Section 4

Society and Culture

Key Ideas

- Society in West Africa was based on kinship and caste.
- African religions varied from place to place, but shared certain features.
- Oral tradition played a key role in preserving African history and culture.

Key Terms • caste • kinship • lineage • ethnic group • oral tradition • proverb • polyrhythmic drumming

Visual Glossary

Reading Skill Sequence Take notes using the graphic organizer in your journal.

Ancient West African village economies were based on producing food, a tradition that still exists in parts of Africa. Here a woman carries millet in Mali. ▼

West African empires of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai had organized societies. There were large empires, but also cities, towns, and villages. Throughout the empires, societies had complex, family-based relationships. "Kings may come and go," observed a popular saying from Mali, "but the family endures."

Society in West African Empires

Little is known about how a person spent time in past civilizations. Throughout the West African empires, most positions of leadership were reserved for men. Men also took part in warfare and Islamic learning. In later African societies, women farmed and took care of the family. Early West African society was organized by a ranking of social classes. In West Africa a person's social class, or **caste**, determined that individual's place in the social structure. A person's caste was established by the family he or she was born into.

Social Structure The emperor ruled each empire. He had the most power and the highest status, or social rank. All who appeared before him had to bow. In Mansa Musa's kingdom, some had to sprinkle dust on themselves to acknowledge his superiority.

The nobility and kings formed the next-highest caste. Nobles helped the emperor govern the various parts of the empire and lead its armies. They paid tribute to the emperor.

Below the noble families were traders and free people of the towns. They ran the businesses and farms. Next down the rung of the

social ladder were the skilled workers. Each trade formed a different caste. For example, one caste might specialize in iron working, but another might work as musicians.

Slavery in West Africa Enslaved people made up the lowest level of society. People were enslaved for different reasons. Some people were born into slavery. Often, however, war captives, political prisoners, and kidnap victims were enslaved. Slaves performed many tasks. In the Songhai empire they served as soldiers, farm workers, and servants. In Mali, slaves served in the royal court and in the government.

Some slaves had rights in West African society. Some could marry, and families could not be separated. Slaves were also protected from harsh punishment. They could earn money and buy their freedom. One enslaved person even became an emperor of Mali.

Importance of Kinship In West Africa, family members shared a strong sense of **kinship,** or connection based on family relationships. Families were not just made up of parents and children. They included grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. These large families formed lineages. A **lineage** is a group of people descended from a common ancestor. Often the head of a lineage controlled the family members and property.

Lineages were the building blocks of West African society. Each lineage was part of a clan, or larger group of related families. In turn, West African clans formed even larger groupings. Several closely related clans lived together in a village. Many villages shared a distinct culture, language, and identity. Such a social unit is called an **ethnic group**. The West African empires included many ethnic groups, each with its own way of life.

Relationships in West African Families

Traditional family structure in Africa is complex. Villages are made up of clans. Each clan has lineages descended from a common ancestor. This structure fosters strong kinship.

City and Village Life West African families grouped together in cities, towns, and villages. In many urban areas, Arabic was the main language of trade and Islamic worship and teaching. In rural villages, families spoke languages of their ancestors and worshiped ancient gods.

Village economies were based on producing food. Villagers developed tools for farming. Farmers grew crops such as rice, yams, and beans. Herders raised animals such as cattle for meat, milk, and skins. Villagers traded in markets.

City economies were based on trade. Markets offered goods brought on the caravan routes. City dwellers could count on a varied and steady supply of food. They could also buy finely crafted goods. A leading Muslim scholar of the time described the city of Djenné.

> "Djenné is one of the great markets of the Muslim world. There one meets the salt merchants from the mines of Teghaza and merchants carrying gold from the mines of Bitou. . . . Because of this blessed city, caravans flock to [the area] from all points of the horizon."
>
> —Abd al-Rahman al-Sadi, from *African Civilizations* by Graham Connah

Thousands lived in large cities such as Djenné, Gao, and Tombouctou.

Reading Check **What is a clan?**

African Religions

A great diversity of ethnic groups populated West Africa. Although Islam and Christianity were practiced to a great extent in early Africa, some people followed traditional religions. These traditional religions shared some common characteristics. Many African religions

diversity, *n.,* variety

This is a buffalo mask and vegetable fiber costume from an African agricultural festival. ▼

This West African memorial screen is used to honor the dead.

Rituals are still an important part of African life. This shows a "praise song" at a wedding in Bamako, Mali.

had religious leaders to guide prayers, and followers prayed on a daily basis. Most traditional religions also involved religious rituals, and promoted the honoring of ancestors. Many Muslims also practiced rituals and ancestor worship.

Religious Rituals People engaged the gods on a daily basis. They attended shrines to pray, get advice, and make offerings. Religious officials helped people communicate with the gods. Rituals reinforced the social and moral values represented by the gods. Following religious teachings helped keep society functioning smoothly.

Honoring Ancestors Africans also honored their ancestors. Upon death, they believed a person became a spirit and joined the spirits of ancestors. Some families created shrines to their ancestors, so that they could remain in touch with them. Rituals and spiritual mediums helped some people seek ancestors' help with their problems, much like the gods.

Reading Check **How did West Africans treat their ancestors?**

Cultural Legacy

The Arabic language allowed for more learning and teaching within the African empires. Many Africans also had a strong **oral tradition**. That is, they used oral history, poetry, folk tales, and sayings both to teach and to entertain. The societies of West Africa were also rich with music, dance, and art. These artistic traditions helped to pass on each group's history and culture.

A Rich Oral Tradition Storytelling was a part of daily life. Families shared folk tales at home. A popular fable, still shared today, told how Ananse the Spider gave people wisdom.

> "...Ananse did indeed finish collecting the world's wisdom. He packed all this in a gourd and began to climb a tall palm. Halfway to the top he got into difficulties. He had tied on the gourd in front of him, and it hampered his climbing. At this point his son, Ntikuma ... called in a shrill young voice: 'Father, if you really had all the wisdom in the world up there with you, you would have tied that gourd on your back.' This was too much even for Ananse, who was tired from long labor. He untied the gourd in a fit of temper and threw it down. It broke and the wisdom was scattered far and wide. After a while people who had learned their lesson came and gathered in their own gourds whatever each could find; it is this that explains why a few people have much wisdom, some have a little, but many have none at all."
>
> —African folk tale

Proverbs, or wise sayings, provided a quicker way to share wisdom. For example, the proverb "Every time an old man dies, it is as if a library has burnt down" reminds us to value our elders. Such sayings were passed down through countless generations.

Professional storytellers and oral historians, the griots, served African kings and nobles in some areas of Africa. Griots memorized and told stories of famous events and people.

myWorld Activity
Oral Storytelling Telephone Game

my worldhistory.com
Primary Source

Closer Look

West African Art and Culture

African culture is rich with traditional music, dance, and storytelling. Unique instruments made from animal hides, gourds, and carved wood create a unique African sound. Masks and dancing are used for entertainment, religious purposes, and social ceremonies. Griots (pictured at left) tell stories.

It is difficult to say how long griots have existed, but clearly they have been socially important for centuries. Griots receive a fee for performing their tasks today, but it is whatever people want to give them. One griot even received an airplane from a grateful client!

Think Critically Based on the reading, how do you think the role of griots might continue to change?

Traditional dance in Mali and an African drum (inset) ▼

A leg rattle from Cameroon ▶

▲ Wood and copper mask from the Marka tribe, Mali

▲ Traditional xylophone from Gambia

Ibn Battuta described griots at a festival in Mali, where griots stood before the ruler in a "costume made of feathers." When they recited their poetry, he wrote, it was like "a kind of preaching." The griots urged their leaders to rule fairly. Their main job, however, was the transmission of their people's history and culture. "Without us the names of kings would vanish," explains a modern-day griot.

The tradition of griots and griottes (female storytellers) remains today. Their role has changed with time and circumstance. It will continue to change as griots accompany Africans wherever they live.

Music, Dance, and Art West Africans' lives were filled with dance and music. Mothers lulled babies to sleep with soothing songs. Young people learned songs that taught them adult responsibilities. They also learned certain dances when they became adults. Dance and music marked many important stages in people's lives. Dancers celebrated births and marriages and performed at funerals.

West Africans created many musical instruments. The most widely used instrument was the drum. African drummers created polyrhythmic music. **Polyrhythmic drumming** combines two or more different rhythms at the same time. Dancers performed complex movements to match the drummers' polyrhythms. Dancers' feet might follow one rhythm, while their hands or hips moved to another. Dancers performed during festivals and religious ceremonies. The dancers acted out stories of gods or ancestors.

Dancers wore masks of gods and spirits carved by skilled artists. West African artists created art for many purposes. Art was used in everyday life to express people's beliefs. For example, people honored the dead with carved wooden images of their ancestors. Emperors used art to show off their wealth and power. In the kingdom of Benin, sculptors made metal plaques and figures to record important events and people. In Mali, artists crafted clay soldiers in fine detail.

Reading Check What is a griot?

transmission, *n.,* the passing on of something, such as stories or history

Section 4 Assessment

Key Terms

1. What is a lineage?
2. Why is an oral tradition important?
3. Which musical instrument is the most used in West Africa?

Key Ideas

4. Describe the social structure of West African society.
5. How are West African traditional religions like Islam?
6. What was the purpose of griots?

Think Critically

7. **Compare and Contrast** How do you think slavery in West Africa compared to slavery in the United States?
8. **Draw Inferences** Why do you think the story about Ananse is included in this section?

Essential Question

What are the consequences of trade?

9. Are art and trade related? Explain. Go to your Student Journal to record your answer.