

Storytelling and the Arts of West Africa

Section 3

Standard 7.4.5

Describe the importance of written and oral traditions in the transmission of African history and culture.



Section Focus Question

How were the culture and traditions of West Africa preserved and spread?



Background Knowledge

- We previously learned about Sundiata, the emperor of Mali. All that we know about him comes from tales told by African storytellers. This section, will discuss West Africa's arts and strong oral tradition.



The Telling of Tales

- Until the arrival of Arab traders, West Africa had no written language. Instead, West Africans developed a strong oral tradition. They used oral history, poetry, folk tales, and sayings both to teach and to entertain.



The Role of Griots

- Professional storytellers and oral historians
 - memorized and recited stories of famous events and people.



Folk Tales

- Shared at home
 - Heroes, hunters or animals
 - to teach young people right from wrong.
- Anansi the Spider was an especially popular figure in West African folk tales.



Proverbs

- **wise sayings** a quick way to transmit wisdom.
 - “It takes a village to raise a child,”
 - “Every time an old man dies, it is as if library has burnt down.”

It is the toothless animal that arrives first at the base of the fruit tree, to eat his fill before others arrive.

~Kenya, Africa~

Music, Dance, and Art

- **Polyrhythmic - playing two or more different rhythms at the same time**
- Dance was part of religious ceremonies.
 - Masked dancers acted out stories of gods or ancestors.
- West African art served many purposes.
 - show off their wealth and power
 - record important events and people
 - honor the dead and religious ceremonies



The Legacy of Empires

- Millions of Africans speak the languages of Mali and Songhai.
- Griots still carry on oral traditions.
- West African music has influenced other types of music
- Families and castes are still important.
- Markets and farming are key parts of the economy.
- Islam continues and traditional religions are still a major influence
- West African culture spread to Europe, the Americas, and around the world.
- Beginning in the 1500s, many West Africans were taken to the Americas as slaves.