LESSON 1
WHO WERE THE STORYTELLERS?
THE POET SINGS

VOCALESSENCE WITNESS

LEARNING GOALS:

- Describe the role of storytellers in preserving and sharing history, knowledge, traditions, and experiences.
- Explain how griots/jelis/djelis use storytelling, music, poetry, and performance to preserve cultural memory.
- Explore how Lamban and Gullah storytelling traditions use music, movement, oral tradition, and performance to pass cultural knowledge between generations.
- Connect traditional storytelling practices to the ways poets, musicians, and other artists share stories and ideas today.

MATERIALS:

- "Joli A Da" lyrics
- Projector/display for videos or images
- Lamban video link
- Whiteboard
- Markers
- Paper for student reflections

OBJECTIVE

Students will explore the role of storytellers in preserving and sharing cultural memory, with a focus on griots/jelis/djelis, Lamban, and Gullah storytelling traditions, and identify how words, music, movement, and performance can communicate stories, history, and cultural knowledge.

PROCESS

1. Opening: "Joli A Da"

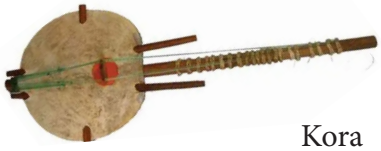
Begin the lesson with "Joli A Da" (pronounced JA-LI-A-DA), a song meaning "I am glad to meet you," calling out to others to come listen to the Griot. Provide students with the lyrics. Teach the song using call and response.

(Lyrics to part 1 of lesson forthcoming)

After teaching the song, briefly discuss its meaning and introduce the word ***Griot***. Explain:

> In several West African traditions, particularly among Mande-speaking peoples, a **griot**, also called a jeli or djeli (pronounced JA-LI), is a storyteller, musician, praise singer, and keeper of cultural knowledge. Griots have traditionally helped preserve and share stories, genealogies, histories, proverbs, music, and wisdom from one generation to the next.

Griots traditionally learned through long apprenticeships and, in many communities, griot roles were passed through families. They might perform for important ceremonies, praise patrons or leaders, recount histories and epics, and use music and poetry to communicate knowledge. Instruments such as the **kora** and **balafon** are closely associated with Mande jeli traditions.



Kora

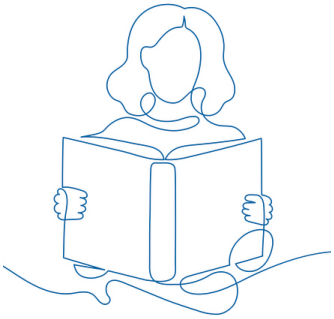
Emphasize that "griot" is a broad term used in English, while jeli and djeli are terms used within particular West African cultural and linguistic traditions.



Balafon

Ask students:

- Why might a community need someone to help preserve and share its stories?
- What kinds of information are important for a community to remember?
- Who are the storytellers in your family or community?



Tell students that they will explore what it means to be a storyteller, why storytelling is important, and how stories can help people understand themselves, learn about others, and build community.

2: Introduce the Concept of Storytelling

Write **"STORYTELLER"** on the board.

Ask students:

- What makes someone a storyteller?
- What does a storyteller do?
- Does a story have to be a book?
- Does a story have to be true?
- Why to people tell stories?
- What can stories do for a person or a community?

Invite students to share ideas and create a working definition of *storyteller* together.

Then introduce the idea that storytelling can happen through words, music, movement, images, and performance.

Explain: A storyteller doesn't always sit down and write a story. People can tell stories by singing, dancing, performing, creating art, writing poetry, or sharing memories.

MINNESOTA STATE STANDARDS CONNECTIONS

MUSIC: Responding
Standard 7: Analyze and construct interpretations of artistic work. Students explore how music communicates meaning and how musical elements contribute to that meaning.

MUSIC: Connecting
Standard 7: Analyze and construct interpretations of artistic work. Students explore how music reflects cultural and historical contexts through griot/jeli, Lamban, and Gullah storytelling traditions.

ELA: Connecting/Responding
Standard 7: Participate actively in collaborative discussions, building on others' ideas and expressing ideas clearly and respectfully.

ELA: Creating
Standard 9: Generate and document musical ideas for a variety of purposes and contexts.

Connect to WITNESS:
Poets are storytellers, and poems can convey meaning, share experiences, and tell stories.

3: Why is Storytelling Important?

Introduce the idea that people tell stories for many different reasons.

Stories can help us:

- Remember
- Teach
- Connect
- Celebrate
- Understand
- Question
- Imagine
- Preserve history
- Share experiences

Lead the class discussion around the following questions:

- What can a story teach us?
- How can a story help us understand someone's experience?
- What stories need to be told?
- Whose stories do we hear?
- Whose stories might we not hear?



Introduce the concept of cultural memory:

> Cultural memory is the knowledge, stories, traditions, beliefs, and experiences that a community remembers and passes from one generation to another.

Explain that storytelling can help carry this cultural memory forward.

WHO IS A GRIOT?

A griot, also called a jeli or djeli in Mande traditions, is a traditional storyteller, musician, praise singer, and keeper of cultural knowledge. They are a living library; a human repository of songs, stories, history, and key artistic components of a culture.

For generations, jeli families have preserved and performed important histories, genealogies, stories, proverbs, songs, and epic traditions. Griots have also served as advisers and participants in important ceremonies and have used music and poetry to remember and communicate the deeds of important people.

One famous example is the Epic of Sundiata, a long oral tradition about Sundiata Keita and the founding of the Mali Empire. Jelis have helped preserve and perform versions of this history through generations.

A griot's work is not simply about entertaining people. Their work can help a community remember who they are, where they came from, and what their community values.

Ask students:
If a community didn't have books, photographs, or the internet, how could it remember its history?

Allow students to brainstorm.

Then explain:

Oral storytelling can carry information across generations. When someone tells a story that they learned from a parent, grandparent, teacher, or elder, they become part of a chain of people carrying that knowledge forward.



Nino Galissa is a seventh-generation griot in Guinea-Bissau. He composed a song about the new archaeological excavation of Kansala, the legendary capital of a vanished kingdom in that part of West Africa.



Griots performing in Sofara, Mali

LAMBAN: STORYTELLING THROUGH MUSIC & MOVEMENT

Lamban is a traditional musical and dance tradition associated with jeli communities in the Mande region of West Africa, including areas of present-day Mali and Guinea. It is sometimes called Jeli Don (Ja-Li-Don), meaning the dance of the jeli.

Lamban shows us that storytelling doesn't always happen through words. Music and movement can also carry cultural knowledge and identity.

Traditional Lamban performances can include musical patterns, singing, praise, dance, and references to important people and stories. In some performances, musical phrases can bring particular people, histories, or cultural associations to mind for listeners who know the tradition.



Praise dance to the djelis (griots) at the 2019 Solstice Parade Opening Night in Santa Barbara, CA.

Listen, Watch, Notice

Play a short excerpt of a Lamban.

Ask students to listen/watch silently and identify:

- What do you hear?
- What do you see?
- What is the music doing?
- What is the movement doing?
- How might music or dance communicate something without explaining it in words?

Then ask:
How is Lamban another form of storytelling?

This is a nice place to reinforce that the *storyteller isn't always just the person speaking*. The musicians, singers, dancers, and audience can all participate in keeping a tradition alive.



Lannaya Drum and Dance Ensemble performing a Lamban.

GULLAH STORYTELLING

The Gullah Geechee people are descendants of enslaved Africans from different West and Central African societies who were forced to work on plantations along the coastal regions and Sea Islands of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. Their communities developed and maintained distinctive cultural traditions, including language, music, stories, spiritual practices, foodways, and crafts.

Storytelling has been an important part of Gullah Geechee cultural life. Stories, songs, sayings, proverbs, and other forms of oral tradition helped people pass knowledge, history, beliefs, humor, and lessons from one generation to another.

Gullah storytelling includes many different kinds of stories, including animal tales, humorous stories, legends, personal experiences, spiritual traditions, and stories about community life. The Library of Congress has preserved recordings of Gullah stories and songs collected from community members, demonstrating the importance of oral traditions in preserving cultural knowledge.

Gullah Geechee musical and storytelling traditions include forms of participation in which one person or group calls and another responds. The ring shout, for example, combines singing, rhythm, movement, and community participation and has roots in the traditions of enslaved Africans and their descendants along the coastal South.



Anita Prather Singleton, a Gullah master storyteller from St. Helena Island, shared stories and songs.



Renowned storyteller Lillian Grant-Baptiste

Ask students:

- Why might oral storytelling have been especially important for people whose histories were not recorded in the ways that powerful institutions recorded history?
- What can stories preserve that a textbook might not?
- How can a song, saying, or family story carry history?

Emphasize Gullah Geechee storytelling is not simply a copy of West African storytelling. Gullah Geechee culture developed in the United States through the experiences of African-descended people and includes both African cultural influences and new traditions that developed in their communities.

4: Stories Can Travel

Draw this simple chain on the board:
PERSON → STORY → COMMUNITY → NEXT GENERATION

Explain: Stories can travel from person to person and generation to generation. Sometimes the story changes as people tell it, but important ideas, memories, values, and cultural knowledge can continue.

Ask students to think of one story, saying, song, recipe, tradition, or piece of advice that has been passed down in their family or community.

Have them turn to a partner and share:
Something that has been passed down to me is _____.

Then ask:
Who helped pass it down?

Connect this back to the lesson:
Griots/jelis → preserve cultural memory through storytelling, music, and performance.
Lamban → shows how music and movement can carry cultural traditions.
Gullah storytellers → preserve stories, language, music, history, and community traditions through oral tradition.

5: My Story: A Self-Portrait

Distribute the My Story: A Self-Portrait worksheet. Explain that students are storytellers and can use art to tell a story about who they are and what matters to them. Encourage students to include people, places, objects, symbols, colors, or words that represent their story.

As students create their portraits, feel free to play the song "Take My Picture" by Nur-D.

Quick Exit Question

Have students complete: **One thing a storyteller can help a community remember is _____.**

Or for younger students: **A storyteller helps people _____.**

STUDENT WORKSHEET

MY STORY: A SELF-PORTRAIT

THE POET SINGS

VOCALESSENCE WITNESS

You are a storyteller! Stories can be told in many different ways. You can tell a story with words, music, poetry, art, photographs, movement, or even a picture of yourself. Your portrait can tell a story about you—who you are, what matters to you, and the people and places that have helped shape you.

Create a portrait that tells a story about YOU. Your portrait can include people, places, objects, symbols, colors, words, or anything else that tells your story.

As you draw, think about:
Who are you? What is important to you? Who and what are part of your story?

Name(s): _____ Date: _____

MI HISTORIA: UN AUTORRETRATO

EL POETA CANTA

VOCALESSENCE WITNESS

¡Eres un narrador! Las historias se pueden contar de muchas maneras diferentes. Puedes contar una historia con palabras, música, poesía, arte, fotografías, movimiento e incluso con una imagen tuya. Tu retrato puede contar una historia sobre ti: quién eres, qué es importante para ti y las personas y los lugares que han ayudado a formarte.

Crea un retrato que cuente una historia sobre TI. Tu retrato puede incluir gente, lugares, objetos, símbolos, colores, palabras o cualquier otra cosa que diga tu historia.

Mientras dibujas, piensa en:
¿Quién eres? ¿Qué es importante para ti? ¿Quiénes y qué cosas forman parte de tu historia?

Nombre(s):_____ Fecha: _____