

Gambia

MARLOES JANSON

**Gambian griottes, or female bards, are in a serious predicament. Islamic ethics prescribe that women should behave in a modest way, while conversely the griottes' very profession implies that they stand out by their behaviour and the way they dress. How do these women reconcile their identity as female performers with Islamic values? The Gambia is an interesting setting in which to explore this question because of its long history with Islam. There was even talk that President Jammeh wanted to impose the *shari'a* in this small West African country.**

For centuries the griottes' male counterparts, the griots, have attracted the attention of scholars. If griottes are mentioned in literature, however, they mostly appear only in footnotes, or are mentioned in passing. Indeed, in actual fact they are very conspicuous in the Gambia. They can be recognized by their flamboyant style of dressing, and with their sharp voices they are audible from a great distance. This being the case, the following aims to provide insight into the griottes' practices. The main activity of griottes is performing *daaniroo*, a Mandinka\* word that is difficult to translate. When griottes set out for *daaniroo*, they sing or recite their patrons' praises. Praises, which are composed of a mixture of fixed formulae and genealogies, are powerful since they affect and persuade the patron by referring to the great deeds of his or her ancestors. In return for their praises, the griottes are rewarded with money or goods. So, *daaniroo* can be interpreted both as praising and as gift exchange.

*Daaniroo* not only refers to the gift exchange between griottes and their patrons, but also to the gift exchange between believers and God. People beseech God by offering alms to a mediator, in the hope that God will reward them with divine blessings. In the relationship between griottes and patrons, *daaniroo* has the connotation of 'praising' and this is a way for the patron to accrue prestige. In the relationship between Muslims and God, *daaniroo* has the connotation of 'praying' with the aim of entreating a blessing. An equivalence exists between its performance in the sense of praising and its performance in the sense of praying. In both cases it concerns an invocation that is responded to by a reward: a gift from the patron or grace from God. There are also differences, in particular because of the ambivalent relationship between music and belief in Islamic tradition (cf. Charry 2000). There is an inherent tension between the

**Griottes dividing up their market *daaniroo* earnings.**



PHOTO: MARLOES JANSON, 1998

# On the Boundaries of Muslim Gender Ideology

exaltation of man and the adoration of God. Qur'anic scholars, who have an influential position in the area where my field research was conducted, therefore considered the Islamic identity of griottes dubious. They believed that these women could not sing and still be good Muslims. In their opinion singing distracts the worshippers' attention from God and leads to the loss of one's self-control.

A distinction can be drawn between two occasions on which griottes practise *daaniroo*. On the first type of occasion they are invited by their patrons to perform. This includes naming ceremonies, marriages, and initiations. On the second type of occasion griottes themselves take the initiative to perform, including at the market. In the area around Basse Santa Su, the provincial capital of eastern Gambia, griottes are difficult to ignore. The market is a convenient place because griottes are free to go there whenever they want, whereas ceremonies are not organized on a daily basis. At the market they easily meet people and earn a little, as people usually have money in their pockets when they go to Basse Santa Su. *Daaniroo* at the market is probably a recent phenomenon. Several middle-aged griottes construed it as the outcome of the historical process in which colonialism induced changes that eroded the old system of patronage. In order to survive, they had to perform at the market. The development of *daaniroo* at the market may also be related to rising economic pressure on women. The griottes with whom I worked complained that they have many 'family problems' nowadays, and indeed, they have become to a great extent responsible for feeding their households. Taking into account that most of them do not farm and that regular employment is restricted to men, these women have to generate money to pay for food. The market is the natural place to practise *daaniroo* because food crops are sold there.

The performance at the market is considered not an 'authentic' form of *daaniroo*, and several patrons condemn it, preferring the *daaniroo* performed at their ceremonies and upon their invitation. The local Islamic scholars disapprove of *daaniroo* at the market for other reasons. In their perception earning a living by means of music is immoral. They argue that griottes should not 'expose' themselves as public women. Islamic law commends unremitting labour, but in the judgement of the Muslim clerics, *daaniroo* practised at the market cannot be regarded as work. The leader of The Gambia Muslim Women's Association compared it to exploitation:

'Griottes beg from us even though they are sometimes richer than we are. Nevertheless, we have to give them our last cent, which we had saved to support our families. What griottes do is very bad and therefore they will have marks in their faces by which they can be recognized on Judgement Day. The Prophet has said that we should scatter sand in their faces.'

Moreover, the griottes' increasing contributions to household maintenance collides with the Muslim ideal of the man as the principal provider.

The negative assessment of the griottes' public performances as conflicting with Islamic morals may have been increased under the influence of 'bumpsing' (following tourists). As a result of the enormous growth of the tourist industry on the Gambian coast, numerous boys turned 'bumpsing' into a profession. These 'bumpsters' regard tourists as patrons who can provide money, luxury goods, and mobility. Some equate the obtrusive way 'bumpsters' ask for gifts with the activities of griottes. They note that 'bumpsing' as well as *daaniroo* as it is practised today is *haram*. The griottes themselves see no contradiction between being a Muslim and being a bard. They try to behave as correct Muslims by living according to the pillars of Islam and react to the scepticism of the Qur'anic scholars by accentuating the Islamic dimension of their profession.

## Islamizing griottes

A striking development is that the griottes often frame their *daaniroo* as a form of praying. The way they request their patrons for gifts may, to a certain extent, be equated with the way mendicants beg for alms. Griottes, for example, punctuate the praises sung or recited for their patrons at the market with blessings. These blessings tend to be fairly formulaic utterances, of the sort 'May God bless you with long life'. Furthermore, they lace their praises with Qur'anic verses and religious phrases. When setting out for the market, griottes often wear a special kind of headdress that is usually worn by people who have made the *hajj*. It seems that by wearing this headdress they want to emphasize their devotion. They also explain their choice of dress in an Islamic context stressing that they dress splendidly to demonstrate that they have 'a clean heart' (i.e. that their appearance corresponds to their moral values). Griottes also

interpret their way of practising *daaniroo* in a moral context. Before they set out for the market, they form groups because as pious Muslims, they believe, they are not allowed to perform individually. A woman venturing on to the street alone is regarded as 'prey to Satan'. By practising on her own, a griotte runs the risk of being depicted as a 'wanton woman'. When she mingles with her colleagues, social control is being exercised. It seems that griottes single out specific elements of their traditional cultural background and integrate and reinterpret them in the light of Muslim norms, in order to meet the expectations of the local reformist scholars. The roles of griottes may have expanded to incorporate various aspects of an Islamic culture, as the Gambian president, Yayha Jammeh, lately began to demand greater adherence to the rules of the religion.

In their movements women are restricted by the boundaries of the dominant Muslim gender ideology, but griottes have to cross these boundaries to be able to exercise their profession. In their position as bards, they have acquired a certain freedom that other women in Gambian society are not allowed to exercise. On the one hand, this explains their strong position, but on the other hand, it makes them vulnerable to criticism. To disentangle themselves from this ambiguous position in which they operate, griottes have developed strategies to embed their performances in a reformist Islamic discourse. By employing such strategies, they are attempting to earn a living without subverting their position as respectable Muslim women.

## Note

\* The Mandinka comprise the majority of the Gambian population.

## References

– Charry, E. 2000. *Music and Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa*. In N. Levtzion and R.L. (eds), *The History of Islam in Africa*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press.

Marloes Janson holds a Ph.D. in anthropology and is currently teaching at the University of Amsterdam. Janson's Ph.D. thesis was entitled *The Best Hand is the Hand that Always Gives. Griottes and Their Profession in Eastern Gambia* (Leiden: Research School CNWS, 2002).

E-mail: m.janson@let.leidenuniv.nl