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Ethnographies as Texts/Ethnographers as Griots

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Source: *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (May, 1994), pp. 353-366

Published by: Wiley on behalf of the American Anthropological Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/645893>

Accessed: 13-06-2018 08:16 UTC

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ethnographies as texts/ethnographers as griots

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Me ra hari si denji wi
"One mouthful of water will not douse a fire"

Boro ma bon bey za borey man'inga bey
"People must know themselves before they let others know them"

—Songhay proverbs

Among the peoples who live in the West African Sahel, there are many proverbs that speak to the notion of preparation. Like sorcerers, possession priests, or initiates in secret societies, griots or bards must be thoroughly prepared to talk social life. Griots must apprentice themselves to masters for as many as 30 years before they are deemed ready to recite their poetry. There are two stages in the training of griots among the Songhay-speaking peoples of the Republics of Mali and Niger. First, griots must master a body of rudimentary knowledge—in their case, Songhay history. Such mastery, however, is insufficient, for griots must also master themselves. This means that they must learn to dispossess their "selves" from the "old words" they have learned. The words that constitute history are much too powerful to be "owned" by any one person or group of people; rather these words "own" those who speak them. Accomplished griots do not "own" history; rather, they are possessed by the forces of the past. By decentering themselves from history and the forces of social life, these griots are infused with great dignity. Only these griots are capable of meeting the greatest challenge: imparting social knowledge to the next generation.

For many Songhay elders, ethnographers are griots. Ethnographers, like griots, must learn history and cultural knowledge. Griots are strictly oral practitioners; ethnographers recount what they have "mastered" through printed words or in filmed images. There is a long-standing tradition of scribes in Songhay that dates to the 15th century and the court of Askia Mohammed Touré (see Hale 1990). Songhay populations have sensed the griotic possibilities of film since the early 1920s. Many Songhay elders think the films of Jean Rouch (films on Songhay possession, magic, and migration) are the tales of a griot, albeit a cinematic one. When ethnographers read their works to gatherings of Songhay elders, they, too, are considered griots.

West African griots or bards are charged with talking social life; they are burdened by a localized politics of representation. Ethnographers are charged with writing or filming social life; they are burdened by a globalized politics of representation. In this article, I suggest that ethnographers have much to learn from the localized practices of griots. More specifically, I argue that when ethnographers attempt to depict social life—to write or film lives—they consider following the griot's path. This means that ethnographers, like griots, spend long periods of time apprenticing themselves to elders, long periods of time mastering knowledge. This also means that ethnographers attempt not only to make contributions to social theory but also to tell the story of a people or a person with depth, respect, and poetic evocation. [ethnography, fieldwork, griots, West Africa, theory]

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Ethnographers, however, usually consider themselves anthropologists, not griots. They prepare themselves for their life's work in a manner altogether different from that of the griot. They read canonic texts, debate arcane theories, take examinations, conduct fieldwork, and "write-up" or "edit" the results of their data-gatherings. Sometimes they return to the field for follow-up research. This preparation and "work" results in a body of scholarly articles, monographs, ethnographies, and ethnographic films. In most cases, ethnographers attempt to tease from the tangled threads of social life insights that will make a contribution to social theory.

For most Songhay elders, the theoretical results of social science research are meaningless. They do not care whether Songhay ethnographies refine theories of cultural hermeneutics or clear up the murkiness of the postmodern condition. They *do* care about how well the tale is told. They care about the poetic quality of the story. They especially care about whether ethnographers demonstrate a healthy respect for the "old words." They care about whether ethnographers are humbled by history, which consumes the beings of those who attempt to talk it, write it, or film it. They care about the nature of the responsibility that ethnographers take for their words and images. For most Songhay elders, the ultimate test of ethnographers is whether their words and images enable the young to uncover their past and discover their future.

In the remainder of this article, I suggest that when ethnographers attempt to depict social life—to write or film lives—they should incorporate the griot's historically conscientious and respectfully decentered conception and practice of ethnography, a conception and practice of ethnography that reverberates with the tension between the political and the poetic. Such an incorporation requires that ethnographers spend long periods of time apprenticing themselves to elders, long periods of time mastering knowledge. This also impels ethnographers to complement their explorations in social theory with tales of a people that are respectful and poetically evocative. In this way, ethnographers will understand how a mouthful of water cannot douse a fire and why griots must know themselves before they let others know them.

the griot in Sahelian West Africa

Griots are considered masters of words in Sahelian West Africa. From a Sahelian perspective, however, this means that griots have been mastered by words. African scholars like Ahmadou Hampaté Ba consider griots the "archivists" of their cultures. They are "great depositaries, who, it can be said, are the living memory of Africa" (1981:166). The words that have mastered the griot are said to embody great power. Among the Mande-speaking peoples in and around the Republic of Mali, words are dangerous, for they are infused with *nyama*, which Charles Bird translates as "energy of action" (1971:98).¹ Among the Mande, only the *nyamakala*, a "casted" branch of Mande society consisting of musicians, leatherworkers, smiths, and griots, can manipulate the potentially dangerous force of *nyama*.² In Sahelian West Africa, "griots are spokespersons and ambassadors, matrimonial go-betweens, genealogists and historians, advisors and court-jesters" (Miller 1990:81). In some griotic performances, especially the recitation of genealogies, there is intense negotiation between a patron and her or his griot. Sometimes the griot will stop the recitation of a genealogy to negotiate or, more likely, to renegotiate a fee, all of which is tied to the mutual recognition of status. In the recitation of epic poetry, these kinds of negotiations take place before the performance. No matter when the negotiations take place, griots are very much aware of their audiences and will sometimes footnote their performances. Irvine's (1978) work on Wolof griots articulates the complexities of this negotiation and how it is tied to the historical dimensions of the griot's performance.

As a medium, film has more affinity to the griot's performance than ethnographies articulated in prose. Film can capture the fluidity of cultural performance in ways that prose cannot. When Jean Rouch first screened his films in Ayoru, Niger, and along the Bandiagara Cliffs in Dogon Country (Mali), people remarked: "You are a true griot. Your films have enabled the dead to

live again." Many Songhay elders nonetheless consider my ethnographies as griotic tales. Adamu Jenitongo, a Songhay sorcerer (*sohanci*) and spirit possession priest, once said to me: "You are my griot. I give you my words and you write them. If my words live forever, I shall live forever." He believed that one day his grandchildren would read about him in my books. He also thought it was important for me to be his griot to Americans. To his dying days, he wanted American readers to know some of the feats of the Songhay past; he wanted readers to know something of the *sohanci's* courage and daring.

The subject of the griot in West Africa is a vast one. The concern here, however, is principally with the griot as go-between, as articulator of history, as the teller of tales of both social and political significance. John Chernoff's long-term research among the Dagbamba of northern Ghana suggests that drummers are the griots of that society (Chernoff 1979). Dagbon drummers are "owned" by the "old words." They learn and teach the history of Dagbon. They are masters of kinship, religion, culture, and philosophy. Chernoff describes the work of his teacher, Ibrahim:

He has many names. His name is Ibrahim. His name is "Father Drummer." His name is "What a human being refuses, God will take and make well." His name is "Wisdom has no end." How a person comes to have such names is another story among the stories in this book, but he is one man among many like him. He speaks the words of those he knows and has known and the words of those who gave birth to him and have passed away. He represents them, and he is old because he holds their words. He and his colleagues are all masters of words, but they do not write. Their knowledge is sustained by memory; it is communicated in public places by sound and movement, by singing, by drumming, by dancing. [1995:2 of MS]

Even if griots demonstrate a certain pride of performance, the most accomplished ones never forget their humble relation to the power of words and the forces of history. In West Africa, then, the greatest griots are "owned" by the oral tradition that means that they are possessed by "total knowledge" (Hampaté Ba 1981).

What conditions construct and shape this "total knowledge?" What factors influence the transmission of this "total knowledge?" How do griots talk history and social life? Are there affinities between the quandaries of talking social life and those posed by writing or filming social life? Are there affinities between griots and ethnographers, who, unlike the griot, usually have the difficult task of *representing* someone else's social life?

griots and the death of the author

During the past 20 years, North American scholars in the humanities and social sciences have been greatly influenced by poststructuralist criticism. This maze of ideas has eroded, or so we are led to believe, the last vestiges of objective representation, determinacy, and (social) science. In a perilously fragmented world in which space and time are likewise exploded, the death of God, proclaimed by Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky, has led ultimately to the death of "man," and to the death of the author (Barthes 1977).

The foundation of Barthes's admittedly ironic view of authorship is that one does not write in isolation of cultural and historical conditions. Writing is therefore not context free; it is shaped by political and sociological factors. To borrow Derrida's now famous phrase, writing is always already there. Situated in the vortex of ever-changing political, social, historical, and cultural realities, writers choose among various voices, themselves contingent upon social and historical factors. In this way, author-ity is rendered problematic. Can authors speak for themselves? Can they speak for others? Or do their often conflicting voices constitute a patchwork of the contingent conditions of sociality? In the contemporary world as it is perceived by many poststructuralist and postmodernist critics, the self, hence the author, is opaque. As a consequence, "dead" authors live on as dispossessed writers who speak in what Barthes called "the middle voice":

[T]he middle voice corresponds exactly to the state of the verb to write: today to write is to make one's self the center of the action of speech [parole]; it is to effect writing in being affected oneself; it is to leave the writer [scripteur] inside the writing, not as a psychological subject . . . but as agent of action. [1972:164–65]

In the middle voice, there is no authorial agency. Words are articulated, but no agent is associated with the signified action. An apt example is the French intransitive verb *se manger*. The expression *ca se mange* (this eats itself) constitutes an indirect, agentless commentary on the (good) quality of food. Sociolinguistically, the use of such an expression decenters the subject in a manner similar to the way that griots decenter themselves during a performance. With the subject decentered, writing or performing becomes the site of an “authorless” text. From a contemporary perspective, the arrogance of “living authors” who constructed their subjectivity through the objectification of others has created much shame that has survived their deaths (see Miller 1985, 1990; Mudimbe 1988; Said 1978, 1989; Spivak 1990). Such a tack would be unthinkable to the seasoned griot. Put another way, dead authors become writers who no longer “own” language; like the griot, they are “owned” by language.

During the 1980s, Barthes's death-of-the-author syndrome affected anthropology in a major way. Anthropologists began to reflect on their own ethnographic practices. Such reflections, first hinted at by Clifford Geertz in the 1970s, produced a new discourse that bifurcated into two paths. Followers of the first path traveled in the direction of philosophical critique. These scholars considered both the politics of anthropological representation and the politics of interpretation. They began to examine the epistemological assumptions held by pioneering anthropologists. Citing the texts of continental poststructuralists, they criticized ethnographic realism, in which anthropologists constructed societies as totalities. They delved into the moral implications that colonialist and neocolonialist politics held for the profession of anthropology. Confronting the postcolonial world with its incessant “heteroglossia,” to borrow Bakhtin's phrase, they questioned the bases of ethnographic authority (see Clifford 1988; Marcus and Cushman 1982; Said 1989; Tyler 1987). The vast majority of this anthropological discourse on ethnographic authority is writing about writing, a corpus of criticism suggesting future directions in ethnographic expression. The number of anthropologists who have actually embedded these important issues in their ethnographies, however, is sadly limited. Of these ethnographies, several of the earliest are the most notable, especially Jean-Paul Dumont's thoughtful *The Headman and I* (1992[1978]) and Paul Riesman's incomparable *Freedom in Fulani Social Life* (1977). In these and later texts, ethnographers worry, epistemologically speaking, about politics, representation, meaning(lessness), the dialectic of the ethnographer and the other, and the other's muted voice (see Cesara 1981; Dwyer 1991[1982]; Jackson 1986; Price 1983). Several critics have complained of the interminable self-reflection, the theoretical anarchy, and the illocutionary opaqueness of these works (Beidelman 1989; Birth 1990; Carrithers 1990; Sangren 1988). Indeed, in his *Works and Lives* (1988), Clifford Geertz characterizes many of these antirealist ethnographies as anemic, timid, and tirelessly self-doubting. Geertz notwithstanding, the writers of these books are, in Barthes's terms, attempting to write in the middle voice, writers who are attempting to take greater responsibility for the social and political ramifications of the words and images conveyed by their disseminated works.

Many of these ethnographies are troubling. Despite the political and theoretical sensitivity of these “dead” authors, the writing in these works often reflects rather parochial dispositions. What are the social and political responsibilities of writing or filming social life? What does collaboration imply for written or filmed ethnography? Does one pay serious attention to non-Western theories of ethnographic authority? With the notable exception of the literature on indigenous media in visual anthropology (see Henaut 1991; MacDougall 1992; Ruby 1991; Turner 1991), these questions are usually left unanswered in the ethnographic literature.

One facile response to these quandaries is to suggest that questions of (ethnographic) authority are purely academic concerns. If the griots of Sahelian West Africa constitute a representative

case, questions of authority are asked in many nonacademic contexts and settings. Social context shapes the nature of the griot's performative discourse. Aesthetic convention influences the griot's performance styles. Like "dead" poets thrashed about in the winds of the postmodern condition, griots are more like writers in Barthes's sense. They are intermediaries who creatively and respectfully use "old words" to reconstruct history and culture, to negotiate social identities, and to ruminate on stasis and change (see Hale 1990; Irvine 1978; Miller 1990).

Initially, there appear to be many affinities between griots and postmodern writers, but there are significant differences. Unlike Barthes's writer, whose subjectivity is overwhelmed by language, griots, who are also "owned" by language, are still able to use it to negotiate their multifaceted subjectivity. Griots are always implicated and embodied in their communities: they are full social and political participants in the villages where they live. Their words are performative: they help to create social life by talking it. For the most part, the words and images of ethnography are not performative. Most ethnographers are shielded from the complicated negotiations of social life in other-land, which means that ethnographers are usually absolved from assuming an implicated responsibility for their words, images, and actions. Many contemporary ethnographers are, therefore, disengaged and disembodied. By incorporating the griot's localized practices into the ethnographer's more global representations, ethnographers will be better able to write and film ethnographies that meet the griot's greatest challenge: to express words and images that enable the dead to live again.

implication

Ethnographers, like griots, are implicated social actors in the field. In the words of French anthropologist Christine Bergé, "to be implicated means to be embroiled, compromised, entangled in an affair." Bergé does not limit her analysis of implication to a logical relationship; rather, she sees the social interactional definition of implication as central to the ethnographic enterprise. All human beings, even the most "objective" and "scientific" anthropologists, she says, are perforce implicated in a network of relationships (n.d.:2).

Although all human beings are "implicated" in Bergé's sense, anthropologists, according to her, are (over)implicated. The late French anthropologist Pierre Clastres, for example, considered his colleagues as "Artaud functionaries" (1974). The functionary is the representative of the establishment; he or she makes rules and follows them. Artaud is the illuminated wanderer, a nomad of the mind. In reality, anthropologists can never choose between Artaud and the functionary. As Bergé writes: "Even [Jacques] Lizot, [who lived for almost 20 participatory years among the Yanomami Indians] has his computer with him among the savages, and counts on his researcher's status. Publications assure him fame. One foot in France, one foot in the forest" (n.d.:4).

One can say that the anthropologist is an over-implicated being, a crossroads of contradictory paths, a knot of unformulated desires. Like a . . . fragile retina, he views the world from a poorly received intimacy. He records speech, gestures, the distribution of elements, and exchanges and contributes to the transformation of values. He sometimes has a heart filled with repentance, a spirit filled with hope, and dirty, tired and trembling hands. Sometimes the anthropologist's body is sickened by this dismemberment. . . . Far from being a history of moral choice, implication is thus already the anthropologist's mode of existence. [n.d.:5]

In the end, (over)implication in the field provokes a crisis during which anthropologists question the limits of the self, the illusion of unity, and the secret compromises of the real. As Bergé says philosophically, "implication is the 'lived among.' It is the exercise of this reality: that there is not a position outside the system, that the anthropological gaze is not a 'gaze upon' but a sort of vibration on a fragile and ultra-sensitive antenna" (n.d.:6).

Bergé's portrait of the (over)implicated anthropologist seems curiously similar to Barthes's "dead" author. Like the "dead" author, (over)implicated anthropologists relinquish their authority to the sweep of historical and contextual contingency. Like the "dead" author, the (over)implicated anthropologist becomes entranced by his or her contradictory path and is ultimately transformed into an intransitive medium whose subjectivity can be devoured by language.

To stop here, however, would not take us much beyond the anthropological writing of the 1980s. Despite its sensitivity, Bergé's decidedly philosophical portrait of (over)implicated anthropologists leaves us muddled in an ethnography in which (over)implicated writers are sometimes guilty of (over)indulgence. Ethnographers certainly cannot deny their implication, even their (over)implication in the field. But if they focus attention upon the griot's practices, might they not steer a middle course between the dead zones of ethnographic intransitivity and ethnographic transitivity? Given the contextual dynamics of their performances, it is clear that griots do not allow themselves to be completely devoured by language. What can their practices teach us about the ethnographer's consumption of other lives? What can their practices teach us about how other lives consume the ethnographer?

implication, embodiment, and voice

Songhay people talk about implication through gustatory metaphors. People say, for example, that one person eats another and is, in turn, eaten by her or him—all part of the process of learning about social others. Songhay people say that one eats power and is eaten by power.³ Sorcerers eat a variety of plants to enhance their power, which enables them to "eat" (overpower) others. Such consumption, however, makes sorcerers vulnerable to a rival's insatiable appetite for power. Songhay griots say that they eat history and are eaten by it. Griots eat the "old words" and are eaten by them. In short, one consumes otherness in Songhay—in whatever form it takes—and is consumed, albeit partially, by otherness. In other words, any kind of entangled implication in Songhay has embodied implications. One's implication in things Songhay can never be purely intellectual. Such an embodied entanglement entails a number of textual ramifications. For griots, it means that the spoken word not only shapes and reshapes the story of the past, but is also central to the negotiation and renegotiation of their social roles in the present. The griot is never disengaged and disembodied. For ethnographers, this suggests acknowledging an embodied implication in ethnographies through (1) a critical awareness of the senses, (2) an attentiveness to voice, and (3) a recognition of the increasingly political implications of their works. Like griots, ethnographers must negotiate and renegotiate their social roles across a maze of cultural boundaries.

Most writing and filming in anthropology and the other human sciences fail to follow the griot's first rule of practice: to create a dynamic tension between the poetic and the political, the past and the present. Most written and filmed ethnography is flat and analytic; it usually underplays the importance of power relations in-the-world (see Coombe 1991). Such a discourse generates structures through dissection and categorization. Reacting to this dehumanizing process, the Senegalese novelist and filmmaker Sembène Ousmane, who considers himself of modern griot, once complained to French filmmaker Jean Rouch: "You observe us like insects" (quoted in Prédal 1982:78).

It would be too facile to suggest that the solution to the representational quandaries of depicting social life in the present is to adopt a more sensual mode of ethnographic expression. It would also be too simple to argue that the missing piece in the ethnographic puzzle is that of voice. Writers search for their voices; painters search for their styles—or so we are led to believe. Voice, of course, like writing and the concept of self, is not an element that exists in isolation. Ethnographers do not search for *voices*. As in the griot's case, historically and socially conditioned voices search for them. Sometimes, these voices find ethnographers and use their

bodies to express the tension between the past and the present, the poetic and the political. Griots are at the center of a swirl of discordant voices. They use these voices to creatively craft their tales. The “old words” consume them, but not completely. So it is with ethnographers. Ethnographers’ voices cannot, strictly speaking, be their own. By the same token, the voices in ethnographic prose or films cannot be strictly those of whom we represent. As MacDougall (1992) points out, ethnographies sometimes take on a life of their own. Sometimes ethnographers, like griots, shape what is presented to them to construct ethnographies that analyze and describe, evoke and provoke. In this way, ethnographers as griots become interlocutors in the ongoing conversation that constitutes sociocultural life.

The griot’s talk, then, produces a cacophony of voices from past and present. What can ethnographers learn from this? The problem of voice is a central theme in many of Jean Rouch’s films of ethno-fiction. Indeed, Rouch is considered a griot in the communities he films; he has participated in Songhay social life for more than 50 years (see Stoller 1992). His long, implicated, and embodied exposure to others—Rouch calls it shared anthropology—has resulted in a rare and significant corpus of ethnographic work. In such Rouch films as *Jaguar* (1954), *Moi, un noir* (1957), and *Petit à Petit* (1969), one hears the distinct tones and articulations of many voices, including that of the filmmaker. And yet, no one voice dominates these films. Rouch’s films constitute a corpus that is expressed not so much in Barthes’s space of the intransitive middle voice as in a series of distinct voices in which subjectivity is not completely consumed by the immanence of language. In what remains of this article, I describe how the recognition and acceptance of my own long-term implication and embodiment in things Songhay impelled me to attempt to write ethnographies (*In Sorcery’s Shadow* [1987, with Cheryl Olkes] and *Fusion of the Worlds* [1989]) in the manner of a griot.

form and voices in ethnography

My implication in things Songhay has grown over a period of 20 years. During that time, I have been a theory-testing anthropologist, a wide-eyed apprentice to sorcerers, and a practitioner of sorcery who has attacked enemies and who has been attacked by foes. When, in 1979, a sorceress in the town of Wanzerbé paralyzed me, I left the relative comforts of the Songhay social world and experienced for the first time the Songhay world of eternal war. I continued my apprenticeship in Songhay sorcery until 1984 when the world of eternal war was “too much with me.” I renounced the Songhay path of power and at the suggestion of my teacher, Adamu Jenitongo, opted for the Songhay path of plants—herbalism.

My immersion in this Songhay world, which is known to only a small number of Songhay sorcerers, posed many problems for me as an ethnographer. How could I write about my being poisoned or paralyzed? How could I describe the horrors and terrors of such a merciless world?

At first I tried to describe the world of Songhay sorcery in the language of anthropology. I placed sorcery and witchcraft in a strictly theoretical context, and I described what happened to me in dispassionate, plain language. Although widely practiced, this tactic was unsatisfactory for me. I felt that such a “representation” of sorcery was a violation of the trust my teachers had placed in me. They had selected me to learn sorcery for two reasons: (a) they had seen a sign that I should be taught sorcerous secrets, and (b) they wanted someone entangled in their network to tell their story with dignity and respect. In short, they found in me an apprentice sorcerer and a griot. “We want you to take power objects from here and take them to America. We want you to make offerings to your altar in America. We also want you to tell our story, and tell it well—to bring us respect,” they told me.

My griot’s burden compelled me to write *In Sorcery’s Shadow*, co-authored with Cheryl Olkes, more like a novel than an anthropological monograph, the latter usually consisting of, in the words of David Saper, a theoretical introduction, a conclusion, and much Procrustean

bed making in between.⁴ We wanted readers to know my teachers as individuals who spoke in idiosyncratic ways. It is impossible to reproduce the zesty flavor of Songhay expressions in English translations, but one can attempt to add some Songhay spices to English translations, and one can certainly attempt to include in reconstructed dialogue the kinds of vocalizations that mark a particular speaker. But unlike Barthes's intransitive writer, we did not want my subjectivity to be completely imprisoned by language. Rather, we wanted the pain, confusion, and euphoria of my experience to resonate with those who read about it. In *In Sorcery's Shadow* there are musings about my feelings and reactions and reports on how others reacted to my existential dilemmas. As in the griot's performance, a number of voices are manipulated to shape my textual subjectivity. In short, the ethnographer's burden, the griot's burden, was to recreate the past—in my case the recent past—with delicacy and verve. And so a way of writing *In Sorcery's Shadow* was chosen that evoked the sensuality of the Songhay world, that homed in on the prosody of Songhay dialogue albeit translated into English, that caressed the texture of Songhay social relations. *In Sorcery's Shadow* is most certainly a personal take on my entanglement in Songhay sorcery, but in it the contentious voices of significant others are articulated. These efforts resulted in a book that poses many problems—personal, moral, and theoretical—but provides no answers. Readers are left to ponder these issues for themselves in the same way that members of Songhay audiences ponder the unanswered issues that griots articulate in their performances.

In West Africa, griots are performers. Although the content of their genealogical and epic recitals must convey a certain number of key historical points in a prescribed historical style, there is much variation in griotic performances. The variation devolves from contextual factors: *who* is in the audience?; *what* is the occasion? Depending upon audience and occasion, griots will edit their performances, emphasizing distant as opposed to recent history, singing at length about one particular branch of the royal family. The sociocultural context of performance, as we have seen, has a direct bearing on the "strategic" content of the griot's poetry (see Irvine 1978).

Just as the structure and content of the griot's poetry is sensitive to context, so the narrative strategy of the ethnographer's writing must not only be sensitive to audience but also to distinct social settings. As in the griot's practice, the form and styles of ethnographic expression should vary with the subjects being described. So it is with *Fusion of the Worlds*, my ethnography of Songhay spirit possession, a text quite different from *In Sorcery's Shadow*. The world of Songhay sorcery is private, filled with resentments and murderous jealousies. Songhay sorcerers do their "work" in the privacy of their houses late at night. The world of spirit possession is public, filled with music, movement, the flash of colors, and the acrobatics of the spirits in the bodies of mediums. Spirit possession ceremonies are carnivalesque, the combination of joyous festival and serious religious ritual. While the sorcerer confronts the sorcerous world alone, the diverse members of the Songhay spirit possession troupe (possession priests, mediums, praise-singers, musicians) confront the supernatural through the frame of a complex spirit pantheon.

The conditions that shaped the writing of *Fusion of the Worlds* were fundamentally different from those that textured the writing of *In Sorcery's Shadow*. The story of possession in Songhay is one of great complexity: hundreds of spirits, hundreds of spirit objects and costumes. It is also a story that cuts to the heart of Songhay social life: the complexity of social relations, the construction of gender idioms, the vicissitudes of agriculture in the Sahel, the symbolic re-creation of history. By the same token, the story of possession is a story of people: the personal pain of initiation, the social strains of mediumship, the interpersonal enmity that destroys social harmony in Songhay communities. How to portray such a tangled story in prose?

In *In Sorcery's Shadow*, my entanglement in the Songhay world of sorcery devolved from confrontations with distinct individuals—other people in a limited network of sorcerous relations. Hence, the memoir form of *In Sorcery's Shadow* conveyed, better than any other

genre, the filigreed patterns of the Songhay world of sorcery. Since the world of Songhay possession is so much more complex, the simple story line of *In Sorcery's Shadow* was incongruous. And so my struggle with the spirit possession material resulted in a multigenre text, featuring narrative and multiple voices, but also historical exposition and realist description. This maze of tones and voices are interconnected in the attempt to create, like the griot's complex performance, a seamless whole of an epic. And, like the griot's seamless epic, much of the burden of argument in *Fusion* is embedded in narrative rather than in the plain style exposition I have employed in this article.⁵

Fusion of the Worlds amplifies a diversity of voices. My voices (anthropologist, griot, initiate) coexist with the voices of possession priests, spirit mediums, Songhay deities, and musicians, as they tell their stories through my griotic re-creation of dialogue. Some of the voices of history are frozen in sober academic exposition, but others are juxtaposed to the blur of movement, the "cries" of the monochord violin, the clacks and rolls of the gourd drum, and the contours of spirit praise-poetry—other voices of history. The talk of the spirits and priests about the weather is adjoined to the detached observations of ecologists about monsoons. One hears about Dongo's (deity of thunder) path of rain as well as the intertropical front. And like the griot's talking social life, these diverse voices are arranged structurally to confront one another—always, to borrow James Fernandez's apt phrase, in an argument of images (1982). Why all of this textual construction?

ethnographies as texts/ethnographers as griots

In 1982, George Marcus and Dick Cushman published their influential essay, "Ethnographies as Texts." This article defined a significant moment in anthropology; it forced anthropologists to confront themselves politically, epistemologically, and aesthetically. After "Ethnographies as Texts," anthropologists could no longer blithely "write up" their "data." Indeed, Marcus and Cushman had problematized the politics of ethnographic fieldwork as well as the politics of ethnographic writing. In the wake of "Ethnographies as Texts," there has been much published on ethnographic and representational practices (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Manganaro 1990; Marcus and Fischer 1985; Rosaldo 1989; Said 1989; Tyler 1987). In the wake of these reflections, there have been any number of essays in which writers are highly critical of what they call "postmodern" anthropology. For these writers, "postmodern" anthropology usually conflates—incorrectly, I think—a cornucopia of analytical and textual approaches to the discipline (interpretive anthropology, reflexive ethnography, humanistic anthropology, narrative ethnography, post-Marxism, textualism, and so on). Some of these writers have berated what they term "the confused state of a new generation of American anthropologists" (Beidelman 1989:267). Others complain about the hubris and careerism of so-called "postmodern" anthropologists (Sangren 1988). Still others attempt to demonstrate the affinities among "post-modern" anthropology, parapsychology, and Shirley MacLaine! (Lett 1991).

These critics often dismiss the themes expressed in what they call postmodern works: social fragmentation, the loss of authority, the failure of social theory (challenges to positivism, empiricism, objectivism, comparative method, and inductive inquiry), and the onset of the hyperreal world of simulation. These themes, of course, did not appear out of thin air; they are linked inextricably to the condition of postmodernity brought on by the explosion and proliferation of high technology and the inexorable globalization of economic markets (Harvey 1989). Even Kenneth Gergen (1991), a social psychologist who unabashedly yearns for the "kinder" and "gentler" values of the romantic era, admits that postmodernity is here to stay, that postmodernity, like it or not, has not only reshaped the academy, but also has inexorably changed our patterns of social relations (see also Bauman 1991). Although it would be wonderful to return to the halcyon days of anthropology as an unquestioned science, the world

has changed in fundamental ways. In these times, it is essential for anthropologists to develop multifaceted epistemological and textual strategies that lend themselves to postmodern complexities. Otherwise, the world will pass us by, and anthropology will become increasingly anachronistic.

There are, of course, no simple solutions to writing or filming social life in the contemporary world. As Rabinow pointed out in 1985, the link between representation and politics can be fashioned with misleading facility (see also Fox 1991). Can one equate realism with colonialism? That, Rabinow argues, is too simple. Both Marcel Griaule and Michel Leiris, who held opposing views on colonialism, wrote “realist” texts. Can narrative ethnography be equated with the textual contours of postcolonialism? Most of the texts loosely classed as postmodern have been preoccupied with the form and language of ethnography, which is reminiscent of the hermetic self-consciousness of high modernism—not postcolonialism—in the arts and literature (see Marcus 1990).

The beginning of postmodernity does not mean the end of ethnography. But it does force us to confront with flexibility the aesthetic, epistemological, and political complexities of the contemporary world. Like a griot, Rabinow cautioned anthropologists about the problems of transparency in ethnographic writing and argued for an anthropological return to the world (1985:9,12). As griots well know, ethnographies can never be transparent; ethnographers “must face up to the fact that we can never avoid the author function” (1985:3).

Rabinow’s call for an anthropological return to the world is well advised. But we must leave the rarefied heights of textualism with our eyes wide open to complexity. “Postmodernism shares with hermeneutics a commitment to understanding culture and knowledge as socially constructed, but postmodernism is also committed to exploring the complex interrelationships between culture and power. It considers the genealogy of the cultural in terms of historically specific practices” (Coombe 1991:115). More specifically, Coombe suggests:

Postmodernism . . . is a perspective upon cultural practice that provokes us to consider phenomena in a new manner. It also suggests that we consider new phenomena, given the changing character of the worlds we live in. The historical sociocultural complex known as “the postmodern condition” or “the condition of postmodernity” refers to a multiplicity of processes . . . related to a global restructuring of capitalism, and new media, information and communications technologies. [1991:116]

Coombe goes on to argue for what Said (1989) called “street savvy,” ethnographies of everyday practices. Everyday practices are complex, multifaceted, and creative. They demand a complex and multidimensional approach to ethnography. Ethnographies may be tales that ethnographers recount to readers or viewers, but the tales are no longer simple ones. They must now combine, as does the West African griot, history and economics, past and present, narrative and exposition. In *The Modernist City*, James Holston (1989) calls for “critical ethnographies of modernism”; Rabinow’s return to the world resulted in *French Modern* (1989), in which the “author” mounts a critique of modernity through his analysis of a group of French colonial administrators who were urban planners during the 1920s. Rabinow has said that his book could be called “an ethnography of French pragmatic philosophical anthropology” (1989:16). In both cases, these ethnographies focus more on sociocultural processes—the construction of discourse—than on how individuals or groups of individuals cope with the daily exigencies of contemporary life. For that, we need more performative texts—engaged, multigenre constructions that combine narrative descriptions with historical and economic exposition. Boddy (1989), Kondo (1990), and Narayan (1989), for example, have produced elegant texts that integrate narrative and exposition, individual and social, and local and global perspectives through cultural analyses of gender, identity, and politics. (For other examples see Desjarlais 1992; Foley 1990; Rose 1987, 1989; Wafer 1991).

It takes a lifetime for griots to shape their delicately decentered ethnographic performances. For ethnographers, nothing is more difficult than crafting a multigenre text. What threads can

one weave through the text to make its disparate elements hang together? How does one juxtapose exposition, dialogue, and narrative? How does one develop a sense of place—that is, of locality—in ethnographic expression? These questions are answered only when ethnographers struggle with their complex materials.

And yet, no one writes or films social life in isolation. The persistent ethical and political questions remain: why do we write? for whom? When asked these questions about his films, French anthropologist and filmmaker Jean Rouch replied. “First I make films for myself. Second I make films for the people whom I film. Third, I make films for general audiences” (Rouch 1990). Rouch’s answer brings us back to the griot. Griots never talk social life in isolation. They talk social life for themselves, for their communities, and, increasingly, for general audiences. Griots must confront their fluid “materials”—the ever-changing complexities of contemporary social life—before, during, and after their performances.

Scores of anthropologists, literary critics, and philosophers will no doubt continue their stimulating debates about voice, difference, reflexivity, representation, the phenomenology of the field encounter, and the politics of both interpretation and publication. Such critical debate expands the space of ethnographies as texts. But there is another space well worth expanding, that of ethnographers as griots. Standing on the griot’s spot, which is marked by contested history and cultural politics, ethnographers are charged with the burden of incorporating the griot’s multifaceted practices into ethnography. This means that ethnographers seek ways of writing and filming social life that enable the dead to live again and the living to recognize better ways of coping with the confusions of contemporary life. Is this not a burden worthy of our future efforts?

notes

Acknowledgments. The reflections in this article are based upon more than a 20-year span of fieldwork in the Republic of Niger. These missions were made possible by generous grants from the U.S. Dept. of Education (Fulbright-Hays Program), the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, the National Science Foundation (NATO Postdoctoral Fellowship in Science Program), the American Philosophical Society, West Chester University, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Earlier versions of this article were presented at the Spring Symposium (African Life Writing: Objectivity and Reflexivity) of the Center for African Studies, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. I thank Alice Deck for her invitation to participate in the symposium. A version of the article was also presented to the Faculty Colloquium of the Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto. Comments from both audiences have been invaluable. I would also like to acknowledge the constructive comments of the four anonymous reviewers of *AE*, as well as those of Don Brenneis. Finally, conversations with Rosemary J. Coombe about the central issues of this article pointed a near-sighted ethnographer in a theoretically fruitful direction. I thank her for her guidance and support.

1. There is much debate about the definition of *nyama*. Sory Camara (1976:11) translates it as “all powerful spirit.” Massa Makan Diabate translated it as “evil.” Others have translated it as “trash or garbage” (N’Diaye 1970:14). In Songhay, the notion of “force” is not concretely articulated. “Force,” rather, is articulated through deeds. The “force” of a sorcerer is not named but recognized through his or her *korte* (literally, charms) or his or her “work.”

2. Most of the writing about West African griots comprises a discourse about male poets who express themselves in ceremonial contexts. But this body of literature tells only part of the story of the oral tradition in Africa; it ignores the considerable sociocultural importance of female storytellers. Trinh T. Min-ha underscores the cultural importance of women (*griottes*) in the West African bardic tradition. In a fascinating and provocative chapter of her book *Woman, Native, Other*, Trinh describes how storytelling, long the province of women (grandmothers), has been assigned the same stigmatized status accorded to women in society:

Story-writing becomes history-writing, and history quickly sets itself apart, consigning story to the realm of tale, legend, myth, fiction, literature. Then, since fictional and factual have come to a point where they mutually exclude each other, fiction, not infrequently, means lies, and fact, truth. DID IT REALLY HAPPEN? IS IT A TRUE STORY? [1989:120]

The female bard in West Africa, *la griotte*, performs in many contexts, such as wedding and child-naming ceremonies, but she appears to be excluded from the more formal and political recitation contexts, especially the epics.

3. The notion of eating power is widespread, if not widely understood in African societies. The notion that "power is eaten whole," for example, is the starting point for Fabian's (1990) remarkable book about the dynamics of cultural performance in Zaire. Here, Fabian writes a performative ethnography that demonstrates the inexorable link between performance and the construction of culture.

4. This statement comes from a letter that David Sapir sent to prospective authors in his ongoing Culture and Symbol Series, which is now published by the University of Arizona Press (Sapir 1983).

5. My use of plain expository prose in this article is not at all ironic. Like the griot, the writer of journal articles must pay some heed to institutions and audiences by following some of the overriding realist conventions of journal publishing in the human sciences. And yet, no ethnographer—even the author of a journal article—needs to adhere to all scholarly conventions of representation. Ethnographers as griots can embed into their rule-governed prose performance elements that play with those very conventions, rendering them problematic.

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submitted October 26, 1991

revised version submitted June 15, 1992

accepted October 5, 1992