

# 3 Musical Columns

Cheick Hamala Diabate is a griot from Mali, in West Africa. The griot functions in his society as a bard and musical healer of sorts, as our conversation will elucidate further. Cheick Hamala performs on the koni, a gourd or wood-bodied lute that is an ancestor to the American 5-string banjo. For booking information, contact Bruce Penner, (804) 973-2084. This interview was conducted in French through a translator, and Bruce was also present.

## griot

**WHJ:** In what way is your music a spiritual path for you?

**Cheick:** As a griot I'm responsible for people, in a sense. If there are two people, and they don't know each other's history, the griot will be called in to reconcile them, to share their cultures and traditions through song and words—I'm a story-teller—so that they have a common bond.

**WHJ:** How can you function as a griot being here in the West?

**Cheick:** There's a sizeable Malian community in Washington and New York, and to some extent across the United States. And whenever someone in that community has a marriage or any important life or cultural event, the griot is called, and he is the one to fortify the spirit of the people by sharing the tradition.

**WHJ:** When the griot does that, is he functioning as a spiritual healer, or is it something else?

**Cheick:** If you're going some place you have to know the place you are coming from first. When a griot goes to speak and help people in a relationship, he's bringing up their ancestors, their history, lessons from the past. When a griot is singing a song, he's counselling people—giving them the history from tradition to check against their own situation to help themselves through it.



**Bruce:** There's an idea in their society of nyama, and the griots handle nyama. It's sort of like in Lucas films, "the force." It's something that's in the world. A hunter kills an animal and releases its nyama. A metalsmith will take the earth and in working it will release its nyama. The griot will speak the history of a people....it's hard to imagine, but these are the histories of your family back to the Medieval time—they know these histories. So they're evoking who you are. You know, people in the United States might ask "Who are we?" but if you want to know who you are in Mali, you ask a griot and he'll tell you who you are! This is the nyama of sound, so these things are extremely powerful. The whole idea of a griot telling you in the course of a song, "This is who you are and this is what you must do," you're talking about enormous power.

**Cheick:** Say for example your name is Diabate. No matter where you are—say you're somewhere in D.C. and you say hello to someone, and ask them their family name. If they say Diabate, the griot will say sacred words that will make that person stop and reflect on who he is, just like that—the words will have extreme significance to the person. I call people out in the community, in the culture and the society, for the good and the bad that they do. So it's good to act well, because the griot will broadcast it. In Africa, if you've done something bad, and you're walking down the road and you see the griot, you're going to try and hide, because the griot will call you out.

**WHJ:** Can you do this for people outside of your culture?

**Bruce:** It's a matter of how much contact you have. Cheick knows me, so he's going to speak my name to other griots. But his people have lived as neighbors with other people for many generations so they know about them.

**WHJ:** But he obviously wouldn't know your ancestry.

**Bruce:** No, but he knows who you are in the world, which is a cumulative thing. So he doesn't know my ancestry, but he knows who I am now—you always start somewhere, and he can respond on that level.

**Cheick:** Griot is the French word. The word in Africa is jeli, which means blood. If you take a human being, with all the organs inside, the heart, the spirit—if the blood isn't circulating right, he will die. If you look at the world as a lot of different organs within one body, the jeli is the blood circulating among the organs, giving it nourishment, oxygen, keeping everything alive. And if a griot dies, it's like a library has been burned—because it's an oral culture.

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