
The Roles of Griots in African Oral Tradition among the Manding

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Abstract

*Oral tradition in West Africa and indeed the African countries south of the Sahara constitutes an important aspect of African culture and values. It is a body of knowledge made up of different parts and which different segments of the society relate with. Oral literature has attracted the interest of African scholars, and indeed it has continued to attract from time to time the interest of scholars who may want to draw inspiration from this deep fountain of knowledge. This paper therefore examines the place of griots in oral tradition among the Manding people of West Africa. The study highlights their roles and importance in the day to day life of their traditional community, through some examples drawn from two novels based on the same story: the epic of Soundiata Keita of ancient Mali Empire. These works are: Camara Laye's *Le Maître de la parole (The Master of the Word)* and Djibril Tamsir Niane's *Soundjata, ou l'épopée manding (Sundjata: An Epic of the Old Mali)*. Our theoretical analysis of this work will lean on both comparative and sociological approaches. The paper concludes that, considering the importance of oral literature in our rural communities and, particularly, as an educative tool in the life of the young ones, the roles of traditional griots should be encouraged even nowadays, irrespective of the social structures which have evolved in the traditional societies with the advent of modernity and information communication technology.*

Key words: Oral Tradition, Culture, Griot, Role and Importance.

Oral African literature is an important and an integral part of African culture, with its own forms and social functions. Oral narrative and performance for instance, like all other speech acts, is a communication system in which a social discourse takes place principally between a narrator/performer and his audience. The nature of communication in oral tradition or in oral narrative and performance may be similar to other processes of communication in which the communicator transfers some messages to his audience or listener. The most basic characteristic of oral literature is that it is a performed expression. This means that an oral literary expression exists as a

performance, as a speech act accentuated and rendered alive by various gesture, social conventions and the unique occasion in which it is performed.

One other feature of oral literary is orality. The oral creation expressed through narration; the audience performance situation. The personality of the artist is also an important feature. The personality of the performer not only recreates, but also meditates between the inherited form and his living performance and audience, colouring the received version with his personality traits such as his experience, narrative and verbal skills, the power of his memory and his voice. In case of some entertainment performances, the narrator can also transform and remold the materials received in accordance with the power of his imagination and memory. This aligns with the affirmation of Akporobaro (2006), citing Ivan Vansina:

A testimony, in fact, is the tradition as interpreted through the personality of the informant, and is coloured by his personality. It is this influence exerted by the personality of the informant on the testimony that enables one to postulate that a referent may consist of one or several traditions. [...] It can happen that an informant has heard only on tradition which he passes on. But an informant may, during his rotation mixed up in his mind several versions so that he gives a single testimony embracing all of them. There is then no means of discovering which parts of his testimony belongs to which of the various traditions that forms the basis of his statements. He has merged them altogether.

Other characteristics of oral tradition are the audience as a factor, the memory as well as the improvisation factors. The audience is a vital feature of oral form of literature. The audience is very often involved in the actualization and recreation of any given pieces of oral literature. This is so because the artist relies on the audience who is usually receptive to his narration with its reactions, expectations and cultural assumptions. Depending upon the genre or personality of the narrator, the reactions and beliefs of the audience are woven into the story, poem or recitation.

Oral tradition or narrative depends a lot on the power of memorization. The memory of the artist affects the identity of the oral story. Addition of narrative items, omissions, elaborations as sources of reshaping of the form generate varied possibilities which both enrich the tradition of a given piece and add confusion or complexity to what constitutes the authentic form. Thus the same piece could be rendered in with slight variation. Improvisation is also an important element of oral literature. The narrator of a story or a poem does not merely do it in a dogmatic manner or in a pre-established form. In his performance, he exercises his creativity by introducing new and exciting words, images, motifs and names of objects.

The practice of improvisation introduces the element of the variability of oral literary forms, just as it could be seen in the epic of Soundiata narrated by the griots Babou Condé and Mamadou Kouyaté and transcribed by Camara Laye and Tamsir Djibril Niane in their novels respectively. It must however, be noted that the mastery of delivery techniques combined with skillful improvisations works to heighten the artistic effectiveness of the narration and the reciter.

Oral narrative or performance is an embodiment of Africa's oral literature and traditional social life. It has been defined in various terms by both Africans and non-

Africans. Belinga (1978) refers to it as "the knowledge and the activities embedded in the esthetics of unwritten African works"; while Akporobaro (2006) describes it as "the heritage of imaginative verbal creations, stories, folk-beliefs and songs of pre-literate societies which have been evolved and passed on through the spoken word from one generation to another". In Black Africa, written literature probably emerged in the 1900s with the education of Africans in western education. This date underscores the antecedent of oral literature in the Negro-African cultural universe.

Nonetheless, even in this modern era, this form of oral tradition still exists among the various traditionalists in Africa, and such groups as the griots among the Manding people of West Africa, who were at one time regarded as veritable holders of oral tradition before the transformation of societies with the advent of modernity. It is in the light of this that we are going to examine the roles of the griots and their importance (the carriers of tradition) in traditional Manding society in Africa.

As far as this study is concerned, theoretically, our analysis of the subject under consideration will follow a sociological approach as well as comparative. Sociological approach looks at issues vis-à-vis its evolution, manifestation and dynamics in the society, and since we are dealing with issues that relate to culture and society, a critical look at this phenomenon called griot, as it concerns traditional society will enable us to examine the subject in relation to its dynamic in the African traditional society of West Africa. The comparative approach will enable us through the textual analysis of the two texts we are examining, to bring to the fore the activities of the griots as mentioned by the authors in their texts.

The Griots and Oral Tradition

The griots are groups of people in Western Sudan which includes West Africa, who are guardians of history of the community and keep as well as recreate the tradition of oral performance (Laye 1978). They are called different names in various communities. For instance, the Yoruba of people of West Africa call them *Akewu Oba* (the king's praise man) or *Olohun iyó* (golding voice) as the case may be in relation with his roles. The griots are known generally in the Senegambia region, among the Manding, the Wolof, the Bambara and other ethnic groups in the upper Niger region of West Africa from Mali to Niger. According to historians, the Manding (also called Mandingo or Mandinka) people migrated and settled around the Futa Jallon region of West Africa from the western side of Niger River, where they founded the empire of Kaabu, comprising of small kingdoms (Edris 2003). Charry Eric in *Wikipedia* asserts that:

They converted to Islam during the reign of Mansa Musa (1312-1337). The tribe flourished in the ancient Mali Empire under the rule of Soundiata Keita. Traditionally, they engage in agriculture and grow rice, groundnut and millet, crops that are traded. However, the tribe members are also into other professions carpentry, blacksmithing, tailoring and butchering.

The society is patriarchal in nature with an elder being the chieftain of the tribe. The tribe is one of the most widespread tribe in West Africa; it has many sub-tribes like the Dyula, Bozo and Bambara. In modern West Africa, the tribe is found in countries

like Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad and Guinea-Bissau.

In traditional Manding community, the griot caste is considered as the repository of oral tradition. Those who belong to the griot families are specialists in history of the community, in genealogy, songs, and oratory. Secou Keita describes a griot as "a West African story teller, singer, musician, and oral historian. He excels as orator, lyricist and musician." He stresses that the griots keeps records of all births, death, marriages, through the generations of the village or family (keita 2014).

According to *Wikipedia*, "the griots are traditional communicators, and are called *djéli* among the Manding and *guéwël* among the Wolof. The authentic griots belong to the caste of traditional specialist in custom, history of their tribes and also double as orators and praise singers". The men and women who constitute this caste are usually linked by blood and family relationship, they are not to be confused with "the caste of professional musicians [also referred to as griots] who live on the back of others"(Edris 2003). Many of these other groups parade themselves in big cities and perform in recording studios mainly for material gain.

Nonetheless, many of the authentic griots who are guardians of tradition have not totally disappeared from the villages of West Africa. Such great authentic voices include: Djéli Babou Condé - *Le Bélën-Tigui* (The master of the word- *Le maître de la parole*) (Laye 1978).The author of the story transcribed by Camara Laye is regarded as an encyclopedia of history of Kouroussa and upper Guinea regions. The story in the novel is about Soundiata, the thirteenth century Manding ruler who united a number of small kingdoms to form the Empire of Mali, one of the great political dynasties of Africa. The other griot worth mentioning is no doubt Djéli Mamadou Kouyaté of the village of Djéli Koro in Guinea. He is D. T. Niane's informant for his work, *Soundjata ou l'épopée mandingue* (1960) which is also based on the same story of Soundiata. In this book, Mamadou Kouyaté introduces himself thus:

I am a griot. I am Djéli Mamadou Kouyaté, son of Bintou Kouyaté and of Djéli Kédian Kouyaté, master of the art of speech. Since time immemorial, the Kouyaté have been at the service of the Keita prince of Manding... The art of speech has no secret for us, without us the names of kings would be forgotten; we are the memory of men; by the word, we give life to the actions of our dead kings for the benefit of the present generation... My word is pure and devoid of all untruths, it is my father's word; it is my father's father word.

The statement of Mamadou Kouyaté shows that his types are not just any kind of griot, they are the guardians and reservoirs of oral tradition, and processes put in place for its conservation and transmission in their lineage from one generation to another. Every princely family of the Manding tribe has his griot as Naré Maghan tells his Son the prince: "In Manding, every prince has his griot. Doua was my father's griot; Doua is my griot; the son of Doua, Balla Fasséké whom you see will be your griot" (Niane 1960).The activities of these ones transcend praise chanting and singing the way modern griots do, just to extort money from people. For Mamadou Kouyaté and his likes, one does not become griot, one is born griot. It is a blood link and it is sacred. The caste of Djélis or griots among the Manding and other sub-tribes in the

Senegambia and upper Guinea regions could be identified through family names such as: Kouyaté, Diabaté, Niakaté and Soumano among others.

The Roles and Importance of Griot among the Manding

The role and importance of griot in traditional African society, particularly among the Manding, can never be underestimated; it is indeed monumental. The Manding society is a caste system. The griots belong to a special caste. Not only are they artists in the community, they are the people the society rely on for the safeguard of the oral tradition, music and poetry, because the society depends on them for the oral narration and performance, conservation and transmission of their history and other oral works from one generation to another. They transmit oral tradition and history from father to son; if not, some of the ancient oral works would have been in the limbo of dead memories. In the traditional community, they play the roles of counselors, community historians, story tellers, singers, as well as mediators in family and tribal feuds. Some of the roles are discussed below.

Oral Historian and Guardian of Tradition

A historian is usually, someone who studies or writes about history either in forms of oral or written communication. The griots among the Manding people of West Africa play this important role in their communities. They are entrusted with the history of their people as a collective group. They are regarded as the soul of the community, the fountains of knowledge and traditional libraries which the kings and the subjects could lean on when the need arises. They are entrusted with the socio-cultural patrimony of their tribes. This caste, is knowledgeable in historiography and genealogy of their community. These they conserve and preserve through the art of memorization, and further pass it on from one generation to another. Such a task demonstrates their importance as they were regarded as *sine qua non* libraries of traditional societies.

King (1978) mentions that Camara Laye for instance speaks of the oral tradition preserves by the griots as essentially artistic; its significance is less as historical document than as aesthetic preservation of the essential values of culture. Tamsir Djibril Niane on his own part says that the oral history of the Manding always has a moralizing aim. He further suggests that the corpus of Soundiata legend was probably formed around the end of the seventeenth century during a period of political crisis, in an effort to give the ruling aristocracy an idealized image of itself and the world. Irrespective of the various interpretations of the roles of griots in traditional societies, their importance cannot be down played. No wonder that Hampaté Bâ, quoted by Chevrier (2004), in reference to the importance of these traditionalists asserts that "an aged, who dies, is a library that got burn [our translation]". Camara Laye confirms this adage made popular by Hampaté when he opines about Babou Condé: " We know that he was '*the Bèlèn-Tigui*' (master of the word), we mean the repertoire, the repository of the history of Kouroussa regions, with a population of about hundred million souls [our translation]" (Laye 1978).

Camara Laye's assertion aligns with the pronouncement of the reciter in Ola Balogun's *Shango*. As a griot, he doubles as a historiographer of the kingdom and the mediator between the visible and the invisible world. He declares:

Who is he that knows better than me, the mediator between the ancestors so far away and the actual occupants of the earth? I am the master of the word! The forms of the past emerges everywhere at my call, for I draw my substance from the sacred fire which declares the past and the future. (Balogun 1968)

The reciter introduces himself here as one who transmits the tradition and who perpetuates the ancestral values. He is a leaving witness of the history or story of his clan. The griot is at the centre of dramatic debate, he plays, recites and organises the space. His functions extend into reciting stories, entertaining and making people laugh. People move from one place to another to listen to and to meditate on the tales of this sage who is in a way the link between the past and the present of the community.

As oral historians, the griots incorporate in their materials, ancient poetic and heroic texts, pre-colonial, contemporary social and political histories of their regions as the case may be, depending on the personality of the reciter. Babou Condé's tale as mentioned in Camara Laye's work is based on the first of the four types into which the history of the Manding people is divided: 'Kouma Lafôlô', the history of the great Soundiata Keita. He includes a detailed genealogy of their family. He presents the lineage of rulers following Soundiata for a number of generations. The history of the Manding rulers is a frame for the central story, the miracles and the legendary feasts surrounding Soundiata himself. Conscious of his role in the society, the griot often refers to himself as the source of historical truth. It is from this narrative, based on an oral tradition that combines historical background and miraculous legends, that Camara Laye and D. T. Niane have fashioned a modern tale.

Counselor, Diplomat or Spokes Person

In modern societies, counselors and diplomats represent their nations in other lands or countries. They are the chargé d'affaires of the countries they represent and advise the home nation as the case may be. In the traditional societies, the griots could also play the role of counselor and advisers sometimes. In the ancient Senegambia regions of West Africa, every king or princely family has a griot attached to it. He could play the double role of a counselor or a diplomat or even as a spokes person as result of his deep knowledge in history, culture and tradition of his society. This is shown in Camara Laye *Le maître de la parole* when a hunter from the neighboring village paid a visit to the palace. After having greeted the king and his entourage, his griot, Doua replies on behalf of the king: "The king and his entourage is profoundly touched by your courtesy and show of respect to our custom, and has mandated me to tell you: you are coming from your home, and you have arrived at your home in the court of Niane ... !" (1978: 8)

He is closer to the king than any other chief as a result of his importance to the community. For instance, in Camara Laye's book, according to King (1978), "when Soundiata is thirteen, Dankara Touman his step brother appoints Soundiata's griot and companion as emissary to the court of the powerful Soumaoro king of Sosso even

though he has his own griot court". Outraged by this insults Soundiata, accompanied by his mother, her two younger children and Nan Boukari, a half-brother begins a six-year exile from the court.

The griot in the traditional Manding society acts as the spoke person of the king because he is usually the king's confidant. The power of the ancient society in Manding region resides in its small kingdom, where the king - although separated from his subjects, to whom " he only speaks through his griot who has his authority - must work for the welfare of the community" (King 1978). It is a society of well-defined rules of courtesy and hospitality to strangers; charity to the weak is a virtue often compensated by the gods, and the authority is founded on divine will. Revolts against a leader, even a tyrant, are only possible when it is clear that God's will is being obeyed. Nothing is accomplished without consulting the divine will, manifested by natural and supernatural powers. God's spirit is in direct communication with man, who must remain close to the natural world and must look for sign in the behavior of animals or in the sky. The griots are knowledgeable not only in material world or their environment but also have mystical insight into the spiritual world, and could therefore play their roles as king's spokesmen effectively.

Story Teller and Singers or Musicians

The acts of narration and performance form part of the activities of griots. There are griots that function in the office of story tellers and singer at occasions and festivals as well as other social activities of the community. These recount stories, great epics of the past and other heroic deeds of their communities to amuse their audience. Such griot could be invited to special events such as naming ceremonies, marriages, funerals etc. In such cases, he usually sings the praise of his host, which of course includes the praise of the person's father, the mother as well as the grand- parents. This means retracing the genealogy of his host. Just as Finnegan (2012) rightly observes among the Hausa and the Yoruba, every celebrated man has his own praise name which is used as a basis for prolonged praises by what Tremearne describes as 'professional flatterers' [...] Similarly among the Yoruba the *oriki* or praise names are permanent titles held by individuals, given to them by friends or, most often, by drummers. Some individuals have several of the names, so that a collection of them recited together resembles a loosely constructed poem (also called *oriki*) about the person praised.

To such events, the griot takes along his son and traditional instrument the 'Cora', a traditional guitar with two or three strings and traditional drums. According to King (1978):

The traditional griot's tale which is accompanied by musical instruments, is told in three modes; a speech mode in which he narrates events in his own word; a recitative mode, for praising great men and for making general observation about life; and a song mode. As in all oral tales, one finds frequent exaggeration and repetition, to emphasise significant event and to make the audience understand both the plot and the moral message.

The griot makes moral judgments and often refers to himself, his own perspective on life, and the authenticity of his source of traditional knowledge. As he is

both a repository of tribal history and a performer who must hold the audience attention, he must be clear and at the same time lively. It must also be noted that the modern traditional singers sometimes call themselves griots. The modern griot singers nonetheless, do not have the ingredients of traditional griots. They have simply become professional musicians who entertain and parade themselves in recording studios for profits. The traditional griot is mainly concerned with his role of relation culture and tradition to his people, be it in reciting or entertaining forms.

Mediator in Tribal and Family Feuds

In traditional Africa, inter-tribal and intra-tribal as well as inter-family squabbles occur from time to time. The elders in the society mediate at such a time. The wisdom with which the griots are endowed gives them the capacity to act as judges or mediators in tribal and family disagreements. The traditional griots, due to their depth of knowledge of the customs and history of their communities and region, and also because of their wisdom and insight into both the physical and the spiritual world around them; they often play the role of mediators in family and communal disputes. They know the history of the families and communities around them. This makes people to rely on them in settling disputes and for enlightenment when such occasion presents itself.

Mamadou Kouyaté, the griot whose tale Niane (1960) transcribed in his book - *Soundjata ou l'épopée mandingue*, asserts to this when he declares: "When there is a quarrel between tribes, we are the mediators because we are the repositories of the oath which the ancestors proffered". The reciter of the story of Sango in the play *Shango* by Balogun (1968) affirms this same role when he says that he is the mediator who sees the hidden secret of the oracle and mediates in the things that concern the mortals and the immortals. All these show the importance of griots in the traditional society of the Manding people in Africa. Despite the changes brought about by modernization and the propagation of means of communication, the griot represents an important person in safeguarding traditional values.

The Art of the Traditional Griot

In the second chapter of *L'enfant noir (The African Child)*, we are introduced to the performance of a griot that was brought to Camara Laye's father's workshop by a woman who came to order for jewels for a festival. The griot with his Cora began to sing the praises of Camara's father. This demonstrates that the art of the griot as revealed through the works of Camara Laye and that of Djibril Tamsir Niane in traditional society is a musician, poet, story teller, historian and a praise singer, and could also function in other offices as well as the ones we mention above. The griot is an artist who transforms his material through techniques that Laye defines as a kind of 'expressionism', exaggerating certain qualities, so that an essential truth appears. For example, the tale of the exploits of one of Soundjata's followers who cuts the hill in two with his sword to show his bravery on the eve of the battle, should be understood not as literal fact, Laye said, but as an expression of an essential emotion (King 1978).

In the art of telling his tales, the griot uses techniques common to traditional oral tales. The styles of *Le maître de la parole* and *Soundjata ou l'épopée mandingue* as mentioned by King (1978), are appropriate to an epic; they include repetitions, images, proverbs, intervention of the reciter in the narration etc. "The laughter broke out like a bush fire. The three comrades heard it crackle like a bush fire. They heard every tongue of flame crackle". Even this also, "I want the entire tree, in front of my hut, the entire tree". While the use of images based on the environment may in some cases be attributable to the griots in the two novels, the authors adopt a style that is appropriate to epic story, as oral tradition places emphasis on repetitions. Senghor, in his preface to the *Nouveaux Contes* of Amadou Koumba, is of the opinion that the multiplicities of interrogative as well as exclamatory sentences in D. T. Niane's novel, is to give rhythm to oral nature of the tale.

One other important aspect of African oral tradition is the esthetics of participation. The art of griot for instance follows a certain order which requires the intervention of the griot in the narration and performance. Between him and his audience, he could give information which is anterior to the order of narration. In the same way, dialogues between the author or reciter and the audience is also very dear to oral tradition as they help in sustaining the listeners' interest in the narration; and these are brought to the fore in Babou Condé and Mamadou Kouyaté's tales. As it concerns the songs and the praise singing aspects, the voice and the Cora are two instruments at the disposal of the griot and he uses them adequately in the process of his recitation and performance.

Conclusion

The riches of Africa of yesteryears, in terms of its cultural heritage and values, can never be underestimated. This has been attested to in various communities across Africa through the study of different elements of the corpus of its culture. The tale of the exploits of Soundjata in the works of Laye as well as in that of Niane, is an attempt to bring to the fore the roles of the griot in traditional Africa to the modern audience. The griot uses traditional material. The basic historical and legendary material of the narratives of both Laye and Niane in this legendary tale is not really new to the people. Nonetheless, the writers use them for their own purpose. By showing a picture of the essential facts of the moral and social life of their people, Laye and Niane tried to show the relevance of the legendary history to modern life and also to amuse the contemporary audience with an entertaining story.

The activities of the griot caste in oral tradition constitute an example to studies, particularly among the Manding, the Wolof, the Seréré and other tribes in the Senegambia region of West Africa; where they play major roles in the daily life of the people and the community in traditional Africa. Indeed, oral literature from time immemorial constitutes an instrument for inculcating informal education to the young ones, to make them grow into responsible adults in rural African communities. The society must not lose sight of this all important value among others which derive from our oral tradition.

It is however sad to know that with the advent of modernization, emigration and rural exodus, many sons and daughters of griots have abandoned the knowledge and artistic practices of their ancestors. Many of them no more fulfill their original function. Their roles have changed, particularly in big towns where they have become professional artists. The need to adapt to new social structure which modern society has imposed, has made even the older griots not to encourage their wards to take after them; for they are in the dark as to what the future holds for them in African society with its irreversible mutation.

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