

What is a Griot? (pronounced GREE-oh)

Griots are historians, praise-singers and musical entertainers. And yet, none of these descriptions quite captures their unique status in Manding [Mande] society. In the time of Sundiata, griots tutored princes and gave council to kings. They were educated and wise, and they used their detailed knowledge of history to shed light on present-day dilemmas. A Griot is also an African historian. He is a revered clan member who would memorize all of a village's significant events, like births, death, marriages, hunts, seasons and wars, ensuring that the collective heritage, culture and lineage of the clan continued. A Griot would speak for hours, even days, drawing upon a practiced and memorized history that had been passed on from Griot to Griot for generations. Long after the fall of the Malian Empire in 1468, a Manding family of means would have their own griot to advise, arrange the terms of marriages and mediate disputes, always relying on their understanding of each family's history.

Somewhere along the line, griots, or jelis as they are known among the Manding, also became the official musicians of the society. The **balafon**, which figures prominently in the Sundiata story, is a wooden xylophone and probably the original jeli instrument. But now, jelis also play the **ngoni**, a small traditional lute, and the **kora**, a 21-string cross between a harp and a lute. Jelis also sing in loud, proud voices full of the grandeur of their history. There are male griot singers, but many of these beloved and respected vocalists are also women.

The griot's ancient art, **jeliya**, is still practiced today, though some say it has declined under the pressures of modern, commercial society [a central theme of *Keita: The Heritage of the Griot*]. These days, Manding families generally cannot afford their own private griot, so the musicians move from family to family, performing at weddings and baptisms, entertaining and praising the guests. Critics claim that this way of working forces griots to know a little bit of everybody's history, but prevents them from knowing all the rich detail that their ancestors had to master.

Perhaps jeliya has changed, but it remains enormously popular. Some of the most celebrated pop music stars of Mali, Guinea, Senegal and the Gambia are griots, who have transformed traditional compositions to create modern, electric music. In Mali, female griot singing stars include Ami Koita, Kandia Kouyaté, and Tata Bambo Kouyaté, all of whom have released many volumes of cassettes on the local market. Guinea's Mory Kanté has built an international career on his driving, Paris-produced dance tracks, but the music remains firmly rooted in his griot past. Perhaps West Africa's most celebrated pop star around the world, Salif Keita of Mali, does not have griot ancestry. Indeed, as the name Keita indicates, he is a noble descendent of Sundiata Keita, the first king of the Malian Empire. But Salif nevertheless draws heavily from griot tradition in his music.

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