

Name: _____
Date: _____

A Great Oral Tradition

The European colonial powers called Africa “the Dark Continent” when they began their explorations. They saw Africa as a vast and dangerous place filled with savage people, but Africa has been home to many advanced, exotic civilizations. Many of them have been buried beneath the sands of time, 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 who had memorized the entire story of the village of Juffure to a date two centuries in the past when Haley’s 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 on my grandma’s front porch in Henning, Tennessee.”

--Alex Haley, Roots: The Saga of an American Family

A great deal of what we know about West Africa comes from the griots, but archaeologists are often surprised by new finds. Scholars have concluded that civilization developed in West Africa as much as one thousand years earlier than they once believed. We now know that Africa had an Iron Age culture with cities and trade routes about 250 years before the Common Era.



Fill in the Blanks

Africa was once known as “the D_____ Continent” because the European c_n_i_e_t_l powers saw Africa as a v_____ and d_n_e_o_s place filled with s_v_g_e people. The E_r_p_a_s did not know of A_____’s many a_v_n_ed civilizations.

A great deal of what we know about African history comes from the stories of the g_i_ts. Griots will often m_m_r_ze the f_m_ly histories of a village going back *h_n_r_ds of years. American writer Alex H_l_y met a g_____ that knew the same family stories he learned while growing up in T_n_e_s_e.

What we know about African *h_s_o_y evolves as time passes. Recently we learned that c_v_l_z_t_on developed in West Africa nearly a *m_l_e_i_m earlier than previous estimates. We now know that A_____ had an I_____ Age culture with c_____ and t_____ routes about _____ BCE.

Answer in Complete Sentences

*1. The expression “buried beneath the sands of time” in the first paragraph is a metaphor. Explain “sands of time” in your own words.

2. What have archaeologists recently concluded about African civilization?
