

FUTA TORO

West African Dance Ensemble

Art Form: Music and Dance

Style: Traditional

Culture: West African

MEET THE ARTIST:

Futa Toro West African Dance Ensemble presents the dances, songs and music of the West African countries of Senegal, Mali and Guinea. The name "Futa Toro" is derived from a large geographic region in African that encompasses areas of northern Senegal and southern Mauritania, in the Senegal River Valley. Encompassed by tropical climates, low-lying plains and the edge of the Sahara desert, the land and the people are rich in history, culture and music. The *Futa Toro Ensemble* encompasses the cultures of West Africa, providing students with a colorfully-costumed, in-depth look at the history, nations and people of the region. The ensemble is directed by *Malik Sow*, a master drummer of Senegal, singer, dancer and choreographer. Mr. Sow has also appeared in films, including "Amistad," "Poetic Justice," "Distinguished Gentleman" and "Cap de Thiaroye" and has appeared on the Arsenio Hall Show, Family Accents and True Talent. *Futa Toro* tours extensively and currently has a roster of 20 performers and a repertory of more than 10 ballets. Annual trips to the African continent by company members reconnect them with the roots and vitality of their culture.

ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE:

A performance with *Futa Toro* is a celebration of color, sound, movement and spirit! It is a vibrant, hand-clapping event that transports the audience to a far away West Africa village. It begins with a 'drum call,' using a traditional West African rhythm such as Sunu (soo-noo) to signal everyone within hearing that a celebration is about to begin. The speaker of the group helps viewers understand the customs, costumes and lifestyle of the people of West Africa. They learn about the continent of Africa, the West African countries and heritage of the people. The instruments used in the performance include a djunjun (jun jun), or bass drum; two djimbe (jim bay) drums which play the accompaniment patterns and lead parts; and a shekere (shay ker ay), a gourd covered with beads. Dancing is an integral aspect of the music. One of the most popular dances is the tague (tah gay) which is performed before the planting and after the harvesting of the crops. The domb dance challenges the skill of the performers with rapid tempos and intricate dance steps.



PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE:

The continent of Africa has both an ancient and modern history, but this section will focus on the ancient, traditional aspects of the West African regions of Senegal, Mali and Guinea. The Empire of Ghana (4th -13th centuries) covered eastern Senegal, southwest Mali and southern Mauretania. The Soninke people controlled trade at this time, including the gold trade with the Arab states across the Sahara desert. Cross-cultural influences developed from this strong economic relationship. In the 11th century the Empire began to decline and the Mandingo state of Kangaba became known as the Great Empire of Mali (13th-15th centuries).

Sundiata Keita (1210-1260), known as the great magician king, is called the founder of the Mali Empire. Crippled from birth, he went into exile with his mother when his father died; his extremely jealous half brother became king. However, his half-brother was later overpowered and his people begged Sundiata to help them. He put together an army and achieved victory, ruling the Mali Empire for the 25 years until his death in 1260. His era was marked by a period of great wealth and education among the people. His name lives on in songs, poems and dances.

The Mali Empire reached the height of its glory under Mansa Musa (1307-1332). Later leaders were unable to maintain the strength of the empire, which fell to an invading Moroccan army in 1591. During this period a considerable body of literature in Arabic was developed, but due to the turbulent history of the area, much of this treasure was lost. Throughout its history, West African traditional culture has relied on the oral tradition. Myths, fables, legends and stories continue to be passed down by griots (oral historians) and performers in order to amuse, entertain and teach the people about legendary heroes, historical events, values, beliefs, and traditional customs. Because France held much of West African territory in the early part of the 20th century, French is the official language today.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- What words (verbs and adjectives) would you use to describe the performance?
- Name some of the specific instruments that were featured in the performance. What do you recall about each instrument? Can you remember the names of any the instruments? (Check the glossary.)
- What was the role of the Master Drummer? How did he give signals to the other musicians and dancers?
- Did any part of the performance intrigue you? Confuse you? Surprise you? Delight you? Discuss why.
- What are some of the specific things you learned about West African traditions or culture?
- Describe the costumes. What qualities made them unique?

FRAMEWORK FOCUS - HISTORY/SOC STUDIES:

Using a map or a globe, find the continent of Africa. Identify the countries of West Africa and specifically locate Senegal, Mali and Guinea.

Divide into groups. Have each group research one of these countries and discover such things as geological variations, temperatures, weather, and indigenous animals and plants?

Make a list of comparisons between West Africa and California. How big is each country in comparison to California? What is the highest point of each country? What are the longest rivers? Compare the weather.

What countries border the featured ones in West Africa? What states border California? What things do you find that are similar? What things do you find that are different?



- Legend:
- ⊗ Artistic perception
 - ❖ Creative expression
 - ▾ Historical & cultural context
 - ⇒ Aesthetic valuing
 - * Connections, Relations, Applications

ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE:

- ⇒ Pair students and have them take different roles, one being the person who attended the performance and one who didn't. The one who attended the show should describe the performance and what they themselves learned. The other person is to ask questions to learn more. Switch roles. This can also be done as a writing assignment.
- ▾ In traditional West African societies, music and songs are integral to the telling of stories. However, when Africans were forced into slavery their languages were banned and they were not allowed to sing their songs. Today most of the translations of the stories do not include the songs sung by each character. Go to the library and find some books or recordings of the tales of West Africa. Pay special attention as to whether or not traditional words, phrases or songs are included. Read or listen and find one to share with a friend.



- ⊗ Review the vocabulary list, paying particular attention to words that describe costumes and instruments. Select 1-5 words and draw a picture to illustrate the meaning of the word.

- ❖ Communication is an important function of drumming in Africa. When playing rhythms, drummers are emulating a spoken language to inform people about upcoming events. Write short messages on paper. Using your hands, rhythmically clap the syllabic sounds of your message. Divide the class into different sections and then have each group clap the message, passing it on to the next "village." Try this example first: 'Join us for dinner.' 'Sweet potatoes, beans, salad and rice.' 'Come at dusk.'

SUGGESTED RESOURCES:

Artsource® unit: *Chuck Davis (West African dance)*. Go to the Music Center Education Web page below for a description of the unit and information on how to order. www.musiccenter.org/artsource/dance.html#africanroots

Video: *African Healing*, 1997. This is an instructional video with a manual and guide for warm-ups, dance movement, six traditional dances and guided improvisations based on aspects of natural elements and animals. Available from Amazon.com. Eric Charry.

Mande Music: Traditional and Modern Music of the Maninka and Mandrinka of Western Africa. Available from Amazon.com.

VOCABULARY: FUTA TORO

CLOTHING OR ACCESSORIES

- *Buba/buru* Large, loose fitting gown worn over other clothing
- *Cellopats* Type of baggy trousers worn by African men.
- *Cowrie Shell* Type of sea shell used to decorate yama yama, such as belts, bracelets, necklaces, etc.
- *Dashiki* Loose-fitting man's shirt.
- *Gelle'* Woman's head wrap.
- *Lapa* West African wrap-around skirt, made of one large piece of fabric, wrapped and tied at the waist.
- *Yama yama* Accessories used for adornment.

LANGUAGES

- *French* The official language of many of the West African nations.
- *Wolof* Language widely spoken in West Africa.

INSTRUMENTS

- *Agogo* A double metal bell.
- *Balafon* A 21 wooden-keyed instrument played with a stick.
- *Coteroba* A short bass drum.
- *Dawota* A double-sided bell, hand-made from a piece of iron.
- *Djimbe* A large, mushroom-shaped West African drum that is hung around the neck of the drummer and played as it is suspended between his legs. This drum is made from a hollowed out log with a goat skin stretched across the top. The skin is held in place by two steel rings; the top one is attached to a rope which is pulled by the drummer to change the sound.
- *Djun djun* The bass drums
- *Kora* Made from a gourd covered with goat skin, this instrument is part lute and part harp, with 21 strings.
- *Seruba* A lead drum that stands about two and a half feet tall.
- *Songba* A smaller version of the djunjun, and often played together with the djunjun.
- *Sabar* A Wolof orchestra consisting of five drums of different sizes and sounds.
- *Shekere* A gourd within a netting of macramé and beads, used as a rhythm instrument.
- *Whistle* A whistle is often used by the lead drummer to accentuate the drum 'breaks' and signify changes in the rhythmic structure.



Djimbe

DANCE/RHYTHMS

- *Doumba* A dance that challenges the skill of the performer with rapid tempos and intricate dance segments.
- *Sunu* A traditional West African rhythm that is used to call people together.
- *Tague* A dance that is traditionally performed before the planting and harvesting of the crops.

WEST AFRICAN COUNTRIES

Senegal

Guinea

Gambia

Mali

Ivory Coast