

ETHNIC FOLKWAYS RECORDS FE 4178



THE GRIOT

MINISTERS OF THE SPOKEN WORD
Recorded in West Africa by Samuel Charters



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DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE

Sculpture from Moses Asch collection

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An Introduction

by Samuel Charters

It is now becoming increasingly clear to us that the traditional methods of historiography have given us a picture of the development of mankind that has at best been incomplete and often inadequate, and at its worst, a tangled distortion of some of the main currents of human history. This is especially true of an area like Africa, where a complex historical period has been presented only by one of the participating groups, without an adequate method of cross-reference with the other cultural groups who were most directly effected by the events. We have had a history of the last five hundred years of African history told by Europeans, and we have not had the same history told by the Africans, which would have been invaluable in placing the European historical view in a clearer perspective.

This is not to say that the work of the European historians has been bad - much of it has been careful and sympathetic, and it gives an important insight into the major events affecting Europeans and Africans in their contacts during this period. But it is difficult to assess motivations, attitudes, or deeper currents of response without some more comprehensive knowledge of the forces at work in the African society itself, and this is a view that could only be given by African historians.

The problem in seeking out material of this kind is, of course, that none of the West African cultures involved had developed a written language. There was some knowledge of Arabic, and some early work was done by Arab travelers, but throughout large areas there was no contact with a written language. But within every culture there is the need to maintain a continuity from the past, and in these societies the role of the historian was taken over by the professional singer/historian, the artists now known to Europeans as Griots. They correspond roughly to the bard or skald of medieval Europe, and when the first European travelers encountered them they were attached to the houses of the kings, or important local chieftans. A collection of travel writings published in London in 1745, Green's Collection of Voyages, has a number of mentions of the Griots.

"Of the role of the musician in the society there seems to be considerable agreement, although there are differences in the name. 'Those who play on the instruments are persons of a very singular character, and seem to be their poets as well as musicians, not unlike the Bards among the Irish and the ancient Britons. All the French authors who describe the countries of the Jalofs and the Fulis, call them Guiriots, but Jobson gives them the name of Juddies, which he interprets fiddlers. Perhaps the former is the Jalof and Fuli name, the latter the Mandingo.'

The traveler Bardot says the Guiriot in the language of the Negroes toward the Sanaga, signifies Buffoon, and that they are a sort of syncophant. 'The Kings and great men in the country keep each of them two, or more of these Guiriots to divert them and entertain foreigners on occasion.'"

The peoples referred to as Jalofs and Fulis are now known as Wolof and Fula, and they live in the northern

crescent of the area where slaves were brought by the Europeans for sale to the colonies in the Americas, in what is now the countries of Senegal, The Gambia, and Guinea; though the Wolofs generally live north of the Gambia River. The Mandingo are now known as the Mandingo, and they lived further inland, back in the basin of the Gambia River, and were one of the dominant cultural groups of West Africa at the time the Europeans first encountered them. It was not until the religious wars between the Mandingo and the Fula culminated in the destruction of the Mandingo capitol in 1856 that their power was broken. The word for singer/historian in Mandingo is Jall; so the report by the traveler Jobson had the correct word, although the pronunciation had given him difficulty. Jobson also was able to learn a little more of the position of the Griot in the society.

"The fiddlers (guiriots) are reckoned rich, and their wives have more crystal, blue stones, and beads about them than the king's wives. . . and it is remarkable that after all this fondness of the people for music, and yet the Musician is held in great contempt and is denied their common rite of Burial, instead of which the Corpse is set upright in a hollow tree and left there to rot. The reason they give for this treatment is, that these cantators have a familiar converse with their Devil, Ho-Re."

In the modern societies of West Africa the griots no longer hold such high positions, but they are still part of the everyday life of the villages, and they can be hired to compose songs for the birth of a new baby, for an important birthday, for a wedding, or a funeral. They are expected to have an exhaustive memory of the ancestors of every family in the village, and part of their performance is a detailed mention of all of the members of the family present and their family background. An American Black, the Writer Alex Haley, knew, through his own family's tradition, the name of the African slave who had been his great-great-great-great grandfather, as well as a few words of an African language. With this he was able to trace his ancestry back to a small village near the Gambia River, and the village griot was able to describe the disappearance of Haley's forbear in the summer of 1767.

There are, as well, professional griots who still hold positions of importance, and the President of The Gambia has two griots who perform on official occasions, and who are living repositories of a priceless cultural heritage. The importance of the griot has been known for some time, and there have been extended efforts to document their narratives. One of the best known of the researchers in the field is Dr. Jan Vlasina, who recorded hundreds of griot narratives, and used them in his book The Oral Tradition. Also in the African nations themselves there is a consciousness of the meaning of the narratives, and a great deal of recording is being done by the state radio services. Radio Gambia, in fact, presents weekly programs by griots of all the country's leading cultural groups.

My own involvement with the griots began with the realization that with the newest research in the field we could tell, with a high degree of certainty, from which areas and from which tribal groups the American slaves had come. In terms of numbers the Africans in America were a small immigrant group - only about 390,000 people over a period of two hundred years - but their importance in the development of the United States was enormous, from the cultural as well as the physical aspect. These recordings were made in the course of two field trips to West Africa in the spring and early summer

of 1974. I was trying to trace the line of development from the African village singer to the American bluesman; so much of my work was with the griots, who were clearly the predecessors of the bluesman, the Caribbean calysonian, and the Bahamian "rhymen," even if the sources of their musical styles and their role in the society had changed in the years that passed. Also, it had been twenty years since I had first begun recording Afro-American music - I first began recording New Orleans street singers in the spring of 1954 - and it was time to travel to Africa. The recordings I did with the griots were only a suggestion of the rich background of material that was there, but I was trying to trace early banjo styles, which can be heard in the music of the Wollof halam players, and early blues guitar styles, which can be heard in the kora technique of the Mandingo musicians, as well as trace the historical lines of development themselves; so these recordings can serve as an introduction to the griot tradition.

I also feel that the long narrative "Toolongjong" is the single most important field recording I've ever done, and its description of the beginnings of the slave trade with the Portuguese and the Dutch in the early 1600's has given me a clearer insight into the backgrounds of Afro-American society than anything else I've been able to record or document. In years to come we will realize more and more the importance of men like these griots for filling in the unfinished sketch we have made of human history. Just as the blues man in the United States has given us a living document of some aspects of black life in America, his African forbear, the griot, gives us an unforgettable portrait of the African life that is part of our common background as Americans.

Side A

Band 1. Toolongjong

Alhaji Fabala Kanuteh, singing and accompanying himself on the balafon.

Alhaji Fabala Kanuteh is one of the most important of the West African griots, and this long narration of the first encounter of the people of the Gambia River basin with the Portuguese slave traders is of considerable historical importance. He is from a long line of Jali - the word for singer/historians in his own language of Mandingo - and at the age of three he was taken by his father to his grandfather's house in Manding to learn his profession. He remained there for twenty-four years, and his exhaustive, detailed accounts are a vital repository of the culture and history of the Mandingo people. He is employed by the president of The Gambia as one of the country's two official singers, and is head of a loosely organized grouping of Jali within the country. He is also considered to be one of the handful of Jali whose knowledge takes in the whole of his people's culture and he has been taken to London to perform for gatherings of the Mandingo people from every area of West Africa. A powerful, dignified older man who has made his pilgrimage to Mecca and earned the title of Alhaji, he lives in the village of Brikama, twenty miles from Banjul, on the flat, hot land south of the Gambia River. He also keeps a compound in Banjul and has a family there as well.

The term "song" is probably misleading; since the Jali narratives are closer to recitations, with interludes of singing and playing on the accompanying instrument. The interlude in most of these narratives are "praisings," that is set phrases praising the patrons of the Jali or great kings of the Mandingo peoples. The instrumental interludes give the performer a moment to rest his voice and also show off his instrumental skill. The Jali, as young beginners, learn the instrument first, then the praising, then finally the long

complicated narratives themselves. Fabala Kanuteh is considered to have lost a little of his virtuosity on the balafon, but there are few of the younger Jali who have his sensitivity and clarity on the instrument. The balafon of the Mandingo Jali is a small, easily portable instrument, generally constructed by the artist himself. It has nineteen wooden keys, with small calabash shells attached beneath them to amplify the sound. It is called a "balanjie," to distinguish it from the larger balafons that are used for dancing.

"Toolongjong" itself is a startling glimpse into the Africa that existed before extended contact with the Europeans, and gives a clear idea of the alteration in the societies which organized selling of slaves caused. Slavery was a solidly established institution throughout Africa, but it was the sudden appearance of the outsiders which set a whole of train of events in motion, and led to the long, complex involvement of Europe and Africa which is still not entirely resolved. It is certainly from narratives like this that we'll see most clearly into the attitudes and responses from the African side of the exchange, and since all of the African cultures involved had not developed written languages these narratives are one of the few sources that we have for knowledge of this kind. "Toolongjong" is particularly interesting in its narration of the sale of the slaves first to the Portuguese, and then by them on to the Dutch. It was a Dutch ship that brought the first slaves to the colony of Virginia in 1619; so this could be an account of the first Africans who came to the American colonies. Mandingo people were among the first to be brought to the southern colonies in large numbers, and they were particularly sought after in South Carolina. With their tall, dignified bearing, and highly developed social skills Mandingoes were, like the Wollof people who were from the area to the north of them, used as kind of middlemen between the plantation owners and field slaves themselves, and they were often house servants and performed minor clerical duties. Certainly the concept of the Jali and his Wollof counterpart, the Halamkat, continued in the blues singer, even if the role and the sources of the music itself changed radically. As "Toolongjong" describes, it was Mandingoes who helped establish the distinctive Afro-American culture simply by being among the first to arrive in the new world, and their culture played an important role in the development of what has followed after their arrival, as the African struggled to find some kind of culture that would give them a new concept of self and of society to bridge the distance between their past and the frightening present.

It is possible to follow the narrative of "Toolongjong" by listening to the recitation with the text. The names of the people and the places are generally clear, and the interludes give a moment to catch up with the story. Some Mandingo words which occur and can help in following the performance.

Mansa - king
keme - 100
Walendaya - The Dutch
Jonga - slave

When he describes the building in Jang Jang Bure as a "slaf" house, he is using the English word for slave. The building is a ruined stone structure on the banks of the Gambia River. The places called Jufreh Tenda and Albreda Tenda are also on the Gambia River; although not so far inland as Jang Jang Bure, which is now called Georgetown, but was also called MacCarthy, a name he uses in his narrative at one point, instead of Jang Jang Bure. The description of the drums beating in the villages refers to the signal drums, telling of the king's presence in the area.

Toolongjong is the song that was sung for Sunyetta,
the king of Fuda.

This same Toolongjong was also sung for the great soldiers of Sunyetta.
This Toolongjong was sung for Musa Molo, the king of Fuladu,
for Seneke Jammeh, this Toolongjong was sung for the Koree Danso,
for the Sang Kala Maran,
this Toolongjong was sung for Mansa Demba of Berending,
this Toolongjong was sung for Wals Mandiba.

Now I will tell how slaves came to be sold to the Europeans.
How it came about is what I'm going to tell.
In that time Mansa Demba was the king of Nomi
and Seneke Jambi was at Bakindi Ke.
There were two wharves, one at Jufreh Tenda and the other at Albreda Tenda,
and anyone who went there, to Youmi Mamsa, went to the king
there, that is the king Mansa Demba, and to the woman king
called Kodending.
If they got hold of any slaves they took them to Mansa Demba
and sold them to him.
At this time Han Sunyetta was the leader of the world,
he made another king for the village of Sillia,
and made another king at Salum,
and made another king at the village of Baul.
Another king Murujang and Gao.
Before that Satifa Jawara and Fakolly Kumba,
and Komfatta Keying and Nana Jibril, they were the strongest
of Sunyetta's soldiers.

Then the Europeans came from Europe,
and at the time the only Europeans were the Portuguese.

(long interlude of praising)

When the Portuguese came they brought their ship
to Sani Munko and they left the ship at Sani Munko
and raised their flag there.
Mansa Seneki Jammeh, a king, sent people to Sani Munko
to see them.
The messengers arrived at Sani Munko and they found the
Portuguese there and the Portuguese asked them questions.
The first man they saw was Kambi Manneh and the Europeans
asked him what was the name of the place
and he told them "My name is Kambi," and they wrote
the name of the place down, Kambi.
And they came to this place and they found people cutting
these sticks called the bang and the Europeans asked them
"What are you cutting" and they said they were cutting the
sticks called bangjolo, and the Europeans wrote that down
for the name.
Then the Europeans said to Seneki Jammeh "We are looking
for something,"
and Seneki Jammeh asked them "What is it?"
And they told him, "We are looking for slaves."
Seneke then went to Tambana and fought with the people of
Tambana, and fought with the village of Baria,
and then fought with Jokadu Dasalami.
When he had these slaves he went
and sold these slaves to the Europeans.

(short instrumental interlude)

Then he sold the slaves to the Europeans,
and the leader of the Europeans was called Wampiya,
and he took the slaves to the city of Salamki Joya.
He went with the slaves to the Walendaya,
that is to the people of Holland,
and he sold the slaves to the Walendaya,
then the Walendaya took the slaves to America.

(short instrumental interlude)

Then Musa Molo, the king of Fuladu, took four slaves
and gave them to the men called Dikori and Dansa.
He told Dikori and Dansa to take the four slaves
to the place called Youmi Mansa, to Seneke Jammeh,
then the two messengers said to Seneke Jammeh
that we were sent by Musa Molo to bring these four slaves
to you and sell them to you, to sell them to you for
gunpowder and white cloth.
Seneke Jammeh said, "Well it's true we sell slaves
to the Portuguese," then the Portuguese took the slaves
to the Walendaya, the people of Holland,
and the Walendaya took them to America.

(long interlude)

So then they took the four slaves and sold them to the
Portuguese and the Portuguese took them on their ship
and sold them to the Dutch - the Walendaya -
and the Dutch took them to America, and when they got
to America they sold the slaves there.
Then Dansa and Dikori returned to Musa Molo and told him
that they sold the slaves at Youni.
And Musa said, "Is that so?"
Then he said, "I would have taken my army to the people
of Youmi and fought them."
Then Musa went with his people to Kunti Wata, to Mansa Burekamara.
Mansa Burekamara gave Musa Molo 300 and 3 slaves,
and then Musa Molo left again.
He went to Almam Basise of Yani, who was together with
Bamba Esa Jamili,
and each of them gave Musa Molo 300 and 3 slaves.
Then he went to Lyama Banta, to Ngari Sabally of Kachamb.
Ngari Sabally gave him 1000 slaves.
He then went to Jatta Sela at Toro Koto with those 1000 slaves
and when he came to Jatta Sela then Jetta Sela told him,
"I will give you 400 slaves."
And then they went to Samkarangmarong
and he, too, gave Musa 300 slaves.
Then Musa crossed the river.
He left the Jokardu district,
he came to the village of Tambara,
and to the villages of Baria and Darselami,
and he sent a message on to the village of Bakindiki,
and the drum was beating there.
The drum was beating at a village called Berehkolong.
Another drum was beating at Berending and at Jinakibarra,
and another drum at Tubabu Kolomb.

(instrumental interlude)

When they arrived they sent a message to the lady king
Musa Mansa Kodending and to Seneke Jammeh
and another message to Bumyadu
and another message to Berending
and another message to Sangako
and another message to Misseramding
and another message to Missiraba
and another message to Jinakibara
and another message to Jinaki Kajatta,
and they said Musa Molo the king of the east has arrived
and come to visit the king of the west, Mansa Demba.
Then Mansa Demba said, "I will a message to Seneke Jammeh"
and they sent a message to Bakindi Ke.
When the message came to Bakindi Ke the people then
got ready, and they said,
"Musa, we know what you want," and they gave him 100 slaves.
100 young girls. 100 women. 100 young boys.
Money, 100. Gold, 100. Cows, 100. Goats, 100. Sheep, 100.
Musa then said, "If there is to be a war you can see that
it is only because there is something we want to have."
Then he said to the people of Bakindi Ke,
"There is no fight between us."
He told the people, "You have divided your land between the
two villages, Albadar and Jufering,
and these two villages took slaves and sold them
to Sanneh Munkujoyeh. Since you have been doing this,"
Musa told them, "I would like to meet the Dutchmen themselves."
And the people told him that it was the Portuguese who came,
and not the Dutchman himself.
"But when the Portuguese come we will take you to the place,"
then they took the Portuguese to a river place,
the place they called Jang Jang Bure, that is the name
of two brothers there.

(interlude of praising)

Then when Musa Molo came he collected all the people
of Fuladu, from Ndorma up to Santangto Bubu Tabanding.
Up to Santangto Wuruma. Up to Chargel.
He collected them all and he told them,
"Let us build a house at the place of the brothers
Bure and Jang to put slaves in,
and then sell them to the Europeans.
If we build that slave house then we can
sell the slaves when the Portuguese come
with their ships to sell them to America.
Then the people said, "Yes, we're going to do it."
Then they built the house, and up to now
the house is still there,
the kind of house the Europeans used to call
"Slave House."
The building is still at Jang Jang Bure.
At that time when they sold the slaves
the people who caught the slaves for Mansa Musa Molo
were Dikori, Dansa, Malam Buletema, Yungka Mandu,
Kemo Sarata, Funjunga Kemo,
they were the people who got all the slaves,
and Dembo Danso was also among them.

(instrumental interlude)

When the Europeans came,
when they brought their ship from Portugal,
the ship used to start its journey from Banjul,
then it went to Sanemunko Joyo to collect slaves there
in the presence of Seneke Jammeh, and Mansa Demba Sanko,
and Samkala Marong, and Wali Mandeba, and Jata Sela.
Anyone who had slaves they collected them all together
and took them to the places called Aladabara and Jufure
to sell them to the Portuguese.
Then the Portuguese put them in their ship
and left there and went to Jang Jang Bure.
When they arrived there they went
right to the slave house to collect the slaves there,
and take them to the Dutch.
Then the Dutch collected them and sent them to America,
It is because of this
that slaves were plenty in America.

They call them American Negroes.

(The performance ends with the names of some of the men who captured
slaves for Seneke Jammeh.)

Side B

Band 1. Nego Sirimang

Alhaji Amara Sahone, reciting and accompanying
himself on the konting.

Amara Sahone is a Serehule, a tribe living inland
in the area that is now Mali. They are related to the
Bambara peoples of that region, and are considered to be
energetic, shrewd businessmen. Much property investment
in the cities of West Africa is in the hands of Serehules,
and they are continually traveling throughout the area.
Amara Sahone has been as far as Paris and the Congo,
sometimes traveling as a professional musician. The
Serehules are Moslems, and he has also made the pilgrim-
age to Mecca. He is tall and wiry, a quiet man, his face
decorated with tribal tatoos, his compound small, but in
a continuous process of rebuilding, and he has arranged
small rooms to rent out, living with one of his wives
and their children in a small room at the corner of the
compound. He is an excellent musician and has from time
to time been part of traveling groups of singers and in-
strumentalists. He is a Jare, the Serehule word for the
West African singer/historian.

The instrument that he plays is the large four string
version of the halam, and with the halam - which is played
by the Wollof people of the coast - is certainly one of the
forerunners of the southern banjo. Two of the four strings

are drones, the top drone played with the thumb, as in the banjo, and the two inner strings are fingered with a variety of techniques which also became part of the banjo style, including string warping, sliding and pulling-off. The style seems most closely related to the more rhythmic styles found later in areas like Kentucky.

Nege Sirimang is a very brave man who is never afraid of any battle. Whoever fears a battle, Nege Sirimang would face it.

A man who has grown up who is never of any use to others is good for nothing - even a child is better than such a man. A man must be useful and always know his duty. This song is always played for men who are brave and of use to others, not for men who can be trifled with. I am calling for men who can save the lives of other men whenever there is trouble, when there is hunger for those who can stand it and fight for their rights. This song is for those men.

We see the difference in the good children of the women when there is hardship. When there is difficulty things are left to those good children. Many things have already gone and many things are still to come, and even to be pious needs bravery. Men can even be husbands to other men through great good deeds. Men who always have bad names are those without modesty. A trueborn child should always be good and filled with modesty.

People are not equal - God created people differently. Man kind has differences the way leaves and plants have differences. The kings for whom this song was played have passed away a long time ago, but the griots still cry for them. The griots are never ungrateful to their patrons. Shameful and shameless people are all creatures of God. To be rich does not make one a good person. Many people are good and yet they are poor. Many rich people have also been bad. Goodness is a gift from God. God has had many days in this world - he has not only created one thing. God creates well, and many of the people who have died have been good and brave. Nege Sirimang was one of these men of good deeds.

This songs calls the brave men of goodness. God owns the sky and the earth, but many hundreds and thousands of brave men live on it. The children of bad women feel uneasy listening to this song, while the hearts of the sons of women who are obedient and good are filled with joy. A father's death can bring happiness to another father. Some are made angry, some are made happy. This is always the world.

Band 2. Alifa Ya Ya

3. Moro

Satata Kurubally, riti and drone voice, Baba
Jale Sowe, lead voice

These are Jelefo, the word for singer/historian in their own Fula language. The Fula are scattered over much of West Africa, and in the earliest period were nomadic herders living throughout the Gambia basin. Following their conversion to the Muslim faith they waged a long, relentless war with the Mandingo people, and finally - in 1856 - the warriors and leaders of both tribes were destroyed in the final battle for the Mandingo capital of Kobo, when the Fula fought their way into the royal compound of King Janke Wali and he ordered the seven powder magazines ignited in a cataclysmic explosion. The war is still called "The war to end wars" by the griots, and there are many songs relating to it. The Fula were not as skilled instrumentalists as the other professional musicians of the tribes around them; although their flute playing styles were highly developed. The historical narratives are accompanied on a one-string violin, with a calabash body and a skin head. Satata Kurubally plays and sings the first song, which was written for the great king Alifa Ya Ya, and is said to have been sung to wake him in the mornings. "Moro" is a "cho san," or historical song.

ALIFA YA YA

Alifa Ya Ya, the great man.
Alifa Ya Ya was a great king.
He was a king and a learned man as well.
Alifa Ya Ya - all kings are not the same.
The great tree fell and the birds scattered away.
Alifa Ya Ya, all people cry for you.
You were the best of all kings.
Alifa Ya Ya - all kings are not the same.
Alifa Ya Ya - the king of kings.
Alifa Ya Ya, the kingdom of Fula will not forget you.
Alifa Ya Ya, it is because of trouble that people cry.
Whenever we cry it is because something is wrong.
Alifa Ya Ya, the great tree has fallen and all the birds fly away.
When Alifa Ya Ya died all his followers scattered.
Alifa Ya Ya - all kings are not the same.

MORO

This is the song for kings and their battles.
This is the tune that calls you to war.
The battle is at hand,
take up your bows and arrows -
do not be afraid of war.
It comes when it has to come and ends when it has to end.

This is the song "Moro" now,
reminding you warriors of war.
The enemy is almost ready for you.
They have gotten on their horses.
Don't be afraid of war - it is war
that makes you strong, that gives you slaves -
why would you fear war?

We griots don't go to war, but we put the fire
into you kings to go to war!

Side C

Band 1. Lambango

Mawdo Suso, balafon and voice, Dela Kanuteh,
voice, Karunka Suso, kora and voice.

These are three younger Mandingo Jali, who have
begun playing for friends and for village entertainments.
The combination of the kora, the stringed instrument, and
the balafon, the marimba, is very popular. They have been
performing together for some years, and they are at the
second step of their training as Jali. They have learned
their instrument, and they have learned the elaborate
praising formulas. They are now beginning to master the
narratives themselves, which for a Mandingo Jali means a
mingling of narrative, comment, and moral advice. They
are from small villages in the Basse area, about two
hundred miles inland in the southern Senegal/Gambia region.

We are singing Lambango,
a song that is meant for the griots.
We sing to it and we dance to it.
Here we call for our honourable patrons
who care for us.
We call for the griots who honor our profession,
the art of singing and dancing for our patrons.
We thank God who created the earth and man kind.

Oh the world and its creatures.

I am singing and calling for my patrons,
patrons who are traders.
Patrons like the Dabos, who is my host -
Aliu Dabo!
We call for our honourable patrons
who feed and cloth us.
Many days have gone and many days are to come.
Many great people have gone -
great men we griots will never forget.

Band 2. Abdu NJai

Jali Nyama Suso, singing and accompanying
himself on the kora.

It is interesting to contrast the singing of Jali
Suso, one of the best-known and highly regarded of Gambia's
griots, with the younger men who have only begun to master
their skills. The most obvious difference is in their
texts, which in Jali Suso's singing are an elaborate
weave of history and comment - even small jokes like the
reference to the woman who has finished all his tobacco.
"Abdu NJai" a Wolof song, and he still includes many Wolof
words in his performance. As in many of the narrative songs
the story is so well known that the singer doesn't feel any
necessity for telling all of it. He only selects a few de-
tails to sketch out some of the most dramatic events, and
in a short performance like this there isn't time to de-
velop the whole story. Jali Suso is from a long line of
Jali, and he has spent his life in the village of Bakau,
outside of Banjul. He was injured in a fall from a tree
when he was a teenager, and has only one leg. The injury
forced him to turn more and more to music, and he is a

brilliant instrumentalist as well as singer. He has a
weekly program on the state radio station in The Gambia,
has spent a year at the University of Washington as artist-
in-residence, teaching the kora, and has recorded a solo
lp for the French company Acora.

The kora is the most complex of Africa's folk in-
struments, and it seems to have developed from the lyre-
harps of the northern Saharan cultures. It now has twenty-
one strings stretched over a high, carved bridge that
divides the strings into two banks. The instrument has two
small sticks on either side of the bridge for the player
to hold the instrument, and he plays on each bank of strings
with the thumb and forefinger in a kind of alternate thumb
style very similar to the instrumental technique of the
Carolinas blues school, particularly a musician like Gary
Davis. Since Mandingoes were in the Carolinas in such
large numbers it is probable that there's some relation-
ship between the two styles. The body of the kora is a
large calabash, with a round wood neck and a skin head.
The strings are tied to the wooden neck and the player
tunes them by slipping them by slipping them up and down
to adjust the length. Tuning is difficult because tight-
ening one string tends to put more pressure on the neck
of the instrument and the pitch of the other strings is
altered slightly. The modern kora is strung with different
weights of plastic fishing line, and as a general rule the
performers make their own instruments.

Abdu NJai, oh Abdu NJai, you beg of Abdu NJai
for everybody fears the king.

Kulbiram NJai, Tara NJai, Refet NJai,
Roose NJai, Baha NJai, Burr Santa NJai

The king who does not leave other kings alone
would never leave the poor alone.

Abdu NJai lets you beg, the king who doesn't
leave other kings alone would never leave the poor alone.
Oh the world, the days, of Abdu NJai have gone,
Abdu NJai who was at Kalbera and Blamang,
Koubberang NJai.

(repeats earlier phrases and praises Abdu NJai
in the Wolof language.)

Abdu NJai, who buried a Manjako king alive.
It was on that day that people cried and said
some men are planting cassava,
some men are planting groundnuts,
while Abdu NJai is planting human beings.

The king who who does not leave other kings alone
would never leave the poor alone.
The king who does not let his beloved wife beg
from him would never let the poor beg from him.

Smoking tobacco! A woman has finished all my smoking
tobacco!

(repeats earlier verse segments)

Anyone who tries to play with Abdu NJai
will be eaten by vultures.
Abdu NJai is not to be played with, and anyone
who tries it will be eaten by vultures!

(repeats earlier verse segments.)

Band 3. Tiramang

Falie Kuyateh, singing and accompanying himself on the kora, with second kora played by Jali Nyama Suso.

Falie Kuyateh is also a Mandingo Jali, now an old man who is the uncle of Jali Nyama Suso, who plays the kora with him for this piece. Kuyateh is typical of the older generation of singers, who still perform with great strength and excitement, but who no longer recall the details of the songs. In the three selections by these Mandingo Jali it's possible to get an idea of the continuity of the tradition, which is continually being handed on from singer to singer. Praising of Allah is very important in Jali Kuyateh's performances, and he uses a number of repeated praise verses. "Tirimang" is a famous song from the period of the break-up of the Mali Empire, when Mandingo was fighting Mandingo, and guns were beginning to appear. The most well-known incident in the song - which Jali Kuyateh doesn't include - is the final battle, when groups of bowmen dug holes in the ground and stood in them with their feet and lower legs buried in the earth so they couldn't retreat.

Give the Tirimangs the guns to fight with.
Oh, the people of Tirimang
Give the bows and arrows to the Tarawalles
of the Tirimang family, the fearless people
who are always ready,
the families of Tirimang.
Always give them the bows and arrows to fight with.
Always give them the bows and arrows to fight with.

It is God who helps every man,
it is not men who can help themselves.

The great man Shrifo Hydera has come,
the man of property, the marabout Shrifo Hydera

(the rest of the verses repeat material he has sung before.)

Side D

Band 1. Sunyetta

Band 2. Mariami Janki

Abdoulie Samba, reciting and accompanying himself on the halam.

This is the music of the Wolof griots, the Halamkat or Gavel, as they are called in their own language. The Wolof peoples live in the area between the Senegal River and the Gambia River, in what is now modern Senegal. The Wolof were involved in the forced movement to the Americas for only a short period, but they were used by the Europeans as translators for many years and the Woloff language has left many words in American English. The instrument played by Abdoulie Samba is certainly the direct ancestor of the 5-string banjo. It has a shallow wooden body and a stretched skin head, with five strings on a round stick neck. Three of the strings are drones, the top and the two lower, leaving two middle strings for playing. The drone strings are fastened further up the neck, just as the drone string is on the American instrument. The short top drone string is played with the thumb. Both the playing techniques and the instrument itself were brought directly to the southern United States, and although the performers now are whites who have taken over the tradition from their black neighbors the style of banjo playing in many rural areas is the closest link we have to the African music that came across the Atlantic on the slave ships. The halam is considered a very difficult instrument to play, especially in the newer styles, which have derived some of their ornamentation from the kora. Fast arpeggio patterns are natural to the kora, but very complicated on the

smaller halam. Abdoulie Samba considers himself more of an instrumentalist than a singer, and his texts were simple praise verses repeated many times. "Sunyetta" was one of the great kings of the Mandingo, and "Mariami Janki" is an old dance song. The rhythm sound comes from his nail tapping on the skin head.

Band 3. Manka Yire

Alhaji Sait Camara, singing and accompanying himself on the halam.

Alhaji Sait Camara, like Abdoulie Samba, is a Wolof Halamkat, and he comes from the village of Balangar, close to the Gambia River. He learned from his father, who was also a Halamkat, and MankaYira is one of the older dance songs in his repertoire. He plays the halam with a finger pick made of sharpened bone set into a strip of leather. The pick is placed on the top of the first finger and is used on the downward stroke, in the same way that finger picks were used in some American frailing techniques on the banjo.

A Note -

I was assisted by a number of people in my work with the griots, and I would particularly like to thank Jali Nyama Suso, who helped me locate some singers, and spent, also, long hours talking about the griot tradition with me. Musa Camara of Radio Gambia also helped me meet a number of singers, and Aliu S. Dabo brought singers to his compound in Banjul. For the translations I worked with a number of people, but principally with Mr. Dabo. My method was to get two or three rough translations of the original, and from these I have written my own version, which stays as close as possible to the original, but has been phrased in slightly different ways when the original was difficult to follow. The original field recordings were done with a portable Uher stereo machine, and on some of the recordings I was assisted by Musa Camara, who translated for the singer for me, and also helped with the microphones.

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