Name: _____

Date: _____

Africa: A Great Oral Tradition

For centuries, much of Africa's history was missing from the history books, not because nothing happened, but because so little of it was written down. Great kingdoms rose and fell, cities prospered, and people traded across enormous distances without leaving the kind of written records historians rely on elsewhere. Because so little was written down, European colonial powers who began exploring Africa concluded there was little worth knowing. They called it "the Dark Continent," a vast and dangerous place filled with savage people. They were wrong. Africa had been home to thriving civilizations for thousands of years.

Griots and Oral Tradition

West Africa has a great oral tradition, and no one carried more of it than the griot. A griot is a learned storyteller, entertainer, and historian who traditionally preserved history without writing it down. Griots could sing or recite enormous amounts of information, including family histories, rulers, battles, migrations, and stories stretching back generations. Many scholars suggest that communities depended on them to preserve knowledge of the past. In a society without written records, memory did work that books do for us today.

In 1967, American writer Alex Haley met a griot who had memorized the entire story of the village of Juffure, back two centuries, to the moment 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

Haley was both unusually dogged and exceptionally lucky. He found an oral tradition that appeared to connect with his family's story, although later research raised serious doubts about whether that connection was correct. Most lost African lives and communities left no such trail for someone to follow.

Archaeology

Sometimes history is uncovered by accident. In 1928, tin miners in Nigeria uncovered a strange terracotta figure while digging for ore. They had no idea their discovery was the first clue to an African civilization forgotten for centuries. Today we call it the Nok civilization, after the village where they found the figure.

Written Records

Our knowledge of African history becomes clearer as the first surviving written records about West Africa appear. North African traders crossing the Sahara carried their goods and the Arabic language into sub-Saharan West Africa. Over generations, some West Africans learned Arabic and converted to Islam. By the eleventh century, Muslim scholars were recording information about West Africa. For the first time, historians had written accounts to compare with oral tradition and archaeology.

Piecing Together the Past

Much of Africa's early history remains unknown. Archaeologists can uncover cities, tools, graves, pottery, and works of art, but cannot tell us everything about the people who made them. Oral traditions preserve what archaeology cannot, but stories change or disappear across generations. Written accounts offer another kind of evidence, but reflect only what their writers knew and believed.

Africa's history is not missing because nothing happened. It is incomplete because so much of the evidence did not survive. But the search continues. New technologies are helping archaeologists find settlements and other traces of the past that earlier generations could not see. Africa still has history waiting to be discovered

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Name: _____

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Fill in the Blanks

Until recently, much of Africa's history was m__s__i__g from history books because relatively little of it had been w__i__t__n down. Instead, many c__m__u__i__i__s preserved knowledge of the past through o_____ tradition. In West Africa, learned storytellers called g__i__ts could r__m__m__er and r__c__te family histories, rulers, battles, migrations, and s__o__i__s passed down for g__n__r__t__o__s.

Other clues about African history have come from archaeology. In 1928, t__n miners in N__g__r__a accidentally uncovered e__i__e__ce of what became known as the N__k civilization. Written evidence became more common as N__r__h African t__a__e__s carried the A__a__ic language across the S__h__ra. By the e__e__e__th century, Muslim s__h__l__rs were recording information about West Africa. Historians can now c__m__a__e written accounts with a__c__a__o__o__y and oral traditions, while new t__c__n__l__g__es continue to reveal c__u__s about Africa's past.

Answer in Complete Sentences

1. Why do we know relatively little about Africa's past?

_____

_____

_____

★2. How might a griot describe your family history?

_____

_____

_____

_____

★3. When did written records about West Africa first appear? Why?

_____

_____

_____

4. Why can oral histories become less reliable over time?

_____

_____

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★ This is a higher order learning question. You must answer the question to the best of your ability, but any reasonable answer will be graded as correct.

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