Part I: **Oral Poetry between Tradition and Innovation**

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Jeliya goes Spotify: From Griot Oral Traditions to Multimodal Representations of Contemporary West African Music and Languages

Introduction

For centuries, griots[1] have dominated the musical traditions of West African cultures, combining the professional skills of poets, instrumentalists, singers, and mediators (cf. Hale 2007). With colonial conquest and the subsequent independence of modern nation-states in Africa, these traditional lyricists faced the challenge of adapting to a rapidly changing socio-political environment – a challenge their children have successfully mastered today.

Taking an interdisciplinary approach (combining musicology, cultural studies, sociolinguistics and history), this chapter will introduce the musical oeuvre of three outstanding West African artists hailing from griot families, namely Sona Jobarteh (Gambia), Tiken Jah Fakoly (Côte d'Ivoire), and Habib Koité (Mali). Not only were they introduced to composing, songwriting, and performing music from an early age, they also managed to transcend the local and transmit their craft to a global audience and can thus be considered true "modern griots" (Sajnani 2013).[2] How their contemporary art form relates to the original elements of a griot's craft, which frames are evoked in the multimodal representation of their songs, and how international audiences react to their music and the use of African languages in their lyrics are questions this chapter seeks to answer.

After a short literature review and a presentation of the methodology, I will give some background on the important role griots played in Mande society. The subsequent section will show how West African spoken art forms transitioned

1 The different theories to explain the etymology of the term "griot" are discussed in Hale (1997).
2 For a critical discussion of the inflationary usage of the phrase "modern griot" especially in US Hip Hop, see Sajnani (2013).

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from oral delivery to multimodal representations, which today can be heard (sonic representation, as in recordings), seen (visual representation, as in music videos), and read (textual representation, as in CD booklets or on internet platforms). Next to an analysis of both their lyrics displayed on digital streaming sites such as Spotify and the accompanying music videos on YouTube, this section will also look at recipients' comments on social media to evaluate the impact these artists' compositions have. I will then summarize the findings and discuss how the artists' choices to sing in their respective indigenous languages can contribute to an international appreciation of the depth and richness of African musical and poetic output. Finally, the chapter will close with a conclusion and a suggestion for future lines of inquiry into this understudied field.

Literature Review and Methodology

Griots are described as praise singers, poets, or traditional troubadours who provide wit, wisdom, education, and musical entertainment at social gatherings and special events. Their function usually surpasses the mere singing and playing of instruments, however, since "they have served as respected advisors to rulers, as tutors for princes, and as diplomats in delicate negotiations" (Hale 1997, 250). They are referred to as *jeli* in Mali (*jeliw* in plural), *djely* in Guinea, and *jali* in Gambia; in the Pulaar language, they are called *gawlo*. In Mande languages, the word *jeliya* is used to describe the artistry of a griot, and the closely related term *jelikan* designates a griot's speech as social practice and function (cf. Jansen 2000; Roth 2008).

One of the first publications about griots was a Ph.D. thesis of Knight in 1973. Many more publications followed, including the important emic perspectives of Camara (cf. 1976) and Keita (cf. 1988), who described how the griots Banzouma Sissoko and Massa Makan Diabaté successfully installed their jeliya tradition in post-independence Mali. Focusing on the diplomatic aspect of jeliya, Jansen (cf. 2000) cites many examples from the West African Mande population, and Roth (cf. 2008) treats the often-misunderstood aspects of monetary and goods exchange involved (other detailed descriptions of griot cultural practices can be found in Hale 1997; Counsel 2009; Ebine 2019).

While Keita calls his paper "Jaliya in the Modern World," it was already written in 1988, thus preceding the internet age; the same is true for several subsequent studies that discuss the impact of broadcast media on the griot tradition (cf. Panzacchi 1994; Hale 1997; Henrich 2001). Other sources do include internet research, but mostly write about "modern griots" outside of Africa, especially in

Afro-American cultural contexts (cf. Sajnani 2013); contributions that focus on the visibility of griot musical practices in the digital sphere and their reception on social media are rare. Translations and analyses of griot lyrics are available for older orally transmitted texts (cf. Innes 1974; Pfeiffer 1997), but not for contemporary songs. This chapter attempts to close these gaps and presents examples of how jeliya cultural practices transcend their local context, finding new audiences around the world.

As for the theoretical frame underlying this work, I align with Williams (cf. 1958), who stated that culture cannot be studied in isolation, but that it is interwoven with the lived everyday experience of the people, which is why listeners' views and reactions are included in this study. The underlying frames of cultural performances may, according to Bailey, "be coded in the text itself and therefore discoverable"; others, however, "remain non-lexical, internalized, incorporated, embodied" (1996, 16) and are harder to decipher. The present analysis is concerned with the former, the lexical texts used in music lyrics. Aware of the critical discussion concerning the concept of "tradition" (cf., e.g., Phillips and Schochet 2004), I will use the terms "tradition" or "traditional" to refer to precolonial times, while "modern" will be used to refer to the post-millennial present.

Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were used in a triangulation of data. The choice of the three case studies is based on an attempt at geographic diversity (the artists hail from Senegal, Mali, and Côte d'Ivoire) as well as the international success of the artists, including album and ticket sales. Having examined their musical output of the last 20 years, I chose one song from each artist based on the following criteria: a) written in an indigenous African language, b) listed on Spotify, including a transcription of the lyrics online, and c) having an accompanying music video on YouTube.

Using *Musixmatch* as a source, the song lyrics were downloaded and checked for spelling errors. The translation provided by internet sources was verified by consulting existing translations or native speakers. To analyze the transcribed lyrics and music videos, I used a combination of *Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis* (MCDA) as suggested by Machin and Mayr (cf. 2023) and *Framing Analysis* as developed by Entman (cf. 1993).

An important focus of the analysis was the reaction of the audience to the frames evoked by the lyrics and videos. To do so, the comments left by viewers and listeners under the respective YouTube videos were used as data sources. Scraping a randomized sample of comments with *Octoparse*, they were sifted (identical comments by the same person or consisting of emojis only were excluded) and coded with *MaxQDA 2022* using *In Vivo Coding* (cf. Saldaña 2013, 91). To ensure anonymity, no names are mentioned in the analysis, except those of the artists.

Griots in West African Society and Culture

With the current re-calibration of cultural studies, any research into aspects of a culture other than one's own requires careful study of the historical and social circumstances in which cultural products emerge. Therefore, this section provides some insights into the emergence of griots in West Africa.

Their origins are obscure but seem to lie in the Mali Empire (ca. 1230–1470), according to the narrative of Soundiata Keita and his "original" griot Balla Fasséké Kouyaté, which forms one of the oldest and core pieces in the epic narrative tradition. Hale (cf. 1997) points to pre-Islamic times, while Bird (cf. 1976) suggests an even older origin, claiming that griots evolved from priest-bards of hunters' societies (cf. Counsel 2009, 31).

From the beginning, there was a close relationship between the Mande ruling classes (called *horon*) and the griots, who come from a class of artisans called *nyamakala*. Every noble household had one or more griots who became highly specialized experts on the genealogy of "their" houses, reciting praises whenever the horon appeared in official functions in public or received important guests (cf. Counsel 2009, 30).[3] In turn, the nobles would provide for the griot and his family with presents or money in an exchange relationship called *jatiga*. Next to this praise singing function, the griots kept the history of their people alive in epics presented at social gatherings (the most famous of which is the Soundiata epic mentioned above). They also acted as masters of ceremony for occasions such as birth, marriage, or burial, mediators in disputes, and counselors in diplomatic and political affairs (see also Camara 1976 for a detailed description of these functions).

Their occupation with language and communication made them "masters of the word," venerated but also feared by their people. Even after the introduction of the Arabic script during Islamization, "communication via the spoken word is a highly valued commodity [. . .] often more prestigious than the written" (Jansen 2000, 42). Innes differentiates between three modes of delivering these words during a griot performance: the speech mode (in which the griot addresses the audience in his own words or narrates an event), the recitation mode (which uses formulaic expressions to praise patrons or share stories and observations), and the song mode (which uses fixed phrases and may refer to special incidents; cf. 1974, 15–16). Instruments such as the *bala* (balafon) and the *ngoni*[4] were used among

3 See Hale (1997) for an overview of the different subgroups and categories of Mande griots.

4 The *ngoni* is a string instrument described as "the oldest and most ubiquitous instrument in the griotworld" by Hale (1997, 268).

the Mande griots to accompany these presentations; the *kora* is a later addition, believed to have been invented in the seventeenth century (cf. Charry 2023).

The griot profession is not necessarily gender-based (female singers are called *griottes*), but the majority are male. Players of instruments used to be exclusively male, and aspiring griots learned to play the kora, the ngoni, and the bala during their apprenticeship that lasted many years and was hereditary (cf. Counsel 2009, 40).

Modern Griots: Adapting to a Changing Environment

With the advent of colonialization, the fine-grained equilibrium of Mande society was permanently disturbed when kings and nobles lost their traditional domains of power and income and often could not afford griots anymore. The latter were forced to travel and seek other patrons, moving from royal families to the new elites, such as merchants or administrators (cf. Counsel 2009, 53). After World War II, griots turned to the emerging political parties, "praising the highest bidder" (Jansen 2000, 56), which resulted in a loss of prestige.

Instrumental music became more important than historical knowledge (cf. Jansen 2000, 54), and the acoustic guitar, which reached West Africa in colonial times, was quickly adapted by local musicians and griots. They often used it in the style of ngoni playing, thus creating a link between the old and the new (cf. Counsel 2009, 67). Equipped with these instrumental skills, many young griots migrated from rural to urban areas in search of subsistence (cf. Jansen 2000, 55). Here, they found new possibilities to play their music for entertainment, and first compositions emerged that went beyond epic narratives and praise songs. Radio diffusion (until today one of the most used medium in West Africa) and professional recordings facilitated the spread of these new compositions, bringing griot artistry to loudspeakers all over the world.

After independence, many West African states celebrated their new status with pride in their own traditions, and musicians and orchestras used historical events, griot epics, and folktales as inspiration for contemporary artistic expression. Griots were also responsible for the composition of several West African national anthems. Banzoumana Sissòko composed the one for Mali, Guinea's anthem is a composition by griot Alifa Yaya, and Ghana held a competition which was won by griot Jali Nyama Suso (cf. Counsel 2009, 67).

During the 1960s and 1970s, griots also appropriated foreign styles in their musical expressions, experimenting with Jazz and Blues and collaborating with

international singers. With the boom of this "world music" (cf. Bohlman 2002) on global markets, a new class of musicians appeared: young artists who did not come from griot families but established themselves quite successfully on the emerging scene of popular music (Salif Keita, hailing from a horon family, is a well-known example, cf. Harris n.d.). At the same time, local music kept diversifying, assimilating Reggae in the 1980s and Hip Hop in the 1990s.

Another important factor in the global spread of African music was the increased migration during the last three decades. Not only did the migrants bring their musical preferences to the respective host countries, but the rapidly growing diasporic communities also constituted a grateful audience for artists from "back home" (cf. Dorsch 2004, 2006, 2017). The advent of the internet and social media offered further opportunities to quickly gain international fame, and these developments led Jansen to observe that the "griot tradition has adapted very effectively to the commercial and political exigencies of modern African life and its global linkages" (Jansen 2000, ix).

Coming from a traditional line of griot families, "modern griots" have established themselves in the contemporary music business. Oumou Sangaré and Kandia Kouyaté, for instance, became well-known first locally, and in the suite of their careers even outside of their native country Mali (cf. Liman 2021, 892). While their reputation as skilled *jelimuso* (griotte) secures them a steady income in their home country, and international performances add to that, they cannot rely on music sales alone. Although their albums exist in millions of copies throughout West Africa, those are often pirate copies and do not generate income for the artists.

The following case studies introduce artists hailing from griot lineages who have successfully managed to transcend the local and reach a global audience through their albums and performances. In contrast to the two examples cited above, they are not professional griots in the narrow sense of the word but use elements of their jeliya heritage in their contemporary creations, thus representing a class of musicians that adapt traditional forms of griot artistry to the demands of modern popular music.

Sona Jobarteh – "Gambia"

Sona Jobarteh is the first professional female kora virtuoso hailing from a griot dynasty. Her grandfather Amadu Bansang Jobarteh is a widely renowned kora master who taught her cousin Toumani Diabaté his craft. Learning to play the kora from her father, Sona studied Western Classical Composition at the Purcell

School of Music, adding to that a degree in cello, piano, and harpsichord at the Royal College of Music in London (cf. The African Guild 2024). As singer, composer, and instrumentalist, she has since been working on commissions and on her solo career, touring the world. She is also a social activist, speaker, and lecturer in Mande music, history, and social anthropology, and she has founded *The Gambia Academy* in 2015, a school that places a heavy focus on African arts and music (cf. The African Guild 2024). Next to the soundtrack of the movie *Motherland* in 2010, she also released her debut album, *Fasiya*, in 2011. The cover depicts her holding a kora, and all songs are in Mandinka, her paternal language.[5]

Her next album *Badinyaa Kumoo* was released in 2022 (African Guild Records), including the song "Gambia," which was released in 2015 on the occasion of Gambia's 50th Independence Day. Written in Mandinka, it focuses on the positive properties of The Gambia (full lyrics and translation in Appendix 1.1): *peace*, *calm*, *development*, *progress*, and *humanity* are terms used to describe it, and the singer claims in the first verse that "happiness is on all faces." By constantly repeating the country's name in combination with these exuberant words, Jobarteh uses the praise pattern typical for griot recitations, as described by Innes: "praises consist mainly of names of ancestors [. . .] and of phrases which refer to some incident in the hero's life" (1974, 16). In the case of "Gambia," the country takes the place of invoked ancestors, and the characteristics cited may be seen as a hero's achievements:[6]

(1) 'The home of peace – everyone say Gambia'
kayira suu ali a fo Gambia
peace home 2pl 3sg say Gambia

According to Pfeiffer, another typical pattern for griot praise singing is the use of elaborated speech and aphorisms (cf. 1997, 155), an example of which can be found as well:

(2) 'The truth is, if you forget your ancestors, you forget yourself'
tooɲaa i ɲina- i bonsuŋo la I ɲina- i faŋo le la
ta *ta*
truth 2sg forget 2sg origin POST 2sg forget 2sg self EMPH POST

5 Mandinka belongs to the Western branch of the Mande language family, comprising about 1,5 million speakers in The Gambia, Senegal, and Guinea Bissau (cf. Creissels 2024).

6 Here, as well as in the other two case studies, the examples are taken from the original lyrics of the song (see Appendix 1) and are presented in a simplified interlinear translation that does not constitute a full linguistic analysis; a list of abbreviations is provided in Appendix 2.

While using the first-person singular in verses one and four, thus relating her personal experience, the singer switches to the inclusive first person plural in the bridge and in verse three to create a feeling of togetherness. She also directly addresses fellow Gambians in the chorus and in verse two: "wherever you are, don't allow yourself to forget your homeland Gambia."

The official video of the song was uploaded on November 19, 2015 and has 28,674,899 views at the time of writing. It was shot exclusively in The Gambia and, with min. 5:37, is the longest and most elaborately produced video among the three case studies. From the 90 scenes, 42 show the singer walking, singing, in interaction with others, or playing instruments (acoustic guitar and kora). The remaining 48 scenes show everyday scenes on the market or in workshops, nature and animals, children playing, and African dancers performing (a crew called *The Fab Team*). The video also features Musafilly Jobarteh and Mamadou Sarr on percussion, singer Sekouba Bambino from Guinea, and Lamin Suso, a famous kora maker, as well as students of the ABJ Music School (cf. Jobarteh 2015).

With this strong focus on West African people, arts, and crafts, the video reinforces the message brought across by the lyrics, portraying The Gambia as a beautiful country. The dominant frame evoked by words and visuals is the pride that Gambians feel toward their roots and culture.

Tiken Jah Fakoly – "Tata"

Hailing from Odienné in Côte d'Ivoire, the real name of singer Tiken Jah Fakoly is Doumbia Moussa Fakoly. While most online sources claim that he comes from a griot family (e.g. Bax 2016; Fischer 2024), Kouame writes that, "hailing from the caste of blacksmiths, his [Tiken Jah Fakoly's] parents were not supportive of the life of a professional musician of which he dreamed" (2023, 548; transl. GS), without citing sources, however. In 1987, Fakoly founded a band he called *Djelys*, meaning 'griots,' which quickly became known in his country and beyond. Releasing their first self-titled album in 1993, a string of solo releases followed, of which *Mangercratie* (1996) and *Françafrique* (2002) are among the most successful and politically outspoken ones, causing the Ivoirian government to ban the album and the singer to seek exile in Mali (cf. rfi musique 2021). Until today, Fakoly has released 16 albums, the most recent *Acoustic* in 2024. His first language Dyula, a Western Mande language closely related to Bambara, is used in many of his songs, but to reach an international audience, he also sings in French and English.

The song chosen for analysis here is "Tata," released on Fakoly's album *Dernier Appel* (2014, *Barclay*). It is sung in Dyula and takes a first-person perspective, presenting the true love story of the singer and Tata, who fell in love but were not allowed to marry. In the chorus of the song, Tiken asks Tata for forgiveness (full lyrics and translation in Appendix 1.2), while verse one describes what Tata had to suffer at the hands of her father "because of me," as the singer repeatedly states. In verse two, he explains that men from far came to marry Tata, but she refused because "it is me she wants":

(3) 'People who came from far wanted to marry Tata'
sangawuli na na ku ye Tata furu la
famous.people come AFF contain for Tata marriage POST

(4) 'Tata said it is me she wants'
Tata ko kale be n le fɛ
Tata say swear COP 1sg EMPH want

Verse two seems to correspond to the song mode of griot epics described by Innes, which "may also take the form of interpolated reflections on, or summaries of events described in the speech mode" (1974, 19). If verse one is considered to be the description of the event, then verse two summarizes her resolve to not marry anybody else. While example (3) is the first of four instances of men asking Tata for marriage (coming from far-away places like France and America), example (4) shows her repeated refusal.

In the outro, Fakoly praises Tata for being upright and true to her words and, using the conditional tense, claims, "if I had been like you, we would have left together." Here, the praise formulations so typical of jelikan epics are intensified by repeating the word *kankelentigi* [person who keeps her word; trans. GS] seven times. In verses one and two, as well as in the chorus and the outro, the name of the "hero" of the song, Tata, is repeated 28 times in total.

A video for the song was uploaded on May 10, 2018 on the artist's YouTube channel and has 3,414,445 views to date. With a duration of min. 4:28, it has a total of 52 scenes, most of which play in the past (34 scenes). After starting in the present, depicting a woman who finds a photo of a young couple she shows to the singer, the camera zooms in and we experience a cut to the past, transitioning from the black-and-white of the picture to the scene photographed, coming alive in vivid colors. The following scenes alternate between the young couple on the one hand, happy, smiling, and singing in natural African surroundings, and the girl in her home compound on the other, repeatedly scolded and scoffed by her father. The video shows how the couple first met and fell in love, how the girl's

father then chases away the singer from his compound, instead receiving visitors who come to ask Tata's hand in marriage, offering him money. At the end of the video, the young man steps up to a rope as if to hang himself, shakes his head and turns away. We then see him at rehearsal with other musicians, followed by a cut to present-day Tiken on stage infront of a big audience (cf. Fakoly 2018).

There are several frames evoked here: while the visuals highlight the beautiful natural surroundings, again conveying a sense of pride in the singer's African origins, the plot focuses on how true love overcame arranged marriage; also, a frame of guilt and regret for what happened in the past is discernible.[7]

Habib Koité – "Wari"

Habib Koité grew up with 17 siblings, learning to play the ngoni as part of his griot heritage. Displaying a natural talent for it, he accompanied his griotte mother whenever she performed. In 1978, he started studying music at the National Institute of Arts (INA) in Bamako, and through his outstanding talent, he was made conductor of the school band in just six months. Graduating as top of his class in 1982, the school hired him as guitar teacher (cf. Contre-Jour Belgium n.d.).

Koité's compositions are unique because of his pan-Malian approach, which includes musical styles from different ethnic groups. He founded his own band, *Bamada*, in 1988, winning several prices in the following years and embarking on their first international tour in 1994. The following year, they released their debut album, *Muso Ko*, followed by seven others until the latest, *Kharifa*, in 2019. Most of his songs are in Bambara, one of the most widely spoken Mande languages. The song "Wari" [money; trans. GS] is featured on Koité's album *Baro* (2001, *Contre-Jour*). The video, which also includes French subtitles of its lyrics, was uploaded on January 8, 2014, to the artist's YouTube channel and has 835,532 views to date (cf. Koité 2014).

Turning to the lyrics first, the singer expresses his point of view on money. Like a letter, Koité addresses his son, Tidjani. He talks about the difficulties of life without (enough) money, mentioning emic African knowledge through proverbs and similes, as in the following (a full transcription and translation of the lyrics is included in Appendix 1.3):

7 In an interview with Les Femmes d'Ici (2022), Fakoly recounts the true story behind the song: how his teenage lover Tata died after waiting for him for ten years.

(5) ‘you will not have breakfast if you don’t take out your money’

tìlèla	*tɛ*	*dun*	*i-i*	*mà*	*CFA*	*billet*	*da*	*finyɛ-na*
breakfast	NEG	eat	if-2sg	toward	CFA	bill	lay	wind-in

(6) ‘an old proverb says that money doesn’t give you happiness’

kumà	*kɔrɔ*	*dɔ*	*ko*	*warì*	*tɛ*	*se*	*bangè*	*la*	*hɛɛrɛ*	*la*
word	old	one	say	money	NEG	be. able	give. birth	to	happiness	with

(7) ‘money can take away many worries’

warì	*bɛ*	*màa*	*bɔ*	*nɔgɔ*	*la*	*kɔ*
money	FUT	human	pull	dirt	in	from

Examples (5) – (7) show the creative and playful use of language, features described for Mandinka spoken art in general and jelikan (griot speech) in particular;[8] here they are skillfully applied by the singer. Thus, in (5), a simple verb could have been used to describe the act of “taking out” or “showing” the money bills; instead, the more poetic formulation of “laying the bills in the wind” was chosen. The metaphorical expression in (7) is used to describe the act of eliminating worries – you are being “pulled out of the dirt” that you were stuck in. Example (6) uses traditional African wisdom in the form of a proverb, just as a griot would in his performance. Another element described as part of griot performances is the chorus singing (cf. Innes 1974, 3), which is audible from min. 01:30 and 02:40, accompanied by rhythmic clapping.

The music video shows the singer and a young boy (representing his son Tidjani), whom he addresses directly. The video is 04:20 min. long and comprises 45 scenes. Of these, 27 play in the living room, as seen in the first scene. Other scenes show another room decorated with African masks and fabrics (8 scenes) as well as then outdoor scenes shot in several places in Mali. The video sequences basically illustrate the lyrics – for example, a beggar is shown in min. 01:40 when the lyrics mention a beggar, and an animation shows trees from which money bills fall in min. 03:34, while Koité sings about his wish to plant such trees all over Mali. Throughout the video, the singer’s appreciation of African values is evoked by the dancers in traditional dress, the African-themed background, and the everyday scenes on the streets, as well as the inclusion of instruments such as metal

8 Pfeiffer mentions five genres of Mandinka spoken art: griot narrations, folktales, songs, proverbs, and riddles; she also claims that griots use “very elaborated speech with a vocabulary larger than that used in everyday language” (1997, 12).

shakers and balafon. The opening and closing scenes work like a thematic bracket, giving a special spin to the narrative. When Koité enters the room, he picks up a piece of chalk, paints a "T" on a blackboard (probably signifying "Tidjani") and starts singing. The boy, who was immersed in a video game, stops playing and listens attentively. At the end, he goes to the blackboard, picks up the chalk, and adds a few strokes to make the "T" look like an African mask. Although different interpretations are possible, I understand it as a sign that the message of the song, framing traditional African values as more important than money, has been passed on and understood by the next generation.

Impact and Public Reactions

The artists described above have gained considerable following over the course of their years active. In Tab. 1, some social media numbers that bear proof of this standing are given:[9]

Tab. 1: Social media followers.

	Sona Jobarteh	Tiken Jah Fakoly	Habib Koité
Spotify	797,161	411,570	155,059
YouTube	33,300	558,000	20,800
Instagram	77,396	226,250	3,197[10]
Facebook	169,328	3,355,671	143,578

In the following section, some reactions to the artists' songs, expressed by listeners via YouTube comments under the corresponding music videos, will be analyzed to demonstrate the international appeal of their music.

As can be seen from Tab. 2, which lists the code frequencies of the analyzed comments, the category with the most comments is "Positive Evaluation", including praise of the song, artist, or music video. Coded as "Identity Expression", the next largest category is the one in which commenters tell personal stories, mention "Africa", or ask others for a reaction, followed by the category "Emotion"

9 The respective social media pages were visited on September 9, 2024; numbers may have changed since then.

10 The low number of followers on Instagram can be explained by the fact that the artist is not active there (no post at the time of writing this article, November 2024).

Tab. 2: Code frequency of YouTube comments (full code book in Appendix 3).

Codes	Sona Jobarteh – Gambia	Tiken Jah Fakoly – Tata	Habib Koité – Wari	Total
Positive Evaluation	56.1% (370)	35.9% (173)	35.9% (33)	**576**
Identity Expression				**536**
– Storytelling	22.9% (151)	16.4% (79)	10.9% (10)	240
– Africa	35.5% (234)	1.2% (6)	0	240
– Touch base	2% (13)	6.2% (30)	14.1% (13)	56
Emotion				**485**
– Love	43.2% (285)	11.2% (54)	7.6% (7)	346
– Touching	4.2% (28)	7.3% (35)	1.1% (1)	64
– Tears	3.2% (21)	7.3% (35)	0	56
– Goosebumps	0.6% (4)	2.9% (14)	1.1% (1)	19
Origin				**481**
– Africa	25.6% (169)	7.3% (35)	0	204
– Europe	10.9% (72)	0.6% (3)	1.1% (1)	76
– South America	8.2% (54)	1% (5)	1.1% (1)	60
– North America	6.5% (43)	0.8% (4)	1.1% (1)	48
– Asia	5.3% (35)	0.4% (2)	0	37
– Gambia	3.6% (24)	0	0	24
– Mali	0.3% (2)	0.4% (2)	17.4% (16)	20
– Côte d'Ivoire	0.1% (1)	2.3% (11)	0	12
Artist Address				**366**
– Gratitude	13.3% (88)	11% (53)	16.3% (15)	156
– Blessings	8% (53)	8.7% (42)	5.4% (5)	100
– Pride	7.6% (50)	1.2% (6)	4.3% (4)	60
– Respect	3.2% (21)	6% (29)	0	50
Reference to Lyrics				**261**
– Discussion	10% (66)	20.1% (97)	9.8% (9)	172
– No Understanding	8.5% (56)	6.4% (31)	2.2% (2)	89
Action Call	7.3% (48)	2.9% (14)	5.4% (5)	**67**
Critics	0.8% (5)	1.5% (7)	1.1% (1)	**13**
Total comments (N)	**660**	**482**	**92**	

(485 occurrences in total). Whenever commenters spoke directly to the singers, this was coded as "Artist Address", including "Gratitude" (156 comments), "Blessings" (100 comments), "Pride" (60 comments), and "Respect" (50 comments). The category coded as "Origin" shows that commenters come from all over the world, most prominently from Africa (204), Europe (76), South America (60), North America (40), and Asia (37).[11] The three countries of The Gambia, Mali, and Côte d'Ivoire were coded separately, as they represent the countries of origin of the respective performing artists.

Of special interest are the comments coded as "Reference to Lyrics." 172 commenters in total discuss or relate to the lyrics in some way (subcode "Discussion"): while around 10% of the commenters refer to the content of the songs "Gambia" and "Wari," this number is doubled (20.1%) under Fakoly's song "Tata." The reason for this higher engagement might be the emotional charge this song carries, as many commenters seem to be aware of the tragedy described in footnote 7 and express their compassion in phrases like "may her soul rest in peace" or "a true and unconditional love" (Fakoly 2018; transl. GS). Next to those who commented on the content, a group of commenters mentioned the *language* of the lyrics, admitting that they do not understand it or asking for a translation (89 in total, coded as "No Understanding"):

(8) "I don't know the lyrics of this song, but I am totally in love with it!" (@benimakwela2356 2022, under "Gambia")

(9) "It is in moments like these i [sic!] wish to speak the language sung." (@engratiabanks9033 2021, under "Tata")

(10) "SVP quel est le dialecte, j'ai envie d'apprendre, c'est juste magnifique" ["Please, what is the dialect, I want to learn it, it's really beautiful"; trans. GS] (@radibenjellounlilia2471 2021, under "Tata")

(11) "In English Please?" (@terristokes7446 2016, under "Wari")

This hints at both the appeal these artists have outside of their own linguistic group and their important role as cultural ambassadors, a thought picked up in the discussion below.

11 No IP-addresses were analyzed for these results. Comments were coded as "Origin" only when commenters explicitly mentioned where they are from, e.g. "I'm from France."

Discussion

The three case studies presented have shown that the artists use several elements of their griot heritage in their contemporary works. Thus, Sona Jobarteh has acquired great skill in playing the kora, an instrument traditionally associated with griots, and uses the form of praise singing in her lyrics; Tiken Jah Fakoly, in the example cited, has chosen a "song mode" form for narrating the past, embedding it into griot instrumental traditions with the use of balafon, drums, and kora. Habib Koité, finally, includes word play and proverbs in his lyrics, as well as clapping and call-and-answer singing, a feature found in audience interaction during griot performances (Pfeiffer 1997, 12). All three artists employ visuals that are exclusively filmed in Africa, thus expressing their love and appreciation for their origins and evoking a frame of pride. In response to this frame, 240 commenters acknowledge "Africa" in their comments (234 under "The Gambia" and 6 under "Tata", see Tab. 2).

A direct opposition to this frame can be seen in early Afrobeats music videos, which often show Western metropolis, airplane travel, swimming pools, jewelry, and sports cars. Ugor, for instance, mentions "material wealth and consumption; [. . .] transnational mobility and hybrid selves; high-class fashion, accoutrements of postmodern life [. . .]" as dominant themes in the lyrics and videos of Nigerian pop music (2021, 135). While these material symbols seem of paramount importance for Afrobeats artists to portray a modern, postcolonial, and affluent identity, the (re-)turn to spiritual values and precolonial musical traditions seems to set apart the case studies presented in this chapter.

All three artists further have in common the use of their respective indigenous language in their songwriting. Both Fakoly and Koité (or their management) have added their lyrics to *Musixmatch* so that they are displayed on music portals such as Spotify, as shown in the screenshots in Fig. 1 and Fig. 2.

Additionally, both artists included a French translation in the subtitles of their respective music videos. Although Jobarteh has not uploaded the lyrics to her song on Spotify, they can be found on several online platforms such as lyricstranslate.com.[12] Audibility and visibility of African languages thus enhanced, this cultural performance practice has a direct impact on listeners. While speakers of these languages feel gratitude and pride, as many of the YouTube comments show, those who do not understand it express curiosity and love (see examples (8)–(11) above). As comment (8) illustrates, not knowing a language does not deter listeners from loving a song; the fact that these artists choose to sing in their re-

12 https://lyricstranslate.com/de/gambia-gambia.html-2 (accessed September 21, 2024).

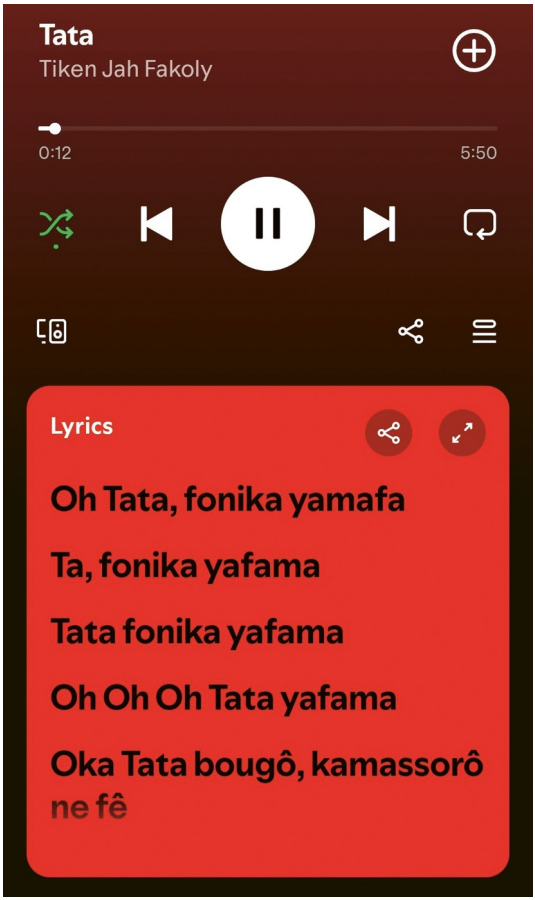

Fig. 1: Screenshot – Tiken Jah Fakoly, "Tata," Spotify, 14.05.2024.

spective African languages thus contributes to the appreciation of alternative modes of expressions in foreign speech communities. The use of indigenous languages in song lyrics may be seen as an important decolonial practice that raises the prestige and reach of the idioms used, as Carter-Ényì and Carter-Ényì remark: "[S]inging in indigenous African languages has become an intentional act of decolonization and a recognizable signifier of Pan-African identity for African audiences" (2019, 63). This, in turn, can foster positive attitudes toward minority languages and multilingualism, thus contributing to the maintenance of African languages (cf. Yekini-Ajenifuja and Okùnadé 2013).

By transcending African audiences through international performances and the diffusion of their music on platforms such as Spotify, these artists grant visi-

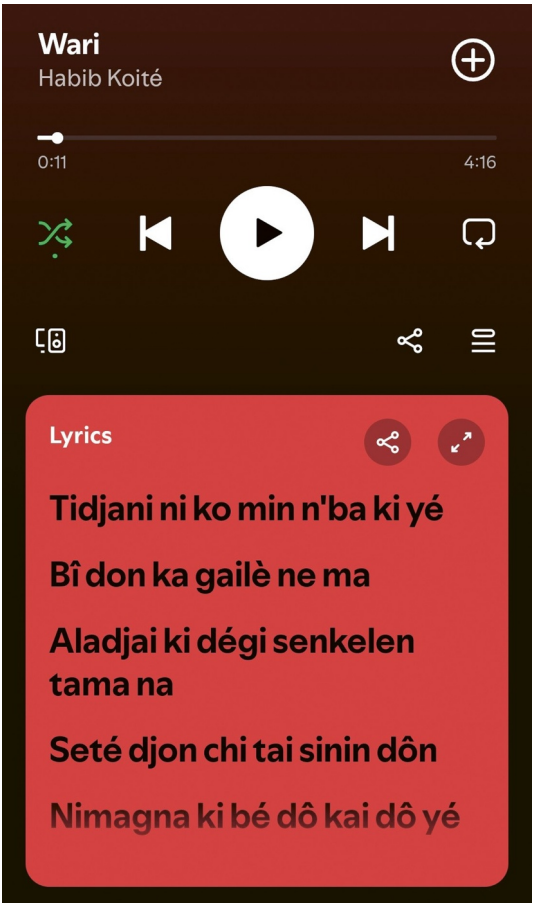

Fig. 2: Screenshot – Habib Koité, "Wari," Spotify, 14.05.2024.

bility to African languages[13] and globally underrepresented voices, foster cultural exchange, and connect different generations through music that unites both traditional and modern elements of composition and presentation.

13 Portals, such as https://m.afrikalyrics.com/public/lyric-languages, provide links to song lyrics in several African languages online.

Conclusion and Outlook

Until today, artists descending from griot lineages use traditional praise lines in their songs or in live performances (cf. Counsel 2009, 129), and the typical arrangement patterns and stylistic devices of jeliya art can be found in modern compositions. The three case studies have shown that, next to the typical vocal performance, different jeliya elements such as word play and proverbs ("Wari"), praise ("Gambia"), narratives of the past ("Tata"), and traditional instruments are used. At the same time, the artists have used modern techniques to bring the message of their songs across to an international audience, e.g. by producing music videos and uploading their songs, including lyrics and translation, to streaming sites such as Spotify. This makes their music accessible through several modalities, including auditory modality (hearing the song on Spotify, radio, or MP3/ CD), visual modality (watching the music video or reading the lyrics online), and somatosensory modality (experiencing the music during live concerts or while dancing to it).

While traditional griot performances are also multimodal (people are present to hear, see, sing, and dance along), a new dimension is that of unlimited repeatability because the songs are recorded. Thus, the audience can replicate the listening or watching experience as often as they like. This, then, brings us to the ways in which these presentations differ from those of traditional griots. First, the modern audience is physically present only during live concerts. All other listening or watching instances are experienced in the absence of the performing artist (at home, in the car, or with headphones). Thus, the audience's feedback (if there is any at all) is considerably delayed via social media, whereas, during griots' live performances, it is immediate. The comments on YouTube stem from listeners all over the world and concern both the content of the specific music videos and the personalities of the artists, as well as the individual emotional reactions to their music.

Another difference lies in the flexibility of the lyrics. Traditional griots usually stick to a core subject, but deliver it differently every time they perform, adapting to the audience or including references to recent events. The songs of modern artists, however, are static. Once recorded, they remain the same whenever they are played, although artists may vary some elements slightly in live performances.

Finally, while traditional griots performed within their own speech community, modern artists transcend these linguistic limits. Through the global diffusion of their songs, indigenous African languages are transported to listeners who do not understand their lyrics and might search for a translation online. At the very least, these artists' cultural practices raise the audibility and visibility of minority languages, adding to their international prestige, which in turn might foster positive attitudes and slow down language shift; they also provide researchers with a rich corpus for analysis. Although some articles point to the possibility of preserving languages through

music (cf., e.g., Ledwaba 2021 on SiNdebele; Siririka 2022 on Oluzemba; Vermillion 2022 on Garifuna), more case studies and a thorough scientific treatment of the subject are necessary to suggest possible lines of action in the future.

Through the international success of Afrobeats, "some vocabularies have become generic among societies outside the original speakers' environment" (Yekini-Ajenifuja and Okùnadé 2013, 236), and it is now quite common to hear audiences in big Western metropolis sing along to, e.g., Yoruba lyrics. The more elaborated poetic lyrics of griot artists are less popular on the dancefloor, but those who do listen to them to do so with concentration, as the reactions in the YouTube comments suggest. However, more research is needed to analyze and explain the stylistic devices used in both traditional and modern griot lyrics. The problem is that there are few specialists fluent enough in the respective African languages to perform such studies, and few African linguists are sufficiently well versed in poetics and literature studies. The solution seems to lie in an interdisciplinary collaboration of experts from both fields or the training of native speakers, so that oral modes of presentation and lyrics in African languages can be documented and analyzed lest the beauty and richness of indigenous African poetry is lost.

Appendix 1.1: Lyrics and Translation: Sona Jobarteh "Gambia"

Verse 1:	
Kayira ye a loo	peace built it[14]
Tenkungo ye a beng	calm brought it together
Yiriwaa ning nyaatotaa le ye a jiyaa	development and progress hosted it
Hadamayaa	humanity
Seewo ye nyaadaalu beng	happiness is on all faces
N na banku kendemaa le mu, Gambia	my good country Gambia
Verse 2:	
I be daa-wo-daa	wherever you are
I kana song muumee	don't allow yourself
Ka nyina i faasuwo la, Gambia	to forget your homeland Gambia

14 The lyrics and translation were originally taken from https://lyricstranslate.com/de/gambia-gambia.html-2 and have subsequently been corrected with the help of Katrin Pfeiffer (personal communication).

(continued)

Toonyaa (ning) i nyinata i bonsungo la I nyinata i fango le la	The truth is, if you forget your ancestors, you forget yourself
Bridge:	
N si nganiyaa Nte nganyiaata n na banku le la N si nganiyaa, N si nganiyaa Ali nga naa kafu nyooma, nga nyoo muta N si nganiyaa Wo le mu nyaatotaa (ti) ning n na fang-sotoo	we are proud we are proud of our country we are proud, we are proud let us come together and unite we are proud this is our progress and our independence
Chorus:	
Gambiankoolu lee Nying ne mu banku nyimaa ti Gambiankoolu lee Nying banku kayiramaa Gambiankoolu lee Nying ne mu moolu la banku ti Gambiankoolu lee Nying ne nyongo mang siyaa	People of the Gambia (lit.: Where are the Gambians?) this is a beautiful land People of the Gambia this is a peaceful land People of the Gambia this is the land of our people People of the Gambia there is nothing that compares to this land
Verse 3:	
A neemata wo le ye a saabu Moolu ye a buunyaa A barakata wo le ye a tinna Moolu mang nyanna, Nying banku nyimaa fayi laa Aaaaaaaaaaaa banko dingolu Ali nga naa kafunyooma	It is blessed, this is why people honour this country It is blessed, this is why people should not abandon our beautiful country children of this land let us come to together
Verse 4:	
Toonyaa m mang nimisa Nying banku dingyaa la muumee Ning n taata duniyaa kono Nying bankoo la diyaa m be a fo la Gambia, nyong te	the truth is I don't regret to hail from this country at all wherever I travel in this world I shall tell of the wonders of this country there is nowhere that compares to Gambia
(Chorus)	
Gambia le ma, Gambia le ma M be kuu ma la (repeat) Kayira-suu, ali a fo Gambia Neema-suu, oohhhoo Gambia Hadamayaa-suu, ali a fo Gambia Baadingyaa-suu, oohhhoo Gambia…	About Gambia, about Gambia all say The home of Peace. . . everyone say "Gambia" The home of Blessings. . . oooh "Gambia" The home of Humanity. . . everyone say "Gambia" The home of Family. . . oooh "Gambia"

Appendix 1.2: Lyrics and Translation: Tiken Jah Fakoly “Tata”

Chorus:	
Oh Tata, foni ka yafa n ma	Oh Tata, I beg you to forgive me[15]
Ta, foni ka yafa n ma	Ta, I beg you to forgive me
Tata foni ka yafa n ma	Tata, I beg you to forgive me
Oh Oh Oh Tata yafa n ma	Oh oh oh Tata forgive me
Verse 1:	
Oka Tata bugɔ, kamassɔrɔ ne fɛ	they have beaten Tata because of me,
Oka nɛni kamassɔrɔ ne fɛ	they yelled at her because of me
Oka Tata djɛbɛ, kawa kunkɛ nɛyɛ	they have hurt Tata because of me
Oka nɛni kamassɔrɔ ne fɛ	they blamed her because of me.
Oh Tata, fonika yafama	Oh Tata, I beg you to forgive me
Oh oh oh oh tata yafama	Oh oh oh Tata forgive me
Oka Tata bugɔ kamassɔrɔ nɛ fɛ	they have beaten Tata because of me,
Oka nɛni kamassɔrɔ ne fɛ	they yelled at her because of me
Oka Tata djɛbɛ, kawa kunkɛ nɛyɛ	they have hurt Tata because of me
Oka nɛni kamassɔrɔ ne fɛ	they blamed her because of me
(Chorus)	
Verse 2:	
Sanga wolu nana, kuye Tata furula	People who came from far wanted to marry Tata
Tata ko kalɛ be nelefɛ	Tata said it is me she wants
Ameriki kalu nanan kuye Tata furula	People who came from America wanted to marry Tata
Tata ko kalɛ ye nelefɛ	Tata said it is me she wants
Bo Faransi kalu nanan, kuye Tata li furula	People who came from France wanted to marry Tata
Tata ko kale ye nelefɛ	Tata said it is me she wants
Ameriki kalu nanan kuye Tata furula	People who came from America wanted to marry Tata
Tata ko kalɛ ye nelefɛ	Tata said it is me she wants

15 The lyrics were transcribed by the author based on the respective Spotify lyrics entry (https://open.spotify.com/intl-de/track/6Nuf4dy4COQATWSsWfhTtc); they were translated by the author based on the French subtitles provided under the YouTube-video (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iVVvVaet84Y).

(continued)

Outro:	
Ma Tata kankelentigi	My Tata, true to her words,
Awa bamusso kankelentigi	Awa's mother is worthy
Tata kankelentigi	Venerable Tata
Tata kankelentigi	Honest Tata
N'gile keni kankelentigiyɛ	You had only one word until the end
Ninetonkakɛ kankelentigiyɛ	If I had been like you
Ninetonkakɛ kankelentigiyɛ	If I had been like you
Antunbeta yunfe	we would have left together
Chorus (2x)	

Appendix 1.3: Lyrics and Translation: Habib Koité "Wári"

Tidjani ni ko min n'ba ki ye	Tidjani, I'll do everything you want for you[16]
Bi don ka gɛlɛn ne ma	but today, times are hard for me
Aladjɛ ki dege senkelen taama na	you should try to learn to walk on one leg
Sete jon ci tɛ sinin dɔn	C.T., nobody knows what tomorrow will be like.
Ni manya ki bɛ dɔ kɛ dɔ ye	if you want to do something for yourself
Adɔn, dɔ kɛ dɔ ye son'na nyɛni ma	my son, know that you will suffer
Nyɛni fana fura ye hɛɛrɛ ye	the only cure for suffering is a moment of happiness
Hɛɛrɛ bi la nyina nyɛni kɔ	happiness will make you forget the suffering
Den mirila fa tɛ se dɛsɛ ko la	the child thinks that his father cannot fail
Fa tɛ fantanya kisi den'ni ma	no father ever wishes poverty for his son
Den ko, a ye ne dɛmɛ den ko la	ah this story of the child, help me with it!
Tidjani jon ci tɛ sinin dɔn	Tidjani, nobody knows what tomorrow will be like.
Ni mamin ko bi kunkolo yi dimin na	in our days, if you have a simple headache
(Ko fu ye)	(Tell them!)

16 The lyrics were transcribed by the author based on the respective Spotify lyrics entry (https://open.spotify.com/intl-de/track/1PVTG8C4XY9e76QGaIlMu3); they were translated by the author based on the French subtitles provided under the YouTube-video with the help of Ba Hawa Fofana (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=34cvzIHpiF0).

(continued)

Ni CFA mugan tɛ sipirini tɛ dila fu	if you don't have 100 CFA you won't get aspirin for free
Misiriman sigile saraka deli la siraba dala	the beggar who asks for alms by the side of the road
Ni se tun bɔ ye o na kɛ dow ma jigiya ye	if he was rich, somebody else could count on his help
Nin wari ko	when it comes to money,
Cɛ bɛ kanyan ni dɔ ye	I think everyone has a right to it.
Ni mamin ba fɛ ka kɛ jɔn ye dunuya	but if you want to become a slave to life,
I ka jarabi wari la	be the lover of money
Wari tigiya ne ba fɛ ni jɔnya ye	but I would rather be rich than be a slave
Jɔn bɛ fama ka nyɛni wari ye	the slave rarely suffers when he is rich
Hali ka dan i dahirimɛ ma	even if you limit yourself to a minimum of food
Tilela tɛ dun ni ma CFA billet da finye'na	you won't eat breakfast if you don't take out your money
Kamalan gulu'len duruni kɛrɛ la paranti'ya	the young person who hangs at the side of public transport as apprentice
Jɔn-maya wale tɛ i dahirimɛ nyini cɛ	there is no such thing as a bad (slave) job when you look for your daily bread, my friend
Kuma kɔrɔ dɔ ko wari tɛ se bange la hɛɛrɛ la	an old proverb says that money doesn't give you happiness
O tanw ka tinyɛ ye wari bɛ ma bɔ nɔgɔla ko ye	this is not our truth – money can take away many worries
Ni se tun bɛ nye na yiri-nin turu Mali fan bɛ	if I had the power, I would go plant trees all over Mali
Fan bɛ yiri'mɔ ye CFA billet ye	and the fruits of these trees would be money bills
Nin wari ko (Ko fu ye)	when it comes to money, (Tell them!)
cɛ bɛ kanyan ni dɔ ye (Ko fu ye)	I think everyone has a right to it. (Tell them!)
Nko nin wari ko (Ko fu ye)	I say, when it comes to money (Tell them!)
cɛ bɛ kanyan ni dɔ ye (Ko fu ye)	I think everyone has a right to it. (Tell them!)

Appendix 2: List of Abbreviations

AFF	affirmative particle
CFA	currency in Mali (*Franc de la Communauté Financière Africaine*)
EMPH	emphatic particle
FUT	future tense
COP	copula
NEG	negation
pl	plural
POST	postposition
sg	singular

Appendix 3: Code Book YouTube Comments

Code	Subcode	Content	Example
1. POSITIVE EVALUATION		Praising song, lyrics, video or artist	“Fascinating music!” (HK)
2. IDENTITY EXPRESSION			
	2.1. Personal story	Storytelling of personal past, present or future	“My dream is to return back home after 35 years.” (SJ)
	2.2. Africa	Hailing Africa / Africans	“I love Africa.” (TJF)
	2.3. Touching base	Asking for answers / comments	“Qui l’écoute en 2021?” (HK)
3. EMOTION		Expressing emotions	
	3.1. Love		“Love you my Gambia sisters and brothers!” (SJ
	3.2. Touching		“Trop touchant!” (TJF)
	3.3. Tears		“This music made me cry.” (SJ)
	3.4. Goosebumps		“Ça donne des frissons.” (TJF)
4. ORIGIN		Stating country of origin	
	4.1. Africa		“Love from Ethiopia.” (SJ)
	4.2. Europe		“Tienes una fan en Madrid.” (HK)
	4.3. South America		“Depuis Haïti” (TJF)

(continued)

Code	Subcode	Content	Example
	4.4. North America		“Love from San Diego” (SJ)
	4.5. Asia		“Love from Hong Kong” (TJF)
	4.6. Gambia		“We the Gambians” (SJ)
	4.7. Mali		“depuis le Mali” (HK)
	4.8. Côte d’Ivoire		“la musique de chez nous” (TJF)
5. ARTIST ADDRESS			
	5.1. Gratitude	Thanking artist	“Merci papa Habib” (HK)
	5.2. Blessings	Blessing artist	“Que Dieu vous protège” (TJF)
	5.3. Pride	Proud of artist	“Am so proud of you” (SJ)
	5.4. Respect	Respect to artist	“Big respect!” (TJF)
6. REFERENCE TO LYRICS			
	6.1. Discussion of lyrics / video		“Le chanson là est plein de conseils.” (HK)
	6.2. No understanding / Translation request		“I don’t speak your language but I love this song.” (SJ)
7. ACTION CALL		Share, stand up, make a change	“Africains réveillés vous unissez vous” (TJF)
8. CRITICS		Expressing dislike or critical views	“Tenemos un presidente que no nos permite la libertad” (SJ)

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