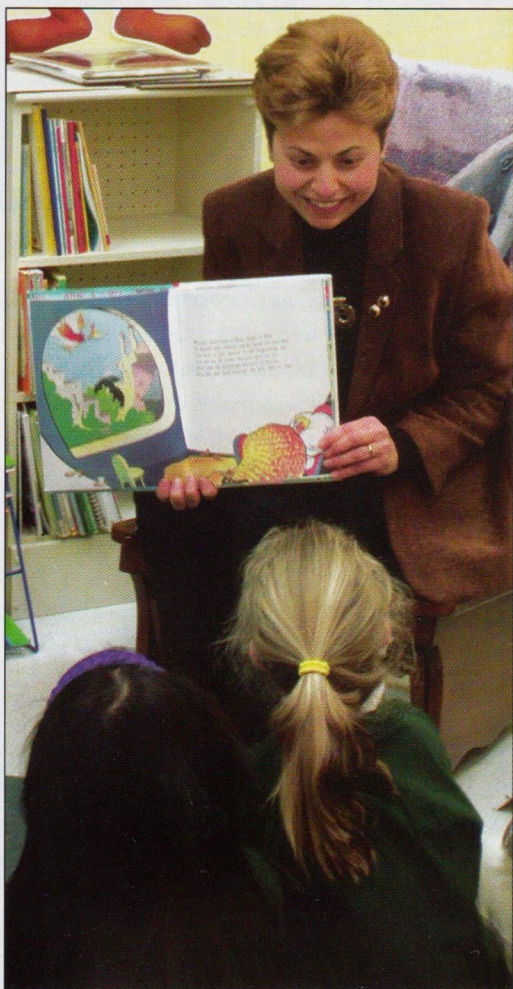


the WISDOM in FOLK TALES



NELDA LA'EEF READING TO CHILDREN

BY ALICE ROSS

While engaged in fieldwork in the Republic of Niger as part of her anthropology studies at Harvard University, Nelda LaTeef met a blind woman selling Chiclets under an acacia tree.

She turned out to be the village *griot*, or storyteller, the revered keeper of the community's history. It was an encounter that had a lasting impact on Nelda.

Although she did not understand Zarma, the woman's native language, and relied on an interpreter to translate the conversation into French, Nelda was moved by the storyteller's versatility and bountiful portfolio of folk tales. "She had an amazing set of vocal cords and could create incredible vocal images," says Nelda. "She could make sounds like no human I had ever encountered."

Nelda watched as her interpreter became increasingly mesmerized with the woman's delivery. As one particularly exciting story wound down, the wide-eyed interpreter asked, "Did that really happen?" Nelda recalls the *griot* smiling as she replied, "The truth is as hard to find as the footprints of a flying bird. You decide."

The *griot* is a beloved and prominent member of society throughout West Africa. It is said that village rulers will make decisions only after listening to the *griot* deliver a complete recitation of the community's births, deaths, marriages and battles.

"Only 10 percent of the Zarma people are literate," says Nelda. "That's why the *griot* is so important in the villages. They say that when a *griot* dies, it's the equivalent of a library burning down."

One of the tales Nelda heard under the acacia tree is finding new audiences throughout the world in the form of her recently released children's book, *The Hunter and the Ebony Tree* (Moon Mountain, 2002). Geared toward five-to-nine-year-olds, the book has been published in both English and Italian and has been licensed for translation into Korean. Nelda hopes to see it published in French since the Nigerians have embraced the book as their own story.