

Keepers of History

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Who holds your history?

In West Africa, written history is something new. African history was written in European languages during the colonial era beginning in the late 1800s, and has been around in Arabic for centuries. But societies in the Sahel and Savanna regions of West Africa have long kept their own history, in their own languages, orally, in the form of epics.

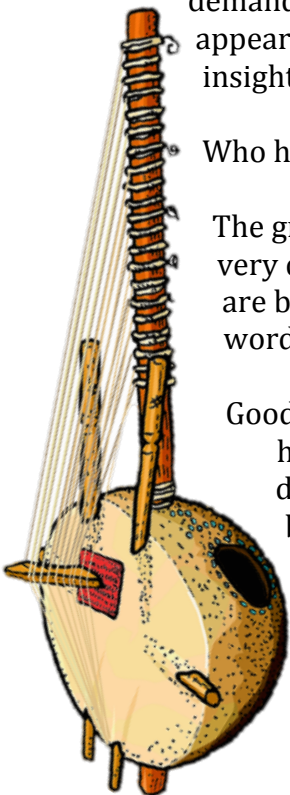
Imagine relying on someone's memory to hold your people's history. In many parts of West Africa, this job is carried out by the griot, or *djeli*.

Griots—masters of words and music, Tom Hale calls them in his book, *Griots and Griottes*—have been around for a millennium. Over time, the griots' function has changed as society evolved. Once, the male griots and female griottes were historians, genealogists, advisers to nobility, entertainers, messengers, praise singers—the list goes on. Today, they perform on television and radio and record CDs. Many are popular singers who reinterpret traditional songs, giving new meaning to old words—"time binding," Hale calls it. As performers, griots and griottes are in great demand, not only for ceremonies and parties in West Africa, where they have traditionally appeared, but all around the world. Here in the United States, they tour universities to give insight into West African culture.

Who holds your history? Who tells your story?

The griot profession is inherited, passed on from one generation to the next. "Griots are very different from the rest of society—almost a different ethnic group," says Hale. They are both feared and respected by people in West Africa for their wisdom and talent with words. They can sing your praises, but they can also sing your doom.

Good griots must have remarkable memories and be ever ready to recite or sing long histories, genealogies, and praise songs. They must also be musically talented. Hale describes their training as comparable to that of receiving a doctoral degree. To become a griot you must learn genealogies and histories, but not just the words, also the music. You can't separate the musical art from the vocal art without losing the overall effect. Griots often play a 21-stringed instrument called a **kora**. The kora is described as a bridge-harp with two rows of strings, one on either side of the meter-long neck, and a body made of a calabash. The sound of the kora has no American equivalent, and is as unusual as its structure.





Training for a griot begins within the family unit, with boys and girls learning from their griot parents, and then moves on to a formal griot school, and then to an apprenticeship with a master griot. Both boys and girls can train to be griots, although griottes may have less freedom to travel and train because of family obligations.

Who holds your history? Who tells your story? Who is your voice?

Until Hale began researching the songs of the griotte in 1991, most research focused on the male griot, the assumption being that in patriarchal West Africa, the griotte played a lesser role, standing by while the griot recited, or perhaps singing only short choruses throughout a song.

It appeared that the women of West Africa had no voice. Hale and his former student, now colleague, Aissata Sidikou-Morton, believe that the reason we did not hear these female voices was that we weren't listening.

Sidikou-Morton, a native of Niger, came to Penn State to do her doctoral thesis on women singers in Niger, Senegal, and Gambia. **"The West has said that African**

women never had a voice. They think that African women never had a voice because they never wrote it down," says Sidikou-Morton. She has been working to write down the songs of griottes and other female singers of West Africa because the people who know these songs are disappearing. "I want my children to know," she says. And she wants to show to the world the voice of African women.

Question: Are griots (djelis) a good, trustworthy source of historical information about West Africa?