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Eureka, CA**

**Delta State University**

**NEH Landmarks Workshop  
The Most Southern Place on Earth**

**Subject/Topic/Unit: West African Folk Tales and Bluesmen as the Griots of The Delta**

**Grade Level: Seventh Grade Social Science**

**I. Main Ideas/Conceptual Understanding/Goals**

- Students will understand the role and importance of the Griot in ancient West African societies
- Students will understand how elements of West African music were brought to slave and sharecropping societies in the Mississippi Delta and helped shape blues music
- Students will understand how cultures preserve traditions, histories, and stories orally

**II. Specific Objectives/Overview**

Students will become familiar with the role of African Griots by reading and then restating traditional African folk-tales in the common A-A-B rhyme pattern of the blues music of the Mississippi Delta. Once students are familiar with that rhyme pattern, I'll provide them with some specific information about the blues that was created in the Delta, and have them write blues songs about typical blues themes, or songs that re-tell a contemporary folk tale. The main objective is to prove that the musical and historical purpose of the African Griot manifested itself in the Delta in the form of Delta blues. This week long lesson will occur during our study of West African cultures of the Middle Ages.

The California State Social Science Standards that will be addressed are:

**7.4** Students analyze the geographic, political, economic, religious and social structures of the sub-Saharan civilizations of Ghana and Mali in West Africa

**7.4.5** Describe the importance of written and oral traditions in the transmission of West African history and culture.

### **III. Procedures**

#### **A. Introduction/Motivation (“hook”)**

I’ll explain to the class that we’ll be hearing ancient West African folk tales about Anansi, the trickster god of West African lore. Anansi is often depicted as either a spider, a human, or a combination of both. His stories often were used to explain human characteristics, or to explain why humans or animals acted in certain ways. They are stories that some of the griots told. There are many stories available for public use at the website:

[librivox.org/west-african-folk-tales-by-william-h-barker/](http://librivox.org/west-african-folk-tales-by-william-h-barker/)

We’ll discuss the moral of the story and determine the main point of the story as a class. I’ll tell the class that many of the traditional West African folk tales were told by musical storytellers known as griots. Griots played an instrument called the kora. The griots preserved the tales, and the lessons they shared. They passed them down through generations, often adding their own personal touches to embellish the stories. I’ll explain to them that this African tradition of musical storytelling was preserved in the United States first in slave communities in the American South, and later in the blues music of the Delta. Once we’ve established the purpose of the story, and discussed that legacy of the griots, I’ll have students write a verse about the story using the A-A-B rhyming pattern traditionally used in Delta blues. We’ll review the A-A-B patterns the students create until the students have a firm understanding of how they work (see slides in attached powerpoint). We’ll also establish a common number of syllables for each line so that what they create will be something that can be sung along to traditional blues riffs.

### **B. Study/Learning**

Day 1-?: Students will be assigned individual stories to analyze from the librivox website and will create 12 line versions (4 verses) of the stories using the A-A-B rhyme pattern. If time permits these could be printed and combined with a student illustration and posted around the classroom.

Day 2 (or later, depending on how long the first activity takes): I'll discuss elements and roots of the blues with the class using a powerpoint (attached). Students will take notes by filling in the blanks on the attached handout. Because I play guitar, I'll play and sing a few examples for the class. It is during this lecture that I'll attempt to establish the connection between African music and story telling, and the blues. I'll also show a brief segment about the blues from the American Roots Music DVD series.

Day 3: Students will write their own 12 lined blues songs about topics discussed in the lecture from the previous day, or contemporary folk tales.

### **C. Culmination**

I'll perform some of the better songs and invite students to sing their own songs if they would like to.

### **D. Follow-up**

Questions about griots and the blues will appear on the unit test.

## **IV. Materials/Resources**

"Griots of West Africa." An introductory essay by Robert Palmer (attached)

African folk tales found at:

[librivox.org/west-african-folk-tales-by-william-h-barker/](http://librivox.org/west-african-folk-tales-by-william-h-barker/)

American Roots Music DVD set

Powerpoint lecture (attached)

Student note fill-in (attached)

"Why the Praying Mantis Still Shakes." An example of an Anansi tale (attached).

**V. Evaluation related to objectives**

Completion of two 12 lined “songs” in the A-A-B pattern

Test results