

Charlotte Blake Alston

A woman with dark hair, wearing a blue patterned shawl over a black top, is smiling and playing a traditional African stringed instrument (possibly a kora) on a sandy beach. The instrument has a wooden frame and a gourd body with metal beads. The background shows a beach and the ocean.

 VIRGINIA ARTS FESTIVAL 2025

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CHARLOTTE BLAKE ALSTON: TELLER OF TALES

It's no big surprise that Charlotte Blake Alston would become a master storyteller who uses musical instruments to help spin her tales. After all, words and music have been a part of her life since she was a little girl.

Charlotte's mother was a musician, a church organist who insisted that all her children learn to play piano and sing. Her father had a passion for language and literature and would often read books aloud. When Charlotte was six, her father gave her a collection of poetry by Paul Laurence Dunbar. Dunbar was a Black poet who often wrote in the dialect of nineteenth century African Americans—he wrote the way people spoke.

Charlotte's father asked her to memorize, or learn by heart, one of Dunbar's poems. When he saw how quickly she was able to do that, he began writing comedy monologues, or funny speeches, for Charlotte to memorize. Together, they would travel to churches, teas, and other social gatherings where Charlotte would recite the long passages she'd learned. Audiences loved "Miss Charlotte Blake," and she became very comfortable speaking in public.

When Charlotte was a teenager, she dreamed of performing with Alvin Ailey, the legendary choreographer, or designer of dance, who popularized the modern dance form. Charlotte was an athlete in high school; for her, dance was another form of athletic expression. She loved the way modern dance moves seemed to defy gravity. Charlotte's mother had different ideas, though. She encouraged Charlotte to attend college instead.

When Charlotte became a teacher after college, she started to pay attention to storytelling and the way it could communicate ideas. In her classroom, she used storytelling to bring subjects like history and literature, which can sometimes be a bit boring, to colorful life. One day, Charlotte told a story at the school assembly. The enthusiastic response from students and teachers surprised her—they talked about it for days!



Not long after that, Charlotte the teacher went to see a professional storyteller perform. It was a life-changing experience for her. She was amazed at how, just with his voice, the storyteller transported the audience to an entirely different time and place. "I immediately understood [storytelling's] power," she would say later. "So the first place for me to turn was to my own stories. Not my personal stories about growing up in my house, but the stories of the collective body of African and African American people."

Inspired, Charlotte researched African folktales and African American storytelling customs. As she performed these tales, adding the sounds of traditional African instruments, she discovered that stories can be "a bridge, a window, an opportunity for people to access, acknowledge, affirm, and value a cultural perspective that's different than their own." In other words, through stories, we can learn about and appreciate how people from different cultures view the world.

Today, Charlotte Blake Alston shares her stories and music at festivals, schools, universities, museums, libraries, and on stages around the world.. She's worked with musicians and dance troupes, and often performs with symphony orchestras and other musical groups, including the Philadelphia and Cleveland Orchestras, Orpheus Chamber Ensemble, and the Carnegie Hall Jazz Band. She has received many awards and honors for her remarkable storytelling.



Photo: Griots de Sambala, roi de Médine (illustration de Côte occidentale d'Afrique du Colonel Frey) - Fig.81 p.128 - [Cote : Réserve A 200 386]

GO, GO, GRIOT!

Storyteller Charlotte Blake Alston follows in the centuries-old footsteps of the African griot (pronounced GREE-oh). What's a griot? In many West African cultures, the griot is a storyteller, musician, poet, and historian. The word griot comes to us from French; a griot is also called a djali or jeli in West African Mande languages.

In precolonial West Africa, a griot might summon the people of his village with a drum or rattle at the end of the day. As villagers gathered around, the griot would tell wonderful stories that could include dancing and songs. In some stories, people or animals learned about the natural world. Other stories told of everyday life. Many stories told the village's or nation's history, describing great wars, thrilling hunts, or the births, marriages, and deaths of people in the community.

The griot told the stories again and again, keeping an oral record of his people's history. Griots were important and respected members of society, the people's "library." People sought out griots to mediate and settle disputes. Griots performed their stories at important ceremonies like weddings. In the Mali Empire, families of aristocratic warrior-kings had their very own griots who advised the kings, tutored the princes, and even arranged marriages. Traditionally, griots came from particular families, who passed down their stories and craftsmanship parent to child.

When African people were brought to the Americas during the time of slavery, they faced many challenges. Slaveholders tried to prevent them from practicing the traditions of their homeland. Still, storytelling was such an important part of African life, slavery could not stop it.

Charlotte Blake Alston explains, "Many of these stories come out of the condition of slavery and our feelings of powerlessness. The stories use animals and people and deal with the supernatural, the inexplicable. A lot are about underdogs who live by their wits."

Griots still exist today in many parts of West Africa. Some of the most famous pop stars of Mali, Guinea, and Senegal are griots who have transformed traditional songs into modern music. Charlotte Blake Alston studied with the highly respected Senegalese griot Djimo Kouyate.

: What Do You Think?

- : Do you like telling stories? Perhaps you might try playing the role of griot for your family, classroom, or school.
- : What tales would you tell?

STORYTELLING: AN ORAL TRADITION

As long as there have been words—language—people have told stories. Stories can help people make sense of the world they live in or look at something in a new way. Stories entertain and inform. They can take people to faraway places and make them feel happy or sad.

Stories that come to us in a spoken or sung form are part of *oral tradition*. In oral tradition, stories aren't written down. Instead, they're shared through storytelling or song. Because stories in the oral tradition are not set in writing, sometimes they change over time as they're told and retold. A storyteller might add a bit here or take away a bit there. As the story passes from teller to teller, from place to place, and from generation to generation, it can develop and grow.

Charlotte Blake Alston tells several different types of stories in the oral tradition.

Anansi story

Anansi the spider is a beloved figure in West African and Caribbean folklore. He is what's called a trickster, a character who plays tricks, doesn't follow the rules, or doesn't behave properly. There are many tricksters in the oral traditions of the world's cultures; Anansi stories are part of this great collection of trickster tales.

Tall tale

A tall tale is a story that stretches the truth. The characters in tall tales are "larger than life." In some tall tales, the characters are imaginary. In others, they're based on actual people who really lived.

Dilemma tale

African dilemma tales are stories that don't have a tidy ending. Instead, listeners are left to sort out for themselves how to solve the problem posed in the story.

Pourquoi tale

Pourquoi is the French word for "why." Pourquoi tales explain why something is the way it is. They usually deal with occurrences in nature, like why the camel has a hump, why the leopard has spots, or why mosquitoes buzz in people's ears.



: What Do You Think?

- Do any of these story types sound familiar to you? Have you ever heard or read an Anansi or trickster tale, tall tale, dilemma tale, or pourquoi tale? Try to write your own!

TRADITIONAL AFRICAN INSTRUMENTS

Like the griots, Charlotte Blake Alston often uses music to help tell her tales. She plays a variety of traditional African instruments, each with its own special sound. Which is your favorite?

Djembe

The djembe (JEM-bay) is a goblet-shaped wooden drum. It's played by hitting an animal skin stretched across the top of the drum with the open palm of the hand. The skin is secured to the drum with elaborate rope knots, which can be adjusted to change the drum's tone. The djembe originated centuries ago in Mali, but can now be found all over West Africa.

Berimbau

The berimbau (bay-RIM-bow) looks like a bow you might shoot arrows with. But instead of pulling on the bow's string, the player strikes it with a stick. A hollowed-out gourd attached to one end of the bow helps produce the berimbau's distinctive "wah-wah" sound. It's believed enslaved Africans brought the berimbau to Brazil, where it's used in the Afro-Brazilian martial art called capoeira.

Shekere

The shekere (SHAY-kuh-ray) is a type of rattle. It's made from a hollow gourd, which is covered with a net of seeds, beads, or shells. The shekere is shaken or hit against the hands. These rattles can be found throughout West Africa.

Mbira

The mbira (um-BEER-uh), or thumb piano, is made of strips of metal of different lengths fastened at one end to a piece of wood. The mbira often sits inside a gourd, which amplifies, or makes louder, the chiming sounds produced when the free ends of the metal strips are plucked with the fingers. Bottle caps, shells, or other objects are sometimes attached to the wood board to create a buzzing sound when the mbira is played. Believed to attract ancestral spirits, the mbira is the national instrument of Zimbabwe.

Kora

The kora (KOH-rah) is a harp made from a large gourd called a calabash. The dried calabash is cut in half and covered with cow skin. Twenty-one strings run from a long hardwood neck to a bridge on the skin. Though the kora's sound resembles that of a harp, it's played like a guitar or lute, but with the thumbs and index fingers only. The kora can be found in many West African countries, including Guinea, Mali, and Senegal.



AFRICA

Many Nations, Many Peoples

The continent of Africa is composed of many nations—more than fifty separate countries! Within those nations, there are hundreds of different ethnic groups, languages, cultural traditions, and belief systems.

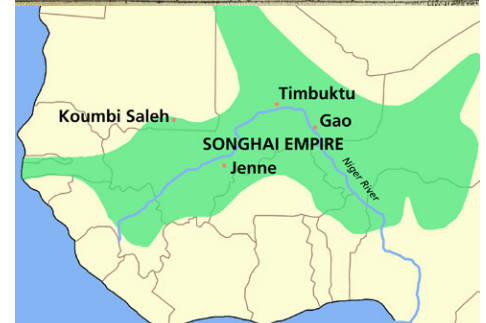
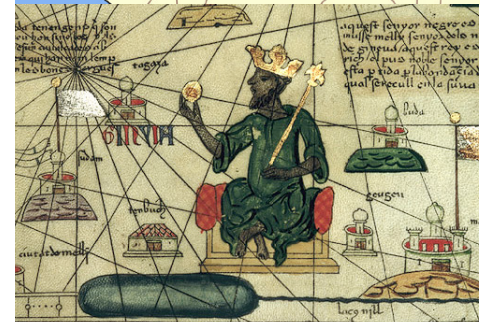
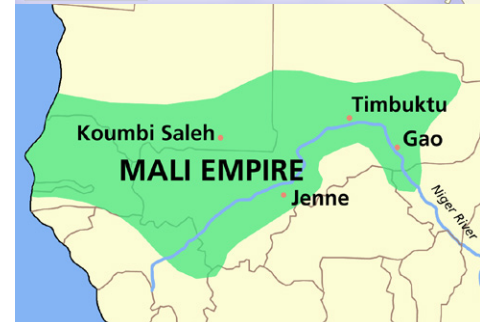
Many of the stories Charlotte Blake Alston tells and the instruments she plays come from West Africa. This area, the westernmost region of the African continent, includes vast grasslands as well as the desert of the southern Sahara and the dwindling rainforests along the coasts. West Africa covers approximately 5 million square miles. Sixteen countries make up West Africa: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo.

West Africa has a rich history. Ghana was one of the region's earliest kingdoms, emerging at the end of the eighth century near the southern border of the Sahara Desert. Ghana was known as the "land of gold." Gold was mined and traded with people in other parts of Africa, as well as in Europe. Because of the gold trade, the kingdom grew very wealthy.

In 1235 C.E., a great king named Sundiata became the leader of Mali, the empire would come to replace Ghana. The Mali Empire eventually ruled over all of Ghana, plus even more territory. During its time, Mali was the second largest empire in the world, behind only Asia's Mongol Empire. Mali's wealth came from the gold trade and the salt trade in the north. Mali's most celebrated king was Mansa Musa, who encouraged Islam as the region's religion. Great centers of Islamic learning emerged in Mali, where religion, mathematics, music, law, and literature were studied.

After Mansa Musa's death, the empire of Mali gradually declined. Songhai, once an important trade center within Mali, rose to power in the region. Songhai leaders extended their borders even farther and instituted a highly organized system of government. Songhai became the largest and most powerful kingdom in West Africa. In 1591 C. E., however, the empire collapsed, weakened by civil conflict and defeated by the Moroccan army.

Today, the West African nations of Ghana and Mali share their names with those ancient kingdoms, but are geographically different.



FOR TEACHERS

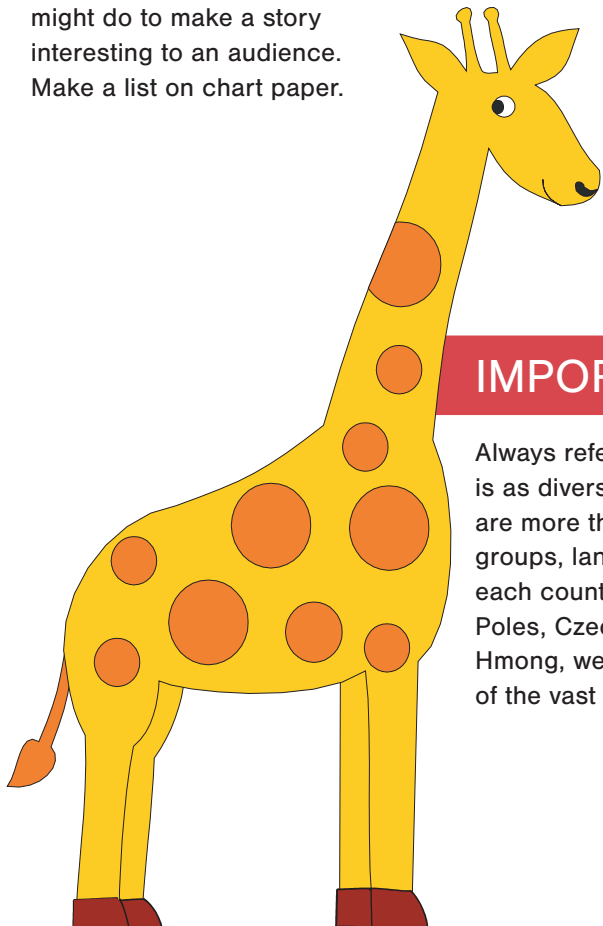
Before the Performance

Familiarize students with African and African American folktales by:

- Reading aloud or having students read several folktales (consult your school librarian for help in determining stories for your grade level).
- Reading aloud an Anansi story, a tall tale, a dilemma tale, or a pourquoi tale and asking students to discuss what they think is the moral of the story.
- Reading aloud two versions of the same story and having children make comparisons between the two.
- Encouraging students to tell, not read, a story they're already familiar with and discussing the differences between telling a story and reading that same story from a book.
- Having students brainstorm what they think a storyteller might do to make a story interesting to an audience. Make a list on chart paper.

Familiarize students with the names, locations, and diverse cultures of the African continent by:

- Identifying the ethnic group, culture, or country associated with the stories you use in the classroom. Write and speak the name of the group or region of origin when referring to the story. (For example, Anansi stories were created by the Ashanti people of what is now Ghana in the western part of the continent. Sungura, the trickster rabbit, comes from Kenya, on the opposite side of the continent. The lands, peoples, and lifestyles are different.)
- Identifying on a map or globe not just the African continent but the country (and ethnic group or culture, where possible) of the story's origin, such as the Ashanti of Ghana, the Yoruba of Nigeria, the Baganda of Uganda, or the Shona of Zimbabwe.
- Selecting an ethnic group, country, or region of the continent and researching and exploring the cultural traditions, foods, clothing, family structures, and languages of that region.
- Having students search an online encyclopedia for an African country and download or print out the information. What did students discover?



IMPORTANT

Always refer to the African continent as just that—a continent. It is as diverse, if not more so, than the European continent. There are more than fifty separate countries and hundreds of ethnic groups, languages, cultural traditions, and belief systems within each country's borders. Just as we make a point to clearly identify Poles, Czechs, Armenians, Scots, Bosnians, Serbs, Croats, or the Hmong, we must also do the same when referring to the inhabitants of the vast and ethnically diverse continent of Africa.



FOR TEACHERS

During the Performance

Ask students to:

- Listen and observe the storyteller carefully. Participate when asked.
- Notice how the storyteller uses her voice, and take notice of any additional items the teller uses to enhance the story.
- Visualize the setting and characters of the story.
- Be aware of what in the stories makes you laugh or feel empathy, excitement, sorrow, fear, or suspense. Do any of the situations in the story sound familiar?
- If the story has animal characters, pay attention to their behavior in the story. Do they take on human characteristics?
- Notice if a character—human or animal—learns a lesson in the story. Is there an aspect of the story the listener can learn from?

After the Performance

Review the list that was brainstormed prior to the performance. Ask students to identify items on the list the storyteller incorporated into her performance. Ask students to recall anything the storyteller did that wasn't included on the list.

Ask students:

- What specific things held your attention most?
- Did any of the stories leave you with something to think about or discuss? What, if any, lessons were learned from the stories?
- How were instruments used to enhance the story?
- Which of the stories were most enjoyable?

Suggested student activities:

- Retell the story in your own way.
- Illustrate one of the stories.
- Research and select your own story for telling.
- Create your own story, perhaps one that teaches a lesson.

Source: Siegel Artist Management

RESOURCES

Books

Africa for Kids: Exploring a Vibrant Continent by Harvey Croze, Chicago Review Press, 2006. Colorful look at the plants, animals, and people of Africa, including traditional ways of life and modern-day African society. Includes nineteen activities. Grade 4 and up.

Ancient West African Kingdoms by Jane Shuter, Heinemann-Raintree, 2009. What's a griot? How were the West African kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai ruled? Why did they disappear? Explores what the West African people of these empires wore, what they ate, how they traveled from place to place, how we know about them today, and much more. Grade 2 and up.

The Book of Griot: A Collection of African Folktales by Alexander Junior, Barnes & Noble Press, 2020. Delve into various folktales from different regions of Africa, from the story of the Drummer and the Alligator to the tale of the Boy Hunter.



Virginia Standards of Learning

English: K.DSR.1; K.RV.1; K.RL.1&3; 1.DSR; 1.RV.1; 1.RL.1, 3; 2.DSR; 2.RV.1; 2.RL.1, 3; 3.DSR; 3.RV.1; 3.RL.1-3; 4.RV.1; 4.RL.1-3; 5.RV.1; 5.RL.1-3

History and Social Science: Skills K-3, WG Music: K.3-7, 9; 1.3-7, 9; 2.3-7, 9; 3.3, 5-7; 4.3-7; 5.3-7; EI.3-7, 10-11

Internet

Anike Foundation: African Folktales

An array of illustrated African stories for students, with some told in animated videos! <https://anikefoundation.org/african-folktales>

Odyssey Online: Africa

Interactive portal where students can explore African art and cultures, based on the collections of the Michael C. Carlos Museum at Emory University. <https://carlos.emory.edu/htdocs/ODYSSEY/AFRICA/ahomepg.html>

Zoom School Africa

Elementary-level information, activities, and downloadable printouts about Africa from Enchanted Learning. <http://www.enchantedlearning.com/school/Africa/>

African Musical Instruments

Accessible description of a variety of African musical instruments for students, including photos and cultural details. <https://www.contemporary-african-art.com/african-musical-instruments.html>

BBC Bitesize: Music of Africa

Educational introduction to African music focused on percussion and rhythmic composition, as well as African rhythms' influence on music genres from pop to classical. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zhsny4j/revision/1>

Paul Laurence Dunbar

Brief biography and selected works of the late nineteenth century African American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, one of Charlotte Blake Alston's influences. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/paul-laurence-dunbar>

“How Griots Tell Legendary Epics through Stories and Songs in West Africa,” Metropolitan Museum of Art

Overview of griots of the Western Sahel with photos of relevant artifacts at the museum. Focused on the oral tradition of the epic of Sundiata, the legendary first king of the Mali Empire. <https://www.metmuseum.org/perspectives/sahel-sunjata-stories-songs>

FEEDBACK FORM

We need your feedback to make our Education Programs even better! Please take a moment to complete this form and either return it to the Virginia Arts Festival office at 440 Bank Street, Norfolk, VA 23510, fax it to (757) 605-3080, or e-mail your answers to education@vafest.org.

Event: _____

How did your students respond to the performance?

How did you prepare your students for this performance? Did you use the Education Guide? If so, how?
Did students enjoy the materials?

How did this performance contribute to experiential learning in your classroom?

What role do the arts play in your school? In your classroom?

If you could change one thing about this experience, what would it be?

Please include quotes and comments from your students as well!

(Optional)

Name: _____

School: _____ City: _____

Would you like to be part of our database? Yes No