



International Journal of African Studies

Publisher's Home Page: <https://www.svedbergopen.com/>



Research Paper

Open Access

Rethinking State-Media Relations in Contemporary Africa: Lessons from Griot Patronage in Precolonial West African Societies

Mukudzeiishe Madzivire^{1*} 

¹Columbia University, 116th and Broadway, New York, NY 10027, United States. E-mail: mm6431@columbia.edu

Article Info

Volume 5, Issue 2, December 2025

Received : 20 September 2025

Accepted : 10 December 2025

Published : 25 December 2025

doi: [10.51483/IJAFRS.5.2.2025.1-12](https://doi.org/10.51483/IJAFRS.5.2.2025.1-12)

Abstract

This paper investigates the relationship between griots and political leadership in precolonial West African societies, and the lessons this relationship provides for contemporary state-media relations in Africa. The griots were a caste of oral historians and musicians who served many social and cultural functions within their communities. They enjoyed, amongst other things, the patronage of traditional political leaders who, in exchange for support and counsel, became the source of subsistence for the griots. This research finds that the mutual codependence that characterized the griot-patron relationship is a model for state-media relations in Africa today. Amidst the rising consolidation of control over the media by governments and calls for the largescale privatization of media institutions, the griot-state relationship reveals the possibility of a third option, characterized by productive coexistence. Thus, the griot-state relationship is evidence of the wealth of lessons available in precolonial African history for African governance today.

Keywords: *Griot, Mass media, State-media relations, Postcolonialism, Griot patronage*

© 2025 Mukudzeiishe Madzivire. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made.

1. Introduction

Ancient cultures displayed a deep-rooted respect and reverence for storytellers. No matter who they were or where they were found, the storytellers were honored and celebrated. Nowhere is this truer than in precolonial African societies. From the sarungano in Zimbabwe, to the imbongi in South Africa, to the jelilu and the akan in Senegal and Mali, all the way to the azmari and gabay reciters in Somalia, storytellers were often held to similar levels of esteem to their communities' religious and political leaders. They enjoyed unparalleled social admiration, unfathomable proximity to power, and the coveted custodianship of their communities' histories and cultures. They were commentators on the sociopolitics of their times, advisors to the leaders of their societies, and repositories of the hopes and aspirations of the people. To these communities, the sociopolitical world was constantly under construction and those with the powers of storytelling played a special role in shaping and reshaping this world.

The storytelling tradition has undergone dramatic transformations since the precolonial era. Although traditional storytellers still exist, they number far fewer than they once did and are often concentrated in rural areas. Contemporary

* Corresponding author: Mukudzeiishe Madzivire, Columbia University, 116th and Broadway, New York, NY 10027, United States. E-mail: mm6431@columbia.edu

storytellers—journalists, novelists, filmmakers, poets, and other such individuals—have overwhelmingly displaced traditional storytellers, bringing with them new mediums of expression that are circulate more easily and are more accessible. Traditional or contemporary, storytellers on the African continent today live markedly different lives from those of their predecessors. Their modes of storytelling are constrained, the subjects they discuss are restricted, and many experience violence and persecution at the hands of the state. This has only worsened over time: Press freedoms have declined significantly in nearly every country in Africa, with media ownership increasingly monopolized by the rich and Powerful ([Africa: Media Independence Undermined by Ownership Consolidation and Pressure from Advertisers, 2025](#)). Violations of artistic freedoms have been recorded in over 20 African countries, including Egypt, Nigeria, Senegal, Ghana and Kenya ([The State of Artist Human Rights Defenders in Africa, 2023](#)). Meanwhile, traditional modes of storytelling face a range of forms of suppression and ostracization that severely restrict the freedom they have to tell their stories. In short, no matter who they are, where they come from, or the modes of storytelling they employ, the role of the storyteller is increasingly under threat, from the newsroom to the studio, to the living room, all the way to the circle around the village fire.

The suppression of the storytelling tradition has been matched by a corresponding effort at consolidating control over narrative construction in the hands of a privileged few. Media pluralism is consistently suppressed through the imposition of prohibitive costs for establishing media houses, and the censorship of voices from marginalized identities ([The State of Media Freedom and Safety of Journalists in Africa, 2022](#)). Governments continue to own and operate large portions of the media landscape and exercise strict control over private media ([The State of Media Freedom and Safety of Journalists in Africa, 2022](#)). With the control they exercise, governments convert the media into a mouthpiece for monochromatic narratives about people and about the world, limiting their citizens to carefully controlled streams of information that often reinforces, rather than challenges, the state's perspective.

Amidst this and other crises embattling the African continent today, scholars of African Studies and African History have looked into precolonial African history as a treasure trove of knowledge about how we are to administer the postcolonial world. This research joins in this tradition by posing two questions: Firstly, what lessons can we draw from precolonial relations between political leaders and traditional storytellers? Secondly, how might these lessons shape our contemporary understanding of state-media relations?

To answer these questions, this research maps out the changes in the relationship shared by the griots, a caste of oral historians and musicians indigenous to present day West Africa ([Ashworth, 2012](#)), and the political leaders of their time. Prior to the colonial era, the griots were immensely influential figures in their various societies. They fulfilled a wide range of roles in the political, spiritual, and sociocultural lives of their communities, for which they were compensated and supported by political leaders. During colonialism, the griots experienced a precipitous decline in their influence from which they have never recovered ([Leymarie-Ortiz, 1979](#)). From this, two theories can be formulated: The first is that prior to colonialism, political leaders enjoyed a relatively healthy, symbiotic relationship with the griots, who were the precursors to contemporary mass media. The second is that as part of both active and passive processes of the disempowerment of the storytelling tradition by colonists, the seat of the griot—and the wider role of the storyteller—evolved from one of prestige to one of precarity, coopted, ignored, or actively suppressed by the state.

By suppressing the storytelling tradition, the colonists worked to build postcolonies that insisted on significantly restricting access, by the colonized, to a diversity of narratives about the world. This paper holds a mirror up to this history, revealing that the historical disempowerment of the storytelling tradition would lay the groundwork for the modern-day restriction of a range of storytelling traditions. More seriously, this empowerment entrenched, into the public psyche, a conception of state-media relations as necessarily a dichotomy between competition and co-optation. The griots and their relationship with traditional leadership espouse a third option—coexistence—that has since been foregone to the detriment of West African governments and the storytellers they oversee, from journalists, to musicians, to poets, all the way to the modern-day griots.

This analysis is important because it contributes to broader investigations into the multifaceted nature of colonialism and its enduring influence on Africa and the world today. It goes without saying that many aspects of the African continent remain colonized, from our institutions to our education systems, to our relationships with religion and culture. This paper's contribution to this body of knowledge is in the recognition that the West African relationship with storytelling, narratives, and more broadly, epistemology, was colonized and has remained colonized to-date. Only an active rejection of the patterns of history that shape our relationship with storytellers today will repair this.

The following section presents the core pillars of postcolonialism, the theoretical framework underpinning this research. Thereafter, this paper will discuss the place of storytellers in precolonial Africa, with a focus on the case of the griot. I will map out the history of the griots from the precolonial era to the postcolonial era. Thereafter, I will reflect on the lessons the griots offer to the contemporary era before, in the conclusion, the implications of these lessons will be examined.

2. Theoretical Framework

Postcolonialism studies the “effects of colonization on cultures and societies” (Sawant, 2012, p. 120). It examines the ways in which colonialism interacted with the people and communities it encountered, and the nature of this interaction during and after the colonial process. Postcolonial theorists believe that the value in this examination lies in its revealing of the full extent of colonialism, and the insufficiency of decolonization. A postcolonial lens reveals to us the true scale of colonialism by placing its reach across the ages on display. Similarly, postcolonialism shows us that we still have a long way to go towards decolonization by spotlighting the aspects of our societies most desperately in need of decolonization. In this way, postcolonialism becomes a tool for learning about the full spectrum of the experience of the colonized.

Central to the problem postcolonialism seeks to solve is the process of defining postcolonial Africa. The founding thesis of postcolonialism is that the colonial world is reflected in the postcolonial world. This necessarily undermines the “post” in postcolonialism. Achille Mbembe, a seminal scholar in postcolonial studies attempts to repair this defect through his understanding of the postcolony. To Mbembe, all history exists as “a combination of several temporalities” (Mbembe, 2001, p. 15), rather than a single, linear timeline. Thus, the postcolony too exists not as a distinct period of history neatly cleaved from the precolonial and colonial eras, but as a range of overlapping timelines, displaying features evident and observed in previous timelines.

If the postcolony exists at the intersection of temporalities, what other intersections define the experience of individuals and institutions in postcolonies? The entire field of postcolonial studies attempts to answer this question. Mbembe sees postcolonial Africa as existing as an interlocked coexistence of practices whose origins are distributed across the precolonial, colonial, and post-colonial worlds (Mbembe, 2001). Homi Bhabha builds on this view by extending the typology of the interactions between the postcolony and its colonial and precolonial history. To Bhabha, the postcolonial condition is characterized by three recurring features: hybridity, a type of acculturation resulting from the encounter between the colonized and their subject; mimicry, in which the colonized imitates the colonizer but never truly becomes like them; and ambivalence, in which the colonist and the colonized experience both revulsion by and attraction to each other (Bhabha, 2012). These three features are not static; postcolonies display them each at different times, and sometimes at the same time. In this way, the postcolony reveals itself to be a deeply complex entity, deserving of specific and targeted analysis in academic study.

The overarching conclusion reached by Mbembe, Bhabha, and other similar theorists is that the postcolony often evolves to retain many characteristic features of the colony. Whether it does so through mimicry, hybridization, or ambivalence, or it does so via temporal overlap, the postcolonial world is inseparable from its colonial past, and this inseparability is put on full display by the retention of colonial practices in the contemporary age. Ngugi wa Thiong'o offers a complementary explanation of this retention. He describes the process by which the colonized come to be psychologically subjugated in addition to their physical subjugation. During the colonial era, a “cultural bomb” was detonated whose effect was to “annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves” (wa Thiong'o, 1986, p. 3). The mechanism of action of the cultural bomb was a systematic effort towards the “destruction, or the deliberate undervaluing of a people's culture, their art, dances, religions, history, geography, education, orature and literature” (wa Thiong'o, 1986, p. 16). In the absence of these histories and cultures to look to, it was inevitable that postcolonial African countries would retain aspects of the colonial era in the postcolonial world.

Scholars of Africa have proposed several solutions to this problem. The earliest group of intellectual leaders were “fascinated with Europe and its ideas,” renouncing African culture and “seeking to imitate Western civilization” (Falola, 2001). Others still believed that a focus on “what is indigenous to Africa” (Mazrui, 2005, p. 77) would drive African development, calling for a wholesale return to the institutions, cultures, and practices that defined Africa precolonialism. Others still, the accommodationists, sought to adjudicate what, within the Western tradition, could be extracted and applied to develop Africa (Falola, 2001).

The theoretical basis of this work is best described as an alternate form of the accommodationist tradition. Africa cannot aspire to imitate Europe because African people, cultures, and societies are vastly different from and have different needs to Europeans. Similarly, to call for a return to indigenous Africa, or for the accommodation of Western tradition within African indigenous practices, presumes the widespread adoption of pre-colonial African practices in every facet of African life. Inconveniently, much of the world around us is imported from the West, from the clothes we wear, to the languages we speak, all the way to the institutions that govern us. Deconstructing this hegemony will be a monumental task and will preoccupy African leaders and scholars for generations to come. In the meantime, however, it is possible to learn from pre-colonial history and seek out ways in which this Western-imported world can be amended, even by the slightest margins, to reflect alternate ways of existing in a postcolonial world.

3. Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative, literature-based methodology, largely based on analysis of secondary sources and grounded in comparative analysis. I analyze historical and cultural scholarship on the griots, synthesizing this to construct an image of griot-patron relations in precolonial West Africa and explore its implications for understanding state-media relations today. This research is situated within the interpretivist and interdisciplinary traditions, leveraging accounts of griots to generate novel perspectives on the relationships between political leadership and mass media.

4. Findings

4.1. Griots Prior to Colonialism

Storytelling is an essential part of every culture, African or otherwise. In addition to being entertaining, stories serve an important didactic function, facilitating the process by which a society articulates and transmits its culture. Because of this, storytelling, particularly in traditional Africa, has always been “an important event,” providing an occasion for storytellers to “transmit a people’s norms, values, ideas and thoughts through the narration of folktales, myths and legends” (Sone, 2018, p. 153). Many storytellers were granted special roles and showered with immense respect and honor in recognition of the immense importance of their work to the cultural life of the community. The griots were an archetypal example of this.¹

A griot is any member of a usually caste-based collective of oral historians and musicians found in much of present-day West Africa (Ashworth, 2012). Some of the earliest accounts of griot-like personalities are found in written accounts by 11th century Arabs, 14th century African and Portuguese explorers, and 16th century Europeans (Ashworth, 2012). The term griot is broad and describes a large and multivariate set of overlapping personalities that recur in many West African cultures. The terms *jeli*, *gewel*, *gawlo*, *marok’a*, and *bendere*—found in the Mandinka, Wolof, Fulani, Hausa, and Mossi languages, respectively—all refer to a persona that could reasonably be described as a griot (Carter, 2009; Leymarie-Ortiz, 1979). Evidence of griots and griot-like personas has been found in areas including modern day Mauritania, Senegal, the Gambia, Mali, Guinea Bissau, the Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Niger, Nigeria, Chad, and the Upper Volta region (Leymarie-Ortiz, 1979).

The griots were a prominent feature of societies with an entrenched caste system. They formed a sub-group within the artisans’ caste which, in Wolof society, was below the *ger* (free men) and above the *jam* (war captives) (Leymarie-Ortiz, 1979). Among the most authoritative portraits of the griots, Griots and Griottes, by Thomas A. Hale, lists no less than 15 different functions the griots played in their societies. The griots were genealogists, historians, advisors, spokespersons, diplomats, mediators, interpreters and translators, musicians, composers, teachers, exhorters, warriors, witnesses, praise-singers, and participants in a range of important ceremonies including naming ceremonies, weddings, coronations, and funerals (Hale, 1998). Isabelle Leymarie-Ortiz adopts a similarly broad conception of the role of the griots, describing them as “the keepers of tradition,” and as “moralists, counsellors, preceptors of princes, spokesmen, public announcers, mediators, messengers, buffoons, porters, and tax collectors” (Leymarie-Ortiz, 1979, p. 187). Griots are described elsewhere as acting in the role of “counselor, mediator, master of ceremonies, diplomat, translator and teacher” (Ashworth, 2012, p. 1), of “traditional praise-singer, musician, social go-between, counsellor or dancer and

¹ Although female griots—called griottes—exist, they are minimally discussed in scholarship. The term ‘griot’ will be used to refer in general to refer to both male and female griots. Where the distinction between the two is necessary to the argument, the terms griot and griotte will be used.

acrobat” (Panzacchi, 1994, p. 190) and as “public praise speakers, singers, family historians, counselors, and confidantes” (Schulz, 1997, p. 445). The griots were, in effect, the heart of many precolonial West African societies: they were the “binding agent” (Ashworth, 2012, p. 1) and the “center of social interaction” (Leymarie-Ortiz, 1979) within their various communities.

Griots typically derived their legitimacy from patrilineal lineage and skill (Ashworth, 2012). One version of the epic of Sundiata, the founder of the Mali Empire, for example, begins with one such invocation of the ancestors and an appeal to this patrilineal lineage:

Listen to me, children of the Bright country, and hear the great deeds of ages past.

The words I speak are those of my father and his father before him, pure and full of truth.

For we are griots.

Centuries of law and learning reside within our minds.

Thus we serve kings with the wisdom of history, bringing to life the lessons of the past so that the future may flourish.

Listen, then, to the story of Sundiata, the Lion King, who overcame all things to walk with greatness.²

As demonstrated above, each griot, each time they rose to recite a poem, sing a song, or tell a story, was in communion with the ancestry of griots who came before him. The most immediate of these ancestors – that is, older men within the family – were responsible for inducting the prospective griot into his new life as the cultural heartbeat of his community. This induction was rigorous. From as early as five years of age, the prospective was taught to play the kora, a 21-stringed instrument that was theorized to bear occult power that could kill mortals (Ashworth, 2012). In addition, daily reinforcement was used to help the aspiring griot memorize the epic stories and histories of the community (Ashworth, 2012). At the end of this training, the griot was a persuasive oralist, a deft musician, and a figure of wisdom within his community. He drew on his mastery of each of these traits to produce a vast repertoire of “histories and genealogies... epic poetry, ballads, fables, folktales, myths, and... news of current events and works lauding patrons, rulers and hosts” (Ashworth, 2012, p. 49). He was valued as an advisor to the people, a reliable mediator of disputes, and the facilitator of a range of important cultural rites. The griots also provided information to the public about the past and the present, keeping them informed on current events and the works of traditional leaders, and of the life and times of the society’s ancestors (Ashworth, 2012).

Given the scope of the griot’s authority and influence, it is no surprise that traditional leaders – chiefs, and other cultural political administrators – sought to maintain a close relationship with them. In an era and a geography where many rulers derived their legitimacy from their kingly or otherwise aristocratic ancestry, the griots played a crucial role in legitimizing the rulers’ claim to authority (Ashworth, 2012; Leymarie-Ortiz, 1979; Schulz, 1997). The griot’s knowledge of history made him an important resource in credentialing new leaders and granting the legitimacy that they needed in order to govern. In some cases, the griots were known to rewrite the less favorable aspects of a given leader’s ancestry in order to preserve their public image (Schulz, 1997). Most of the time, however, griots could be relied on to look into his internalized historical records and provide the evidence needed to validate a leader’s claim to the throne. Once a leader had been installed, the griot was a valued advisor in his court. Griots constantly escorted traditional leaders and were privy to the most confidential information about the affairs of the community (Leymarie-Ortiz, 1979). They were called upon to weigh in on important issues and decisions and worked to maintain the image of the leaders by proclaiming their works to the people (Schulz, 1997).

Traditional leaders and other aristocrats often offered handsome compensation to the griots in exchange for their services (Schulz, 1997), typically consisting of “food, clothes, horses, cattle, jewelry and even fiefs and slaves” (Panzacchi, 1994, p. 190). These elites sustained the griots, providing the necessities on which they subsisted and reinforcing their social status (Ashworth, 2012). The griot’s relationship with traditional leadership could thus be understood as a “patron-sponsor relationship” that “effectively guaranteed power and social status for both the ruler and the griot” (Ashworth, 2012, p. 3). Traditional leaders and griots thus shared a symbiotic relationship in which they worked to maintain each other’s status socially, politically, and economically (Ashworth, 2012).

² Domenica R. Paterno (1994). The True Lion King of Africa: The Epic History of Sundiata, *King of Old Mali*. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED386732>

The relationship between griots and traditional leadership was not always stable. Despite the codependence of these two personas, their relationship could be tense. Because griots were often itinerant, moving from one family or village to another within the same wider society (Hale, 1998; Hopkins, 1997; Leymarie-Ortiz, 1979; Panzacchi, 1994), they tended to have a deep and varied knowledge of the range of issues facing their communities. The griots' political neutrality made this knowledge a highly sought after resource; suggestions to leadership of ways to improve public welfare were often provided by the griots (Hopkins, 1997). The griots' ability to draw on this knowledge and reflect it in their music and orations made them prime critics of the political establishment and social commentators on the most contentious issues of the day. Thus, beyond their work in validating political leaders, griots would come to serve the equally important function of cautioning them when they strayed from their community's expectations and advising them on how they might re-align with these expectations.

Griot social commentary existed on a spectrum, from direct and critical to veiled and esoteric. At its most direct, the advice of a griot to a client left the listener with "no choice but to follow it" (Hale, 1998, p. 26). In one account by a 19th century French captain, a high-ranking official in the Samory Toure regime's army named Ba-Bemba was fiercely criticized by a group of griots when, during a siege of a large town, Ba-Bemba granted clemency to a group of the town's citizens who had submitted cattle and hostages in exchange for mercy (Hale, 1998). In light of this criticism, Ba-Bemba recanted his original offer and attacked the remaining defenders (Hale, 1998).

More often, however, the griots' criticisms were veiled, vague and ominous, inviting the listener to pause and reflect on their behavior within the moment. Here, a griot might draw on the wealth of aphorisms they had committed to memory to call a client to order when they had erred. Hopkins lists examples of some of these proverbs. These include "No king can reign over the world forever," "God created men, and men are not equal. Even tomorrow morning men are not the same," "God created men. Thus one should not say there is no one stronger than oneself," and many others (Hopkins, 1997, p. 58). Through each of these seemingly truistic declarations, the griot would caution against despotism, prohibited inter-caste activities, arrogance, and several other vices within their clients. Other times, griots could take advantage of their metaphorical speech to subtly hint at a leader's shortcomings and sometimes outright threaten them. Additionally, griots could seek to undermine traditional leaders by alluding to less favorable epochs in their family's history (Schulz, 1997). In each of these ways, the griot both counselled and held public leadership to account.

The ability to occupy the roles of both counsel and critic to the political administration positioned the griot uniquely within his society. Many groups, such as the caste of prisoners of war, were bound by the expectation of perpetual, uncritical allegiance to the political leaders. Additionally, the public, even when they had criticisms of the governing body, did not always have the immediate access to their ear necessary to forward their concerns. The griots repaired this by serving as the mouthpiece of both the people and the state mediating the bidirectional communication pathway between the people and their leaders.

4.2. Colonialism and the Griots

Central to the French colonial project was the belief that the France was endowed with a special duty to civilize the 'primitive' world. According to colonial era officials, the citizens of world outside of Europe, particularly Africa, existed in a backwards state out of which they needed to evolve. This rhetoric was not novel—all European powers claimed to be involved in a civilizing mission abroad (Conklin, 2000). The French went one step further than this however, codifying the *mission civilisatrice* into the official doctrine of their imperial project. This doctrine would become one of the hallmarks of French colonialism, defining the colonies the French would build, particularly in the West African territories of present-day Benin, Burkina Faso, Guinea, the Ivory Coast, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Senegal.

France and other European powers faced a common problem, however. In what Mahmood Mamdani describes as the native problem, imperial powers, distant and unfamiliar to the indigenous majorities they sought to conquer, needed to innovate modes of governance that would be acceptable to their new subjects despite their unfamiliarity (Mamdani, 1999; Müller-Crepon, 2020). Several solutions to this problem were developed. Direct rule is the most relevant of these to this research and was largely practiced by the French. The objective of direct rule was to elevate to elite status a subset of the native population. These elites would earn this elevation, as well as expanded legal and political rights, by assimilating into colonial culture (Mamdani, 1999). This elite would then serve as the progenitors of the French empire, executing their will on the ground in the colonies. Direct rule was the hallmark of the civilizing mission: it sought to

condemn and dismiss indigenous culture, presenting it as backwards and seeking to eradicate it (Mamdani, 1999). A new, Westernized elite would lead this eradication and would embody the 'civilized' life to the native population.

Education was an immensely important feature of direct rule. Through education, the colonial administration was able to create an elite among the natives, 'civilizing' them through its education system. In 1883, France piloted a novel curriculum in its then colonies. At the heart of this curriculum was the belief that the project of civilizing the backwards world had to involve converting Africans "into a kind of 'black Frenchmen'" (Yates, 2018, p. 97). In order to do this, half of all learning under this new curriculum would involve learning French language and culture (Yates, 2018). The study of indigenous languages was strictly prohibited. Those who succeeded within this new curriculum "served as employees of the administration and commerce" within the French colonies (Yates, 2018, p. 97), responsible for managing the day-to-day affairs of the colonies. They would become the direct rulers of the colonial French empire.

The French colonial administration was deeply destructive to precolonial structures of leadership and governance. Precolonial leadership—typically, the chieftaincy—embodied a complex interplay of "ritual, economic, political and other functions" (Alexandre, 1970). Additionally, the criteria for chieftaincy were often rigid and codified: the chiefs had to come from specific families, be a specific sex, age, and other such traits (Alexandre, 1970). The chieftaincy was also often not consolidated in a single individual but rather, dispersed across several individuals. In the Kotokoli Federation of Togo, for example, two twin personas—the Uro-Eso or king-god, and the Ladin-Ndo or Chief of the Earth—served jointly as the seat of administrative power within the society.

Importantly, the nature of the precolonial chieftaincy necessitated the presence of a griotlike figure to empower and hold the chief to account. The complex set of prerequisites for potential chiefs were investigated by griots, who drew on their encyclopedic knowledge of rituals and genealogy to assess the worthiness of potential chiefs. Additionally, the complex interplay of political and spiritual functions within the chieftaincy necessitated an external persona capable of drawing on their knowledge of the culture to call the chieftaincy to order when it was acting in error. Finally, the griots played an important role in mediating disputes between and within the different levels of a given society.

French colonialism saw, within the structure of the chieftaincy, an opportunity for control over native populations. Specifically, French colonists believed in the potential of natives to execute their will with the least resistance from the native population. The French looked to the chief as "an agent of the colonial government" whose role it was to "carry out the instructions of his colonial administrator" (Crowder and Ikime, 1970). Unlike the British-appointed chiefs, whose function was downstream of their role as instruments of direct rule, the French chiefs were mere bureaucrats within the architecture of the French colonial administration. Their role was to do as they were instructed without asking questions. The chieftaincy was dead, and turned into a mindless cog in the sprawling, cross-national colonial administration.

The shift in the nature of the chieftaincy dramatically altered the prerequisites for leadership within the colonies. Where previously, ritual, ancestry, and other culturally significant traits were the sources of kingship, the prerequisites for colonial era chieftaincy were markedly different and held meaningfully less ritualistic significance. Where a chief would, for example, have had to be descended from a royal lineage previously, one merely had to be sufficiently fluent in French and enculturated into the French way of life in order to be a colonial era administrator. The effect of this change on the griots was dramatic and varied. Some griots gravitated to these newly elevated political administrators, lending them the cultural legitimacy they desperately needed in order to govern (Schulz, 1997). These griots sang the praises of these new leaders, invented noble genealogies for them, and actively publicized their activities to the public (Schulz, 1997). In doing so, however, these griots delegitimized themselves and their claim to being faithful clients of their original patrons, and honest representatives of the indigenous culture. They would be publicly questioned on the legitimacy of their allegiance to their new clients, frequently accused of having insufficient information about the new patron's family to be able to recount an accurate family history (Schulz, 1997).

Of the griots who did not capitulate to the new administrators, some decided to pursue a colonial education and enter into the colonial administration, a decision that would mark them as sellouts and collaborators to the native populations (Panzacchi, 1994). Other griots collaborated with the French who leveraged their in-depth knowledge of indigenous tradition to obtain inside information about target societies (Leymarie-Ortiz, 1979). These griots were richly rewarded for their services. Others still pivoted away from their work as griots, taking up new work as farmers, tailors, vendors, and other similar menial, vastly less noble work. A fourth group remained faithful to their original patrons, serving as their praise-singers and confidantes until the end.

Importantly, the decline in the power and influence of the griots is not singularly explained by the displacement of traditional leadership as the mode of the West African chieftaincy. Rather, several factors converged during this epoch that made the lives and work of the griots vastly more difficult. The griots' political speech, deemed as radical and as having the potential to incite the native population against the central governments, marked the griots for persecution by the colonial government (Hoffman, 2001). Meanwhile, tensions with Christian missionaries, who labelled griot activity as pagan, furthered the ostracization of the griots within their communities (Austen and Jansen, 1996).

The griots have never recovered from the effects that the French had on their trade. Since independence, the fact of democratization has marginalized the social stratum within which the griots once operated (Leymarie-Ortiz, 1979). Many of the griot caste have since foregone their traditional roles, pursuing more conventional and vastly more profitable careers. Some have pursued economic opportunities abroad (Ashworth, 2012), where they work to present their culture and heritage to Western audiences (Mekuria, 2006). Others still have remained at home—in Senegal, for example, many griots have diversified their work to include activities such as hairdressing and other similar trade work (Mekuria, 2006). Beyond these changes, griot life is much more accessible today than it was two centuries ago. Women griots—griottes—are much more common and are especially active in the diaspora where they write, sing, and choreograph impactful works for fellow diasporic audiences (Mekuria, 2006). Individuals who do not descend from griot castes and ancestries have also gradually assimilated into the griot tradition and are doing the important work of preserving and distributing their cultures at home and abroad (Mekuria, 2006).

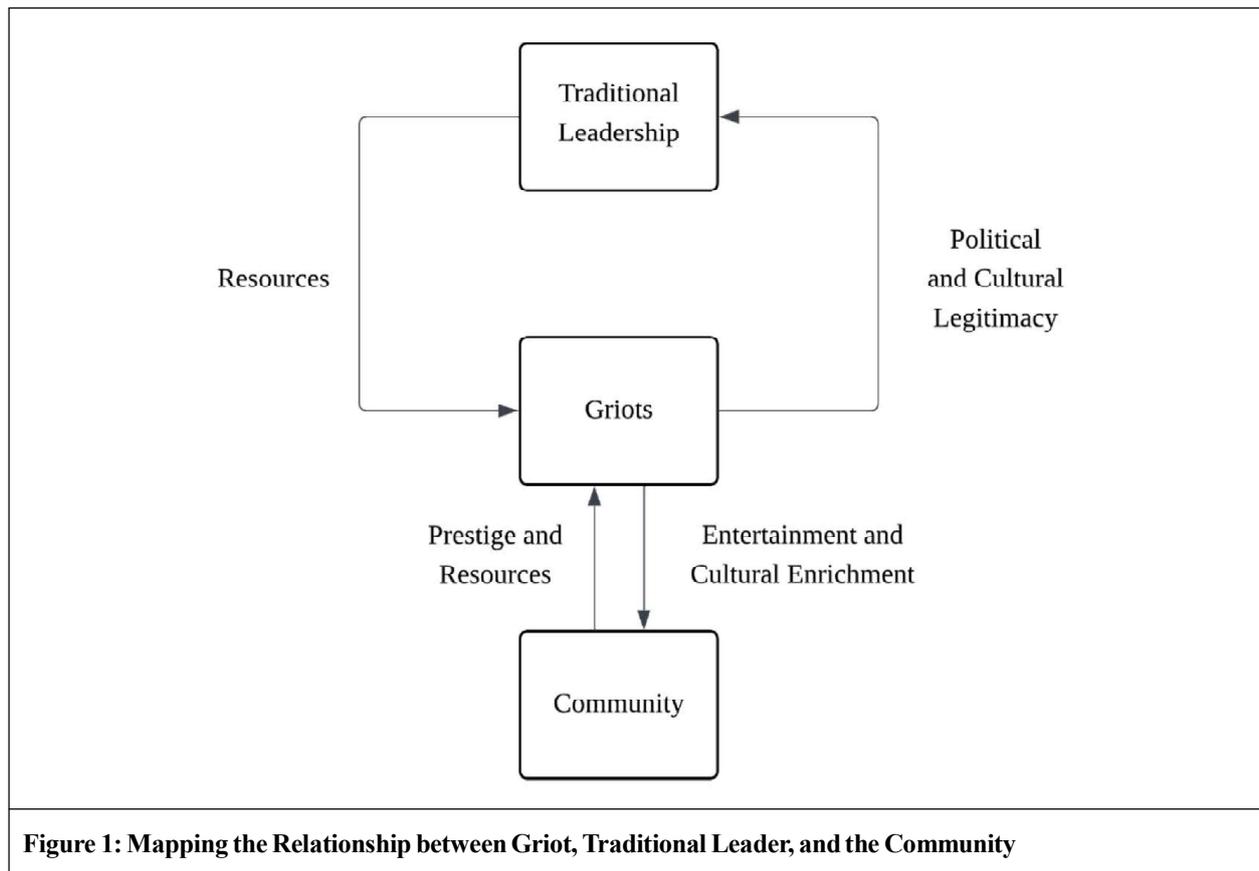
5. Discussion

The griots' relationship with the leadership of the day was an early model of the relationship between the media and the state. Prior to the innovation of the printing press, mass media and rapid telecommunications, the griots were an integral part of the media ecosystem, often embodying, within a single individual or group of individuals, various arms of the media. When the griot acted as a genealogist to the public, he was at once a historian, peering deep into the history and background of the leader-in-waiting, and a political analyst, offering a robust, culturally grounded testimony as to the capacity of the heir to the chieftaincy to govern. Similarly, when the griot subtly denounced the chieftaincy for their misdeeds, he was a whistleblower, sounding the alarm bells to the public about the impending threats to the polity posed by its administration. Meanwhile, the griot in singing and reciting epic poetry about the heroes of age, was jointly novelist, playwright, screenwriter, and poet, providing entertainment and cultural enrichment to the community, for which the community rewarded him with prestige and resources.

Evidently, the griots, as precursors to the institution of the media, shared a complex, dynamic and multidimensional relationship with the political administration and the people. The griot enjoyed the relative freedom to endorse and critique the political administration, to advise and caution the general public, and to guide the ritualistic life of the community. Crucially, the relationship between the political administration and the griots was symbiotic; neither could survive without the other. It was the chieftaincy's patronage that sustained the ability of the griots to serve as intermediaries between the government and the people, and between the physical and spiritual realms. Meanwhile, it was the griots' endorsement that legitimized the king's governance, granting the popular and ritualistic legitimacy to rule. This symbiosis enabled both the traditional leadership and the griot to effectively serve the political and cultural life of their communities.

Colonialism radically altered the relationship between traditional leadership and the griots. Specifically, the colonists upset the balance of power between the two parties. Initially, this relationship was held together by the flow of resources from the chieftaincy to the griot, and the flow of legitimacy from the griot to the chieftaincy. In the wake of colonialism, however, the ability of the traditional leaders to provide these resources was dramatically diminished. Suddenly, access to the resources that the griots had once relied on for subsistence was in jeopardy.

Conceptualizing the griots as a precursor to contemporary mass media in their relationship with the state reveals striking similarities between griot-polity relations and contemporary media-state relations. In non-democratic, non-Western countries, the media is often understood to be merely "an extension of state power" (Figure 1) (Hammond, 2016, p. 80). Within this view, media is seen "as an instrument of power" (Hammond, 2016, p. 80), reinforcing the power of elites, primarily the government, and serving as a tool with which it does its bidding. Despite evidence to the contrary, particularly in highly repressive environments where artists, musicians, journalists, and other media personnel are involved in concerted efforts at subverting state-sponsored censorship and suppression, this evidence is the exception rather than the rule. Overwhelmingly, the media infrastructure in these places does not enable the viewpoint diversity



and narrative plurality that characterizes the overwhelming majority of the democratic world. Here, the media is not only assumed to be independent but is empowered to serve as “a watchdog on the powerful” (Hammond, 2016, p. 80). Once again, there is some complexity to this view: critical scholarship observes that many supposedly democratic media landscapes are characterized by a range of perspectives that is confined to the views of political and economic elites, narrowing the scope of controversy (Hammond, 2016). In general, however, the media in democratic environments is trusted to be a critic of the powerful, “rather than simply an arm of official authority” (Hammond, 2016).

The West African country of Mali offers a prime opportunity for conceptualizing postcolonial state media relations. Mali gained independence from France in 1960. Since then, its political landscape has been tumultuous. The country was authoritarian for the first three decades of its independence before beginning to democratize in the early 1990s (Mali, 2025). Since 2012, however, Mali has experienced dramatic levels of backsliding, with a succession of coups culminating in the installation of the military junta that governs the country today. The junta has postponed elections indefinitely, cracked down on opposition, and significantly restricted media activity. As a result of this and much more, Freedom House in its most recent Freedom in the World report awarded Mali a Global Freedom Score of 24 out of 100 and a designation of “Not Free” (Mali: Freedom in the World 2025 Country Report, 2024). The Human Freedom Index, produced by the Cato Institute and the Fraser Institute has seen Mali’s human freedom ranking tumble since 2000 from 6.53 (93rd in the world) to 5.75 (123rd in the world), placing the country more than a full point lower than the global average human freedom score (Vásquez *et al.*, 2024).

Mali’s media landscape matches the predictions Hammond makes regarding state-media relations in un-democratic states. Mali’s media landscape bloomed when Moussa Traoré was deposed in 1991, seeing significant increases in the number of newspapers, radio stations and TV channels (Mali, 2025). Recently, however, instances of “censorship, self-censorship, and threats against journalists” have significantly risen in the country (Mali: Freedom in the World 2025 Country Report, 2024). The Malian junta has placed significant pressure on the media to glorify the junta in its productions and targeted those it has deemed to be critical to its approach and activities (Mali: Freedom in the World 2025 Country Report, 2024). Several broadcasters, particularly those with ties to France, such as France 24 and RFI, has been suspended and reporting on political activities was briefly banned by the Malian media regulator, the Higher Authority for Communication (HAC) (Mali: Freedom in the World 2025 Country Report, 2024), which serves at the pleasure of the government (Mali, 2025).

Amidst expanded efforts by states, such as Mali, at controlling how and under what circumstances the media can operate, many people call for, as a knee-jerk reaction, the full-scale privatization and liberalization of the media. To these people, the Malian case is a result of a political landscape that made it possible for the state to play a role in determining the *modus operandus* of the media environment. Crucially, however, full-scale privatization is an imperfect solution: Private actors, by virtue of their profit orientation, are prone to sensationalism and will produce and promote the forms of media they deem to be most profitable regardless of their truthfulness or social value, and at the expense of narrative plurality and diversity. Private actors also tend to platform perspectives that are favorable to themselves, their funders, and their interests. They also commercialize access to the media, with devastating implications for access for the poorest and most vulnerable populations.

The precolonial West African relationship between state and the griots reflects a middle ground between these two extremes. Rather than parroting the chieftaincy, or perennially critiquing it, the griots wore both these hats and more at once, comfortably navigating the middle ground between what has, for a long time, been presented as a dichotomous choice that media institutions must make between overtly pro- and overtly anti-state agenda-setting. This conclusion, though surprising, has important implications for contemporary West African media landscape. It is not merely enough to replace one master—the colonial administration, or the state, and their monopoly over the media—with another—the private sector. A productive relationship between the state and the media is possible and is within reach and is, in many cases, given the state's access to an abundance of resources, desirable.

Notably, the state's patronage of the media does not need to be absolute. States can—and should—invest in the subsidization of access to journalism, music, literature, art, and other forms of media. Equally, states can—and should—work to reduce the regulatory thresholds for prospective media producers and massively expand access to the media landscape for private actors. These and many other solutions represent a healthy middle ground between state ownership and private ownership of the media, balancing equitable access and distribution with independence of thought. Such solutions likely abound in the annals of precolonial African history, reminding us that colonialism stripped the continent of a range of systems that, modified for the present moment, have the potential to generate unimaginable gains for the African continent.

6. Conclusion

The objective of this paper was to explore the figure of the griot in West African history—his work, his influence, and his relationships with the political, social, and cultural life of his community. The griots were a complex and dynamic caste who, prior to colonialism, were the cornerstone of public life in their various communities. They represent an early example of cultural storytellers in precolonial Africa, and their relationships with the political administration of their societies reflect a premodern example of a relationship between the state and the media. By navigating the difficult middle ground between independence and state-patronage, the griots reveal to us the broadness of the range of alternatives to the rise in state ownership of the media in Africa in general and West Africa in general. A postcolonial approach to studying griot-leader relations thus offers fascinating lessons on the structure of political life in precolonial Africa with important implications for envisioning state-media relations in postcolonial Africa.

Conventional approaches to studying the griots have sought to place them within their cultural context, reflecting on the role they played in the ritual life of their various societies. This research takes this analysis a step further to situate the griots within the broader context of the political life in precolonial West Africa. This recontextualization of the work of the griots is important because at their core, the griots were a class of storytellers. Prior to their work as cultural leaders, political advisors, and social commentators, the griots were involved in the process of narrative construction. This process was an inherently political one. Narratives shape the preferences that people submit to their leaders, determine who is and isn't represented in the priorities of the government, and influence how receptive people are to the government and its efforts. It is for this reason that placing the griots and their work as storytellers within the context of the prevailing politics of that era is so important.

A major limitation of this research lies in the struggle of properly qualifying the scale of the griots' influence in precolonial West African societies. This is especially problematic given the sheer number and distribution of the societies that occupied present-day West Africa during the pre-colonial era. It is unlikely that the griots enjoyed equivalent, high levels of influence in each of these societies. It is equally unlikely that the griots enjoyed parallel influence in politics, religion, and culture in different places. What is more likely is that different griots in different places at different points in history enjoyed different levels of influence in their different areas of specialization. Thus, where a

griot in present-day Senegal may have been a more influential cultural leader, a griot in present-day Burkina Faso may have been a trusted political pundit to their community. This reduces the generalizability of the conclusions of this research but does not undermine its implications. The highly likely heterogeneity of the griots reveals an even broader range of opportunities to investigate griot-leader relations, and to glean even more lessons for state-media relations in the present.

More seriously, as is always the case when drawing parallels between noncontemporaneous phenomena, the challenge of accounting for the unique circumstances faced by the griots two hundred years ago and the mass media today is enormous. This challenge is exacerbated by the minimal research done into the griots and into this aspect of their work. The solution to this is an increased effort at diversifying the angles with which the griots and other precolonial figures are understood. Despite its shortcomings, however, this research reveals the immeasurable merits of decolonizing our vision of the media, the state, and the relationship they share. Both state-owned media and private media are imported innovations on the African continent. Neither of them serves the continent well in the present. The decolonization of media studies, which begins with recognizing the false dichotomy we have been placed into by the existing models of state-media relations, is a reminder that deep in the annals of history are alternate models for structuring our world. For a long time, our vision has been constrained and our options restricted. A whole new world awaits us.

Conflicts of Interest

This project has no relevant conflicts of interest.

References

- Achille Mbembe. (2001). *On the Postcolony* (Issue Vol. 41). University of California Press.
- Africa: Media Independence Undermined by Ownership Consolidation and Pressure from Advertisers (2025). May 14. <https://rsf.org/en/region/africa>
- Alexandre, P. (1970). *The Problems of Chieftaincies in French Speaking Africa*. in M. Crowder and O. Ikime (Eds.), *West African Chiefs: Their Changing Status Under Colonial Rule and Independence*, 24-28, Africana Pub. Corp.
- Ashworth, R.C.R. (2012). *New Media, Oral Histories, and the Expansion and Modification of West African Griot Culture: A Case Study of Alhaji Papa Susso*. Ph.D., Virginia Commonwealth University. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1268180553/abstract/B041C14BD1E64481PQ/1>
- Austen, R.A. and Jansen, J. (1996). *History, Oral Transmission and Structure in Ibn Khaldun's Chronology of Mali Rulers*. *History in Africa*, 23, 17-28. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3171932>
- Bhabha, H.K. (2012). *The Location of Culture*, 2nd Edition, Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203820551>
- Carter, T.L. (2009). *The Historical Role of Griots in Gambian Politics*. Ph.D., University of California, Los Angeles. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/304851559/abstract/B3F58885F6254BB2PQ/1>
- Conklin, A.L. (2000). Introduction. in *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930*, 1-10, Stanford University Press. <https://www.degruyterbrill.com/document/doi/10.1515/9780804765039-004/html>
- Crowder, M. and Ikime, O. (1970). Introduction. in *West African Chiefs: Their Changing Status Under Colonial Rule and Independence*, Africana Pub. Corp.
- Falola, T. (2001). *Nationalism and African Intellectuals*. University of Rochester Press.
- Hale, T.A. (1998). *Griots and Griottes: Masters of Words and Music*. Indiana University Press.
- Hammond, P. (2016). *Theorising Media/State Relations and Power*. in *Routledge Handbook of Media, Conflict and Security*, Routledge.
- Hoffman, B.G. (2001). *Griots at War: Conflict, Conciliation, and Caste in Mande*. Indiana University Press. <https://openurl.ebsco.com/contentitem/nlebk:66880?sid=ebsco:plink:crawler&id=ebsco:nlebk:66880&crl=c>
- Hopkins, N.S. (1997). *Memories of Griots*. *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, (17), 43-72. doi: <https://doi.org/10.2307/521607>

- Leymarie-Ortiz, I. (1979). The Griots of Senegal and Change. *Africa: Rivista Trimestrale Di Studi e Documentazione Dell'Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente*, 34(3), 183-197.
- Mali. (2025). Freedom in the World 2025 Country Report. Freedom House, 2024. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/mali/freedom-world/2025>
- Mamdani, M. (1999). Historicizing Power and Responses to Power: Indirect Rule and Its Reform. *Social Research*, 66(3), 859-886.
- Mazrui, A.A. (2005). The Re-Invention of Africa: Edward Said, V.Y. Mudimbe, and Beyond, *Research in African Literatures*, 36(3), 68-82.
- Mekuria, W. (2006). Modern-Day Griots: Imagining Africa, Choreographing Experience, in a West African Performance in New York. Ph.D., City University of New York. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/305355683/abstract/50A6C6276CCD4B14PQ/1>
- Müller-Crepon, C. (2020). Continuity or Change? (In)direct Rule in British and French Colonial Africa. *International Organization*, 74(4), 707-741. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818320000211>
- Panzacchi, C. (1994). The Livelihoods of Traditional Griots in Modern Senegal. *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 64(2), 190-210. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1160979>
- Sawant, D.S.B. (2012). Postcolonial Theory: Meaning and Significance. *Proceedings of National Seminar Postmodern Literary Theory and Literature*, 120-127.
- Schulz, D. (1997). Praise Without Enchantment: Griots, Broadcast Media, and the Politics of Tradition in Mali. *Africa Today*, 44(4), 443-464.
- Sone, E.M. (2018). The Folktale and Social Values in Traditional Africa. *Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies*, 4(2), 142-159. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23277408.2018.1485314>
- The State of Artist Human Rights Defenders in Africa. (2023). East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project. www.defenddefenders.org/reports
- The State of Media Freedom and Safety of Journalists in Africa (No. ADD-CI/2023/02). (2022). UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000389343.locale=en>
- Vásquez, I., Mitchell, M.D., Murphy, R. and Schneider, G.S. (2024). The Human Freedom Index 2024. The Cato Institute and the Fraser Institute. <https://www.cato.org/human-freedomindex/2024>
- wa Thiong'o, N. (1986). *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Boydell & Brewer, Limited. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/columbia/detail.action?docID=6311142>
- Yates, D.A. (2018). France and Africa. in *Africa and the World*, 95-118, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-62590-4_5

Cite this article as: Mukudzeiishe Madzivire (2025). Rethinking State-Media Relations in Contemporary Africa: Lessons from Griot Patronage in Precolonial West African Societies. *International Journal of African Studies*, 5(2), 1-12. doi: 10.51483/IJAFRS.5.2.2025.1-12.