Africa
Africa is a vast continent comprising 54 countries and over 1 billion people speaking over 3,000 languages. The continent is the birthplace of human civilization, agriculture and metallurgy, and home to early empires such as the River Peoples living along the Nile Valley, as well as the Ghana and Mali Empires.

African peoples enjoy rich histories that have been passed down from one generation to another through oral tradition. African oral history is learned, spread and communicated verbally and even performed during important events through music and dance.

Many regions in Africa were rich in different natural resources such as gold and ivory. These natural resources caused European countries such as Spain to engage in trade with various African communities.

![Figure 1. African gold](image)

Beginning in the late 15\textsuperscript{th} century, millions of Africans were taken against their will overseas as slaves in the African slave trade and were forced to work in North and South America. By the late 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries, European powers competed to invade, occupy and colonize many African territories. It was not until the second half of the 20\textsuperscript{th}-century that many African countries freed themselves of colonial rule and gained independence.

Because of its vast diversity of peoples, languages and cultural traditions, we cannot speak of a single “African Music” or “African Dance.” The West African countries of Guinea, Senegal, Mali, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Mali and Gambia are home to some of the most compelling music and dance traditions on the African continent. In these traditions, musical sound and movement work together to form a cohesive and kinetic unity.

***
West African Dance

West African dance embodies dynamic athleticism and a graceful beauty flowing with rhythm. In fact, dancing is a natural and instinctual way people respond to music—movement is something that is ingrained in us. Similarly, in West African performance events, dance plays a central role and it is common that everyone is motivated to participate. There are few barriers between performer and audience; in fact spectators often become part of the performance by dancing, singing, or clapping. This reflects the importance of making individual artistic contributions to a collective creative whole. Through dance, anyone can express themselves through movement and participate in a West African performance event.

West African dance is distinctive and is characterized by total body articulation and simultaneous emphasis on various parts of the body as it moves in time to the music. For example, shoulders, chest, pelvis, arms, and legs can each move independently along with the different rhythmic layers of the drumming. As well, different ethnic groups in West Africa emphasize different parts of the body. For instance, the Ewe people of Ghana emphasize the upper body and hands, while the Kalabari people of Nigeria emphasize subtle movements of the hips. Dancers often use symbolic gestures, masks, props, costumes and body painting to further heighten the affective power of their movements.

In West Africa, dance forms an important part of ritual ceremonies that mark the experiences of one’s life, teach social values and offer praise, depict stories and re-enact histories of the community, communicate with ancestors, and work therapeutically to heal the sick. Dance plays an important part in ceremonial rituals and rites of passage. For example, in Ghana, Nmane is a dance women perform in honor of a bride’s upcoming
wedding. Another dance is Agbekor, is an ancient war dance that is now performed purely for ceremonial reasons at cultural events. The movements in this dance often mimic movements that would be found on the battlefield and incorporate upper body motions.

![Agbekor war dance in Ghana, West Africa](image)

**Figure 3. Agbekor war dance in Ghana, West Africa**

**West African Drumming**
The music of West African drum ensembles is among the most dazzlingly complex in the world. Comprised of wooden drums, iron bells, and gourd shakers, these ensembles produce multi-layered rhythms that compel dancers to move. These rhythms are often **polyrhythmic**, which means that there is more than one rhythm sounding simultaneously. The music is not improvised but rather highly structured. The drummers in the ensemble are guided by a **timeline** or repeating steady pulse played by the bell and shaker players. The **lead** or **master drummer** mediates between the drummers and the dancers, guiding the ensemble and playing audible cues for the dancers to change their movements. If you listen closely, you can hear **call and response** musical dialogue between the master drummer and the rest of the drummers in the ensemble.

***
West African Musical Instruments

**Djembe**—a hourglass-shaped hand drum that can produce *bass*, *tone*, and *slap* sounds. Because of its loud volume, the djembe is often the lead drum in the ensemble.

![Figure 4. Djembe drum](image)

**Dundun**—a barrel-shaped bass drum played with a stick. The *dundun* produces a deep bass tone. A bell is sometimes attached to the drum so the player can combine the sound of the dundun and the bell. The *dundun* comes in three sizes you will see and hear in today’s performance:

![Figure 4. (from left to right) Dundunba, Sangban, and Kenkeni drums](image)

- **Kenkeni**—the smallest *dundun*. The *kenkeni* has the highest pitch and plays a simple rhythmic pattern.
- **Sangban**—the medium sized *dundun*. The *sangban* has a medium pitch and plays a more complex part that defines the *dundun* rhythm.
- **Dundunba**—the largest *dundun*. The *dununba* has the deepest pitch of the three drums and plays a sparse rhythmic pattern with widely spaced notes.
Shekere—a dried hollow gourd with beads woven into a net covering the gourd. The shekere originated in Nigeria and is used throughout West Africa in drum ensemble music.

![Shekere shaker](image)

*Figure 5. Shekere shaker*

Balafon—a 14-21 wooden keyed xylophone of West Africa. Played with two rubber tipped mallets, the balafon is a tuned percussion instrument. Skilled balafon players can play two different melodies at the same time. The balafon is one of the instruments associated with West African oral historians called jaliya.

![Balafon xylophone](image)

*Figure 6. Balafon xylophone*

Kora—a 21-string harp-lute of West Africa. The kora is built from a large calabash cut in half and covered with animal skin attached to a long wooden neck. The instrument sounds like a harp and is played with the thumb and index fingers of both hands that pluck the strings in polyrhythmic patterns. Along with the balafon, the kora is one of the instruments associated with West African oral historians called jaliya.
African Music Performance Terms

**High Pitch**—In drumming we call the high pitch djembe drum stroke the “slap.” In African dance, this corresponds to crisp, open movements of the arms, shoulders, and hips.

**Middle Pitch**—Drummers call the middle pitch the “tone” drum stroke. In African dance, the middle pitch corresponds to the movements of the dancer’s feet.

**Bass Pitch**—The deep bass notes of the dundun drums create the impression of large physical size, bodily expansion, freedom, space, unity, and union. In African dance, the bass pitch is translated into movement by way of a hollow body shape.

**Polyrhythm**—Polyrhythm is the simultaneous sounding of two or more rhythms at the same time. The best-known West African polyrhythm is known as “two-against-three.”

**Timeline**—The bell and shaker players in the drum ensemble play a repeating rhythmic pattern called a timeline. The timeline keeps the other musician and the dancers together.

**Lead or Master Drummer**—The lead or master drummer guides the drum ensemble and the dancers through the performance. The master drummer plays patterns that cue the musicians to start and stop and also compel the dancers to specific movements.

**Call and Response**—In many West African dance and drumming pieces you can hear call and response between the drummers. The lead or master drummer will play a pattern and the rest of the ensemble will respond will the same or similar pattern. In this way, call and response is a kind of conversation through musical sound.
Masquerade and Chakaba—In West African performance traditions, *masquerade* performers disguise themselves as animals, spirit ancestors, or as other people. *Chakaba* is a traditional practice of wearing a sacred spirit mask while dancing on stilts.

![Chakaba stilt walker](image)

**Figure 8. Chakaba stilt walker**

***

**During The Performance**

- African performance events are multimedia happenings where a lot of different things happen at the same time. Try to *watch* and *listen* to everything onstage: the dancers, the musicians, the movements and sounds, the costumes and facial expressions. As you take in the performance, think about how the dancers and musicians work together and communicate using movement and rhythm.

***

**Guide To The Performance**

We begin by introducing the drums through interactive clapping to help students learn West African rhythms.

- **Funga Alafia**—This is a traditional welcome song and dance. It originates with the Hausa people in Nigeria. “Alafia” is a Hausa greeting and “Asheey” means “good health and peace.”

- **Egyptian**—This is a North African movement as depicted in ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs.

- **Gumbe**—This is a celebration dance from the country of Gambia. Gumbe is a dance of rejoicing of the Lebu people. It is danced when a new Djarraf (village chief) is elected and when fishermen bring home their catch.
• Menjani—This is a traditional dance that celebrates the rite of passage into adulthood. The dance and music originates in the West African country of Guinea.

• South African Gumboot Dance—This type of dancing was developed by black miners in South Africa as an alternative to drumming. The miners were not allowed to carry anything on them when entering the mines and were searched before and after work to ensure that they did not take any diamonds, gold, or coal. During their leisure time they would create music using their bodies and voices—clapping their hands, stomping their feet on the floor and yelling in a coordinated and rhythmic fashion. The boot dance is very similar to modern step dancing.

• Gang Gang—This is an African American form of African dance that uses elements from modern, jazz, and ballet. This dance form was created by Katherine Dunham (1909-2006) and other choreographers during a time when African Americans were not allowed to study or perform classical ballet. This piece incorporates the dancing of the Stilt Walker.

Questions For Discussion After The Show

• What words would you use to describe West African dance?

• How did the costumes affect the performance? Did they help the performance?

• What did you learn about West African rhythms and how they are created? Can you remember any of the rhythms enough to sing them?

• If someone asked you about the performance you just saw, what would you tell them about it? What would you say is the most significant aspect of the performance?

• How does this West African music differ from the music you listen to? What does it have in common with it?

• How is seeing and hearing a live performance of West African dance and music different from watching it on TV or hearing it on the radio?

***
Group Activity To Practice: How To Play A West African Polyrhythm

![Figure 8. “Two-Against-Three” Polyrhythm](image)

1. Place your hands on a table or on your thighs.

2. Slowly, play and repeat the following 6-beat pattern on your thighs:

   **(Note: Together [hands together], Right [right hand only], Left [left hand only], --[silence])**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Count:</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Drum:</td>
<td>Together</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Right</td>
<td>Left</td>
<td>Right</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. As you get comfortable with the pattern, speed it up.

   You are now playing a “three-against-two” polyrhythm!
   (Hint: the three-beat pattern is in your right hand, and the two-beat pattern is in your left.)

4. If you feel adventurous, trying singing the hand patterns as you drum them!

   ***

![Figure 9. African kente cloth](image)
WORD SEARCH

WORD BANK:

KENKENI  POLYRHYTHM  SHEKERE  DUNDUNBA
GHANA   GUINEA     CHAKABA  JALIYA
MASQUERADE  SENEGAL   DANCE  SANGBAN
TIMELINE  MALI      MENJANI  BELL
DJEMBE   BALAFON    KORA    LEAD
DRUM
ANSWER KEY

WORD BANK:

KENKENI  POLYRHYTHM  SHEKERE  DUNDUNBA
GHANA  GUINEA  CHAKABA  JALIYA
MASQUERADE  SENEGAL  DANCE  SANGBAN
TIMELINE  MALI  MENJANI  BELL
DJEMBE  BALAFON  KORA  LEAD
DRUM

WORD BANK:

KENKENI  POLYRHYTHM  SHEKERE  DUNDUNBA
GHANA  GUINEA  CHAKABA  JALIYA
MASQUERADE  SENEGAL  DANCE  SANGBAN
TIMELINE  MALI  MENJANI  BELL
DJEMBE  BALAFON  KORA  LEAD
DRUM
Further Resources

**Books**


**Video**

**Web**
http://echarry.web.wesleyan.edu/jembearticle/article.html