



**THE BLACK MIND**  
**A History of African Literature**

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A History of  
African Literature



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*To my wife Hilde  
and my children Shade Cecily  
and Alexander Franz Keith.  
And to Janheinz Jahn,  
a true pioneer  
in African literature.*

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# Preface

To understand ourselves, we ought to take a hard look at our place of origin—Africa. But the consequences of history have resulted in our displacement and the nature of this also becomes important if we are to see ourselves as we are. In *The Black Mind* I have focused on the oral and written literatures of Africa and the question throughout the book is—what do we say about ourselves? There are different answers and the artists at times admit to a confusion. But this is no handicap; in the search for legacy, in putting our minds together, in acquainting those who live near us with the nature of our heritage, there can be only one aim—trying to understand. I hope that *The Black Mind* is a beginning in this direction of understanding ourselves and helping others to understand us.

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# PART I TRADITION



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## The Traditional Artist

The artist in traditional African society is a difficult figure to understand, for his function corresponds to nothing comparable in present-day western society. He is at once inheritor and donor of the literature, its custodian and its liberator. He is a spokesman for the society in which he lives, sharing its prejudices and directing its dislikes (in a limited form of satire) against what is discountenanced. He is not recognized as an individual, for he has no personal voice, but he is a highly respected member of the community. He can be a professional or an amateur, but this is not a qualitative judgment, since he has to be ingenious in expressing whatever he chooses to express.

Traditionally the artist was the link that bound art to the life of the people, or rather he was the continuous expression of a living art. As T. Adeoye Lambo once said:

[W]hile Western art has become largely just a by-product without immediate function in daily life, African tribal art is integrated into the community with specific functions. African traditional art was not, as is the art of more contemporary societies, a luxury or a pastime. It was the expression of a crude but intensely earnest religion and arose partly out of a social necessity to express and communicate through and partly out of a natural instinct for adornment.

The profound and intensely emotional links which exist between magic, religion, social organisation and creative motivity can be observed among a number of African peoples. The daily life of the tribal African shows the interaction of *mores*, economic demands and religious ceremonials with artistic expression.<sup>1</sup>

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The significance of the priest and narrator cannot be overlooked; they participated in all aspects of group life and joined with their audience in all activities associated with existence.

Although the functional expressions of both the spoken and the sung or chanted art are occasioned by similar references—to the experiences of life—various forms of artistic expression did have their own specialized artists, from original composer on the one hand to what might be termed bard, rhapsodist, improviser, or reciter on the other. The extent to which the artist could “convert” his material depended on the nature of the material itself and the role that he was required to play. There is no doubt that among certain societies, memory was the artist’s most important attribute; for instance, Deborah Lifchitz has commented that in Upper Volta and Chad “the people who recite the myths and the tales do not form a special class among the Dogon. Every man and above all every old man can tell a story. But there exists in the community a certain number of people whose memory, superior to that of the others, allows them to tell tales and myths better than anybody else. These men do not have a special position but they are given special respect and they are often asked to tell one tale or another.” But no artistic display was simply a test of memory. Although the traditional artist obviously associated his work with a body of material, in many cases it was unformed and only partly helped him to create. Nketia makes this point when discussing the Akan dirge singers in Ghanaian society: “In dealing with the dirge, then, we are dealing in the main with traditional expression stored up in the minds of individuals and re-created by them in appropriate contexts, traditional expressions cast in forms which individuals learnt to handle because society expects them to use them in the situation of the funeral.”<sup>2</sup> The fact that the oral tradition was a reservoir from which the artist drew meant that he was restricted; this was the formal limitation imposed on him.

The audience was also responsible to this unformed ideal of art that was present in everyone’s memory. The artist did not so much perform for them as act as a mask for them, impersonating in turn each member of his audience. Alta Jablow describes the accomplished virtuosity of the narrator as follows: “In West Africa, as in other parts of the continent, story telling is an art form, as much theater as narrative. A good story teller knows how to spin a yarn to capture the interest and stimulate the participation of the audience. He is an accomplished mime as well, changing his voice, his posture and his mannerisms; acting out the parts, embellishing the fictional characters and situations. He shifts from role to role with fluidity and grace.” The roles, ostensibly the characters

in the folktale, were transpositions of the personalities of the audience, changes that might well have been taking place under the catalytic effect of the narration. The link between audience and narrator was their direct involvement in, and their utter responsibility to, the absoluteness of this experience. H. L. M. Butcher comments that "the various actions described are imitated, and onomatopoeic sounds are freely used. Any misfortune to the characters of the story, particularly if caused by the 'villain,' draws forth roars of laughter, and any magical or mysterious happening elicits a chorus of grunts and exclamations of surprise."<sup>3</sup>

The artist in oral traditional literature came to mean everyone who participated in this creative ordering; the idea of alienation of the artist from his audience is therefore incongruous and irrelevant. In a "full" society no such cultural atomism is apparent; art like life is whole. Both artist and audience were interested not only in the transposition of the experience from the absolute to the representative, but also in the complete restructuring of that experience. The artist refashioned it topically, he recast it locally; in all cases it was dictated by social necessity, never by individual option. As W. E. Abraham remarked, "It was open to the raconteur to change the images handed down to him in a composition, and even surround salient details in his account with more local and topical allusions. A raconteur revealed his verbal virtuosity in the way in which he adorned the bare substance of his recitative. The account as presented and publicly received was therefore already affected by purely literary creativity, even if it was not an individual creation."<sup>4</sup> The alteration, then, was of enormous significance, for the image was resurveyed, the means of apprehension completely reorganized. The members of the audience were judges of this: even though they knew the ending, they could evaluate the literary process by which the conclusion emerged.

Because artists in traditional society inhabited this curious limbo between fleshlessness and corporality, they could not exist by name. Each one was the means by which the accrescent nature of the literature altered. Naturally there were individual composers of songs, as Hugh Tracey has noted, but because they were tribally contained, they were restricted by the sheer nature of their effort. The Senegalese *griots* are a case in point. "The *griots* formed a low caste—superior only to the liberated slaves and slaves—in traditional Wolof society, before the arrival of Islam. They are the minstrels of Senegal, and they were often attached to free-born families with the duty to sing their praises, genealogy and history. They were story-tellers, actors, acrobats and buffoons, privileged to mock and criticise their superiors." F. Brigaud notes that

they were also musicians. But it is wrong to imply, as André Sauvaut does, that "all his [the *griot*'s] poor life passes in his song," for his song was not about himself but about the people to whom he was attached.<sup>5</sup> In a poem as if to his own family *griot*, Mbaye Dyob, Senghor writes:

Dyob! You cannot trace back your ancestry and bring order into black history, your forefathers are not sung by the voice of the *tama*

You have never killed a rabbit, who went to ground under the bombs of the great vultures

Dyob! you are not captain or airman or trooper, not even in the baggage train

But a second class private in the Fourth Regiment of the Senegal Rifles

Dyob! I will celebrate your white honour.<sup>6</sup>

It is this inarticulate historical role that the *griot* has played which makes him a passive actor and gives Senghor occasion for celebration.

The function of the *griots* therefore is to retell history. Again the same kinds of conditions apply: the audience, here the family, already knows what is going to be recounted. Thus, the *griot* is not the retainer of history, but its interpreter. A similar function is played by the Ruan-dan *aèdes* who sang the praises of their chiefs. Hampaté Ba is credited with having said that "every old man that dies is a library that burns down" and he was possibly thinking of the traditional methods of retention and bequeathal. The way experience, then, is stored in the memory of the tribe and the method by which it is manipulated in the creative process is through "form," which, according to K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, "is not an extraneous something superimposed by the artist on matter. Form is really inherent in matter, and is but helped to fulfil itself by the artist."<sup>7</sup>

Obviously the extent to which the artist is able to alter the nature of this inheritance depends on the degree to which the *word itself* constitutes the experience. This is clearly the case with formulas relating regularized parts of narratives or songs, or with religious incantations and charms. The *babalawo* who recite the Ifa oracle of the Yoruba would at first sight seem to be an example of the type of traditional artist who must depend on the letter rather than on the idea. Beier writes that

the ritual poetry of Ifa is divided into 16 principal sections called *ODU*. Each of these is subdivided into sixteen further sections, and these are divided again: the total number of the poems is said to be 4696. The oracle priest or *babalawo* (that is the father of secrets), must know all the poems

## THE TRADITIONAL ARTIST

by heart. In order to arrive at a particular poem that is relevant to the case of his client he goes through a set ritual with palm nuts. He has a carved wooden board covered with white flour, and sixteen nuts. He throws the nuts in the air with one hand and tries to catch as many as he can. If an even number remains in his hand he draws one line on to the board. If an uneven number remains he draws two lines. Repeating this two times he arrives at a sacred figure which is named after one of the *Odu*. The *babalawo* then recites the poem and interprets it to his client.<sup>8</sup>

But here as well the question of interpretation—of the idea—comes in, and it would seem that even in the memorizing of the *Odu* some measure of art is essential in the selectivity. E. Bolaji Idowu points out that “this is an intricate art which is painfully and laboriously learnt before it can be mastered to any appreciable degree. To master it completely is a counsel of perfection. One has to learn the two hundred and fifty-six *Odu* with the endless stories connected with them, the practical applications of the stories, and the pharmacopoeia which is part of the system, all by heart.”<sup>9</sup> In addition to interpreting, the *babalawo* is allowed the power of invention. His own personal stories are incorporated into the *Odu* corpus, which accounts in part for the disparity between Beier’s figure and Idowu’s. Even here, where artistic expression is firmly yoked to ritual, the nature of the oral tradition is still one of accretion. So Wande Abimbola has collected an *Odu* which describes the good luck of a *babalawo* (who had himself followed the advice of other *babalawo*) who had journeyed to Benin at a time when the king died and when, according to custom, a great portion of the dead king’s wealth had to be given to the fortunate newcomer. As the *babalawo* himself chants:

I arrive in good time  
I travelled in good time  
I am the only man who travels in time of fortune  
When valuable objects of wealth are being deposited, I entered  
    unannounced like the heir to wealth.  
I am not the heir to wealth  
I am only good at travelling in time of fortune.  
These people divined for the fat stranger  
Who would enter unannounced  
On the day the property of the dead king of Benin was  
    being shared.<sup>10</sup>

By now it should be evident that the traditional artist, though functioning in society and responsible to it, was never a mere instrument of society. Although an anonymous intermediary, he was expected to reorder the group experience, not merely because there was a “need to