

## REVIEW ESSAY

**CONCEPTUALLY RECALIBRATING “GRIOTIQUE”: ABOUBACAR TOURE’S RESUSCITATION OF AN AUTHENTICALLY (WEST) AFRICAN CONCEPT OF DRAMATURGY**

**Aboubakar Cyprien Touré. *La Griotique: mémoires et réflexions*. Paris: L’Harmattan, 2014, pp.118, ISBN : 978-2-343-02180-5. 18 Euros.**

West Africa’s Côte d’Ivoire has usually been considered as an Eldorado. In fact, the country was called an “economic miracle” when it became independent in 1960 from French colonial rule. The country has also been lauded for being a sort of haven of political stability, even though the the political regime was far removed from democracy.

People do not know much about Côte d’Ivoire’s cultural productions and developments during the same period of economic growth. In fact, when economy was blossoming, cinema and literature were also on thriving end. The area of dramatic arts and novelistic productions was furnished by celebrated authors like centenarian Bernard Dadié, François Joseph Amon D’Aby, Ahmadou Kourouma, Charles Gbessi Nokan, and Jean-Marie Adiaffi, Amadou Koné, among others . These writers have been emulated by younger writers who now attempt to give this area of intellection the *lettres de noblesse* (years of glory) of the era both before the Independence and immediately after. In dramaturgy, a huge development took place. It even enthralled, to a higher degree, those who love theatrical representations. Concomitantly, theories and critique of literature developed. One of these artistic developments was “griotique,” a neologism created by the late Dieudonné Niangoranh Porquet, and later borrowed and conceptualized to its fullest extent by Aboubakar Cyprien Touré. Toure was Porquet’s age mate and artistic companion since high school in Abidjan. The coinage must be taken as a fresh start, conceptually and mentally, for Ivorian dramatic art, in particular, and “black” African<sup>1</sup> art in general.

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<sup>1</sup> I tried to translate the adjective “négro-africain”, which could be rendered as “Negro-African”, a phrase Senghor and his peers turned around and resemantized during the struggle against French/ European

Over the years, the neologism that was most welcomed by the world of arts and letters in Côte d'Ivoire, became disaffected. This was so because of the strange trajectory the concept took with Niangoranh Porquet laying exclusive claim to the paternity of the neologism. Of course, this reduced the co-user of the concept to a silence of sorts that almost signed the death warrant of this beautiful addition to Côte d'Ivoire's artistic wealth.

What is “griotique”<sup>2</sup> and how did it *truly* come about? What happened to the neologism in the course of its deployment, and how do the two co-creators conceptualize their coinage? Niangoranh Porquet being dead, how does the surviving father (Aboubacar Touré) reconstitute the truth about the now embattled and denigrated concept of “griotique”? Answering these questions in the light of Touré's new book will prove more beneficial and enlightening because the neologism did not enjoy any clear-cut conceptual compass after the year 1972.

With a testimonial and a reflection on griotique Aboubacar Touré came in 2014, after three decades to revive it from the abyss of induced disaffection and oblivion. First, Toure's book comes in four parts or chapters. The first chapter of *La Griotique: mémoires et réflexions* goes by the title “Aujourd'hui, la griotique?”, which is telling because *griotique* was declared defunct by some critics. This chapter weighs the relevance of the word; it briefly surveys the neologism's reception both at its inception and at the present time. Most of responses, apart from the warm welcome it earned on its birth date (1972), have been instigated by the way one of the co-creators handled the concept. Niangoranh Porquet and Aboubacar Touré, who grew up and went to school together, created the concept to instill some African blood in what came to be known as modern African drama. The latter was highly Europeanized. Due to Toure's four-year absence out of the country, Niangoranh Porquet, coined further terminologies to advocate the

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enterprise of “thingification” of native Africans with darker skin tone. I distance from using *Negro* here because of its offensive and derogatory charge even though some in Francophone Africa still use it in literary criticism.

<sup>2</sup> This new concept will sound inappropriate if it came as “griotics.” French words like *critique* and *technique*, among others, have been borrowed and naturalized in English. So 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 wanted in the French language.

neologism. This made most critics think that Porquet was the exclusive father of the newborn word. However, Toure has this to say :

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 myself, two brothers working hand in hand at dawn when griotique was coming of age. (18) [My translation]<sup>3</sup>.

From 1972 to 1983 –the period Toure was literally evinced from the shared ownership of *griotique* by his artistic companion–, he authored four (04) texts to conceptualize their shared coinage. Toure claims that the 1972 text is quintessential. This is so because it not only gave a theoretical mooring to the word, but also stands as his actual pronouncement on *griotique*. He reveals:

The 1972 text is a testimony of my own understanding of the concept. It is a crystallization of *my* own griotique; that is, the initial griotique in which I believed, prior to its getting convoluted (23).

The original *griotique* came into being when Toure and Porquet were admonished by their French professor of Arts and Letters after a play they performed. The professor remonstrated against their excessive use of gestures during poetry recital. He writes,

We were extremely disappointed when our stage director who, very self-confidently so, told us: “young men, you move excessively!” [...] Yet [...] we, young Africans who were new on the stage and not shaped by the mold of Western theater, the only one taught in schools, expressed ourselves as freely as we could. The rhythm of our gestures and movement of the body was an accompaniment for the spoken words and it turned the poem into music, song and dance. [...] We felt uncomfortable deep within our heart because we could not make gestures anymore. This simply led to the creation of griotique. When came the time to perform this play, we wanted to find a name other than recital which was a dramaturgical style we sought to fight. We searched and I borrowed the word “griotique” from my friend *Niangoranh*. [...] We thus intended to contribute to the rehabilitation of our traditional dramatic art and to an affirmation of an authentically African dramaturgy (24-26).

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<sup>3</sup> Subsequent translations of the original quotations in French are my own.

*Griotique* derives from “griot” and the suffix “-ique”. Griot is a traditional Mande court historian and advisor to the princes, a storyteller who used to offer public performances with musical accompaniment; he used mostly the kora.<sup>4</sup> The suffix is used for nouns and adjectives.

The second chapter is titled “La bohème et le sphinx ou paternité de la griotique” [The Bohemina and the Sphinx or the Paternity of Griotique]. This chapter surveys the influence that Toure and his companion, late Niangoranh Porquet felt from older African dramatists like, among others, Bachir Toure originally from Senegal, centenarian Bernard Dadie, one of the fathers of Ivorian theater and literature, and the famous Keita Fodeba of Guinea-Conakry.

The chapter also sheds more light on the origin of “griotique” and the creation of the *Duo Porquet-Toure et Compagnie*. In short, griotique, as the performance of play given on February 29, 1972 at the *Théâtre des Cités* in Abidjan, was “the true and spontaneous result of the commitment of young amateurs willing to create a unique work of art”(41). Toure explains that “griotique,” a coinage that came into the dramaturgical world of Côte d’Ivoire during the 1972 show co-organized by Porquet and himself, was borrowed from Porquet upon the latter’s suggesting it. Initially, Porquet had wanted to use the word in his poetic works and confided that it did not exist, and no dictionary at the time had an explanation for its possible meanings. “[...] This neologism, as the title of a collection of poems, was diverted from its initial destination –literary production– to production for the stage”(51). As the title indicates, there arose later in the companionship of Toure and Porquet, around the early 1980’s, some conflicts. Their shared paternity of *griotique* came under attack; Porquet spoke about the concept as something exclusively his own at the expense of his co-actor, drama companion.

Chapter three, “La griotique et la problématique du théâtre négro-africain contemporain” [Griotique and the problem of contemporary African theater] is a kind of treatise on drama and

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<sup>4</sup> The kora is a twenty-one-stringed harp built from a large calabash which is cut in half and covered with cow or goat skin. It is used very extensively in West Africa, more specifically among the Mande and by the griot caste. The instrument is believed to have been played for the first time by Balla Fasseke Kouyate, the griot of Soundjata Keita, the founder of the 13<sup>th</sup>-century Mali Empire in West Africa.

recital such as they were practiced in the former French colonies of West Africa. It also deals with the very idea of drama in pre-colonial Africa.

Toure explains that the recital first appeared in 19<sup>th</sup> 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 time, it went on to be applied to other musical instruments only to find good resonance in other forms of artistic expressions like dance, though exclusively through public poetic recitation. This is how the recital entered drama. Considering the various itineraries travelled by the recital, Toure and Porquet—when they worked together—believed that it did not have to be used prescriptively, i.e., in a way dictated by someone other than those making use of it. Consequently, they rejected it on behalf of a new form of poetic/dramatic performance branded “griotique.”

Discussions and thought about recital have Toure grapple with the colonialist question as to whether such form of art ever existed in Africa before the encounter imperial forces. In fact, French ethnological discourse declared outright that drama was entirely European, Western. Even Maurice Delafosse, the French explorer who putatively accepted the native “Other” as an “equal”, believed that dramatic art was embryonic in Africa for what he witnessed on the continent was in need of extensive work to approximate drama as known to Westerners:

[Examination of colonialist discourse] reveals that any evident ‘ambivalence’ is in fact a product of deliberate, if at times subconscious, imperialist duplicity, operating very efficiently through the economy of its central trope, the manichean allegory. [...] Even the works of some of the most enlightened and critical colonial writers eventually succumb to a narrative organization based on racial/metaphysical oppositions, whose motives remain morally fixed but whose categories flex to accommodate any situation. (JanMohamed 61)

Toure offers a continuum including French colonial officers with educators and native Africans schooled in the colonizer’s ways. The continuum spans claiming the inexistence of dramatic art in Africa and the existence thereof. In 1914, four decades before the independence of French West Africa, François Victor Huelbecq collected the local story of Samba Gueladio Diegui. It was published only in 1974 as *La légende de Samba Gueladio Diégui*. The Frenchman claims that there is no trace of theater in the former French Soudan where he collected the story

(pp. 80-1). Yet, we know that Bakari Travélé authored the seminal work on theater in Africa, *Le théâtre négro-africain et ses fonctions sociales* in 1958. According to Toure, the very idea of posing the question of the pre-colonial anteriority of theater in Africa is racist and ethnocentric.

Therefore, he writes,

[...] When we closely look at the debate, it becomes clear that it is deeply rooted in ethnocentrism: theater or no theater? The ethnocentric malady is at the heart of the colonial question about the existence of theater in black Africa. (91)

In short, colonial ethnology considered Europe as the exclusive reference in dramatic art although the definition of drama can be equivocal. This warrants the following question:

How else in this context and in the intimacy of the social and cultural field of this elusive and indefinable art of Western theater, could such an art be relevant, significant, coherent and discursive reference as the French colonial ethnography would like us to believe in order to permit the identification of theater in Ancient Africa, I mean in the intimacy of another social and cultural field? (107)

For example, Huelbecq writes that “the only instances we may rarely have are actually scenes of clowning”<sup>5</sup> Conversely, Travélé who seeks to disprove the Euro(-logo)centric theses, happens to look for features of Western theater in Mande performance. Besides, Toure shows that theater means both the place where performance is given and the actual play. The existence of no clearcut definition of dramatic art makes Toure doubt the primacy of this all-at-once Eurocentered and universalized. Thus, Toure believes that “dramatic art is not the only true and intemporal structure of human dramaturgical ingenuity”(134). Western understanding of theater as cannot be the exclusive norm and the only manner in which dramatic virtuosity can be deployed. Rejection of this belief explains the invention of “griotique” when those who claim the paternity came to realize that the very idea of “a black African traditional theater was a European colonial construct”(134). Clearly, while Toure partakes of the debate on dramatic art in Africa, the author reaches the conclusion that there is no such thing as dramatic art in pre-colonial Africa.

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<sup>5</sup> Victor Huelbecq quoted by Aboubacar Toure, *La griotique*, p. 81.

Chapter four, “De la griotique,” is undoubtedly the heart of Toure’s reflection on the almost Afro-centered theory of dramatic art co-created in Cote d’Ivoire. Toure’s actual understanding here contributes to the cultural repositioning of the African continent. He centers his conceptualization on the reprimands of his former schoolteacher who once told them that they were not good performers. Toure 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 some students were criticized for budging during performance. The two students created their own performance in consonance with “traditional African performance like that of the Mande griot. “[G]riotique did not originate from a book or a theory; rather, it came out of lived experience” (137). The concept derives from “griot” who is the master of the word, who acts and makes gestures at the same time.<sup>6</sup> What is more, “music is the griot’s soul” (Niane 39). Toure and Porquet tapped into griotic gestuality and musicality invented because “[...] words and concepts hold and convey our memory, our specific history, [and] griotique binds us together with our own selves and our culture. It reconciles the younger people with their roots and culture”(146).

Clearly, the new dramatic art ever invented in Côte d’Ivoire, is “a reply to our intrinsic need of the orality of our poetry as well as to the spectacular and living pulse of our poetry” (152). Poetically speaking, Africans of any kind all over the world have drawn from the “griotic” stock to maintain their cultural identity. No wonder, speaking of older Blacks, (ex-)slaves invented the blues in the USs while younger and new generation uses politically poems recital (slam, dub poetry and rap). However, Toure believes that none of this showcases African poetic/cultural identity more than griotique.

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<sup>6</sup> These phrases are taken from Sory Camara’s description of the griot and what he does in Mande society and culture: “Yet, griots are different from other members of their caste because they are people whose occupation lies in the spoken word: oratorical skills, epic and genealogical songs, lyrical songs, beautiful or impactful language which is always punctuated with tunes, gesturing word of the body dancing away it pain and expressing its joys. These are, among others, the features of the action-oriented words of the griot”(Camara 11).

Visibly, Toure realized a lack of conceptualization of the griotique and its practice. It ought to be noted that, when undertaking alone his artistic adventure, Niangoranh Porquet attempted to provide a definition as well. According to him, griotique is

A theatrical representation encompassing dramatic art, narrative art, epic art, it comes in two forms. Its scriptural aspect is called “grioture” while its performative part is griophonie. The “griotiseur”, the stage director of the “grioticien” movement in other words, may submit “grioturgical” works which are written and literary representations by “grioticians” or may draw from the black African repertoire and get elements to put in movement. [...] In griotique, there is no difference between poetry recital and theatrical representation or an event of traditional vigil. [...] The theorist of griotique (griotician) imagines a play in which he integrates methodically and coherently the spoken word and the song, music and dance, mime, the history and literature of African people. Therefore, the griotician finds inspiration in the griot’s traditional art; he used to be wordsmith, a storyteller, a musician and dancer, a historian who was custodian of people’s history and was a peace-broker during social conflicts. (Kone & Porquet 91)

Porquet’s pronouncements raise problems of conceptual and terminological order. Conceptually, Porquet’s definition differs from Toure’s. The latter claims that they attempted to distance from making their adventure look like a movement. Yet, the former speaks of “griotician movement.” Better still, when Toure clearly grounds their invention in the separation between recital and actual dramaturgy, Porquet does not distinguish recital from drama in griotique. Terminologically, Toure is more circumspect handling words and their semantic charge. The only words he uses in addition to griotique are “griotiseur” and “grioticien.” Porquet creates words like “griophonie”, “grioture”, “grioturgique” and “griotiseur”, which remain largely unconceptualized and unexemplified.

Also, as if he were unable to ascribe meaning to his neologisms, the scholars who make it seem that Porquet is the only coiner of griotique came to his rescue and defined his them. For instance, words like “griotisme”, “griotismologie”, “griographie” and “griotisation” have been systematized by critics only to add more confusion and incoherence to them.<sup>7</sup> These neologisms

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<sup>7</sup> Ramses Boa-Thiemele, one of the Ivorian scholars who attempt to spoliage Toure of the “griotique” adventure, also tried to synthesize Porquet’s version of griotique as follows. See Boa-Thiémélé, Ramsès.



were cheap talk. Porquet never attempted to translate into performative practicality what he professed, which rightly earned him the harsh critique. Bruno Gnaoule-Oupoh simply considers him as someone juggling with facile neologisms because, more often than not, he is unable to conceptualize properly. Gnaoule-Oupoh calls this state of affairs “hardly acceptable gaps” (Gnaoule-Oupoh, 153). These words, though defined years after Porquet passed away, were never operational. Thus, Gnaoule-Oupoh believes that

Instead of wasting time with facile glossing, Porquet ought to have dedicated himself to serious research on the different forms of traditional Ivorian dramatic representations in order to familiarize with them and exploit those that are consonant with work on stage. Failure to do so led griotique to be crushed by its own discourse. (154)

Of course, Gnaoule-Oupoh is referring to Porquet’s griotique. Otherwise, Toure’s recalibration and subsequent repositioning of griotique contribute to a liberatory praxis deemed necessary back in the 1970’s at the inception of griotique in reaction to the so-called “théâtre de Ponty”<sup>8</sup> (Western dramatic art). This was taught and practiced on Goree Island, academic capital of French colonial West Africa. Recourse to the griot—which Toure clearly endorses and acknowledges—harks back to the roots for the sake of freedom. This is fully consonant with what Amilcar Cabral’s arguments. He writes,

[...] with a strong indigenous cultural life, foreign domination cannot be sure of its perpetuation. [...] It is not possible to harmonize the economic and political domination of a people [...], with the preservation of their cultural personality (Cabral 39-40).

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“L’Ivoirité et l’unité africaine” In *Les Etats-nations face aux défis de l’intégration régionale en Afrique de l’ouest*. Ed. Souleymane Yéo. Paris : Karthala : 2009 :49.

<sup>8</sup> Ponty is the shortened version for the Ecole normale William Ponty in Senegal’s Gorée Island. It is there that students from French West Africa were most trained in the humanities. The kind of dramatic art taught there was exclusively Western even though the students would use materials from their traditional and cultural elements to write and perform their plays.

The French assimilation project stripped countless West Africans of their cultural heritage to such a point that some considered themselves to be of actual French stock. Hence, the phrase “Nos ancêtres les Gaulois.”<sup>9</sup>

Africans are known to use many art forms to express their day-to-day experience. Carvings, painting –even if this does not meet Western prescriptive criteria – music, singing and dancing played this socio-artistic/cultural role. No wonder, Senghor posited a West-is-good-and-the-Other-is-bad binary that has: “l’émotion est nègre, la raison est hellène”[Emotion is African and reason and Hellenic] (Senghor,1939: 295 ). Putting aside the self-degrading and extremely generalizing nature of this claim, one must acknowledge that art (to be understood as a diverse gamut of human activities and the products thereof, usually involving imaginative or technical skill) was an integral part of African life prior to the Atlantic slave trade and colonialism. By “emotion” Senghor actually referred to creative representations like masquerading, mimicry and pantomime, all this lulled in music and performed through dance. It is not exaggerated to call this integrated whole “theatre.” In other words, depending on one’s location, theater takes on the form of the means available and the ways the people perform. Be that as it may, like some Eurocentric critics and interpreters, Toure deems there is no such thing as dramatic art in West Africa drawing from the examples of the peoples of Cote d’Ivoire and even from the Mande people with the “griotic” tradition. There are other forms of expressive arts like griot’s poetry told with music, dance and gesture. This suggests dramatic art is the West’s intimate creation making one with its cultural/artistic identity. Toure could not make his claims clearer when he stated,

When we will have agreed that dramatic art just like cinema is not part of cultural roots, only then will we have the necessary humility to learn dramatic art the same way one learns cinema and adapt it to our creative ingenuity afterwards (155).

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<sup>9</sup> The French colonial teachers, if not the colonial curriculum set to whitewash and acculturate the natives, would tell schoolchildren to consider themselves as the original Frenchmen’s siblings or cousins; they would say: “Nos ancêtres les Gaulois” [Our ancestors, the Gauls]. Late Antillean Henri Salvador sang “Faut rigoler” in 1960; it is a song that uses the phrase as a refrain.

Being in a globalized world, it does not hurt to borrow from others and enrich one's own culture. Ngugi wa Thiong'O known for his staunch defense of African cultural identity, thinks the same thing. He writes,

All societies develop under conditions of external contacts with other societies at the economic, political and cultural levels. Under 'normal' circumstances a given society is able to absorb whatever it borrows from other contacts, digest it and make it its own. [...] Cultures that stay isolated from others can shrivel, dry up or wither away [...]. Cultures that change to reflect the ever-changing dynamics of internal relations and which maintain a balanced give and take with external relations are the ones that are healthy (Ngugi xv-vi).

Clearly, (creative) art is a means to self-assert and liberate oneself culturally as Cabral would have it. African art, Senghor tells, 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 1964: 279). Toure and countless African artists and writers, whether on the continent of Africa or in the Diaspora<sup>10</sup>, rightly understood.

The artistic movement could have been salvaged from the conceptual drift it experienced, had appropriate discursive or epistemological measures been duly taken by its surviving inventor. In fact, Toure has accused Porquet "[...] 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 "T" denotes a serious crisis of ownership.<sup>11</sup> Porquet asserts here his paternity, which in actual facts Toure has never been called in question. Perhaps, he should have stepped up, redress the

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<sup>10</sup> That's why Hoyt Fuller, an "ideologue" of the Black Art Movement in the 1960's would say that Black art does not overburden with purely aesthetic import when it is clear that art can be placed in the service of its practitioner's social advancement. He writes, "Whatever the value of Black writing, it must proceed as a direct result of the service it will perform for the Black community, and the sooner we accept our roles as the community voice, the closer we will be to a solution to the struggle" (Fuller 10).

<sup>11</sup> For unclear reasons, Bruno Gnaoule-Oupoh, who is one of Toure's former colleagues at the University, considers Toure to be Porquet's stage director, and thereby rewrites the narrative history of the two playwrights' first performance of griotique when they newly founded their troop by the name "Duo-Toure-Porquet & Company. That's probably why he writes, "Niangoran Porquet put up his first show on February 29, 1972 with the Masques & Balafons group of the then University of Abidjan. It was a recital of African poetry [...]" (Gnaoulé-Oupoh 152).

accounts of his former artistic companion, which he did only 22 years later. This seems to be the problem that has fraught art in Côte d'Ivoire considered as a turning platform for most African artists in the 1980's . Inventions were not curated and well preserved. Playwright and director of the Koteba Dance Company, late Souleymane Koly, rightly accused his peers of not doing enough for what they invented. In an interview a couple of years before his demise, Koly notes that

[...] There are a lot of ideas here and they grew up well. The problem is that we fail to sustain them over a long period of them. In fact, the entire community does not appropriate new ideas and make them sustainable. [...] It is fine to have good ideas, but what matters is to transform these ideas so that the entire community may be able to use them.<sup>12</sup>

I believe that Toure contributed, by way of his silence which he attributes to his legendary calm character, to the dangerous adventure and the ostracism that his conceptual child suffered. It is not necessarily too late to redress this wrong, for as the Mande say: "When the truth appears, lie runs away". The anathema<sup>13</sup> declared by critics like Gnaoule-Oupoh seems to be lifted.

All in all, it ought to be said that Toure and Porquet have added something original to Ivorian arts and letters in particular, and in general to African creative expressions and personality in the globalized village our world has becomes. Like the word *negritude* coined and conceptualized by Senghor and his two friends, Damas and Césaire, Toure, and to some extent Porquet, has 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 to make things right. That's why, his majestic work needs to be read over and again by those who are interested in drama, and more specifically, African drama of French expression.

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<sup>12</sup> See "Souleymane Koly : Entretien avec Schadé Adédé".

<sup>13</sup> He writes, "[...] Griotique is completely disaffected by Ivorian people because it is now a form of drama called « Boulevard africain » where there are few crazy or lively rhythms, facile body movements and where realism expresses itself in a meaningless form"(Gnaoule-Oupoh 154).

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Konaté A. Siendou  
 Université Félix Houphouët-Boigny  
 Côte d'Ivoire