

Study Guide for Teachers

Charlotte Blake Alston

Stories and Songs in the African Oral Tradition

presented by
Young Audiences New Jersey & Eastern PA
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ABOUT THE PROGRAM

For hundreds of years throughout the African continent, stories were the way the beliefs, mythology, cultural identity, history, and shared community values of a people were taught and preserved. Charlotte Blake Alston uses her melodic and mesmerizing voice to breathe life into contemporary and ancient tales alike, accompanying her stories with thumb piano, djembe, and 21-string kora. This program draws upon the rich stories, songs, games, and music that are the hallmarks of the African and African-American oral traditions.

ARTIST INFORMATION

Charlotte Blake Alston is a Philadelphia-based storyteller, narrator, and singer whose interest in literature, the oral tradition, and the arts began in childhood when her father read to her the work of writers and poets. After 21 years of teaching from the preschool through graduate levels, Charlotte chose to devote more time to touring and performing.

Since 1994, she has been the host of *Sound All Around*, the Philadelphia Orchestra's preschool concert series, and continues to appear as a guest host and narrator on family concerts. Charlotte also hosts *Carnegie Kids*, Carnegie Hall's preschool concert series, and has been a featured artist on the Carnegie Hall Family Concert Series since 1996. She has been a featured teller at the National Storytelling Festival, the National Festival of Black Storytelling, and at regional festivals throughout North America. She has been a featured artist at the Presidential Inaugural Festivities in Washington, DC, and the Pennsylvania Gubernatorial Children's Inaugural Celebrations in Harrisburg, PA.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR STUDENTS

The oral (griot) tradition has been passed down for centuries in the present-day West African countries of Mali, Gambia, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Senegal. The griots are the embodiment of their countries' societal histories. In contrast to written literature, the African oral history is composed to be verbally performed, and is an integral part of spoken word performance, theater, dance, and music. The griots, through their public and private performances of story and music, transmit historical facts from one generation to the next.

In traditional African societies, some professions are primarily conditioned by family heritage. The griots are one example of this tradition. Future historians are born, raised, and imbued with the education and skills necessary to serve their societies. Other families in the societies employ the services of a griot as a personal historian. The griot spends much time with the employer families recording important events while at the same time passing the history and the job on to his or her children so that the history of the employer family stays alive for all times. Most important, the griot ensures that the historical recordings of his or her employer are passed on to the future generations of that family through story and music performances at family gatherings.

One of the attributes of the griot tradition that remains today is the respect for the griot as a chronicler and competent commentator on social events. The griot has retained the right to openly criticize all social classes. The freedom to criticize is unlimited, and the griot's criticism is almost always accepted.

LEARNING GOALS

- To pass on the great tradition of the griot, who instructs and entertains through stories.
- To inspire audience members to tell their own stories.
- To empower children and adults to feel that they can make a difference in their world.
- To impart important and helpful messages through stories in ways that can be retained.

BEFORE THE PROGRAM

1. Read several folktales to or with your class. If you can, include an Anansi story, a tall tale, and a story that explains natural phenomena, such as "Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears." Try to find two versions of the same story. Have the children listen and make comparisons.
2. Encourage students to tell—not read—a story with which they are familiar. Discuss the differences between telling and reading a story.
3. Have your children brainstorm what they think a storyteller might do to make a story interesting to an audience. Encourage them to watch and listen carefully during the performance to see what Ms. Alston does to make the stories interesting and fun.
4. Many of the stories and songs that Ms. Alston shares are passed down through the generations.
 - Discuss how cultural history and ethnic traditions are preserved within a family.
 - Ask students to share any stories, songs, or special customs particular to their own families or cultures.
 - Point out how the oral tradition plays a vital role in defining history and heritage.

VOCABULARY WORDS

Griot: Master storyteller/historian in West African countries, responsible for passing on the history and culture of their communities.

Ancestors: People who were part of your family or ethnic group before you were born to the family or group.

Version: A different way of telling a traditional or familiar story.

Dilemma Tales: Stories that present a problem that is then left to the audience to discuss before the outcome is told.

Call and Response: A traditional African singing style. One person sings a line and a chorus responds. This style of singing which has survived in African-American street games and choral singing.

Shekere (*shake-A-ray*): A percussion instrument made from a dried gourd.

Balophone: An ancestor to the xylophone. Keys are made of wood with small open gourds tied under wood blocks creating resonance. Played with a mallet.

Talking drums: Elongated drums with two heads held under the arm. Squeezing changes the pitch. These drums were once used to communicate. The drums imitate the human voice.

AFTER THE PROGRAM

1. Check the list your students generated before the performance. Ask the students to see if there are any items on the list that the storyteller incorporated into her storytelling style. Ask them to recall anything that the storyteller did that was not on the list.
2. Discuss the specific things that held their attention the most .
3. Ask students if any of the stories had lessons or left them with something to think about. Ask them to identify the stories and the lessons learned.
4. Ask how the performance would have been different if the storyteller had sat down and read the same stories.
5. Have students illustrate one of the stories heard.
6. Make a list of "unexplainables": anything from why the sky is blue to why boys like to tease girls. Have students select an unexplainable, make up a story that explains it, then tell that story to the class.
7. Have your students think of a special message or lesson they would like to share, then create a story that illustrates that lesson and read it or tell it to the class. See if the class can guess the lesson or message before the student reveals it.
8. Make a story cloth. Have the students select a story of their choice. Students may draw or cut out construction-paper figures that represent characters or aspects of the story selected. Sew or glue each figure on a large piece of burlap. Students can use the story cloth to retell the story to another class. Story cloths can be displayed.
9. Using a story from the performance or another of their choice, students can act out a story in the form of a skit or using puppets.

RESOURCES

Virginia Aardema, *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears*.

Peggy Appiah, *Who's in Rabbit's House? Tales of an Ashanti Father*.

Marion Barnes and Linda Goss, eds., *Talk That Talk: An Anthology of African-American Storytelling*.

William Faulkner, *The Day the Animals Talked*.

Virginia Hamilton, *The People Could Fly*.

Margaret Read MacDonald, *The Storyteller's Sourcebook: A Subject, Title, and Motif Index to Folklore Collections for Children*.

Cheryl Warren Mattox, *Shake It to the One That You Love Best: Playsongs and Lullabies from Black Musical Tradition* (book and tape)