

Griot/Djali

Poetry, Music, History, Message

Griot has grown in significance in the U.S., essentially because of the burgeoning perception here, now, that Afro-America is inextricably bound not only to Africa, but to the U.S., Pan-America (the Western Hemisphere, the actual “Western World”), and, through its Pan-African diaspora (pre & post and always, right now, modern), international culture too.

So the word *Griot*, the poet, musician, historian, story teller, is getting known all over the world. Though “French” as transmitted “symbol,” it is the best-known term for the West African *Djali* (or *Djeli*, but *Djeli ya* also means the Djali’s act, his “getting down” to take us up and out), the Central and South African *Imbongi*, the East African *Mshairi* or *Ngombe* (rapper), the Yoruba *Iiala*, all carry the same general meaning, though altered somewhat by the detail of history of the specific culture they come out of, Africa is a continent, there are many cultures, from West to Central to East as from South to Central to North. To say African anything is like saying European anything. Where you talking about? . . . the question.

Griot, with its “French” vibration, from the colonial “gift” the northerners imposed on their piece of the West African pie, yet carries with it the insistence of “Cry.” As in Cry Out? From tears, or in the essentially secular remonstrance of “Town Crier,” as it was used in the North, Europe. (There is also, with that, the inference, in the word, of “Gray,” as in *Gris*, so that the Gray is being cried away, or there is

some presence bursting out of the grayness. The fact that “gris-gris” is a “fetish,” i.e., carrier of, or celebrator of, or homage to, whatever power kept us cool, kept the gray away. (You mean “Grays,” like we used to call “white” people? If African “Lucy” is human #1, how does “white” get in it, unless you from outside the Van Allen belt?)

What is important about this is that if you look at the Masks of Drama, you see the geography and philosophical aesthetic of the world. The smile at the bottom of the world, sided by the frown at the top. It means that the southerners’, the Africans’, highest point of revelation was the unbridled joy that we still find in Black U.S. churches, or now, with more “integration,” in Rock concerts everywhere. Those old women screaming in church on Sundays, “getting happy,” the Gospel (God Spell). Going up and outta here to receive the soul’s revelation! Another name for the Djali is the *Gleeman*! Dig it? Is that why we called “Shine,” cause we be gleeman? (One Greek philosopher hated us because, he said, we be smilin all the time. Yeh? Well, not no more!) So it could be “Cry” as in the southern “Shouts” and “Hollers” and in them churches they was sure hollerin.

In the north, they taught us in school, tragedy is the highest revelation of humanity, hence the frown. In Ency. Brit, they say they yet do not understand the purpose of laughter! and describe it as a concatenation of physical connections!! (Oh, yeh!). So that the dude who iced his ol man, slept with his mommy, and put out his own eyes so he could go colonial and not have to dig it is a paradigm of northern revelation, like Nietzsche said, Emotion interferes with my thinking!

Djali is more to the point, though *Griot* is its translatable quantum. Like Rock & Roll means R&B. But *Griot* is specific enough, until you get under the word, and understand that the Djali was to *raise* us, with the poetry, the music, the history, the message, to take us up and out, not to drag us. (That’s why we still call dumb stuff “a drag,” you know, like the Klan is a drag. That’s why we call “Squares”—which the Egyptians said was the angle of failure, while the pyramid is the angle of “Success”—those who are “Lame,” like the first Crazy Eddie, Eddie Pus.)

The Djali is not a “Town Crier,” he is a Town Laugher. We were not screaming when Trane blew because we were sad, were dragged, Trane had got down and went out and took us up with him! Up up and away, beyond the squares. He had got ON (like the African city named so because it was precisely constructed under the Sun to dig the biggest

Sol we know). The original meaning of “Comedy” is “together or to gather in Joy” not “Slap Stick” (ow!).

So the Djali, in his revelation of the “everywhere allways.” The “message” is not just “Six O’Clock and All’s Well,” it might be Gylan Kain saying, “You shdda cut the mf, made him bleed. You shdda made it personal!” It could be Amus Mor saying, “Who are we, where are we going?” It could be Larry Neal saying, “Don’t Say Goodbye to the Pork Pie Hat.” It could be Margaret Walker saying, “For my people, everywhere. . . .” You know.

The misunderstanding that many of us have, even those who style themselves “Afrocentric,” is that we don’t understand that Africa colors everything that exists! In the Western Hemisphere, we are a combination of African, European, Native (Asian). That is the culture and the people, what ain’t that ain’t here, except on paper, or as paper. The reciting of poetry with music, recycled in the ’50s by Langston Hughes, etc., and which received such ignorant response (both pro and con), was not new, it was the basis of what poetry (musical speech) has always been. Just as the talking heads of European theater, which got, after the Victorians and the modern Imp of colonialism, less integrated with music and dance, as ignorant supremacy, the devil’s brew, took over the world’s mind, and convinced people they didn’t exist and nobody else did either, Never did! Otherwise yall wouldn’t be laughing and still in chains.

Poetry is music! Read Du Bois’s *Black Reconstruction*, a history book could move you as a poem. The African, whose early society was communal, and woman dominated, created, from the beginning (*art* means “exist,” e.g., “and thou art with me”), social expression that replicated the structure and nature of that society. Mother Africa, the Mother Land. Not “the Father Land.” “The spirit will not descend without song!” Equiano tells us. When “Blue was our favorite color,” before we got so nutty we sold our selves to the junkman, took a really bad trip, and wound up cross the sea with the Blues, another story.

Rap, for instance, is as old as the African tree, upon which we rapped, and told our story, which later was *Ngoma*, the drum. The Pygmies were here before God, or the drum! A log, the semen tells us (how’re you spelling that?) to record, the rap. The best, of our heart, why we under On to dig, the BE and where it’s AT. Spirit is literally Breath, inspire expire. Space, as it is specific to we, and us, & I (means Black), becomes speech. What Air is that (you mean Song, son? Or

Sangre, Blood? or the hotness with which you blue, blew, singed you, didn't it).

Speech is the oldest carrier of human life. Song, from Sun (where the Sol gives you Soul), dig? Get down. Find Out! The body of happiness (Funk). Everything we carried, from watermelons to boogalooing in the end zone after the t.d., was carried. Where would it go? U.S. culture is a pyramid of African, European, Asian (Native). So that it is not a matter of "African Survivals." To be an "American," north, south, or central, is to be that as well.

The Griot has always been with us, even in the U.S., listen to Lightnin Hopkins, Bessie Smith, Louis Armstrong ("What Did I Do, to Be So Black & Blue?"), or Al Hibbler flying in his Dukeplane, or Billie, God knows, or Larry Darnell, "Why you fool, you poor sad worthless, foolish fool!" Or Stevie, Aretha, Abbey, Sun Ra. You wants some Djali, and the Djeli Ya, the get down, like we say. Well, begin with Djeli Roll Morton, who invented Jazz (you mean "I AM!" the come music? JAZZ). He said that? Or Dinah and Ella singing (getting hot as the sun), "It must be Djeli, cause Jam don't shake like that!"

Jam? You mean Jamaa, the family? Like a Jam Session? Or Ujamaa, the communal society. Is you all in all them colors (many stories, colores) because you communal, like Max Roach said, our Music always is. My man call it polyrhythmic, polyphonic. When the priest (before the is, and digging, prying into it) calls and we respond (come back), we together many, this connection opens us as Gates. You straight, Gate? Or the *Imbongi*, you mean you can drum (*Ngombe*) your way inside us? Be at the where we is under standing, so we get ON?

That's why it's *Mshairi*, you communal on us again. In the U.S., We is a bunch of I's without the logical connection. The rap for your cap to wake you from your nap, or wake you to your naps. Ba, Ba, Black Sheep, they asked, have you any wool? Yeh, a whole head full! (Wisdom, the Sufi said. That's our bag.)

That is, let the story of the Griot get you Djali, make you understand you is as old as you is new. And what you don't know is how you blow. It's why we Blue, because we blew. But then get down with the Djali, Mr. B. say, "Djeli Djeli Djeli," what is needed is what the Griot/Djali provided, information, inspiration, reformation, and self-determination! Mama Sky, we cried, hook us up with the Electricity. Turn us ON. That city of our deep desire.