The Oral Tradition: Africa's Living Library

AiCE Africanism & Pan-African Studies — The griot, proverbs, and living knowledge

The Griot: Keeper of Memory

Before the written word, before the printing press, before the internet — there was the griot. The griot (in French; jeli in Mande languages, gewel in Wolof) is one of the most important and most misunderstood figures in African cultural life. A griot is a hereditary keeper of oral history, a musician, a poet, a praise-singer, a genealogist, and a social commentator — all at once. In West African societies from Senegal to Nigeria, the griot tradition has sustained the memory of peoples, the genealogies of royal families, the histories of kingdoms, and the ethical traditions of communities across generations without a single written word.

The most famous griot performance in African oral literature is the Epic of Sundiata — the account of the founding of the Mali Empire by Sundiata Keita in the thirteenth century. The epic has been performed continuously by griots for approximately eight hundred years. It tells the story of Sundiata's miraculous rise from a disabled child, mocked by his father's other wives, to become the warrior-king who united the Mande peoples and defeated the Sosso king Sumanguru Kante. It is an epic of the highest literary order — comparable to Homer's Iliad or the Indian Mahabharata — and it has survived for eight centuries not in a library but in the mouths and memories of living people.

The griot tradition is not merely historical. It is current. Contemporary griots accompany politicians at rallies, celebrate births and marriages, mediate conflicts, and preserve the social memory of their communities. The rapper — the most globally influential musical form of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries — has deep structural parallels to the griot: both use rhythmic speech over percussion to tell stories, comment on social conditions, praise and criticise, and maintain communal memory. When scholars trace the genealogy of hip-hop from West African griots through the African-American spoken word tradition to the global phenomenon of rap, they are not making a metaphorical connection. They are describing a genuine cultural continuity across the Atlantic diaspora.

Proverbs, Stories, and the Philosophy of Oral Knowledge

African oral traditions extend far beyond the epic poem. Every African society has a rich tradition of proverbs — compressed philosophical statements that encode generations of accumulated wisdom about human nature, social ethics, governance, and the natural world. The Yoruba proverb 'Bi a ba n lọ si ogun, a maa n ranti ile' ('When we go to war, we remember home') encodes an entire ethical framework about the relationship between courage and rootedness. The Akan proverb 'Onipa na ohia onipa' ('A person needs other people') expresses Ubuntu philosophy in six words. The Zulu 'Umuntu akalahlwa' ('A person is not to be abandoned') articulates a theory of communal responsibility that entire books of Western philosophy have tried to express.

African folktales — the Anansi spider stories of West Africa that travelled with enslaved Africans to the Caribbean and North America, the tales of the tortoise and the hare that appear across the continent in different forms, the stories of Mwindo the hero in Central Africa — encode moral philosophy, social critique, and practical wisdom in narrative forms accessible to every age. These are not children's stories in the trivial sense. They are the primary vehicles through which African ethical knowledge was transmitted across generations before — and alongside — the written word.

The denigration of oral knowledge systems as 'primitive' compared to written ones is one of the most persistent legacies of colonial intellectual hierarchy. The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) represents a global acknowledgment that oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, and knowledge systems about nature and the universe are cultural heritage of equal value to monuments and manuscripts. Africa's oral traditions are not preliterary remnants waiting to be superseded. They are sophisticated knowledge systems with their own epistemologies, their own standards of evidence, and their own mechanisms of transmission and verification — that deserve study and preservation as urgently as any written archive.

> *“A person is not to be abandoned.”*
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> **— Zulu proverb — Umuntu akalahlwa**

Key Takeaways

The griot tradition sustained African history, genealogy, and ethics across centuries without writing, and lives on today in forms from ceremonial praise-singing to the direct musical lineage connecting it to modern rap. African proverbs and folktales are not primitive precursors to written knowledge but sophisticated, self-contained philosophical systems, formally recognised by UNESCO as cultural heritage equal to any written archive. The next lesson turns to the written literary tradition that grew alongside, and eventually beside, this oral one.