

Cordillera and Mindanao are among the most important areas calling for just such a treatment. For this reason, these films make excellent supplementary teaching aids. As stand-alone materials for the lay audience, on the other and, they are somewhat less suitable in that the authors opted for taking background information for granted. Their archival value, finally, could have been more substantial if subjects were given the opportunity to narrate their own stories and expand on to the dialectics that underpin their role as torch-bearers of old traditions in a fast-changing environment.

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Griot. 2012. Directed by Volker Goetze, video, colour, 82 minutes. Distributed by Volker Goetze on www.volkergoetze.com

The Voice of the Kora. 2010. Directed by Claudine Pommier, video, colour, 45 minutes. Distributed by Claudine Pommier, steinpom@shaw.ca

In 1967, the African-American writer Alex Haley arrived in Juffure, a village in Gambia where he met a *griot* who tells him about his family tree going back to the ancestor Kunta Kinte. The story of his family, reported in narrative form in his book *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976) was then transposed for the small screen in two television series: *Roots* (1977) and *Roots: The New Generations* (1979). In one of the final scenes of the latter, the protagonist Alex Haley (played by actor James Earl Jones) goes to a Gambian village where he interviews an elderly Mandinka *griot* to learn the genealogical tree going back to his ancestor Kunta Kinte. Playing the *jali* (Mandinka name for “griot”) is Alhaji Bai Konte, a renowned *griot* and *kora* virtuoso. Konte had the merit of being the first to introduce the *kora* and the *griot* repertoire to the American public in the 1970s by participating in festivals—such as the Newport Jazz Festival in 1973—alongside his son Dembo. Konte also paved the way for Gambian *kora* master Foday Musa Suso, who moved to the United States in the late 1970s and founded The Mandingo Griot Society. Since then, the figure of “griot” has become very popular in the West in the wake of the World Music “vogue” of the 1980s and 1990s. In 1987, the Guinean *griot* Mory Kante released the song *Yéké Yéké*, which was one of Africa’s best-ever selling hits as well as being a European number-one in 1988, making it the first ever African single to sell over one million copies.

But who is the *griot*? The term is often translated simply as “storyteller”; in fact, he is a keeper of West Africa’s oral history. Scholars like Sory Camara (1976), Thomas A. Hale (1998), and Eric Charry (2000) have investigated in-depth the subject but, ethnomusicological literature apart, the *audiovisual* representations of *griot* in documentary films are still quite scarce. The documentary *Griot*, directed by the German jazz-trumpeter-cum-

filmmaker Volker Goetze, is a lyrical but languid attempt to depict the figure of the West-African storyteller of the former Mande Empire and his role in both traditional and contemporary society. Central to Goetze's documentary is the portrait of the Senegalese *griot* and *kora* player Ablaye Cissoko. Kimintang Mahamadou Cissoko (alias Ablaye Cissoko), is a *kora* virtuoso from a family of *griots* but formed at the Conservatoire de Musique in Dakar. He is a "traditional" *griot* in that he belongs to one of the four *griots'* families who preserve unchanged the *kora* playing technique and style. At the same time, what makes him a "modern" *griot* is the abandonment of the traditional *griot's* repertoire—epic songs and praise songs—in favour of original compositions inspired by his life experience. In the documentary, the intimist harp-like serenity of Cissoko's *kora*-plucking is masterfully blended with the muted-trumpet tone of the filmmaker.

The film opens with Ablaye singing a song, accompanied by the *kora*. His performances are intercut with images of the astonishing landscape of Sahel. The latter prefigure a naturalistic documentary. The graphic animations by Joshue Ott, which the director relies on to a fault across the whole film, offer a sort of dreamlike or even hypnotic counterpart. In the following scene we see some children dancing to the rhythm of a *sabar* ensemble. Their drums, played with a stick and a hand, are characteristic of Wolof musical culture (the largest ethnic group in Senegal) rather than the Mandingo tradition (the ethno-linguistic group Ablaye belongs to). In the interview, we are informed by one of the *sabar* players, the *griot* (*gewel* in Wolof) Abdou Khadre Diop—his name does not appear in the caption—that there are two kinds of *griots*, those who play and sing (*jeli*), and those who tell stories but do not play any musical instrument (*fina*). He also claims that "we did not learn the music. It is in our blood." *Griots* often reiterate the concept that they are born musicians and claim that they owe their musical abilities to genetics. In so doing, they risk reinforcing the Western equivocal stereotype of the African musician having "music in the blood." A *griot* is a hereditary musician, belonging to a caste, i.e., an endogamic social structure characterised by an occupational specialisation inherited via the paternal line. Accordingly, *griots* are recognisable by their family name: Kouyaté, Diabaté, Kanouté, and Cissoko (or Sissoko).

Interviewed by the filmmaker, Ablaye argues that *griot* is an invaluable resource for the preservation of a vital cultural heritage and explains his social role: he takes part in the ceremonies of the cycle of life (baptisms, circumcisions, weddings, and funerals). On these occasions he recounts the ancient family stories which establish and reaffirm the family's location in society. The *griot* also acts as a social mediator, since his status is committed to the life of his community and its social conflicts (as, for example, when there are disputes between two families). In the precolonial era, the *griot* also had the role of messenger and spokesman of the king (*mansa*). Historian Mamadou Diouf points out the relevant role of *griot* as depositary of the collective memory in a society underpinned by oral traditions as well as the important role he plays as a "matchmaker" between two families for the purpose of marriage: "Each family is attached to a family of a *griot*. So, when two young people are ready to marry, the parents will go and check, who wants to marry their daughter, or who their son wants to marry. That marriage is not a result of two people loving each other is the

result of an alliance contracted by two families. And, again the *griot* will be there to tell, to say who is who and why this marriage is an important marriage.”

At the end of the documentary, the film director and jazz trumpeter Volker Goetze tells us about his first meeting with Ablaye in his hometown Saint Louis in 2001, during the Saint Louis Jazz Festival (the most important of its kind in West Africa). This musical encounter was the starting point of a deep friendship and a long artistic collaboration that led to the release of two CDs (*Sira*, 2009; *Amanke Dionti*, 2012).

The film makes it clear that *griots* are among the most respected members of their community but at the same time lets us understand their low status in the Mandingo caste society. From the interview with Ablaye’s wife, who belongs to a noble family (Coulibaly), it emerges that intermarriage between a man and a woman belonging to different castes is not widely accepted yet. The late-coming drama about the country’s history of slavery and the troubles of its restless youths is tacked on somewhat awkwardly. Nevertheless, as reported in the Director’s Statement, “the film is neither a traditional Western documentary, as it does not settle for a conceptual understanding of our subject; nor is it simply a performance piece, as it does not settle for collecting powerful songs. This piece celebrates the art of the Griot.” In fact, although Diouf’s interview provides useful context information, the film does not go into sufficient depth to answer many of the ethnomusicological questions suggested by the material at hand. How and to what extent are *griots* being influenced by fast-changing sociocultural patterns and values? What is their position in relation to the “mediascape?” Are they agents in the process of hybridisation and the dialectic local-global new media entail? What is their stance vis-à-vis showbiz and the commercial promotion of World Music?

Griot exhibits high production values, is visually rich and artfully constructed. The interviewees’ voiceover lends coherence to the narration. The soundtrack, skilfully recorded, is particularly effective in that it binds together the narrative and emotional content of the film by returning frequently to Cissoko’s performances. Variety in camera angles, frame construction, and the use of frequent cuts from one scene to another, has produced a technically clean and visually appealing video capturing *images of* rather than merely documenting *griot* and his music culture. In spite of the aforementioned distracting graphics animations, picturesque cutaways, absence of subtitles indicating the names of the musicians and titles of the songs, and last but not least some naïve vignettes, the strength of Goetze’s *Griot* lies in the musical performances we witness and in the canny way in which these performances have been edited. All these aspects make the film suitable for a general viewer as well as the music specialist.

Ablaye Cissoko also features in Claudine Pommier’s *The Voice of the Kora*, a 45-minute documentary that retraces the history and evolution of the *kora*, a 21-string lute-bridge-*harp* or *harp-lute* with a calabash resonator and a long hardwood neck. The film follows the instrument’s transformations as well as its appropriation and reinterpretation by Western musicians, and its placement in the world music context. Traditionally, *kora* players (*korafola*) come from *griot* families, as explained by the undisputed master of the *kora*, Toumani Diabaté, member of the 71st generation of *kora* players in his family. However, since the latter half of the twentieth century, *kora* playing has extended beyond

this framework. Some *kora* players do not belong to a *griot* lineage, and they often perform in new contexts and for a broader range of audiences.

The camera brings us into the Keur Moussa Abbey, some 50 kilometers from Dakar (Senegal), where, in the 1960s, the founding monks were trained on *kora* by two *griots*. Over time the monks adapted both the style of playing and the instrument itself for liturgical use. Brother Dominique Catta—one of the nine monks who came from the Monastery of Solesmes (France) and founded the Monastery of Keur Moussa—explains how the traditional diatonic *kora* was modified by the Benedictine monks into a Western-style chromatic *kora*. To allow for easier tuning they replaced leather rings bound around the neck (called *konso*) with metal ones and adopted mechanism of the guitar by adding levers that allow for easy switching between major and minor keys.

French filmmaker Claudine Pommier privileges a synchronic and comparative approach so as to be able to observe and examine the transformations the *kora* has undergone. The viewers are catapulted from Senegal to France and then to the USA where we find some musicians using the Keur Moussa-style *kora* (Jacques Burtin in Brittany) or traditional *kora* (John Hughes in Vermont) to create their own compositions as well as *kora* makers and luthiers. The film also shows the *electric kora* made by Kaelig and the *gravikora*, a *kora*-like electric double bridge-harp invented by Bob Gravi, designed to employ a separated double tonal array structure that makes it possible to play polyrhythmic structures easily. Notably absent from *The Voice of the Kora* is a discussion of the acceptance or rejection of these (Western) innovations by the African *griot kora* players.

The film draws attention to the dissolution of not only the caste barriers between *griot* and non-*griot* in contemporary society but also the gender barriers between male and female competences in musical activity. This change is mainly due to Toumani Diabaté, who has allowed women to learn this instrument, once reserved only for *jelikelu* (*griot* men). I have particularly appreciated the filmmaker's decision to include an interview with Sona Jobarteh and a short excerpt of her performance with her father Sanjally Jobarteh. Given Sona Jobarteh's calibre, this section of the film could have been longer. She is a Gambian *griotte* (female *griot*), the cousin of Toumani Diabaté (Jobarteh in Gambia, as per the English spelling of Diabaté), both of them members of a renowned family of *kora* players (her grandfather was the great Gambian master Amadu "Bansang" Jobarteh). Sona broke the traditionally male domain of *korafolas* (*kora* players) to become the first *griotte* *kora* player. In fact, as she explains in the interview, in Manding traditional society, female members of *griot* families are not allowed to play any instrument. Their role is singing. She grew up in the UK and studied at the Royal College of Music and SOAS University of London. Her being a musician in-between two worlds is well expressed by her statement: "the real challenge is to have the ability to be innovative while still preserving the tradition."

Considering that the primary focus of the video is the *kora*, the film is somewhat deficient in historical background. Missing are references to the first written record of the instrument, reported with the name of *korro*, by the Scottish explorer Mungo Park in *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa* (1799) or the first visual representation of the *kora* in *Travels in Timannee, Kooranko and Soolima Countries, in Western Africa* (1825) by the Scottish explorer Alexander Gordon Laing or, again, the earliest recordings issued in the

1970s of the greatest *kora* masters: Sidiki Diabaté and Djelimadi Sissoko (*Cordes anciennes / Ancient Strings*) (D'Amico 2014). Another issue not addressed in the documentary is the origins of the *kora*, be it the “myth” recounted by Ablaye Cissoko in Goetze’s *Griot*, where he claims it was invented nine hundred years ago by his ancestor, Kimintang Cissoko, or “organological” origin, as a derivation or a further evolution of the harps of the hunters’ societies of southern Mali and northern Guinea (the *simbingo* and the *donso ngon*; D’Amico 2014). For the general viewer this may not be an issue worth raising but for ethnomusicologists and others who study African music, and in particular the figure of the *griot* and his main instrument, the *kora*, this data is valuable.

The film is well-made from a technical standpoint but suffers from an uneven and “jumpy” narrative. In spite of moving back and forth between France, Mali, Senegal, USA, and Gambia, the musically sensitive camera work, sustained close-ups of the musicians during the performances, and first-rate audio recording provide a clear documentation both of construction technique and performance practice (the lone exception is the sound recording in the scene with Sona Jobarteh). Close-up shots clarify the method of playing the *kora* (two thumbs and two index fingers). English translation in easily-read subtitles, moreover, allows for an effective comprehension of song lyrics and interviews in place of scripted narration. The documentary is made up mainly of interviews: speakers address the camera directly or speak over appropriate illustrative imagery. While this cinematic method works well in providing information and insight about the *kora* and its development, it may detract from the aesthetic pleasure of the performances. The film footage is competently linked together, interspersing interviews about the instrument’s making and short music excerpts. Well suited to classroom use— though it should be supplemented with other materials to better contextualise the history behind the *kora*—appropriate for both scholarly and general audiences, *The Voice of the Kora* should be informative and compelling for anyone interested in the *kora*, the *griot* and African music in general.

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