

West African Rhythm and Storytelling Study Guide

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Acknowledgments

This study guide was developed with contributions from Isaac Akrong and the African Arts Institute staff and board members.

Special thanks to the educators, artists, and cultural workers whose passion and dedication to preserving African arts and knowledge help make resources like this possible.

Additional insight was provided by members of the AAI board, and research for this guide draws on resources developed by West African arts, storytelling, and cultural organizations.

Introduction to the Study Guide

This study guide aims to familiarize students with the vibrant traditions of **West African rhythm, dance, and storytelling**. For generations, these artistic traditions have played an important role in community life, bringing people together through music, movement, and shared cultural expression.

This guide explores West African cultural practices through drumming, movement, rhythm, and storytelling. Students will also look at why **cooperation, shared responsibility, respect, and stewardship** are important, and how they shape these art-forms. Educators can use this guide to help teach these rhythmic traditions in their classrooms.

By participating in activities and responding to discussion prompts that align with the **Ontario Curriculum**, students will cultivate a more profound understanding of rhythm, music, and movement. Their abilities in observing, listening, and participating creatively will be strengthened. The guide also shows how rhythm and storytelling **foster community, convey ideas, and transmit knowledge through generations**.

The materials are adaptable for teachers to use in a single lesson, a brief set of workshops, or a half-day learning module. In the upcoming section, we'll explore the expertise of **Isaac Akrong and the African Arts Institute**, focusing on his contributions to African drumming and dance traditions.

Beyond introducing students to rhythm traditions, this guide seeks to spark **curiosity, promote cultural respect, and inspire creative exploration**.

This guide is designed with Grades 4–6 classrooms in mind.

Learning Objectives

Students will:

- Explore **West African drumming, rhythm, and dance heritage**.
 - Enhance their understanding of values such as **cooperation, community responsibility, and shared learning through artistic practices**.
 - Identify key vocabulary and concepts related to rhythm traditions.
 - Develop collaboration and involvement skills through exercises like **Call and Response**.
 - Learn about the historical background and cultural importance of rhythm traditions like **Sorsonne**.
 - Examine how **oral storytelling** serves to safeguard history and transmit knowledge across generations.
 - Expand their knowledge of **Africa and its cultural diversity**.
-

Introduction to Isaac Akrong and the African Arts Institute

Learning about the artist and educator who shaped these materials is helpful prior to exploring the rhythmic traditions in this guide.

Rhythm was a part of **Isaac Akrong's** early life. During his childhood in Ghana, he remembers how children were instantly drawn to the sound of drums.

“Educators realized that students connected to the sound of the drums. If it wasn’t included in the classroom, they would leave to where the drumming was happening.”

— **Isaac Akrong**

Isaac Akrong is the founder, president, and artistic director of the **African Arts Institute (AAI)**, a nonprofit charitable organization based in Belleville, Ontario, committed to advancing the education of African arts and culture. With decades of experience in West African drumming and rhythm traditions, he brings a passion for community arts and a dedication to making **Ghanaian art forms accessible to people everywhere**.

Over the years, Isaac (www.isaacniiakrong.com) has taught widely, including at renowned universities such as **York University (Ontario)**, **Wesleyan University (Connecticut)**, and **Swarthmore College (Pennsylvania)**. As an **arts educator**, he has also conducted various workshops with schools across Ontario, including the Toronto District School Board, Peel District School Board, and Algonquin and Lakeshore Catholic School Board. He started his formal education at the **University of Ghana's School of Performing Arts**. Afterwards, he

became part of the **Ghana Dance Ensemble** at the Institute of African Studies, enhancing his grasp of cultural performances.

Isaac earned a **Master's in Dance and a Ph.D. in Ethnomusicology from York University**, specializing in traditional African performance arts that shape popular culture.

As a performer, Isaac excels in traditional dance and drumming, art forms originating from the **Ga people of Ghana**. In 2001, he founded the **African Dance Ensemble** (www.afridance.com), an interactive performance group, and has performed on local and international stages, using rhythm, movement, and shared experiences to inspire communities.

He believes that art has the power to **bring people together across cultures and communities**. His work — which spans performance, choreography, ensemble leadership, and research — reflects this human-centred approach. As a researcher and cultural practitioner, he advocates strongly for **honouring and preserving Ghanaian music and dance traditions for future generations**.

It was out of this deep respect for rhythm traditions and community learning that the **African Arts Institute (AAI)** was founded. Guided by Isaac's expertise, AAI provides **workshops, concerts, educational programs, and community events** that expose African arts to learners of every age, from young children to university students. The institute's offerings include programming for adults and seniors.

Isaac also founded the **Humanity in Harmony Festival**, an event uniting artists, scholars, and community members to celebrate the arts and explore their cultural significance.

This study guide draws from Isaac's expertise and his commitment to sharing knowledge through the arts. By engaging with these materials, teachers can help students appreciate **West African rhythm traditions** and their role in **community life**.

The next section will explore **Africa's rich cultural diversity**, highlighting how music and rhythm are fundamental in shaping community life across the continent. This foundation will support students in their exploration of the traditions and practices in this study guide.

Cultural Diversity of Africa

"Africa is full of many rhythms and traditions. There are over 75 ethnic groups in Ghana alone. Every community has its own music and dance that tells its story."

— **Isaac Akrong**

Africa is a large, vibrant continent made up of many languages, cultures and traditions. Today, it has **54 countries**, each with its own history and cultural practices. Across Africa, **more than 2,000 languages are spoken**, reflecting the many ethnic groups and communities across the continent.

Africa's diversity is reflected through its art, customs, cuisine, and ways of life. For example, in Ghana alone, **people may speak English alongside local languages such as Twi, Ewe, and Ga**. Each language and community carries its own distinct collection of stories, traditions, and cultural knowledge.

Did You Know?

- In many African communities, **people sing, clap, or play music while working, celebrating, or telling stories**.
- Some musicians describe **rhythm as being connected to the human heartbeat**, because it reflects natural patterns in the body.

Throughout many parts of West Africa, artistic traditions such as music, dance, and storytelling are deeply embedded in community life. **These traditions are often highlighted during ceremonies, harvest celebrations, and important milestone events**. Rhythm and dance are important parts of many traditional West African practices and often reflect **community values and cultural identity**.

Beyond movement as a form of expression, symbols are another important artistic practice used to communicate ideas, proverbs, and shared knowledge. Adinkra symbols, originally developed by the Akan people of Ghana, represent key concepts such as wisdom, unity, peace, strength, and truth.

For example, the symbol **Sankofa** encourages learning from the past in order to move forward, while **Nyansapo (the wisdom knot)** represents wisdom, intelligence, and thoughtful decision-making.

By learning about Africa and these West African traditions, students can develop a stronger understanding of this part of our world and the many cultures that exist within it. This guide showcases rhythm traditions as an example of cultural practices that unite communities and builds connection and trust.

Getting Started

Before beginning the lesson, try one of the following activities with your class.

1. Map Exploration

Grades: 3–5

Materials:

- World map
- Printable Africa map
- Coloured pencils or markers
- Stickers

Instructions:

1. Present a large world map to the class (you can find a printable one here: <https://www.freeworldmaps.net/printable/africa/>). First, show students where Africa is on the world map. Next, provide each student with a map of the continent of Africa and ask them to identify each region of Africa using different colours. Encourage students to look at the geographic features that are within or near Africa, such as the Nile River or the Sahara Desert.
2. Next, have students label ten different countries on their map and mark their locations with stickers. Ask each student to choose one country to learn more about.
3. To build their discovery skills, have students research five facts about their chosen country. Once they are finished, gather the class in a circle and invite students to share their findings with the group.

This activity aims to **teach students about Africa's size, diversity, and geography.**

2. Listening to Rhythm

Grades: 3–5

Materials:

- Audio clip of a rhythm or drumming pattern
- Speakers (optional)

Instructions:

1. Play a short rhythm for students to listen to. The first time you play it, encourage the class to notice what they hear.
2. Play the rhythm a couple more times. Students can match the rhythm with gestures or body sounds, such as clapping to the beat.
3. Alternatively, students can go around the room and introduce themselves using a small movement or rhythm.

The goal of this activity is to help students tune into their listening skills and **identify the distinct features of music and rhythm.**

2. Explorer Hunt

Grades: 3–5

Materials:

- Bingo-style worksheet with questions or prompts
- Classroom clues or resources

Instructions:

1. Begin by asking students what they already know about Africa. Invite them to share any words, ideas, or images that come to mind.
2. Next, give students a bingo-style sheet with different questions or prompts about the continent. Students must look around the classroom to find clues that help them answer the questions.
3. The first student to complete three or four squares in a row wins.

The purpose of this activity is to **enhance students' knowledge of Africa's diverse continent, highlighting its many regions, customs, and traditions.**

3. Watch an Educational Video

Grades: 3–5

Materials:

- Projector or screen
- Internet connection

Instructions:**1. Watch Together**

Facts About Africa: an educational video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KcNVNsvyFfA>

2. Ask students to pay attention to new facts or images they notice about Africa.
3. After watching, invite students to share one new thing they learned.

By identifying words and images linked to Africa, **this activity seeks to improve listening and interpretation skills.**

Students will now learn about the role of storytelling in **West African rhythm and music traditions and how these stories help strengthen community ties and preserve the cultural legacy of these traditions.**

Storytelling, Folklore, and Learning

“Storytelling is one of the important ways knowledge is passed down. Stories can teach morals, relationships, responsibility, and even environmental care.” — Isaac Akrong

What's in a Story?

Stories are powerful. From advertisements, television shows, and even flyers, they're everywhere we look. Not only do they shape how we understand the world around us, they can

also help us connect to big ideas, and larger-than-life experiences. By tapping into this form of artistic expression, we can relate to others and ourselves in a deeper way.

In many African societies, storytelling has been instrumental in building community, preserving history, teaching moral values, and carrying the wisdom of ancestors.

Through oral stories, knowledge extends far beyond entertainment. They guide how people live, relate to one another, and care for the natural world.

Storytelling as Learning

Storytelling teaches more than facts. It helps listeners:

- understand right and wrong
- learn how to treat others
- reflect on choices and consequences
- connect past experiences to present life

Stories often reveal their meaning over time. A story heard in childhood may take on new meaning as a person grows older.

The Power of Legacy

In recent years, there has been growing interest in West African storytelling traditions, particularly as younger generations seek deeper connections to ancestry and cultural roots. Community organizations and non-profit groups have increasingly recognized the importance of honouring these traditions by creating spaces where stories can be shared during gatherings, festivals, and intergenerational events.

Today, digital tools also play a role in supporting storytelling traditions. Memory work, documentation, and archiving allow stories to be recorded and preserved, while oral storytelling continues to hold deep significance.

Did You Know?

- **A Griot** is a **respected storyteller, historian, musician, and meditator**, who helps to preserve family heritage and keep legacy alive. Trained from childhood, the stories they tell can sometimes include a blend of words with rhythm.
- Often, griots share stories at major events, including births and weddings. Some tales, passed on from generations before, have been told for over 700 years!

Elders often share stories with younger generations, who in turn carry these stories forward, keeping cultural knowledge alive.

Oral storytelling refers to the practice of passing down stories, proverbs, songs, and cultural expressions from one generation to the next through spoken word and performance.

Stories That Celebrate Rhythm and Oral Traditions

As a teacher, you may want to explore books inspired by West African rhythm and oral traditions with your students. Stories such as **“Bringing the Rain to Kapiti Plain” by Verna Aardema** and **“The Spider Weaver” by Margaret Musgrove** are great choices to share with your students. These can stand alone or be part of a bigger lesson. You may refer to the **“Further Reading and Resources”** section for more titles.

We hope that by recognizing the value of storytelling, and its potential to be a powerful learning tool, you can discover ways to make space for stories in the classroom. Next, we will explore **how music, rhythm, and dance work together in celebrations and community traditions.**

Music, Rhythm, and Community

“Rhythm is like the heartbeat. The heartbeat powers the body; it is life. You go to places with no electricity, people walk barefoot, they play drums, and they are happy. Rhythm helps people focus on what matters — family, survival, and community.”

– Isaac Akrong

West African communities have long turned to **rhythm practices as tools to support well-being, restore harmony, teach values, and preserve tradition.** Many of the guiding principles behind these practices developed centuries ago, during a time when communication and the transfer of knowledge looked very different from today. Rhythm involves more than movement and sound. It serves as a transformative method for self-expression and fostered stronger connections with others in the larger community.

What Is Sorsonne?

Sorsonne refers to a rhythmic dance tradition connected to a healing mask practice. It originates from the **Baga people of Guinea**. In some modern performances, choreography draws inspiration from Sorsonne traditions. As a meaningful tradition, it plays a central role in West African dance, often used to **express ideas of community connection, renewal, and holistic well-being.**

The Mask: <https://leicestershiremusichub.org/sorsonet>

The Dance: <https://mandebala.net/references/sorsorne.php>

The Role of Healing in Dance

Music and dance are integral to healing traditions. Rhythm connects the **physical, emotional, and spiritual elements of communal life.** Healing in Sorsonne dance traditions is not considered a solitary act. Rather, it is a collective experience that takes place in the presence of others.

This reflects a cooperative and holistic understanding of well-being, where true emotional balance extends to include the natural world. Historically, healing traditions were sacred rituals closely tied to seasonal cycles and everyday community life, including farming, births, deaths, conflict resolution, and important life transitions. Music and dance were also important in other seasonal celebrations of renewal and abundance.

In the aftermath of colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade, many healing traditions survived through **oral memory, education, family values, ancestral knowledge, and stage performance**. As we continue to learn about rhythm traditions like Sorsonne, it is important to recognize their greater value and treat them with respect and care. These practices have long helped communities stay connected, maintain cultural identity, and support collective well-being.

Symbols in Sorsonne:

In some modern performances inspired by **Sorsonne traditions**, dancers reinterpret harvest imagery through movement and symbolic gestures.

*“The dancers carry **calabashes**, and when they move their hands, it’s like **sprinkling seeds** — seeds of peace, growth, and abundance — onto the earth.”*

*“When there is **peace**, people can flourish. They can farm; they can take care of their family. This is how the world comes together.” – Isaac Akrong*

Calabash → fruitfulness, sacredness, sustainability, health

Sprinkling seeds → growth, peace, future abundance

Harvest imagery → nourishment, care, survival

Masks → protection, transition, guidance

Call and Response

Call and response is a common element in West African rhythm and dance. It functions as a conversation expressed through music and movement. One person typically begins by offering an idea (the call), inviting others to answer (the response).

The call can take many forms: a signal, a sung line, a drum phrase, or even a simple movement or gesture.

The response is the answer. It might come through a drum pattern, a repeated sung line, or a movement that replies to or completes the original idea.

Call and response is collaborative. It emphasizes the ensemble rather than a solo performer and often invites audience participation. Anyone can take part, including those new to the tradition.

The form can look different depending on whether it is expressed through drumming, dance, or singing.

Call and response can also be a compelling tool for restoration and renewal. As a grounding practice, it can help regulate energy and emotion, strengthen connections, and support balance when harmony is disrupted.

Teaching Rhythm: Guidelines and Community Values

Rhythm is a mutual exchange – A bridge to connection. Every sound, gesture, movement is all part of a bigger message. Both teachers and learners can gain something valuable, if they are open and willing to receive.

Rhythm teaches:

- **Sacredness.** Some movements are meant only for specific moments and ceremonies. In classrooms, we prioritize movements that are supportive, educational, and inclusive.
- **Responsibility**—We are responsible for the care of ourselves and our fellow peers.
- **Joy**—The rhythm and dance is celebratory. We channel positive energy within ourselves, and exchange with others.
- **Listening** (especially in relation to call and response). Being fully present and aware is a key part of effective listening. We take part in the free exchange of ideas and acknowledge another's presence.
- **Belonging/Cooperation**—Everyone plays a part, ensuring no one is excluded. We also understand and appreciate everyone's contributions. The group matters as much as the individual.
- **Timing**—Everything must be done at the right time, with care and respect. We choose not to rush the process, rather, we wait for events to unfold naturally, with patience and gratitude.

Sorsonne, when taught today, focuses on many of the above values in relation to the importance of **preserving heritage and ancestral knowledge, community building, emotional grounding, and respect for tradition**. The following section highlights the **celebratory function of dance, its close relationship to rhythm, and the role it continues to play in ceremonies and cultural traditions across West Africa**.

Dance, Celebration, and Cooperation

“Everyone has a role. One person branches out; another supports. Like pilots on a plane, everyone has responsibility.” — Isaac Akrong

Dance, as an art form, is more than just movement. It is celebration, community, and connection. By observing how members of the ensemble interact, we begin to understand the deeper meaning behind the choreography.

From dancers to singers to drummers, everyone has a part to play. Principles such as cooperation, affirmation, and care for one another are brought to life through dance and are extended to the audience as an invitation to participate.

Members of the ensemble **communicate through symbolic movements, call-and-response chanting, posture, and timing**. These elements help promote strong community values, convey history, and pass along stories of the ancestors. At its core, this is a collective understanding — one in which each member of the group is treated with care, respect, and non-judgment.

Types of Celebration Dances

Dance, in its many forms, is a tradition passed down over time. It plays a central role in many West African celebrations and gatherings, marking important moments in community life. Below are some occasions that often involve dance and rhythm:

- **Harvest Festivals**

Using symbols of seeds, growth, and harvest, community members — from young to old — take part in movements that celebrate abundance and prosperity.

- **Coming-of-Age Dances**

These dances mark a pivotal moment in a young person's journey from childhood to adulthood. They often involve initiation ceremonies and rituals that honour growth, responsibility, and maturity.

- **Cultural Festivals and Heritage Events**

Traditional dances, sometimes blended with contemporary movement, are performed in public spaces to preserve cultural practices and share them with younger generations.

- **Ritual Dances**

These performances are considered sacred and are connected to religious ceremonies or spiritual rituals. They are often used to honour the natural world, ancestral spirits, or deities.

For further reading:

<https://www.afriklens.com/ceremonies-and-rituals-dance-and-cultural-significance/>



Watch Together

African Dance Ensemble performance:

https://youtu.be/xpH0bDJozKA?si=23a7x6l8o_3qNNL9

After viewing, guide students in a group discussion using the below questions as a starting point. This conversation will support the **storyboard activity** in the student study guide.



Further Reflection and Discussion

1. What story do you think this performance tells?
2. How did the performers communicate without words?
3. Why do you think rhythm is such an important part of this tradition?
4. How would you describe this performance to someone who has never seen it before?

Student Activities



ACTIVITY 1: Call and Response

Grades: 3–5

Subject Area: Music, Social Studies, Dance

Curriculum Connections

Below are three specific expectations from the Ontario Arts Curriculum that this activity addresses:

Grade	Strand	Specific Expectation
Grade 3	Music: Creating and Performing	C1.2: Apply the elements of music when singing, playing, and moving (e.g., use clapped patterns to demonstrate an understanding of steady beat versus rhythm).
Grade 4	Music: Creating and Performing	C1.1: Sing and/or play, in tune, from memory and/or from notation, a varied repertoire of music from diverse cultures and communities.
Grade 5	Dance: Creating and Presenting	A1.1: Use the creative process in the development of short dance pieces, using a combination of planned and improvised movement.

Summary

A high-energy exercise in active listening and rhythmic imitation.

Supplies:

Instruments, props that make sounds.

Step One:

Lead facilitator claps a short pattern → students clap it back.

Step Two:

Lead facilitator makes a gesture → students respond with a movement.

Step Three:

Now have a student take the lead by coming up with a gesture or sound for the rest of the group to follow.

Variations:

The student creates a sound → the class answers together. Switch things up by adding in a new instrument or having multiple leaders at once.

Assessment Opportunities

Teachers may assess:

- Students' ability to distinguish between steady beat and rhythm
 - Responsiveness to auditory and visual cues
 - Participation and collaboration within the group
 - Confidence and clarity when taking a leadership role
 - Optional: Small-group creation of a short call-and-response performance
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**ACTIVITY 2: Storyboard**

Grades: 5–6

Subject Areas: Media Arts, English, Social Studies

Curriculum Connections

This activity focuses on the “Reflecting, Responding, and Analysing” and “Creating” strands of the Media Arts and Dance curriculum:

Grade	Strand	Specific Expectation
Grade 5	Media Arts: Creating and Presenting	B1.1: Create media art works using the creative process (e.g., use a storyboard to plan the sequence of a performance or video).

Grade	Strand	Specific Expectation
Grade 6	Media Arts: Creating and Presenting	B1.2: Organize ideas, images, and sounds to produce a draft of a media art work (e.g., use sketches and notes to map out a performance).
Grade 6	Dance: Critical Analysis	A2.1: Construct personal interpretations of dance pieces and support them with evidence from the work itself and from their own perspectives.

Summary

Students will watch the performance video and create a storyboard that maps out key scenes using visual and written descriptions.

Supplies:

Sticky notes, projector, blank paper, markers, whiteboard, or Canva Storyboard Maker.

Step 1: First Viewing – Experience the Performance

Watch the video without taking notes. Focus on the “vibe” first!

See: What did you notice first? (Movement, energy, setting)

Hear: What sounds stood out?

Emotions: How did it make you feel? (Mood, tone)

Step 2: Build the Storyboard

Replay the video in 15–30 second clips. Sketch or jot notes for 3–5 frames.

Consider:

Facial expressions and Choreography.

Rhythm and Props.

The Arc: Does your storyboard show a clear Beginning, Middle, and End?

Step 3: Add Details and Reflect

Fill in the labels beneath your panels:

Beginning / Setting: Where are the musicians? What colours stand out?

Sound / Rhythm: Is the beat fast or slow? Loud or soft?

Emotions / Mood: What feeling does the movement express?

Personal Response: What was your biggest takeaway?

Assessment Opportunities

Teachers may assess:

- Ability to identify structure (Beginning, Middle, End)
- Use of descriptive language and visual detail
- Evidence-based interpretation of movement and rhythm
- Personal reflection and insight
- Optional: Oral presentation of storyboard with explanation

Vocabulary List

Term	Definition
Tradition	A practice or custom passed from one generation to the next.
Diversity	The presence of many different cultures, ideas, or ways of life.
Ethnic Group	A group of people who share a common culture, language, or ancestry.
Rhythm	A pattern of sounds, beats, or movements in music.
Call and Response	A musical exchange where one voice leads and another answers.
Culture	Shared beliefs, practices, and ways of life within a community.
Ensemble	A group of musicians, singers, or dancers who perform together.
Oral Tradition	The passing down of stories, songs, and knowledge through spoken word.

Griot	A respected West African storyteller, historian, musician, or poet.
Legacy	The lasting impact of a person, tradition, or event.
Holistic Healing	An approach that considers body, mind, community, and environment together.
Symbolism	Using images or objects to represent deeper meanings.
Sorsonne	A rhythm and dance practice from Guinea connected to healing and community celebration.
Performance	The presentation of music, dance, or another art form to an audience.
Ceremony	An event marking an important cultural or spiritual occasion.
Choreography	The arrangement of dance movements into a planned sequence.
Ancestry / Ancestors	Family history and relatives who lived before you.

Facilitator Guide

This guide was designed to support educators in the classroom with the tools to facilitate a learning experience for students rooted in cultural respect, inclusivity, listening and shared experience. The aim is to encourage and build upon an understanding of community values and enhance students' learning and understanding of this sacred artistic tradition. The emphasis is on strengthening connections between participants, and cultivating a collaborative learning environment that encourages discovery, curiosity, and safe expression. This guide seeks to help you honour these practices in your classroom through shared knowledge and understanding.

Guiding Principles for the Classroom

1. **Listening First** – Learning begins with listening. Before responding, encourage students to pause and be present. Listening extends beyond just hearing sound, but also noticing movements, gestures, energy dynamics, and body language.



Facilitator Tip: Assess by engagement, collaboration, and participation.

2. **Connection and Cooperation** – This principle involves the participation of everyone in the group. As a facilitator, part of your role is to ensure everyone stays connected to the group. A safe, supportive space leaves no room for competition or performance mastery; there is a place for every individual. Participation matters more than precision.



Facilitator Tip: Maintain a calm, grounded space with tone and body presence, so that each participant feels seen and respected.

3. **Cultural Care & Responsibility** – Practices like Sorsonne are culturally specific. Students should learn *about* traditions with respect. Prioritize learning about community values and help provide context about the practice, as one of several West African traditions.



Facilitator Tip: Choose to begin the practice with a brief lesson and explainer about the tradition. Allow room for discussion and space for students to ask questions.

4. **Curiosity & Creativity** – Encourage a free-flowing, respectful space of discovery, where curiosity, individuality, and creative expression are celebrated! Help your students take pride in their differences and embrace them wholeheartedly.



Facilitator Tip: Model a supportive and affirming presence. Recognize different creative contributions by giving pointed feedback (i.e.—“I love how open and willing you were to try something new!”)

5. **Learning and Reflection** – Normalize mistakes. Embrace growth. Encourage reflection through prompts, discussion questions, and journaling exercises. There are no “wrong” answers!



Facilitator Tip: Set aside space during the day for students to slow down and process their experiences. Model patience and support in the aftermath of a mistake, and don’t overcorrect.

Activity-Specific

Story Circle

- Choose to set aside an **optional grounding sensory centre** ahead of time in the classroom. This can operate as a quiet space for students to decompress.
- Provide different levels of engagement to support various **learning styles** (i.e. – large font on print materials, visual cues, provide activity instructions in different formats, etc.)
- Set up a **community agreement** so all participants can be on the same page (i.e. – no interrupting when one participant is sharing, etc).
- Encourage respectful listening.
- Model patience and presence.

Storyboard

- To help maintain a space full of expression and discovery, encourage students to embrace a **learning mindset** that releases them from perfectionism.
- The focus of this activity is less about artistic skill. Every storyboard will look different, and that’s okay!

- Encourage students to move at their own pace and provide alternative access to the video and materials for those in need
 - Every thought, idea, and detail matters.
-

Further Reading, References & Resources

These resources help educators and students explore West African rhythm and music traditions, cultural history, and community practices.

Community & Educational Organizations

1. **African Arts Institute**
Offers West African drumming programs grounded in ensemble practice, cultural context, and oral tradition. Suitable for educators, community learners, and students seeking historical grounding.

Website: <https://www.africanartsinstitute.com>

2. **Alpha Rhythm Roots**
A Toronto-based group that offers West African drumming and rhythm classes, and emphasizes learning rhythm as a community practice. Their programs emphasize listening, participation, and shared musical experience.

Website: <https://www.alpharhythmroots.com>

3. **Cultural Infusion**
Develops classroom-ready programs on West African music, instruments, and storytelling. Designed for school settings with a focus on cultural respect rather than performance mastery.

Website: <https://culturalinfusion.com>

Performance Ensembles & Cultural Groups

4. **West African Rhythm Ensemble**
A university-based ensemble teaching West African drumming, dance, and song through collective practice and cultural study.

Website: <https://www.carleton.ca/music/ensembles/west-african-rhythm/>

5. **Ballet Creole** – A leading Afro-Caribbean dance company exploring African diasporic rhythm traditions.

Website: <https://www.balletcreole.org>

6. **Afiwi Groove** – A nonprofit organization based in Pickering, Ontario that offers programming designed to connect participants to African diasporic arts.

Website: <https://www.afiwigroove.com>

Books and West African Storytelling

The following resources draw from African oral storytelling traditions and rhythm-based narrative styles. Many of the following books are available through public libraries, school libraries, or educational video read-aloud platforms.

1. **Bringing the Rain to Kapiti Plain**

Author: Verna Aardema

This classic story follows a young boy who saves his community during a drought. The story is written in a **cumulative call-and-response rhythm**, mirroring the structure of oral storytelling traditions.

Read-Aloud: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YI7f6KXWmOw>

Publisher Page: <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/314792/bringing-the-rain-to-kapiti-plain-by-verna-aardema/>

2. **Drum Dream Girl**

Author: Margarita Engle

Inspired by West African drumming traditions brought through the African diaspora. The book tells the story of a girl who dreams of playing drums in a culture where only boys traditionally perform.

Read-Aloud: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ws3xY2IG9q0>

Publisher Page: <https://www.indiebound.org/book/9780544102293>

3. **The Spider Weaver**

Author: Margaret Musgrove

A retelling of an **Anansi folktale**, one of the most famous storytelling traditions originating from Ghana.

Read-Aloud: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YF0pY4FfL4M>

Publisher Page: <https://www.harpercollins.com/products/the-spider-weaver-margaret-musgrove>

4. **Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears**

Publisher Page: Verna Aardema

A well-known folktale inspired by African oral storytelling traditions.

Read-Aloud: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O9yTq7vFQ3c>

Publisher Page: <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/314792/why-mosquitoes-buzz-in-peoples-ears/>

5. The Talking Drum

Author: Margaree King Mitchell

A story about a boy who learns how communication and rhythm connect communities.

Read Aloud:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O4vJtqG0r0c>

Publisher Page:

<https://www.harpercollins.com/products/the-talking-drum-margaree-king-mitchell>

Explore More - African Music and Rhythm Traditions

For students and teachers interested in continuing their exploration of African music and culture, the following resources offer additional learning opportunities.

7. Smithsonian Folkways – African Music Resources

Website: <https://folkways.si.edu>

8. BBC – Africa Country Profiles

Website: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa>

References

The following references were used to support the development of this guide and provide additional cultural and historical context. This guide also draws on community-based knowledge, oral traditions, and performance practices.

Classroom Resources

The following resources support educators in the classroom and expand on activities included in this guide.

Storyboard That

What is a Storyboard?

<https://www.storyboardthat.com/articles/e/what-is-a-storyboard>

Imagine Forest*Free Storyboard Template*https://www.imagineforest.com/blog/free-storyboard-template/#google_vignette**Story Arts Online***Story Circle and Storytelling Lesson Ideas*<https://www.storyarts.org/lessonplans/lessonideas/#circle>**University Musical Society (UMS)***A Celebration of Culture Through West African Dance*<https://ums.org/learning/k-12-programs/performance-playground/a-celebration-of-culture-through-west-african-dance/>**Education World***Journey Across Africa: Mapping a Continent's Diversity*https://www.educationworld.com/a_lesson/Journey-Across-Africa-Mapping-a-Continent%27s-Diversity

Video Resources**YouTube***West African Dance and Drumming Performance*<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7dlfW95kBas>**YouTube***West African Rhythm and Dance Demonstration*https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zmw8pcF_cO8

Cultural Context and African Traditions**National Geographic Society***Africa Culture Overview*<https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/africa-cultures/>**UNESCO***Intangible Cultural Heritage*<https://ich.unesco.org/en>**State Accent***West Africa: Traditions, Festivals, and Uniting Ceremonies*<https://stateaccent.net/cultural-insights/west-africa-traditions-festivals-and-uniting-ceremonies/>**Adinkra Symbols***Adinkra Symbols and Meanings: Explore African Symbols, Wisdom, and Culture*<https://www.adinkrasymbols.org>

Rhythm, Music, and Performance

Afriklens

African Drumming: Culture, History, Spirituality and Influence

<https://www.afriklens.com/african-drumming-culture-history-spirituality-and-influence/>

African History

The Origins and Evolution of African Drumming

<https://africanhistory.info/the-origins-and-evolution-of-african-drumming/>

ML Percussions

Traditional African Dances: Regions, Styles and Culture

<https://mlpercussions.com/blogs/mlp/traditional-african-dances>

Ade Jembe Fola

Exploring Traditional Dance Styles and Their Histories

<https://adejembefola.org/blog/exploring-traditional-african-dance-styles-and-their-histories>

Tontinkan

Traditional Djembe Rhythms of West Africa

<https://tontinkan.net/wp/sorsornet/>

Storytelling & Oral Traditions

Africa Interactive

Celebrating Africa's Rich Oral Literature and Folklore

<https://africa-interactive.net/celebrating-africas-rich-oral-literature-and-folklore/>

Travel Reference

Explore the Rich Storytelling Traditions of West Africa

<https://travel-reference.com/west-african-storytelling-traditions/>

African Mythology Worldwide

The Power of Words: How Oral Tradition Shapes West African Creation Myths

<https://african.mythologyworldwide.com/the-power-of-words-how-oral-tradition-shapes-west-african-creation-myths/>

Storyboard That

What is a Storyboard?

<https://www.storyboardthat.com/articles/e/what-is-a-storyboard>

Imagine Forest

Free Storyboard Template

https://www.imagineforest.com/blog/free-storyboard-template/#google_vignette

Story Arts Online

Story Circle and Storytelling Lesson Ideas

<https://www.storyarts.org/lessonplans/lessonideas/#circle>

University Musical Society (UMS)

A Celebration of Culture Through West African Dance

<https://ums.org/learning/k-12-programs/performance-playground/a-celebration-of-culture-through-west-african-dance/>

Education World

Journey Across Africa: Mapping a Continent's Diversity

https://www.educationworld.com/a_lesson/Journey-Across-Africa-Mapping-a-Continent%27s-Diversity

Community Knowledge and Interviews

Isaac Akrong

Interview conducted for the development of this study guide

January 2026

We'd love to hear from you.

If you have any questions, suggestions, or feedback about this study guide, please contact the African Arts Institute at:

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