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**A Great Oral Tradition**

The European colonial powers called Africa “the Dark Continent” when they began their explorations. They saw it as a vast and dangerous place filled with savage people, but Africa has been home to many advanced, exotic civilizations. Many have been buried beneath the sands of time, but we know of others, and archaeologists continue to uncover more clues about ancient African civilizations.

West Africa has a great oral tradition. A griot is a learned storyteller, entertainer, and historian. Often a griot will memorize the genealogy, or family history, of everyone in a village going back centuries. American writer Alex Haley met a griot in 1966 that had memorized the entire story of the village of Juffure to a date two centuries in the past when his ancestor was enslaved.

“The old griot had talked for nearly two hours up to then … ‘the oldest of these four sons, Kunta, went away from his village and he was never seen again’ … I sat as if I were carved of stone. My blood seemed to have congealed. This man whose lifetime had been in this back-country African village had no way in the world to know that he had just echoed what I had heard all through my boyhood years of my grandma’s front porch in Henning, Tennessee.”

-- Alex Haley, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976)

A great deal of what we know about West Africa comes from the griots, but archaeologists are often surprised by new finds. In the last fifteen years, scholars have concluded that civilization had developed in West Africa as much as one thousand years earlier than expected. We now know that Africa had an Iron Age culture with cities and trade routes about 250 years before the common era.

*Reflect upon what you have just read and answer each of the following questions with one paragraph (5-8 sentences) per question on a separate sheet of paper.*

1. What is the role of traditions in your life?
2. What traditions of other cultures have you observed, and what do you think of these traditions?
3. Do you think it is possible to live a “traditional” lifestyle in modern society? Why or why not?
4. What difficulty might a person who has lived a life bound by cultural traditions find if he or she relocated to a place in which those traditions were not as meaningful or were nonexistent?