



CLASS  
ACTS

## TEACHER'S GUIDE

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2008-2009 season  
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# The Song and Dance Ensemble of West Africa

Friday, November 7, 2008  
12:30 p.m.

SANGAMON AUDITORIUM 

## **Biography of the Song and Dance Ensemble of West Africa**

This extraordinary group of traditional West African musicians is directed by Bamba Dembele, who is also a big star of the Super Rail Band of Bamako as well as the percussionist in the Super Djata band Karkar; as his striking force, he uses the country's traditional sounds and rhythms. The Song and Dance Ensemble of West Africa's acoustics are powerful. The musicians use well known instruments, the Kora, N'Goni, the Balaphon, Djembe, Doundouns, and flute. This orchestra uses all the musical styles of Mali: peul, malinke, sénoufo, bambara, and like many other artists in this country, the Song and Dance Ensemble of West Africa has gone overseas to open up new horizons for itself.

In Europe in particular the Song and Dance Ensemble of West Africa has become known to lovers of Sahel music. This orchestra has given many concerts in France, the UK, the Netherlands, Belgium, the Antilles, etc. And like all other rivers, the Ensemble has its own tributaries, which endow it with strength and pride.

The famous singer Oumou Sangare, for instance, started her professional career with this orchestra, and so did Toumany Diabate, the prince of Kora.

The Song and Dance Ensemble of West Africa has offered astounding performances to its audience: Varied percussion instruments, from the djembé to doundouns and other balaphons, excellent dancers whose muscles seem to be capable of any movement at any speed, and a very elaborate visual ensemble with colorful, inventive costumes.

It is a modern ballet as if from another world, with graceful movements and a virtuosity, which have conveyed irresistible drive and force to the public. Between tradition and modernity, the troupe works along a straight line of West African ballets, djembés, dunums, balaphons, traditional songs and dances; its repertory is rich and varied. The traditional rhythms, songs and dances are always represented in the troupe's various creations, as well as the Mandingo tradition.

Founded in 1985, this group of traditional musicians and dancers is accomplished and respected. It is a high-level orchestra composed of percussionists, musicians and dancers from Mali (West Africa). They give a performance inspired by traditional music with their own identity and personality to create an authentic musical experience.

## About African Culture

We tend to speak of Africa in very general terms, as if it were a single environment. Perhaps that is one reason Americans and Europeans have never really understood Africa. Africa is as diversified as any continent on earth, huge in size and complex in geographical features. It is larger than North and Central America combined. It has Mount Kilimanjaro, rising over nineteen thousand feet, only one thousand feet lower than North America's highest summit, Mount McKinley. Danakil Depression in Ethiopia is 383 feet below sea level, lower than any point in North America. Lake Tanganyika is almost as large as Lake Superior. But for natural wonders, Africa's most awesome is the huge Sahara, the largest desert in the world.

The cultures of Africa are as varied as the natural environment. They are the products of a variety of religions, all with deep roots. For centuries many Africans have been Moslem. For several centuries others have practiced Christianity. Older still are native religions. They are the soul of African tribal traditions and loyalties.

When you look at a map of Africa, you see a collection of national states, not tribal boundaries. Those national boundaries were imposed on Africa by Europe's nineteenth-century colonial powers. The real cultural divisions, however, are primarily tribal. So it is often more accurate to talk about tribal folk arts and crafts than about national ones.

Yet as modern Africans develop national awareness and identities, tribal cultural traditions begin to merge into national cultures. It can be difficult to know where one begins and the other ends. African businesspeople and government officials in Western business dress don traditional costumes for family celebrations. City executives happily join traditional ceremonies when they visit the villages where they were born. Africans easily move back and forth between modern realities and tribal traditions.

Taken from *100 Craft Projects from Around the World: Multicultural Art Experiences* by William Reid, Jr., published in 1982 by J. Weston Walch Publisher.  
ISBN 0-8251-0007-0

## Where is West Africa?



The region of West Africa includes 15 different countries:

Benin	Ghana	Niger
Burkina Faso	Guinea	Nigeria
Cape Verde	Guinea - Bissau	Senegal
Cote d'Ivoire	Liberia	Sierra Leone
Gambia	Mali	Togo

Some definitions of the region also include:

Cameroon	Mauritania
Chad	Western Sahara

## Learn About West African Nations

The CIA publishes *The World Factbook* annually with up-to-date detailed information about every country in the world. Students can use this resource to research the countries of West Africa and learn about their:

- Geography
- People
- Government
- Economy
- Communications
- Transportation
- Military
- Transnational Issues

The World Factbook is available online at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html>

### Activity –

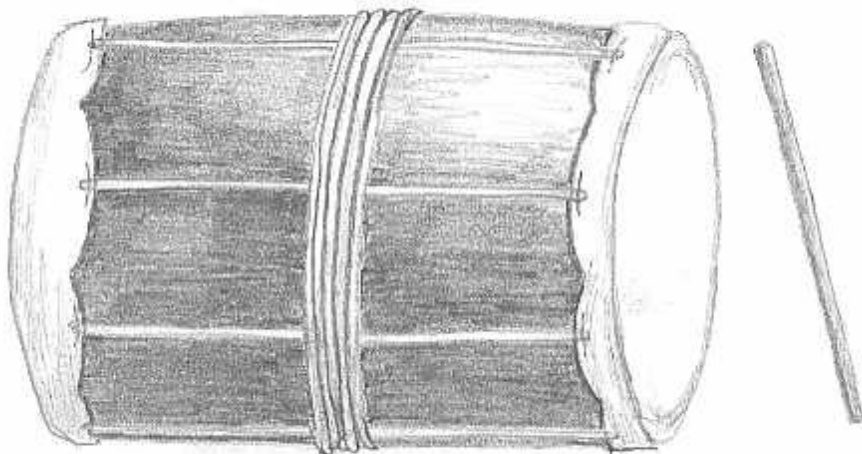
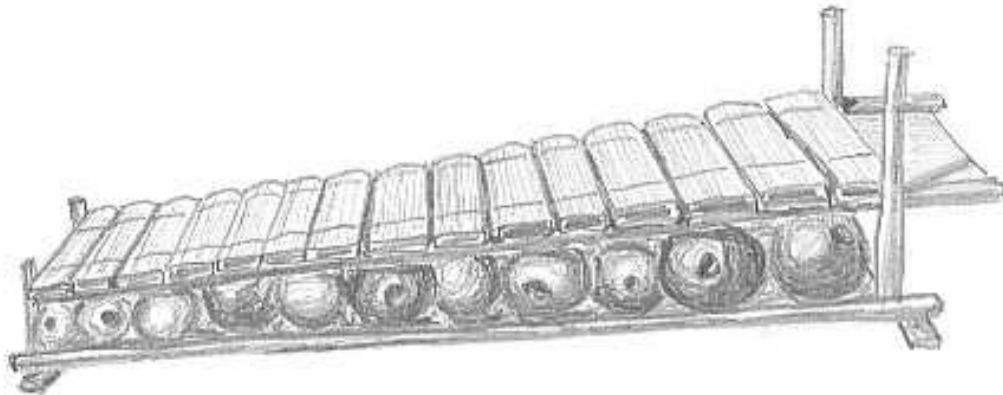
Have your students select one of the countries in West Africa and learn more about it. Students can prepare a short report or presentation using the information from *The World Factbook*. Consider incorporating this activity into a computer/technology class where students learn how to use Powerpoint or place images in a Word document.

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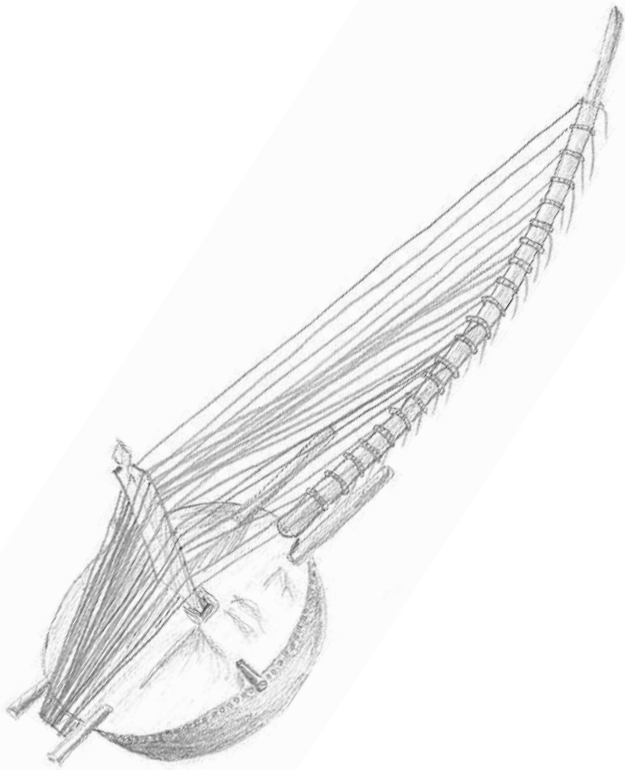
## African Instruments

During the performance, student will see musical instruments that are not often used in Western music.

**Balafon** – The balafon is a percussion instrument, similar to a xylophone, that usually has 17-21 keys. The keys are made of wood and usually attached to a wooden frame using leather straps. African gourds, called a calabash, are placed under the keys to help the sound resonate.



**Doun Doun** – The doun doun (also spelled dunun or djun-djun) is a large drum that makes low bass sounds. The drum is often played resting on its side.



**Cora** – The cora (also spelled kora) is a 21-string instrument that sounds similar to a harp. The player uses only his or her thumbs and index fingers to pluck the strings, while the other fingers are used to hold the instrument.

**Ngoni** – The ngoni, similar to a guitar or banjo, is a string instrument made of hollowed-out wood with animal skin stretched over it. It is often used to play fast melodies.

**Djembe** – The djembe is a drum that is played with your hands, rather than using drumsticks. It can make different sounds depending on how the fingers are held and which part of the drumhead is hit. They can vary in size, but a typical djembe is 12” in diameter and 24” tall.

## About African Rhythms

A distinctive feature of African music is the use of polyrhythm, or twos against threes. This means that different people in the ensemble will play different types of rhythms, some counting to two and others counting to three. This is different than traditional western music where everyone plays in the same rhythm.

In African music, sometimes one musician will play both rhythms at the same time. These multiple rhythms also apply to the dancers, who will move different parts of their bodies to the different rhythms. The following exercise can help your students understand how these different rhythms work together. Even if you don't have drums, you can tap the rhythms on your desks. Then, during the performance, they can listen for the different rhythms.

This exercise was adapted for the World Wide Web from the book, *Ancient Traditions--Future Possibilities* by Matthew Montfort, Exercise III A, pages 18-20. An accompanying MIDI file is available online at <http://www.ancient-future.com/2X3.html>.

**1. Count the numbers in the middle column out loud, tapping with the left hand on one, and with the right hand on one, three and five:**

LEFT HAND	COUNT	RIGHT HAND
1	1	1
	2	
	3	3
	4	
	5	5
	6	

**2. Then, tap on one and four with the left hand while tapping on one with the right hand:**

LEFT HAND	COUNT	RIGHT HAND
1	1	1
	2	
	3	
4	4	
	5	
	6	

**3. Combine steps 1 and 2:**

LEFT HAND	COUNT	RIGHT HAND
1	1	1
	2	
	3	3
4	4	
	5	5
	6	

**4. Transfer your awareness from a feeling of six pulses to a feeling of two pulses with the left hand against three pulses with the right. Tap out the same pulses as in step 3, but this time count out loud only the pulses of the right hand:**

LEFT HAND	COUNT	RIGHT HAND
1	1	1
*	*	*
*	2	2
2	*	*
*	3	3
*	*	*

Note: \* = rest

**5. Count out the pulses of the left hand while tapping three pulses with the right hand and two pulses with the left hand, as follows:**

LEFT HAND	COUNT	RIGHT HAND
1	1	1
*	*	*
*	*	2
2	2	*
*	*	3
*	*	*

It may be helpful to try the following counting scheme as a preparatory step:

LEFT HAND	COUNT	RIGHT HAND
1	1	1
*	*	*
*	2	2
2	&	*
*	3	3
*	*	*

When counting 1 \* 2 & 3 \* , accent the & of 2.

Then change the count to 1 \* \* & \* \* .

Finally, change the count to 1 \* \* 2 \* \* .

**6. Keeping a slow tempo, alternate between step 4 and step 5 until it is possible to switch between them at will.** This is similar to switching between the two perspectives of an Escher print.

## Online Resources

### About Africa –

The United Nations Office for West Africa

<http://www.un.org/unowa>

Africa for Kids – an interactive website by PBS

<http://pbskids.org/africa/index.html>

list of books about Africa

<http://www.si.umich.edu/chico/UMS/Drummers/materials.html>

### About the music and culture –

article about African music on MSN Encarta Encyclopedia

[http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia\\_761560962/African\\_Music.html](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761560962/African_Music.html)

information about African music and instruments

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/music/worldmusic/africanandcaribbeanrev2.shtml>

musical instruments in the National Museum of African Arts

[http://africa.si.edu/exhibits/aud\\_art/](http://africa.si.edu/exhibits/aud_art/)

listen to sounds of African instruments

<http://www.dancedrummer.com/museum.html>

### Activities and lesson plans –

lesson plan about Sundiata, Mali's Lion King, developed by The Kennedy Center

<http://www.artsedge.org/content/2352/>

lesson plan about Mali developed by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

[http://www.vmfa.state.va.us/mali\\_activities.html](http://www.vmfa.state.va.us/mali_activities.html)

African cultural activities for the classroom

<http://www.dl.ket.org/humanities/connections/class/africa/africaact.htm>

a day-long experiential learning activity, students create their own village

[http://www.onesky.ca/projects/detail/west\\_africa\\_alive/](http://www.onesky.ca/projects/detail/west_africa_alive/)