

Unit 12

Transmission of Traditions

Section 1

Unit Materials

Questions To Consider

Question 1.

What are the means by which cultures preserve and transmit traditions?

Question 2.

In what ways can technology aid the transmission of tradition?

Question 3.

What kinds of historical forces propelled Islamic, Chinese, and Mande cultures to spread across Eurasia and Africa?

Question 4.

How do traditions interact with cultures into which they are introduced?

The Big Picture

How is this topic related to Increasing Integration?

When traditions are preserved, retold, and transmitted within cultures over time, they help integrate peoples through a sense of shared identity.

How is this topic related to Proliferating Difference?

When traditions are transmitted across cultural boundaries, they can contribute to an increased sense of difference by introducing new religions, customs, and cultures.

Unit Purpose

- Cultural traditions can be transmitted in many ways over time and across space. Religion, language, oral tradition, material culture, dance, and music are just some of the ways traditions can be transmitted.
- Technologies like writing, printing, and the production of paper can play critical roles in transmitting traditions to new social groups and cultures.
- All agents of cultural transmission select and shape the content of the traditions they transmit.

Unit Content Overview

Beginning with the earliest human communities — who moved with their animal herds or settled in places to gather, hunt, fish, or farm — people have discovered many different techniques and forms to transmit their traditions (such as language, history, customs, and religion) to the next generation. Art, architecture, music, dance, ritual, and writing are some of the means by which traditions can be transmitted over time and across space.

This unit explores the mechanisms by which traditions were transmitted and preserved in Islamic Spain, Korea, and West Africa between 500 and 1500 CE. The identities of peoples on the Iberian and Korean peninsulas were shaped by imported religious traditions (Islam in Spain and Buddhism in Korea). Institutions such as the Arabic translation school in Toledo and the Korean “Hall of Assembled Worthies” transmitted traditions — Greek and Arab medicine; mathematics, science, and philosophy at Toledo; and Chinese learning at the Korean court — across cultures that had profound impacts on world history. The technologies that supported transmission — paper and printing, in particular — had themselves been transmitted across cultures. In West Africa, oral tradition and musical performance were the primary ways in which culture was transmitted over time, especially through specially trained historian/storytellers called griots. Whether transmitted through print or oral tradition, however, all traditions are selectively re-created. Moreover, the transmission of tradition is linked to the questions each generation asks about the past — questions that are considered relevant to the times. A world historical perspective will be concerned with transmitting a past that will be useful in constructing an inclusive global identity.

Unit References

- Ralph A. Austen, ed., *In Search of Sunjata: the Mande Oral Epic as History, Literature, and Performance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).
- Jerry Brotton, *The Renaissance Bazaar: From the Silk Road to Michelangelo* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- Thomas Hale, *Griots and Griottes: Masters of Words and Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).
- Maria Rosa Menocal, *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain* (Boston: Little Brown, 2002).
- Sohn Pow-kee, “Printing Since the 8th Century in Korea,” *Koreana* 7, no. 2 (summer, 1993).
- Young-Key Kim-Renaud, *King Sejong the Great: The Light of 15th Century Korea* (Washington, DC: International Circle of Korean Linguistics, 1992).

Global Historical Context

- Time Period: 500–1500 BCE
- The millennium between 500 and 1500 was a period of major readjustment and change in regions all over the world. The early centuries CE had been a period of instability in most of the classical societies, including China, the Mediterranean, India, and southwest

Asia. After about 500 CE, these societies were faced with the necessity of restoring political and social order. With the restoration of order, these post-classical societies were able to re-establish and revive old networks of trade and cross-cultural exchange. Islam also first appeared in the post-classical era, and quickly spread from the Arabian Peninsula to India, North Africa, and the Iberian Peninsula. Buddhism continued to spread in this period, along with Confucianism from China to Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. Christianity, meanwhile, gained ground in Northern and Western Europe. After 1000 CE, the pace of cultural change quickened around the world, as states and kingdoms became even more centralized and cultural interactions increased. Indeed, the period 1000 to 1500 saw the development of the Mayan, Andean, and Mississippian cultures in the Americas; the European Renaissance; the creation of the Mongol Empire; and the establishment of empires and centralized states in East Asia, South Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa.

AP Themes

- Examines interactions in economies and politics by focusing on exchanges within the Islamic, East Asian, and West African worlds through trade, conquest, and diplomacy.
- Explores change and continuity by examining how regional cultures were changed and shaped by exposure to new cultural influences.
- Discusses cultural and intellectual developments because regional cultures in the Iberian Peninsula, Korea, and West Africa were altered as a result of exposure to new ideas and traditions.

Related Units

- Unit 2. History and Memory: How are history and memory different? Topics in this unit range from the celebration of Columbus Day to the demolition of a Korean museum to the historical re-interpretation of Mayan civilization, exploring the ways historians, nations, families, and individuals capture, exploit, and know the past, and the dynamic nature of historical practice and knowledge. It is related to Unit 12 because it also explores — albeit for a later period — the preservation and reconstruction of past traditions.
- Unit 7. The Spread of Religions: How do religions interact, adopt new ideas, and adapt to diverse cultures? As the missionaries, pilgrims, and converts of Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam moved around the world, the religions created change and were themselves changed. This unit is related to Unit 12 because an important means by which traditions were transmitted across cultural boundaries was by religious traditions.
- Unit 17. Ideas Shape the World: How do ideas change the world? This unit traces the impact of European Enlightenment ideals in the American and Haitian revolutions and in South America. It also examines the revitalization of Islam expressed in the Wahhabi movement as it spread from the Arabian Peninsula to Africa and Asia. It is related to Unit 12 because it demonstrates, in a different cultural context, the ways in which ideas transmitted from distant places took on new meanings in new cultural settings.
- Unit 26. World History and Identity: How have global forces redefined both individual and group identity in the modern world? This unit examines the transnational identity that emerged from the Chinese diaspora, and compares it to a newly redefined national Chechen identity forged through war with Russia. It is related to Unit 12 because it

demonstrates, for a later period, the ways in which cultural identities can be shaped by global influences.

Section 2

Video-Related Materials

Video Segment 1: Islamic Spain

This segment examines the influence of Islamic traditions in the Iberian Peninsula between the eighth and fifteenth centuries. Islam came to the region through conquest by Arab and Berber armies. After conquest, Islamic influence was spread through military might, intermarriage between conquerors and indigenous peoples, and immigrant Muslims who brought their culture, learning, and traditions with them. In the city of Cordoba, for example, immigrant Islamic leaders built mosques and gardens planted with imports from the Islamic world. Pilgrims from Spain traveled to Muslim holy sites, and both migrants and travelers from the Islamic world traveled to Spain. In each case, such people spread Islamic learning and ideas throughout the Iberian Peninsula. Aided by the technology of paper manufacturing, Arabic poetry and music became increasingly popular, and deeply influenced musical styles in the region. Non-Muslims, including both Jews and Christians, also encouraged the spread of Islamic culture by translating Arabic works into European languages — including some of the most important scientific texts of the era. However, by the late eleventh century, small Christian communities who had resisted Islamic conquest began the reconquista — the Christian reconquest of Spain. The reconquest took 500 years to accomplish, and in 1492, the last of the Muslims were expelled from the Iberian Peninsula. Even so, in both language and culture, Islamic traditions continue to be visible in Spain today.

Video Segment 2: Confucian Korea

This segment explores the influence of Chinese traditions in the Korean peninsula after the fourth century CE. Although Chinese influence in Korea dates as far back as the second century BCE, it was the introduction of Buddhism in the fourth century CE that had the most transformative effects on Korean society. By the seventh century, Buddhism was widely accepted in Korea. But Buddhism brought more than just a new religious philosophy — it also brought Chinese written language, literature, political ideas, and Confucian philosophy. Confucian philosophy provided a moral basis on which the Koryo and Chosun dynasties could rule, and established a class of scholars who needed to master many texts in order to be eligible for government service. This demand for texts — as well as the desire to spread Buddhism — created a related demand for technologies such as printing, also borrowed from China. By the thirteenth century, Koreans developed the first metal movable type, 200 years before the first Gutenberg Bible was printed using similar technologies. However, communication in Korean was difficult using borrowed Chinese characters. The desire to distribute the virtues of borrowed traditions like Buddhism in the native Korean language, then, resulted in the creation of a phonetic Korean alphabet, called Han'gul, in the fifteenth century. Han'gul, in turn, aided the transmission of traditions to many Koreans beyond the elite literary class who were able to learn Chinese characters.

Video Segment 3: Oral Traditions in West Africa

This segment explores the transmission of tradition in West Africa — a process that relied principally on oral tradition and performance rather than on written texts. In some areas, initiation rites and ceremonies functioned to communicate past traditions to living audiences. For example, among the Bamana peoples, one ceremony teaches audiences about their history as well as the qualities necessary to become a good farmer. Most West African societies also relied on the skills of griots — traditionalists who preserve the past through song and verse. These specialists, in effect, functioned as historians, motivational speakers, genealogists, poets, and musicians, and their job was to maintain traditions by performing them to large audiences. Although modern historians have questioned the historical accuracy of such oral traditions, the presence of archaic words and place names within the stories suggest that they are in fact quite old. Beginning in the

twelfth century, an Arabic written culture also began to appear in West Africa as a result of the spread of Islam. Although the first texts to appear in West Africa were limited to religious matters, secular texts that attempted to translate oral into written traditions also began to appear. However, written texts could not replace the role and appeal of the griots, who even now continue to play a role in West African societies.

Perspectives on the Past: What Happens When the Transmission of Traditions Is Disrupted?

How can people continue to transmit traditions even when they have been separated from their home cultures? Historian Richard Bulliet argues that even without a homeland, people continue to transmit cultural traditions. When Jews and Muslims were expelled from Spain, for example, they settled in the eastern Mediterranean or North Africa, and enriched those cultures by bringing Spanish music, language, and community structure to their new homes.

Video Details

Who Is Interviewed

- Candice Goucher
- Richard Bulliet
- Ma-ji Rhee

Primary Source Materials Featured in the Video

- ar-Rundi, Arab poet
- Sunjata, Malian ruler
- King Sejong, Korean ruler

Program Contents

| Begins | Ends | Contents |
|---------------|-------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 00:00 | 01:27 | Show tease, show opening credits |
| 01:28 | 02:37 | Program overview/introduction |
| 02:38 | 10:46 | Video Segment 1. <i>Islamic Spain</i> |
| 10:47 | 17:01 | Video Segment 2. <i>Confucian Korea</i> |
| 17:02 | 24:55 | Video Segment 3. <i>Oral Traditions in West Africa</i> |
| 24:56 | 26:25 | Perspectives on the Past: <i>What Happens When the Transmission of Traditions Is Disrupted?</i> |
| 26:26 | 28:25 | Show close and program credits |