Smithsonian Global Sound

Explore African Immigrant Musical Traditions with Your Students

Recommended for Grade Levels 5 and up

Teacher Preparation / Goals

African immigrant musical traditions are as rich and varied as the many languages and cultures of Africa. There are many different reasons for their formation; to explore new influences, to reshape older practices, or to maintain important traditions from the homeland.

In these reading and activities students will learn about the African immigrant musical traditions found in the Washington, D.C. area. Special programs held after school and during the weekend and summer have been initiated to teach children more about their culture through the medium of music and dance. In the African immigrant community, music and dance groups immerse the students in the culture of their ancestors' homeland. Some of these groups have been here for many years and are an important part of the community. Many African-born parents value these programs because they fear that their American-born children may be losing their heritage.

In preparation for the lesson read the attached articles, "African Immigrant Music and Dance in Washington, D.C." and "Nile Ethiopian Ensemble: A Profile of An African Immigrant Music and Dance Group."

See what you can find out about the musical traditions to be found in *your* area, and not just those performed by African immigrants, but by others as well. For example, when you start looking, you may find a Korean group or a group from the Czech Republic. If possible, visit a performance of a music or dance group and talk to the teachers or directors of the group. There may be interesting ways of linking your classroom or school with one of these groups.

Objectives: Students will…

– Learn about African immigrant musical traditions and the part they play in maintaining a sense of cultural identity

– Investigate some of the musical traditions in their own family and community

– Discover ways to learn more about musical traditions from their own investigations and those carried out by their fellow students

Lesson Arrangement:

The African Immigrant Musical Traditions lessons are arranged as follows.

1. Introductory Activity

2. Student Readings:

a) "African Immigrant Music and Dance in Washington, D.C."

b) "Nile Ethiopian Ensemble: A Profile of an African Immigrant Music and Dance Group."

* Comprehension and Discussion Questions following the articles

4. Activity #1: Compare and contrast traditional and popular music, looking for similarities and differences.

5. Activity #2: Study how traditional music and dance affect a community's identity

6. Activity #3: Research your family's or community's music and dance traditions

7. Activity #4: Plan a day of cultural learning at your school

Lesson

1. Introductory Activity: Why Do Children Learn Music and Dance?

Part A. Open a general discussion about musical traditions outside the classroom

Does anyone in the class go to music or dance lessons after their regular class day or on weekends or in the summer time (Sunday school, tennis camp, dance or piano lessons or actual immigrant music or dance schools)? What do you learn in these other classes or schools? What do you learn in these other classes or schools that you don't learn at home? Are they fun? Do you make new friends?

Write down three things you would like to learn related to music or dance that you are not learning in your regular school. Where would you learn these things? Who would your teach these lessons?

2. Student Reading #1: "African Immigrant Music and Dance in Washington, D.C."

Written exercises:

Comprehension Questions

1. What can be used as markers that define boundaries between community insiders and outsiders?

2. What are three styles of African immigrant music found in the Washington D.C. area?

3. Where do African immigrant musicians perform?

Discussion Questions

1. Where do children learn to dance or play instruments? What are some of the other ways of learning to dance or play musical instruments?

2. What are some ways children can learn about their culture?

3. How can learning the music and dance traditions of a culture help you understand even more about that culture? (What are you learning other than just singing and dancing? Are there words to the songs? Do the dancers wear costumes? Who leads? What do the lyrics and costumes mean?)

4. Have you ever attended a music or dance class, or summer enrichment class outside of your regular school? Describe the experience.

3. Student Reading #2. "Nile Ethiopian Ensemble: A Profile of an African Immigrant Music and Dance Group."

Written exercises:

Comprehension Questions

1. What part of Africa are they from? Find the country on your map.

2. Why did they choose to become a musician?

Discussion Questions

1. What are some musical groups that perform in your community?

2. Why did they choose to become musicians?

Activity #1:

Compare and contrast traditional music found on Smithsonian Global sound and popular music you hear on the radio. Look and listen for similarities and differences. Locate recordings of both traditional and popular music (Smithsonian Global Sound is a great resource for traditional music) and play them in class and ask the students to identify any portions of the selections that may be similar and ask them to explain why.

Ask them if any of the pieces selected hold any special significance to them and why?

Activity #2:

Study how traditional music and dance affect the identity of a community or influence how a community views itself or presents itself to others.

Encourage the students to identify specific musical selections that are played or sung during celebrations or on special occasions within their own communities.

Encourage the students to identify any special dances that are performed during celebrations or on special occasions within their own communities.

Activity #3:

Research music and dance traditions in your own family or community.

How can you learn about the music and dance traditions in your own family?

The best way to learn anything is by asking questions! Ask your parents, grandparents, guardians, or older community members. You may already know some of the answers, but it will be interesting to get your family's opinions on and responses to these questions. If your own family or community does not seem to have a significant amount of information about this topic, find someone (a mentor, neighbor, or someone at your school) who does. Interviews like these present wonderful opportunities to learn about things that people may not usually discuss or explain.

Where did your family come from originally? How long ago?

Did you teach, or are you teaching, your children a song, a dance, or a musical instrument? How did/do you teach them?

Have you or your children ever learned the music and dance of their (or some other)culture? How did it help them learn more about the culture in general? Have they performed in a group?

What kinds of cultural traditions and values are carried by the songs, dances, or musical instruments of your family?

Did/Do your children go to any sort of music or dance school? Where was/is it held? When? Who was/is the teacher?

What would you most like your children to learn about their own culture through songs, dances, or musical instruments? What plans do you have to make sure they do?

Write up your findings in presentation for the class.

Add some examples of the material you are asking about (the words to a song, or pictures of instruments or dances, for example).

Activity #4:

Now you are ready to plan a day of cultural learning. You can use the information you have gathered about music and dance groups and what you have learned about your own family and community traditions. Use some of the ideas below or plan your own, depending on the resources in your community.

Idea #1….

Each One Teach: Prepare a lesson, presentation, or exhibit about music or dance from your family's culture, or the culture of someone else you interviewed in Activity #3. This could be teaching a song or a short dance, or telling a story about an important instrument or performance in your family. If possible, invite your parents, grandparents, or community members to help you "teach" the lesson.

Idea #2…

Invite a music or dance group to visit your classroom: Identify a music or dance group from your area (see the list of African immigrant musical or dance groups in the Appendix, but your teacher can help you find others). Have your teacher help you make an invitation to the teachers and students of the groups to come visit your class and teach you more about their culture.

Idea #3…

Perform a play or create a story about a family moving to a new and different place. As immigrants, how would the family's traditions relate to those of the host community? Would both communities change? If so, how would they change? How would the immigrant family change/maintain features of their cultural identity? Feel free to research, select, and create the cultural groups represented in your production. Think about the characters in the play. Where and how would *you* fit in the plot based on your own life experiences? For example, consider what changes may take place when a new student joins the class, or when new players join an established team.

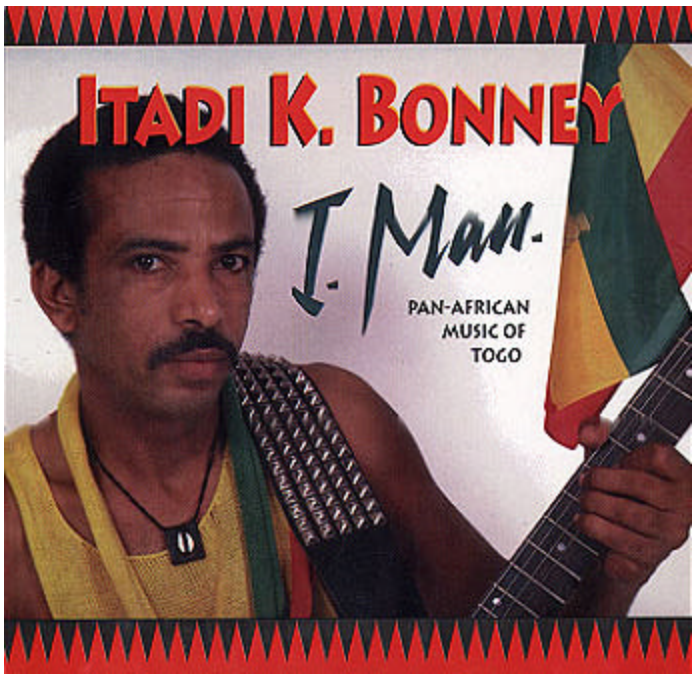
Or…

Create a script or storyline for a reality television show in which each student pairs up with another student with the challenge of imagining what life would be like if both of their families had to live together in the same house for one year. What customs or traditions would they have to or want to change when living in a new place? What if the families were to live with each other for a longer period of time? How would children grow up in such a situation?

African Immigrant Music & Dance in Washington, D.C.

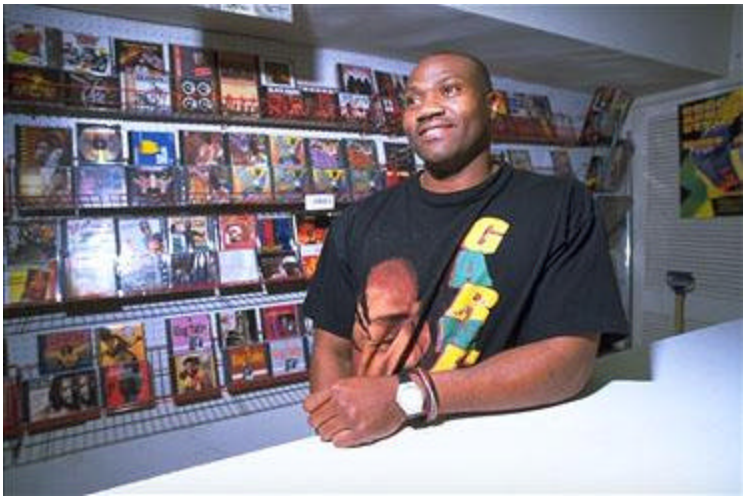
From a Research Report by Kofi Kissi Dompere & Cece Modupé Fadopé

As African people have migrated to different parts of the world including the United States, their artistic expression of their values and beliefs has helped them to survive. Recent immigrant Africans in the Washington, D.C., area contribute labor and skills to the regional economy and enliven the local cultural environment through their art, clothing, adornment, and food. It is their music and dance, however, that have most strikingly transformed the cultural terrain.



The increasing appreciation of African polyrhythms has created a demand for live music. During any spring-summer season, the sounds of Majek Fashek, Soukous Stars, Aster Aweke, and Lucky Dube can be heard at concert halls and music festivals throughout the city. In addition to the African musicians who visit annually from Africa and Europe, a number of local groups have sprung up. Itadi Bonney and the Bakula Band play African highlife and soukous music. The recordings of Mr. Bonney, an exile from Togo, include Mayi Africa *and* I-Man*, both produced in Washington. Photo courtesy Itadi Bonney Productions*

The broad range and the wide variety of contexts of African music and dance styles to be found in and around the city reflect the cultural diversity of its African-born residents. African immigrant music in metropolitan Washington includes sacred music such as Coptic liturgical music in Ethiopian churches, Muslim devotional chanting in Senegalese Sufi gatherings, Nigerian and Ghanaian gospel music based on popular highlife rhythms, and ceremonial music like praise songs and epic poetry. Popular dance music such as Zairian soukous, Cameroonian makossa, shaabi from Egypt and Morocco, and Nigerian highlife are also part of the area's musical soundscape.



Large music stores carry African music of internationally known popular artists like Fela Kuti, Miriam Makeba, and Salif Keita. But new specialty retailers such as Simba International Records are making a wider range of African music, artists, and videos available to area residents. Photo by Harold Dorwin

Musicians perform live at local community events, at restaurants, in homes, and in places of worship. Music circulates via audiotape and videotape cassettes, CD, community radio, and cable television programs. Events like independence day dances bring together people who have come to the United States from the same country of origin. In the Washington area, immigrant Africans celebrate themselves by coming together and sharing traditions within a new community. They create ethnic music and dance troupes to educate their children and others unfamiliar with their cultural heritage.

Young members of an Ethiopian Christian congregation play the kebero, a traditional drum, and sing during a service celebrating the new year. Photo by Harold Dorwin

Tastes in music and knowledge of dance can be markers that define boundaries between community insiders and outsiders. They can also bridge communities. Jamaican reggae music, for example, in which Ethiopia is a central symbol of African world heritage, is embraced by young Ethiopian immigrants in Washington, D.C., and performed as part of the musical repertoire of Nigerian, Gambian, and Ghanaian musicians. The messages of African music have found many an ear in metropolitan Washington.

Much of the production of African music in the area has been the effort of enterprising individuals. Ibrahim Change Bah and his African Music Gallery Productions, for example, have not only provided a retail outlet for music but also produced Syran Mbenza on the CD *Bana*, the Soukous Stars in *Soukous Attack*, Thierry Mantuka and Gerry Dialungana in *Classic O.K. Jazz*, and Tabu Ley Rochereau in *Baby Pancake-Aba*. Eddie Asante's labors produced *Timeless Highlife* by C.K. Mann and Nkai by Pat Thomas of Ghana. Lately, System 77 of Yaw Acheampong Sekyere has been reproducing and marketing Ghanaian highlife music.

In this photograph, Ibrahim spins disks on his weekly radio program on WDCU. Photo by Harold Dorwin

Ethnic and regional community organizations like the Volta Club organize traditional Ewe music and dance groups to create an atmosphere of family from which members derive support, assistance, and cultural fulfillment in time of need, sorrow, or joy (see Joan Frosch-Schroder 1991). Photo by Ebo Ansah

Nile Ethiopian Ensemble: Profile of an African Immigrant Music & Dance Group

by Betty J. Belanus, from research by Tesfaye Lemma & Dagnachew Abebe

More than 40,000 Washington-area residents claim the Ethiopian region as their birthplace. They are members of several culturally, religiously, linguistically, and ethnically diverse communities. The largest is Amharic, but the area also includes Tigrean, Oromo, Eritrean, and Gurage. Tesfaye Lemma, a longtime advisor and community scholar of the African Immigrant Folklife Project, is the founder of the Center for Ethiopian Arts and Culture and of the Nile Ethiopian Ensemble. The center, like many other African immigrant organizations, promotes traditional culture for the benefit of their youth and the understanding of the general American community. And, like many African immigrant music and dance groups, the ensemble presents traditions from many peoples - in this case, those from the Horn of Africa - in their performances.

The ensemble often performs with Seleshe Damessae, a master of the *kerar* (six-stringed lyre), who learned to play from his father. Damessae spent four years studying the traditions of the Azmaris, itinerant performers in northern Ethiopia, from whom he is descended. He now teaches young apprentices to make and play their own kerars here in Washington, D.C.

Most members of the ensemble started performing as youngsters in Ethiopia. "I enjoyed dancing with my friends during holidays like Easter, New Year, Christmas, and also weddings. Many people from the neighborhood admired my talent, and I continued my singing and dancing career in school," said dancer Abebe Belew, who was born in Gondar Province.

Like singer Selamawit Nega, most future members of the ensemble in the late 1970s were recruited or forced to join music and dance groups sponsored by the former Ethiopian government "to educate for propaganda purposes." Dancer Almaze Getahun recalls that when his family objected to this, "My father was labeled a revolutionary, and they sent him to jail." During this time, members of the ensemble learned songs and dances from many Ethiopian ethnic groups.

Most of the ensemble members eventually moved to Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, and joined musical groups that toured the Middle East, Europe, and the United States. Tesfaye Lemma defected to the United States while on a tour in 1987. As musicians and dancers arrived in the Washington area, Lemma formed the ensemble. And, in accordance with the Amharic proverb, "Kes be kes inkulal be igru yehedal" (Slowly, slowly, even an egg will walk), the group has developed a loyal audience for their performances in the Washington, D.C., area and beyond.