

## CULTURAL SPACES

*Research article*

### **ADAPTATION OF THE GRIOT CASTE IN THE POST-COLONIAL SOCIETY OF WEST AFRICA**

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TATAROVSKAYA Irina Gennadyevna, Dr.Sc. (Philosophy), PhD (Philology), Senior Research Fellow, Centre for History and Cultural Anthropology, Institute for African Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow, Russian Federation. ORCID: 0009-0009-2772-5902. E-mail: itatarovskaya@mail.ru

**Abstract.** Griots play an important role in preserving the cultural and historical heritage of the peoples of West Africa. The first written references to them date back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century. For several centuries, the Griots have managed to preserve their identity. However, the cultural and social role of the “artisans of the word” underwent significant changes in the postcolonial period. This article examines the postcolonial cultural politics of Modibo Keita, Sékou Touré, and Léopold Sédar Senghor. The leaders of the young states pursued a policy of modernization aimed at reviving cultural traditions at the same time. They purposefully used the historically established authority of the Griots to influence the masses through their creativity. The Griots assumed the role of the “voice” of the state, successfully integrating the traditional music and oral traditions of the Manden peoples into new realities. They updated their musical repertoire with contemporary musical instruments and new arrangements. The Griots remade renowned songs of praise about legendary heroes of the past, replacing their names with those of modern leaders. These reinterpretations were supported and sponsored by the governments of Mali, Senegal, and Guinea. Later, when the Griots freed themselves from ideological censorship, they turned to economic and social issues in their work. Most of the Griots remained musicians and singers. Those Griots who chose to pursue a political career assumed the role of advisers and spokespersons for government officials. This paper researches the transformation of the social status of the Griots in the postcolonial era.

**Keywords:** Griots, West Africa, Sékou Touré, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Modibo Keita, postcolonial cultural policy, musical groups

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## INTRODUCTION

In traditional West African society, social organization was structured around three major social groups, which were distinguished by their respective roles and statuses. At the top of the “social ladder” were the “freeborn”, then came the artisans, and at the bottom were the slaves. Each social class had its own gradation. The group designated as “freeborn” encompassed the ruler, the nobility, and the commoners. The second group included artisans, who were organized into “castes”. There were distinct castes of blacksmiths, jewelers, weavers, carpenters, and so on. A special place in the social structure of the society was occupied by the caste of “craftsmen of the word” and musicians, known as Griots. At the bottom of the social hierarchy were slaves. They belonged to the category of unfree people.

This three-tiered social structure was present in all medieval states in Ghana, Mali, and Songhai, referred to in the literature as “empires.” However, some scholars [Diop 1985; Ogawa 2009] have proposed an alternative interpretation of ancient society, suggesting that it was initially divided into two groups—“the free” and “the unfree.” Over the course of several centuries, artisans emerged within the group of “free” people as a result of the integration of different ethnic groups. The Soviet Arabist and Africanist L.E. Kubbel posited that the social structure of the society of the peoples of West Africa developed as a result of the monopolization of social functions. “Such a system was consecrated by tradition, became a tradition itself, and this explains its stability over the centuries among the majority of peoples of the savanna belt of the western Sudan” [Kubbel 1974: 143].

## CASTE SYSTEM IN WEST AFRICA

One of the smallest groups of the population are the artisans. In academic literature, this social group is often referred to as castes. It is important to emphasize that the use of the term caste is not unanimously accepted within the academic community in Africa. For example, the Senegalese intellectual Hamady Bocoum is opposed to the use of the term. According to him, it is a big mistake to use it in social anthropology. The term was imposed by Europeans and is based on the reality of the Indian subcontinent, and thus cannot be used to describe African society.<sup>1</sup>

However, the majority of African sociologists are in favor of using the term for artisans. For example, Abdoulaye Bara Diop believes that the term “caste” is an appropriate designation for naming craft groups, as it meets the criteria for defining this term [Diop 1981: 32]. P.A. Kutsenkov, Doctor of Cultural Studies and leading researcher at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, believes that West African “castes” have little in common with classical Indian castes. First and foremost, they are not fully endogamous: individuals belonging to a particular caste may only marry someone from their own caste but of any other ethnicity. Therefore, it would be more accurate to refer to them as “specialized socio-professional (or ethno-professional) groups” [Vanyukova, Kutsenkov 2022: 33]. Nevertheless, this conditional term has been widely adopted in the field of Russian African studies.

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<sup>1</sup> Nzale F. Hamady Bocoum. Les castes? Une grosse faute de l’anthropologie sociale». *Le Matin*. 18.12.2006. [https://www.seneweb.com/news/Societe/hamady-bocoum-professeur-chercheur-les-castes-une-grosse-faute-de-l-anthropologie-sociale\\_n\\_7295.html](https://www.seneweb.com/news/Societe/hamady-bocoum-professeur-chercheur-les-castes-une-grosse-faute-de-l-anthropologie-sociale_n_7295.html) (accessed: 17.11.2023)

The number of castes among the different peoples of West Africa varies considerably. The Moors and Tuareg have two castes—blacksmiths and griots; the Dogon have three castes—blacksmiths, griots and leather workers; and the Bambara, in addition to blacksmiths, griots, and leather workers, have a caste of weavers, carpenters, and even a caste of calabash menders. The Songhai have up to six and the Senoufo up to seven castes. The Fulbe and Tukolor have as many as twelve castes, some of which overlap. The Soninke have four castes.

It should be noted that among some West African peoples, the griot caste was comprised of sub-castes. In the Malinke culture, the griot caste was referred to by the generic term *nyamakala*. The etymology of this word can be translated as “dirty trunk,” indicating their low position in society. This caste included the following sub-castes: the Mabo were carpenters or weavers; the Fine or Fina were storytellers, keepers of history, i.e., historians; the Dyeli were musicians and singers; and the Gaulo, the aristocrats of the caste, were singers, musicians, storytellers, and historians [Evgenieva 2017: 233].

### ORIGIN OF THE TERM GRIOT

Around the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the griot social caste first emerged in West Africa. This caste constitutes a narrow endogamous group comprising people of various ethnicities. The term “griot” is a term that has been introduced, generally accepted, and widely used in literature. There are many hypotheses regarding the origin of the word “griot.” Two versions are the most widely accepted. According to the first, the term “griot” has French roots. This viewpoint is based on the fact that in 1637 the French Capuchin monk Alexis de Saint-Lô described the Griots in his work “Relation du voyage du Cap-Verd,” where he used the term *guiriot* for the first time. And in 1778, Le Brasseur, a colonial administrator in West Africa, made a report in which he wrote: “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” [Hale 1998: 357]. Le Brasseur’s definition is based on the similarity of the word “griot” to the French word “*grelot*,” which means “rattle, chime.”

According to the second version, the word griot is of Portuguese origin. Most researchers agree that the most probable etymology of the term “griot” is derived from the Portuguese language. The French ethnologist Henri Labouret believed that the term griot “is not borrowed from any of the local languages of West Africa... It comes from the word *criado*, which means “the nourished, the cultivated,” and in a broader sense—“a servant.” Henri Labouret explains the transformation of *criado* into griot in terms of phonetic processes, noting that “c” and “g,” two velar plosives, are close and interchangeable [Labouret 1951: 56–57]. His theory has merit. Firstly, the Portuguese arrived in West Africa long before the French, and Portuguese was spoken in Senegal. Secondly, the very translation of the word “servant” reflects the actual situation of some Griots.

Another version of the Portuguese origin of the word “griot” is related to the observation made by many travelers. All of them, in describing the performances of the Griots, pointed out the noise they made during the performances. In Portuguese, *gritar* means “to shout.” All of the words derived from this root are indicative of a similar meaning: *grito*—“a shout,” *gritalhao*, *gritador*—“a person who shouts a lot” [Hale 1998: 359]. Based on the consonance of these words, the hypothesis above is put forth.

## GRIOTS: THE MASTERS OF WORDS AND MUSIC

The Griots are a social caste of professional keepers of historical knowledge and cultural traditions. They are singers, musicians, poets, historians, philosophers, orators. It is not surprising, therefore, that in Africa, they are often likened to a “live library” or to a baobab—the most beloved tree of the Africans, the symbol of wisdom, strength, and long life. The renowned Griot Mamadou Kouyaté said: “We are the vessels of speech, the vessels that contain ancient secrets. The art of eloquence is open to us, and without us, the names of kings would have been long forgotten; we are the memory of humankind. With our word, we revive the past deeds and feats for the new generations” [Olderogge 1963: 16]. Through the efforts of the Griots, a lot of oral folk literature, musical pieces, historical works, and rulers’ genealogies have survived to this day.

The history of griotism dates back to ancient times, with the emergence of the first ancient states on the territory of West Africa. There are different versions about the origin of the Griots. It can be assumed that they have an “extraordinary” origin. The earliest information on them is found in the folklore, followed by written accounts from Africans and later by European travelers and missionaries [Tatarovskaya 2019].

Historically, the majority of Griots occupied the lowest social rank. This is mainly due to the fact that the “artisans of the word” were regarded as outsiders. However, they performed very important functions. The Griot’s profession consisted not only of formal performances, which included the use of musical instruments, singing, dancing, and reciting, but also other duties. They performed many ceremonies that marked significant stages in an individual’s life, including birth, naming, initiation, marriage, the birth of children, promotions, and funerals. And since the fear of the unknown, the mysterious, and the magical is frightening, ordinary people tend to maintain a distance from those who interact with the supernatural realm.

Nevertheless, certain people of the caste had great influence on the ruler and his entourage. For example, those Griots who managed to become famous for their art and gain service in the court of a ruler or a noble family belonged to the upper strata of society. Their duties included glorifying the name of their “master” and keeping records of his genealogy and family history. In many feudal states of ancient Africa, the Griots served as advisors to rulers, educators for their children, and “diplomats.” At the same time, most Griots were itinerant performers who had to earn their living by traveling from village to village, entertaining people with their art in exchange for food, gifts, and shelter. Despite the prohibition against owning property, the Griots were permitted to visit different estates, and no one could deny them shelter.

The Griots are a closely endogamous group. They can only form a family within their own group but with any other people. The Manden<sup>2</sup> have a saying: “One has to be born a griot.” This tradition is still alive today. In fact, the caste system is particularly intransigent at the level of marital relations. Marriages between members of different social classes remain difficult, if not unfeasible. Africans traditionally try to avoid mixing blood, so it is forbidden to marry people from different social backgrounds. The griot caste is one of the most stable social and professional groups in African society. Many griot families in West Africa have a rich lineage.

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<sup>2</sup> The Manden (Maninka) peoples are a group of peoples in West Africa (Mali, Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Senegal, The Gambia).

Over the centuries, the Griots have succeeded in maintaining their identity. They jealously guard the secrets of their craft, which they pass down through generations. The education of a Griot typically commences during childhood. The training of the future master takes place in an environment of strict discipline, repeated memorization of various texts, listening, and making music.

This tradition is not inherently gendered. However, a gendered division of labor exists. Traditionally, male Griots recite and play musical instruments, while women are typically engaged in dancing and singing. Men may also sing, but the lead vocals are always female. During the recitation of an epic work by a griot, women engage in a variety of activities, including singing, shouting, drumming, and dancing, which serve to enhance the overall performance.

The rigid division of roles in the play into female and male roles dates back to ancient times. It is believed that women are by nature more sentimental and therefore better at lyrical digressions than at reciting epic poetry or accurately enumerating family trees. It is also believed that only a man can be a poet because only he is endowed with the divine gift of versification; women are not worthy of this gift. Moreover, female Griots did not accompany the ruler on military campaigns (as did their male counterparts) and had therefore no right to comment on events they did not directly witness. Women were forbidden to recite not only the epic itself but also its individual chapters. Many superstitions are associated with this practice. For example, in one of his interviews, the brother of the renowned Malian singer Tata Bambo Kouyate, Cheikh Kouyate, who himself plays *tamani* drums, stated: “If a woman does *tarikou* her children will be ill, or something terrible will happen. Men have even threatened to kill a woman with *kòròte* [poison], if she dares to perform the *tarikou*. So no woman will do it, at least not in public” [Durán 2007: 580]. In the present era, female Griots rarely recite the epic. According to experts in griotism, women’s recitation of the epic is more like singing than recitation.

The Griots have a gender division not only in the verbal genre but also in terms of female and male musical instruments. The main instrument for women is a *nege*, also called *karinyang*, a tubular bell that is struck with a metal rod to produce sound. Most of the other musical instruments, both stringed and percussion, are used by the men [Counsel 1997]. In recent years, however, this rule has been abided to less strictly. A notable example is Sona Jobarteh, who descends from a renowned Griot family of *kora* players. Though playing *kora*, a 21-string African lute, was always considered a masculine art, Sona Jobarteh has broken this tradition and became the first female Griot who professionally performs on *kora* in public<sup>3</sup>.

The griot’s profession involves not only playing musical instruments, singing, dancing, and reciting but also organizing ceremonies, in which they make sure that all the necessary rules are strictly observed. Male and female Griots have different duties and responsibilities. The men are responsible for organizing official events related to political power, including receptions, meetings, ceremonies of varying levels, and public holidays. Female Griots deal with public actions related to family events such as weddings, funerals, the birth of a child, naming ceremonies, etc. During these ceremonies, they act as advisors on various worldly problems. They give their advice in the form of fairy tales, parables, and songs [Ksenofontova, Ilyina, Tatarovskaya 2021: 197–202].

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<sup>3</sup> Khan A. A Celebrated Virtuoso on an Instrument She Wasn’t Meant to Play. *The New York Times*. 17.09.2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/17/world/europe/sona-jobarteh-griot-kora.html> (accessed 11.09.2024)

## CULTURAL POLICY OF MODIBO KEITA, SÉKOU TOURÉ, LÉOPOLD SÉDAR SENGHOR

The cultural role and social function of the Griots underwent significant changes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and especially in the post-colonial period. As guardians of history and culture, the Griots became the voice of the government and were seen by the leaders of many West African countries as disseminators of a new ideology, as the agents of social change.

At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, most of West Africa was a colonial possession of France. French West Africa included the Ivory Coast (Côte d'Ivoire), Upper Volta (Burkina Faso), French Guinea, Dahomey (Benin), Mauritania, Niger, Senegal, and French Sudan (Mali). To ensure "direct rule," the French downgraded traditional rulers to the status of local "chieftains." They introduced a market economy to prevent the local aristocracy from profiting from their traditional sources of income by monopolizing trade (gold, salt, slaves, etc.), thereby eliminating the main financial source of their wealth.

The former rulers began to receive salaries from the colonial authorities that were less than the sums they had previously been paid. The former patrons could no longer pay the Griots the same amount, so the "artisans of the word" were forced to find new sources of livelihood. During this period, the Griots became more in touch with the population and especially with the actively emerging new class of bourgeoisie. In exchange for payment, they composed and sang songs in praise of their new masters, while a thorough knowledge of the historical repertoire faded into the background. The performance of epic works became rare as many Griots were forced to abandon the griot tradition in search of a more stable livelihood. This led to Griots leaving their homelands for the major urban centers in search of income and new patrons [Diawara 1996: 593].

However, in the post-colonial period, when the newly formed countries needed an independent political and cultural course, the Griots again became the voice of the rulers, but in a completely new capacity.

Guinea gained independence from France in 1958, followed two years later by Senegal and Mali. All three nations were led by charismatic figures: Guinea was led by Sékou Touré, Senegal by Léopold Sédar Senghor, and Mali by Modibo Keita. Each nation was trying to shed the burden of years of colonial rule. The new leaders of the young nations embarked on ambitious campaigns to revive their cultural traditions. The development of the traditions was based on the theory of modernization. One cannot but agree with the Russian Africanist I.V. Sledzevsky that it became the main tool for shaping the post-colonial trajectory of African countries [Sledzevsky 2013: 471].

Modibo Keita (1915–1977) was the first president of Mali, holding office from 1960 to 1968. He was a direct descendant of Sundiata Keita, who was the most prominent mansa (ruler) of Mali. Sundiata's life and exploits are chronicled in the epic work of the same name. Sundiata Keita played such an important role in the creation of the Mali Empire and the history of the Manden peoples that oral tradition has made him a great warrior and hunter-magician whose exploits enabled his descendants to rule the region for centuries. For the Griots, their moment of glory had come. They sang songs praising the first president of the independent Republic of Mali as a descendant of the renowned Mansa of the medieval kingdom of Mali.

The government of Modibo Keita pursued a radical cultural policy that encouraged the establishment of state-sponsored regional and national orchestras. In Mali, *L'Orchestre National "A" de la République du Mali* was established on the following day of the country's independence in 1960. In line with the new government's cultural policy,

the orchestra was composed of musicians who had vowed to serve their country by “contributing with all their genius to the protection and revalorization of Malian musical art.”<sup>4</sup>

Most of the artists in the orchestra were Griots. The ensemble was conducted by the griot Keletigui Diabaté. He was a well-known multi-instrumentalist in Mali, playing the lead guitar in the orchestra. It was one of the first groups to play electric musical instruments in Mali and the first electric ensemble to perform songs in local languages. It should be noted that ensembles with electric instruments had existed in various West African countries since the early 1950s, but their repertoire consisted of Cuban songs, jazz, and pop tunes. *L’Orchestre National “A” de la République du Mali* was the first to use both traditional and modern musical instruments, to perform traditional melodies in modern arrangements, and to reinterpret traditional music in a modern context.

The government of Mali has established six regional and two national orchestras, in addition to a national ensemble comprising over 20 musicians. Performers were admitted to these ensembles through a competitive process. Winners of regional and national music competitions became members. They performed at festivals and numerous state occasions. As a result, the government of Mali became the new “patron” of the bands. It provided them with performance venues and musical instruments, paid their fees. In such an environment, it is not surprising that many songs in support of official policies were composed by Griots. The Modibo Keita government deliberately used the Griots’ historically established authority to influence the masses through their art.

A considerable number of musical groups began to incorporate fragments of Manden oral traditions into their repertoire. They modernized their repertoire with modern musical instruments and new arrangements, attempting to “revitalize” and “rejuvenate” traditional music. These new modern interpretations were part of a government initiative to restore and revitalize Mali’s cultural heritage.

The postcolonial cultural policies of the Republic of Guinea have much in common with the Republic of Mali. In the year following Guinea’s independence in 1959, the government of President Sékou Touré sought to free Guinea from European influence, which was believed to be undermining and destroying traditional values and culture. One of the government’s first decrees was to disband dance groups, orchestras, and chamber music ensembles that used “slave interpretations,” meaning they played European music. In the same year, the *Les Ballets Africains* and the *Syli National Orchestra* were established. As in Mali, the majority of the performers originated from the griot caste. They were awarded prizes in government-sponsored competitions. The musicians in the orchestra played both European and traditional instruments. Their role, like that of their Malian counterparts, was to modernize the traditional repertoire, write new songs, and create new arrangements. A number of musical groups were also organized on the basis of the first national orchestra. Their tasks and objectives were similar. The result was a large number of propaganda songs extolling the achievements of the single political party, the *Parti démocratique du Guinée*, and its leader, Sékou Touré.

Ahmed Sékou Touré (1922–1984), like Modibo Keita, had a notable figure in his family lineage. He was a descendant of Alhaja Samori Touré (1840–1900), the founder of the state of Ouasulu (Wasulu). He led the Maninka resistance to French colonialism. Samori aspired to reestablish the former greatness of the Mande kingdom. To this day

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<sup>4</sup> Counsel G. African classics: *L’Orchestre National “A” de la République du Mali*. Reviews of classic recordings from Africa. *Radio Africa*. <https://www.radioafrica.com.au/Classics/NationalA.html> (accessed: 27.04.2024)

Samoré Touré remains Guinea's national hero. The Griots wrote many songs of praise dedicated to Alhaja Samori Touré, expressing their profound respect for the politician. For example, the famous album *Regard sur le passé* ("Looking back") by the Guinean band *Jazz National* was dedicated to Samoré Touré, in which the Griots praised Sékou Touré as a worthy descendant of the esteemed ancestor.

On August 20, 1960, Senegal formally declared its independence. Léopold Sédar Senghor (1906–2001) was elected president. He was one of the founders of the cultural-philosophical and ideological-political doctrine of Negritude. Upon becoming head of state, Senghor declared that since independence, every effort should be made to create a new literature, a new dance form, and a new music to create and establish a new national identity [Counsel 1997]. The first president of Senegal wrote poetry, was interested in the work of the Griots, and exhibited a profound familiarity with the arts. Sédar Senghor authored the national anthem of the country, and he wrote about 20 collections of works of various genres. It is noteworthy that for some of his poems, he provided "instructions" for the Griots to play traditional musical instruments during the recitation. The griot Lamin Kouyate recorded Senghor's poems to the accompaniment of the kora. He released several recordings. It is known that Léopold Sédar Senghor never appeared in public without his griot, Yandé Codou Sène<sup>5</sup> whose singing preceded the president's speeches. In the present day, nearly every prominent political figure in Senegal can be linked to the griot tradition.

The Griots thus became the "voice" of the state. They adapted the epic heritage of the Manden peoples to the new realities. A favorite technique was to replace the name of a legendary hero with that of a modern political leader. The songs of previous centuries, already renowned, acquired a new dimension. It is important to acknowledge that even before the emergence of the Mali Empire, the Griots had a rich repertoire of songs related to the history of the peoples living in West Africa. In accordance with the fluctuations of the political situation, the heroes they sang about also changed [Kai 2014: 180]. For example, the praise song "Janjon," which extolled the exploits of Soninke warriors in establishing the Ghana Empire, was later changed to glorify the troops of Sumanguru Kante and Sundiata. "Douga," another famous song of praise, was composed before the Manden era. The song glorified the exploits of warriors who had perished in battle. Consequently, this skill was transmitted from one generation of Griots to the next. Today, the songs "Janjon" and "Douga" are performed at the funerals of distinguished hunters and at military parades, where Griots sing about the achievements of modern armies. Additionally, griot songs addressed social issues in postcolonial society, including the dissemination of literacy. They also composed songs about freedom and national unity. These works were controlled by state authorities and reflected the policies of the governments of Mali, Guinea, and Senegal.

### CURRENT STATUS OF THE GRIOTS

Today, the Griots have established themselves as a prominent force within the political landscape. Historically, they served as advisors, interpreters, and experts in laws, customs, and history at the courts of rulers and the families of aristocrats. They were the "voice" of their master and patron. In the modern world, numerous Griots have assumed

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<sup>5</sup> Gueye M. Rôle du griot dans la société africaine: les mutations d'une figure clé. *The Conversation*. 03.04.2023. <https://theconversation.com/role-du-griot-dans-la-societe-africaine-les-mutations-dune-figure-cle-202770#:~:text=De%20même%2C%20le%20griot%20occupe,il%20se%20désigne%20lui-même> (accessed: 16.05.2024)



the role of spokespeople for political parties and figures, including presidents. By employing persuasive techniques and oratorical skills, they continue to communicate with the people and the press on behalf of their patron as they did in the past. In Senegal, each political party has its Griots, whose role is to enhance the party's reputation and advance the profile of its leader within the society. For example, the Socialist Party of Senegalese President Abdou Diouf formed a national committee (*CONAGRISPAD*) composed entirely of Griots whose only concern was to support the leader and his party [Panzacci 1994].

Here are some famous names of griot politicians. El Hadji Mansour Mbaye is a Griot for the Socialist Party. Abdoulaye Mbaye Pekh was the griot of President Abdoulaye Wade from 2000 to 2012. He was also the ceremonial master of the Caliph General of the Murids in Senegal. Farba Ngom is a member of parliament and the griot of the President of the Republic, Macky Sall.

It must be said that many West African politicians have Griots as advisors who are able to speak on their behalf. Since the attainment of independence, political parties have retained Griots as musicians, actors, singers, and masters of ceremonies. At the same time, the emergence of new social leaders in the form of religious teachers has led to Griots becoming advisors to sheikhs. In West Africa, each sheikh is accompanied by a griot, who on occasion assumes the role of spokesperson in public settings.

Thus, Griot art was ideally suited for new purposes in the postcolonial period. They defended the government's ideology, popularized new leaders, and served as agents of social and cultural change.

In the 1970s, numerous musical ensembles undertook tours of neighboring countries, with some achieving considerable international success and recognition. Salif Keita from Mali, for example, has been hailed as "the golden voice of Africa." He is not a griot by birth but a descendant of Sundiata Keita; nevertheless, his music is based on the griot tradition. Mory Kanté (1950–2020) from Guinea made an international career with his dance tracks in Paris. He is a Griot by origin. Many traditional African motifs can be heard in his music. One of the most popular musical groups in West Africa was *Le Super Rail Band de Bamako*, later renamed *Les Ambassadeurs*. The orchestra was primarily composed of Griots. The popularity of this musical group was based on the fact that the Griots managed to create a syncretic mixture of musical forms and styles. The new style appealed to the public and remains popular to this day. Consequently, contemporary musical styles have been significantly influenced by the post-colonial music of the 1960s.

However, the financial burden of maintaining ensembles and orchestras proved to be a significant obstacle. In Senegal, Mali, and Guinea, most of the major musical ensembles had to be disbanded. Sékou Touré died in 1984. The new government abandoned his policies. At the same time, new small ensembles emerged.

As political leaders began to focus on economic issues rather than cultural development, griot musicians were no longer constrained by ideological censorship and were able to focus on a wider range of issues. For example, Sira Mori Diabaté<sup>6</sup> (1925 (33?)–1989), nearly blind from birth, was one of the most popular performers of folk music and songs in Mali. She was born in the town of Kéla, which is considered the center of griotism. The Griots from all over Mali come there to demonstrate and validate their professional skills. The Diabaté family is the most respected and oldest griot family from Kéla, Mali. As a member of such a family, Sira Mori Diabaté was destined to become a singer. She went through all the stages of training. She performed with her parents for

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<sup>6</sup> Sometimes her name is written in one word: *Siramori*.

many years, then was one of the singers in her brother El Haji Yamudu's group, where she danced and sang in the choir. One of the members of this group was her husband Nankoman Kouyate Aphoto. However, Sira Mori Diabate has managed to achieve high professional recognition. Sira Mori is best known as a singer. She performed a variety of musical pieces, including both traditional folk songs and her own compositions. Sira Mori's performances were always a great success [Tatarovskaya 2017: 24–37]

Sira Mori was not only a singer, but also an active participant in the social life of Bamako. Her musical compositions and vocal performances resonate with and are accessible to all demographic groups within Malian society. In her work, she touched many acute social issues of Malians. One of the most famous and popular songs of Sira Mori is "Sara". The song's narrative revolves around a young woman named Sara who did not want to marry the young man chosen by her father. She dreamed of marrying for love. The song describes the ritual of the payment of the bride price, then her wedding. But after becoming the wife of an unloved husband, Sarah falls ill. No witch doctor, no sorcerer, no physician can cure her. Then the girl's relatives return the bride price (money and a cow) to the groom, dissolve the marriage, and Sara returns home to her father. The song has a happy ending. The girl meets her lover and recovers [Jansen 1996: 188–194]. The song "Sara" is popular not only in Mali but also outside it. The theme of marriage for love and traditional marriage is one of the most topical in modern society, not only in Mali but also in other African countries; it has been also explored in numerous literary works.

Sira Mori was always very proud of her griot lineage. She emphasized this in every interview she gave. However, Sira Mori blamed the Griots for a recent change in their attitude toward the profession. In the pursuit of money, many Griots began to lose their skills, resulting in a decline in the overall level of professionalism.

Another prominent griot from Mali, Ami Koita (b. 1952), has followed in her footsteps. She also uses traditional music and songs, but in a new way. Ami Koita has not abandoned the traditional Malian style, but has modernized it by using modern arrangements and European musical instruments. She does not touch on politics in her work, nor does she perform praising songs. In an interview with the newspaper *Aujourd'hui-Mali* on July 20, 2018, she stated, "I am apolitical, that is, I do not affiliate with any political party. I do not support any particular candidate. But as a griot, I belong to society. The presidential palace is a symbol of the country. If I am called, I cannot refuse, although this does not imply that I endorse any particular candidate. Moreover, I am grateful to all the presidents of the Republic who have succeeded each other in power."<sup>7</sup> Ami Koita has released more than 20 albums. In her songs, she addresses issues of women's rights.

Today, songs that were praising the ruling regime and certain politicians of the post-colonial era have acquired a negative resonance in collective memory. For example, songs in honor of Sékou Touré evoke painful memories of his autocratic rule for many Guineans.

The Griots' talent for retelling events of the bygone days made them excellent chroniclers of history and genealogy. Although the libraries of Timbuktu in the Mali Empire contained a rich collection of written works on subjects ranging from scientific theories to religious scriptures, access to this extensive body of knowledge was largely

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<sup>7</sup> Sissoko O. R. Que sont ils devenus? Ami Koïta: De Badougou Djoliba à Bamako, sur les traces de la diva du Mandé. *Aujourd'hui-Mali*. 20.07.2018. <https://www.maliweb.net/musique/que-sont-ils-devenus-ami-koita-de-badougou-djoliba-a-bamako-sur-les-traces-de-la-diva-du-mande-2768356.html> (accessed: 11.03.2022)

limited. Consequently, the oral tradition of griotism was essential to the education of West Africans. With independence, the young states of West Africa needed to build a new ideology. The spoken word of a Griot represents the history of a people, extending into the present and future. The Griots played an important role in education. Their knowledge of the history and genealogies of rulers helped to write textbooks on the history of the Gambia, Mali, and neighboring regions.

Government officials were engaged in complex negotiations with the Griots. The crux of the matter is that after telling a small fragment, the “artisans of the word” demanded payment for continuing the story. Traditionally, the Griots received gifts in return for their work, so they considered this gesture as part of their cultural role. The Griots regarded the free dissemination of historical legends as a violation of their professional ethics.

### CONCLUSION

The historical processes in Africa have had a decisive impact on the evolution of the griot caste. In the modern world, the griot must constantly find a compromise between modern art and traditional art. Marketing is a crucial element in the evolution of the griot identity space [Ouallet 2020]. Nevertheless, the status of the griot entails adherence to a set of defined ethical standards. In the contemporary era, the Griots occupy advanced positions within the cultural and media landscape.

The disruption of the traditional social structure in the cities resulted in a decline in the influence of the Griots as “rulers of the word” and an expansion of their role as musicians. The introduction of European musical instruments and the opening of public music schools accessible to all sectors of society have enabled people from other social groups to become professional musicians. At the same time, the prestige of the griot musician remains considerable in Africa. In Senegal, for instance, approximately 90% of professional musicians are the Griots. However, the public perception of the Griots in the postcolonial states of West Africa is subject to fluctuations in accordance with the advent and demise of political regimes. When their songs of praise glorify presidents unpopular with the people, their reputation suffers, and vice versa. Nevertheless, their ability to employ subtle symbolism in conveying a message allows a particular narrative to be interpreted in different ways, depending on the audience.

Those Griots who wished to change their social status adopted new occupations. A significant number of Muslim Griots became Islamic clerics or religious singers, thus moving from the secular to the sacred, while maintaining their role as artists but covered by the veil of Islam. The skill of public speaking and oratory enabled some Griots to pursue careers in politics. Griots who managed to obtain higher education became teachers, programmers, engineers, and administrators. Most Griots, however, ultimately found their place in the mass media. The profession of sports commentator is particularly popular among Griots. The aforementioned professions, such as news anchor, toastmaster, host, animator, showman, and master of ceremonies, are not a complete list of the specialties of modern Griots.

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## АДАПТАЦИЯ КАСТЫ ГРИОТОВ В ПОСТКОЛОНИАЛЬНОМ ОБЩЕСТВЕ ЗАПАДНОЙ АФРИКИ

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ТАТАРОВСКАЯ Ирина Геннадьевна, доктор философских наук, кандидат филологических наук, старший научный сотрудник, Центр истории и культурной антропологии, Институт Африки РАН, Москва, Российская Федерация. ORCID: 0009-0009-2772-5902. E-mail: itatarovskaya@mail.ru

**Аннотация.** Автор статьи рассматривает представителей социальной касты профессиональных певцов, музыкантов и сказочников – гриотов, которые играют большую роль в сохранении культурного и исторического наследия народов Западной Африки. Первые письменные упоминания о них относятся к XIII в. На протяжении нескольких столетий гриоты сумели сохранить свою идентичность. Однако культурная и социальная

роль «ремесленников слова» претерпела значительные изменения в постколониальный период. Статья посвящена постколониальной культурной политике Модибо Кейта, Секу Туре, Леопольда Седара Сенгора. Лидеры освободившихся от колониальной зависимости государств проводили политику модернизации, направленную на возрождение культурных традиций. Они целенаправленно использовали исторически сложившийся авторитет гриотов для влияния на массы посредством их творчества. Гриоты в этот период стали «голосом» государства, они сумели адаптировать традиционную музыку и устные предания народов манден к новым реалиям, они модернизировали свой репертуар с использованием современных музыкальных инструментов и новых аранжировок. Гриоты переделывали знаменитые хвалебные песни о легендарных героях прошлого, заменяя их имена на имена современных лидеров. Эти новые интерпретации поддерживались и спонсировались правительствами Мали, Сенегала и Гвинеи. Впоследствии, освободившись от идеологической цензуры, они обратились в своем творчестве к экономическим и социальным проблемам. Большинство гриотов остались музыкантами и певцами. Те гриоты, которые связали свою жизнь с политикой, стали советниками и пресс-атташе представителей власти. В статье показано как менялось социальное положение гриотов в постколониальный период.

**Ключевые слова:** гриоты, Западная Африка, Секу Туре, Леопольд Сенгор, Модибо Кейта, постколониальная культурная политика, музыкальные коллективы

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