

Discovering the Arts and Culture of Mali

Supplementary Lesson Plans

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

Office of Statewide Partnerships

Discovering the Arts and Culture of Mali Supplementary Lesson Plans

The lesson plans in this booklet reinforce student understanding of Mali's culture and history by tying the traditional Malian visual and performing arts to the empire's economic development, political structure and oral tradition. Each lesson plan includes information regarding Virginia Standards of Learning objectives and provides the teacher with suggested materials, talking points, classroom instructions, and student directions/worksheets.

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Office of Statewide Partnerships developed these materials and distributes them to Virginia teachers at no charge. Educators are welcome to reproduce them for classroom use and to share them with colleagues.

Table of Contents

Click on a heading below to go to that section

Sharing Our Stories <i>Oral History</i>	Page 3
Gold Weights <i>Proverbs and Trade</i>	Page 15
Sundiata Festival <i>Mythology and African Masks</i>	Page 21
An African Garden <i>Geography and Earth Science</i>	Page 27
Tell Me Why <i>Mythology and Creative Writing</i>	Page 31
The Story Tunic Book Reports and/or Personal Essays	Page 35

*Additional resources on Mali are available at the Virginia Museum's website:
http://www.vmfa.state.va.us/mali_geo_hist.html*

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

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Sharing Our Stories: Oral History

Materials and Equipment

Writing materials, cardboard tube, gold foil, raffia, plastic or Styrofoam apple, colored paper, glue, clear contact paper, television and VCR (optional), CD player (optional), DOE Hour videotape on Mali (optional)

[Note: The videotape of the DOE Hour is available from the Virginia Museum's Office of Statewide partnerships (804) 204 – 2681.]

Objectives

This activity introduces the following concepts and skills:

The importance of oral history in Malian culture

The position of the griot in Malian society

The role of oral history in modern life

Techniques used by effective interviewers

Techniques used by effective speakers

Standards of Learning

This activity may be used to address the following Standard of Learning objectives:

History 3.2: The student will study the West African Empire of Mali by describing its oral tradition.

English 3.2: The student will present brief oral reports using clear and specific vocabulary to communicate sequentially organized ideas.

English 4.1: The student will use effective oral communication skills in a variety of settings.

English 5.3: The student will make planned oral presentations that present appropriate, organized content and incorporate visual aids to support the presentation.

English 8.1: The student will use interviewing techniques to gain information.

English 9.6: The student will develop narrative, literary, expository, and technical writings to inform, explain, analyze, or entertain.

Essential Information

(The teacher may read, paraphrase, or distribute this information)

As in much of Africa, Mali's history was preserved by a rich oral tradition. Until Middle Eastern traders brought written language to the area, all of Mali's history was memorized and shared in a storytelling performance by professional historians called Griots (GREE-

ohs). Griot is an old French term that used to mean “keeper of memories.” Griots were employed by villages, kings, or clans and had to commit to memory tremendous amounts of information; orally recounting the lineage of a given village or family from the modern day back to ancient times could easily take several hours. Listening to an extended “talk” of this length would be hard on an audience, so when the griot tells about the history of a village, the information is mixed with poetry, song, dance, and music. As a result, the stories of the Malian Griot convey history as well as elements of the ancient performing arts of that culture. Griots still practice their art today in Mali and in other parts of Africa. This skill tends to remain in specific families that have worked as griots for many generations. In these families, the older generations instruct the younger members in the content and techniques that a skillful Griot must master. *(At this point, the teacher may want to show the excerpt of the DOE Hour featuring Mande Griot Djimo Kouyate singing a family lineage and playing the Kora, a traditional West African harp.)*

Directions to Students

Overview

Where do we see examples of oral history today? In many families, stories are shared at the dinner table or during reunions associated with special holidays. Others are shared casually in everyday conversation. Think of some of the family stories you have heard. Who in your family is an effective storyteller? What makes his or her stories so entertaining or interesting? Your task for the next few days is to collect two stories from members of your family. The source of the story (i.e. the person who tells the story) should be someone older than you – remember, the idea is to preserve a story from your family’s past.

Interviewing

In order to hear good stories, you are going to have to be a good interviewer. The person you talk to in your interview is called the subject. If you simply approach your subject and demand that he or she tell you a story, you won’t get what you are looking for. Start with a few questions instead. If you remember a specific story that you would like to hear again, ask the subject to tell it to you in a bit more detail. You might even think of some questions that you have about that story and start with those. If you do not know of any family stories, ask an older member of your family a few questions that will prompt him or her to tell stories. Some questions that work well include:

Describe a typical after-school day when you were in elementary school, middle school, or high school. Include details such as popular foods, stores, television shows, movies, clothing, and music.

Describe a piece of technology whose arrival changed everyday life in your household (this may be the house in which you grew up or our current family and household).

Describe your experience of a news event (Woodstock, Nixon's resignation, or the first landing on the moon, for example) or an era or movement (the Women's Movement, the Civil Rights Movement, the "Yuppie" movement) that you lived through or observed firsthand.

How did our family come to the United States? Where did they come from? What prompted them to leave their former home? How do you know this family history?

Why did you/your family settle in the city or community in which we live? How has the community changed over the years?

What do you know about our house? When was it built? Who lived there before you did? How has the house changed in structure or decoration over the years?

Describe the first car you ever drove. Whose was it? What was its image – "cool car," "family truckster" or "jalopy"? Do you remember how that car was advertised when it was new? How did it differ from cars today? What finally became of it?

Who was the most unusual person in our family? Tell me about him/her.

Who is our family's "unsung hero"? Why? (An unsung hero is a person whose deeds are admirable but who never seems to receive quite enough credit.)

Tell me about a lesson that you learned the hard way.

Who was your hero when you were growing up? Why? How did he or she become your hero?

What news event that you remember had the biggest impact on you? What were you doing at the time that you learned about it? How did you react?

What was your most frightening experience?

What was the most amusing thing you ever witnessed?

You can probably come up with many other questions that will lead to wonderful family stories and oral histories. Remember that you want to ask questions that will get the subject to tell a story about his or her life, rather than merely recalling an isolated memory (riding on a horse-drawn trolley, for example).

Six Tips for Getting a Good Interview

1. *Ask permission to share the story.* Tell the subject that you are looking for stories as part of a school assignment. If you selected that subject because you thought he or she would be a good storyteller, you might mention that, as well.
2. *Look interested.* If you are conducting your interview over the telephone, indicate that you are listening by asking relevant questions and responding appropriately to what the subject is telling you.
3. *Do not try to write down every word that the subject says.* Spend most of your time simply enjoying the story. Do make note of names, specific events, and colorful words or expressions that the subject uses. (See handout.)
4. *When your subject stops talking, wait.* Do not rush in with another question or comment. You will find that people often add interesting tidbits at the end of a statement or section of the story. When the subject stops talking, try to wait five seconds before asking another question.
5. *Ask a follow-up question or two.* If the person you are interviewing briefly mentions something in the story that you think is interesting, ask him or her to tell a little bit more about it.
6. *Remember that a good interview is a conversation.* It's okay to go in with a few questions written down, but do not walk in with a list of ten or twelve questions that you mechanically ask one by one.

Sharing Our Stories: Interview Worksheet

For each interview that you conduct for this assignment, please complete the following worksheet.

Full Name of Interview Subject: _____

How is he or she related to you? _____

Date and Time of Interview: _____

Location of Interview: _____

Brief notes on the story that this person told:

What moral or lesson does this story teach? Or, what main point does it make?

Did hearing this story make you think of other stories you would like to hear or questions you would like to ask? Jot them down here for future reference:

Signature of Interview Subject: _____

Directions to Students

Preparing to Share

After you have recorded at least two stories and completed worksheets for each, select one to present to the class. Your presentation will incorporate techniques used by the Griots of Mali. These are techniques that effective speakers today often use, as well. As you put your story together, think of ways that you could incorporate at least two of the following elements to make your story come alive:

- Props
- Costumes
- Music (recorded or something performed by you or a classmate)
- Movement such as dance or pantomime
- Poetry

Remember that African Griots are concerned with

(A) Preserving family and village history *and*

(B) Reinforcing the values of the culture.

As you craft your story, be very precise about who the people in the story are and how they are related to you. Be attuned to the lesson, value, or moral that the story is supposed to convey. Bring that “moral of the story” in at the beginning and end.

As you prepare your story, think about whether you want to tell it in the *first person* (speaking as if you were your grandmother, father, aunt, or whoever told the story originally: “I remember a time back in the fifties when my little brother and I learned that our mysterious neighbor was a more important person than we had ever thought.”) or *third person* (telling about something that happened to someone else; not pretending to be the person who originally told the story: “When my grandmother was a little girl, she and her brother learned that their mysterious neighbor was a more important person than they had ever thought.”). You should practice telling the story several times; after all, the Griots of Africa tell their stories repeatedly. Remember that good speakers speak somewhat more slowly and clearly than we would in normal conversation. Remember to use pace, tone of voice, and facial expressions to make your story exciting. You’re not just telling a story, after all; this is a performance.

(At this point in the lesson, the teacher may want to show the portion of the DOE Hour featuring a class sharing family stories in a similar exercise).

Student Activity

Preparing Our Stories

Think back over the interviews you conducted. Which story would you enjoy presenting in class as a classroom Griot? In the spaces below, answer the following questions to help clarify and develop the story.

1. When and where did the events of the story take place? If this is a story you heard from someone else, when do you first remember hearing it?

2. If this is a story that someone else told you, who told you the story? How would you characterize his or her voice or way of talking?

3. If you were going to share this story at a family or community gathering, where could you add props (such as objects, photographs, or documents) or performance elements (music, poetry, dance, or impersonation/drama) to enliven the performance? List some ideas here.

4. If you were to title this story, what would the title be? Why?

5. Take a few moments to write the story down. While oral histories are told, not written, your story will have more coherence and more flow if you take a few minutes to write it out first. (That way, when you tell it, you will know where it is going!) Remember, the Griots of Mali had the advantage of having heard the stories many, many times; this is a way of building in that familiarity. You may continue on the back of this sheet.

Tips for Sharing a Story with an Audience

Picture the story. See the scenes in your mind, as clearly as you can. Later, these pictures will help you recreate your story as you tell it. Some people like to sketch the story's scenes with figures; this is called storyboarding.

Write to get the storyline. Don't worry too much about writing the perfect story, though. Use the writing as a tool for finding the narrative and the details.

Many writers and storytellers find it easier to start right in with the body of the story, adding beginnings and conclusions after the bulk of the piece is written.

Vary the tone, the pitch, and the volume of your voice. Pay attention to your speed, as well – most people speak too quickly. Slow down and use silences. Remember, variety pitch, tone, and pace catches and holds attention

Use gestures that are comfortable and natural to you. Gestures can mime the action, or just add emphasis to a word, detail, or event. Gestures keep the eyes on *you*.

When not gesturing, simply hold the Griot's staff. If not holding a staff or prop, keep your hands relaxed at your sides or loosely clasped in front of you.

In your story, pay special attention to beginnings and endings. You may want to think about an introduction along with the story. This introduction can tell something about the story or about you.

Pay special attention also to how you portray your characters. Good characters bring a story to life—so put life into them, with face, voice, gesture, and body posture. Try to make each of them different enough that they're easily told apart.

When portraying two characters talking together, try a trick called “cross-focus”: make each character face a different 45-degree angle.

Storytelling is magic in part because it's *personal*—so make a personal contact with your listeners. Talk to them—not *at* them—and don't be afraid to talk *with* them.

Look them in the eyes. If there are too many of them, or you can't see them all, look mostly at the ones in front. If some aren't paying attention, focus on those who are.

As you tell your story, take your time, and give time to your listeners—time to “see” the story, time to laugh, time to feel, time to reflect, time to hang on the edge of their seats for what comes next.

It's easy to go too fast, hard to go too slow. If you're losing their attention, you may need to slow down!

Storytelling is interactive. As your listeners respond to your story, let your story respond to your listeners. Make your voice and gestures “bigger” or “smaller.” Stretch or shrink parts of the story. Pay attention to what works and what doesn't. Next time you can change, add, or subtract.

Endings should be clear, so your listeners know that your story's over without your telling them. You can do this by slowing down and adding emphasis. When you are finished telling the story, be absolutely quiet. Let there be silence after a story; in that silence, the audience will absorb the story's meaning.

Making the Griot's Staff

Supplies:

Slide of *Royal Linguist's Staff* from the Virginia Museum of Fine Art

36" Cardboard tube (the cardboard cylinder from a roll of gift wrap, for example)

Gold foil

Raffia

A plastic or Styrofoam apple

Colored paper

Glue
Clear contact paper

Cultures throughout Africa use staffs to indicate the status and occupations of citizens.

(Show slide of *Royal Linguist's Staff*.)

This is an example of an occupational staff. It is called the *Royal Linguist's Staff* and it is from Ghana, a country with a very rich oral history tradition similar to Mali's. It is an example of art from the Akan kingdom, a West African kingdom that is still alive today. The heavy use of gold ornamentation in Akan art shows the lingering influence of the West African gold trade of which Mali was a very important part.

What is depicted on the top of this staff?

Two birds; one looks like a rooster.

What do roosters do every day?

They crow when day breaks.

Why is this an appropriate image for this type of staff?

The linguist helps the king communicate with others in distant lands; similarly, the rooster's crowing tells people far and wide that morning has arrived.

The people who created this staff have a proverb that the top illustrates: "Although the hen knows that the dawn is breaking, she leaves it to the rooster to announce."

Teacher's Note: Prior to this activity, make the Griot's staff by covering the cardboard tube with gold foil. Tie raffia around the top edge and secure the apple to the very top of the staff with hot glue to make the finial. The gold represents the gold trade, the raffia represents agriculture and the use of raffia in mask ceremonies, and the apple represents school and learning.

The teacher may want to reinforce discussion etiquette after this unit by using the Griot's staff during other whole-class discussions. Alternatively, the Griot's Staff may be held by the Student of the Week or Student of the Day as a privilege.

Review

Your story must be based on an interview with a family member older than yourself.
Your story must incorporate at least two of the following: music, singing, props, costume, movement, poetry, other (clear other ideas with teacher first).
Your presentation of the story should be between three and five minutes.

You must turn in a completed the worksheet by the beginning of the period on_____.

Discussion

What were some of the repeated morals or lessons in the stories people shared for this assignment?

Did any of the stories mention historic periods or events that you had heard about or read about before? What did you learn about that period from the story you heard today?

How is this kind of oral history different from history that we read about in books or old newspapers?

Compared with written history in books and newspapers, what advantages and disadvantages does oral history present?

Evaluation

The following rubric may be used to evaluate student performance of this set of activities. The teacher may assign point values to each of the ratings, if desired.

1. Oral history presentation was focused and polished

Excellent *Good* *Average* *Needs Improvement* *Unacceptable*

2. Presenter introduced and summarized the story effectively

Excellent *Good* *Average* *Needs Improvement* *Unacceptable*

3. Presenter incorporated the required number of performance elements into the presentation of the story.

Excellent *Good* *Average* *Needs Improvement* *Unacceptable*

4. Performance elements suited the presentation and were thoughtfully selected

Excellent *Good* *Average* *Needs Improvement* *Unacceptable*

5. While listening to others' presentations, student demonstrated good audience behavior.

Excellent *Good* *Average* *Needs Improvement* *Unacceptable*

6. All worksheets were neatly completed and showed evidence of thought and effort.

Excellent *Good* *Average* *Needs Improvement* *Unacceptable*

Adapting and Extending

This activity may be adapted in a variety of ways.

Older students may complete a writing exercise afterward, in which they record the story in the speaking style of the teller. This could be used in conjunction with a unit on *voice* and *audience* in writing.

Students may commemorate their stories by completing cloth or paper patches for a "story quilt" that would be displayed in the classroom.

On the presentation day, students may wish to create a festival atmosphere by bringing snacks to share as the stories are performed. For an added Mali link, students could research the traditional foods and crops of Mali and bring in dishes associated with Mali.

The nature of oral history could be a topic for a follow up lesson in which students read a newspaper account of a news event in recent history (Kennedy's assassination, the Challenger explosion, the first moon landing, Vietnam war protests). After students read the account, they could interview a person who remembers the event and write a short essay about the two versions of history that they experienced.

Teachers who have students who live apart from their families may open up the requirements to include older people from neighborhood, place of worship, or organizations as possible interview subjects.

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Gold Weights

Materials

Self-hardening clay or oven-hardening clay such as Sculpey or Crayola Model Magic

Objectives

This activity introduces the following skills and concepts:

The importance of gold and salt as imports and exports in ancient Mali.

The structure and meaning of African and American proverbs.

The ways that proverbs reflect the culture of the people who create them.

Use of simple fractions to determine weight and price of everyday items.

Standards of Learning

This activity may be used to address the following Virginia Standards of Learning objectives:

History 3.2: The student will study the West African Empire of Mali by describing its economic development through trade.

History 3.4: The student will develop map skills by explaining how the people of West Africa adapted to their environment to meet their needs.

History 3.7: The student will explain how producers use natural resources to produce goods and services for customers.

History 3.8: The student will recognize the concepts of specialization and interdependence in the production of goods and services in Mali.

Math 3.14: The student will estimate and then use actual measuring devices to measure weight/mass.

Math 4.11: The student will estimate and measure weight/mass using actual measuring devices and express the results in both metric and U.S. Customary units, including ounces, pounds, grams, and kilograms.

Math 5.3: The student will create and solve problems involving addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division of whole numbers, using paper and pencil, estimation, mental computation, and calculators.

English 8.3: The student will apply knowledge of the characteristics and elements of literary forms by explaining the use of figurative language.

English 10.3: The student will explain similarities and differences of structure and images in the writings of different cultures.

Introductory Remarks

Prior to the activity, the teacher may read, paraphrase, or distribute the following information to the students.

Ancient Mali was a major worldwide trading center attracting merchants from Europe and the Middle East. Salt, gold, silver, ivory, honey, jewelry, tools, metal, leather goods, rare birds, livestock, horses, and cloth were traded in the marketplaces of Mali (*the teacher may want to list these items on the board*). Old Mali's biggest *export* (*item taken from a country for sale or trade in another country*) was gold. Gold was abundant in West Africa, and the kings of these empires kept the locations of the gold mines a closely guarded secret. Ordinary people in West Africa routinely adorned themselves with gold, and this part of the world became known throughout Europe and Asia for its wealth.

Mali's most important import (*something brought into a place from another country, usually for sale or trade*) was salt from the area just to the north, in the Sahara Desert. Salt was very important to the people of Mali. It was used to season and preserve food, and was an important part of the diet of people who lived in such a hot, dry climate. In fact, at one time, salt was traded for equal amounts of gold in Mali!

Mali's economy was interdependent, because the people of Mali traded their gold for salt from other lands. The king of the empire controlled trading through taxation, and this was also a major source of income.

Question: How do you think traders measured quantities of the items we listed on the board? What kinds of things did they count? What did they probably weigh? What might have been measured in length or width? Which category do the most important import and export fall into?

Since gold and salt were weighed, African traders developed carefully crafted weights to measure them for trading. These weights had to be calibrated exactly so that the trader would neither lose money nor profit unfairly in the marketplace.

Gold weights were often decorated in a way that would bring to mind important proverbs (*popular sayings [oral tradition] that convey general truths or rules of conduct, often by employing a colorful metaphor*) for wise traders to remember as they conducted their business.

Question: What are some English proverbs that you know?

(Teacher can give a few examples to get the ball rolling – “A stitch in time saves nine”; “Don’t count your chickens before they hatch”; “Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.” As the children generate a list of a dozen examples or so, the teacher may list their examples on the board and ask if the students understand the proverbs. A good way to check for understanding is to have the students to paraphrase the proverb after it is written on the board.)

Question: Which proverbs are probably important for traders or business people today? Why? Can anyone think of other proverbs or figures of speech that have an important meaning for business people or for people who are buying and selling things? (List other examples.)

Today we are going to develop our own weights. African traders made these from metal, but we are going to make ours out of clay. Prior to creating a metal sculpture such as a weight, an artist will make a model first. We will make models for what could be developed into one-ounce weights. Each student will get a piece of clay. In the spirit of African gold weights, your weight should reflect a proverb that you think is wise to remember as you are buying or selling things or as you are conducting business. In other words, your weight should depict the meaning of that proverb. As you work, resist the

temptation to tell others what proverb your weight depicts. We will share the weights later and the other students will try to guess which proverbs they illustrate.

Summary

After students have finished their gold weight models, they may share their work in a circle. Students may guess the proverbs that the weights illustrate. Students may also explain their proverbs if others fail to guess.

Question: What are some ideas that come up over and over in the proverbs that other students selected for their weights? Did you notice any sets of proverbs that essentially mean the same thing?

For homework, students may complete the *Proverbs* and *Weights and Measures* worksheets.

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Proverbs

Look at the list of traditional West African proverbs below. As you read them, think about what they might tell you about the people who created them.

- A. One who damages his neighbor's reputation damages his own.
- B. One camel does not make fun of the other camel's hump.
- C. No matter how long a log stays in the water, it does not become a crocodile.
- D. The child who does not respect the traditions of his elders will never eat at the elders' table.
- E. If you refuse the elder's advice, you will end up working the whole day.
- F. The forest in which you hide has eyes.
- G. Better to be a curtain hanging motionless than a flag flying in the wind.
- H. The person who hurries eats goat; the person who takes his or her time feasts on beef.
- I. Talking to you is like pouring water on the back of a duck.
- J. The hunter in pursuit of elephants does not stop to throw stones at birds.
- K. Before you ask a man for clothes, look at the clothes he is wearing.

L. An enemy defeated by truth will never return, but an enemy defeated by weapons is certain to return.

M. If every seed that falls were to grow, you could not follow the path through the trees.

1. Which of these proverbs remind you of American proverbs? Can you rephrase any of them as famous American proverbs?

2. What can these proverbs tell us about West African terrain and lifestyles?

3. What can these proverbs teach us about the values and culture of the people who created them?

Weights and Measures

Let's see how much some of the items that you use each day would cost if they were priced in 1-ounce units to correspond with the weight you made.

Look around your house and find some things that you could price per ounce. How much does something like sugar cost per ounce? How about perfume? What is the price of an ounce Kool-Aid drink mix? Look on the packages and notice how many ounces are in the container. Once you have done that, look at the price tag (if there is no price tag, try to remember the price or ask how much it cost). When you have that information, complete the chart below:

Sample:

Item: Bubble Gum Ounces Per Package: Six

Price Per Package: 99 cents Price Per Ounce: _____

We can use the following equation to determine how much an ounce of your favorite foods costs:

$$\text{Price Per Package divided by Ounces Per Package} = \text{Price Per Ounce}$$

Now let's try it with the numbers plugged in.

$$\text{Price Per Package (99 cents) divided by Ounces Per Package (6) = Price Per Ounce (16.5 cents per ounce)}$$

99 divided by 6 = 16.5. One ounce of my bubble gum costs 16.5 cents.

Calculate the cost per ounce of three items in your house. Think about foods you like, foods you dislike, treats for your pet, art and craft supplies, toiletries, perfume, gasoline for the car, etc. Use your imagination.

Item: _____ Ounces Per Package: _____

Price Per Package: _____ Price Per Ounce: _____

Item: _____ Ounces Per Package: _____

Price Per Package: _____ Price Per Ounce: _____

Item: _____ Ounces Per Package: _____

Price Per Package: _____ Price Per Ounce: _____

Which item was most expensive? Which was least?

Which item had the greatest volume per ounce?

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Sundiata Mali's Lion King

Materials

Sundiata by David Wisniewski (several versions of this story are also available on line)

Images of Malian masks

Videotape of Malian Dama ceremony

(Note: Videotape is available through the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Educational Resource Room.)

The following art supplies should be on hand for student use in the classroom:

Cardboard, construction paper, paints, crayons, markers, beads, feathers, scraps of fabric, string, yarn, glue *(Students may also want to add natural materials such as tree bark or sticks to their masks; see below)*

Objectives

This activity introduces the following skills and concepts:

The role of Malian king Sundiata in liberating Mali from the Ghanaian Empire

The purpose of Malian festivals such as the Dama and the Sirige

Qualities associated with various animals and the use of their attributes in African mask design

Archetypal patterns seen in myths about heroes

Standards of Learning

This activity may be used to address the following Virginia Standards of Learning objectives:

History 3.2: The student will study the early West African Empire of Mali by describing its government and economic development.

Science 3.4: The student will investigate and understand that behavior and physical adaptations allow animals to respond to life needs.

Visual Arts 3.3: The student will develop art ideas from alternative sources, including print, non-print, and technology.

Science 4.5: The student will investigate and understand how plants and animals in an ecosystem interact with one another and with the non-living environment.

Research 5.8: The student will synthesize information from a variety of sources.

History 8.2: The student will compare selected ancient river civilizations in terms of location in time and place and development of social, political, and economic patterns.

English 10.3: The student will describe cultural archetypes in short stories, novels, poems, and plays across several cultures.

Introductory Remarks

After reading Sundiata or summarizing the story to the class, the teacher may read, paraphrase, or distribute the following information; the teacher may also opt to summarize the story of Sundiata for the class:

The people of Mali and other African countries use festivals to preserve and celebrate their cultural history. These festivals use music and dance to teach children and remind adults about significant people and events from the village's past. One of the most important elements of these festivals is the use of masks. Masks used in performances 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.)

The people of Mali have two very important festivals. One 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 very infrequently – only once every 60 years. 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 the most important festivals 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.

At this point, the teacher may show the class the videotape of the Dama ceremony [available from Virginia Museum's Statewide Media Resources (804) 204 – 2681]. After viewing, the teacher may want to ask students 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 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.*)

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?

Our class will create a Malian festival to commemorate the great hero Sundiata. Our festival will feature music and masked dances that retell parts of the story of Sundiata.

At this point, the teacher may show the students the slides of Malian masks included in the Discovery kit. The teacher may want to ask some of the following questions during or after the slides:

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?

Are the masks worn over the face or over the head? What challenges would dance in these masks present?

We will divide into five groups, and 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 your section of the story:

Each group will have one drummer. The other group members will portray characters in the story. In other words, each group member except the drummer must have a character role. Your performance will include (A) entering the stage area; (B) dancing and miming the story section; and (C) exiting the stage area. Your section of the festival should take three minutes or so to perform. As you create your performance, keep in mind that you will want to make your motions very clear and somewhat exaggerated. Think about how the animal you chose for your character's mask moves and behaves – you may want to bring some of that to your movements, as well. Be sure to use the space well. Each member of the audience should be able to see each of the performers.

Creating masks for each of the characters in your section of the story:

Each group member will design a mask for his or her character (*note – drummers see below*). The masks must be worn during your presentation, so pay attention to sturdiness and fit; you will also need to be able to see and speak while wearing the mask. African masks often incorporate animal characteristics. Your mask must feature animal characteristics. The animal that you select for your character should have characteristics that go with your character's personality.

Creating the music for the performance:

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.

Summary and Follow Up

Following the presentations, the teacher may use the following questions to generate discussion.

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 (examples: King Arthur, Odysseus, Superman). How is Sundiata's story similar? (*Answers will include that the 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 or high 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 go with the characters on whose masks they are represented? What about those animals' environments fosters those characteristics?

Following this activity, the drums and masks may be displayed in the classroom. Following this activity, the class may view Disney's The Lion King, which was based on the story of Sundiata, and discuss how the animated film compares with the written tale and how its selection of animals as characters supports the personalities of the real-life characters..

Sundiata Festival Worksheet

Which character are you portraying in the festival? _____

What are three specific, precise adjectives that come to mind when you think of this character?

What animal is most like your character in habits and/or behavior? Explain why.

Consult a book or article about the animal you chose. Give its full title (underlined or italicized, please) and the name of its author below:

Title: _____

Author: _____

According to the book or article that you consulted, how has that animal's behavior or physical characteristics helped it to respond to basic needs such as finding food and shelter, protecting its territory and nurturing its young?

Respond in a well-developed paragraph to the following:

How have this animal's behavior and physical characteristics contributed to our idea of its personality?

An African Garden

Objectives

This activity introduces the following skills and concepts:

The ecological diversity of Mali's terrain

The ways that different environments support varied plant and animal life

The impact that available plant sources have on human culture

The ways that plants and animals adapt to their environments

Standards of Learning

This activity may be used to address the following Virginia Standards of Learning Objectives:

Science 3.6: The student will investigate and understand that environments support a diversity of plants and animals that share limited resources.

Science 3.7: The student will investigate and understand the major components of soil, its origin, and importance to plants and animals including humans.

Science 3.8: The student will investigate and understand basic sequences and cycles occurring in nature. Key concepts include animal and plant life cycles.

Science 3.9: The student will investigate and understand the water cycle and its relationship to life on Earth. Key concepts include water supply and water conservation.

Science 4.4: The student will investigate and understand basic plant anatomy and life processes.

Science 5.5: The student will investigate and understand that organisms are made of cells and have distinguishing characteristics.

Introductory Remarks

The teacher may read, paraphrase, or distribute the following information to students

Mali has a variety of landscapes that produce different kinds of crops for animals and humans. Although it is generally flat, Mali is also famous for cliffs, escarpments, and steep plateaus.

The Niger River is its largest body of water, connecting Mali to three other countries. Its 1700 km coast brings life to a region that is otherwise inhospitable to much plant and animal life. The river now known as the Niger was once made up of two rivers that flowed in opposite directions. Over time, they joined together forming one immense river that flows west. In the northeast, the Niger forms what is called the inland delta, a vast network of channels, streams and lakes. This delta is the result of a large river like the Niger meeting a relatively flat landmass like the one that hosts the delta. The water has nowhere to flow, so it collects in the streams and channels that form this delta.

Mali's other major river is the River Senegal. It flows northwest through Mali and follows the border between Mauritania and Senegal before emptying into the Atlantic Ocean on the Senegalese coast.

Along the banks of the Niger River, the regular floods and rainy season support vegetation. In the semi-arid Sahel, the climate is far dryer, and farmers have had to devise ingenious ways to compensate for the lack of rich soil. The northern reaches of Mali are in the Sahara Desert and support little vegetation.

Because of soil erosion, the Sahara Desert is growing. Every decade it creeps downward into the Sahel, increasing its mass by an area the size of the state of New York every decade. Desertification is Mali's number one ecological problem. The soil erosion that has created this problem is largely due to over harvesting of trees in the Sahel and animals' being allowed to overgraze on vegetation in concentrated areas there.

Mali clearly has a number of different types of terrain, each of which makes a unique contribution to sustaining life. Below is a list of plants used in Malian cuisine and crafts:

Rice Millet Peanuts Okra Baobab Onions Cassava Potatoes Ginger Eggplant

Maize Carrots Acacia Tomatoes Yams Wheat Cucumbers Cram-Cram

Cauliflower

Working in pairs, students will research their plants. (A list of recommended books and web sites follows.) They will create mobiles that incorporate the following elements:

(Remember to write and/or draw on both sides of the paper as you are making the mobile.)

1. The name of the plant
2. A map of Mali with the region in which the plant grows highlighted
3. A drawing of the plant that shows what it looks like above and below the level of the soil
4. An animal that uses this plant for food or shelter
5. Ways that people use this plant in Mali. If it is used for food, what is the name of the dish? If it is used for a craft, explain how. If possible, include a photo or example of a food or craft item for which this plant is used.

And at least one of the following:

- A. The Latin and French names of the plant (Latin is the international language for classification of plants, and French is the official language of Mali)
- B. A piece of folklore or a superstition about the plant
- C. A West African recipe that includes the plant
- D. A medicinal use for the plant

Students will present their mobiles to the class, and the mobiles will be used to decorate the room.

Resources:

Attenborough, David. *Atlas of the Living World*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1989.

Brown, Leslie. *Africa: A Natural History*. New York: Random House, 1965.

“Influence of Africa Cuisine” *African American Culture*
<http://afroamculture.about.com/library/weekly/aa041700.htm>

Kingdon, Jonathan. *Island Africa: The Evolution of Africa's Rare Animals and Plants*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1989

“Lure of African Cuisine” *Ebony*

http://www.findarticles.com/cf_dls/m1077/10_55/63735688/p1/article/jhtml

Ogunsanya, Dokpe. *My Cooking: A West-African Cookbook*. New York: Dupsy, 1998.

USDA Plants Database

<http://plants.usda.gov/>

West African Vegetable Homepage

<http://www.wam.umd.edu/~mathewsc/Link.htm>

Summary and Follow Up

Mali's diverse ecology supports a variety of life forms. Your research on the plant life of Mali demonstrates the impact of the environment on the development of animal life and human culture. Briefly respond to the following questions:

What seems to be the most important staple in the Malian diet? What could substitute for that crop if it were threatened by environmental factors?

Which plants have the widest variety of uses? Can you think of additional uses for them?

Following this activity, students can have a Malian feast. Students should prepare dishes from the West African cooking sources they find. Traditional Malian music (included in the Virginia Museum's Mali Discovery Kit) can play in the background as students share their treats.

A local nursery may be willing to donate live examples of these plants. Students may use them to create a window garden and add paper cutouts of butterflies, snakes, lizards, monkeys, and other animals native to West Africa.

Tell Me Why

Activity: Mythology and creative writing

Objectives:

This activity introduces the following skills and concepts:

The importance of the blacksmith to the cultural heritage of Mali

How to recognize and define characteristics of mythology in general and pourquoi myths in particular

How varying cultures use mythology to define themselves and explain their world

How diverse cultures use mythology in similar ways

How to adapt one's own writing to specific audiences

Standards of Learning

This activity may be used to address the following Virginia Standards of Learning Objectives:

History 3.2: The student will study the West African Empire of Mali by describing its oral tradition

English 3.8: The student will write stories, letters, simple explanations and sort reports across all content areas.

Visual Arts 3.13: The student will discuss how history, culture, and the visual arts influence each other.

English 4.7: The student will write effective narratives and explanations.

English 5.7: The student will write for a variety of purposes to describe, to inform, to entertain, and to explain.

English 8.5: The student will write in a variety of forms, including narrative, expository, and persuasive writings.

English 10:3: The student will read and critique literary works from a variety of cultures.

Introductory Remarks and Directions to Students

As the class views the Virginia Museum's *Staff of a Ritual Thief* (note – this image is available on the Virginia Museum's website [www.vmfa.state.va.us] in the Mali unit for students and teachers found under “Educational Resources”), the teacher may generate discussion by asking the following questions:

(If the class has already viewed the slide lecture available from Statewide Media Resources [(804) 204 – 2681], the teacher may simply show the slide and have the students recall why it is decorated as it is. The teacher may also opt to summarize the myth for the class without using the slide.)

What do you see carved on this staff?

It is decorated with images of human figures falling or flying.

Do you notice anything unusual about the appearance of the figures?

The figures depicted in bas-relief on the handle have enlarged joints. The Dogon tale of fire says that when the ancestors of modern man were ready to come to earth, they had no fire. Heavenly blacksmiths called Nummo spirits, children of heaven and earth, were guardians of fire. One of the human ancestors approached the realm of the Nummo and stole a piece of the sun from their workshop. In retaliation, the Nummo spirits threw bolts of thunder and lightning at the ancestor, but they missed. The ancestor was able to slide down a rainbow back to earth, but he fell so fast that he broke his limbs when he landed. Originally, the human ancestors had sinuous, snake-like limbs like those of the Nummo. They looked like luminescent serpents. After man stole fire, his limbs were forever jointed, symbolizing man's bold spirit and his ability to work and dance. Because of the Dogon belief that living spirits inhabit natural substances such as metals, wood, stone, and leather, the blacksmith is traditionally a revered member of the Dogon community

What else about this staff goes with the Dogon people's respect for blacksmiths?

This staff is worked in iron. Its shape echoes the shape of the carver's adze.

What might a “ritual thief” be?

Student answers will vary. In Mali, a ritual thief is a person appointed to steal livestock for sacrifices and for fasting after funerals.

Myths are stories about events that are said to have taken place in the distant past. Myths serve to reveal an aspect of culture or to explain why and how something came to be. Myths that specifically explain how something was created or why something in the natural world looks or behaves as it does are called *pourquoi myths* after the French word

“pourquoi,” which means “why.” The story of the ritual thief is an example of a Pourquoi myth, because it explains why people have jointed arms and legs.

At this point the class may view “Why Mosquitoes Buzz In People's Ears” and “The Village of Round and Square Houses” from the videotape titled *Why Mosquitoes Buzz In People's Ears and Other Caldecott Classics*, from the Virginia Museum's Statewide Media Resources [(804) 204 – 2681]. These two stories are examples of West African pourquoi myths. After the class has viewed the video and the slide, the teacher may generate discussion by asking the following:

1. *What aspects of nature and society do these two stories explain? How are they explained?*
2. *What can you tell about the cultures that created these myths from the details included in these stories? What can we detect about their landscape? Their families? Their values?*
3. *Can you give some examples of other pourquoi myths?*

Students may cite examples from ancient Greece such as the myth of Persephone and its explanation of the four seasons or the way that the myth of Phaeton explains the hills and valleys of the earth's surface. Other examples come from the Bible: the Tower of Babel and its explanation of the different languages of the world or the way that the story of Adam and Eve explains why snakes crawl on their bellies.

Note: These myths could also be read in class to generate a discussion about how a variety of cultures use pourquoi myths. Students will also notice that each culture's geography and values are revealed in the details of these myths.

Write Your Own!

In addition to being interesting to read or listen to, pourquoi myths are fun to write. A pourquoi myth begins with a question. Think about some questions that could be answered plausibly in a fanciful modern myth. You may want to start by thinking of questions that little children ask: Why is the sky blue? Why is the moon large some nights and small on others? Why do cats purr? Why do people hiccup? Use your imagination to generate two or three of these kinds of questions.

The teacher may want to ask for examples of questions to list on the board.

Once you have a question that you find intriguing, write a short, 2 – 3 paragraph (this may be adjusted according to the age and ability level of the students) original myth that answers the question in a colorful way. These kinds of myths are often written with small children as the intended audience. Keep this in mind as you write. Students may complete this assignment in class or for homework.

Summary and Wrap Up

When students have finished writing, they may share their stories with the class. After the stories have been shared, the discuss the following:

1. Did any of the made up stories have some basis in fact? How so?
2. Did any of them reveal aspects of our own culture? In other words, how could you tell by reading one of these myths that it was written by a contemporary American instead of an ancient Greek or a contemporary West African?

Extending

As a follow up to this activity, students may do the following:

Create a piece of art that goes with the myth that he or she wrote in the same way that the *Staff of a Ritual Thief* goes with the myth of the ancestor who stole fire for mankind.

Since these kinds of stories are often for young readers and listeners, the students who wrote the myths may share them with a class of younger students. Alternatively, they can rewrite them as children's books and illustrate them. The books could be shared with a class of younger readers or placed in the school library.

Older students could research African mythology on the Internet or in the library and find other examples of West African pourquoi myths. These could be shared with the class or be used as the basis of a short essay comparing and contrasting aspects of the different myths from the same region.

The Story Tunic

Objectives

This activity addresses the following skills and concepts:

The meaning and use of the hunting tunic in the Bamana culture of Mali

The concept of the rite of passage

Identifying symbols and themes in literature

Writing effective personal narratives

Writing effective book reports

Standards of Learning

This activity may be used to address the following Virginia Standards of Learning objectives:

English 3.6: The student will continue to read a variety of fiction and nonfiction selections and identify the characteristics of folk tales, biographies, and autobiographies.

English 3.7: The student will write descriptive paragraphs.

English 3.8: The student will write stories, letters, simple explanations, and short reports across all content areas.

English 5.5: The student will read a variety of literary forms, including fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, describing character development in fiction and poetry selections.

English 5.5: The student will describe the development of plot, and explain how conflicts are resolved.

English 5.7: The student will write for a variety of purposes to describe, to inform, to entertain, and to explain.

English 8.3: The student will apply knowledge of the characteristics and elements of various literary forms, including short stories, essays, speeches, lyric and narrative poems, plays, and novels.

English 8.3: The student will explain the use of symbols and figurative language.

English 8.5: The student will write in a variety of forms, including narrative, expository and persuasive writings.

Introductory Remarks

The teacher may read, paraphrase, or copy and distribute the following information to the students. The teacher should first show the students an image of the Museum's Bamana Hunting Tunic, available on the Virginia Museum website (www.vmfa.state.va.us) or on the classroom poster titled "The Art of Ancient Mali."

Outside of city life, many communities in Africa depend on controlling an unpredictable environment as a means of food and livelihood. Traditionally, hunting has provided more than food—a successful hunt is a symbol for general prosperity for the entire village. Although hunting is disappearing as a way of life in most of Africa, hunters still join together in associations that sponsor meetings and group hunts.

Hunters perform rituals to assure safety and success before they leave the protection of the village and venture into the wilderness. Many African cultures view wilderness as a space of dangerous animals and spirits and yet also the source of magic, healing, power, and spiritual knowledge. Those who enter the wilderness learn of medicines and herbs that can be found there and seek to harness supernatural energy of wilderness spirits. The hunter may search out certain animals for their connections with the spirit world. When captured, the teeth, claws, horns, or fur of these animals are collected as charms.

Embellished shirts like this are worn by hunters in many African cultures; the attachments represent the skill and knowledge of the hunter. While simple, unadorned clothing is typically worn for the actual hunt, special shirts like this are worn for festivals, parades, and other gatherings to distinguish hunters from the rest of the community.

These ceremonial garments are usually constructed of woven cloth (linen or flax) dyed in earthen colors to which is attached animal bones, claws, skins, horns, wood, shell, and other natural substances as well as manmade materials such as metal disks, mirrors, and glass. Special packets known in the Mande languages as "basi" (secret things) represent knowledge acquired by a hunter during his lifetime. In French, the official language of modern Mali, the word for basi is "gris-gris." The contents are known only to the wearer, in keeping with the Mande belief that amulets lose their power if left unwrapped. In a blending of traditional African religious beliefs and Islam, Islamic prayers or "magic squares" corresponding to numbers and letters are often enclosed for protection and spiritual power in leather, cloth, or metal to form similar protective amulets. All of the attachments give the shirt symbolic power to ward off evil and bring good fortune to the wearer.

To commemorate events in our school year and our lives, our class will make a tunic that features decorations, charms, and amulets from each person in the class. We will use it to decorate the classroom, and during special activities (oral history storytelling, for

example), students will take turns wearing it. The Bamana villagers who made the tunic you see on the poster used it in the same way; in their case, the tunic was to be worn in special ceremonies preceding a hunt.

Making the tunic:

A simple tunic can be constructed from several pieces of chamois or burlap. These materials resemble those used in the Bamana hunting tunic, and are soft enough to sew items to. Chamois requires no hemming. Teachers who are handy with a needle can fashion the pieces into a shirt. The pieces can also be sewn into a large circle with a hole for the head like a poncho. Keep in mind that the tunic should be fairly large, as members of the class will wear it over their own clothes. Students may sew, staple, or pin to the tunic items connected with learning units. Some examples follow:

The Readers' Tunic

Exterior Decoration/ Favorite Books

In conjunction with a book-talk discussion of free-reading selections, students may write a book report that focuses on the moral or lesson of a favorite book read on his or her own during the school year. Once the book report is finished, the student may make or find a symbol of that book that can be sewn to the tunic. Students may carefully sew their symbols to the outside of the tunic; alternatively, students may attach them with safety pins. When the reports, symbols, and sewing are finished, the class may sit in a circle and take turns presenting their books to their classmates informally. As each student takes a turn presenting his or her book, he or she may wear the “readers’ tunic” and display and explain the charm at an appropriate point in the discussion.

The Rites of Passage Tunic

Interior Decoration / Rites of Passage

After the teacher explains the idea of rite of passage and defines the term (an event that marks the end of one phase of life and entry into a more mature phase; examples could include starting school, beginning a first job, joining a club, or going to camp for the first time) students may discuss rites of passage and write short narratives about a personal rite of passage and the important lessons it brought. After that composition has been drafted, edited and revised, the student will find or create a special *basi* (“secret thing”) that symbolizes the lesson or rite of passage. It may be a small object, an outgrown small toy, a piece of writing or artwork made by the student, a picture, or another small item that expresses something meaningful in the narrative. In the tradition of the *basi* on the hunting tunic, students may enclose their *basi* in simple pouches made from a square of fabric and tied closed with string. The pouches may be pinned, sewn, or tied to the tunic. Students can discuss why they think the hunters of Mali chose to keep their *basi* secret; afterward, the class may decide whether to keep their *basi* secret. When the sewing is

completed, the tunic may be turned right side out and students may take turns wearing the tunic as they share their writings orally with the class.

Note – As a way of tying the two activities together, the teacher may want to have the students' independent reading selections focus on rites of passages, as well.

Summary

The tunic may decorate the classroom for the remainder of the year. At the end of the year, the students and/or the teacher may decide whether the tunic is to stay intact in the classroom or if it will be disassembled and the tokens returned to the students.

1. How does the secrecy of those charms affect their meaning to the wearer of the tunic?
2. Why was it important to the young hunters of Mali to keep those charms a secret?
3. If you had the opportunity to open up one of the basi on the Virginia Museum's Bamana Hunter's Tunic, would you? Why or why not?
4. What are some of our society's rites of passage for young people? How are they similar to or different from the construction and use of the hunting tunic in the rite of passage of young Bamana men?

[To top of document](#)

[To Mali web site](#)

[To Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Homepage](#)