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### The Modernization of the African Griot Tradition

This project is the history of the African griot and how their influence came to America. The beginning of the project will outline what the griot is: a historian, advisor, and diplomat for the people of Western Africa. They were looked to as the custodians of their people; in other words, they kept the knowledge of the families in the tribe, they would be looked to when there was a problem, and sent to other tribes to make peace or start a tie for the two. The stories of Sundiata show that this tradition orally still survives after these past 800 years or so. These people were feared more than anyone else in the tribe and looked up to more than anyone else. The nature of oral storytelling is common between most ancient civilizations but the importance of this group is that they have a huge impact to our culture in the United States.

The griot is seen as the influence of most slave storytelling and song; the connection that I make to *Roots: The Saga of An American Family* is this storytelling. A big part of our history in America is of slavery, and I believe it is important to highlight the struggle that they went through and understand the struggle so that, in hopes, we do not repeat such a thing in the future. There is a big representation of works of struggle in our public curriculum, but I was only taught slavery in history; what about all of the novels and short stories and poems that tell of this struggle? We need to bring these into the classroom because not only are they more modern than most novels taught today but there are stories even older than most of recorded works (The story of Sundiata dating only about one-hundred years after *Beowulf*).

The problem with teaching these stories is the disconnect that most of the youths today. Introducing these stories will have a great impact on students because most of them respond well to very real issues and problems that are clear and concise. This is where Hip-Hop comes into the lesson, I find that most students can connect to it because it is a prevalent part of their lives; we have to connect to them, not the other way around. The poetry of Hip-Hop is captivating and concise when used correctly. Not all rap artists are good examples but those like 2pac and Nas really highlight the real struggles of life and most kids like this and react well; in personal experience, the deeper the song and topic and message, the more attentive and willing they become.

#### Teaching of the Unit (Into the Text)

To start the unit, a history lesson would begin. The pre-colonial history of Western Africa is simple: tribes and families ruled most of the land, a caste system was dominant, Islam is the main religion, and being along a river and the ocean was great for trade and prosperity.

When you have places that thrive and have lots of trade, you get many scholars and people of other cultures, which is something to point out.

After they are bored to death, it's time to bring them back to life with the introduction of the griot.

The introduction will encompass who they are and what they bring to society: the caste system, which they live in means that you can only become griot if you were born into the family. They were feared and beloved; it is told that a griot could prophesize your demise or your wealth and prosperity. The traditional griot was male, until modern times, and used a 21-string instrument called a kora to play their songs. A traditional griot could remember hundreds of songs, and some of which are hours long. These stories use literary devices such as historical

non-fiction, hyperboles, metaphor, satire, and most definitely personification. These songs were used for: parties, ceremonies, family history, stories of your ancestors, advising, diplomatic purposes, and the history of the land from which they live.

Time to reel the class back in with a poem from the griot (it has no name):

Father of the poor people

Husband of beautiful ladies

At whose absence the city is not interesting

At whose absence the people are not happy

Be our mother

Be our father

Provide us with clothing

Be the salt we need for our gravy

Be the oil we need for our porridge

You are our eyes

You are our mirror

You are our hands and legs

That we use to walk.

I have three students from the class read each stanza. We would discuss what we think the poem means and what might inspire someone to write this. I will address the personification from stanza two, and ask them to explain the metaphors in stanza three. I would try to instruct them to lean towards family and the value we have of our family then conclude with a homework

assignment: create your own family values poem, what would you write your family for them to remember you by. I would make one myself as an example.

(Works to go with Centerpiece)

The next day we would share as a class the poems that we have created. We would explore the idea of family values again, and I will introduce Sundiata.

Sundiata is the most prominent oral story in West Africa. Takes place in Mali, which is off the west coast of Africa about a boy that overcomes his deformities and becomes king. Sundiata will be taught as a work of fiction, though he was a real person, and I will address to the class.

The basis of Sundiata is that a legendary hunter told his father that if he married and had a child with the ugliest woman in the town, that child would become king. I would have printed copies of bits and pieces of *Sundiata: Lion King of Mali*, since it is only a 30-page story by David Wisniewski. I would highlight how Maghan, Sundiata's dad, treats the family unit since his first wife, Sassouma, hates Sundiata and his mom. I would highlight Sundiata's challenges like figuring out a way to walk and learn to become a warrior.

At the end of the story, I will have them identify the theme of the story, which is triumph, and discuss which literary devices were used in the story. For example, Sundiata's wood splint and iron rod to hold himself up can be seen as his symbolic rise to conquering his deformity or they can be seen as personification to his determination of learning how to walk.

The introduction of Sundiata would be left in the classroom but I would print out a chapter from *Sanakhou* by Elizbeth Evans for them to read at home. I want to show how storytelling was portrayed back in the 13<sup>th</sup> century for griots. Sundiata's daughter in the book, Chinue, does not know how what love is and learns it from poetry. I believe this is the part to

give to students because, first off I can't give them the whole 400-page book but secondly, I only want to bring light to how stories are being told from the position of the griot and their oral tradition.

The next day, we would reflect on Chinue's struggle for love and make comments on the story. I would ask the class why was it important for griots to record this, since these characters are based on real people. I will say that Chinue's struggle is an allegory to fathers really wanting what is best for their daughters in 13<sup>th</sup> century Western Africa, which is getting married and having children. I would hint them again toward family and their society, to transition to the next part of the lesson.

(Centerpiece)

We will briefly restate the importance of oral stories for people with no written language and start to hint on *Roots*, my canonical work.

*Roots* is a very long book, about 700-pages, so the main idea would be to give one chapter per night, only for 4-5 days, to highlight Kunta Kinte's life transitioning and Alex Haley's struggle to find griots that he can trace his lineage back to.

Coming back into class, every morning would start with sharing what we read in the chapters. Some questions I will pose are: how did the griot help Haley trace his lineage, how did Kunta Kinte's traditions stick with him after being sold into slavery in America, and why is it important to understand where your family origins lie.

The last question is obviously a loaded question; the point is to introduce the idea of African tradition in our way of life in America and how it influenced us.

I would give another short history lesson about African traditions in America, more importantly storytelling with music, the griot way of life. Since the griots were based in Western

Africa, where most of the African slaves were picked from, the traditions were brought with them to America. We would discuss music in our lives briefly; I will talk about country, jazz, blues, and rock n' roll then introduce the fact that these stem from Africa. This will lead to my next big lesson, which is Hip-Hop.

(Beyond the Centerpiece)

Hip-Hop history comes from the Caribbean with the styles of MC'ing, DJ'ing, breakdancing, and graffiti. The main part for this lesson is the MC'ing within Hip-Hop, otherwise known as rap.

I would show the YouTube video of Michael Eric Dyson defending rappers and saying that they should be taught just as many canonical works.

After the video, I would open the floor to the class to speak on behalf or against Mr. Dyson. I would hope to have children speak for teaching rap and ask for them to bring in songs that they think would be good for teaching. I would give my example, Tennessee by Arrested Development, and we will talk about the song. I will break down the three verses, along with showing the video, and have them understand that the song is about his family origin in Tennessee. I am opening the griot way of life again and I will openly say that this is the modern version of the griot tradition: Speech from Arrested Development is going to his childhood home in Tennessee to relive his family origins and is speaking to other African Americans to respect the struggle they went through to give them the life they now have. Speech uses his life as a metaphor to direct African Americans to respect their heritage and the better life others gave them.

The next class, they will have brought songs to share in class. I will direct them to get into groups of four to discuss the songs they brought in and choose which song they would like

to present in front of the classroom. For the rest of the class period, I will want them to write a rap of their own and work on it in class and at home.

I will give them some simple literary devices that they can use to outline their raps like personification, metaphor, juxtaposition, and imagery. The song Love of my Life by Erykah Badu is a great example of personification through the music video and lyrics; she uses it to write an ode to hip-hop, showing the stages of hip-hop as a culture and what it went through. Another example would be Akala's Comedy Tragedy History; Akala uses the 27 Shakespeare plays into a song, he masterfully uses alliteration as well.

Other songs I would love to use for this lesson:

- 2pac – Keep Ya Head Up: 2pac gives his thoughts on how men treat women in today's society telling men to rethink their notions of them.
- Nas – Daughters: Good combination song with 2pac, he talks about his daughter and how he needs to be in her life more, his reflection on single dads.
- Jay Electronica – Renaissance Man: His life story before he became a rapper, he grew up in slums, slept in unfavorable conditions, and gives his perspective on ghettos in America.
- Akala – Absolute Power: Good combination with Jay Electronica, he talks about growing up in the slums of London and reflects on how he understands those growing up the same way he did.
- RZA – Twelve Jewelz: This song is about the basis of Hip-Hop, knowledge. RZA talks about chemistry, anatomy, and metaphysics. Namely speaks of the Qu'ran and the idea of the Twelve Jewels of Islam.

- Pharoahe Monch ft Common and Talib Kweli – The Truth: Good combination with RZA. Another metaphysical song.
- Poor Righteous Teachers – Holy Intellect: Good combination with Twelve Jewlez and The Truth. Another Metaphysical song, namely ideals of Islam.
- Grandmaster Flash – The Message: Good combination with Jay Electronica and Akala. Flash talks about growing up in the ghetto of New York, his perception is that he is angry at the way his town is turning out to be. An original song by one of the founders of Hip-Hop.

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# The modernization of the African Griot Tradition

By Cameron Healy

- What is a Griot?

1. Caste group from Western Africa
2. Oral storytellers, typically used instruments
3. Memorized hundreds of stories

# Sundiata: Lion King of Mali

By David Wisniewski

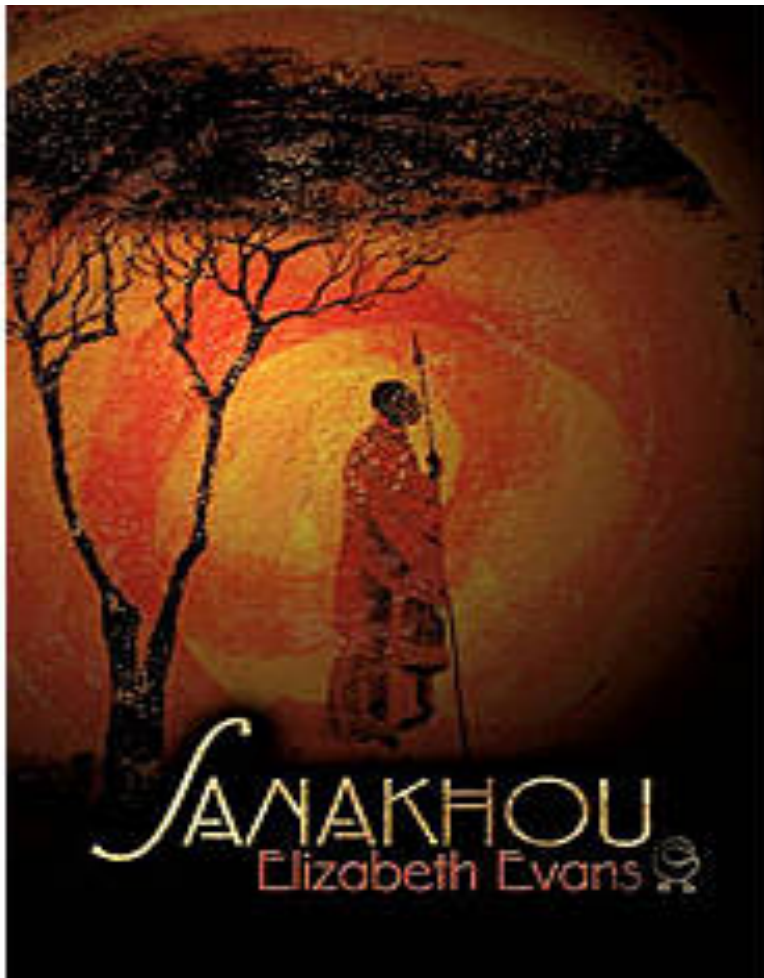


- Sundiata's dad, Maghan, was told that if he married an ugly woman he would have a son that would be King.
- He married the ugliest woman he could find and Sundiata was born.
- Sundiata was born unable to walk and had other deformities.
- He leaves home to overcome them, becoming a great warrior, and his father wants him to come home to fulfill the prophecy.

# Sanakhou

by Elizabeth Evans

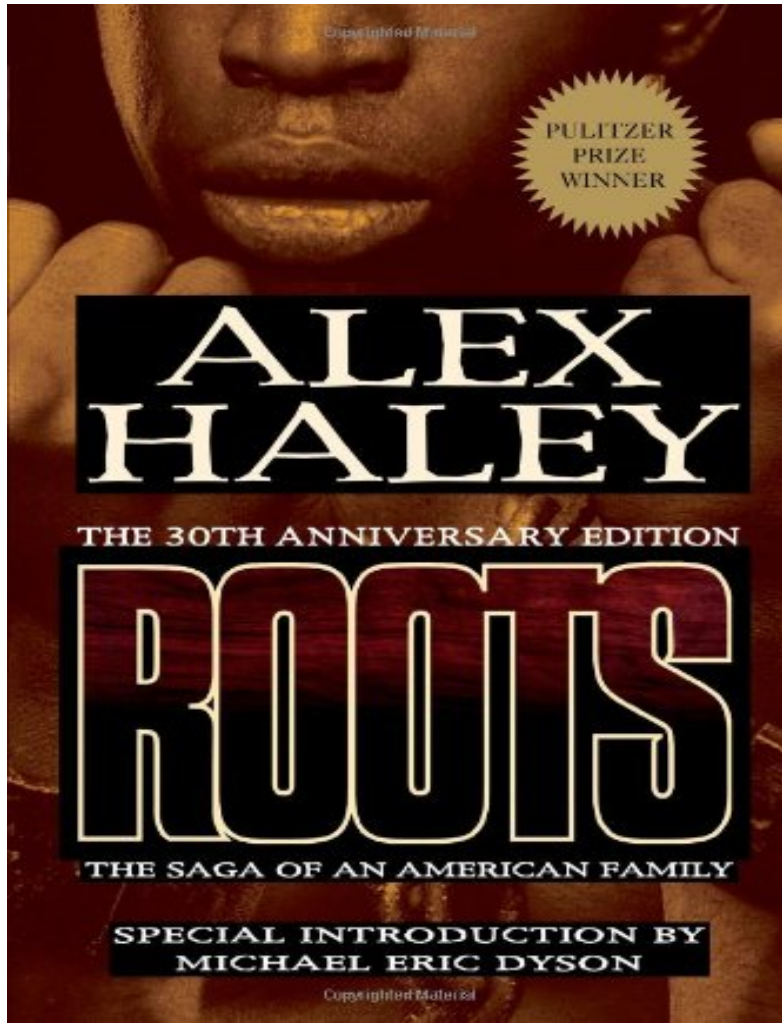
This term roughly translates to “bantering brothers”



- Sundiata wants his daughter, Chinue, to be married and have children and be happy with her life. He orders his “sanakhou brother” Ayinde to marry her.
- Ayinde is in love with someone else and heard that she is deformed like Sundiata.
- Wemusa, illegitimate son of Sunadita, wants to rule the kingdom, so he wants to ruin the marriage and have Ayinde seduced.
- Chinue is naïve to men and love. She teaches herself to read and reads poetry at home; through the books, she learns about love.

# Roots: The Saga of an American Family

By Alex Haley



- *Roots* follows Kunta Kinte's life in Africa until getting captured in 1767 and sold into slavery in America.
- Alex Haley travels to The Gambia and talks to griots to understand where his family lineage stems from.

# Arrested Development – Tennessee

(verse 1)

Lord I've really been real stressed  
Down and out, losing ground  
Although I am Black and proud  
Problems got me pessimistic  
Brothers and sisters keep messin up  
Why does it have to be so damn tough  
I don't know where I can go  
To let these ghosts out of my skull  
My grandma's passed, my brother's gone  
I never at once felt so alone  
I know you're supposed to be my steering wheel  
Not just my spare tire (home)  
But Lord I ask you (home)  
To be my guiding force and truth (home)  
For some strange reason it had to be (home)  
He guided me to Tennessee (home)

# Other songs to highlight

- 2pac – Keep Ya Head Up
- Nas – Daughters
- Erykah Badu – Love of my Life (An Ode to Hip Hop)
- Jay Electronica – Renaissance Man
- Akala – Absolute Power
- RZA – Twelve Jewelz
- Pharoahe Monch ft Common and Talib Kweli – The Truth
- Poor Righteous Teachers – Holy Intellect
- Grandmaster Flash – The Message

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