

The Blues Man, the Blues Woman, and the West African Griot/-te Tradition

Evelyne Delgado-Norris

Chicago State University

In West African societies, griots and griottes are the musicians, storytellers, and historians of the community. Griots praise, educate, give hope and stir the soul, but they also use language to criticize and condemn. Blues men and women present many similarities with the griots of West Africa. This study will highlight some of their connections from a sociological perspective.

Who are the griots and what is their role? The griots are much more than simple entertainers. One does not apply to become a griot or a griotte, it is a specialized craft and caste. You are born within a griot family and the gifts of memory, recitation, and performance are taught from an early age and passed down

from generation to generation. Historically, this class of individuals was and still is prevalent throughout West Africa, particularly in the Sahel in the Senegambian zone, Mali, and Guinea, stretching all the way through Niger, northern parts of Nigeria, and Chad. In societies and cultures that valued orality above written expression (most West African languages were not written languages), griots have held the specialized role as keepers of history, teachers, and vessels of wisdom. Traditionally, they were often attached to prominent families, kings and nobles, specific clans and communities to preserve the memory of main events, genealogies, alliances and wars. These memories were preserved in their epics, stories, and songs. In sort, they are the “living archives” of families, communities, and empires. The role of the griots and griottes is also to entertain. They learn at an early age to play drums and other traditional instruments such as the kora or the balafon. The griot class is strongly rooted in West African societies and dates thousands of years back. Their existence and role are stressed in important African epics such as the *Epic of Sundiata* from the 1200s (but griots existed long before and we find their origin in 7th century Malinké societies). One of the main griots in the epic is *Balla Fasséké*, the griot of the founder of the Empire of Mali, Sundiata Keita. He bears witness to history (in this case, the ascent of Sundiata), serves as the mouth piece of the King, advises, entertains and even inspires a whole army with his words that “filled their hearts”. The power of words and music to take possession of minds and souls also associates griots with magical abilities that are feared by many.

In addition to being attached historically to important families and nobles, griots are also independent artists and travel around to lease their services. Griots are hired for parties and celebrations, most often accompanied by dance and collective participation. They are present at marriages, birth, naming ceremonies, rites of passage, and death. But griots can also use their tongue to criticize and condemn individuals and society as a whole. In today’s African societies, you will even find griots at political rallies!

The Spirit of the Griot in America

The spirit of the griot survives in America. When Africans were brought to the New World, they brought with them millennia of culture and knowledge as well as their cultural practices and created something new in a different environment. Even though there was an effort to often diffuse ethnic groups and the uniting ties of language, religion, and cultural practices that would give strength to uprooted Africans (Alleyne, 1994), cohesive groups were also maintained in certain states because of valued specialized skills or certain dispositions noted by traders. The commonalities of the many African tongues, world beliefs, cultural expressions and practices (such as the strong oral and musical traditions of the griots) still survived. The Africans brought to the shores of the Americas to be enslaved and exploited on the plantations of the south and elsewhere came with their cultural heritage and everyday practices and this includes without a doubt not only farmers, healers, carpenters, metalworkers who brought their craft, but also Africans from the griot caste. Slave ship records show that large groups of Africans arriving in the first waves to the American shores (Maryland and Virginia in the 17th century, for example) came from the Senegambian region and thus, would have included people of a variety of occupations and skills, including griots. Looking through slave voyages records from the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade database (available from slavevoyages.org), one can find British and Dutch ships originating from what is documented as “Gambia and Senegambia” transporting Africans stemming from ethnic groups where the griot and the oral tradition were strong.

Separated from their context and given new roles, these Africans refashioned their practices in a new oppressive environment. Edouard Glissant developed a useful framework for understanding the refashioning of culture in the Americas through the process of what he calls “creolization”. Glissant explains the process of cultural agency and identity reconstruction using the concept of “traces” in these terms: “[it recomposes through traces a language and arts available to all...he/she [the African] was able to create something unpredictable from the power of memory, from the traces left in his mind; from there he was able to create [creole] languages, but also new artistic forms for all] (Glissant, 2007). Traces of African cultural practices, languages, and worldviews are strongly present in the Blues.

When looking from a sociological perspective in terms of their role and the way they are perceived in society, blues men and blues women possess many similarities with the griots of West Africa. First, they are specialized musicians and wordsmiths. From the hollers in the fields, storytellers and entertainers at night to the evening porch fiddlers and the post-civil war traveling musicians with no fixed home or income, blues men and women have traditionally carried messages from the heart and the stories, not just about their personal experiences, but also carried the traces of the collective memory of Black folks. The stories of heroes and villains, typical archetypes that serve to teach and inspire, but also warn against bad choices make up the fabric of many blues songs. In the Black imagination, personages such as John Henry are immortalized in popular folklore and in Blues songs passed down and still sung today. John Henry's story recounts the tragic battle and end of a "steel-driving man" on the railroad who challenges a steam-powered drill to a race. John Henry wins the challenge but pays with his life and dies from exertion. The story stages a strong Black man's struggle against a new world where technology and machines would replace man's honest work. One version of the song by Joe Brown and transcribed by the Heritage Discovery Center unravels in these words:

John Henry was a little baby

Sittin' on his papa's knee

He picked up a hammer & a little piece of steel

Said "Hammer's gonna be the death of me, Lord, Lord!

Hammer's gonna be the death of me."

The captain said to John Henry

"Gonna bring that steam drill 'round

Gonna bring that steam drill out on the job

Gonna whop that steel on down, down, down!

Whop that steel on down."

John Henry told his captain,

“A man ain’t nothin’ but a man

But before I let your steam drill beat me down

I’ll die with a hammer in my hand, Lord, Lord!

I’ll die with a hammer in my hand.”

(<https://www.heritagejohnstown.org>)

At the other end of the spectrum, you have figures such as *Stack’O Lee* who is immortalized in Blues tunes as a warning of the dark side of human nature and our propensity toward violence. The story is based on a real-life murder that occurred on Christmas night in St. Louis in 1895. As reported in the local newspapers at the time, an altercation occurred when Billy Lyon was shot for snatching the hat off a man named Sheldon. Billy was arrested, tried, and put to death. The story is a favorite among old time blues singers who use it as a cautionary tale to use self-control and not let anger take over your mind and sound judgment. Stories like John Henry and Stack O’ Lee (also titled Stagger Lee at times) offer an educational window to teach about the human condition and humans’ struggles that are timeless and universal.

Giving a Snapshot of the World Around Them

As Chicago blues man and educator Fernando Jones put it, the Blues continues to document the state of society at a particular time, it bears witness to a time and place. In his words, “some people document with a movie or a camcorder, the Blues song writer documents with words. He or she records information through the eyes and ears and they write about it”. He goes on to say: “Once something is documented, it can’t be disputed that it didn’t happen” (WGN news clip, 2020). Similarly to the griots who brought a “compass” to the kingdom by giving advice to kings and emperors (but also within the nucleus of the community and families), Blues men and women offer social and political commentary through their lyrics. The tradition of providing social commentary was and continues to be strong in West African

societies and carried through in the Americas with Blues artists. *Bourgeois Blues* by Lead Belly is an example. It is a song written in 1937 recounting his experience in Washington D.C. where he came to record some songs for the archives for A. Lomax (a prominent researcher in American folk traditions). Needless to say, he was not welcomed in that part of town in which was segregated at the time. The Blues man was denied a stay in the neighborhood near the Library of Congress.

Lord in a bourgeois town

It's a bourgeois town

I got the bourgeois blues

Gonna spread the news all around

.....

Home of the brave, land of the free

I don't wanna be mistreated by no bourgeoisie

.....

Well, me and my wife were standing upstairs

We heard the white man say "I don't want no niggers up there"

.....

I tell all the colored folks to listen to me

Don't try to find you no home in Washington, DC....

(<https://genius.com/Lead-belly-the-bourgeois-blues-1938-lyrics>)

There are innumerable Blues songs that address social issues and inequalities within society, particularly for African Americans. Blues artists talk about personal experiences, but also larger economic issues,

<p>Ndimbeul na sa fek Lokhoy borooooom !!!</p> <p>Woy Africa !</p> <p>Bou dianteu bi finké waw ! Na la fek diok ! Ak sa dioumetou kaye ! Beuthieuk bi gaw neu !</p> <p>Niéteu dou beuré Té niarra meuneu kééééneu waw ! Yone wi ! sorré na ! Té métti na Naniou ko waaadial</p> <p>Bo doul nopé khalate La niou défone Mameuuuu ya! Sa khol do toul nekh Té dotou khame lou doul féyane to !</p> <p>Souma sagnone Africa Béne niit mo koy djité ! Niou bolé Sounouy khalate Ak sounouy dolé Diokh ko !</p> <p>Naniou oubi frontiers yi! ratakhale yone yi Ba nieupeu guissé</p> <p>Changes your thinking! Work together! Keep and working!</p> <p>Cheikh Anta Diop! Kouamé Nkrumah! Steven Biko!</p> <p>All you people! Africa!!!!</p>	<p>The day passes very quickly Let's confront our problems one at a time United we are stronger</p> <p>A long road lies ahead We have much to do So let's get ready</p> <p>When I think of how our grandparents suffered I cry But our past must not stop us from moving forward</p> <p>I dream to see Africans unified by a common vision Let's marshal our ideas, our energies Open the borders and come together</p> <p>Change your thinking Work together Keep on working</p> <p>Cheikh Anta Diop, Kwame Nkrumah, Steven Biko, Nelson Mandela</p> <p>All you people AFRICA!!</p>
--	--

(<https://genius.com/Youssou-ndour-new-africa-lyrics>)

Even though African music is generally a collective practice, the personage of the griot can also stand alone and will accompany himself/herself to perform as the central figure, just like the bluesman. String instruments such as the Xalam and the Kora are king with the Wolof and the Mandinka and are said to be

the African “memory” or “trace” for the American banjo. Early fiddles used by slaves resembled the Sahelian goge with its bow and the riti (Nyanyeru) of the Fulani. Beyond the stories, the virtuosity of the performer makes his fame. Their instruments, particularly the Kora and the Balafon are said to be imbued with magical powers, capable of invoking spirits, influencing events and the outcomes of battles, and even wielding power over natural elements. The gift of music itself and the skills of the musician place him or her in a mystical position. That is another similarity between the blues artist and the griot. In the collective imagination in both cultures, both the griot and the quintessential blues man have often been associated with some obscure force. We all know the story of Robert Johnson at the crossroads. His meeting with the devil is a seminal moment in blues folklore. The story goes that between US 61 and US 49 in Clarksdale, Mississippi, the devil offered the blues man extraordinary musical talent in exchange for his soul. After that encounter, Johnson rose to fame. In West African folklore, the crossroads symbolize dilemmas, the making of decisions, and crossing mystical boundaries. In many West African stories, strong spirits linger around crossroads. Also, demanding something precious in exchange for a musical talent is a common trope with griots in West Africa. For example, griot Juldeh Camara, one of the leading Riti players (traditional African fiddle) from the Fulani ethnic group in the Gambia, tells how a spirit (or djinn) met his father in the forest and taught him to play the Riti. The price for this musical gift was his father’s eyes. To soften the blow, the spirit let him know that despite his blindness, he would give him “the gift to see what others cannot see.”

When it comes to women, West African female griottes (*jelimusow*) play a different but essential role in maintaining social cohesion and norms. Many make a living lending their services in family events and important junctures in a women’s life: marriage, birth, baptism and naming of child, tattooing ceremonies (praising the courage of the women) but they also use their voices to address particular women’s and societal issues. In African scholarship, the songs of the griottes have often been neglected. Scholars like Aissata Sidikou-Morton have been working to fill this gap and to show African women’s perspectives and prism on history and everyday life in their own communities. In Sidikou and Hale’s

Women's Songs from West Africa, the songs presented highlight “alternative” versions of the grand epics (like Sundiata’s), praise-songs, tattooing songs, lamentation, and even Wolof women’s songs breaking the taboo of sex. Due to the predominance of Islam and patriarchal hierarchies, women’s transgressive songs were mostly sung within women’s private spaces. Wolof women from Senegal, for example, sing songs that educate about sex during ceremonies such as the *Laabaan*, which celebrates the bride’s virginity, but also warns young women listeners against men’s ways to tempt them into pre-marital sex and the consequences (dishonor to the family). Researcher Marame Guèye has studied the content of these songs and notes that “In Wolof culture, sex education occurs within these private women’s spaces. Laabaan (the name of the ceremony and the type of song) is “reserved exclusively for women and conducted by them” (Sidikou & Hale, 1992). The songs are often raw and direct, mentioning sexual parts and full of humor. Today, the griotte’s role and performance styles are changing, particularly with urban culture and global influences. Many step out of the private realm and have become national and international stars, speaking on behalf of their communities, but also for women and Africa’s empowerment in general. Artists like Sona Jabarteh have brought the spotlight on the griot tradition in a modern local and global context. Sona stems from a griot family and is the first professional virtuoso on the Kora, an instrument traditionally reserved for men. Her practice and choice of the instrument is transgressive in itself. Her mission is to preserve her rich cultural heritage, but to also bring it into the 21st century, accessible to all and carry new messages of hope and social justice. Her mission points to the griotte stepping out of the private realm of women to burst out in the public spaces to also express national concerns. Jabarteh’s *Gambia*, for example, calls her country to unity and a march forward very much in the style of Youssou N’Dour’s *New Africa*. Sona Jabarteh assumes here the role of a modern griotte stepping out on the public stage as a mouthpiece for her people:

Translation from Mandinka lyrics]

[Intro]

Peace knows stability and progress welcomes it

[Verse 1]

Hospitality, happiness feel the faces of the country

The Gambia is a good country

Where ever you are, never let yourself forget

Your homeland Gambia

Truth is, if you forget your homeland

It means you forgot yourself

[Chorus 1]

We are proud, I am proud of my country...

We are proud...

[Interlude]

Let's come together and be united for

That's the way forward and benefit for all

[Chorus 2]

Where are the people of the world? This is a beautiful country

Where are the people of the world? This is a peaceful country

Where are the people of the Gambia? This is my country

Where are the people of the Gambia? This is hard to find!

(Sona Jobarteh – GAMBIA Lyrics | Genius Lyrics)

Sona Jabarteh remains rooted in the tradition of uplifting women, but takes a more progressive stance in terms of calling out women's oppression and shaking up the norms and expectations for women in African patriarchal societies. Jabarteh's song *Musolou (Women)* reminds us that all humanity is born from

a woman and that the love of a mother is a special gift in this world. In the griot tradition of a praise song, the names of her heroines, these global women "ancestors" are called as homage and witnesses to women's greatness: "I ask that societies give back to women in return for their hard work and sacrifices. Women are controlled, silenced, oppressed, beaten and mutilated... I ask what type of people harm the very people that bring us into the world and raise us? I ask the people of this world to stand by women, to fight for them and their dignity" (Tigay, 2023). And further, she sings:

I pay homage to just a few iconic female role models of African descent,
Past and present, who have fought for social change:
Maya Angelou, Queen Nanny of the Maroons, Yaa Asantewaa,
Queen Nzinga of Ndongo and Matamba, Angela Davis,
Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Harriet Tubman, Mbuya Nehanda,
Giséle Rabesahala, Miriam Makeba, Rose Chibambo,
Margaret Ekpo, Sojourner Truth, Andrea Lua, Women Warriors of Dahomey.
Women of the world, I thank you"

(Tigay, 2023)

Blues women are, in the same vein, our American griottes. They have highlighted alongside their fellow Blues men the personal, social, and economic conditions of African Americans from a Black woman's perspective. Blasting to pieces the stereotypical image of the "Mamy" and domestic servant, blues women sang of independence, including sexual independence (which meant a lot in view of America's long history of rape of Black women). Many of Spivey's songs are laced with expressions of sexual freedom, including *Good Cabbage, I'll Keep Sittin' On It if I Can't Sell It*, etc. Alberta Hunter's *Yelpin' the Blues* is a direct reference to the determination and strength of women. You can also find

political commentary in songs such as *Christmas Mornin' Blues* by Victoria Spivey in which she points to systemic racism, the condition of many Black men in prison, and the negative consequences this situation brings on women (emotionally and economically):

My man's so deep in trouble the white folks couldn't get him free
My man's so deep in trouble the white folks couldn't get him free
He stole a hog the charge was murder in the first degree
.....
Next Christmas I won't be here to get this bad bunch of news
I won't be here to get this bunch of bad news
Just mark on my tombstone, "Died with the Christmas Morning Blues".

(<https://www.musixmatch.com/lyrics/Victoria-Spivey/Christmas-Morning-Blues>)

Spivey's *Murder in the First Degree* laments about African American women not being able to improve their economic condition by occupying roles such as maids and domestic servants. Today, Blues women continue to "tell it like it is" and use their music to affect change. Grammy-nominated Blues woman Shamekia Copeland (who stems from a Blues family herself through her father) sings about love and harsh times, but also covers urgent social problems and women's challenges in America: *Done Gone Too Far* and *Blame it on Eve* are some of her latest releases. The titles say it all.

The blues is a musical genre that carries the unique and rich cultural imprint of Africans and their descendants in North America as it travelled from the deep south to the streets and clubs of Chicago and other big cities. This study aimed to look at the connections between the griot and griotte and the American Blues artist from a sociological perspective. Their role is important in carrying history and bearing witness to a time and place. These masters of the word constantly re-invent themselves and continue to create bridges between the past and the present, the living and the dead, and above all,

between cultures who, even though separated by a grand ocean, continue to share visible and invisible ties.

References

Charter, Samuel. *The Griots, Ministers of the Spoken Word*. Introduction S. Charter for Folkway Records. Album No. FE 4178, 1975. NYC, USA.

Counsel, Graeme. "The Griots of West Africa: Agents of Social Change". *Context* 14 (Summer 1997-98). 43-51.

Fertel, Miles "Robert Johnson and the Crossroads."

<https://medium.com/@milesfertel/robert-johnson-and-the-crossroads-in-africanand-african-american-folklore> (Retrieved 4/1/2025)

Glissant, Edouard. *Caribbean Discourse*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989.

Guèye, Marame. "Wolof Women Breaking the Taboo of Sex Through Song" in Sidikou's *Women's Songs From West Africa* (pg. 19-51). Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 2013.

———. *Memoires des Esclavages*. Paris: Gallimard, 2007.

Hall, Mildred Milo. *Slavery and African Ethnicities: Restoring the Links*. Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2005.

Johnston, James H. *From Slave Ship to Harvard: Yarrow Mamout and the History of an African-American Family*. Fordham U. Press, 2015.

Jones, Fernando. WGN TV Chicago interview "Blues Camp International Online 2020 on WGN TV". https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DxLb_cFJC4&t=3s (Retrieved 3/10/2025)

Kubik, Gerhart. *Africa and the Blues*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1999.

Lomax, Alan. *The Land Where the Blues Began*. New York: New York Press, 1993.

Pearley, Lamont Jr. "The Historical Roots of Blues Music". *Black Perspectives*, May, 2018. Published by the African American Intellectual History Society (AAIHS).

<https://www.aaihs.org/the-historical-roots-of-blues-music/> (Retrieved 3/15/2025).

Sidikou, Aissata & Hale, T, ed. *Women's Songs from West Africa*. Indiana Press University.: Bloomington, 2014.

Tigay, Alan. "Sona Jabarteh: Badinyaa Kumoo"

<https://worldlisteningpost.com/2023/02/24/sona-jobarteh-badinyaa-kumoo/> (Retrieved 4/20/2025).

Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Data Base. <https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/database> (Retrieved 3/15/2025).

John Henry Lyrics. <https://www.heritagejohnstown.org/> (Retrieved 3/10/2025).

