

DIRECTIONS FOR TEACHERS

LISTENING SECTION

COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION IN ENGLISH

Thursday, June 17, 2004—9:15 a.m. to 12:15 p.m., only

BE SURE THAT THE LISTENING SECTION IS ADMINISTERED TO EVERY STUDENT.

- 1 Before the start of the examination period, say:

Do not open the examination booklet until you are instructed to do so.

- 2 Distribute one examination booklet and one essay booklet to each student.

- 3 After each student has received an examination booklet and an essay booklet, say:

Tear off the answer sheet, which is the last page of the examination booklet, and fill in its heading. Now circle “Session One” and fill in the heading on each page of your essay booklet.

- 4 After the students have filled in all headings on their answer sheets and essay booklets, say:

Look at page 2 of your examination booklet and follow along while I read the **Overview** and **The Situation**.

Overview:

For this part of the test, you will listen to an account about the role of “griots” in West African society, answer some multiple-choice questions, and write a response based on the situation described below. You will hear the account twice. You may take notes on the next page anytime you wish during the readings.

The Situation:

Your speech class is studying oral traditions and plans to publish a series of articles in booklet form explaining these traditions. You have chosen to write an article in which you describe the griot tradition of West Africa and explain how that tradition is passed on. In preparation for writing your article, listen to an account by Ken Hawkinson. Then use relevant information from the account to write your article.

Now I will read the passage aloud to you for the first time.

- 5 Now read the passage aloud with appropriate expression, but without added comment.

Listening Passage

In West Africa, there is a saying: “Among the things existing in the world, speech is the only thing giving birth to its mother.” What is meant here is that little discussions lead to bigger discussions through which all problems may be solved. It is believed that speech links people together and establishes order. Whenever a lesson is to be taught, a decision made, or a problem solved, the people in a traditional village will sit beneath a tree and engage in a discourse filled with images, metaphors, stories, and proverbs. Much of this discourse speaks to the importance of listening to the elders for it is they who hold within them the wisdom gained by previous generations. It is said, “An old person’s mouth smells bad, but it utters good things,” “When the mother cow is chewing the grass, the young calves watch its mouth,” and finally, “Old cooking pots make better sauce.” The traditional leader of this discourse, and he who has been called to educate and entertain the people of his village, is the griot.

While many children of West Africa are provided with the opportunity to attend a formal school, others still receive their education through traditional methods. Through the folklore, children may learn the values of their society, acquire a sense of place in the hierarchy of their group, and hear of the traditional practices and rituals that are a part of their daily life. While here in the West we use science to explain many of the secrets of our world, in traditional West Africa, mythology serves to explain the unexplainable and pass the collective knowledge of one generation on to the next. When I was in Mali, I had the opportunity to observe how a full eclipse of the moon was understood. The people around me chose to believe in the explanation provided by their oral tradition, that a black cat was covering the moon. Most of the night, the beating of drums could be heard while that cat was slowly driven away.

All people know and tell folktales in West Africa, but only the hereditary griots pass on the myths, epics, and history of their people. They also memorize the lineage of their clan and the noble family to whom they are attached, they sing songs of praise to the family’s greatness and wisdom, they tell the stories that teach people to live productively and cohesively in society, they provide the music both to entertain the people and to support the many rituals and ceremonies, and they serve as living libraries for the traditional mythology that links people to their cultural heritage. These myths, epics, histories, tales, songs, and music have come to be known as the “old speech.” The griots have been designated by their generation to be the depository of this collective knowledge and they spend their lives making themselves aware of it and developing the necessary skills needed to share it effectively with others.

To be a griot one must be born into the griot caste. Members of this caste live near noble families who are their benefactors. In return for keeping their family genealogy and history, and composing and singing songs of praise, nobles will help support the griot families. Since most villages have families of noble caste living within them, so too do most villages have griots. Those villages without nobles or griots are visited by traveling griots, much like the circuit preacher on the American frontier.

Everyone born into this caste carries the name “griot” but not all will become storytellers and musicians. Beginning at an early age, griot children attend storytelling events with their parents and are introduced to the stories and music. Only those who show particular promise are called to go into an apprenticeship with a master griot. Those not called take on the work of their tribe and become farmers, fishermen, or herders.

Each clan or extended family has a master griot who takes in these young apprentices and trains them throughout their youth and young adulthood. The apprentices begin by doing much of the cooking and cleaning in the compound while all the time listening, and

observing the older students and master. Formal training begins with the apprentices learning to repair and build instruments. They receive instruction on how to play the instruments and gradually become proficient on the guitar, the kora, the drums, or balafone, and in time learn the tunes and rhythms that accompany all the stories in their masters' repertoires. As the years go by they learn and memorize the genealogy and history of the noble families, their praise songs, and the internal politics of the families so one day they may serve as effective arbitrators. They practice simple storytelling and are coached by their elders on how to enhance their use of voice, movement, gesture, and overall delivery style. Gradually, their memory and skill develops to the point where they can recite the great epics of their people, playing an instrument as they speak.

But to be a griot involves far more than the training. Africans believe that to be a griot one must be born a griot, one must be anointed with the "old speech" which is acquired from one's mother and refers to the special knowledge embedded in one at birth. It is believed that the ensuing years of training are simply to release that which is already within. This belief also applies to the griots' ability to play the instruments: they were born with the ability to sing and play, and the years of practice and training merely allow that ability to appear. It generally takes fifty years before a griot realizes his full potential....

In the presence of the structured form of European education in West Africa, there is a question about what is to become of griots and the "old speech" in the future. While perhaps necessary if one is to exist in the "modern" world, this type of education with its tilt toward a discursive world view may undermine the African's ability to understand the "old speech." There are also the problems resulting from television, which is pulling people away from the performances and messages of the traditional griots. Perhaps the most macabre experience I had in my three years in Africa occurred on a Sunday night, while visiting friends in a desert village. The chief brought out his generator and television, and along with the entire village, I sat in the sand and watched an episode of *Dynasty* dubbed into French. Many in Africa now prefer such television shows to the traditional stories told by griots....

Though the future may look bleak, most Africans say that the "old speech" can never die. They say that the worst that can happen is that it will fall dormant for a time. Then, some day, when the knowledge and wisdom of ancient tradition is called for again, it will re-emerge in the songs of a new generation of griots.

— from "Old Speech,"
Parabola, Spring 1994

6 After reading the passage aloud once, say:

You may take a few minutes to look over **The Situation** and your notes.
(Pause) Now I will read the passage aloud a second time.

7 Read the passage a second time.

8 After the second reading, say:

Now turn to page 4 of your examination booklet, read the directions, and answer the multiple-choice questions. Be sure to follow all the directions given in your examination booklet and your essay booklet. You may now begin.

