



ROSE SKELTON FOR IAR

## THE VOICE

**38-year-old Ibrahima Soumano follows his ancestral tradition of being a griot. It is as integral to him as being Malian**

I don't know when I started to learn to be a griot because I was born one. My father was the head of the organisation of all the griots of Mali, which mediates between ethnic groups, couples, regions, government officials, everything to do with society. From the time we were born, we saw our father take decisions, confront the problems of young people, and we grew up around that. That is transmission. Little by little, that is how we learned.

The other name for griot is 'Djeli', which means 'blood' in Manding. It means that we Djelis run in the body of society, just like blood runs in the biological body. If there is no blood in the body there is no life. If there was no Djeli in society, society would not exist.

Sundiata Keita, the founder of the Mali empire, said in 1236: "Griots: be the eyes, the ears, the memory and the mouth of the Mande people, so that the names of important men are not forgotten." And he said to the Mande people: "Make sure that the griot never cries." What does that mean? If I am called to assist at a funeral, a baptism or a wedding I don't get paid a fixed fee. It is all a voluntary service. "The griot must never cry" means "Give something to the griot to eat, drink and be clothed." People forget everything that the griot does. We bring joy, atmosphere, we intervene at exactly the right moment. He

gives his energy and his time, and he gives it in the service of the people. But, aha! There is a price for that.

What I am paid depends on the generosity of the family. I am going to tell you a secret. I once went with a couple to Segou for the marriage of their daughter, and when I got back to Bamako they gave me a car and 3 million CFA francs (\$5,200). That was a day when the fishing trip was fruitful! But there are days when I earn nothing. Once I went with a couple to Nara. We had a car accident and I wrote off my car. But I accepted it. This is just to tell you that life is not always rosy.

On paper I am polygamous, which is what I signed at the time of marriage. But it is my personal belief that you cannot have two wives at the same time. When you say to a Malian woman that you are going to be monogamous, you will not be at peace. She will get big-headed and she won't take care of the relationship any more, because there is no more competition. The man regrets having signed this bit of paper. But when you sign polygamous, the woman says: "If I behave well, my husband will stay with me, but if I behave badly, he will go elsewhere."

I am happy when I feel useful to my country. When I negotiate between a couple, or at a wedding, or when I go on the radio to talk about the history of our people, or when people telephone me to ask questions about who we Malians are. I feel useful when I am transmitting my knowledge to the younger generation. Once I was invited to France for a month, but I said, if Malian people need me and I am in France, how can I help them? I would not go to any corner of the earth for a whole month. It is only in Mali where my function as a griot is properly understood. ● Interview by **Rose Skelton**