

PART IV THE WESTERN AFRICAN CULTURAL ROOT

Chapter 12 West African Languages and Literature: The Oral Tradition and Its Legacy

I. Written Literature in Africa

1. Only a few African languages were written before the nineteenth or twentieth century.
2. The hieroglyphic script of ancient Egypt appears to have no written descendant except possibly the language of the Meriotic people, whose writings have never been deciphered.
3. Some African literature, including black African, was and is written in Arabic.
4. Understanding the oral literature is vital to understanding African cultures.

II. Oral Literature

1. Scholarly studies over the last fifty years have shown that many of the great works of the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian tradition were in fact oral compositions that were written down generations later.
2. The reliance on an oral tradition necessitates a mentality very different from that of a society with written documents.
3. The empire of Benin ruled a wide area without a written language.
4. Many African states preserved their histories through the griot, an official poet-historian whose job is to mentally preserve and transmit the history of the people.

A. Mande and the Epic of *Sundiata*

1. The Mali empire was mostly made up of a people from western Sudan known as the Mande, one of the first African groups to develop agriculture.
2. Sundiata was the leader of a group of Mande that rebelled against the declining Ghana Empire.
3. Under Sundiata's leadership, Mali expanded to become the largest of the medieval African empires.
4. An oral epic of Sundiata's exploits informs the cultural identity of the Mande people to the present day.
5. The wealth and high culture of Mali became known to the world when the Mali king Mansa Musa made a pilgrimage to Mecca.
6. Scholars from the Middle East and North Africa came to Mali and formed a great center of learning in Timbuktu.

B. Hausa

1. The Hausa are principally from Northern Nigeria but there are substantial Hausa speaking communities in northern Ghana and in every major city in West Africa.
2. The Hausa have been engaged in long-distance trading for centuries.
3. The Hausa initially lived in walled cities surrounded by rural communities which housed their subjects.
4. The Hausa were displaced by another African people, the Fulani, as the ruling people of these communities.
5. During the nineteenth century, the Fulani united and centralized the governing of these former Hausa city-states into what came to be known as the Fulani Empire.

C. Yoruba

1. The Yoruba are an agricultural and trading people from southwestern Nigeria and the republic of Benin.
2. During the time of contact between Africa and Europe, the Yoruba had mostly been subjects of other African states.
3. The Yoruba, however, excelled in the arts—sculpture, music, and dance—and their aesthetic is probably the best known internationally of any African culture.

III. African Myths and Religions: Some Generalizations

1. As with other cultures, African myths are allied with the culture's religious beliefs and values.
2. Unlike legends and epics, myths are not based on historical events, but attempt to explain or clarify the primal mysteries of man's creation and place in the cosmos.

IV. Tales (Hausa)

1. Another type of oral literature alongside myths is tales, which are more concerned with the social world of human beings.
2. All African oral literature includes a large body of tales of several distinct types.
3. One of two main types of tales by the Hausa is *Tatisunyoyi*, entertaining stories about animals and people usually told by older women to young children.
4. The other type of Hausa tale, *labarai*, is told by old men to each other and to young male adults; these tales are not literal but do include factual occurrences and represent the Hausa's view of their own past.

I. Riddles

1. Frequently uttered as a statement rather than a question, the essence of the idea and metaphors instruct the young in the wisdom and culture of the elders.
2. The riddles include allusions to the natural world and, frequently, explicit sexual references.
3. The cleverness and humor of stock phrases make riddles entertaining as well as educational.

VI. Proverbs

1. Proverbs have a special place in oral literature; they are most often used in conversation and more formally in litigating community disputes.
2. Philosophical observations and moral teachings are illuminated in these proverbs.

IV. Poetry

1. The most prolific and complex of the oral literature genres, poetry marks important transitions in the lives of people. Birth, death, love, and initiation rites are a few examples.
2. Poetry is often concerned with humanity's relationship to God and the spirits.
3. The praise poem is the most widespread genre, extolling kings, and other prominent personalities as well as the gods.
4. Poetry is sung and the merit of a poem is often judged by the successful integration of words, music, and dance.
5. The griot may be a composer, musician, and poet, as well as a historian.

Chapter 13 Visual and Musical Arts of West Africa

1. Each African society has its own artistic and musical styles.
2. Because of the great impact African art and music have had on Western styles, it does not seem as strange and exotic as it did a hundred years ago.
3. African artistic forms do have qualities that make them significantly different from their Western counterparts.
4. Despite the great diversity within African arts, they do share some common elements.

I. Visual Arts

A. Art and Communal Life

1. African art and Western art are classified differently.
2. All African art is in some sense utilitarian.

B. Problems of Dating African Art

1. African society does not concern itself with the identity of the individual artist or with when a work is created.
2. The social function of a work is preeminent.
3. Once a work has outlived its usefulness, it is usually discarded.

C. Meaning in African Art

1. The museum or art gallery does not exist in traditional Africa.
2. African art typically has multiple layers of meaning.
3. African art is sometimes classified by region (style area).
4. Another classification system, "basic style," classifies art by the way the subject matter, the human form for example, is depicted.

D. Masks and Headpieces

1. Masks are usually worn by men for social or religious rituals.
2. These rituals usually involve associations that are sometimes called "secret societies."
3. These rituals are especially important within ethnic groups that do not have strong centralized leadership.
4. The masks and headpieces often have animal themes and exaggerate what are considered the most important physical traits of the creature depicted.
5. White-faced masks of the northern Ibo may signify ancestor spirits or a young maiden.
6. The masks display principles of abstraction that would intrigue and inspire modern twentieth century artists.

E. Figurines

1. Picasso used a Bakota reliquary figure for a series of studies.
2. These figures were made to drive away evil from the remains of the dead.
3. Equestrian figures are a symbol of power in many African cultures and are a popular subject for traditional artists.
4. The snake motif was popular in western Sudan where it is associated with the creation myth and with the founding of the Soninke Empire of Ghana.
5. The Bakongo *nkisi nkondi* figures from Central and West Africa include cavities in the head or stomach for magical substances.

F. Divination Trays

1. The Yoruba tray is used in the process of divination.
2. A priest uses the tray on behalf of a petitioner.
3. Palm nut kernels are tossed in the air and their number and arrangement are used to determine the petitioner's fate.

G. Stools

1. The utilitarian principle of African art objects is exemplified in Ashanti carved stools.
2. Special stools are carved for important occasions in a person's life.
3. There are also special ceremonials for official and state occasions.

H. Kente Cloth

1. Kente cloth is another example of artist accomplishment and political authority manifest in a utilitarian object.
2. Kente is a large cloth draped for ceremonial dress with distinctive geometric patterns inlaid with silk.
3. The patterns and color of Kente cloth often have special meanings.

II. African Music

1. Even after excluding all of the music of nonnative origin, there remains a tremendous variety and complexity of sound emanating from this gigantic continent.
2. The music of West Africa represents an indigenous form that has had international significance.

A. Characteristics of West African Music: Similarities with Jazz

1. West Africans brought to the New World as slaves as well as their descendants strongly influenced the development of jazz.
2. Black slaves were able to maintain their own musical heritage while being influenced by the surrounding communities.
3. Like West African music, jazz is a shared creative experience.

B. Elements of African Music

1. African music does not concern itself with harmony but is compatible with European harmonies.
2. The leading elements of African music are melody, rhythm, and timbre.
3. Verbal elements are frequently intertwined with the music.
4. At times, West African music can be more explicitly communicative than European music through variations in rhythm and pitch.

C. Rhythm

1. Rhythm and percussion are preeminent in African music.
2. A rhythm section is typically included in every instrumental ensemble.
3. West African music is closely associated with jazz and the emphasis on rhythm reflects that connection.

D. Vocal Music: Call and Response

1. Great stress is placed on vocal music in addition to rhythm and percussion.
2. Like American blues, a wide variety of themes are represented in the vocals, such as war, hunting, play, work, religion, and social commentary.
3. The call and response mode of the vocals is similar to that of American jazz and blues instrumentals.

E. Music from the Festival of the *Tohossou*

1. The festival of the *Tohossou* (Princes of Dahomey) includes ceremonies and rituals, the reasons for which are not entirely known.
2. The festival includes songs, dances, and ritual acts dealing with the enemy, fallen comrades, and sacred deities.
3. Careful listening to this festival music as well as other West African music reveals a relationship to American jazz.

III. African Arts in Festival: The Efe/Gelede of the Western Yoruba

1. Festivals have a long tradition in Western culture, from the festival of Dionysus in ancient Greece to the Mardi Gras festival in New Orleans today.
2. The electronic mass media and individualism have eroded the festival tradition in the West.
3. In traditional African societies and in countries where African influence is strong, festivals are still an important means of aesthetic expression.

A. Significance of the Festival

1. The Efe/Gelede festival is observed by many of the Yoruba in western Nigeria and the republic of Benin.
2. The festival takes place before the beginning of the Spring rains.
3. The Yoruba society is patriarchal; this festival honors women, especially mothers.
4. The first day of the festival is devoted primarily to songs, the second and last to costumes and dancing.

B. First Day: Efe

1. The Efe ceremony takes place in the market area and lasts nearly until dawn.
2. A Yoruba man portrays Oro Efe, the principal performer of the ceremony.

C. Efe Poetry

1. The poetry recited by Oro Efe is based on the belief that *aes*—power authority, and potential energy—can be embodied in words.
2. The types of poetry recited include invocation, social commentary, history, and eulogies.

D. Invocation

1. The invocation asks the deities to bless the population as a whole.
2. The invocation includes a plea for a bountiful harvest and protection from disease.
3. The singer expresses his respect for the mother and acknowledges her power.

E. Social Comment

1. The Oro Efe praises, cajoles, and condemns events that have occurred in the community.
2. The tone is ribald and the style satirical.
3. Individuals may be targets of the Oro Efe's ridicule.

F. The Gelede Celebration

1. The Gelede, performed on the second day, attempts to please and honor the mothers.
2. The main performers are masqueraders, all men, but some portraying females.
3. The costumes exaggerate the sex characteristics of the male or female.

4. The elaborate art of the Gelede masks touch on all aspects of Yoruba life.

G. Dance

1. The visual imagery of the masks is enhanced by that of the dance performed by those who wear them.
2. The dance dramatizes some of the tension between males and females within the Yoruba society.
3. The festival is an interplay of many facets of African aesthetic expression that evokes an essentially African mode of expression – the integration and wholeness of life.