

# Activity Plan

<i>Title</i>	<b>Sundiata, Mali's Lion King</b>
<i>Subject</i>	Dance: Connecting
<i>Author</i>	ArtsEdge: <b>Daniella Garran</b> <b><i>Original Writer</i></b>
<i>Grade level</i>	Grades 6-8
<i>Time duration</i>	60-120 mins
<i>Overview</i>	<p>This lesson introduces the legendary Malian king Sundiata Keita, known as the Lion King of Mali, by using elements of traditional Malian festivals. As students learn about Sundiata's thirteenth-century battle to liberate his people from an oppressive ruler, they will recreate the story in a masked festival that takes elements from two of the most important Malian ceremonies: the Dama and the Sirige.</p> <p>As students work in groups to design a Sundiata festival, they will create character masks based on animals whose qualities mimic the personalities of specific characters in the story. In preparation for this, students will research the behavior and habitat of the animals that on which their masks are based. Students will also explore archetypal patterns seen in myths about heroes such as Sundiata</p>
<i>Objective</i>	<p>Students will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Gather information on Malian king Sundiata</li><li>• Understand Sundiata's role in the formation of the Empire of Mali</li><li>• Understand Sundiata's role in liberating Mali from the Ghanaian Empire</li><li>• Examine the purpose of Malian festivals such as the Dama and the Sirige</li><li>• View a variety of traditional Malian masks and discuss their function in West African traditions</li><li>• Study animal motifs in African mask design</li><li>• Investigate qualities associated with specific animals and apply those attributes to the design of their own masks</li></ul>

---

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explore the varied ways in which traditional West African stories are shared: through storytelling, in dances and festivals, and in writing</li> <li>• Translate a written text into a wordless retelling through creative movement and visual arts</li> <li>• Discuss archetypal patterns seen in myths about heroes from around the world by comparing the themes of the story of Sundiata with those of familiar myths, legends, and fairytales</li> </ul>
<i>Materials</i>	<p><b>Materials</b></p> <p><b>Resources</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Printable</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Important Festivals In Mali</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Tales From The Brazilian Jungle Cuesheet</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Performance Guidelines</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Drum Evaluation Rubric</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Pantomime Evaluation Rubric</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Mask Evaluation Rubric</a></li> </ul> <p><b>Required Technology</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 Computer per Classroom</li> <li>• Internet Access</li> <li>• DVD Player</li> <li>• Projector</li> </ul>
<i>Activities and procedures</i>	<p><b>ENGAGE</b></p> <p><i>An African Hero</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Begin a discussion of Sundiata by asking students what the word "hero" means. How does a hero differ from a star or celebrity? Who are some heroes from history? What traits do they have in common? Who decides if someone is a hero?</li> <li>2. At this point, read the story of Sundiata to the class. <i>Sundiata: Lion King of Mali</i> by David Wisniewski is recommended. <i>Note:</i> The teacher may also wish to paraphrase the story for the class. If the story is paraphrased, the teacher may want to tell the class that history in West Africa was frequently preserved by storytellers called Griots (<i>GREE-ohs</i>), who used music and storytelling to make learning about history more like watching a performance than sitting in a class.</li> <li>3. Following the sharing of the <i>Sundiata</i> story, discuss the following with the class:</li> </ol>

- What is the most difficult challenge that Sundiata has to overcome in order to help his people? Why?
- To what extent does Sundiata succeed by using special equipment or physical strength? To what extent does he succeed by using his mind?
- Sundiata is called the Lion King. What qualities do we associate with lions? How does Sundiata embody those qualities? (*Direct students to think also about the fact that lions are small and seemingly helpless when they are young cubs, but they grow up to be strong and brave.*)
- The Disney movie, *The Lion King* was based in part on the legend of Sundiata. Ask students if they have seen the movie, and if so, where do they see similarities between it and the story we just read?

## BUILD KNOWLEDGE

### *Ceremonies and Celebrations*

1. Begin by asking students what a ceremony is. What ceremonies have students ever witnessed or participated in? Where do we observe ceremonies in school, family life, community life, and in worship? How do ceremonies help to teach people things? How do they help us to preserve history?

2. Explain to students that like people around the world, the people of Mali and other African countries use ceremonies to preserve and celebrate their cultural history. Ceremonies in West Africa often use music and dance to teach children and remind adults about significant people and events from the past. How do people in the United States use music and festivals to teach about history?

3. Distribute the [Important Festivals in Mali](#) handout located within the Resource Carousel and describe the people of Mali's two very important ceremonies: the Dama and the Sirige. Every person in the village attends each of these festivals. These ceremonies are important because they teach Dogon children (*Dogon refers to a region in southern Mali*) about the community's most sacred religious beliefs. These ceremonies also remind the adults in the Dogon community of the beliefs that they share. Attending these ceremonies is similar to attending important services and ceremonies in other religions.

One of these highly important ceremonies is called the Dama (*DAH-mah*). A Dama is a sort of memorial festival held at least a year after a person's death. Some villages hold Damas every few years in which they honor all of the people who passed away during that period. In addition to celebrating the lives of people who have passed away,

---

Malians also believe that the Dama will help their spirits move into the next spiritual realm.

The other highly important festival in Mali is called the Sirige (*See-REE-gay*). The Sirige is held after a generation of village elders has passed away. The purpose of the Sirige is for the younger generation of the village (*teenagers and young adults*) to present a Sigi (*SEE-ghee*) to the village. A Sigi is a very tall mask made by the young people of the village. This mask is made of wood and is often as tall as 20 feet. It is worn at Damas and Siriges by highly trained dancers. The Sigi is meant to capture the essence and character of the generation that created it. When the new Sigi is presented at the Sirige, the old Sigi is retired and placed in a consecrated cave area where it will never be viewed again.

4. At this point, the teacher may show the class the videotape of the Dama ceremony, available by contacting the 'Virginia Museum's statewide media resources department' as previously noted under preparation. Additionally, a [clip](#) of this video is available on the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Web site.

If the class views the videotape, the teacher may ask the following:

- What kinds of instruments did you notice? Did they remind you of any western instruments?
- How did the dancers seem to be grouped?
- What animal did the stilt dancers remind you of?  
(*Note: They are meant to suggest birds.*)
- What other animals did the masks or movements remind you of?
- What was the mood of the beginning of the ceremony? How did it change? What created that change in mood?
- What movements did the dancer wearing the Sigi make? What did you think those movements were meant to represent?  
(*Note: The wearer of the tall Sigi bows to the two ends of the horizon; his mask touches the ground at both points.*)

One of the most important elements of these festivals is the use of masks. Masks used in ceremonies of this kind are meant to show the personalities and strengths of people from the village's history. Typically, this is done through animal imagery. The behavior and habits of various animals make us associate them with certain personality traits. What are some of the character traits that we associate with various animals? (*The sly fox; the fearless lion; the loyal dog are just a few examples.*)

APPLY

*Creating a Ceremony that Tells a Story*

---

---

1. Tell students that the class will create a Malian festival to commemorate the great hero, Sundiata. The festival will feature music and masked dances that retell parts of the story of Sundiata.

2. At this point, you may show the students images of Malian masks available on the websites listed in this resource. You may want to ask some of the following questions during or after students view the images:

- What animal motifs did you see in the masks?
- What kinds of personalities do the animals seem to display?
- What materials are used to create these masks?
- How are different types of masks worn? Would dancing in these masks present any challenges to the dancer?

3. To review the story of Sundiata, have students list the major events of the story on the board. When the big events from the story are listed, discuss with students how to break the story into five roughly equal parts.

4. Divide the class into five groups, and explain that each group will be responsible for presenting episodes from the story of Sundiata. This will involve the following designing a group dance or pantomime that retells a section of the story.

5. Tell students: When you pantomime, you act out an activity, character, or story using only your body and facial expressions. This process is also called "miming." The following exercises will help us get ready to tell stories using no words or sounds - just our faces and bodies.

*Exercise 1:*

See a simple mime exercise in the following Kennedy Center Cuesheet, [Tales from the Brazilian Jungle](#) (pages 2-3)

*Exercise 2:*

Tell students that pantomime may also be used to tell a story. Watch me as I pantomime something from a story that most of you heard when you were little." (*Teacher may act out Cinderella's return just after midnight by walking quickly across the room. Cinderella looks worriedly at a watch, then looks down to see that one shoe is missing and observes that her clothes are no longer elegant. She looks puzzled and wonders what happened.*)

6. Tell students: "In a game called charades, a person or group of people silently act out a book or movie, using only facial expressions and body movements to tell the story. The others have to guess what the book or movie is. To practice telling stories using pantomime, think about a fairy tale that you know. Let's break into groups of three and quietly discuss how to present part of a fairy tale in pantomime."

---

We will take turns having volunteer groups come forward. The rest of us will try to guess which fairy tale scene you are presenting.

*Entering the stage area*

7. Explain that each group will have one drummer and that the other group members will portray characters in the story. In other words, each group member except the drummer must have a character role.

For each section of the festival, students should consider the following components, listed in the [Performance Guidelines](#):

- Think about an interesting way to have the group enter the performance area. Here are just a few options to consider:
- Everyone walks into the performance area single file.
- Performers walk into the performance area individually.
- Performers dance as they enter the performance area.
- Performers enter two by two.
- Performers walk or move as animals as they enter the performance area.
- *Dancing and/or miming the story section*

*Movement*

8. Ask students: If your portion of the story were a charade, how would you use movement and facial expressions to tell the story?

- Think about how you and your fellow performers will act out the story of your section of Sundiata.
- As you create your performance, keep in mind that you will want to make your motions very clear and somewhat exaggerated.
- You will also probably want to keep them rhythmic because your group's drummer will be keeping time on the drum as you present your portion of the story.
- Think about how the animal you chose for your character's mask moves and behaves. You may want to bring some of the animal's natural movements to your own movements.
- Be sure to use the space well. Each member of the audience should be able to see each of the performers.
- Remember, there will be no talking as you present your story - just the rhythmic beat of the drum in the background.

9. You may find it useful at this point to show some clips of African dances. The following videocassette and DVD resources provide good examples:

- *Ipi Ntombi: An African Dance Celebration*. 1997. Videocassette.

- 
- Traditional Stilt Walkers *Moko Jumbie*. 1991. Videocassette.
  - West African Ballet Company *Les Merveilles D'Guinea - The Marvels of Guinea*. 1994. Videocassette.
  - *Cinderella*. 1961. Videocassette.
  - *Exiting the Stage Area*

10. Tell students that they should think of an interesting way to leave the stage after their group's portion of the story is presented.

#### *Drumming*

11. Tell students that their section of the ceremony should take three minutes or so to perform. Remind them that while they are performing, their group's drummer will be playing the drum that he or she created. The drumming should create a rhythmic sound that supports the story that the performers are telling with their bodies and masks. Think about ways that the rhythm could accompany the emotion or action that a performer is expressing with movements:

- Drumming gets faster and faster to show excitement and movement or chaos.
- Drumming speeds up then stops abruptly to show suspense followed by a surprise.
- Drumming becomes slow and loud to signal the arrival of an important person or moment.
- Drumming creates a nice, bouncy rhythm to go with performers entering or exiting the stage area or simply going about their normal activities.
- A sharp beat of the drum provides a sound effect that signals that someone has dropped something or fallen down.

#### *Creating masks*

12. Tell students that each group member will design a mask for his or her character. The masks must be worn during the group's presentation, so they should pay attention to sturdiness and fit; they will also need to be able to see and speak while wearing the mask. African masks often incorporate animal characteristics. The masks must feature animal characteristics. The animal that students select for their character should have characteristics that go with the character's personality.

- Suggestions for making simple-but-effective [masks](#) from paper and cardboard
- The link below gives instructions for a slightly more complicated [mask](#)-making technique using papier mache or sculpture paper

- Many images of striking **Dogon** masks from Mali; also discuss the **meaning** and uses of many Dogon masks

*Creating the music for the performance*

13. Each group will have one member who is responsible for creating a drum and playing it in a rhythm that complements the actions that the masked dancers/mimes perform. The drum should resemble traditional African drums and should be "playable." The sides of the drum should be decorated with symbols or images that retell your group's section of the Sundiata story.

To make a simple drum, begin with a clean, empty coffee can, or other large can. Soak a piece of chamois (very soft leather available at craft stores and automotive stores), wring it out, and stretch it tightly over the top of the can. Fasten the chamois with glue and secure it by winding string, yarn, or twine around it. The chamois will tighten as it dries to form a good drumming surface. The base of the drum may be decorated with paper, fabric, and / or paint.

The Kinderart web site offers an excellent lesson that explains how to make a different kind of African-style **drum**.

**REFLECT**

*Sharing Our Ceremonies*

1. Create a sense of festivity and drama by playing traditional or contemporary West African music (*see the Teacher References section for suggested resources*) as students enter the room.
2. As groups present their performances, students may sit on the floor to watch. Save the discussion of individual parts of the performance until all five groups have performed. Keep the feeling of a performance by increasing the volume of the recorded music during transition periods so that the continuity of the story and performances are not interrupted.

*Conclusions*

3. At the end of the last performance, discuss the following as a class:
  - Based on what you know about Sundiata, what kinds of characteristics did the people of Imperial Mali seem to value in their leaders?
  - How is Sundiata similar to our political leaders today? How is he different? What do you think accounts for those differences?
  - Think about stories you have read or seen in movies about other heroes (*i.e., King Arthur, Odysseus, Superman*). How is Sundiata's story similar? (*Answers will include: heroes tend to be of royal or noble birth; they are separated from their parents at a young age; an older person or a god mentors*)

---

*them; they are assisted by magic and/or gadgets in their early endeavors; they struggle to go home; they fight a monster or powerful enemy for the good of their community; they try to unify their community.)* Teachers of middle school students may want to introduce the term *archetype* and its definition at this point.

- Why were the animals used in the imagery for some of the masks chosen? How do those animals display the characteristics that match the characters on whose masks they are represented? What aspects of those animals' environments foster those characteristics?

To assess students' understanding and experience of the Sundiata Ceremony, pose the following questions to students. Teachers may decide whether to use the questions as part of the discussion or distribute them as writing prompts.

- Let's recap the five parts of the story that each group presented. What part of the story did group one present? Group two? Group three? Group four? Group five?
- Was there any part of a presentation that you had questions about? Let's see what the creators/performers can tell us about those questions.
- How did different groups handle the same material? For example, did you notice that two groups created very different Sundiata characters? What were the advantages and disadvantages of each? What other differences among the various groups' interpretations did you notice?
- Professionals in almost every job evaluate their own work all the time. How would you evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of your own work and your group's work? If you were to present this program again, what would you do differently? Why?

#### ASSESS

Assess the three parts of the student's work using the [Drum Evaluation Rubric](#), [Pantomime Evaluation Rubric](#), and [Mask Evaluation Rubric](#), all located within the Resource Carousel.

#### *Adaptations*

##### Accessibility Notes

Students with visual impairments or disabilities may need modified handouts or texts. Students with physical disabilities will need modified movement options

#### *Links and Websites*

##### Teacher Background

---

The teacher should be familiar with Malian culture and festivals.  
The teacher should be familiar with the story of Sundiata. More information is available at:

- African [History](#) at MrDowling.Com
- An [Epic](#) of Old Mali

**Prior Student Knowledge**

Students should be familiar with the role of festivals in cultures.

Students should be familiar with Malian culture and history.