

Role Reconstruction and Functional Adaptation: West African Griot Traditions in Tanzania's Musical Contexts

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Abstract. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Arusha and Zanzibar, the research highlights how Bongo Flava artists, Maasai ritual musicians, and Taarab ensembles selectively inherit, reinterpret, and reframe the West African griot's core functions – storytelling, social commentary, mediation, and intergenerational transmission– in ways that resonate with their social and cultural environments. The paper argues that griot functions do not migrate intact across cultural boundaries but undergo processes of role reconstruction and cultural adaptation, mediated by linguistic diversity, community structures, and institutional contexts. This Tanzanian case contributes to broader debates on cultural flow, performance, and the transformation of traditional roles.

Keywords: griot traditions, cultural adaptation, role reconstruction, Tanzanian music, ethnomusicology

1. Introduction

While the griot is a central figure in many West African cultures, its role is not universally recognized or directly transferable across regions in Africa. In West African societies, the griot is a West African historian, storyteller, praise singer, poet, and/or musician. Griots are masters of communicating stories and history orally, which is an African tradition [1]. This oral tradition not only preserves genealogies and epics, but also sustains collective identity through performance and social commentary [2]. In contemporary contexts, the griot's enduring role continues to inspire cultural practices and preserve public memory [3]. Tanzania, however, lacks a formal griot tradition. Instead, this study argues that the core functions of the griot—social commentary, history and ritual preservation, and cultural transmission—have been deconstructed and redistributed across different musical genres and performers within Tanzania's pluralistic musical ecology.

This paper examines how these functions are reconfigured within three distinct Tanzanian music genres: Bongo Flava, Maasai ritual music, and Taarab ensembles. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Arusha and Zanzibar in July 2025, this research challenges the “direct-transplantation” perspective and introduces the concepts of “role reconstruction” and “cultural adaptation” to explain how traditional roles transform when entering new sociocultural environments.

2. Theoretical framework

Table 1. Comparative framework: West African griot functions and their reconstruction in Tanzanian musical contexts

West Africa (Griot)	Tanzania (Reconstructed music)
Hereditary caste	No hereditary roles
Composite functions	Functions dispersed (Bongo Flava / Maasai / Taarab)
Lineage-based authority	Media-based or community-based legitimacy
Oral performance in courtly/kin contexts	Mediatized and urbanized performance contexts
Integrated social and ritual roles	Specialized and redistributed functions

The “direct-transplantation” perspective, prevalent in earlier ethnomusicology, assumes cultural roles can be identically reproduced across regions. However, this view overlooks the deeply embedded social structures defining roles like the West African griot, who are tied to hereditary caste systems, lineage authority, and courtly contexts [4,5]. In Tanzania, such institutions are absent due to distinct social histories, including Bantu communal structures, colonial influences, and post-independence Ujamaa policies.

Instead, griot functions undergo role reconstruction (disassembling and reassigning core functions to new carriers) and cultural adaptation (local reshaping of form and meaning) [4]. As shown in Table 1. Comparative Framework: West African Griot Functions and Their Reconstruction in Tanzanian Musical Contexts, in Tanzania’s pluralistic music ecology, Bongo Flava artists adopt social commentary function through Swahili lyrics, addressing youth struggles and urban inequality; Taarab ensembles adopt cultural transmission and identity construction functions in community settings [6]. These adaptations are mediated by local factors such as the use of Swahili for cross-ethnic reach, rhythmic traditions influencing musical expression, and the post-colonial need for a unified national identity [6]. Thus, griot functions are not diluted but reconfigured, a process involving interactive negotiation between external influences and local needs [7,8].

3. Fieldwork context: Tanzania’s musical ecology

Tanzania has a strikingly diverse cultural background, which is shaped by ethnic plurality, Swahili culture, colonial and postcolonial history, urbanization, and globalization. The country is home to more than 120 ethnic groups, ranging from large communities such as the Sukuma, Chaga, and Haya to smaller pastoral groups like the Maasai [6]. This diversity has historically coalesced, and this is evident along the Swahili coast. For centuries, the coast’s contact with Arab, Persian, and Indian traders gave rise to a hybrid culture, one shaped by the Kiswahili language and a distinctive coastal Islamic heritage [9].

This diversity is reflected in its music. Bongo Flava is a hip-hop and R&B hybrid originating in the 1990s. It uses Swahili lyrics to address urban youth issues, inequality, and political critique [10]. Taarab is a coastal genre blending African, Arab, and Indian influences. It is often performed at weddings and community events, and emphasizes poetic metaphor and cultural mediation in Taarab’s lyrics [6,11,12]. Maasai Music is rooted in pastoralist traditions, featuring ritual chants, historical narratives, and collective performances that reinforce social identity and oral history [13]. These three music genres—Bongo Flava, Taarab, and Maasai music—represent distinct dimensions of Tanzania’s pluralistic music ecology. Understanding these social and musical contexts is essential

for analyzing how griots' functions are deconstructed, redistributed, and reconstructed in different regions of contemporary Tanzania, because they provide distinct platforms for griot functions to re-emerge.

4. Core findings: functional redistribution

4.1. Social commentary function in Bongo Flava

In Tanzania, the griot's function of social commentary has been primarily adopted by Bongo Flava artists.

JCB, a prominent Bongo Flava musician, is one of the most influential hip-hop artists in Arusha. During an interview at his residence in July 2025, he enthusiastically performed a line from one of his songs that critiques social reality: "Ukisikia pa, uko safe. Kwa maana ukiwa dead, huwezi sikia pa." This line translates as: "If you hear a 'pa,' you are safe. Because if you are dead, you can't hear a 'pa' at all." Here, "pa" symbolizes the sound of a gunshot, metaphorically representing social pressure.

When discussing the inspiration behind this work, JCB explained that people in Arusha face severe living challenges. The pressure brought by government administrative control, the burden of the shortage of livelihood resources, and other difficulties are intertwined, making it hard for ordinary people to get rid of them. "I see the struggles of people around me every day, and this makes me feel that I must do something," JCB said. "Local musicians barely make any money. Because once we upload our songs online, people can freely download them without paying. We always complain about it, but nobody cares," JCB said. This is a sign of imperfection in the local music industry chain. He hopes to criticize the government's neglect of the needs of the underclass, the unfair distribution of social resources, and the imperfection of the local music industry through this line of lyrics. Although the power of one person cannot change everything, he can let the world pay attention to these neglected real problems.

In terms of musical expression, JCB deliberately used the powerful accented drumbeats in hip-hop music, matched with smooth and infectious melody lines. He believes that "this kind of sound can penetrate numbness and convey strength to everyone's heart." He further explained that the original intention of his creation not only comes from his bond with music since childhood – "Music flows in my body like blood. I sang in the church when I was a child, and then I couldn't let go of hip-hop after being exposed to it" – but also lies in his hope to guide the public through music: "I have seen too many young people ruined by drugs. I want my songs to be a kind of 'antidote', so that when they hear them, they can have the motivation to pursue a better life instead of indulging in degeneracy."

Unlike griots, who performed in intimate settings, Bongo Flava artists rely on digital media, commercial networks, and youth culture to express their voice. They are more individualized and commercialized. Bongo Flava musicians market themselves as independent brands rather than custodians of lineage-based authority. Their thematic orientation is more urbanized and globalized, which reflects both the local struggles of Tanzanian cities and the broader discourses of global hip-hop. Unlike the griot's mediation of interpersonal or familial disputes, the modern focus lies squarely on systemic critique and structural injustice. The reconstructed role of the griot as social commentator in Tanzania is thus mediated by technology, shaped by urban experience, and sustained by globalized media platforms. This is a vivid example of how traditional functions adapt to new institutional and technological environments.

4.2. Ritual and historical functions in Maasai music

The griot's function of preserving history and ritual has been primarily adopted by Maasai traditional musicians.

In the Maasai community of Arusha, a representative welcome ceremony vividly illustrates how traditional music dominates ritual proceedings and serves the function of historical preservation. At the beginning of the ceremony, an elder dressed in traditional attire and holding a long cow horn stood on an elevated spot at the village entrance, blowing a deep and prolonged horn. This unique horn sound not only announced the start of the ceremony, but its rhythm itself is also a symbol of Maasai's historical memory. Over the years, similar horn sounds have been played during major events such as tribal migrations and resistance against external enemies, serving as an auditory link connecting the past and the present.

Immediately afterward, the young men in the tribe quickly formed a semicircle. Dressed in the iconic "shúkà" (a traditional cloth with a red background and black stripes) and holding spears, they stood upright with tall and straight postures. Following the lead of the elder's horn, the men began to emit deep guttural sounds from the bottom of their chests. Initially, the sounds were relatively scattered, but soon converged into a complex and rhythmic pattern. This rhythm was not uniform. Instead, each person incorporated their own improvisations while adhering to the overall rhythmic framework. This created a polyphonic polyrhythmic effect. For instance, I observed that one of the young men skillfully added short pauses and stress variations to the main rhythm, infusing flexibility into the entire musical pattern. As the rhythm gradually stabilized, a man recognized for his outstanding vocal ability stepped out of the formation and began to sing as the lead. His melodic line was highly distinctive, with a wide vocal range, featuring prolonged vibratos and powerful high notes as prominent characteristics. The lyrics mostly eulogized the heroic deeds of the tribe's ancestors, such as "Our ancestors, holding spears, trekked across the scalding sand, repelled invading enemies, and safeguarded our cattle and land." Under his leadership, the other men repeated parts of the lyrics while swaying their bodies back and forth in time with the rhythm, continuously uttering rhythmic shouts that echoed the lead singer.

At this point, the jumping competition officially commenced. In time with the musical rhythm, the men jumped high one after another, and each jump was precisely in sync with the music. The higher the jump, the louder the shouts and singing from the surrounding companions became. The rhythm grew increasingly intense, pushing the ceremony to its climax. From the perspective of musical elements, the rhythm of the jumps not only enhanced the drumbeat-like sense of rhythm in the music, but the shouts emitted by the dancers at the moment of jumping also further enriched the harmonic layers. This made music and dance closely intertwined, forming an indivisible whole.

Throughout the entire ceremony, the young members of the ethnic group were fully engaged. The underage boys stared intently at the performances of their elder brothers. They imitated elders' singing styles and jumping movements; their eyes filled with longing and respect. They hummed softly on the side, striving to keep up with the rhythm; even though their voices were immature, they were full of enthusiasm. This participation was not mere entertainment, but an important part of the Maasai cultural inheritance. By personally participating in the ritual performance, the younger generation unconsciously learned the tribe's history, values, and traditional skills. For example, when the lead singer sang about the arduous journey of the ancestors' migration, the boys listened attentively, as if traveling back to that ancient era through the lyrics. They gained a profound understanding of the hardships of the tribe's survival, thereby internalizing these historical memories in their hearts.

The Maasai case exemplifies a highly contextualized reconstruction. Performances are not detached entertainment but deeply embedded in ritual and pastoral life. Songs are inseparable from their ceremonial environment, such as circumcision rites, marriage gatherings, or warrior dances [13]. Through these occasions, the oral record of Maasai society is continually renewed. Unlike griots, who often preserved the histories of multiple families or courts, Maasai oral historians focus primarily on their own tribe's genealogy and mythic past [5].

As a minor supplement, other Tanzanian genres also carry fragments of this historical-record function. Taarab ensembles may explain episodes of Zanzibar's urban social history in metaphor-laden songs [12], while Bongo Flava occasionally functions as a chronicle of contemporary city life. Yet, neither achieves the centrality of the Maasai in preserving genealogical memory.

4.3. Transmission function in Taarab

The function of cultural transmission has been primarily adopted by Taarab ensembles.

Taarab is a carrier of intergenerational cultural transmission. Through institutions such as the Culture Musical Club in Zanzibar, the tradition is passed down via master-apprentice relations, community ensembles, and increasingly through music schools [6].

A notable center for the preservation and transmission of Taarab is the Dhow Countries Music Academy (DCMA) in Stone Town, Zanzibar. Regarded as a leading institution in East Africa for the safeguarding of Zanzibar and Swahili traditional music, DCMA is widely recognized as a "living archive" and a nurturing ground for artists in this genre. The academy is housed in a historic colonial-era building within Stone Town's old quarter, where Swahili-style carved wooden doors and narrow winding alleys form a cultural backdrop that resonates with the Taarab teachings inside.

The academy openly admits students while also placing strong emphasis on recommendations from local musicians, teachers, and community leaders. The selection committee, typically composed of senior instructors such as Dr. Nathalie M. Pourreau, the academy's principal, prioritizes applicants' genuine interest and commitment to learning Zanzibar's traditional music forms—such as Taarab and Kidumbak—over prior technical skill. "We do not look for talent first. What matters more is whether students are willing to settle into the long, patient process of learning this tradition," Dr. Pourreau has explained. "Most students receive scholarships, so we are able to support their studies." This selection logic is in the same line as the "apprenticeship system" inheritance concept of the Zanzibar Culture Musical Club, with cultural continuity as the core goal.

Interviews with students reveal personal and social motivations for studying Taarab. Student A mentioned, "My father is also a Taarab artist. He is good at playing the Qanun (a traditional stringed instrument with a trapezoidal soundbox, often used in Middle Eastern and North African music, and an important accompaniment instrument in Taarab), so I like Taarab." Influenced by her family environment, she has learned basic lyrics creation and rhythm control from her father since childhood. The reason why she entered DCMA is not only to systematically learn Taarab's music theory knowledge and traditional performance skills, but also to "continue to pass on the music of my father's generation". This inheritance path of Taarab also confirms the view put forward by Fair in his research that the inheritance of Taarab relies on "intergenerational emotional connection" and community support [12].

The transmission function is reinforced by mechanisms including community festivals, marriage celebrations, institutionalized ensembles, and pedagogical practices ranging from informal mentoring to formal instruction. In this sense, Taarab embodies a continuity with griot legacies in cultural preservation, though reframed within Swahili coastal traditions rather than hereditary West African systems.

5. Discussion: drivers, mechanisms, and challenges of reconstruction

Reconstruction occurs through several interconnected mechanisms. Social network, which provides resources and legitimacy, allows functions to reattach: among the Maasai, kinship and age-set systems sustain genealogical memory and ritual instruction [13]; Taarab ensembles rely on cultural clubs and master-apprentice relations to convey poetic and mediating practices [6]; and Bongo Flava artists rely on music industry and digital fan networks to amplify social commentary function, albeit within market-driven circuits [14]. Simultaneously, cultural adaptation means that functional expression varies across different cultures. For instance, compressed song content in Bongo Flava enables rapid circulation of critique. These adaptations reflect a selective combination, wherein certain functions combine with genres with compatible affordances: social critique aligns with Bongo Flava's media-capable style, historical preservation with Maasai ritual forms, and subtle cultural transmission with Taarab ensembles. These are influenced by network density, transmission modes, and local moral economies [8]. Furthermore, institutional collaboration among local bodies, NGOs, and market entities creates new patronage networks that support reconstructed functions, as observed in fieldwork from July 2025.

However, this process faces significant challenges. Commercialization transforms once-authentic expressions in both popular and traditional genres [6]. Commercial pressures often prioritize viral and sponsor-friendly content over sustained critical engagement. Mediatization fragments oral traditions into algorithmically sorted digital segments, altering the nature of cultural "utterance" and "memory" by divorcing them from original contexts despite increasing their reach [15]. Intergenerational discontinuities further threaten traditions dependent on long apprenticeship, as youth gravitate toward urban genres, eroding skills and communal memory transmission [13]. Inadequate policy and institutional support exacerbate these issues, as funding tends to favor economically measurable projects, leaving non-commercial practices under-resourced [6]. These challenges are deeply intertwined, requiring holistic strategies that address economic structures, media ecologies, educational pathways, and cultural policy to sustain the reconstructed functions.

6. Theoretical response

The Tanzanian case supports a processual model: first, deconstruction; second, flow or diversion; third, network reattachment or selective coupling; fourth, situational adaptation; and finally, mediated consolidation or attenuation. This model predicts that (a) in contexts lacking hereditary institutions, functions will fragment; (b) the distribution pattern will depend on the density and type of available networks (kinship, cultural clubs, industry, digital communities); and (c) long-term preservation of complex functions requires institutional supports that favor slow transmission (apprenticeship, archives, policy). These propositions can guide further comparative research across East African sites and policy interventions (targeted support for apprenticeship programs, community archives, and platform-aware cultural strategies).

7. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the griot's roles—social critique, historical preserving, and cultural transmission—have been reconstructed in Tanzania and adapted across distinct music genres. Rather than replicating a unified griot figure, these functions are redistributed: Bongo Flava artists comment on society through their music; Maasai performers preserve genealogical memory and ethical instruction within ritual and kinship systems; and Taarab ensembles facilitate cultural

continuity via metaphor-rich and apprentice-based performances [6]. These adaptations do not emulate West Africa's hereditary and patronage-based model but reflect a distinctly Tanzanian reconstruction shaped by ethnic diversity, coastal hybridity, urbanization, and mediatized globalization [8]. The resulting processual model—involving deconstruction, diversion, reconstruction, and adaptation—shows how core griot functions endure while transforming in form and context.

The paper contributes a theory-informed East African case to debates on cultural role transformation, shifting focus from individual figures to mobile functions. It integrates theories of cultural flow, performance, and mediatization to explain how griots' functions reattach to new networks, gain multi-sited legitimacy, and are reshaped by digital infrastructures [8,15,16]. Methodologically, it illustrates how mixed-method fieldwork, which combines interviews, participant observation, and textual analysis, can trace functional repackaging across diverse settings.

8. Limitations and future directions

This study has several limitations. The study centers on one Bongo Flava artist (JCB/Jecob) in Arusha, the Maasai traditional musicians, and Taarab ensembles in Zanzibar. While these cases are not statistically representative, they were selected for recognized cultural significance: JCB is an influential figure in Arusha's hip-hop scene, the documented Maasai rituals represent core expressive practices within their socio-cultural system, and the DCMA (Dhow Countries Music Academy) serves as a key institution for Taarab preservation. To mitigate concerns of selection bias, the findings are triangulated not only with existing scholarship but also with informal testimonies from local community members. During the interview, residents near Arusha said: "There is hardly anyone in the streets and lanes who doesn't know JCB." "The Maasai music ritual is very famous, even among us." They proved the representative roles of these artists and traditions.

The limited fieldwork duration (approximately two weeks in July 2025) restricted attention to seasonal or long-term cultural processes. While this short timespan precludes deeper analysis of cyclical or slowly evolving practices, the intensive, multi-sited participant observation and interviews enabled a deep description of how griots' functions are reconfigured in Tanzania music industry. Additionally, by cross-validating literature and online background information with our observations, this study seeks to offer a nuanced, if preliminary, model of cultural transformation.

Future research should adopt longitudinal designs to trace how reconstructed functions evolve as artists, ensembles, and cultural backgrounds change. Intra-national comparisons (e.g., Dar es Salaam vs. Zanzibar) could clarify how regional differences in regulation, religion, and markets affect functional reallocation [6,12]. Computational methods, such as lyric topic modeling or collaboration network analysis, may help quantify how digital platforms reshape cultural "memory" and "utterance" [15]. Comparative studies across East Africa (e.g., Kenya, Uganda) could test the transferability of the processual model, while policy-oriented research may evaluate interventions (archives, community schools, apprenticeship programs) that support sustainable transmission amid commercial and generational pressures [6,14].

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