bear some similarities to *griot*, but more linguistic evidence is needed to make the case for them as sources.

The American linguist Charles Bird has suggested that *griot* comes from an early form of the Mandé word for *griot* that might have been heard as *gerio* by the French (1971:16-17). This view is contested by the historian David Conrad, who argues that the French had relatively little contact with people farther inland who use the modern form of that term, *jeli* (1981:8-9).

The French scholar Henri Labouret has proposed a Portuguese source, “*criado* [one] who has been nourished, raised, educated, who lives in the house of the master’; and thus in a broader sense ‘domestic, dependent client, preferred client’” (1951:56, my translation). Labouret's theory has some basis in the fact that the Portuguese arrived in West Africa long before the French, and that Portuguese was spoken along the coast from Senegal southward for some distance.

There is also an obvious link between loud verbal expression and a Portuguese family of words based on the verb *gritar*, “to shout.” It includes *grito* (a shout), *gritalhao* (a person who shouts a lot), *gritador* (a person or place that is the source of much shouting), and *gritaria* (many shouts at

once). Tempting as a theory built upon these words may be, there remains a perplexing question: if *gritar* is the source of *griot*, why would the French adopt a variant of that particular term from Portuguese, and not *judeu*, the word used by Portuguese and Portuguese creole-speakers for five centuries in West Africa? *Judeu*, “Jew” in Portuguese, dates to 1506 (Fernandes 1951), preceding by 130 years the 1637 use of *guiriot* by St. Lô. It is still employed today in Guinea-Bissau in both standard Portuguese and in Portuguese creole, where it has become *jidiu* or *djidiu*. The reference here to Jews is rooted in a complex network of local knowledge about this minority in both Europe and Africa.

In Morocco, Mauritania, and neighboring areas during the Middle Ages, Jews who worked as metalsmiths were perceived to have special powers. Charles Monteil has advanced the thesis that metalsmiths and griots in this region came from Black populations that had converted to Judaism in part because of the gold trade (1951:287-88). Persecuted by Muslims, Jews had fled the Maghreb and descended into Mauritania where they converted Blacks to Judaism. Later, fleeing the Muslim Almoravids who were building an empire based in Morocco, they crossed the border into Senegambia and left archaeological traces as far inland as Tendirma, just upriver from Timbuktu (Camara 1976:80-83). It is quite possible that the Portuguese were aware of these communities and their activities, and therefore based their description of griots as Jews on more than simply observation of apparent social discrimination against them by other members of society. *Judeu*, the Portuguese word for griot, might then have evolved into the early French *guiriot* by the beginning of the seventeenth century.

More than one hundred and thirty years separate the Moravian writer Fernandes, who used *judeu* in 1506 in his compilation of travel information, *Description de la Côte d’Afrique*, from St. Lô, who employed *guiriot* in 1637—time enough for much linguistic change. When the French arrived in Africa in the early seventeenth century, *jidiu* might have evolved into *guiriot* as the channels of communication between Portuguese Creole-speaking Africans and French travelers developed.

As early as the Portuguese were in exploring West Africa, however, they did not have as much contact with the region, especially with North West Africa, as did the Spanish, whose contacts predate the invasion of Spain in 711 by Arab and Berber armies. Africans came to Spain throughout the Middle Ages via several routes: trade across the Sahara and the Mediterranean to Gibraltar and other ports, through direct importation by slavers who landed along the West and North West coast, especially during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and through the Canary Islands.

Africans were so well known in southern Spain in the sixteenth century that they often appear not only in the literature of the time but also in other cultural activities that they brought with them. African influence is evident in a variety of vocabulary, including the *guirigay*, a dance popular in Seville in the sixteenth century (Ortiz 1924:246). The word entered the Spanish of this time to mean language that is obscure and difficult to understand (Ortiz 1924:246). It is possible that Spanish travelers invented this term to portray what they saw as the unintelligible song and bizarre dance of griots. The word for griot today in Spanish is *guiriote*, and this may well have been inspired by the seventeenth-century French term *guiriot*, or it may have developed from *guirigaray*. But more evidence is needed to follow this path.

Between West Africa and Europe, the Berber-speaking region marked by later Arabic influences constitutes a large zone of cultural diffusion that influences neighboring peoples on both sides. The French Africanist Vincent Monteil has suggested that *griot* came from the Berber *iggio*, or *iggiw* or *iggow* (1968:777-78). The British researcher H. T. Norris rejected Monteil's view of the Berber origin of *iggiw* when he asserted that the term comes from "communities across the [Senegal] river. It is *gêwel* in Wolof and *gawlo* in Toucouleur" (1968:53).

Norris's view finds support in the research of another French scholar, Michel Guignard, who studied the music of Moors and traced part of their musical tradition to Blacks. In the Arab-Berber world, he explains, there are no performers who fulfill the many roles of the griot, although one does find musicians, singers, and poets, as well as people who do all of these activities. If the same kinds of performers are found in Moor society, they are distinct from the *iggawen*, who are the only ones to play the lute as well as carry out the psychological and social functions that set them apart from other musicians. Guignard suggests that the griots may have come from the south, and adds that this hypothesis matches the belief of many Moors who trace the genealogies of their musicians either to Blacks or to Arabs. Black influence on Moor music is very ancient and, notes Guignard, continues to this day (1975:178-79).

Whether the origin of *iggio* is North African or West African, the link between these two regions is clear. The focus of the etymological search on the frontier between North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa has directed attention to the dialects of Arabic in Mauritania, Morocco, and Algeria, as well as to the Berber influence on them. Charry has proposed that *griot* comes from the Arabic term *qawal*, or singer, via the Wolof *guewel* (1992:66-67). He sees a similarity between *griot* and *iggiw* (Hassaniya Arabic), *gewel* (Wolof), and *gaulo* (Fulbe):

The Arabic root q-w-l essentially concerns speech. Some of the definitions given in dictionaries of medieval Arabic are virtual job descriptions of *griots*:

‘he spoke in verse . . . poeticized . . . good in speech . . . loquacious . . . copious in speech . . . eloquent . . . the man who talks too much’ (Lane 1956:supplement 2995).

‘Man of the spoken word . . . singer . . . traveling poet . . . improviser . . . to recite verse that one has composed oneself’ (Dozy 1967:II, 420-21).

Charry’s tantalizing hypothesis tying *qawal* to *griot* via *gewell/gawlo/iggiw* is based on the relationship between *gewel* and *griot* proposed by Bérenger-Féraud a century earlier. But that link is much less persuasive than the *qawal/guwel* etymology that leads up to it.

There is another source in Arabic that I believe offers the most promising path to the roots of *griot*: *guinea*, one of the oldest and most widely used geographical terms in West Africa. In a long note in his study on the fourteenth-century kingdoms of the Moors, Bovill explains the origin of *guinea* (1995:116):

The name Guinea is usually said to have been a corrupt form of the name Ghana, picked up by the Portuguese in the Maghrib. The present writer finds this unacceptable. The name Guinea has been in use both in the Maghrib and in Europe long before Prince Henry’s time. For example, on a map dated about 1320 by the Genoese cartographer Giovanni di Carignano, who got his information about Africa from a fellow-countryman in Sijilmas [ancient trading city in North Africa], we find Gunuia, and in the Catalan atlas of 1375 as Ginyia. A passage in Leo [Africanus] (vol. III, 822) points to Guinea having been a corrupt form of Jenne [2,000 year old city in central Mali on Niger river], less famous than Ghana but nevertheless for many centuries famed in the Maghrib as a great market and a seat of learning. The relevant passage reads: “The Kingdom of Ghinea . . . called by the merchants of our nation Gheneoa, by the natural inhabitants thereof Genni and by the Portugals and other people of Europe Ghinea.” But it seems more probable that Guinea derives from *aguinaou*, the Berber for Negro. Marrakech [city in southeastern Morocco] has a gate, built in the twelfth century, called the Bab Aguinaou, the Gate of the Negro (Delafosse, Haut-Sénégal-Niger, II, 277-278). The modern application of the name Guinea to the coast dates only from 1481. In that year the Portuguese built a fort, São de Mina (modern day Elmina), on the Gold Coast, and their king, John II, was permitted by the Pope [Sixtus II or Innocent VIII] to style himself Lord of Guinea, a title that survived until the recent extinction of the monarchy.

Through the Spanish *guineo*, *guinea* came to be a widely used term to describe all Black Africans and occurs today in the names of several countries—Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, and Equatorial Guinea—as well as the Gulf of Guinea. Ortiz cites the first use of it in Seville in 1413 (1924:245). By the early sixteenth century, a period when Spain and its dependencies, especially the Canary islands, had continuous contact with West Africa, the term *guineo* referred both to people from West Africa and to another dance in southern Spain that was inspired by Africans. Given its widespread use at the time and its deep roots in Africa, it is quite possible that with a shift from [n] to [r] *guineo* served as the origin for what later became in Spanish *guirote* and in French *guiriot*.

The Berber root for *guineo* (*agenaou*, close to *iggio* and *iggiw*) supports the hypothesis that *griot* is of African, not European origin. We do not know for certain if it was diffused northward from sub-Saharan Africa by Black African populations living in southern Mauritania who pre-dated the arrival of Arabs in the region a thousand years ago, by traveling griots who associated with the original Berber populations in the region, or by traders who dealt in gold, slaves, and salt between North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. It may even have been transmitted southward from North Africa to sub-Saharan Africa, as has been suggested by Vincent Monteil. But other evidence from recent archaeological work in Mali as well as from studies of music in Morocco support the hypothesis that the term came from south of the Sahara. That evidence requires a brief digression into the history of relations between North and sub-Saharan Africa.

Until relatively recently, scholars assumed that the cities of the Sahel were the product of trade between North Africa and the empires of the region during the Middle Ages. The work of archaeologists, especially that of the Americans Roderick and Susan McIntosh at the site of ancient Jenné-Jeno in Mali in the late 1970s and early 1980s (1981), supports the theory that at least one of those cities has existed for over 2,000 years. Jenné-Jeno was founded in 250 BCE and by the period 400-800 CE was a major trading center in the inland delta of the Niger river that lies between Bamako, the modern capital of Mali, and Timbuktu, an isolated city downstream that is 800 years old. Jenné-Jeno was also a large city for its time. Archaeological evidence shows that it was surrounded by a two-kilometer walled perimeter. Traders there dealt in gold imported from sources 800 kilometers to the south, which was then exported along with other products—food, ivory, and slaves—northward by caravan and northeastward on the Niger river. As indicated by Bovill earlier, it was not until the early fourteenth century that Jenné-Jeno began to appear on European maps.



This trade expanded considerably in the eighth century with the introduction of the camel. Slaves and gold were particularly important for the different dynasties that controlled North Africa and part of Spain during this period, the Almoravids (1071 to 1147) and the Almohads (1147 to 1248). Black Africans were especially valuable because of their use as both soldiers in the armies of the sultans and as laborers for the building of cities and fortresses. One city in particular, Marrakesh in southeastern Morocco, assumed a dominant role both as a major gateway to trade in sub-Saharan Africa and as a powerful political center in the region. Youssef ben Tachfine, appointed by the Almoravid leader Abu Bekr in 1071 to rule Marrakesh, began to build mosques and barracks for an army of 2,000 Black slaves. It is not surprising, then, that the importance of trade with sub-Saharan Africa and the presence of so many Blacks should prompt Sultan el Mansour, a later Almohad ruler, to order the Bab Agenaou, or Gate of Black Africans, to be built in 1185. This was the entrance through which flowed the slaves, gold, and other products from sub-Saharan Africa to the Kasbah, that part of the city containing the headquarters—the palaces, mosques, and military barracks—of the vast Almohad empire. From that time on, the Black African presence in Marrakesh has grown. The flow of slaves increased considerably after the Moroccan conquest of the Songhay empire in 1591, and by the time of Sultan Mouley Ishmael a century later (1672-1727), the regime depended upon not only Arab and Berber forces but also, and to a much greater extent, on a more reliable army of 150,000 Black Africans. Slaves continued to be bought and sold in Marrakesh until the early twentieth century.

The *agenaou*—the people from Black Africa—who passed through the Bab Agenaou to serve as soldiers, laborers, and servants were accompanied not only by gold and ivory but also by their own traditions. They may have suffered less cultural loss in Morocco than did other Africans during the Atlantic slave trade that developed several centuries later in Europe. Although we do not know if the term *agenaou* originated in Ghana, the empire to the south that served as a very early sub-Saharan terminus for the slave trade, or in Jenné-Jeno, the ancient city farther east, any visitor to Marrakesh today quickly encounters a living clue to the cultures of these slaves in a group of musicians known as *Gnawas*.

The *Gnawas* are not griots. But in both their own collective memory as well as in that of the people of Morocco, they are of sub-Saharan African origin. Their presence in Morocco probably precedes the sixteenth-century date most often given for the creation of the *Gnawas*, but with the Moroccan conquest of the Songhay empire in 1591, the flow of slaves across the desert increased dramatically and probably contributed greatly to

the growth of what Viviana Pâques calls the “brotherhood of the slaves” (1991).

*Gnawa* musicians represent a blending of the musical art of the griot (and other kinds of musicians) and the healing rituals of sub-Saharan Africa. Philip Schuyler describes them as a religious brotherhood that “claims spiritual descent from Bilal al Habashi, an Ethiopian who was the Prophet Mohammed’s first muezzin,” but adds that “most aspects of *Gnawa* ritual, however, clearly come from South of the Sahara” (1981:5). Their ceremonies focus on placating spirits that may have brought illness or other problems and also serve “to prolong a happy relationship with a spirit that has brought wealth, clairvoyance, or other blessings” (1981:5). They play a three-stringed instrument called the *gambere* that is similar in some ways to the different kinds of lutes common in Senegal, Mali, and Niger; they also play drums and metal castanets. The *Gnawas* are best known for the lengthy and complex *derdeba* ceremony that leads to trances, spirit possession, dancing, and pantomime. The music of the *Gnawas* includes references to languages and places in sub-Saharan Africa and often contains words that the singers do not understand today. The link between this brotherhood and sub-Saharan Africa has therefore survived, but, significantly, in a syncretic form that contains traces of many cultural activities tied to blacksmiths, griots, and sorcerers.

The *Gnawas*, then, are the cultural descendants of the *agenaou* who migrated through slavery and trade to North Africa. Their survival today suggests that *agenaou* is not simply a Berber term for Black Africans, but a descriptor that represents a very significant and ancient link between North and West African cultures. The word *agenaou*, so deeply imbedded in the intertwined cultures of the North West African region, was most likely a step in the process of linguistic change that began with *ghana* and went on to *gnawa*, *agenaou*, *guineo*, and *guiriot* to produce *griot*.

Two questions remain, one from the beginning, the other from the end of this long etymological journey: what was the origin of Ghana, the name attributed to an empire that was also widely known as Wagadu, and how did *guineo* become *griot*? There is no clear answer to either question, but I propose two plausible hypotheses. For the first, the earliest Arab sources (Ibn Hawqal, tenth century, and Al-Bakri, eleventh century) report that Ghana was the name given to the region of the Ghana empire and the title of its king (Levtzion and Hopkins 1981:52, 79). Although the Soninké call their empire Wagadu, Levtzion points out that *ta-ganat* is a word of Berber origin and means “forest” (1995b). Many archaeologists believe that a millennium ago southern Mauritania, the land of Ghana, was probably covered with forest (McIntosh 1995) and constituted, in a broader sense,

“the forest zone” that lies below the Sahara. Today, in fact, the ruins of a town called Ghanata lie ten kilometers north of Kumbi-Saleh; and according to Soninké oral traditions, Ghanata was the name of the capital of the Soninké empire (Levtzion 1980:25). It may well have been that the two linked cities described by Al Bekri, the one for the king of Ghana and the other for Muslim traders, were in fact known as Ghana and Kumbi Saleh. Yet even if the origin of the term *Ghana* remains unclear, the evidence indicates that it has served for the last 1,000 years to designate the first great empire of the Sahel.

If *ghana*, *gnawa*, *agenaou*, and *guineo* are stages on the route of a linguistic itinerary linking West Africa to Spain, then the question of how the French transformed *guineo* into *guiriot* depends on the nature of their interactions with the Spanish or their neighbors. I believe that *griot* probably resulted from contact with Spanish, Portuguese, or Arab navigators and seamen who knew the North West coast of Africa. At the time the French began to explore the region, North West Africa was marked by a complex national and ethnic blend. In addition to people of diverse Berber, Arab, and sub-Saharan African origin, one could find Jews, Spaniards, Portuguese, and other Europeans. Some were slaves, while others were traders or professionals in various fields. For example, a Spaniard of slave origin known as Pasha Judar commanded the Moroccan army that invaded the Songhay empire in 1591. A convert to Islam who was raised in the palace of the sultan, he led a 3,000-man force composed of a mixture of adventurers from the entire region, Berber troops, and local guides who knew their way across the Sahara.

In the same way that Pasha Judar assembled his army, it is highly probable that when crews were recruited by the French to sail south to the relatively unknown coast of North West and West Africa, those in command made a point to include at least some experienced sailors and navigators who knew the region—most likely old hands from neighboring Spain who had lived in North Africa, Portuguese who had similar experience, or Arabs. When the captains of these ships went ashore or received African chiefs aboard ships, the first people they encountered were undoubtedly griots. Written accounts of meetings between Europeans and chiefs often emphasize the fact that local rulers were usually preceded by griots, the people who announced them and who made the most noise with their loud shouts, songs, and instrumental music. If a captain asked who was the man making such a racket, the response of those in the crew who had visited the coast before may well have been a condescending “He is just another *guineo*.” It is quite likely that, with a very slight sound shift from [n] to [r], race became profession: the *guineo* became a *guiriot*.

More research is needed to confirm the theory that *guineo* is the origin of *griot*. But from the foregoing review of other theories and the evidence assembled so far, it appears quite plausible that *griot* is indeed a term of African origin. At the very least, it derives from the Berber word *agenaou* and quite probably the root of this term, *Ghana*, the name of the first great empire of the Sahel. Although it has certainly passed through European languages, *griot* should not be rejected out of hand because of the belief that it has no connection with Africa.

### **Ethnospecific terms for *griot***

Even though it may be of African origin, *griot* serves mainly to open the door to a world of wordsmiths that is far more complex than anyone from Ibn Battuta to Alex Haley could ever imagine. In each African language there is not only one term for *griot*, but often several words. In many cases, there is considerable ambiguity about these local terms because of overlaps between the profession, the name of the ethnic group, and the descriptor for the subgroup of artisans. If the diverse theories for the origin of *griot* presented in the first part of this study seem to be confusing, the following list of terms for griots may generate even more ambiguity. But a closer look will reveal the kinds of patterns described above by Charry that cut across regional lines.

In Wolof, the general term for *griot* is *gével*, sometimes spelled *guewel*. According to the Senegalese sociologist Abdoulaye-Bara Diop, at one time there existed a complex nomenclature to designate subcategories of performers depending on the kind of music the performers sang, the instruments they played, and their behavior in public. Today Diop recognizes them as blended together under one term. They were the *tamak* (drummers), the *xalamkat* (players of the stringed *xalam*), and the *gawlo* (singers) (1981:53-54). As will be evident below, the term *gawlo* occurs in many other areas of West Africa.

In his description of the Waalo kingdom in the northwestern part of Senegal, on the border with Mauritania, the Guinean historian Boubacar Barry, drawing on Raymond Rousseau's 1929 analysis of *Les Cahiers de Yoro Dyao*, the record of a nineteenth-century Wolof aristocrat, describes griots as part of a group of artisans known by the general name *nyeenyo*. On the social ladder within this category, the *sab-lekk* were musicians and they included in their ranks the *tamak* (a drummer) and the *xalmbaan*, who played a violin-like instrument. Barry mentions a third rank, the *baw-lekk*, or griots who act as clowns. They are known as *gawlo* and *gével*

(1985:67). What Barry describes, however, is a social structure in the past that is disappearing under the weight of external cultural forces.

As might be expected, the nomenclature for griots among the many Mandé peoples—the Bamana, Maninka, Dioula, Mandingo, Mandinka, Khassonké, and others—varies from one part of the region to another. Throughout the Mandé world griots fall into the general category of *nyamakala*, which Conrad and Frank define as a “major professional class of artists and other occupationally-defined specialists” (1995:1). By artist they mean not only griots but also blacksmiths, potters, weavers, woodcarvers, and leatherworkers.

The Mandé area is very large, ranging from Senegal in the west to Mali in the east. For the Mandinka of the western Mandé in the Senegambian region, the term for *griot* is *jali* (pl. *jalolu*), with the male *jali* distinguished from the female *jalimuso*. *Jaliya* is the profession or activity of griots. In the central Mandé area, especially in Mali, where the Bamana and Maninka variants are spoken, the term for *griot* is *jeli* (pl. *jeliw*). For women the equivalent is *jelimuso* (pl. *jelimusow*). The master singer, male or female, is known as *nara* or *ngara*.

Within these broad differences, one finds a variety of subgroups. For example, among the Khassonké, a Mandé people on the western frontier of Mali, there were two broad categories of griots, the *laada-jalolu*, who were attached to a particular family and therefore benefited from certain privileges not available to other griots, and the *naa*, the newcomers or itinerant griots. A chief griot was a *jali-kuntigo* (Cissoko 1986:160-61). The term *laada* and its variants mean “privilege,” and these words recur throughout several related areas.

One such area is the Soninké. Throughout this region there are griots associated with particular groups: the *funé* (also spelled *finá*), for instance, is versed in oral arts associated with Islam (Conrad and Frank 1995:86), while the *donso-jeli*, or *sora*, serves as the griot for hunters by celebrating their exploits in the field (Cissé 1994:64-65). These bards, however, are different from griots; for example, they can come from any segment of society (Johnson and Sisòkò 1986:28-29).

Soninké is related to the Mandé family of languages but remains somewhat more distant than the others listed above. For this reason the terms for *griot* are more distinct. One Soninké word for *griot* is *geseré* (pl. *geserun*), sometimes spelled *gesseré*. The Soninké are split into several large subgroups, and this accounts for the diversity of terms. The term for *griot* among the Kusa, for instance, is *kusatage*, or “smith of the Kusa” (Meillassoux et al. 1967:13). Fatoumata Siré Diakité explains that *geseré* means “griot of the Wage fraction” or subgroup. A master griot, she adds,

is *fade geseré*, *fade* being a term “given to anyone who has acquired a certain notoriety in what concerns his personal activities” (1977:11). Pollet and Winter distinguish between the *geseré*, who may know some history, and the *dyare* (also spelled *jaare*), whose job it is to praise nobles to the accompaniment of music (1971:217).

These differences reported by scholars who have studied the cultures of the Soninké-speaking peoples are dwarfed, however, by the complex terminology collected by Mamadou Diawara, a Malian historian who conducted an extremely thorough study of the Jaara kingdom that dominated an area on the Western Mali-Southern Mauritania border in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Diawara, who comes from this region, drew on archival sources and an extensive range of oral informants to create a highly detailed portrait of the social structure of the Kingdom of Jaara. Today Jaara is no more than what he describes as a modest village thirty kilometers east-northeast of Nioro in Mali. From the tapestry of different kinds of wordsmiths who served the rulers of Jaara, one can understand the importance of hierarchy and ethnic or clan origin in defining differences between griots. It is also clear from Diawara’s research why he believes that the general term *griot* should be proscribed (1990:40). The following summary of information presented in his *La graine de la parole* (40-46) may seem overwhelming at first. The purpose here, however, is not to confuse the reader, but to give some sense of how complex the world of griots can be in a particular social and historical context.

The *laxaranto* (s. *laxarante*), or “people skilled with words,” include the *geseru*, the singers and musicians traditionally attached to the aristocracy of the Ghana empire and more generally serving the Soninké people, the *jaaru* (s. *jaare*), who carry out the same functions for people who are of Mandé origin but live in the Soninké milieu, and the *mancahinlenmu* (s. *mancahe*), players of stringed instruments who first served marabouts, Muslim religious leaders, and later expanded the range of their patrons to include the aristocratic clan of the Jawara.

In addition to these distinctions, Diawara notes other differences based on whether or not the griots are linked to the nobility in an official way. The *laadan nyaxamalo*, for example, serve the court of the ruler, and within this group one finds the *laadan jaaru*, or court griots, who serve people of Mandé origin, the *laadan geseru*, the court griots who serve the Soninké, and the *mancahinlenmu*, who provide instrumental music.

Within the *laadan jaaru*, there are four subgroups. One is the *sodogarenmu* or *sodoga*, the descendants of Maxa, the only remaining prince of the Nyaxate clan after a political change in the sixteenth century. Maxa lost his title and was given the job of taking care of foreigners who

had allied themselves with the new king, Maamudu. In Soninké, taking care of someone is called *soroga*. For this reason, Maxa was called “*soroga* Maxa.” *Soroga* soon evolved into *sodoga*, and Maxa’s children became *sodogarenmu*, or “children of *sodoga*.” They became the official spokespersons for the aristocracy and occupied the highest rank at court. They did not play instruments, but the women of the clan sang. The *waalemaxannanko*, the descendants of Waala Maxa (different from Prince Maxa of the Nyaxate clan cited above), are of the Koyita clan. Whenever the scepter of the ruler appeared during a ceremony, they enlivened the event with songs and dances. They also made public announcements for the court and served as town criers. They received information from the chief of the *sodoga* and then disseminated it.

The third subgroup, the *xorobete*, arrived at court at the end of the sixteenth century, during the reign of King Haren Waali. They played the *ganbare*, a four-cord lute, and the small *dondondonne* drum. Their family names are *Dannyoxo* for the men and *Danba* for the women. The last subgroup is the *banbagede* of the Tunkara clan. They arrived at court at the same time as the preceding two groups, although Diawara’s sources do not make clear exactly how their functions differed from the other griots.

Another group of the *laxaranto* are the *kuttu*, who, unlike the *laadan jaaru*, are not linked to the aristocracy. The *kuttu* are composed of *geseru* and *jaaru* who depend upon ordinary people for their livelihood. They may benefit from princes, but play no official roles for them.

The Soninké-speaking world is composed of peoples who claim descent from the Ghana empire of the eighth through the eleventh centuries. Given the age of the empire and the dispersion of many Soninké peoples throughout West Africa, it is not surprising that they should have so many terms for *griot*. As we shall see in the following discussion of Songhay terms, over the centuries their influence spread quite a distance from southern Mauritania.

On the right bank of the Niger river in western Niger, the heartland of the Songhay who fled south from Gao after the fall of the empire in 1591, the term for *griot* is *jeséré* (pl. *jeserey*) with *jeséré-dunka* denoting a master griot and *timmé* the descendants of master griots. *Jeséré-dunka* becomes in many cases the name of the person who simply exercises the profession (Olivier de Sardan 1982:225-30). The reason for the similarity between the Songhay and Soninké terms (*jeséré* and *geséré*, respectively) is that the ruler of the Songhay empire in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, Askia Mohammed Touré, was probably of Soninké origin (Touré is a Soninké clan name). When he came to power in 1493, it is likely that Soninké griots migrated to his court. This would explain why Songhay

epics were performed for centuries in Soninké, a tradition that survives in the archaic Soninké terms sprinkled throughout *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, which I recorded in 1981 (see Hale 1990). The Zarma people of this region, who live primarily on the left bank of the Niger River in western Niger, speak a dialect of Songhay. But for the most part they use *nyamakaale*, the Mandé term for artisans, to designate griots (Olivier de Sardan 1982:310). This may be the case because, according to their oral traditions, they migrated from Mali several centuries ago. My own interviews with more than a score of griots in both the Songhay and Zarma areas of western Niger turned up no difference between *jeseré* and *nyamakala* or *nyamakaale*. Finally, for the Songhay the word *gawle*, which appears in other societies, denotes the lower-class griot who seeks only to make money from his songs (Olivier de Sardan 1982:157). *Jeserétarey* is the profession of griots.

To the south of the Songhay empire, in the northern Benin region of Borgou, an area once controlled by the Songhay and heavily influenced by their culture, Jacques Lombard categorized griots of the Bariba-speaking peoples in terms of social status (1965:203-14). Those at the bottom are called *gasira*, flute players who may praise anyone. At the same level he lists the *yereku*, popular singers. A step above them on his scale are the *kororu*, hunters' griots who sing unaccompanied by instruments. The *barabaru*, another notch higher, play the drum. Next is the *bara sunon*, a high-ranking griot who associates with chiefs, and the *gnakpe*, the personal griot of the chief. At the very top of this griot hierarchy is the *gesere*, who is attached not simply to the chief but to the throne. The leader of all griots is the *Ba-Gesere*. Likewise, the term reported to Moraes Farias during a decade of research in Northern Benin is *geserebà* (Moraes Farias 1992, 1993).

Songhay terminology, influenced by Soninké and in turn influencing other peoples, such as those who speak Bariba in northern Bénin, bridges a considerable distance in time and space: the Ghana empire of the Soninké dates from the eighth to the eleventh centuries. Songhay, nearly 1,000 kilometers east of Ghana, did not emerge as a power until the fifteenth century, after the decline of the Mali empire. By contrast, the Fulbe, known also as the Fulani and the Peul, were responsible for a variety of kingdoms scattered across West Africa, some of which lasted until the late nineteenth century. The Fulbe employ a network of terms for *griot* that further complicates the nomenclature. There are words that change from one region to another, from one subgroup to another, and even from one kind of activity to another.



For those dwelling in the Futa Toro, a inland region on the left bank of the Senegal river in northern Senegal, the generic word for *griot* is *gawlo*, or less often *mabo*. However, *farba* designates a master griot, while the *awlube* knows the genealogy and praises for a particular family (Seydou 1972:15-24). The *bambaado* (pl. *wambaabe*) play the *hoddar*, a lute, or the *nyaa nyooru*, a kind of violin. Farther east, these same terms take on different meanings. The *mabo* is associated with the nobility while the *gawlo* interacts with other elements of society. Interestingly, Seydou, citing Gaden, suggests that *mabo* is actually a word of Mandé origin (1972:19-20).

One reason for the diversity of terms for Fulbe griots is the great spread of these people across West Africa from Senegal to northern Cameroon. In the introduction to their recent collection of essays, Conrad and Frank offer a fascinating discussion of the ambiguity generated by the terminology for Fulbe griots (1995:8-9). A summary of their diverse sources will illustrate the challenge faced by any scholar investigating the griot world and the roots of *griot*.

Conrad and Frank cite a Senegalese scholar, Yaya Wane, whose 1969 study of social stratification among the Tukolor of Senegal lists *galabés* as griots who sometimes worked in leather, whereas the French researcher Jean Cremer had seen them in 1923 as simply a category of people from a particular region, the Futa Jalon. For Cremer, the *jawambe* (s. *jawando*) were Fulbe griots high on the social scale but beneath the *mabow*, who are similar to the Mandé *jeliw*. However, Conrad and Frank also cite a French anthropologist, Louis Tauxier, who classified Fulbe griots in 1927 as *bambabe* or *niémmbé*. The *tyapurtaw*, another Fulbe group, were listed by a third French scholar, Dominique Zahan, as “the lowest class of Bamana griot, and bards of the Fulbe” (1963:128). The most confusing aspect of the Fulbe terms *mabow/mabubé* and *jawambe/diawando* was the blurring of the boundaries between professions, classes, and ethnicity. Drawing on a variety of sources from the past century, Conrad and Frank list a number of different identities attributed to *jawando*: courtiers and weavers (Delafosse 1912); griots (Arcin 1907, Cremer 1923); lower-class nobles (Gaden 1931); businessmen and go-betweens (Moreau 1897); and traders, cattle raisers, and teachers (Tauxier 1927). One source (Pageard 1959) indicated that the *diawambe* were prohibited from acting as griots, and another described them as “a branch of a Tukolor lineage who speak Fulfulde and are fanatical Muslims” (Urvoy 1942:25).

The nineteenth-century German traveler Heinrich Barth (1965), note Conrad and Frank (1995:9), listed the *jawambe* as a distinct ethnic group known as the Zoghorân, who were separate at least until the sixteenth

century, when they became assimilated into Fulbe society. A modern scholar, the Senegalese historian Ibrahim Bathily, sees them as an ethnic group with particular professions. He divides the *Diawando* into several different groups: the *Diawandos*, the *Lahtimbés* (slaves of the *Diawando*), and the *Kida Mabos*, the source of the Mabo griots (1936:191-92). By matching Bathily's view with other sources, Conrad and Frank explain that much of the confusion over the professional activities of the *mabow* stems from the fact that as they were being assimilated into the vast Fulbe society, they took on a variety of social functions ranging from trade to education. Zahan, they add, found evidence for the *mabow* as bards among the Bamana, as tanners and weavers among the Fulbe, and as blacksmiths and bards among the Tuareg (1995:10).

The terminology for Fulbe griots, then, is highly complex and fluid, shifting over time and space and depending on the gaze of the classifier and the migration patterns of a people who have probably covered more territory than almost any other in West Africa. *Mabo* and *jawando* seem to be the most generally recognized terms, but it is evident from the foregoing discussion that local context is more important than any system of classification one might attempt to invent.

By contrast, in some areas the nomenclature appears to be relatively straightforward. Returning to H. T. Norris's explanation (1968:35), the Moor term for a griot is *iggiw*, sometimes spelled *iggio* (pl. *iggawen*). A female griot is a *tiggiwit* (pl. *tiggawaten*). According to Skinner, the Mossi of Burkina Faso employ the word *bendere* for *griot*, and the chief griot is called *bendere naba* (1989:35). Geneviève Calame-Griaule describes the Dogon griot as a *genene* (1987:487). But the relative simplicity of terminology available here may simply be due to the lack of research on this particular aspect of these societies by specialists in music. For example, farther east, the Hausa-speaking peoples of northern Nigeria and western Niger designate griots by *marok'a*, with *marok'i* (s. masc.) and *marok'iya* (s. fem.). But these terms cover a vast and diverse collection of musicians, some of whom consider themselves to be *marok'i*, or griot, while others do not.

In the 1960s, Ames and King studied Hausa musicians in Zaria and Katsina, two northern Nigerian emirates with very long histories and a highly stratified ruling class. They produced a list of musicians categorized by a variety of collective terms, such as *mabusa*, wind-instrument players; *magu'da*, women specializing in celebratory ululating; *maka'da*, drummers, understood in the broadest sense of the term; *maka'dan Sarki*, musicians for the Emir; *marok'an baki*, professional acclamators; *marok'an hakimi*, griots in the service of a high official; *marok'an sarakuna*, those who may be in

the service of any high officeholder, including the Emir; and *zabiya*, professional women singers (1971:62-96).

These terms, however, serve only to designate an even longer and more diverse listing of sixty-four different kinds of musicians divided into specialized categories. If *griot* represents the top of the pyramid and local terms such as *jeli* and *marok'i* constitute the supporting ethnic blocks that are not always evident to those unfamiliar with these wordsmiths, then the list of performers prepared by Ames and King might be viewed as an example of the deepest and most complex substratum of these performers' diverse world. Not all of those listed are still identifiable today. Ames and King attempt to distinguish between what we might call griot and non-griot musicians. But it is difficult to separate the two amid the extraordinary variety of these performers. Ames and King classify them into five categories: drummers, lutenists, blowers, acclamators, and talkers (1971:70-103). There is not enough space to list here the enormous variety of griots, but suffice it to say that it is doubtful that any other people in West Africa can claim such a complex nomenclature for the broad category of performers who either are griots or are related in some way to the activities of the profession.

Although the activities of *marok'a* in the Hausa-speaking world do not match completely those of their counterparts to the east in the more unified Wolof-Mandé-Songhay region (for example, there is a far less evident epic tradition), it is clear from Ames and King's long list that these griots are very much a part of a regional tradition of musical and verbal art that extends from Senegal to Lake Chad.

The Tuareg, who live in the Sahara and on the northern fringe of the Sahel—they are concentrated in northern Mali and Niger as well as in southern Algeria—do not have a separate griot tradition. But their artisans who work in metal, wood, and leather, known as *inadan* (s. *ened*), carry out so many of the functions of griots, such as singing songs at weddings and serving as go-betweens, that they cannot be excluded entirely from any discussion of the griot world. Most widely known as blacksmiths, these artisans have so many technical and social functions that this term seems somewhat limiting (Rasmussen 1995).

### **Geography of the griot world**

The nomenclature described above provides a basis for outlining a map of the griot world. If the large family of Mandé peoples stands at the center, and includes Senegal, the Gambia, northern Guinea, and central

Mali, the fringes will extend northward well into southern Mauritania and northern Mali. The southern frontier spreads south to northern Sierra Leone, northern Liberia, northern Côte d'Ivoire, part of Burkina Faso, northern Benin, and northern Nigeria. To the west, parts of eastern Niger and northern Cameroon must be included. In these areas one finds societies that have long supported professional wordsmiths who carry out a variety of other functions. Although one may find counterparts in societies along the southern coast of West Africa, the griots of this inland band that stretches from Senegal to Lake Chad seem to share a common tradition of social function and verbal art that distinguishes them from those farther south. This is not to say, however, that one will not encounter griots in those southernmost areas, especially in the large expatriate communities of Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire; Accra, Ghana; Lomé, Togo; and Cotonou, Bénin.

Within this vast region, the area that is richest in the griot tradition, both verbally and musically, appears to be the heartland of the Mali empire, which includes northern Guinea and southwestern Mali. Whether or not the profession originated in this region is difficult to tell. But the spread of the empire and its cultural influence suggests that the dynamic griot tradition that we know today may have come from this part of West Africa and diffused to the Senegambian area many centuries ago. Activities such as the playing of the *ngoni*, the oldest and most ubiquitous instrument in the griot world, and the chanting of long narratives that celebrate the past are common to this region, which includes southern Mali, northern Guinea, most of Senegal and the Gambia, and Guinea-Bissau.

To the east and north the picture changes. The farther away one travels from the northern Guinea/southwestern Mali heartland, the fewer are the common features. For example, in eastern Mali there are still griots in the isolated area around the northern bend of the Niger River, but at the northern extreme end, around Timbuktu, those who are still performing do not chant long epics. Downriver from Timbuktu, in western Niger, the long narratives recounted by *jeserey* tend to be shorter than those of their Malian counterparts. Farther east, Hausa griots sing praises, but do not usually chant long epics about the past.

Why the relative uniformity to the west, and the changes to the east? One can only speculate about the forces that may have diffused the griot tradition in the region. Certainly the West was the heartland not only of the Mali empire but also of a region that represented in many ways the center of the Sahelian civilization of the Middle Ages. Elements of the Ghana empire migrated southeast to this and other regions, carrying with them a rich cultural heritage. This same Mali heartland fell under Songhay influence for many generations, and the Niger River served as a cultural

conduit in both directions. But once we move eastward, the cultural thrust of the civilization represented by Ghana, Mali, and Songhay seems to undergo a slight shift as we enter another zone of influence. Northern Nigeria, eastern Niger, Chad, and northern Cameroon were all far more influenced by Kanem and Bornu of the Lake Chad region. The one cultural strand that spans these two zones of influence belongs to the Fulbe, who, bearing with them a heritage that goes back to Ghana and earlier, migrated eastward for centuries and absorbed other influences along the way. Again, one can only speculate about the reasons for the changes in the griot tradition from West to East. But what is more important, differences aside, is the relative unity of a profession anchored in verbal art, in service to noble families, and in the symbiotic relationship of word and music.

### ***Griot* or *jali*: Which term to use?**

If the map of this world is clearer from the foregoing discussion, the question of which term to use—one of the many encountered among the diverse peoples, or simply *griot*—is not. Diawara and other scholars, African and non-African, do not like *griot* because of its ambiguity. It certainly does not do justice to a profession that is so old and varied. A simple solution would be to replace it with “bard” or some other term or set of terms.

That is what the government of Niger tried to do in 1980. On December 18, 1979, the President of Niger, Seyni Kountché, complained in his annual address to the nation about what he saw as economic waste occasioned by griots. He felt that people were devoting too much of their resources to gifts for griots at weddings and naming ceremonies. The result of his speech was an unsuccessful attempt to “sanitize” the profession. A study commissioned by the government of Niger recommended that the word *griot* be replaced with the terms artist, musician, and singer. The authors of the report, respected scholars, also proposed the establishment of a professional association, a school to train griots, and the award of medals to the most talented of them (Hale 1990:42-43). In spite of this attempt at linguistic change, however, the term *griot*, like the profession it designates, survives in Niger today.

Such a negative view of the word *griot* is nothing new. For a French official in nineteenth-century Senegal, griots appeared to be a social plague in the capital city of Saint Louis (Héricé 1847:9). This notion has not changed much in many cities today. When a naming ceremony is announced on the radio, the event can attract scores of griots and griottes

eager to help the parents celebrate the occasion—and collect rewards from the many relatives who attend and become the subjects of praises. The linguistic offshoots of *griot*, *griottage*, *griotique*, and *griotism*, have also taken on negative connotations in France where, as in West Africa, they often signify empty praise or praise for pay.

Another reason for the negative connotations attached to *griot* is the dominance of the Mandé cultures in West Africa. They cover an area of West Africa nearly 1,500 kilometers from west to east and almost 1,000 kilometers from north to south. Not all peoples in that area are Mandé, but the Mandé influence is nevertheless the most extensive. There is a tendency therefore on the part of the comparatively large number of scholars interested in these interrelated peoples to take a Mandé-centric view of the profession and to call for the exclusive use of Mandé terms for *griot*, *jeli* and *jali*. This stems from both a desire for greater precision and the fact that the profession of griots is largely populated by Mandé *jeliw* and *jalolu* from the region. But this ethnocentric view of the griot world also comes from a general lack of information about non-Mandé griots in surrounding countries such as Mauritania, Niger, and Benin, as well as among non-Mandé groups scattered throughout the region (the Fulbe, for example).

For two major reasons, however, it seems inevitable that *griot* will continue to serve as the generic term for these wordsmiths. First, the word *griot* has spread into many parts of the African diaspora, in particular the Caribbean and the United States, taking on extremely positive connotations for those who see the profession as a link to their ancestors. African Americans have assumed the role of the griot to read excerpts of the Sundiata epic at Kwanzaa ceremonies each year in December. One finds both excerpts from this text and references to griots in books on this annual African American celebration (Riley 1995, Harris 1995). Distinguished African American musicians and scholars have sometimes been compared in print to griots, while both the mayor of the city of Baltimore and the governor of the state of Maryland have named an official griot, Mary Carter Smith (Smith 1996). Finally, as a result of the *Roots* phenomenon, *griot* has entered the vocabulary of African Americans to such an extent that it would be impossible to try to suppress it. Like the widely traveling wordsmiths themselves, the term *griot* has taken on a life of its own since the seventeenth century and is becoming recognized around the world.

Second, the regional nature of the terms *griot* and *griotte* underscore the fact that the profession carries out some of the oldest and most important cultural activities, activities that link many diverse peoples, including those that are not related to the Mandé. The words are useful reminders of what Paul Stoller has identified as deep Sahelian and Savanna

civilization (Hale and Stoller 1985). Like so many other crossculturally generated words in the Sahel, *griot* has come, then, to serve the needs of West Africans who must communicate with each other across numerous linguistic frontiers within Africa as well as with peoples outside of the continent, be they African or non-African. As with other regional words imbedded in West African languages, *griot* has traveled across much of the continent and found a home in the modern French and, to a lesser extent, the English spoken by many West African peoples. The fact that only a minority of the populations in these countries speaks these European languages does not affect the griot's role in them.

How, then, can one reconcile the ambiguity of *griot*, a term with probable African roots, and the specificity of such ethnically rooted words as *jali*? The answer is that by using both *griot/griotte* and the more precise words, scholars can more effectively bridge the gap in knowledge about the oral tradition for those outside of West Africa. At the same time, the adoption of *griot/griotte* signals to those who are unaware of the existence of *jelimusow* and their sisters in neighboring West African cultures that women also play an active role in the profession (see Hale 1994).

The use of both kinds of terms, the general and the specific, provides the regional framework into which discussions of different kinds of griots—past and present griots, griots from various ethnic groups, griots who perform different functions—can be conducted. This solution allows the varied audiences for griots to hold on to what they value. At the same time, such an approach will facilitate the diffusion of knowledge about griots as important components in the regional fabric of the Sahel and the Savanna.<sup>1</sup>

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