

### 15.1 Introduction

Medieval cultures in West Africa were rich and varied. In this chapter, you will explore West Africa's rich cultural legacy.

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

Much of West African culture has been passed down through 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 ideas that were passed down orally from one generation to the next.



*West African arts, such as this sculpture, have often influenced modern artists.*

Suppose 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 about the first people who lived there. You know how the community grew, and 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.

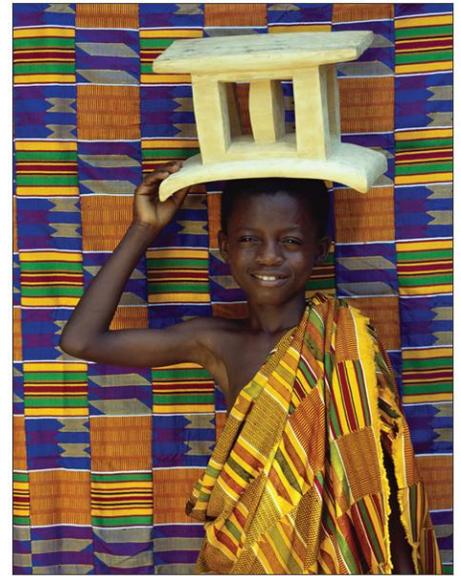
In parts of West Africa, there are people whose job it is to preserve oral traditions and history in this way. They are talented poet-musicians. For many centuries, they have helped to preserve West Africa's history and cultural legacy.

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

### 15.2 West African Oral and Written Traditions

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

**Griots: Record Keepers of the People** A **griot** (GREE-oh) is a **verbal** artist of the Mande people. Griots are poet-musicians who 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 and historians of their people.



*Kente cloth and hand-carved furniture are traditional arts in West Africa.*

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Long before the Mande had written histories, griots preserved the memory of the past. 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 successions of kings. Some griots could tell the ancestry of every villager, going back centuries. Griots were known to speak for hours and, sometimes, even for 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 information in griot history is the story of Sundjata Keita (soon-JAHT-ah KAY-tah). Sundjata was the king who founded Mali's empire in the 13th century. Griot stories were told about him even in his own lifetime. Sundjata remains a hero to many West Africans, who still tell tales about him.

The art of the griots remains alive today. Some of the most famous artists in West African popular music are griots. These artists have changed traditional oral works into modern songs. 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 old stories called **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 the enslaved Africans and their descendants. The folktales became part of the culture of North and South America and the West Indies.

One example is 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. Proverbs are found in all cultures. 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 how Africans valued their 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.



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

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**Written Tradition** After Islam spread to West Africa, written tradition became more important. 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.

### 15.3 West African Music

Music has always been an important part of life in West Africa. Music serves many functions in West African society. It **communicates** ideas, values, and feelings. It celebrates historic events and important occasions in people's lives. For instance, there are songs for weddings, funerals, and ceremonies honoring ancestors. Among the Yoruba of present-day Nigeria, mothers of twins have their own special songs. In Ghana, there are songs for celebrating the loss of a child's first tooth.

The musical traditions of West Africa continue to influence both African and world culture. Let's look at some key aspects of West African music.

**Call and Response** A common style of music in West Africa is known as **call and response**. In call-and-response singing, a leader plays or sings a short phrase, known as a call. Then a group of people, the chorus, answer by playing or singing a short phrase, the response. The leader and chorus repeat this pattern over and over as they perform the song.

Enslaved Africans brought call-and-response songs to the Americas. Slaves used the songs to ease the burden of hard work, celebrate social occasions, and express outrage at their situation. This African tradition has influenced many American musical styles, including gospel, jazz, blues, rock and roll, and rap.

**Musical Instruments** Traditional musical instruments in West Africa include three that have been used by griots for centuries. They are called the *balafon* (BAH-la-fon), the *ngoni* (en-GOH-nee), and the *kora* (KOR-ah).

The balafon probably was the original griot instrument. Like a xylophone or marimba, a balafon is made of wooden bars laid across a frame. The musician strikes the bars with a mallet, or hammer, to make melodies. The balafon is used today in popular music in modern Guinea.

The ngoni is a small stringed instrument. It is made of hollowed-out wood carved in a shape similar to a canoe. The instrument's strings are made of thin fishing line. The ngoni is the most popular traditional stringed instrument in Mali today.

The kora is a harplike instrument with 21 strings. The body of the kora is made of a gourd that has been cut in half and covered with cow-hide. The kora's strings, like those of the ngoni, are made of fishing line.



*The balafon is a traditional musical instrument of West Africa made of wooden bars attached to a horizontal frame. The bars are struck with a hammer, much like a xylophone is.*

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People around the world have been introduced to kora music by West African musicians. Some modern musicians in West Africa combine the sounds of the kora with electronic music.



*Drumming is an important element of West African music. Drums of different sizes and shapes often have bells and rattles attached to them.*

**Drumming** Drums play an important role in West African culture. Drummers perform at parties, religious meetings, and ceremonies, such as weddings and funerals.

West African drums are made of hollowed-out logs or pieces of wood. The drums are covered with animal skins.

Drummers in West Africa play in ensembles, or groups. The ensembles include different types and sizes of drums, along with bells and rattles. Drumming, singing, and dancing take place together in a circle. Sometimes, drum ensembles use a call-and-response style.

West African slaves brought their drumming traditions to the Americas. Over time, West African drum music **evolved** into new styles, particularly in Cuba. West African drum music and Afro-Cuban drumming are now popular elements of world music.

**Dance** In West Africa, dance is as much a part of life as singing and drumming are. Traditional West African dances are still performed in Africa and around the world.

West Africans perform dances for all kinds of occasions. They dance during rituals and during ceremonies that mark important events in people's lives. Dances can celebrate a success at work or help educate children. West Africans also perform dances to seek the help of spirits and to connect with dead ancestors.

Dance movements often reflect the conditions people live in. Among forest-dwelling people, for example, dancers move as if they are finding their way through forest undergrowth.

Some dancers wear elaborate masks that represent the spirits of traditional West African religion. For example, to ask the spirits for good hunting for their community, dancers may wear masks of wild animals and imitate their movements.

### 15.4 West African Visual Arts

West African culture includes many forms of visual art. The traditional art of West Africa served a number of functions. Some art objects, such as fabrics and baskets, satisfied everyday needs. Others, such as masks and sculptures, were used in rituals and ceremonies, or to honor ancestors, spirits, or royalty.

**Sculpture** West Africans of ancient and medieval times used religious sculptures to call upon the spirits to help them in every phase of life. They also used sculptures to honor their leaders.

A wealth of West African sculpture has been discovered in Nigeria. The oldest examples come from the Nok culture (500 B.C.E. to 200 C.E.). The Nok made **terra-cotta** sculptures of human figures. The sculptures tended to have

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long, narrow heads, unusual hair styles, and dramatic expressions. Scholars believe that they represented ancestors or mythical figures.

The Yoruba people of Ife (EE-fay), Nigeria, also made sculptures of terra-cotta. Later, they used bronze and copper. By the 11th century C.E., they were making brass sculptures of royalty. Later, they taught their neighbors in Benin (founded in 1100 C.E.) how to make brass sculptures. Benin artists produced sculptures in honor of the royal court. By the 16th century, they were making elaborate plaques that showed the king's power and authority.

**Masks** Wooden masks have been a part of West African life for centuries. Masks were worn during ceremonies, in performances, and in sacred rites. Like sculptures, they were used to bring the spirits of gods and ancestors into the present.

West African masks are detailed and expressive. They have inspired a number of artists around the world. Among these artists is Pablo Picasso, a world-famous Spanish painter of the 20th century.

**Textiles** West Africans have a long tradition of making textiles that are both beautiful and symbolic. Three well-known types of West African textiles are stamped fabrics, story fabrics, and a particularly colorful kind called **kente** (KEN-tay) cloth.

West Africans make stamped fabric by drawing a grid on a piece of cloth, using a thick dye. They use stamps to fill in the squares with patterns. The stamps represent proverbs, historical figures, objects, plants, or animals.

Story fabrics depict events. For example, they might show kings performing great feats, like hunting lions. Some West Africans make story fabrics using a technique called **appliqué**. In appliqué, smaller pieces of fabric are attached to a larger, background piece to make designs or pictures.

Kente cloth is a famous West African textile. To make kente, people sew together narrow strips of silk or other fabrics. The designs of kente cloth have symbolic meanings that reflect the makers' life or family history, values and beliefs, or political or social circumstances.

The influence of West African textiles can be seen in quilts made by African American slaves. Today, commercially made kente cloth is worn around the world.

**Everyday Objects** West African visual arts also include the design and decoration of everyday objects. Skilled artists turn practical objects into things of beauty. Some examples are ceramic storage containers, utensils, furniture, and baskets.

In many parts of West Africa, baskets are made by the coil method. The basket maker winds fibers into coils and then uses strips of fiber to bind the coils together. Some of these baskets are so tightly constructed that they can hold water.

Enslaved West Africans brought their basket-making tradition to America and taught it to their descendants. This art is still practiced in the American South.

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### SUMMARY

**In this chapter, you explored the cultural legacy of West Africa. You learned about written and oral traditions, music, and visual arts. The cultural achievements of West Africans are still influential today.**

**Oral and Written Traditions** Storytellers called griots helped to preserve the history and culture of West Africa. Folktales and proverbs are also part of West Africa's rich oral tradition. In medieval times, Muslim scholars added a body of Arabic writings to this heritage, which were preserved in Qur'anic schools and mosques. Modern writers incorporate many elements from West African oral traditions in their novels and other works.

**Music** Important features of West African music include call and response, traditional instruments, drumming, and dance. West African influences are still heard in world music.

**Visual Arts** Visual arts include sculptures, masks, textiles, and the design of everyday objects. West African sculpture and mask-making, particularly, influenced many modern artists, one of whom was Pablo Picasso. Kente cloth is still worn today and its influence can be seen in fashions around the world.