TEACHERS’ CORNER: MALI – FROM THE MALL TO THE CLASSROOM
by Melanie Pinkert

The 2003 Smithsonian Folklife Festival offered educators the opportunity to experience Malian traditional and contemporary culture through the performers and artisans of music, textiles and fashion, arts, architecture, and food. A special seminar for teachers during the Festival provided an in-depth look at Malian history, arts, and music. The projects described below are drawn from the seminar presentations and can be used in several content areas. They can be adapted for elementary grades through high school and will help to deepen students’ understanding of Mali and the traditions of West Africa. An annotated list of resources is included following the projects.


Present the jali (griot) as the keeper of family history. This professional musician/commentator sings the praises of individuals and recounts important events. Have students think about the keepers of history in their own families.

Project 1: Make family trees with names, dates, and important events. Assign the task of interviewing older family members and add important historical and social events based on recollections of grandparents, aunts, and uncles, etc.

Project 2: Have students serve as jalis for the class throughout the year. Their job is to compose songs that praise individuals and tell the story of what takes place in the classroom. The songs and stories can be put on posters and illustrated.

The Hero (Resource: Wisniewski, David. Sundiata, Lion King of Mali, Clarion Books, 1999.)

Have students read the story of Sundiata. Discuss the role of the hero and his/her value in Malian culture. Make a list of criteria and traits for a hero using a graphic organizer.

Project 1: Have students compare this hero with those in other cultures and discuss similarities and differences. Have students prepare short plays that exemplify the values they have discovered or have them write and illustrate their own hero stories.

Project 2: Ask students to think about and discuss whom they would choose as their heroes, whether historic figures or people they know, and why. How is each student “heroic” through a deed or accomplishment?
Music Then and Now

Have students listen to traditional and contemporary Malian music. Ask them to identify what they hear: voices, instruments, speed of the music (tempo), loudness (dynamics). Can students identify the sounds of traditional and electric and rock-style instruments?

Project 1: Using the web, have students find images and descriptions of traditional Malian musical instruments. Ask students to identify what materials the instruments are made from and discuss how they might be played. How are these instruments similar or different than the traditional ones students know about or play? Assign reports based on comparisons and the discussion.

Project 2: Discuss the ways that traditions may change over time. Ask students to think about songs they know that have been performed by different musicians and in different styles. One famous and controversial example is the Star Spangled Banner, often played by a traditional concert band. However, in 1969, our national anthem was played by Jimi Hendrix on an electric guitar at the Woodstock Music Festival.

Mali – Ancient Kingdom, Modern Country

Compare the ancient kingdom and modern country of Mali. Students can choose from among many topics: geography and physical features; trade goods and routes v. modern commerce; Islamic influences on culture.

Project 1: Student journalists conduct research and report on both the past and present. Ask students to create newspaper headlines, considering what issues are important for the time period. Have students compare issues to see if people’s opinions and concerns have stayed the same or changed over time.

Project 2: Create a play about a “day in the life” of an ancient or modern Malian. Have students incorporate as many ways as possible to illustrate daily life, including transportation, clothing, food, school, trade, climate, etc.

Music Then and Now

Have students listen to traditional and contemporary Malian music. Ask them to identify what they hear: voices, instruments, speed of the music (tempo), loudness (dynamics). Can students identify the sounds of traditional and electric and rock-style instruments?

Project 1: Using the web, have students find images and descriptions of traditional Malian musical instruments. Ask students to identify what materials the instruments are made from and discuss how they might be played. How are these instruments similar or different than the traditional ones students know about or play? Assign reports based on comparisons and the discussion.

Project 2: Discuss the ways that traditions may change over time. Ask students to think about songs they know that have been performed by different musicians and in different styles. One famous and controversial example is the Star Spangled Banner, often played by a traditional concert band. However, in 1969, our national anthem was played by Jimi Hendrix on an electric guitar at the Woodstock Music Festival.
Mali – Ancient Kingdom, Modern Country

Compare the ancient kingdom and modern country of Mali. Students can choose from among many topics: geography and physical features; trade goods and routes v. modern commerce; Islamic influences on culture.

Project 1: Student journalists conduct research and report on both the past and present. Ask students to create newspaper headlines, considering what issues are important for the time period. Have students compare issues to see if people’s opinions and concerns have stayed the same or changed over time.

Project 2: Create a play about a “day in the life” of an ancient or modern Malian. Have students incorporate as many ways as possible to illustrate daily life, including transportation, clothing, food, school, trade, climate, etc.

Clothing as Art (Reference: Winter, Jeanette. My Baby, 2000.)

Introduce mudcloth making, an important Malian tradition, and have students read about it. Ask students to identify shapes and patterns in the material. Discuss the idea of producing traditional art from commonly found materials. Have students compare other types of cloth decoration (i.e., tie-dying).

Travel

Plan a trip to Mali, using maps and website information about weather, transportation, cities and sights, food and accommodations, etc. Have students make colorful brochures or posters advertising their choices. Ask students to write postcards, letters, or keep a journal telling about their trip.

Resources on Mali and West Africa

Books for Students

Burns, Khephra, Leo Dillon, and Diane Dillon. 2001. Mansa Musa. Harcourt Brace. (one of the great kings of Mali)


Project Resources for Teachers


Multimedia, Music and Dance


“African Dance and Drum.” Video by Rick Levy Productions. 2 videos, 30 minutes each with teacher guide. West African dances, games, clothing, demonstration of musical instruments. Suggested classroom discussion topics and research questions. West Music, 1212 5th St., Coralville, IA 52241, 800-397-9378; www.westmusic.com

Websites: Curriculum Resources
http://www.mnh.si.edu/africanvoices/
www.sas.upenn.edu/African_Studies/K-12/menu_EduMEDI.html
K-12 Electronic guide for African resources on the internet

Websites: General/Ancient History
www.africaguide.com/country/mali (general information)
www.geographia.com (general info, short text, no images)
www.sagatours.com (general tours of Mali: “places to visit” “things to do and see” includes artisans and traditional culture. Images and contemporary music clip)
www.worldatlas.com (general info, map, and country statistics)
www.geocities.com (history of ancient Mali)

Websites: Art/Architecture
www.jembetat.com (African art gallery searchable by country)
www.nmafa.si.edu/mali (Smithsonian National Museum of African Art — Mali Empire and Djenne figures, with curriculum unit)

Websites: Music
www.coraconnection.com (musical instrument/catalogue sales – nice images of current musicians, instruments and explanations of regional styles)

[This teaching activity was originally published in the fall 2003 issue of AnthroNotes, vol. 24, no.2]