

## African Society

West African families shared a strong sense of **kinship** (family connections). Their society was based on forming strong family ties. Their families were connected through **ancestor lineage**. **Lineages** were made up of **clans or large families**. (Great grandma, great great grandpa, aunts and uncles, etc.) **Clans** would live close to each other in **villages**. **Villages** would then be connected to each other through their **ethnicity**. **Ethnicity means:** a social group that has a similar culture, religion, language, identity etc. They would share the same culture, language, identity.

Each **clan** would divide the needed jobs in the village up so that everyone had something to do to contribute to the success of the entire group. **Labor specialization**. Doing one job and doing it well.

Africa did have **enslaved people**. They would be at the bottom of the society. Slaves performed many tasks or jobs. They could serve as soldiers, servants in people's homes, servants in the palace, etc. Slaves did have some rights though. They could marry and their families could not be separated. They were protected from harsh treatment and could even earn money that could buy them their freedom.

**Africa had both farming villages and trading cities.**



The **economy** of farming villages was based on **producing food**. They grew crops as well as herding animals. They would sell their products in their local markets. Getting possibly salt from North Africa or cloth from a different city.



The **economy** in the cities was based on **trade**. Markets offered goods from all along the caravan routes. Trade flowed in and out of these cities from all over Africa and the Middle East.

West African Villages:



You may also look at page 164-165 in your book for examples of their place to live.

**West Africa history** is based on **oral tradition**. This is the telling of stories by word of mouth. They did not have a written language until they came into contact with the Arab traders. **Proverbs** are one part of the West African **oral tradition**.

**Proverbs** are wise sayings or lessons. They were quick ways to transmit wisdom or knowledge. Here are a few examples:

*It takes a village to raise a child.*

*Every time an old man dies, it is as if a library has burnt down.*

*Do not look where you fell, but where you slipped.*

*The fool speaks, the wise man listens.*

*Nobody is born wise.*

*A man who uses force is afraid of reasoning.*

*Wisdom does not come overnight.*

**Storytelling** was also a huge part of West African Society. Professional storytellers were known as **griots**. They would recite and tell stories of famous people and events. Their main job was to pass on their people's history.

“The griots were the storytellers in the ancient kingdom of Ghana. After dinner, villagers might hear the sound of a drum or a rattle announcing a story was soon to be told. They collected around a central fire and settled down to listen.

The storytellers told many stories - stories about the many gods and goddesses worshiped by these early people. They told tales of war and battle and heroes and leaders and kings. Stories were often accompanied with music and dancing and song. There was no written language. Stories kept their history alive. Stories were also entirely fictional.

Everyone loved the stories of Anansi, the little spider! Anansi had a good wife. He had strong sons and beautiful daughters. He had many friends. He was almost always in trouble. Anansi used his wits and humor to get himself out of trouble.

Anyone could tell a story, but there was only one official Griot per village. If a village tried to steal or entice away a griot from another village, war could break out. The griots were very important. The griots did not work in the fields. Their job was to tell stories.

Even today, there are griots in African villages, still telling tales of Anansi the Spider, and creating new stories about the marvelous people of Africa.”

### **Read the story below....Anansi, the little spider**

*Once upon a time, a long time ago, there lived a spider named Anansi. Anansi's wife was a very good cook. But always, Anansi loved to taste the food that others in the village made for themselves and for their families.*

*One day, he stopped by Rabbit's house. Rabbit was his good friend.*

*"There are greens in your pot," cried Anansi excitedly. Anansi loved greens.*

*"They are not quite done," said Rabbit. "But they will be soon. Stay and eat with me."*

*"I would love to, Rabbit, but I have some things to do," Anansi said hurriedly. If he waited at Rabbit's house, Rabbit would certainly give him jobs to do. "I know," said Anansi. "I'll spin a*

*web. I'll tie one end around my leg and one end to your pot. When the greens are done, tug on the web, and I'll come running!"*

*Rabbit thought that was a great idea. And so it was done.*

*"I smell beans," Anansi sniffed excitedly as he ambled along. "Delicious beans, cooking in a pot."*

*"Come eat our beans with us," cried the monkeys. "They are almost done."*

*"I would love to Father Monkey," said Anansi. And again, Anansi suggested he spin a web, with one end tied around his leg, and one end tied to the big bean pot.*

*Father Monkey thought that was a great idea. All his children thought so, too. And so it was done.*

*"I smell sweet potatoes," Anansi sniffed happily as he ambled along. "Sweet potatoes and honey, I do believe!"*

*"Anansi," called his friend Hog. "My pot is full of sweet potatoes and honey! Come share my food with me."*

*"I would love to," said Anansi. And again, Anansi suggested he spin a web, with one end tied around his leg, and one end tied to the sweet potato pot.*

*His friend Hog thought that was a great idea. And so it was done.*

*By the time Anansi arrived at the river, he had one web tied to each of his eight legs.*

*"This was a wonderful idea," Anansi told himself proudly. "I wonder whose pot will be ready first?"*

*Just then, Anansi felt a tug at his leg. "Ah," said Anansi. "That is the web string tied to Rabbit's greens." He felt another. And another. Anansi was pulled three ways at once.*

*"Oh dear," said Anansi as he felt the fourth web string pull.*



*Just then, he felt the fifth web string tug. And the sixth. And the seventh. And the eighth. Anansi was pulled this way and that way, as everyone pulled on the web strings at once. His legs were pulled thinner and thinner. Anansi rolled and tugged himself into the river. When all the webs had washed away, Anansi pulled himself painfully up on shore.*

*"Oh my, oh my," sighed Anansi. "Perhaps that was not such a good idea after all."*

*To this day, Anansi the Spider has eight very thin legs. And he never got any food that day at all.*

**Folktales** were also important in West African societies. Families would share these stories at home. Many of these stories were used to teach children values and life lessons.

# The tortoise and the lizard

Once upon a time there was a famine in the land of the animals. One day, the lizard was passing by a farm when he saw the farmer approach a rock. The lizard hid and watched as the farmer rolled the rock away to reveal the entrance into a cave. The farmer went inside and came out a few minutes later with a handful of yams and rolled the rock back into its place. The lizard waited for the farmer to leave then he too rolled away the rock and went into the cave. Inside the cave were several stacks of yams. The lizard took out a yam, and rolled the rock back into its place. Everyday, the lizard would return to the cave to take a yam and would go home to eat the yam.

One day the lizard was carrying his yam home, he came across the tortoise who asked him where he had gotten his yam. He offered to tell him on the condition that the tortoise told no one. The tortoise promised to keep the secret, so the lizard told the tortoise to meet him the following morning and he would take him to the secret cave. Early the next morning, before the very first cock crow, the lizard and the tortoise went to the secret cave. When they got there, the lizard rolled the rock away to reveal the entrance to the cave. The tortoise could not believe his eyes for there were more yams in there than even he could eat, because the tortoise was a very greedy fellow.

The lizard picked a yam and started on his way home but the tortoise was not done yet. He was going to carry as many yams as he could and maybe even more. Very soon, the farmer came and found the tortoise who was still busy collecting yams. By this time, the lizard was home, had eaten his yam and was taking a nap. The farmer grabbed the tortoise and asked him how he came to be in the cave. The tortoise confessed that the lizard had brought him there, so the farmer took tortoise to the lizard's house. There they found lizard lying on his back. The farmer asked lizard if it was he who brought tortoise to his cave. The lizard was shocked and said it was not possible as he had been feeling unwell and lying on his back all day. The farmer grabbed the tortoise and threw him against the wall and the tortoise lay on the floor with a broken shell. The tortoise cried out to the insects of the forest who helped him pick up and glue the pieces of his shell together. And that was how the tortoise ended up with a broken shell.