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 instruments. They perform music, dance, and drama. But griots are much more than skilled entertainers. They also educate their audiences with historical accounts and genealogies, some 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, huntress, 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 they trusted advisors. They used the griots’ knowledge of history to shed light on their current problems.

The most cherished of griot history of 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, Proverbs and Written Traditions

West African 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. Tricksters tales are popular in many cultures. In West Africa, one famous trickster was a hare. West Africans brought tales of the hare to America, where he became known as Brer Rabbit. In the 19th centuries, 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.

West African oral traditions 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 wisdom and values of West Africans.

One proverbs shows the value that Africans placed stories. The proverb states, “A good story like as garden carried in the pocket.” Another shows the importance of oral tradition. “Everytime 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.

After Islam spread to West Africa, written tradition became more important. Muslims published many words in Arabic. 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.
**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 celebrations the loss of a child’s first tooth.

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

**Call and Responses**

A common style of music in West Africa is known as *call and response*. In call-and-response signings, 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 the 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 ngoni 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 ngoni is the most popular traditional stringed instrument in Mali today. The kora is a harp like 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.
Dance and Drumming

In West Africa, dance is as much a part of life as singing and drumming are. Traditional West African dances are still performed on 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.

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.

Overtime, 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.
Sculpture and Masks

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 B.C.E.). The Nok made a terra-cotta sculptures of human figures. The sculptures tended to have long, narrow heads, unusual hairstyles, 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 in honor of the royal court. By the 16th century, they were making elaborate plaques that showed the king’s power and authority.

Wooden masks have been 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 and Everyday Objects

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.

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 applique. In applique, a 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.

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 America South.