

Griot – Musician, Historian, Storyteller

What is a griot?

In ancient Africa, the griot was a historian, storyteller, musician, and poet. Most villages had their own griot who would record the stories and history of the village through song, and pass those songs down through generations. Royal families also typically had their own personal griot. Historically and still today griots play an important part of the culture and social life of the village.

Storyteller

One of the main jobs of the griot was to entertain the villagers with stories. They would tell mythical stories of the gods and spirits of the region. They would also tell stories of kings and famous heroes from past battles. Some of their stories had moral messages that were used to teach the children about good and bad behavior and how people should behave in order to make their village stronger.



Griot Musicians

Historian

Griots were also the historians of Ancient Africa. They would keep track of the history of the village including births, deaths, marriages, droughts, wars, and other important events. The stories and historical events would then be passed down from generation to generation through son. Because there was no written record of the village history, the stories of the griots became the history and the only record of past events.

Musician

The griot was also the musician for the village. Different griot families played different instruments. The most popular instruments were the kora (a stringed harp-like instrument), the balafon (a wooden instrument like a xylophone), and the ngoni (a small lute). Griots would often play music while telling stories or singing.

- Balafon - The balafon is a percussion instrument similar to a xylophone. It is made out of wood and has up to 27 keys, each with a small gourd hanging below to amplify the sound. The keys are played with wooden or rubber mallets.
- Kora - The kora is a stringed instrument similar to a harp. It is made from a calabash (a large gourd), which is cut in half and covered with cow skin. The neck is made from hardwood. The traditional kora has 21 strings but younger kora players have added an extra bass string to bring the total to 22 strings.

- Ngoni - The ngoni is a stringed instrument similar to a lute. The body is made from hollowed out wood with animal skin stretched across the opening. It has 5 or 6 strings that are plucked with the fingers and thumb.

Modern Day Griots

There are still many modern day griots in Africa, especially in Western African countries like Mali, Senegal, and Guinea. Some of the most popular African musicians today come from griot lineages and use traditional compositions in their music. Though many people have moved from small traditional villages into developed cities, the people of West Africa maintain a strong connection to their traditional cultures and the griots continue to play a special role in social life today.

Interesting Facts about the Griots of Africa

- "Jeli" is the Mandinka word for griot.
- Although griots were well-respected, they were considered a low-ranking caste in the hierarchy of African social life.
- During the Malian Empire, griots of the royal family took on an even more important role. Often the griot of the emperor would serve as counselor and spokesman for the emperor.
- The griots often served as mediators between villages when they had issues and disagreements.

