



Smithsonian
National Museum of Natural History

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.

The Jali (Resource: Broughton, Simon, Mark Ellingham, eds. *World Music: The Rough Guide*, Penguin Books, 1994.)

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.

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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)

Diouf, Sylviane A. 2000. *Kings and Queens of West Africa*. Watts Library/Grolier.

Masoff, Joy. 2002. *Mali: Land of Gold and Glory*. Five Ponds Press.

McKissack, Pat. 1995. *The Royal Kingdoms of Ghana, Mali and Songhay: Life in Medieval Africa*. 1st Owllet ed. H. Holt.

Nelson, Julie. 2001. *West African Kingdoms*. Raintree Steck-Vaughn.

Shuter, Jane. 2003. *Ancient West African Kingdoms*. History Opens Windows series. Heinemann Library Publishers. Grades 4-6.

Wisniewski, David. 1992. *Sundiata, Lion King of Mali*. Clarion Books. (most famous hero of Mali)

Winter, Jeanete. 2001. *My Baby*. 1ST ed. Frances Foster Books/Farrar, Straus & Giroux. (traditional mudcloth making)

Project Resources for Teachers

Broughton, S., and Mark Ellingham, eds. 1994. Rev. ed. *World Music: The Rough Guide*. Penguin Books. (Chapter on West Africa contains an extensive article on Malian music with discography)

Kohl, Mary Ann F., and Jean Potter 1998. *Global Art: Activities, Projects and Inventions from Around the World*. Gryphon House. (Contains examples of Dogon art)

Terzian, Alexandra. 2003. *The Kids Multicultural Art Book: Art and Craft Experiences From Around the World*. Williamson Publishing. (Art projects, paperback edition now available)

Multimedia, Music and Dance

“Mali Lolo! Stars of Mali.” 2003. Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. A compilation CD of traditional and popular music, featuring vocal and instrumental performances. Catalogue #40508.
www.folkways.si.edu/database/

“Music and Culture of West Africa.” 2003. CD-ROM of the Straus Expedition of 1934, compiled by Gloria Gibson and Daniel Reed. Sound recordings, photographs, discussions of fieldwork. Interactive section on African rhythms. For Macintosh and Windows platforms. Indiana University Press
www.indiana.edu/~iupress/tradelist/index.html or www.iupress@indiana.edu

“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 Djenné figures, with curriculum unit)

Websites: Music

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

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