



## What is a griot?

Griots originated in the 13th century in the Mande empire of Mali.

For centuries they have told and retold the history of the empire, keeping their stories and traditions alive.

They tell their stories to music, using instruments such as the ngoni, the kora or the balafon. In Seckou Keita's family it was the kora.

A kora sounds like a melodic harp.

A griot trains for years learning to play the kora and listening to elder griots telling their stories.

Seckou's heritage offers a distinctive twist on traditional expectations.

The Keita name links him directly to the Mandinka kings of the 13th century and as a descendent of these kings, he would not normally have been allowed or expected to play the kora, a skill reserved and handed down primarily within West Africa's griot families.

He would be someone that musicians play for, not as a musician himself!

Fortunately, he was raised by his mother's family, the Cissokho's, who are one of the leading griot families, and so he was trained in music from an early age.

The training itself is extremely rigorous. It takes years and years of listening and memorising.

In his family he was taught to build koras by the age of seven or eight, and only after years of study, acquired the skills necessary to perform the repertoire of hundreds of songs and stories that make up the griot's heritage.

This is when you get your own instrument. Seckou got his at about 18 years old!

Seckou can easily tell when he hears a player if they've had traditional training because there are the deeper patterns and melodies, not just the simple sound in their playing.

Although his interest is in pushing the boundaries of his traditional framework, he has the full, traditional background and repertoire of compositions, some of which date back to the 13th and 15th centuries.

It is his responsibility as a member of his family to pass on what he was taught so that their stories may never be lost or forgotten.