Africa’s Written and Oral Traditions

Most early African societies did not have a written language. Before the introduction of Arabic to West Africa, Arab travelers wrote some information down about these groups. Mostly, the Africans preserved their culture and history through a strong oral tradition.

1. What was unique about most early African societies? How did the world learn about them?

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2. How did African preserve their culture and history? Why was this a difficult challenge?

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The West African Oral Tradition

Storytellers, known as griots, told tales about people and the spirits of the natural world. These stories were often sung accompanied by music. The stories had many purposes. They entertained. They passed on the cultural values of the group to the younger generation. They also retold the history of the clan or kinship group so that it would be remembered. Griots often took part in religious rituals. In these ceremonies, they were seen as intermediaries between the dead ancestors and the people. West Africans believed that their ancestors watched over them. They turned to their ancestors for protection and for favors. Griots performed for kings and for the villagers. They often acted out parts of their stories. The audience often took part as well. Griots are still an important part of the West African oral tradition.

3. What was the role of the storyteller? How did the griots entertain their audiences?

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4. Why were the griots important in their religious ceremonies?

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5. What beliefs did West Africans have about their dead ancestors?

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"I am a griot . . . master in the art of eloquence [skillful talking] . . . We are vessels of speech, we are the repositories [storehouses] which harbor secrets many centuries old . . . Without us the names of kings would vanish . . . We are the memory of mankind; by the spoken word we bring to life the deeds . . . of kings for younger generations . . . For the world is old, but the future springs from the past."
—Djeli Mamoudou Kouyate, from Sundiata, an Epic of Old Mali

6. According to the quotation above why were griots significant in West African society?

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7. Critical Thinking: In what ways might written and oral versions of the same story be different?

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