

## **AFRICAN MUSIC AND MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS**

Music is important in the life of African people. In America, we tend to be spectators or listeners. Nearly everyone in Africa sings and plays one or two instruments.

Africans make music in the home, at the market place, and at social gatherings. Also, music plays an important part in political, religious, and ceremonial life. Music has roles in healing, at trials, announcing the presence of very important people like chiefs and kings, weddings, funerals, and visits of important people.

The person who plays the instruments often is the maker. Materials for the instruments are usually from nature, like wood, gourds, turtle shells, animal horns or skin. Other materials might be recycled from man-made objects, like scrap metal from old cars or oil drums. Blacksmiths or artists trained in instrument making create them for important people and groups. They decorate their instruments so that they not only sound good but are so beautiful they are considered works of art.

## Musicians

African musicians rarely stand on a stage as they do in America. They perform among the audience and move, or “dance,” while playing.



**Drummers move behind a masked dancer as young men dance behind them.**

**Drummers emerge from the sacred forest following a masked dancer.**



## Children and Music

Music is an important part of African children's games and daily life. Except on rare occasions, children attend all the events that occur in the family and community. In play, youngsters imitate the songs, dances and ceremonies of their elders. They often borrow and can play adult's instruments for their songs, games, and dances.



**Children play with a shakere during a break in the dancing.**

**Children join in the dancing during a celebration.**





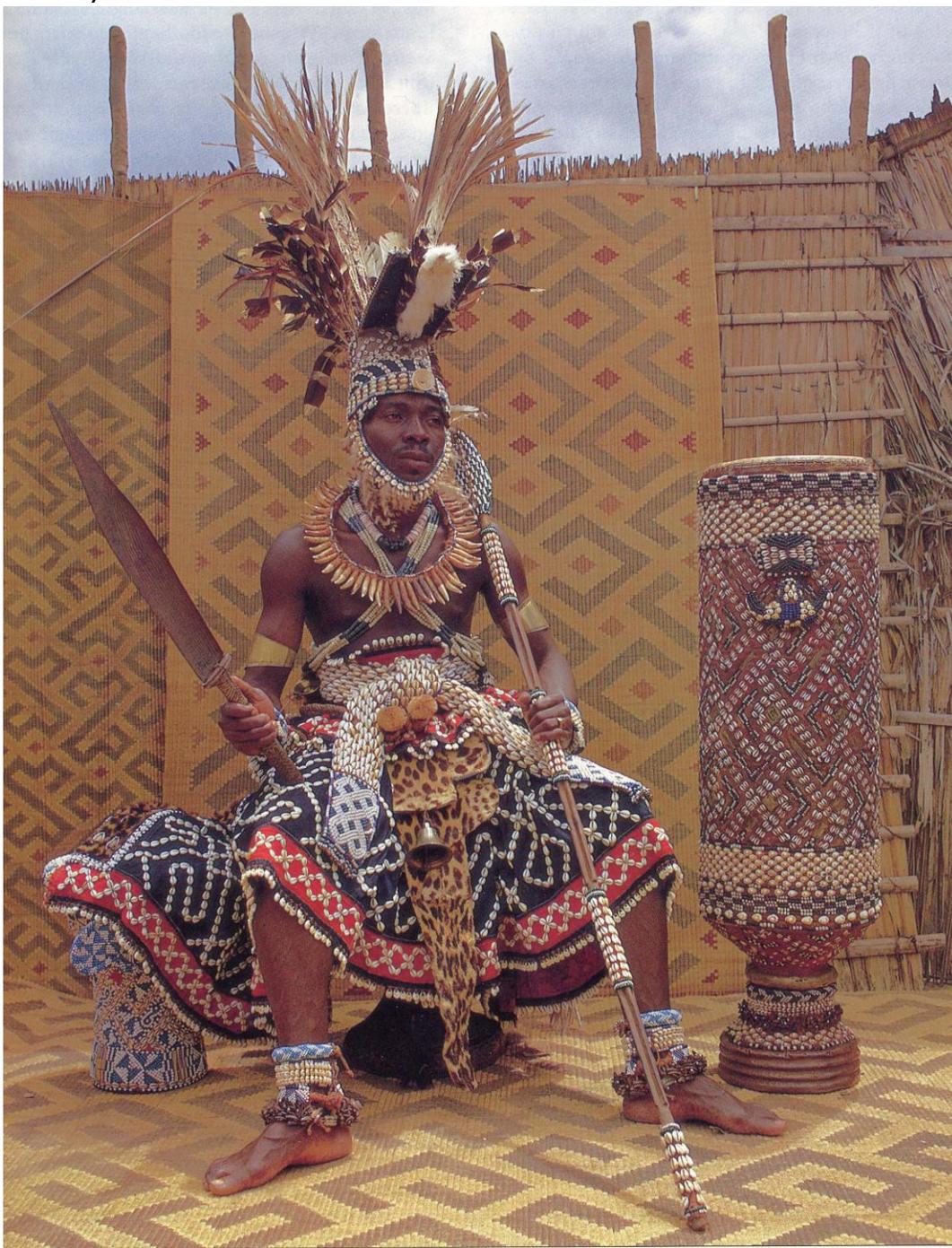
**Children play shakers and sticks accompanying the drummers during a village event.**

## Drums

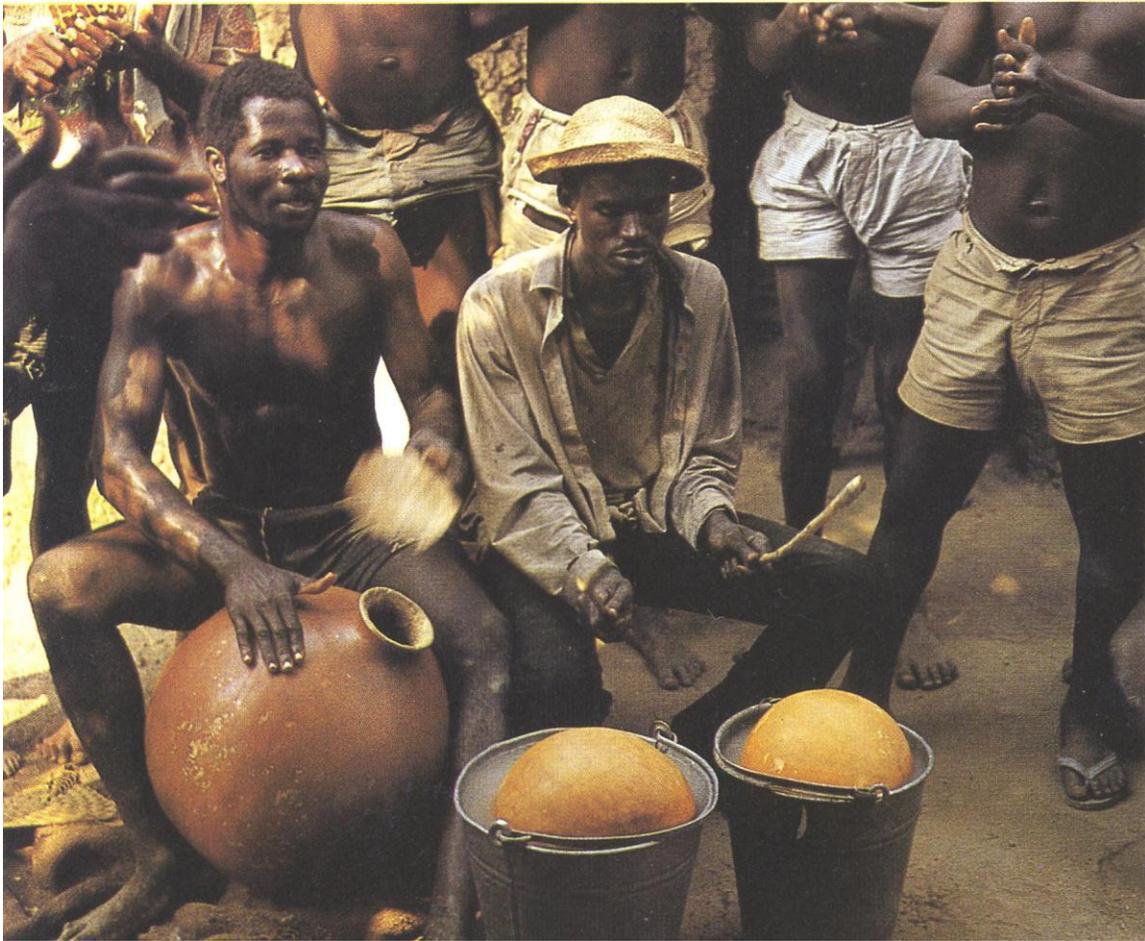
There are many different kinds of drums in Africa. Drums are the basic instrument for most African music. Each group of people uses a special type of its own. Though mostly of wood, drums can be gourds, turtle shells and clay pots.

Drums have many uses in Africa. They announce such important events as births, deaths, or, important public events and dancers. Some drums make sounds that can be heard as far as seven miles away. These drums can communicate with people long distances away. Drums can be as tall as 10 feet or small enough to hold in one

hand. Some drums belong only to the chief or king and represent his office. These drums are played only for ceremonies involving the chief or king.



**King with his  
Royal Drum**



**Water Drums:**

Gourds turned upside-down in buckets of water.

## **Talking Drum and Drum Stick**

Tradition says that a talking drum should be made from a special tree that grows by the side of roads and paths where people often walk. Since these trees are always hearing people talk, it is believed they should be able to “speak” better than trees hidden deep in the forest.

**See objects #13 through 15.**

## Drum Families

Africans use sets of drums of differing sizes called drum families.

In Ghana, some of the larger drums are “mother” drums. They are the most important to the set. Drum makers carve and sometimes paint images into the sides to bring to mind proverbs, riddles, folk tales, boasts and insults recognized by the audience. For instance:



### Rooster and Hen

“Though the hen knows it is dawn, she leaves it to the rooster to announce.” This means, that it is not just men (rooster) who have knowledge. Also, the rooster stands for the king and the hen the people. So, the people may know things, but it is the king's place to make knowledge official and public.

### Crescent Moon and Star

“Although the moon is brightest, the star is constant.” This expresses the people's belief that something that is dependable (star) is preferred over something showy but unstable (moon that changes shape, rises and sets).

## Slit Gong and Slit Gong/Rasp

Players strike the wooden gong with a stick. Some gongs have a row of lines carved into them. When a stick is rubbed along these lines, a rasping sound occurs. These instruments are sometimes used at initiation ceremonies for special organization and occasionally by healers.



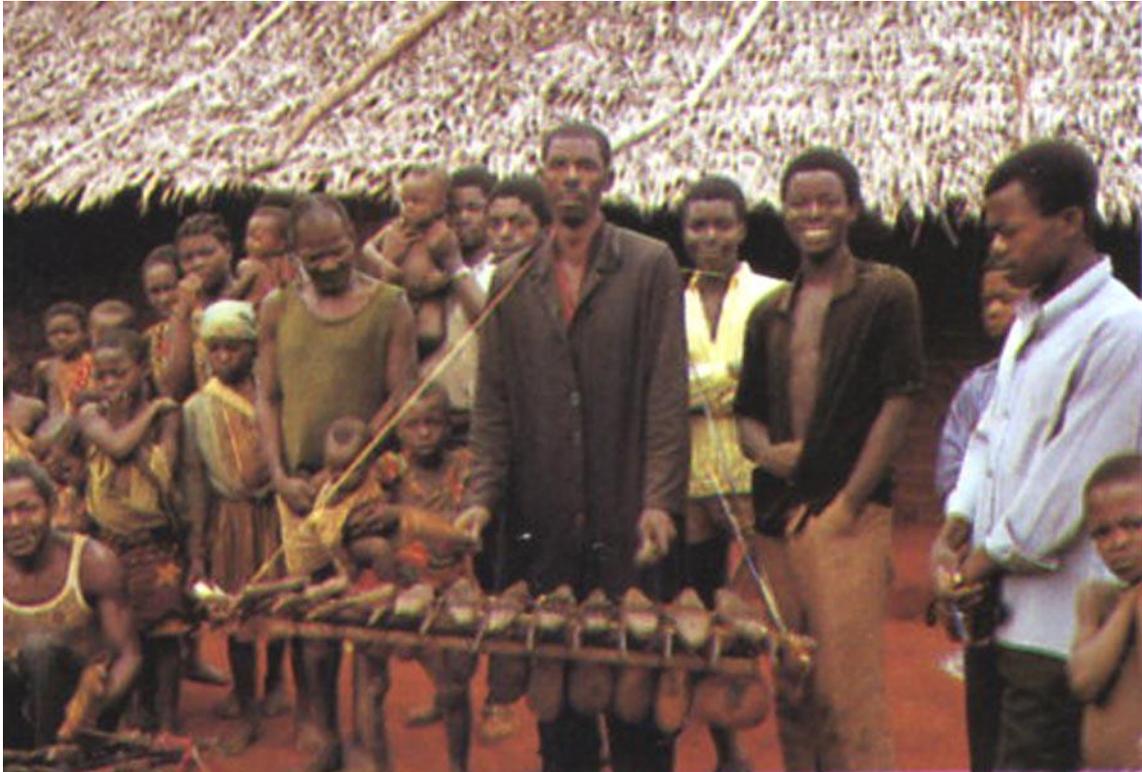
**Iron rasp/gong**

**See objects #16 & 19.**

**Wooden slit gong**

## Xylophones

Wood, vines and gourds comprise the African xylophone. In some areas, they are especially important because they announce that someone has died. They are then played throughout the time of mourning and the funeral.



**See objects #17.**

## Thumb Piano or Finger Piano

Thumb pianos have many names and can be found all over Africa. The number of keys varies from 3 to 36. When playing a thumb piano, the musician may stand, sit or move about. The thumb piano is known as “the walker’s friend” because a lone traveler can entertain himself as he walks through the forest.



**See objects #1 through 6.**

## Bells

Bells accompany dancers and are part of an orchestra's rhythm section. They precede a chief or king into a public area and ring

when a judge announces a court decision.



Metal  
Double Bells

**See object #18.**



## Rattles and Shakers

Shaking instruments occur all over Africa and go by various names. The musician, often a woman, shakes them to make rhythmic sounds. Rattle form important background rhythms in African music. They can be worn on a dancer's body as belts, ankle or calf bracelets, and necklaces. Rattles help heal the sick and make communities safe from spirits that might cause misfortune.



**Leg or waist  
rattles.**

**Cut gourd on a stick.**

**See objects #7 through 12.**



**Shakeres accompany a masked dancer.**



**Shakeres waiting for the dances to begin.**

## Harp

Harps are the main stringed instrument in Africa. They are quiet instruments that usually accompany a singer/storyteller/poet. Harps in Africa date back at least 5,000 years. Today, they are mostly found just south of the Sahara desert from Mauritania on the west coast to Uganda on the east coast.



**Harps** (strings and bowed stick are missing from 2)

## **Musical Bow**

The harp probably originated in the form of a musical bow. Hunters must have noticed the pleasing sound made by the bow string when it was released in shooting. Even today, some African bow hunters at rest play their bows by gently tapping the string with a stick.



## Wind Instruments

Instruments that you blow include whistles, flutes, horns and trumpets. They are usually wood but near the sea they may be made from sea shells. Where elephants live, they may be made from the tusk.

Besides being part of celebrations and dances, horns and trumpets warn communities about emergencies, announce the presence of kings and chiefs, encourage warriors to fight harder, take

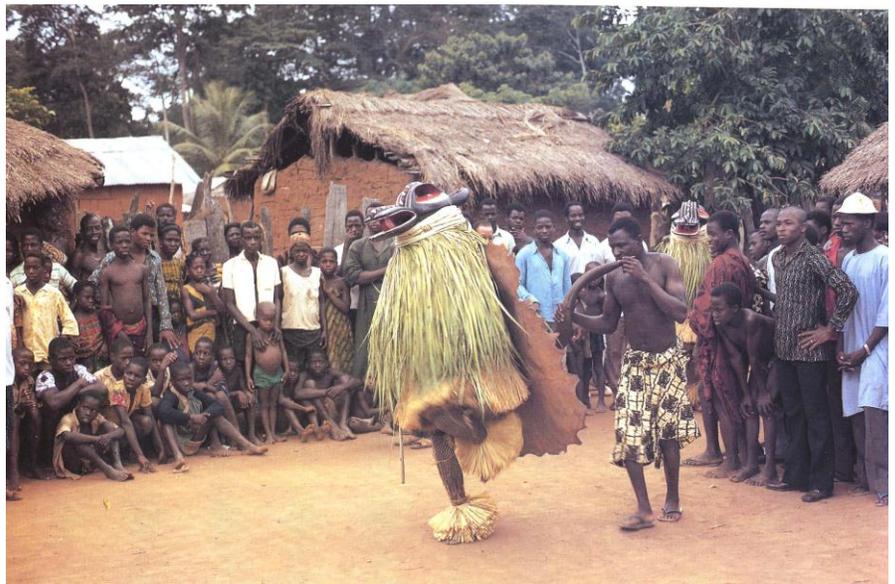
part in secret ceremonies and even help village judges settle disputes.



**Royal trumpet,  
Cameroon**



**Elephant tusk trumpet**



**Animal horn trumpet with dancing mask.**