Unit 12
Transmission of Traditions

Introduction to Unit
This unit explores the mechanisms by which traditions were transmitted and preserved in Islamic Spain, Confucian 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 medicines, 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 that 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 each generation’s own times.

Learning Objectives
- Identify the institutions and other means by which cultures preserve and transmit traditions.
- Recognize the role that the audience plays in the process of preserving traditions.
- Investigate the role that technology plays in the transmission of traditions.

Preparing for This Session
Read Unit 12 in the Bridging World History online text. You may also want to refer to some of the Suggested Readings and Materials. If you feel you need more background knowledge, refer to a college-level world history textbook on this subject (look under the index for Quipus, Griots, Korea, Printing).
Before You Begin—20 minutes

Discuss with your class the culture that the group has developed over the weeks of the course to date. What traditions did you develop around greeting each other, consuming food or drink, meeting outside of class time, interactions with the instructor, or special jokes or vocabulary that only members of your class would understand? How might you transmit these traditions to the next group studying world history? How would you decide what was worth preserving? What might be the process of transmission?

Watch the Video for “Unit 12: Transmission of Traditions”—30 minutes

As you watch the video, take notes on the aspects of culture each of the three case studies shows as important to the traditions in those areas. Moreover, make sure to keep track of the aspects of the cultures that are deemed important and the ways that traditions are transmitted. Be ready to discuss the difference between transmitting traditions through books and through oral storytelling.

Activity 1: Transmitting Traditions—90 minutes

The class should break into three groups. Each group will focus on one of the three case studies discussed in the video. Use the materials in this unit to create an interactive museum exhibition in which the culture(s) of Islamic Spain, Confucian Korea, or West Africa and means of transmitting traditions in those places are displayed. The key question for each interactive museum exhibition should be, “What criteria would people from Islamic Spain, Confucian Korea, or West Africa have used to select items for the exhibition?” Once the exhibitions are created, then each group will visit the others’ museums. Activity 2 will be a discussion of the criteria used to create the interactive museum exhibitions.

Resources for Islamic Spain Interactive Museum Exhibition

(also use other resources available to you in your textbook and library)

Historical Background

Arab and Berber armies conquered the Iberian Peninsula between the eighth and fifteenth centuries CE. After conquest, Islamic culture was spread through military might, intermarriage between conquerors and indigenous peoples, and immigrant Muslims who brought their traditions with them. 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. Though some Jews and Muslims continued to live in Spain, pretending to convert to Christianity, most of the forced migrants settled in North Africa or in the Ottoman Empire at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. In cities from Palestine to Bosnia, Jewish communities settled and lived in peace and harmony with their neighbors. And they brought with them their traditions from Spain: their music, their language, and their community structure. In North Africa, the Muslims from Andalusia had a similar effect, settling in cities from Morocco to Tunisia and bringing with them their traditions from Spain. So, the tragedy of 1492 proved to be a means of spreading a rich culture from Spain to other parts of the world.
Gardens and Architecture
The first Muslim ruler of Cordoba, Abd al-Rahman, a native of Syria, built mosques and gardens planted with imports from the Middle East and North Africa. By the tenth century, many new plants were introduced: citrus fruits, rice, sugar cane, cotton, pomegranate, roses, lilies, and herbs.

Libraries and Scholarship
Pilgrims from Spain traveled to Muslim holy sights, 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. The great centers of learning in the western region of Afro-Eurasia were Cairo, Basra, Baghdad, and Timbuktu. The Muslim pilgrims returned from their journeys with books and built libraries. The library of Cordoba housed some 400,000 volumes. This was at a time when the typical European library contained about 500 books, and when literacy was not yet valued among the ruling elite in northern Europe. Jews and Christians in Islamic Spain 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.

One of the most famous examples is the twelfth-century Jewish physician and philosopher Moses Maimonides, who was born in Cordoba. He wrote a number of famous works including a commentary in Hebrew on the Mishneh (a comprehensive code of Jewish law) and the Guide to the Perplexed, written in Arabic, which elucidates the ideas in the Torah in the context of the philosophy of the ancient Greeks. Ironically, the Jewish community was under attack during his lifetime, so he and his family moved to Cairo where he became the physician to the Sultan Saladin, the military commander who defeated the Crusaders. Below is Maimonides’ Oath for New Physicians—created to be an alternative to the Hippocratic Oath.

The eternal providence has appointed me to watch over the life and health of Thy creatures. May the love for my art actuate me at all times; may neither avarice nor miserliness, nor thirst for glory or for a great reputation engage my mind; for the enemies of truth and philanthropy could easily deceive me and make me forgetful of my lofty aim of doing good to Thy children. May I never see in the patient anything but a fellow creature in pain. Grant me the strength, time, and opportunity always to correct what I have acquired, always to extend domain; for knowledge is immense and the spirit of man can extend indefinitely to enrich itself daily with new requirements. Today he can discover his errors of yesterday and tomorrow he can obtain a new light on what he thinks himself sure of today. Oh, God, Thou has appointed me to watch over the life and death of Thy creatures; here am I ready for my vocation and now I turn unto my calling. (Moses Maimonides, Oath of Maimonides, c. 1200.)
Two generations after Christian armies captured Toledo, Bishop Raimundo created a school of translators there to re-write Arabic works into Latin so that educated people in northern Europe could read them. Some of the most important scientific texts of the early twelfth century that were translated were the writings of the eleventh-century Muslim philosopher and physician Ibn Sina. A Persian, Ibn Sina—known in later European medical texts as Avicenna—expanded on some of the medical ideas of the ancient Greeks. Europeans considered the Latin translation of Avicenna’s *Canon of Medicine* to be the most important source of medical knowledge until the sixteenth century.

**Music**

Poetic rhyme and meter in Arabic—and subsequently Arabic music—became increasingly popular by the ninth century. Aided by the technology of paper manufacturing, Arabic poetry and music became widely disseminated, and deeply influenced musical styles in Islamic Spain. Troubadors (*tarrab* means minstrel in Arabic) then spread this music throughout northern Spain and southern France.

**Resources for Chinese Culture in Korea Interactive Museum Exhibition**

*(also use other resources available to you in your textbook and library)*

**Chinese Influence**

The Chinese influence on the Korean Peninsula began as early as the second century BCE, when the Han dynasty established military outposts in the northern part of the peninsula. Waves of immigration and cultural influences from China continued to flow into Korea over the next 1500 years. Most significantly, in the fourth century CE, the Chinese introduced Buddhism. By the early seventh century, Buddhism was beginning to flourish in the state of Silla, which unified the peninsula for the first time in 668. With Buddhism came other Chinese cultural influences: written language, literature (including poetry written in Chinese styles), and Confucian political ideas and institutions. Confucianism was useful to the rulers of Silla’s successors, the Koryo and Choson dynasties. It established a moral basis of rulership and sanctioned a social hierarchy dominated by scholars steeped in Confucian classical texts. The members of this scholarly elite had to master many texts in order to pass examinations.

**Buddhism and Printing**

Buddhist believers created a demand for more and cheaper texts in Tang China. The Chinese printing technology used wooden carved plates and later wooden moveable type. The Koreans extended this technology in the eleventh century to metal molds, in order to print Buddhist texts with Buddhist images repeatedly. By the thirteenth century, both Confucian and Buddhist texts were reproduced using metal moveable type. The establishment of a Korean government printing office at this time demonstrates the importance of printed text to the Korean elite.

**Han’gul**

In the fifteenth century, King Sejong developed the writing tradition further when he commissioned the invention of Han’gul, the native phonetic writing system for Korean language. King Sejong declared in 1443,

> The sounds of our language differ from those of Chinese and are not easily communicated by using Chinese graphs. Many among the ignorant, therefore, though they wish to express their sentiments in writing, have been unable to communicate. Considering this situation with compassion, I have newly devised 28 letters. I wish only that the people will learn them easily and use them conveniently in their daily life. (Sejong, “Hunmin Chongum [Proper Sounds To Instruct the People]” in *Sourcebook of Korean Civilization*, eds. Peter H. Lee and Donald Baker, trans. Ch’oe Young-ho, [New York: Columbia University Press, 1993–1996] 516–517.)
In the Bamana people’s initiation rites for the initiation society known as Tyi Wara, the antelope mask is very important. It teaches its members both about their history and about the knowledge and qualities that make a successful farmer. Ironically, as the forests were cleared to make farms, the habitat for the antelope was destroyed. When the antelope mask is worn in dance performances, it represents a supernatural being—half man, half animal.

Speech itself was imbued with power, and part of the power/energy of the griot was the fact that he was transmitting the words of the ancestors. His role was really to link the past with the present. Griots with lutes and calabash harps among Mande speakers in the former Mali empire transmitted this favorite story of Sunjata:

Resources for West Africa Interactive Museum Exhibition
(Also use other resources available to you in your textbook and library)

In the Bamana people’s initiation rites for the initiation society known as Tyi Wara, the antelope mask is very important. It teaches its members both about their history and about the knowledge and qualities that make a successful farmer. Ironically, as the forests were cleared to make farms, the habitat for the antelope was destroyed. When the antelope mask is worn in dance performances, it represents a supernatural being—half man, half animal.

Speech itself was imbued with power, and part of the power/energy of the griot was the fact that he was transmitting the words of the ancestors. His role was really to link the past with the present. Griots with lutes and calabash harps among Mande speakers in the former Mali empire transmitted this favorite story of Sunjata:
Griot: The lightning that flashes across the sky is slower, the thunderbolts less frightening, and floodwaters less surprising than Sunjata swooping down .... The Sossos, trampled under the hooves of his fiery charger, cried out. When he turned to the right, they fell in their tens, and when he turned to the left, his sword made heads fall as when someone shakes a tree of ripe fruit. (Ralph A. Austen ed., In Search of Sunjata: The Mande Oral Epic As History, Literature, and Performance. [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999].)

Traditions also were transmitted in West Africa through histories written in Arabic known as “tarikhs.” The books were preserved in the great libraries in Timbuktu and other centers of Islamic learning.

Twentieth-century scholar of Mali, Tierno Bokar Salif, said,

Writing is one thing and knowledge is another. Writing is the photograph of knowledge but not the knowledge itself. Knowledge is a light that is in man. It is the heritage of all that our ancestors have known, and it is the germ that they transmit to us, just as the baobab-tree is potentially in its seed. (Susan B. Hunt, trans., Aspects of African Civilization: Person, Culture and Religion [Paris: Présence Africaine, 1972].)

Photographs of Griots


Activity 2: Selecting Traditions—20 minutes

Compare the criteria you used to select the items for your interactive museum exhibits. What questions did you have about the selective criteria the peoples in Islamic Spain, Korea, and West Africa used in transmitting their traditions?

Activity 3: Methods for Transmitting Traditions—20 minutes

Discuss the difference between transmitting traditions through books and through oral storytelling. Use the following quote to begin your discussion.

Griots know the history of kings and kingdoms and that is why they are the best counsellors of kings. Every king wants to have a singer to perpetuate his memory, for it is the griot who rescues the memories of kings from oblivion, as men have short memories. Kings have prescribed destinies just like men, and seers who probe the future know it. They have knowledge of the future, whereas we griots are depositories of the knowledge of the past. But whoever knows the history of a country can read its future. Other peoples use writing to record the past, but this invention has killed the faculty of memory among them. They do not feel the past any more, for writing lacks the warmth of the human voice. With them everybody thinks he knows, whereas learning should be a secret. The prophets did not write and their words have been all the more vivid as a result. What paltry learning is that which is congealed in dumb books! (Sunjata: An Epic of Old Mali [Longman edition, 1986] 40–41.)
Read Unit 12 in the online text, Section 3, Reading 3: Colin A. Palmer, “From Africa to the Americas: Ethnicity in the Early Black Communities of the Americas,” *Journal of World History* 6, no. 2 (Fall 1995) 223–36 and answer the following questions.

**Reading Questions**

- What aspects of African culture survived the journey across the Atlantic into Mexico?

- To what degree were African-born slaves able to reestablish and maintain ethnic ties and ethnicity in the slave societies of the Americas?

- Why does the author focus on marriage-choice patterns?

- What was the purpose of witnesses at a wedding of slaves?

- Does the author’s thesis—that African cultural traditions survived intact under the conditions of slavery in the Americas—convince you?

**Optional: Visit the Web Site**

Explore this topic further on the *Bridging World History* Web site. Browse the Archive, look up terms in the Audio Glossary, review related units, or use the World History Traveler to examine different thematic perspectives.