I want to preface my entire podcast with an acknowledgement that history is perfectly complicated. An infinite number of perspectives exist, and the only one I am able to accurately capture is my own—though it is in this I am able to exemplify the beauty and intricacy of history as a form of storytelling. This is my understanding of a story, with a handful of allusions to other people’s understandings, that is trying to inform an audience of said story devoid of crippling bias. My lens is but one and I encourage anyone intrigued by this brief analytical overview to further explore the subject using my bibliography as a starting point.

“Who holds your history?” asks Joanna Lott in an article discussing the dynamic role of the griot in West African (or Manden) culture.\(^1\) Deconstructing such a question begs questions including what is history, what defines something as ‘important’ history and can a culture exist with only written or only oral history? These are particularly jarring to consider regardless of where/to whom they are being asked, because they bring into question something so tacit and yet paradoxically explicit that shapes everyone’s understanding of the world around them.

To understand the gravity of this question in West African culture, it is first important to understand the griot and their role in society throughout history. Historically, the duties of a griot were entirely based on lineage; sons inherited responsibilities from their father when he came of age. The most prominent of responsibilities being a repository of local history and current

events: deaths, marriages, affairs, excursions, battles, etc. This also included political commentary, palaver and gossip, or a combination of the two in satire. The griots were most commonly known as oral historians, but were also praise singers; commonly carrying an instrument—most commonly a kora—and singing songs to villagers detailing stories of their ancestors. In fact, music is an indispensable aspect of the griot’s role in Manden culture; as Christopher Wise puts it: “music…necessarily intertwines with the aspirated breath of the griot,” the validity and vitality of story is manifested through the use of instrumentation and lyrical syncretism. A walking, rhythmically inclined, history book. Storytelling must necessarily be intertwined with the written word, as Walter B. Ong asserts, “written texts all have to be related somehow, directly or indirectly, to the world of sound, the natural habitat of language, to yield their meanings.”

The art of storytelling in West Africa is a cultural practice that predated colonization. Before the colonizers arrived, the griot played a valuable role in the hierarchical kingdoms riddling Africa’s west coast. He was a respected spokesman/aid/mediator to a king. A griot family always accompanied a royal family; one without the other was unheard of and essentially worthless. As the “Scramble for Africa” overthrew kingdom after kingdom, the griot lost his stature alongside royalty. They were forced to seek effective employment through other outlets, unable to rely on a king. Though the colonizers no longer have direct control of African nations, the griot never regained their esteemed position in politics. Their roles in contemporary society vary, depending on if they choose to 1) neglect their heritage and pursue a completely unrelated career, 2) embrace their traditional role wholeheartedly as a griot with “no innovation,” or 3)

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forge their own path and somehow involve the, as Cornelia Panzacchi describes, “ethos of the griot,” but have a more contemporary job (such as a career in hip-hop, private detective, working with academic historians, etc).⁵ Arguably, alongside the fall of kingdoms and griots, is the ideological shift from the oral transmission to the written transmission of history. This is not saying that written history did not exist in Africa before colonization—this would be disregarding several ancient Mesopotamian and Sumerian lists from long ago—as far back as 2500 BC—as well as an innumerable amount of ancient documents from around the continent.⁶ What is being argued here is that as the colonial age proceeded on the African continent, the different colonial powers began writing down the histories of their new colonies and the significance of orally transmitted history was greatly changed. The relationship of African colonies to the “modern” world was measured, in part, by the documented “history of white activity there,” as Christopher Prior explains in his analysis.⁷ He then says “historians legitimated imperial change by the reconfiguration of African societies.”⁸ This began a paradigm shift that, though questionably detrimental to griot lifestyle, introduced the written word into West Africa and help bolster modernity. Without the written word there would be no written law, functioning government, access to education, or modes of international communication.

Throughout this investigation, there has been one motif that binds all of the research together: the concept of storytelling and “the word.” Harold Scheub best articulates the importance of stories in saying:

Stories provide us with the truth; they take the flotsam and jetsam of our lives, and give those shards a sense of narrative, of form, and therefore of verity.

⁸ Ibid.
But that truth is slippery, and a crucial characteristic of stories is that they can be revised, are in fact constantly in the process of being modified...And so it is, historians routinely take the events of the past and give them a new gloss, recasting the stories again and again...History is a story that is...never entirely true, but always at least partially true...the events keep sliding around, as each storyteller, each historian, rearranges the incidents, reinterprets, retells, and meaning alters...

The word is what the griot inherits, protects, manifests, portrays and allegorizes. The word is a tricky, multifaceted idea that is both explicit and tacit in its foundation: it is what is spoken in the songs and stories that the griot conveys in order to communicate history and culture, but it is also the preservation of a culture that has been put second to colonization. Therefore, as Scheub explains in the aforementioned analysis of storytelling, the griot was both beloved and somewhat feared within the Mande culture because “they can sing your praises, but they can also sing your doom,” and the image of you they build is what would be commemorated. As Vaclav Havel discussed in his renowned Peace Prize acceptance speech, the word is an arrow. He says: “Alongside words that electrify society with their freedom and truthfulness, we have words that mesmerize, deceive, inflame, madden, beguile, words that are harmful—lethal, even.” Without languages, without words, there would be no politics to argue, no stories to share, no history to bank on. Word is power. Power can become corrupt. Furthermore, having a small group (that is explicitly lineage-based) be in control of the word leaves room for it to be narrowly interpreted and reiterated with bias. This, arguably, could have skewed historical fact in West Africa just as much as the imperial written word, correct? Is one better than the other?

The griot’s guardianship of the word is not necessarily a concept that is contained to Manden culture. A comparative analysis including Egyptian and South African culture shows that both the preservation of the word and the means by which the word is preserved are intrinsic.

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to the conservation of culture. The Manden conception of the word is expressed via the magnitude of “nyama,” defined as “power or means.”\(^{12}\) Essentially, it is the magnitude of the words that come out of one’s mouth; until one has harvested *nyama*, their words are merely wind with no meaning. One’s journey to becoming a griot involves learning how to not only understand the “occult power” but also embody that power in the oral/aural history they communicate.\(^{13}\) This is another responsibility that a griot has: once they have offspring, that child’s young life must involve harnessing *nyama*. This cannot be done without the guidance of their parents. Much like any parent wants to teach their child honesty, kindness, good judgment, a griot parents must guide their child to *nyama*. *Nyama* as a concept did not originate in Manden culture—it can be traced back to *heka* in Egyptian culture—and as Christopher Wise says: can be “construed as a word that may be replaced by any number of substitutions,” meaning that it is a culturally translatable idea.\(^{14}\) What the griot represents is the power that words—that history—has for a people, and that is not something that only the West African cultures have figured out. In South African culture, the imbongi is an ‘oral poet’ that is as Russel Kaschula says: “in a position to act as mediator, educator, praiser, and critic between an authority and those under that authority.”\(^{15}\) It is not shocking that this definition is very similar to that of the griot, in that the “dynamism of culture…allows for common ways of expressing human reality.”\(^{16}\) Different cultures may have different definitions and therefore different interpretations of the “keepers of their culture,” but that does not mean that they do not exist—in some form—worldwide.

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\(^{13}\) Ibid, pg 20.
\(^{14}\) Ibid, pg 20.
\(^{16}\) Ibid, pg 57.
Looking beyond the griot as a role defined by lineage and upbringing, there is a more metaphorical interpretation that many contemporary literary scholars in Africa have come to recognize as a form of resistance. In particular, author Boubacar Boris Diop grew up in Dakar, Senegal. He was forced to participate in the French colonial system of education, and therefore became a subject of an educational culture of extreme assimilation.\(^\text{17}\) He chose, unlike many African intellectuals of the time, not to study abroad in a colonizing country. His choice in doing so was because he “wasn’t interested in living in France or becoming a griot for the single-party state of that era.”\(^\text{18}\) Instead, he chose to become a griot of cultural resistance through writing fictional novels that, when analyzed, are not so fictional in moral. He uses the subject matter and characters in his short stories and novels to allegorize real political and economic issues that exist in Africa. One example is the short story “The Night of the Imoko,” depicting the preparation for a ceremony in the Djinkoré in which it is believed ancestors descend and reveal what is to be done in the village for the next seven years. In the story there is a prince who wholeheartedly believes in the spiritual aspect of this ceremony, and is mortified when he catches the village elders in the forest talking about the “sad comedy” that was to unfold in the ceremony as they posed as ancestors.\(^\text{19}\) In threatening to demystify the status quo, the prince is killed and deemed a sacrifice. Diop has spoken in interviews about the truth behind this story, saying only that the real prince did not die, but went mad and was put in an asylum.\(^\text{20}\) The young and hopeful in this story was removed from the picture without even arriving at his full potential for change. Though Diop is not a griot by lineage and is not exercising any of the traditional responsibilities of a griot, he is exemplifying the *nyama* of storytelling in a contemporary light;


\(^{18}\) Ibid, pg 251.

\(^{19}\) Ibid, pg 268.

\(^{20}\) Ibid, pg 267.
instead of a song or an epic, Diop is using realistic fiction to convey a theme that he feels is critical to deploy in order to contribute to a dialogue on how, as he puts it, “all power is necessarily fraudulent.”

As touched on before, the griot’s fall from nobility forced them to find work in other fields—whether they chose to disregard their lineage, embrace the traditional role, or create a hybrid existence that uses their cultural role outside of their traditional role. One of the ways that the latter is put into practice is through collaboration with European/African scholars as being the “repositories of the history of their people.” In order to combat the fear of “traditional wisdom [being] lost when the old men died,” the griots have been working with scholars in order to transcribe the oral history into written word. This is a critical piece in understanding the contemporary evolution of griot culture—a hybridized existence of both oral tradition of the written word is a tangible exemplification of progress. The word began its journey in West Africa by word of mouth, spreading as fast and as factual as a griot allowed. Entire kingdoms relied on one or two griot, and that griot bred and trained his predecessor. This may have perpetuated a system of bias toward the power complex. Focusing orally transmitted epics on heroes of epic proportions that were capable of leading kingdoms. What was lost in translation can never be recovered, but that which survived is now being combined with the history of scholars to fill in the gaps that both sides undoubtedly retain. Two focuses joining together to create a more holistic picture of the past and help pave the way for a more educated future.

This answers a couple of the questions asked at the beginning of this podcast. What defines something as ‘important’ history? Power is in the word. Word, therefore, can reflect the

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agenda of those in power. But the answer to the last question, *can a culture exist with only written or only oral history*, is no. Both are required. Both reflect different agendas and therefore can counteract each other’s bias in order to reveal something closer to the truth Harold Sheub discusses.

It is in this paradoxical theory that the griot culture is part of global culture: in pursuit of attaining a global voice, West Africa had to dig into their history—their culture—and find an effective way to communicate their voice to the rest of the world. Whether it be one of literary resistance that authors such as Boubacar Boris Diop foster in their subtextual discourse or the archival projects that griots have collaborated with European/African scholars in order to document their history, exemplifying this voice requires a cultural rally composed of many different vehicles—not limited to those discussed in this project. Though it can be perceived as a game of catch-up for the West African nations, it is something much larger than that. Africa (as a continent, as a unit) is equipping itself with the explicit means it needs in order to be perceived as a valuable global presence.
Works Cited


