

← Kente cloth and hand-carved furniture are traditional arts in West African culture.

## The Cultural Legacy of West Africa

### 15.1 Introduction

In the last chapter, you learned about the impact of Islam on West Africa. Now you will explore West Africa's rich cultural legacy.

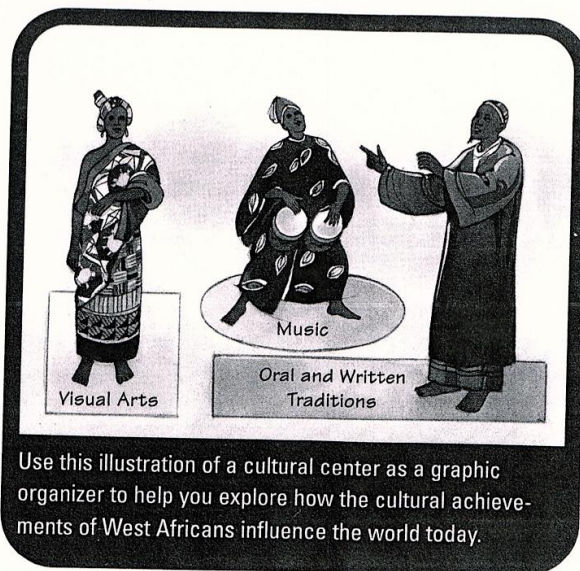
West African culture is quite diverse. Many groups of people, each with their own language and ways of life, have lived in West Africa. From poems and stories to music and visual arts, their cultural achievements have left a lasting mark on the world.

One important part of West African culture is its **oral traditions**. Think for a moment of the oral traditions in your own culture. When you were younger, did you learn nursery rhymes from your family or friends? How about sayings such as "A penny saved is a penny earned"? Did you hear stories about your grandparents or more distant ancestors? You can probably think of many things that were passed down orally from one generation to the next.

Imagine now that your community depends on you to remember its oral traditions so they will never be forgotten. You memorize stories, sayings, and the history of your city or town. You know who the first people were to live there. You know how the community grew, and even which teams have won sports championships. On special occasions, you share your knowledge through stories and songs. You are a living library of your community's history and traditions.

In parts of West Africa, there are people who have this task. They are talented poet-musicians called *griots*. For many centuries, griots have helped to preserve West Africa's history and cultural legacy.

In this chapter, you'll learn about the role of both oral traditions and **written traditions** in West Africa. You'll also explore West African **music** and **visual arts**. Along the way, you'll see how the cultural achievements of West Africans continue to influence our world today.





Modern-day court musicians play traditional instruments in honor of the sultan of Cameroon.

**genealogy** an account of the line of ancestry within a family

## 15.2 West African Oral and Written Traditions

For centuries, the beliefs, values, and knowledge of West Africans were passed down orally from one generation to the next. In medieval times, written traditions also became important. In this section, we'll look at the oral and written traditions of West Africa.

**Griots: Record Keepers of the People** A griot is a verbal artist of the Mande people. These poet-musicians tell stories, sing songs of praise, and recite poems, often while playing a drum or stringed instrument. They perform music, dance, and drama. But griots are much more than skilled entertainers. They also educate their audiences with historical accounts and **genealogies**, or histories of people's ancestry. In many ways, they are the record keepers of their people.

Long before the Mande had written histories, griots kept the memory of the past alive. Every village had its own griot. The griot memorized all the important events that occurred there. Griots could recite everything from births, deaths, and marriages to battles, hunts, and the coronations of kings. Some griots could tell the ancestry of every villager going back centuries. Griots were known to speak for hours, and sometimes even days.

This rich oral tradition passed from griot to griot. Rulers relied on griots as their trusted advisors. They used the griots' knowledge of history to shed light on their current problems.

The most cherished of griot history is the story of Sundjata Keita. Sundjata was the king who founded Mali's empire in the 13th century. The griot stories about him go back to his own day. Sundjata is still a hero to many people in West Africa.

The art of the griots remains alive today. Some of the most famous stars in West African popular music are griots. These artists have changed traditional oral works into modern music. Poets and storytellers make recordings and appear on radio broadcasts performing both old and new works.

**Folktales** West Africa's oral tradition includes hundreds of **folktales**. West Africans used folktales to pass along their history and to teach young people morals and values.

Many traditional folktales were brought to the Americas by West Africans who were sold into slavery beginning in the 1500s. The tales were spread orally among Africans and their descendants. They became a part of the culture of North and South America and the West Indies.

One example comes from a type of folktale known as a "trickster" tale. These stories tell of a clever animal or human who outsmarts others. Trickster tales are popular in many cultures. In West Africa, one famous trickster was the hare. West Africans brought tales of the hare to America, where he became known as Brer Rabbit. In the 19th century, a writer named Joel Chandler Harris retold a number of African American stories about Brer Rabbit. These stories have since been woven into American culture.

**Proverbs** West African oral tradition includes proverbs, or popular sayings. West African proverbs use images from everyday life to express ideas or give advice. They tell us a great deal about the wisdom and values of West Africans.

One proverb shows the value that Africans placed on stories. The proverb states, "A good story is like a garden carried in the pocket." Another shows the importance of oral tradition. "Every time an old man dies," the proverb says, "it is as if a library has burnt down." Enslaved West Africans brought proverbs like these to the Americas.

**Written Tradition** After Islam spread to West Africa, written tradition became more important. As you learned in Chapter 14, Muslims published many works in Arabic. A number of these writings were preserved in mosques and Qur'anic schools. Today they are a key source of information about West African history, legends, and culture.

Modern writers in West Africa are adding to the literary legacy of the region. Some of them have turned ancient oral traditions into novels and other works.

**folktale** a story that is usually passed down orally and becomes part of a community's tradition

Griots, or storytellers, continue the oral traditions of the West African culture. They also represent the importance of elders in West African society.

