



2721 Cardiff Ct. Winston-Salem, NC 27103
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www.livingrhythms.com

The Drums of West Africa

The primary percussion instruments of traditional West African music are the:

- **Djembe:** Pronounced “jem-bay,” this goblet-shaped drum is made from one piece of a hollowed-out tree trunk. The top is covered with a shaved goatskin that is attached to the wood shell with rope. The pitch of the drum is determined by the tension of the rope. The djembe is played with the hands. The hand placement of the drummer determines the sound and tones produced by the drums.

There are three basic sounds produced by djembes: 1) the “bass” note, the deepest sound of all three that is hit in the center of the drum with a closed hand, 2) the “tone,” a slightly higher note that is struck closer to the edge of the drum with a closed fingers, and 3) the “slap,” the highest tone that is hit near the edge with a slightly opened fingers. In addition, up to three rattles made of sheet metal can be attached to the edge of the drum for added rhythmic interest and color.

The djembes “accompany” the dunun drums with one, two or three different rhythmic patterns.

- **Dunun:** Pronounced “doon-oon,” these bass drums and carry the melody of each rhythm. Each has a wooden cylindrical body, which is carved from one piece of a tree trunk. They are covered on both ends with cowhide. The musician strikes the drum with a wooden stick that is held in one hand while simultaneously striking the metal iron bell attached to the side of the dunun with a metal stick that is held in the other hand. The skin of the drum has two sounds: one that is “open” and is allowed to vibrate off the skin of the drum and the other that is “muffled” where the stick is pushed down on the skin.

The dunun come in three different sizes:

1. **Dununba:** the largest and deepest-sounding drum, dununba gives power to a rhythm
2. **Sangban:** the middle size drum, the sangban carries the song or melody line of a rhythm; if only one drum is available, it will always play the sangban rhythm
3. **Kenkeni:** the smallest drum, the kenkeni complements the sounds of the other two drums and serves as the “time-keeper,” never varying from its “assigned” rhythm



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The Role of the Drums in West African Culture

The djembe and dunun were created thousands of years ago by the inhabitants of an ancient West African kingdom known as the Mali Empire. The Mali Empire once covered much of the modern countries of Guinea, Mali, Senegal, Ivory Coast, and Burkina Faso. While the Mali Empire no longer exists as an official kingdom, the inhabitants of this part of the world share a common culture heritage, and refer to their home region as the Mandingue.

Unlike Western music, the music of the Mandingue is not considered art or entertainment. Mandingue music expresses a way of life and reflects the feelings and emotions of everyday existence, such as love, pride, sadness, anger, celebration, transition, and courage. The music of the Mandingue is about the common experience of being human. In this way, Mandingue music primarily conveys the values of community, family, and togetherness.

The spirit of Mandingue drumming music can be captured by the words of a legendary master of the djembe named Mamady Keita. He says, "The djembe does not see people's color. The djembe does not see people's gender. The djembe does not see people's age. What the djembe sees is people's hearts. If we all thought like the djembe the thinks, our world would not be so troubled, we could live as one human family on this planet Earth."

For the Mandingue people, music accompanies all daily activities, such as fishing, farming and hunting. And each life stage—including births, childhood transitions, puberty, weddings, and funerals—is honored through music.

The music of the Mandingue is participatory. There is no "audience." Everyone present when music is being played joins the community through singing, clapping hands, playing drums and dancing.

While the drums themselves seem to be simple instruments, the music played on the drums is not. West African rhythms, especially those of the Mandingue, are among the most complex musical styles in the world and reflect the wealth of cultural, social and political complexities that comprise Africa's history.

The ancient Mandingue rhythms that are still played today have been passed down through oral tradition, from generation to generation. The music has not been written down, so in learning about the drums we all help to preserve these valuable music traditions for future generations.



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Follow-Up Lesson Ideas for Teachers

After watching a Living Rhythms performance and familiarizing your students with the basic information about the drums and their culture (see above) try these follow-up lesson ideas. Keep in mind you may need to modify the activities depending on the age of your students.

- Have your students locate the following West African countries in which the djembe drum can be found: Guinea, Mali, Ivory Coast, Senegal and Burkina Faso.
- Ask your students to compare and contrast the climates, geographies, forms of government, and economies of these places with the United States. Have your students use the Internet or library to research their answers.
- Ask your students to think about what their everyday life would be like if they were growing up in West Africa. What things would be the same? What things would be different?
- Ask your students to discuss their response to the performance they saw. Some questions to ask include: How did the music of the drums make you feel? What part of the performance did you like the best and why? What did you learn during the performance that you didn't know before?
- Ask your students what skills would be required of them if they were to be in a performance like the one they saw? Ask your students to not only think of musical skills (related to rhythm, tempo, etc.) but also interpersonal skills like teamwork, listening, collaboration, improvisation, communication etc.
- Ask your students to take a guess about what they might see in West African visual art and traditional textile design. Did they notice the bright colors and strong patterns of the costumes on stage? These elements are often found in traditional West African visual art and textile design.
- Have your students draw their response to the performance they saw.
- Play a simple game of call-and-response with your students. This is a very common musical element in West African drumming. Clap a rhythm with your hands, or pat it on your legs (or both) and have your students echo your pattern. Give your students a chance to create rhythms for their classmates to echo.



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The Effects of Drumming on Learning and Brain Development

Modern scientific research shows that drumming and music aid in cognitive, emotional, social, language and physical development. Researchers at the Beth Israel Medical Center in Boston found that the brains of people involved in music are actually larger than those who are not.

Scientists at the University of Texas say that rhythm and music stimulate both the left and right sides of the brain, and especially the cerebellum, which is involved in interpreting written letters and words. According to neurologists, drumming also helps reduce stress and improve immune system function.

Drumming challenges students to use what Harvard professor of education Howard Gardner calls multiple intelligences. Drumming engages students' logical-mathematical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, bodily-kinesthetic and musical intelligences in an activity that is both coordinated and creative. Drumming requires focus, concentration and teamwork, so student learn to listen and be receptive, while at the same time expressing themselves in a way that creates unity and togetherness.

Bring Living Rhythms to Your School!

Artists from Living Rhythms regularly travel to schools throughout the eastern U.S. offering hands-on programs in the arts of drumming, dancing, storytelling, and visual arts. Our programs are designed around state-mandated curricula, and are easily integrated into music, art, social studies, English, foreign language, math, and PE programs.

We provide an imported African drum for each student, and work closely with teachers and administrators to create tailor-made programs to fit the curricula and themes of our hosts. Our programs are joyful, engaging and highly participatory! Programs are available for pre-K through university age students.

For information on bringing Living Rhythms to your school please contact us at:
336-774-3898.