

THE AFRICAN LITERARY TRADITION

▼ Place ▼

Africa

▼ Time ▼

2700 B.C.—present

▼ Literary significance ▼

Africa's literary tradition begins in ancient Egypt. There, for the first time, people used paper and ink to record their thoughts and feelings. Ancient Egyptian literature is mainly a religious literature, but the Egyptians also wrote love poems and entertaining tales.

Although the written word has existed throughout Africa for centuries, the spoken word has remained the dominant form of creative expression in most African communities. For centuries, Africa's oral literature—its proverbs, chants, fables, folktales, and epics—has represented an ongoing creative process in which each reteller injects age-old themes with a fresh perspective.

TIME LINE

Africa

LITERARY EVENTS



Detail of hieroglyphics from the Rosetta Stone.



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"Great Hymn to the Aten," attributed to Egyptian ruler Akhenaten, c. 1375–1362 B.C.

Egyptian Coffin Texts are compiled, c. 2000 B.C.

Egyptian Pyramid Texts are collected, c. 2700–2200 B.C.

Egyptian Book of the Dead is assembled, c. 1580–1350 B.C.

Egyptian New Kingdom lyrics are composed, c. 1300–1100 B.C.

3500 B.C.

3000 B.C.

2500 B.C.

2000 B.C.

1500 B.C.

1000 B.C.

Egyptians invent hieroglyphic writing, c. 3500–3000 B.C.

Old Kingdom in Egypt, c. 2700–2181 B.C.

Middle Kingdom in Egypt, c. 2000–1780 B.C.

New Kingdom in Egypt, c. 1550–1085 B.C.

Akhenaten institutes religious reforms in Egypt, 1375–1362 B.C.

The Pyramids and the Great Sphinx are built in Egypt, c. 2500 B.C.

Moses leads Jews out of Egypt, c. 1200 B.C.



CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL EVENTS



Jurt Scholz/Sheostal Associates/SuperStock International

The Great Sphinx and the pyramid of Cheops.

Ethiopian painting of King David, c. 1600s.



The Granger Collection, New York

Carved wooden head of a woman, Ibo.



Werner Forman Archiv/Musee Royale de L'Afrique Centrale, Tervuren, Belgium/Art Resource

Greek scholar Herodotus writes *The Histories*, recounting his travels in North Africa, c. 430 B.C.

Algerian-born Apuleius writes *The Golden Ass*, the oldest surviving Latin novel, c. A.D. 155

St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo (in modern-day Algeria) writes his *Confessions*, c. A.D. 400

Mali's great epic *Sundiata* is composed, c. 1200

Soninke oral epic, *The Dausi*, is composed, c. 1600

500 B.C. A.D. 1 500 1000 1500

Shite kingdom gains control of Egypt, 751–4 B.C.

Last Egyptian dynasty, 378–342 B.C.

Alexander the Great conquers Egypt, c. 332 B.C.

Rise and fall of Kingdom of Aksum, c. 200 B.C.–A.D. 500

Bantu speakers begin to move south and east through Africa from the Cameroon Highlands, c. first century B.C.

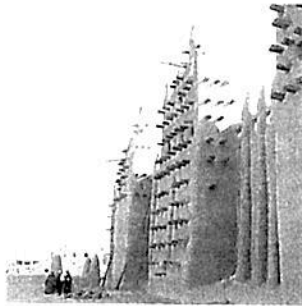
Egypt becomes a Roman province, 30 B.C.

Christianity is introduced into Northern Africa via the Roman Empire, c. A.D. 200

Rise and fall of the Empire of Ghana, c. A.D. 300–1100

Islam is brought to West Africa, c. 600

Swahili language and culture develop in East Africa, c. 1000–1500



Werner Forman Archive

The mosque at Jenne, in Mali.

Rise and fall of the Empire of Mali, c. 1200–1400

Rise and fall of the Empire of Songhai, c. 1200–1592

Islam becomes official religion of Mali, 1235

Kingdom of Congo becomes dominant in the Zaire Basin, 1300–1540

Rise of the Zulu nation in southern Africa, early 1800s

Western European nations divide Africa into colonies, late 1800s

The border of this Time Line depicts Egyptian hieroglyphics, a form of picture writing in which symbols represent words, syllables, or sounds.



AFRICAN LITERATURE

African literature is as old as the pyramids. Written literature on the African continent began with the ancient Egyptians, and many of their literary traditions have counterparts in African literature today.

The "Gift of the Nile"

The Greek historian Herodotus (hə·rād'ə·təs) (485–425 B.C.) called Egypt the "gift of the Nile," and it is not hard to understand why. The Nile itself provided settlers with water and, during the flood season, the fertilizing silt necessary for growing such crops as barley, wheat, vegetables, flax, and grapes. The Nile also provided the transportation that made ancient Egypt's thriving trade with neighbors possible. The Nile brought boats laden with gold, hardwood, and metals—all the resources that Egypt itself lacked. Without the Nile, Egypt would simply have been part of the vast and arid Sahara. With the Nile, Egypt was able to become a wealthy agricultural land and one of the most powerful civilizations the world has ever known.

The Nile provided another gift that enabled Egypt to grow into a remarkable and enduring civilization: the **papyrus** (pə·pī'rəs) reeds that grew along its banks. From these reeds the Egyptians developed paper, a far more convenient writing material than the clay tablets used by their neighbors in ancient Mesopotamia. (Our word *paper*, in fact, comes from *papyrus*.) Paper made centralized rule possible, enabling the Egyptians to keep written records, issue instructions, write histories, compute taxes, survey land, and carry out the other practical tasks of a complex society. In addition, ideas and literature could be shared far and wide and handed down to future generations.

“Truth is great and
its effectiveness
endures.”

—from *The Maxims of Ptahhotpe*

Twenty-seven Centuries of Civilization

Under thirty-one **dynasties**, or successive ruling families, Egyptian civilization flourished for more than twenty-seven centuries. Its greatest years are divided into three main eras:

The Old Kingdom—from about 2700 to 2200 B.C. The great pyramids were built during this period.

The Middle Kingdom—from about 2000 to 1800 B.C. This period was characterized by Egypt's expanding economy and political power.

The New Kingdom—from about 1600 to 1100 B.C. Egypt was at the peak of its political power during this period. Its vast empire reached north to Syria, east to the Euphrates (yōō·frāt'ēz) River, and south to the East African kingdoms of Nubia and Kush.

A Highly Organized Society

The organization of Egyptian society resembled the shape of its pyramids. A single, powerful ruler, the **pharaoh**, was the pinnacle of the social pyramid. Priests and scribes formed the next level of the pyramid. Then came the upper class, consisting of merchants, doctors, engineers, lawyers, and other professionals. Forming the bottom of the pyramidal structure was the largest class: the workers, peasants, and slaves.

The pharaoh was not only a political leader but also a spiritual leader, representing the earthly incarnation of the god Horus (hō'rəs), son of Osiris (ō·sī'ris). It was the pharaoh's destiny to go and live with the gods after death, and in the afterlife to become identified with Osiris, god of the underworld. To ease the pharaoh's journey to the afterlife, the Egyptians built magnificent pyramids, which contained the pharaoh's mummified body and earthly possessions.

The Egyptian Pantheon

Religion was inseparable from everyday life in ancient Egypt. Because the Egyptians believed that their ruler, the pharaoh,



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Statue of the falcon-headed god Horus, protecting the pharaoh, Ramses II. *The Egyptians believed that the pharaoh was the earthly incarnation of Horus.*



Thoth, the Egyptian god of learning.

“ I have not done iniquity. . . . I have not robbed with violence. . . . I have not stolen. . . . I have done no murder; I have done no harm. . . . I have not defrauded the offerings. . . . ”

—*Negative Confession from the Egyptian Book of the Dead*

was a god, service to the ruler was the same as religious worship. Yet the ancient Egyptians recognized and worshiped many other gods and goddesses besides the earthly one. These divine beings—numbering somewhere between eighty and eighty-nine—had different forms and represented different powers. Probably the most important group of gods was the *ennead* (en'ē-ad'), the nine creation gods. These were Atum, the creator; his children Shu and Tefnut; their children Geb and Nut; and Osiris, his wife/sister Isis, his brother Seth, and Seth's wife/sister Nephthys.

The Cult of the Dead

A fascination with death pervaded Egyptian culture. This "cult of the dead" largely dictated Egyptian morality and ethics. Starting in the Old Kingdom, the Egyptians wrote many works dedicated to the quest for life after death. These works contained magical spells for the protection of the dead, burial rites, and other funerary texts. The New Kingdom saw the ultimate expression of Egyptian funerary literature: the Book of the Dead, a kind of "traveler's guide" to the afterlife containing everything the deceased needed to have and know after death.

Religious literature did not stop with the Book of the Dead. Virtually everything the Egyptians wrote was in some way tied to their religious beliefs, written either to instruct people in morality or to praise the gods.

Much of ancient Egyptian literature served to aid or instruct people in attaining the afterlife.

Strictly religious texts included **praise songs** and **hymns**. The most famous of these, "The Great Hymn to the Aten," is the earliest known praise song (see page 73). Other popular genres, or forms of literature, in ancient Egypt included **instructions**, sets of moral teachings often presented in the form of proverbs, and **autobiographies**, a form of secular literature intended to teach lessons in morality. Although the Egyptians told stories for entertainment, such as "The Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor" and "King Cheops and

the Magician," even these narratives were not without religious content. Finally, the Egyptians wrote **sacred** or **ritual dramas**—plays used in religious ceremonies.

During the New Kingdom, when the social structure and morality of the Egyptian culture had become less rigid, secular poetry was written. Much of this poetry was **pastoral**—that is, it portrayed everyday life in idyllic terms. Even today, the New Kingdom pastoral poetry delivers a fresh and honest view of romantic love.



The Granger Collection, New York

Osiris (left) and Atum. Osiris was the father of Horus, and the Egyptians believed that the pharaoh became Osiris after death.

The Rise of Africa's Great Civilizations

By the close of the New Kingdom (about 1000 B.C.), Egypt had lost much of its status as a world power. Internally divided and supported by weak rulers, Egypt fell into decline. But ancient Egypt was not the only civilization in Africa. As Egyptian power was waning, the kingdom of Kush, at the southern end of the Nile River, was gaining strength and prominence. For centuries the Egyptians had struggled to contain the Kushites' power. Between 751 and 664 B.C., Kushite kings succeeded in conquering and ruling

Marc & Evelyn Bernheim/Woodfin Camp & Associates.
Paul & Ruth Tishman Collection



Statue of a drummer, from the Mbala people of the Congo.

Egypt. The Kushite kingdom continued to flourish long after Egypt's demise, and its capital city Meroë thrived as a major producer of iron well into the second century A.D.

In addition to Kush, smaller civilizations also existed around the edges of the Sahara, which was less extensive than it is today. These groups farmed and raised livestock in the fertile grasslands surrounding the desert. Among these were the Fasa of the northern Sudan, whose deeds are recalled today by the Soninke oral epic, *The Dausi*.

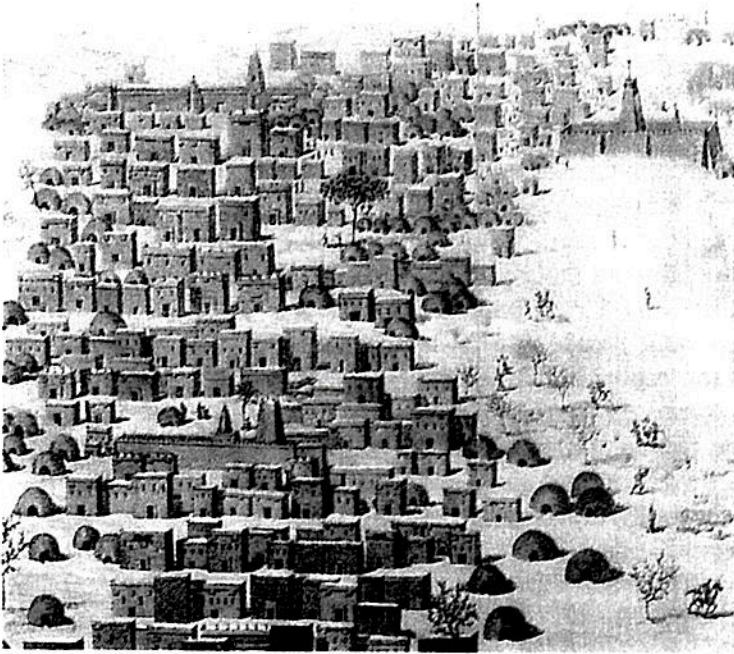
In the third century A.D., a rich kingdom in eastern Africa called Aksum (äk'soom') arose in what is now Ethiopia. Aksum thrived at the center of a trade route that extended as far west as Rome and as far east as India. The culture fell into decline in the sixth century A.D., but not before it developed its own writing system, called Ethiopic script. This writing system developed into several modern scripts still used in Ethiopia today.

As the Egyptian civilization in the north of Africa fell into decline, new civilizations to the east, west, and south began to rise.

Drought drove many migrants south and west. In western Africa, a series of great civilizations arose. The first of these, the kingdom of Old Ghana, was in place by A.D. 300. It was succeeded by the empires of Old Mali and Songhai, among others. The legendary city of Timbuktu was a center of trade and culture in both the Mali and Songhai empires.

New cultures sprang up throughout the South, including the Luba and Malawi (mä'lä-wē) empires in central Africa, the two Congo kingdoms, the Swahili (swä'hē'lē) culture of eastern Africa, the kingdom of Old Zimbabwe (zim-bä'bwä'), and the Zulu nation near the southern tip of the continent.

The period between A.D. 300 and A.D. 1600 marked Africa's long Golden Age. During this time, sculpture, music, metalwork, textiles, and oral literature flourished. African oral literature, like the literature of the ancient Egyptians, includes praise poems, love poems, tales, ritual dramas, and moral instructions distilled into the form of proverbs and fables. It also includes epics and more specific kinds of



Timbuktu. In the fifteenth century, Timbuktu—a center of trade and learning—was one of several bustling cities that dotted the kingdoms of West Africa.

poems and narratives. From Africa's Golden Age came several oral epics, including the Mali epic *Sundiata* (see pages 102–117).

Foreign Influences in Africa

During the fourth century A.D., the Roman Empire had proclaimed Christianity as its state religion and taken control of the entire northern coast of Africa, including Egypt. This early Christian influence spread east to Aksum, eventually leading to the foundation of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, still one of the largest religious groups in Ethiopia.

Around A.D. 700, Islam, the religion of the followers of Mohammed, was introduced into Africa. With Islam, the Arabic writing system was introduced as well. By 1235, Islam was the state religion of Old Mali. Somali and other eastern African nations were also largely Muslim.

Much later, near the close of Africa's Golden Age, Christianity and colonialism came hand in hand to sub-Saharan Africa. Ultimately, in the late 1800s, several European pow-

“ . . . the singing
that comes from your
heart will echo in the
ear of your son and
live on in your
people. ”

—from *The Dausi*,
Soninke (Sudan)

“What kind of people we become depends crucially on the stories we are nurtured on. . . .”

—Chinweizu, Nigeria

ers created colonized “countries.” Social and political chaos reigned as traditional African nations were either split apart by European colonizers or joined with incompatible neighbors.

In the mid-1900s, a move toward independence gained force, and a rebirth of traditional cultures came with it. Literature written in African languages, rather than in English, French, or other European languages, gained popularity. This vital literature is clearly stamped with the tradition of African oral literature, or *orature*, as it has been called.



Kal Mueller/Woodfin Camp & Associates

A priest outside an Ethiopian Orthodox church. Aksum, in modern-day Ethiopia, was a Christian kingdom by the sixth century A.D.

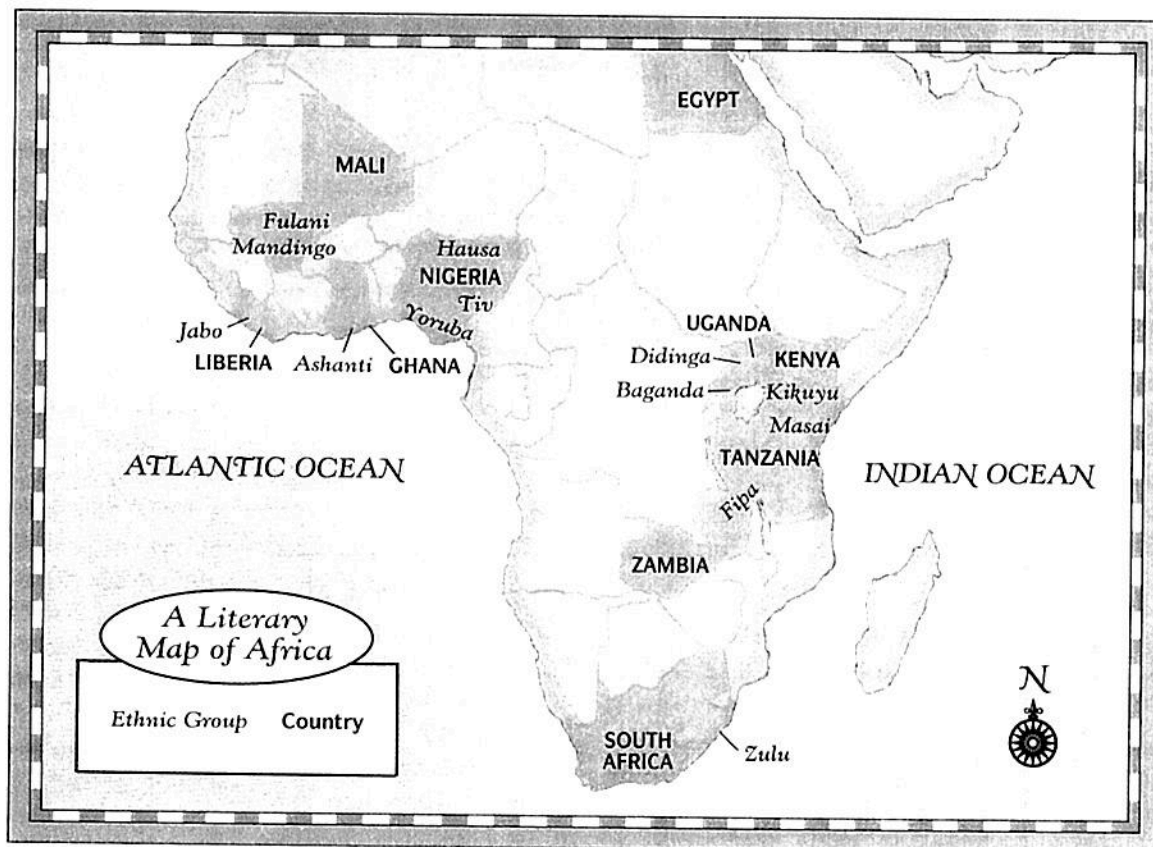
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Traditionally, the keepers of oral literature in West Africa have been the *griots* (grē'ōz). In Africa today, a griot may be a professional storyteller, singer, or entertainer. In the past, though, the griot's role included all of these functions and more. Griots were skilled at creating and transmitting the many forms of African oral literature. Many also memorized their nations' histories and laws. Rather than consulting books or libraries, people in the kingdoms of Africa

consulted griots. Elsewhere on the African continent, bards, storytellers, town criers, and oral historians also preserved and continued the oral tradition.

As storytellers, tutors to nobility, and living records of a culture's laws and customs, the griots were indispensable to African civilizations.

The literary forms of Africa are many and varied. Yet they share certain features. Striking images of nature, poignant insights into the human condition, and subtle ironies allow these works to speak clearly to modern readers, thus transcending barriers of time and culture.



AFRICAN PROVERBS

Background

In the oral literatures of the various peoples of Africa, proverbs are much more than quaint old sayings. Instead, they represent a poetic form that uses few words but achieves great depth of meaning. In cultures that have no written literature, proverbs function as the distilled essence of a people's values and knowledge. They are used to settle legal disputes, resolve ethical problems, and teach children the philosophy of their people. Because proverbs often contain puns, rhymes, and clever allusions, they also provide entertainment. Speakers who know and use such proverbs have power within the community; their eloquence makes others want to listen to them, and their ability to apply the proverbs to appropriate circumstances demonstrates an understanding of social and political realities. More than one modern African leader has turned to the wisdom of proverbs in order to make decisions and to gain popular support and respect.

Proverbs are memorable not only because they are so brief (usually no more than a sentence) but also because, like poetry, they compress sometimes complicated ideas into a few thoughtfully crafted words. And unlike many other forms of literature, they can be easily translated into another language.

Oral Response

As a class, brainstorm as many English proverbs as you can: "It's no use crying over spilled milk," "A penny saved is a penny earned," and so on. Write the proverbs on the chalkboard. Then choose a proverb that is particularly meaningful to you and tell how you have experienced the truth of that proverb in your everyday life.

Literary Focus

A **proverb** is a short saying that expresses a common truth or experience, usually about human failings and the ways that people interact with one another. Proverbs often incorporate such literary elements as **metaphor** ("An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure"), **alliteration** ("He who laughs last laughs best"), **parallelism** ("Where there's a will, there's a way"), and **rhyme** ("When the cat's away, the mice will play").

