



◀ 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.

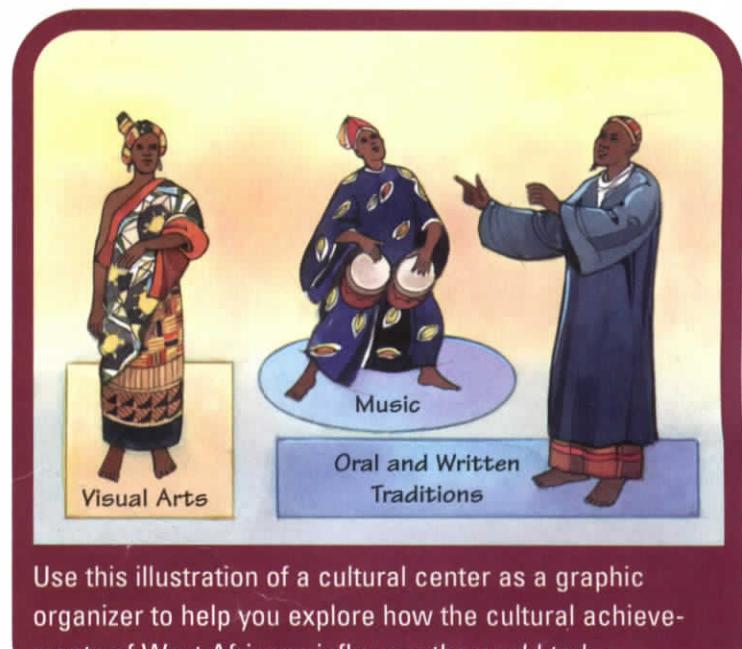
West African culture is quite diverse. Many groups of people, each with their own language and ways of life, have lived in West Africa. From poems and stories to music and visual arts, their cultural achievements have left a lasting mark on the world.

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.



Use this illustration of a cultural center as a graphic organizer to help you explore how the cultural achievements of West Africans influence the world today.



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

## 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.

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

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.

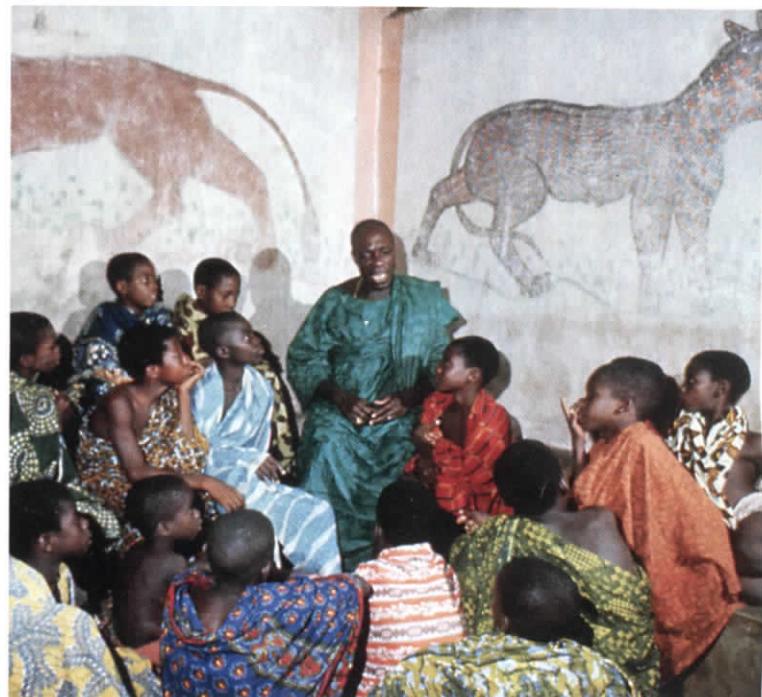
One proverb shows the value that Africans placed on stories. The proverb states, "A good story is like a garden carried in the pocket." Another shows the importance of oral tradition. "Every time an old man dies," the proverb says, "it is as if a library has burnt down." Enslaved West Africans brought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



## 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 song style in which a singer or musician leads with a call and a group responds

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

**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 the *balafon*, the *ngoni*, and the *kora*.

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 ngoro is a small stringed instrument. It is made of a hollowed-out piece of wood carved in the shape of a canoe. The strings are made of thin fishing line. The ngoro 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 skin. The kora's strings,



like those of the ngoni, are made of fishing line.

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** Drums play an important role in West African culture. Drummers perform during 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 circular formation. 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 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 abundance for their community, dancers may wear masks of wild animals and imitate their movements.



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.

## 15.4 West African Visual Arts

The Yoruba people of Ife, Nigeria, made brass sculptures of their royalty. Notice the crown on this brass head.

West African culture includes many forms of visual art. The traditional art of West Africa served a number of functions. Some art objects, like fabrics and baskets, satisfied everyday needs. Others, like 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 long, narrow heads, unusual hair styles, and dramatic expressions. Scholars believe that they represented ancestors or mythical figures.

The Yoruba people of Ife, 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 kente cloth.

**terra-cotta** a baked clay often used to make pottery and sculptures

West Africans make stamped fabric by drawing a grid of squares 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 **appliquéd**. In appliquéd, smaller pieces of fabric are attached to a larger, background piece to make designs or pictures.

The most famous West African textile is kente cloth. To make kente, people sew together narrow strips of silk or simple fabrics. The colors and designs of kente have symbolic meanings that reflect the makers' 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 made so tightly 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.

## 15.5 Chapter 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.

Griots helped to preserve the history and culture of West Africa. Folktales and proverbs are also part of West Africa's oral tradition. In medieval times, Muslim scholars added a body of written tradition to this rich heritage.

Important elements of West African music include call and response, traditional instruments, drumming, and dance. Visual arts include sculptures, masks, textiles, and the design of everyday objects. Music and art played vital roles in West African life.

This chapter concludes your study of medieval West Africa. In the next unit, you will learn about imperial China.

**appliquéd** a technique in which shaped pieces of fabric are attached to a background fabric to form a design or picture



This brass sculpture was made by the Yoruba people of Ife.

## West Africa Timeline

**500 B.C.E.**

Nok villagers use iron tools.



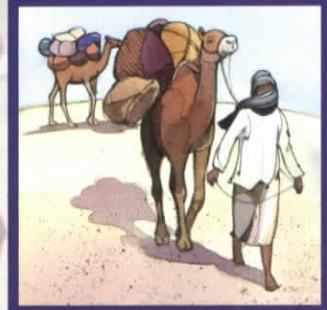
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**700 – 750 C.E.**

Traders from North Africa introduce Islam to West Africa.

**1312 C.E.**

The rule of Mansa Musa in Mali begins.



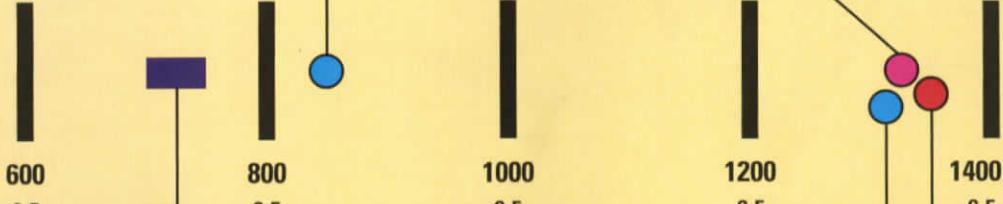
**850 C.E.**

Ghana becomes a rich empire.



**1325 C.E.**

Al-Saheli builds a new mosque at Timbuktu.



**1350 C.E.**

Timbuktu has become a center for the study of Arabic language and literature.

