

Short Description of A Griot

In West African culture, both historically and today, each tribal clan has had its *griot*, an itinerant clan member who is combination historian-musician-storyteller: "A Griot is an oral historian and musician," explains Foday Musa Suso, one of West Africa 's most respected and well-known contemporary griots. "Griots were trusted court advisors to the kings of West Africa from the twelfth century to the twentieth. Every king wanted a Griot to recite the history of the kingdom, and to pass it down from father to son. History wasn't written down – everything was memorized and recited or sung." The griot memorized the clan's significant events such as births, deaths, marriages, hunts, and wars, ensuring the continuity of the collective heritage and culture. "If you want to buy some cloth, go to the weaver. If you want a hoe, ax or knife, then go to the blacksmith. But if you want to know the history of the people, you must go to the griots." Often accompanied by the *kora* (a harp-like stringed instrument), drumming and/or the handclapping of the villagers, a griot might speak for hours, even days, drawing upon a practiced and memorized history, passed from griot to griot for generations. It is said that, **"when a griot dies, a library has burned to the ground."**