

# The Roles of the Griot in the Future of Mali: A Twenty-First-Century Institutionalization of a Thirteenth-Century Traditional Institution

Barbara G. Hoffman

**Abstract:** Every ethnic group in Mali has at least one social category of specialists in conflict mediation and resolution. These are caste groups whose duties include the maintenance of a moral as well as structural social order, even in times of great turmoil. Recent research on the activities of these actors shows that the role of traditional mediator has not vanished, but it has evolved through bureaucratic institutionalization. A thickly described case study of the formation of RECOTRADE, the largest nongovernmental organization of traditional communicators in West Africa, demonstrates how this traditional institution is keeping pace with the political and civil development of the country.

**Résumé:** Chaque groupe ethnique au Mali possède au moins une catégorie sociale de spécialistes en médiation et résolution de conflits. Ce sont des groupes de castes dont les fonctions comprennent le maintien d'un ordre social moral et structurel, même durant des moments de grandes agitations. Des recherches récentes sur les activités de ces acteurs montrent que le rôle du médiateur traditionnel n'a pas disparu, mais qu'il a évolué grâce à une institutionnalisation bureaucratique. Une étude de cas très répandue sur la formation de RECOTRADE, la plus grande

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organisation non gouvernementale de communicateurs traditionnels en Afrique de l'Ouest, montre comment cette institution traditionnelle suit le rythme du développement politique et civil du pays.

**Keywords:** Mali; RECOTRADE; conflict resolution; caste; griot; *nyamakala*; mediators; traditional communicators

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## Introduction

The January 2012 massacre of Malian soldiers in Aguelhok mentioned in Bruce Whitehouse's blog, "Bridges from Bamako" (<https://bridgesfrombamako.com>), and later confirmed by numerous other sources, led me, like many other scholars of Mali outside the country, to build into my daily schedule a perusal of Mali-related social media, blogs, internet groups, and websites for information on what was happening, who was involved, what the issues were, and what strategies were being used to address them. The March 22, 2012, coup d'état left a vacuum of power in the capital that attracted the by-then consolidated rebel groups in the north. I hoped—or perhaps expected—that Mali's professional negotiators—the *nyamakalaw* casted griots (*jeliw*), smiths (*numuw*), leatherworkers (*garankew*), and descendants of slaves (*jonw*) in the south and the smiths and slaves in the north—would be applying their skills to help resolve what was, by May 2012, beginning to look like a civil war.<sup>1</sup> During my anthropological apprenticeship as a griot some thirty years ago, I had witnessed firsthand the expert management of nonmilitary conflict on a smaller scale by master griots in southern Mali, where mediation took on dimensions not usually addressed by political science theories of conflict resolution. There the mediators were both outsiders and insiders, third parties in some senses but not disinterested, and skilled in persuasion and manipulation of the most relevant forms of cultural, rather than financial, capital (see Hoffman 2000). Though that generation of expert intermediaries was largely gone by 2012, I hoped that some of their abilities and strategies and the respect for them that made them effective had been passed down to the next generations. For once blood has been spilled, the resulting wounds to the Malian social body must be thoroughly cleansed in order to heal; as the Malian adage goes, "a wound cannot heal on pus." More than politicians, military experts, NGOs, or religious leaders, the casted artisans—Mali's indigenous experts at reconciliation and social healing—are in the best position to heal social injuries across all sectors of the society. According to the historical division of labor among the *nyamakalaw* artisan castes in southern Mali (the regions of Kayes, Koulikoro, Segou, and Sikasso), griots are the masters of sound, leatherworkers of skin, smiths of metal, potters of clay, and carvers of wood. All share a duty to promote peace and mutual understanding in their communities. In the past, the distinctions among

these endogamous specialized professional social categories were more rigid, but today, as will be seen below, there is a tendency to conflate the mediation duties of their roles into the umbrella category of *nyamakala*.

After the 1991 coup in Mali but before the events of 2012, perhaps the gravest interior political disaster had been the political crisis of 1997–1999 involving the conflict between President Alpha Oumar Konaré’s administration and the opposition parties. On March 4, 1997, Konaré dissolved the National Assembly and then held legislative elections the following month, but those results were overturned by the Constitutional Court just twelve days later. Presidential elections were held in May 1997 and boycotted by most of the opposition parties, which had by then formed the Collectif des Partis de l’Opposition (COPO).<sup>2</sup> In the legislative re-run elections of July and August 1997, continued opposition boycotts, along with student protests and violence, led to a turnout of less than 10 percent of the population (Facts on File World News Digest 1997). On August 10, 1997—three months after his reelection with a reported 96 percent of the vote—the Konaré government’s police arrested nine of the opposition party leaders (IFES 1998; University of Central Arkansas n.d.). For the next two years, parliamentary and municipal elections were canceled, boycotted, rescheduled, boycotted again, and widely considered by the local population as beset by fraud and corruption. The threatened disruption of civil society was grave enough to cause general anxiety within the population. According to Mody Soumano (personal communication, 2003), a journalist at the Office of Radio and Television Mali (ORTM) and a leader in the Bamako griot community, the communal angst prompted the Bamako griot association (*jelitɔn*), led by Jeli Baba Sissoko, to intervene and recall each side to the order of its *dambe*—the dignity, mutual respect, and honor stemming from the complementary societal roles recognized in the historical strata of Malian societies (Koné 2010).

I went to Mali in August of 2013 to research what had become of the griot (*jeli*) community during the 2012–2013 crisis, and what signs there might be of a future for griot practice (*jeliya*) in the political life of the country. At that time, the presence of international forces in the north appeared to have contained the conflict enough for the scheduled presidential elections to proceed. In my initial interviews I was given accounts of the end of *jeliya* from acknowledged leaders in the Bamako *jeli* community as well intellectuals and scholars of other castes, which led me to wonder if the words I had heard so many times from the renowned, now deceased, master griot Siramori Diabaté—that the great griots were all gone—had indeed come true.

## Historical Overview of the Mande Caste System

Nearly every society in West Africa that was deeply influenced by the Mali Empire (13th–17th century) and the resulting cultural diaspora is still marked by a system of social stratification that can be classified as caste—a system of social difference that operates in conjunction with ideologies of endogamy, occupational specialization, and differential access to religious

or occult powers (Hoffman 2000). The occupations associated with caste status typically include those that involve transformation of a natural resource into a product of human endeavor: converting soil, water, sunlight, and seed into food, changing air into meaningful sounds through speech and music, working minerals into metals, shaping clay into vessels, carving wood into iconic and useful objects, weaving fibers into cloth, and producing practical and decorative items of leather from animal skins.

In each society, the hereditary groups that historically comprised practitioners of these professions go by different caste names: the masters of sound may be griots in southwestern Mali but smiths or slaves in the north (Tamari 1997), and in the far reaches of the Mande zone in southeastern Mali and northern Côte d'Ivoire some individuals who belong genealogically to the sound-master caste are leatherworkers (Frank 1995). In some Mande societies such as the Soninke, special spiritual status is accorded to certain clans known as *les clans maraboutiques* (Diawara 1990). In others, occult powers are available to anyone with the special talents to cultivate them.

Relations among the castes have historically been those of a clientelist or patronage system. Members of each caste retained patron–client relations with members of every other caste within their locality so that the products of each could be easily obtained by the others. Members of the food-producing caste (most often referenced in the French literature as “nobles”) were and continue to be the most numerous. The stratification system anticipated that these “nobles” would provide the food that would nourish the other caste groups that specialized in the production of nonedibles and that the latter, in return, would provide the farmers with material as well as social capital. This exchange of products and talents was the basis of a complex network of social distinctions, behavioral differences, and mutual dependencies—more of a complementary heterarchy than a hierarchy, though many casted individuals as well as most of the scholars who study them commonly refer to them as hierarchically ordered (Wright 1989; Conrad & Frank 1995; Hoffman 2000). The Guinean scholar Sory Camara, in describing the precolonial “traditional” relations between the food producers and the non–food producers explained that the status of the latter

is characterized by its ambiguity. They are not patrons, nor are they slaves. . . . Like the farmers, they are free and are not bound by any servile obligations. Like the farmers, they can possess slaves who will work for them. But in other ways, they participate in the status of captives . . . [in that] they cannot seek the hand of a female farmer . . . [nor] rise to political authority. (1976: 64–65; my translation)

In the core Mande area (from Bamako west to Kayes and south to Kankan in Guinea), these castes are known as *hɔrɔnw* (food producers and formerly rulers and soldiers), *nyamakalaw* (artisans), and *jɔnw* (slaves). Even today the structuring of the social relations among castes is often

expressed both morally (X “is better” than Y) and in terms of instructions for gifting behavior (X must give to Y), although both structures are bidirectional and complex in typically unspoken ways (Hoffman 1995; Charry 2000). Precolonially, relations of mutual obligation were maintained between entire lineages and clans of patrons and associated lineages and clans of clients. As a matter of pride, many members of the “noble” caste even today refer to “their” griots/smiths/leatherworkers, and some “noble” families have indeed maintained their status as patrons of certain lineages of client castes. To a great extent, however, the patrons and clients have exchanged places as well as products and found new ones due to the seismic shifts undergone by Malian society since the colonial period.

In response to the colonizers’ demands for school attendance, patron families often sent client children to school, especially those who could be claimed to be members of their household. This inexorably led to the rise of griots and other *nyamakalaw* in the ranks of the formally educated elites who later became the leaders of the late colonial and early independence-era political class. Until the colonial period and its tumultuous aftermath, members of the non-food-producing castes had served as advisers and counselors to the political leaders rather than as rulers themselves, and as motivational coaches to armies rather than as soldiers or generals. This division of political labor became socially codified during the thirteenth-century reign of Sunjata Keita, a member of the farmer caste, who wrested power away from the blacksmith king, Soumaoro or Sumanguru Kanté. During the colonial period, with the opportunities brought by formal education and the acculturation that comes with it, the hour of change had arrived.

Seydou Badian Kouyaté, for example, was born a griot in 1928, but he was sent to school and eventually earned an M.D. degree at the Université de Montpellier in France, where he began his anticolonial political activities along with many others who would become the early political class in French West Africa (Mann 2015). During the first administration of independent Mali, Kouyaté held multiple high-level political appointments, including minister of development. For him and subsequent generations, caste and its professional implications were possible to place in the background, perhaps for the first time in Malian history.

But despite the new configurations of caste relations made possible by the adoption of Western-style governance structures and participation in the world economy, the moral structures of the Mande system did not disappear. Recent studies testify to the enduring salience of the Mande caste system as a kind of “legendary script” that can be overlaid on any nontraditional social scenario, such as the relations among employees of a business or inhabitants of a middle-class neighborhood, to evoke the social relations and mutual obligations of the Mande system (Roth 2008:136).<sup>3</sup> This system of social classification resides in Mande minds as *danbe*—the rules of respect, honor, and identity and the dignity that is connected with observing these rules.

## Griot Roles

Most people familiar with West African societies think of griots primarily as musicians, with the classic griot activities (outside of their advisory role) consisting of reciting genealogies and singing and reciting praise (Diawara 1990). Indeed, Mali is renowned for its repertoire of deeply rooted musical cultures, with griot-style music the basis of the most well-known and popular music. However, as scholars such as Lucy Durán (1995), Mamadou Diawara (1996), Eric Charry (2000), and Ryan Skinner (2015) have shown, being born into the griot or any other artisan caste is no longer a prerequisite for success as a musician in Mali. The conflation of the musical roles of griots and non-griot musicians is so extensive now that there is hardly any caste distinction remaining in the musical domain. Mali's music scene is no longer dominated by griots and their *jeliya*, but instead by *artistes* who perform what Ryan Skinner (2005) has called *artistiya*, which often includes griot stylistics performed by non-griots.

With the jihadist occupation in 2012, all public music that was not Islamic was banned in Timbuktu, Gao, and Kidal, including traditional styles of music integral to local cultures, and this ban affected all musicians, whether of the artisan caste or not. Andy Morgan (2013) has documented the shock, dismay, and strategic responses of Tuareg and Songhay musicians to this abrupt and unexpected disruption of their local cultures, and some musicians responded with acts of resistance. These were most prominent among the rapper community, whose lyrics concerning both the crisis in the north and the coup d'état in the south were the most direct, confrontational, and critical, not only of the politicians on whose watch these catastrophes took place, but also of the voters who put the politicians in power. Fatoumata Keita (2014), similarly, notes the widely distributed anti-Azawad ringtones produced by a young Malian rapper named Mill Grezy. Nevertheless, the declaration of the national state of emergency on January 12, 2013, silenced most public performances in southern venues where griots would normally sing, play, and dance (Skinner 2015). Some musicians (not all of them casted griots) managed to transmit their music outside of Mali. Fatoumata Diawara, a Wassalou singer, organized some forty Malian musicians in Bamako in January 2013 to record "Mali-ko," a song calling for peace and publicizing the crisis. The official video on YouTube has been viewed over 170,000 times. Rappers like Amkoulel, and the combo Iba One and Sidiki Diabate with their piece "Mali Gueleya," also have a wide following. The album *Jama Ko* of the griot Bassekou Kouyate brought attention to the crisis as well (Morgan 2013; Skinner 2015).

Just as today's musicians are not necessarily members of the griot caste, the *jeli* social and caste distinction today is maintained mostly in terms of the *nyamakalaw*'s other roles—as social spokespersons, political legitimators, and mediators (Hoffman 2000; Schulz 2001). In the past, these peacemakers had been called upon to negotiate, implement, and

monitor reconciliations and compromises, and to lend authority to cease-and-desist commands when social turmoil exceeded acceptable limits. As mediators, *nyamakalaw* were renowned for their mastery of occult powers. For the griots these reside in their words, which the Mande people conceptualize as imbued with a force, known as *nyama*, that can cause physical and mental illness and even kill the individual (Camara 1976; Leynaud & Cisse 1978; McNaughton 1988). In this sense the role of the griot exceeds the standard definition of mediation as “third-party intervention in a conflict with the stated purpose of contributing to its abatement or resolution through negotiation” and without force (Zartman & Touval 1985:31). Because of their ability to release *nyama*, master griots were feared for the power of their words, which is a kind of force: not military, and not weaponry, but force nonetheless. The master griot Balla Ba Diabaté from Kela, for example, was famous for having brought the 1985 war of the Kita griots over the griot chieftaincy to a close with the utterance of just three small words, but these were words packed with *nyama*, and they became legendary (Hoffman 2000).

In 2013 I wondered whether it might have been possible for one or more of Balla Ba’s successors to mediate the conflict between the Malian army and the presidency that opened the door to the northern rebels. Or was this war too large, too heavily armed, to be handled with the weapons of *danbe* and *nyama*? In August 2013 I posed these questions to Mody Soumano at the offices of ORTM.<sup>4</sup> He said that the apparent lack of a griot response was understandable and ultimately attributable to the lack of a shared moral order. How does one appeal to *danbe*, he asked, when dealing with stratification based on weaponry rather than on tradition and status?

To resolve a problem, one must understand it well. One must know the actors involved. The MNLA, MUJAO, and AQMI are strangers to the griots of Timbuktu, Gao, and Kidal. The griots couldn’t even diagnose the malady, much less treat it. The pace at which the situation in the north changed after the coup d’état made it impossible for the griots to do the in-depth research necessary to discern wisely the players to whom they could appeal for a return to moral order. With the imposition of shari’ah and the extreme harsh punishments of whipping, stoning, and amputation, the griots saw that they were confronted by amoral powers that could not be dealt with reasonably, and so they withdrew. (Interview, August 15, 2013)

As for the absence of public griot action immediately following the coup in the capital where the bulk of Malian griots live, he said that during the mandate of the ousted president, Amadou Toumani Touré (popularly known as ATT), griots had been excluded from the political life of the presidency, and that instead of there being a vocal and organized political opposition group advocating for transparency, complaints and accusations had flowed like an undercurrent of dissatisfaction through the streets, on the

radio waves, and in the newspapers. There were too many sources making too many contradictory claims; everyone had an opinion that too few others shared. After the coup the griots, like everyone else, were waiting to see who would end up in power and what versions of the reasons behind the coup would be confirmed before they could approach any of the actors about restoring the moral order. “When you don’t have a gun,” he said, “you don’t confront a lion.”

Where griots and other casted artisans did come into play, according to Mody, was in calming the ethnic tensions and encouraging peaceful relations for the success of the electoral process in 2013. Indeed, as I discovered, a rather large organization of casted artisans—the Association of Traditional Communicators for the Development of Mali (Réseau des Communicateurs Traditionnels pour le Développement du Mali, or RECOTRADE)—not only took on an important role in the preparations for elections, but had also attempted to intervene with the government and the army during the 2012 crisis.

### RECOTRADE—A Different Kind of *Tɔn*

The principal griot organization salient in the minds of most Malians is the *jelitɔn*; in the Bamana/Maninka languages the literal meaning of the word *tɔn* is “association,” although the word also connotes the elements of “heavy” tradition, or *lada girin*. Membership in a *tɔn* is automatic: all the inhabitants of a village or neighborhood between the ages, say, of fifteen to twenty-five, constitute the young people’s *tɔn*. All griot inhabitants of Bamako are members of the Bamako griot *tɔn* (*jelitɔn*), which is further subdivided into a griot women’s *tɔn* (*jelimusotɔn*) and a griot men’s *tɔn* (*jeliketɔn*). Not all members are obliged or even likely to participate in the activities of the *tɔn*, especially in one as large as the Bamako *jelitɔn* with its thousands of members. The locus of activity, and of political influence, is situated at the top with the *jelikuntigi*—the head griot—and his circle of advisors, a type of traditional chieftaincy. The honor of rising to the top position is said to be reserved for the eldest eligible member, as expressed in the proverb “Den t’i sigi fa kun na”: “The child cannot rule the father.” However, the definitions of “eldest” and “eligible” are at the root of many battles for the leadership of these traditional organizations.<sup>5</sup>

For at least thirty years the power of the leadership of the Bamako *jelitɔn* resided in the hands of the Soumano clan, originally from Kita. When I first visited Mali in 1984, Djémoussa Soumano was the Bamako head griot. When he died, his civil servant son, Bakari Soumano, claimed the position as his birthright<sup>6</sup> but was challenged by Jeli Baba Sissoko, an older griot, who had popular support due to his longstanding radio and television broadcast career (Hoffman 2000; Roth 2008). Sissoko won that battle, but upon his death Bakari Soumano assumed the position and was later succeeded by his younger brother, Ousmane Soumano, who passed away in June 2014.<sup>7</sup> These hereditary, gerontocratic aspects of traditional



chieftaincies conflict with Western notions of democracy but are fundamental to indigenous Malian governance structures (and they are also, I would argue, at the root of many of Africa's governance issues in general).

Nevertheless, changes are evident among the griots, as exemplified by Mamadou Ben Chérif Diabaté, a Kita native and son of the renowned master griot Kélémonzon Diabaté. Ben Chérif is the incarnation of what I would call the "new griot." First employed as a sound engineer at the national radio of Mali, he later earned a degree in journalism and communication from the University of Bamako. Similar to his cousin, the famous author Massa Makan Diabaté, Ben Chérif utilizes literacy as a tool in his performance of *jeliya*, but he combines it with masterful orality and technical training, bringing modern communication technologies into the service of the griot's ancient arts. In response to the interclan war of the Kita griots in the 1980s and its aftermath in the 1990s, he founded in 1992 the Association des Jeunes Griots de Kita (the Association of Young Griots of Kita), an organization that married the principles of the traditional *tɔn* to the structure of the democratic voluntary association as a means of addressing the long-term conflict in his home town.

The success of this association persuaded Ben Chérif that the talents, skills, and heritage of the griot could be used to unite people across castes and ethnicities throughout the multiple countries making up the Mande diaspora zone. And so on November 2, 1999, he deposited with the Malian Ministry of Territorial Administration and Local Collectivities the necessary paperwork to create RECOTRADE, which is also known as the *nyamakala-tɔn*. The declared purpose of the association was "to contribute to the insertion and implication of the traditional communicators or 'Niamakala' in the socioeconomic, cultural, and educational development of Mali through actions of information, publicity, and communication. . . ."<sup>8</sup> One of its basic principles was that its members would address public praise only to people personally known to them (or to the mother or father of those individuals). Although this principle represented, in fact, a return to ancestral practices, it represented a dramatic shift in the present context—an implicit repudiation of the form of *griotisme* that had reduced the status of griots in the eyes of the public and had been widely critiqued in both the Malian public press and academic writing for decades, whereby large throngs of griots would gather at weddings and funerals to sing the praises, for pecuniary gain, of people they had never met.

Ben Chérif believed that the return to ancestral practices would reopen the channels of trust among griots, their equivalent *nyamakalaw* in other ethnic groups, and members of the other social strata that made up the Mande caste system. This would, in turn, demonstrate to both governmental and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that the members of the *nyamakala-tɔn* could be useful in myriad ways in political life and economic development throughout West Africa. Rather than restricting membership to griots, Ben Chérif recruited all varieties of *nyamakalaw* from all ethnicities across the nation, and eventually across nine countries

in West Africa, seeking those who specialize in mediation through speech, oratory, and negotiation to join what he envisioned as the voice of education and peace in civil society.

The first general assembly of the fledgling association took place in Bamako on March 13, 2004. According to the organization's unpublished statutes, which Ben Chérif allowed me to photograph, RECOTRADE adhered to the fundamental principles contained in international documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Toward Women, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Rights of Children, the African Charter on the Rights of Man (ICESCR), and the objectives of the Millennium Development Corporation. RECOTRADE'S stated objectives in Article 6 of the statutes were "(1) to put the capacities of traditional communicators to the service of the development of the country; (2) to create a framework for the exchange and sharing of experiences among the different members of the association; (3) to contribute to the implication of traditional communicators, *nyamakalaw*, in the processes of economic, social, and cultural development through actions of information, education, publicity, and communication; (4) to participate in the establishment of politics for the promotion of the health, rights, and citizenship of women through education, information, and publicity by the masters of speech, the guardians of local knowledge; (5) to bring their support and their 'savoir faire' to the promotion of good governance and the prevention and management of conflicts for durable peace and development in Africa and in the world; and (6) to promote both material and immaterial patrimony and the spirit of collaboration with the administration, institutions, NGOs and the partners of development."

At its height under the leadership of Ben Chérif, RECOTRADE had only about two hundred members, though he spent the first decade of its existence establishing branches in Mali from Kangaba in the south to Gao in the north and further extending the association's reach into neighboring countries. He felt the initial growth of the association was held back by tensions with the more traditional Bamako *jelitɔn* led by Jeli Baba Sissoko and later by Bakari Soumano and Ousmane Soumano. It took time, he believed, to accustom the *nyamakalaw* to the idea of this new kind of *ɔn*. Still, nowhere in the academic literature on griots, caste, or *nyamakalaw* are the goals and objectives of RECOTRADE mentioned. Ryan Skinner's *Bamako Sounds: The Afropolitan Ethics of Malian Music* describes griots as "musical artisans practicing the time-honored art of musical panegyric and storytelling known as *jeliya* (2015:3)." Molly Roth, in *Ma Parole S'achète: Money, Identity, and Meaning in Malian Jeliya*, defines *jeliya* in terms of

the social order of precolonial Sahelian kingdoms, with their aristocratic war-making and farming corporations organized in the idiom of family. Jeliw were the clients of kings and great families; they sang praises and

recited genealogies, as entertainment and education; and they served as advisors, counselors, messengers, and negotiators. But the institution of *jeliya* has survived the eclipse of that order, and even flourished, without ceasing to define itself in terms of this feudal imaginary. (2008:5)

The association Ben Chérif created was a new hybrid institution, grafting the respected caste status and roles of the past onto a bureaucratically structured, globally linked, nongovernmental organization. Membership requires the appropriate caste status, a testimonial from another member as to the character and knowledge of the initiate, and payment of annual dues (currently 2,000 FCFA/~U.S.\$4.00) like a social club or union, but the functions of the organization have gradually taken on dimensions more in line with those of an NGO.

By 2006, according to the organization's annual reports, Ben Chérif and his associates were participating in a wide range of official meetings and project activities with both governmental and nongovernmental organizations, concentrating on a select number of topics that fall far outside the historical parameters of the classic griot activities. The new undertakings for the *nyamakala-tɔn* included participation in the national campaign to eradicate the practice of excision, and educating the population about critical health issues as well as the duties of a citizen in a democracy—humanitarian efforts with an emphasis on moral authority and reasoning that fall under the rubric of what Gregory Mann (2015) calls “nongovernmentality” (see also Fassin 2007).

In 2006 members of RECOTRADE participated in seminars about resolving armed conflict and constructing democracy in Liberia. In 2008 they attended an NGO-sponsored forum on how to structure an emergency alert system in Region VII in case of armed conflict there. In 2008 they participated in workshops organized by the Ministry of the Interior's High Council of the Local Collectivities on intercommunity dialogue on human rights and the culture of peace in Mopti. In 2009 they attended meetings of the National Council on Civil Society and the National Network for Democracy and Patriotism. In February 2010 they participated in the launch of the project “Actions that Save” (*Les Gestes Qui Sauvent*), a massive public-education campaign by the Malian Ministry of Health in partnership with UNICEF directed at reducing the childhood mortality rate in Mali, which at the time had the eighth highest under-five mortality rate in the world (UNICEF 2010a, 2010b; Cocorico 2011). In order to be accepted as a nongovernmental partner of UNICEF, RECOTRADE had to submit a detailed profile of its own organizational structure, including its finances and the partnerships mentioned above. RECOTRADE participated in this campaign for five years and was commended for its successful dissemination of the campaign's basic public health information in the Dubai Cares 2011 evaluation report as well as in annual reports by UNMDG-F (Lefebvre 2011), UNICEF, and Save the Children (Keita 2013).

RECOTRADE now operates in an organizational context very different from that of its predecessor associations. Scattered throughout its early annual reports are notations of various ceremonies and concerts—more customary venues for the practice of the griot's art—that Ben Chérif and others attended on behalf of RECOTRADE, but these are few in number. Thus during Ben Chérif's mandate, RECOTRADE's dynamic merging of the old and new forms of *jeliya* clearly began to favor the new. This direction was pushed even further under Ben Chérif's successor, Cheick Oumar Soumano, the younger brother of the head griot of the Bamako traditional *jelitɔn* at the time, Ousmane Soumano. The presidency of RECOTRADE was turned over to Cheick Oumar in January 2012 at the organization's general assembly held in Bamako under the auspices of the Ministry of Social Development, Solidarity, and Aged Persons and attended by a thousand people, including political figures, ministry officials, presidents of civic organizations such as the Coordination of the Neighborhood Chiefs and the Founding Families of Bamako, as well as representatives of UNICEF and other NGOs. In order to maintain the political neutrality NGOs demand, Cheick Oumar not only banned association-based political endorsements but also discouraged official association participation in traditional ceremonies and celebrations.<sup>9</sup> This bureaucratization of RECOTRADE's structure and function reflects the exigencies of the NGO context in which it operates. By functioning as clients of NGO patrons, in addition to being clients of individuals of other castes, the *nyamakalaw* members of RECOTRADE have taken up a new version of their ancient practice of clientelism.

It was also decided at that 2012 general assembly that the ten officers scattered through nine countries, as designated in the 2004 statutes, would be expanded to fifty officers in Bamako, with an additional forty-three external to Bamako—one in each of forty-three *Cercles* in Mali, for a total of ninety-three members of the Executive Bureau.<sup>10</sup> As of 2016, membership in RECOTRADE is up to ten thousand *nyamakalaw* within Mali alone.<sup>11</sup>

### RECOTRADE and the Crisis of 2012–2013

In 2012, as all eyes were drawn to the north with the January massacre of Malian soldiers in Aguelhok, the March ousting of Mali's president, and the political and military chaos that ensued, RECOTRADE was working behind the scenes. According to its executive secretary, Sekou Dembélé of the blacksmith caste, during the Malian army's armaments crisis of 2012, which was exacerbated by the embargo imposed by ECOWAS (the Economic Community of West African States), RECOTRADE organized fundraising efforts to support the Malian military's activities in the north with an initial contribution of 1 million FCFA and later by 8 million FCFA (Pomponne 2012). Also, in 2013, when Red Beret Colonel Seydou Moussa Diallo went on a hunger strike in prison following his arrest for the publication in *The Independent* newspaper of an open letter to the administration calling for an

immediate attack on the “narco-jihadists” occupying the north (Koulouba.com. 2014), RECOTRADE sent a delegation to ask him to end his protest for the sake of the honor of Mali, and he did.

Executive Secretary Dembélé also told me that two letters were sent from RECOTRADE to the office of the President of the Republic, Amadou Toumani Touré: one immediately after the Aguelhok massacre to warn him to take swift action, and a second on March 20, 2012, to urge him to attend to the people’s complaints (interview, RECOTRADE headquarters, August 8, 2013). Just two days after the second letter was delivered, ATT was driven into hiding by mutinous soldiers. According to a letter dated March 5, 2012, sent by RECOTRADE to the Ministry of Territorial Administration entitled “Campaign for the Return of Lasting Peace in the North of Mali,”

thousands of Malians living in the conflict zones have preferred to exile themselves to the refugee camps near the borders of neighboring countries. Peace is more compromised than ever before, and Mali is preparing to organize elections next month. Faced with this situation, RECOTRADE proposes to organize an information campaign for the return of a lasting peace following the conflicts between the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad and the National Army.

The specific actions proposed were: (1) to organize missions of mediation with the customary chiefs among the Songhay, Tamasheq, and Arab populations in the regions of Gao, Timbuktu, and Kidal; (2) to organize television broadcasts on the culture of peace and national unity; (3) to duplicate and rebroadcast these messages on local radio stations; (4) to organize training sessions for the Traditional Communicators ( i.e., the *nyamakalaw* equivalents) of the regions of Gao, Timbuktu, and Kidal on the prevention of conflicts; (5) to produce and broadcast specific messages about peace in the Bamana, Tamasheq, Arab, and Songhay languages on local radio stations; (6) to organize community dialogues to create community networks for peace in the northern regions; and (7) to organize missions to the Malian refugees in neighboring countries to convince them to return to Mali.

The successful implementation of these actions, it was argued, would necessitate the grassroots involvement of multiple community leaders in taking responsibility for maintaining the peace through community dialogue, an “ancestral practice” for conflict resolution that includes “customary chiefs and their councils, religious leaders, representatives of women’s and youth associations, and teachers,” organized in a network with formal statutes and assigned responsibilities. According to its proposal, RECOTRADE envisioned implementing this project during the months of March, April, and May 2012. But the proposal met with no reply from the government, which was still trying to find its footing after the coup. As the other articles in this Forum suggest, the chaos of these months in Mali could not be resolved by any group without access to arms.

RECOTRADE submitted another proposal on May 7, 2012, which asked for a meeting with Interim President Diounounda Traoré, Interim Prime Minister Cheick Modibo Diarra, Amadou Haya Sanogo (the leader of the coup who then became president of the National Committee for the Restoration of Democracy and State–CNRDR), and Blaise Campaoré (the now ousted President of Burkina Faso, who was also the appointed mediator for ECOWAS).<sup>12</sup> The stated objectives of the meeting were to discuss the problems of transition (how to arrive at consensus on the selection of a president, the institutions and organizations necessary to effect the transition, and the length of transition); to share the information RECOTRADE had about the north and its capacities for meeting with the leaders of the rebellion in Mali and in Niger; to develop a strategy to activate Malian troops stationed outside the country; to apply RECOTRADE's access to the highest officials of Niger to seek support for a counteroffensive by Malian troops, beginning at the frontier and progressing to the interior; and to designate RECOTRADE as mediator between the Malian government and the leaders of the rebels.

When this proposal, too, went unanswered, the leaders of RECOTRADE took it upon themselves to schedule individual meetings at the organization's headquarters in June 2012 with the leaders of the Malian political class: Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, Mountaga Tall, Zoumana Sacko, Moussa Mara, and Oumar Mariko, as well as the Islamic High Council, the Coordination of the Northern Regions (COREN), the CNRDR, and the prime minister. The purpose of these meetings was to present RECOTRADE's proposals for strategies to end the crisis as rapidly as possible. Not all of the meetings took place, but most did.<sup>13</sup>

Although its efforts to intervene overtly in the political and military crisis of 2012 were largely rebuffed, RECOTRADE continued to build on its previous successful work with the U.N. and NGOs. UNICEF (2012) reported that its Communication for Development campaign benefited from "277 traditional communicators from the Network of Traditional Communicators (RECOTRADE)," who worked with the Association for the Press in Support of Development (ASPAD) to conduct site visits in "44,064 households, benefitting 528,136 people." According to the United Nations' *Plan de Communication du Systeme des Nations Unies au Mali 2008–2012*, which was the basis for the work of all seventeen U.N. agencies operating in Mali, RECOTRADE was one of the recommended media organizations for publicizing U.N. objectives and programs.

RECOTRADE continued its work with UNICEF throughout the first half of 2013. According to the June 2013 UNICEF "Mali Situation Report,"

RECOTRADE carried out C4D [communication for development] activities in 33 vulnerable health districts in the regions of Kayes, Koulikoro, Ségou, Mopti, Sikasso, Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu, 6,082 religious and community leaders were trained on EFP [Essential Family Practices] promotion,

23,688 households were visited by local traditional communicators, [and] 9,026 group discussions took place with 51,407 participants. Some 2,126 IDPs [internally displaced persons] were also educated.

Once the political situation had calmed down enough for the presidential elections to be organized, the UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) engaged RECOTRADE to help inform the population about the identification card (National Identification Number/NINA) each citizen would need in order to vote. In order to obtain these cards individuals had to undergo the biometric census (Recensement Administratif à Vocation d'Etat Civil/RAVEC), which included being fingerprinted and photographed. The time frame allotted for preparation of the elections was extremely constrained—about a month, from the time the U.N. officially took over peacekeeping functions in northern Mali until the first round of the presidential voting. The procedures for transmitting this information to every citizen, which had already begun in anticipation of the elections in 2012 but had been suspended throughout the year of the crisis, needed just the sort of rapid deployment capacities that an organization like RECOTRADE could provide (Cisse 2013; Coulibaly 2013; UNDP 2013). In addition, RECOTRADE officers informed me that another eighty traditional communicators had been trained in techniques of mediation to serve during the elections, supported by the EISA (Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy), and that traditional communicators were dispatched into all the polling stations on the days of the vote to help maintain the peace.

After the election of Ibrahim Boubacar Keita as president of Mali in August 2013, RECOTRADE was invited to the Presidential Palace at Koulouba to greet the new president along with the *Jelitonba*, the Bamako Griot Association that was, at that time, still under the leadership of Ousmane Soumano. According to Amadou Débé Diabaté, the coordinator of programming, RECOTRADE did not want to be considered in the same category as the Bamako *Jelitonba* and asked for a separate audience. This was never granted, but the administration has called upon the organization for mediation services multiple times and has shown its esteem in other ways. For example, after the sudden death of RECOTRADE President Cheick Oumar Soumano on October 18, 2015, President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita gave a moving eulogy at his state funeral (Présidence de la République du Mali 2015).

According to RECOTRADE's 2013 Annual Report (which I was shown at their headquarters on June 27, 2014), on September 30, 2013, unnamed members of the Malian army requested the intervention of the president of RECOTRADE, along with other civil society organizations, with regard to the mutiny of unpromoted soldiers in Kati (Ahmed 2013). The following month, RECOTRADE was engaged to work with the civil society activist Suliman Baldo, who had been commissioned by MINUSMA (the U.N. Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali) to work with local organizations to promote peaceful civil society actions. The same month, RECOTRADE began a partnership with the

Synangouya Association and the project “Mobilizing Civil Society for Peace and National Reconciliation” organized by the Advocacy Network.<sup>14</sup> In November 2013 RECOTRADE met with a delegation of European Union Observers seeking RECOTRADE’s support during the legislative elections in Koulikoro, Timbuktu, and Kidal regions, and in December 2013 it began the second phase of the “Actions that Save” project with UNICEF. With the outbreak of Ebola in neighboring Guinea in early 2014, much of RECOTRADE’s human and material resources went into an information campaign conducted in thirty-two towns and villages on the Malian side of the Guinea border to educate the inhabitants about the virus and how to prevent contamination. The organization’s nimble response to this health crisis—which fortunately was better received by the Malian government than its attempted response to the military and political crisis of 2012, as evidenced by the government’s employment of the organization in the urgent need to communicate with Malian citizens about the nature of the disease and how to protect against it—is an indicator of its vitality and potential longevity.

### Conclusion: RECOTRADE and the Future of Mali

Although RECOTRADE celebrated its fifteenth anniversary in 2014, it is not yet clear what the effects of the organization will be for the future of the griot and the *nyamakala*. It is still shaping its identity, much like its country of origin, which is struggling to find its own identity while still under occupation by the French and the United Nations forces and under ever-expanding threats from terrorists, who struck in 2015 from the southern border with Côte d’Ivoire to Kidal in the north, including in the heart of Bamako.

According to my informal surveys, few *Bamakois* are aware of the existence of RECOTRADE as an entity separate from the traditional *jelitɔn*. The popular semantic conflation of “griot” and *nyamakala* is undoubtedly at work in maintaining the link between the two organizations in the Malian mind, and RECOTRADE’s self-appellation in Bamana as “*Nyamakala-tɔn*” only adds to the confusion. Perhaps a renaming of the organization would contribute to some clarification; for example, a name like “*Nyamakala ka Nyeta Tɔn*” (the *Nyamakala* Development Association) might emphasize the different objectives and functionalities that set it apart from the traditional caste associations.

RECOTRADE’s alignment with the global notions of human rights, as cited in its charter, positions it as a player in the humanitarian field of action. Its bureaucratic structure and a *modus operandi* that includes training sessions, workshops, and general assemblies where minutes are kept and resolutions are taken give it a very NGO-like appearance and a nongovernmental rationality that has been recognized by partners such as UNICEF.<sup>15</sup> The restructuring of the patron–client relation from the individual to the corporate level that gives RECOTRADE its funding, and the fact that the funding is forthcoming on the basis of written rather than



social contracts, further contributes to its NGO-like status. Yet a fundamental characteristic of the organization is that its members are casted artisans with a highly respected and ancient social status, and this gives RECOTRADE a more fluid, hybrid quality: members are born into their caste but they pay dues and undergo training—a form of apprenticeship—as in the European guilds of old. In the villages where the majority of RECOTRADE members live, the griot (or other “traditional communicator”) who offers training, for example, on the health consequences of using soap to wash one’s hands may be the same person who cites the genealogy of parents at the naming ceremonies of children. The very basis for their effective action is their caste and the position of trust and confidence it gives them in the communities in which they live and work. As RECOTRADE’s publicity brochure states,

In matters of prevention and management of conflicts or of mediation between populations in Mali, the intervention of the traditional communicator considered a neutral person [is] a pledge of respective interests. Their presence permits dialogue in a climate of confidence and serenity, necessary conditions for progress toward consensus, solution, peace and social cohesion.

On April 19, 2012, Oumar Korkosse, the Information Officer of RECOTRADE, published an article in the Malian newspaper *Aurore* reporting that

The casted groups of Mali held a meeting yesterday morning at their headquarters in Hippodrome to discuss the situation in the North. The final decision is the same as that proposed to the government at the start of the crisis. Thus one more time, [RECOTRADE] made it their duty to go and talk with their patrons . . . in the North for peace in a united and prosperous Mali.

At the time of the attacks in the North by armed bandits last January, the president of . . . RECOTRADE, . . . Cheick Oumar SOUMANO, had said publicly and in the presence of the Governor of the District, the Minister of Territorial Administration and Local Collectivities, and the Ministers of Defense, Interior Security, and Communication as well as the local elected officials, that . . . [RECOTRADE] hold[s] the solution to peace. He added that it is simply a question of sending them to the North.

He reminded them that nothing is better than dialogue to consolidate the peace. And that Mali is a country with a culture whose nobles value their dignity. He reminded [them] that those who have taken up arms in the North are Malians, just like the president of the republic, with their cultures and their dignity. They also have, in their communities, griots, leatherworkers, smiths, and slaves in whom they have confidence. These casted men hold the history of our compatriots in the North and have the cultural power that would permit them to master them.

Two comments were posted online in response to this article, both of them congratulatory. The second one expressed the same thoughts I had had

myself throughout the tense months of 2012: “Happy to hear this. Because I was asking myself where are the *nyamakalaw*?”

As this study has demonstrated, the *nyamakalaw*, and especially the griots, are present and active in both their ancient arts and their more recently adopted humanitarian, educational, and nongovernmental roles in Malian society. In the long run, the extent to which their mediation can facilitate the reconciliation of Mali’s north and south after the weapons have been laid down depends not so much on their skills and knowledge as on the salience among the ex-combatants of the core values that they uphold. Unless (or until) both sides share common conceptualizations of honor, dignity, and respect, regardless of their cultural and religious differences, the *nyamakalaw*, armed only with the power of words, will not heal the social wounds inflicted by the beast of war. They will, nonetheless, keep trying.

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## Notes

1. *Nyamakalaw* is the term used by speakers of the majority language of Mali, Bamana. The sound represented phonetically by [ɲ] is transcribed in French orthography with /ni/ and in English orthography as /ny/. Throughout this article, spelling will vary, depending on the source, between *nyamakala* and *niamakala*. The plural is indicated with /w/, as in *nyamakalaw*. The descendants of slaves in southern Mali currently play similar social roles as the other *nyamakalaw* and so are included as a category of *nyamakala* in local parlance in specific contexts, as are the smiths and slaves of northern Mali. See Kone (this issue) for a discussion of the current status of slaves among the Tuareg.
2. Also referred to as COPPO: Collectif des Partis Politiques de l'Opposition (e.g., Smith 2001).

3. See also Diawara (1996) and Skinner (2015) for examples of other contexts in which appeals to the mutual obligations of Mande caste are used in innovative ways.
4. Unlike his non-griot colleague Zoumana Yoro Traoré, who had hosted a popular television program featuring Bamako griots called *L'Artiste et Sa Musique* from 1984 to 1990, Mody—who is a griot from Kita—chose to televise the *lada girin*—the “heavy” or “deep” traditions—of communities all over the Malian territory. Thus the name of his long-running and much-watched program: *Terroir*.
5. Hoffman (2000) provides an extended explication of the resolution of just such a conflict over the leadership of the Kita griot *ton*. See Jansen and Zobel (1996) for a discussion of other instances of age issues.
6. Bakari Soumano also tried to claim that he was the head of the griots of all Mali and that there was a national *jeliton*. This assertion was highly controversial, since regional and municipal autonomy among griot associations had been the practice until then.
7. According to a report posted to the RFI website (Baché 2015), in 2015 a new head griot, Kabiné Sissoko, was installed, and the younger brother of Ousmane Soumano, Cheick Oumar Tidjane Soumano, who was also the president of RECOTRADE at the time, participated in the ceremony.
8. All quotations from RECOTRADE documents have been translated from the French by the author.
9. In my 2013 interviews with them, both Mody Soumano and Ben Chérif Diabaté expressed their beliefs that having the brothers at the head of the two most important griot organizations in the capital offered more possibilities for cooperation between the organizations, but as any analysis of Malian kinship would assert, the manifestation of rivalry (*fadenya*) is equally possible in such situations. However, it is clear that membership in RECOTRADE grew exponentially after Cheick Oumar Soumano became the president.
10. *Compte-Rendu du Premier Congrès Ordinaire du Réseau des Communicateurs Traditionnels pour le Développement-RECOTRADE*, January 29, 2012, signed by the president, Cheick Oumar Tidiane Soumano and the executive secretary, Sékou Dembélé. According to RECOTRADE’s documentation, Ben Chérif continues as an active member and is listed on the current directory of the Executive Bureau as the first of fifteen “commissioners of conflicts.”
11. Despite its billing as a *nyamakala* association, the leadership is largely griot and the external impression of the organization is one of a *jeliton*. The list of the members of the Executive Bureau includes names from at least four different caste groups, but nearly 50 percent are griots. In its 2013 publicity materials, the Malian office of the United Nations Development Programme—one of RECOTRADE’s major partners—refers to it in a manner that makes it seem like a purely griot association:

Well aware of the crucial role *griots* play, the Malian government has decided to involve the *griots* as part of the campaign to raise public awareness and promote civic education to be launched before the presidential elections in July 2013. . . . The *griots* will be involved in public awareness efforts regarding the vote by advising communities on how to maintain peace and harmony during the elections. Their network (Réseau des Communicateurs traditionnels pour le développement, or RECOTRADE) will be activate [sic] during the pre-electoral period. . . . On April 24, UNDP organized a workshop to inform

traditional communicators of the importance of conflict prevention during election time and how to facilitate exchanges in terms of their contributions to promoting peace and fostering dialogue. Held in Bamako, 50 *griots* attended the workshop as well as national and international partners. (UNDP 2013)

12. By that time Amadou Sanogo had resigned from office, but he was still known to exert considerable power in the capital's politics—so much so that a RECOTRADE delegation visited him on May 12, 2012, to appeal to him to rally the military to go to the north to defend the northern populations who were suffering immense cultural losses at the hands of the jihadists.
13. I was asked not to reveal which meetings did or did not take place.
14. “Synangouya” is an alternative spelling of “sanankouya” and refers to the joking relationships that exist throughout nearly all Mali’s ethnic groups (see Kone, this issue).
15. RECOTRADE submitted a request for official Malian government recognition as a National NGO in 2013; the status of that request is pending as of this writing.