



What is a Griot?



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Unique to Western Africa, the griot, or jeli, profession encompasses many roles. Griots have been referred to as historians and storytellers, but there is no real word in the English language that includes all of their functions. A traditional griot could do everything from recounting history to composing music, to teaching students, to acting as diplomats. They are genealogists, historians, spokespeople, ambassadors, musicians, teachers, warriors, interpreters, praise-singers, masters of ceremonies, advisors, and more. Not every griot does all of these things, but these are all examples of functions the griot profession embodies.

How to Become a Griot

Traditionally, in order to become a griot, you had to be born into a griot family. It was an art form passed from father to son, almost like an apprenticeship. Your family would expose you to verbal and musical arts, and you would learn to play the kora, a musical instrument similar to a harp that is associated with griotism.

There are also more formal ways of griot training. Sometimes towns have a central house presided over by a master griot where griots go to learn from each other. Today there are both private and state sponsored schools that offer training in griot arts, though these focus more on the musical rather than the verbal aspect of griotism. This has made the profession more accessible to people who are not born into it.

It is also important for a griot to learn by traveling. Young griots visit and learn from master griots in other regions or countries. They accompany them to ceremonies where they watch and learn and often assist. Once talented griots reach middle age, they become master griots, and their chief role becomes to train new generations of griots.

Griottes

Both women and men can be griots. Yet traditional gender biases have delegated female griots, or griottes, to a lesser-known status. Griots and griottes are trained in the same way, though griottes tend to learn more from other women.

Traditionally, griots specialize in history conveyed through the spoken word while griottes focus on praise through song. Griottes specialize in singing. Often, men and women perform together with the griot playing the kora and the griotte singing. Traditionally, women do not play instruments like the kora or the drums but sing instead. Lately, however, the differences between men and women griots have begun to blur. Exceptionally talented women can become master griottes as well once they reach middle age.

Griots in the World Today

Today, performing is one of the most common functions of a griot. Their audience range has widened, and many griots now travel all over the world singing and playing the kora or other instruments. Though the world has changed, griot tradition is still alive and flourishing.

A griot helps keep the past alive by remembering and articulating it for others. A griot sings, praises, celebrates, announces, as well as many other things, but most of all, a griot remembers.



Bibliography

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Ebron, Paulla A. *Performing Africa*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2002. Print.

Hale, Thomas A. *Griots and Griottes: Masters of Words and Music*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1998. Print.

Sites with more information/interesting and relevant articles:

<http://web.cocc.edu/cagatucci/classes/hum211/CoursePack/coursepackpast/maligriot.htm>

<http://babathestoryteller.com/the-ancient-craft-of-jaliyaa/>

<http://news.psu.edu/story/140694/2002/05/01/research/keepers-history>

Further reading:

Griots and Griottes by Thomas A. Hale