

*La Griotique: mémoires et réflexions*  
Aboubakar Cyprien Touré  
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One authentically Ivorian artistic development of the 1970s was “*griotique*,” a neologism coined by the late Dieudonné Niangoranh Porquet, borrowed and conceptualized to its fullest extent by Aboubakar Cyprien Touré, Porquet’s artistic companion. What is “*griotique*”<sup>1</sup> and how did it *truly* come about? Answering these questions in the light of Touré’s new book will prove beneficial and enlightening because the neologism did not enjoy any clear-cut conceptual compass after the year 1972. With a testimonial and then a reflection on *griotique*, Aboubakar Touré came in 2014, after three decades, to revive it from the abyss of induced disaffection and oblivion.

Touré’s book is divided into four parts or chapters. The first chapter of *La Griotique: mémoires et réflexions* is titled “Aujourd’hui, la griotique?” [Is *griotique* relevant today ?] The title is telling because *griotique* has been declared defunct by some critics. This chapter weighs the relevance of the concept; it briefly surveys the neologism’s reception both at the time of its inception and now. Niangoranh Porquet, due to Touré’s four-year absence out of the country, coined further terminologies to aid their neologism, which made most critics consider the former to be the exclusive father of the new concept. And yet, Touré declares:

I was around when the new day was dawning. I do not mean that I was the first to witness this dawning; rather, I was part of a duo, Porquet and me, two brothers working hand in hand at dawn when *griotique* was coming of age. (18, my translation)

From 1972 to 1983—the period Touré was literally evicted from the shared ownership of *griotique* by his artistic companion—he authored four texts in order to conceptualize the neologism that they share in common. *Griotique* derives from the word “griot” and the suffix “-ique”. The griot is a traditional Mande court historian and advisor to the princes, a storyteller who would offer public performances with musical accompaniment; he used mostly the kora. The suffix is used for nouns and adjectives.

The second chapter is entitled “La bohème et le sphinx ou paternité de la griotique” [The Bohemian and the Sphinx or the Paternity of *Griotique*]. This chapter surveys the influence that Touré and his companion, the late Niangoranh Porquet, felt from older African dramatists including, among others, Bachir Touré, originally from Senegal, Bernard Dadie, one of the fathers of Ivorian theater and

literature, and the famous Keita Fodeba of Guinea-Conakry. It also sheds more light on the origin of “*griotique*” and the creation of the *Duo Porquet-Touré et Compagnie*.

Chapter three, “La griotique et la problématique du théâtre négro-africain contemporain” [*Griotique* and the problem of contemporary African theater] is a treatise of sorts on the art of drama and recital, such as it had currency in the former French colonies of West Africa, as well as on the very idea of drama or theater in precolonial Africa. Touré explains that the recital first appeared in nineteenth-century Europe in the area of music rather than drama: “Initially, recital ... was the performance of a single musician with just one instrument” (73). Over the course of time, it went on to be applied to other musical instruments only to find resonance in other forms of artistic expressions like dance, though exclusively through public recitation of poetry. Recital thus entered the area of drama.

Chapter four, “De la griotique” [On/of *griotique*], is undoubtedly the heart of Touré’s reflection on the almost Afro-centered theory of dramatic art he helped co-create. Touré’s actual understanding of dramatic art contributes to the cultural repositioning of the African continent. Touré centers his conceptualization of *griotique* on the reprimands of his former schoolteacher who once told him and Porquet that they had been gesticulating excessively during their recital. Touré writes: “Western dramatic art is not one of gesture and body movement.... First and foremost, it is an art of the voice” (139).

*Griotique* came into being because the French instructor told his students not to budge during performance as is the norm in Western poetic/dramatic performance. In reaction to this injunction, the two students created their own type of performance in consonance with traditional African performance like that of the Mande griot. Touré asserts: “*griotique* did not originate from a book or a theory; rather, it came out of lived experience” (137). The first new dramatic art ever invented in Côte d’Ivoire, *griotique* is “an answer to our intrinsic need for the orality of our poetry as well as to the spectacular and living pulse of our poetry” (152).

Clearly, (creative) art is a means to assert and liberate oneself culturally. African art, as the late Léopold Sédar Senghor from Senegal conceptualises it, is socially creative. He writes: “Art is functional. It is not entertainment nor is it an ornament that adds to the object. It confers effectiveness to the object thereby making it complete. Art confers its character to the object” (Senghor, 279). Touré and countless African artists and writers, whether on the continent of Africa or in the Diaspora, rightly understood that whatever the nature of writing authored by Africans, it must serve the community because the writer must be the community’s voice. The artistic movement *griotique* is one, despite Touré’s claim to the contrary, that could have been salvaged from the conceptual drift it experienced, had appropriate discursive or epistemological measures been taken by its surviving inventor. In fact, Touré has accused his stage companion of stripping him of their joint ownership of *griotique*. In an interview, Porquet confirmed this belief because he referred to himself as the sole owner of the coinage in the

following terms: “I sought to provide a synthesis of my practical activities and my theoretical works. I thus created *griotique*” (Kone et Porquet 91). Excessive use of “I” denotes a serious crisis of ownership. Porquet asserts here his paternity, which in actual fact has never been called into question by Touré.

Perhaps Touré should have stepped up and settled accounts with his former artistic companion, which he did not do until some twenty-two years later. This failure to take action seems to be the problem that has fraught art in Côte d’Ivoire, considered in the 1980s as a turning platform for most artists in Africa. Inventions were not curated and well preserved. Touré contributed, by way of his silence, which he attributes to his calmness and character, to the dangerous adventure and ostracism that his conceptual child, *griotique*, suffered. It is not necessarily too late to redress what has been done wrong, for as the Mande, a large ethnic group to which he belongs, say: “When the truth appears, lie runs away.”

All in all, it ought to be said that Touré and Porquet have added something original to Ivorian arts and letters in particular, and in general to African creative expression in the globalized village, as some call our world in this day and age. Like Négritude, coined and conceptualized by Senghor and his two friends, Damas and Césaire, Touré, and to some extent Porquet, have added a great deal to the world of dramatic expression and its criticism with his first-hand testimony in order to call his detractors to order and set the record straight. That is why his seminal work need to be read again and again by those who are interested in drama, and more specifically, African drama of French expression.

## Notes

1. This new concept would sound inappropriate if it were translated as “griotics.” French words like critique and technique, among others, have been borrowed and naturalized in English. So it ought to be “*griotique*” if it happens to be welcomed in the academic and critical community. Therefore, throughout this essay, I will keep it as its coiners had wished it to be in the French language.

## Works Cited

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