

# Les Ballets Africains the National Dance Company of the Republic of Guinea

## Educational and Outreach Programs

Dear Teachers

We hope this guide helps you prepare your students for the school matinee presentation of Les Ballets Africains. It provides background information on the company, the performance, and the Republic of Guinea, as well as study questions and a review of audience etiquette.

### Introduction



Les Ballets Africains, the National Dance Company of the Republic of Guinea, proudly presents an extensive educational and outreach program designed for students of all levels across the United States and around the world. Our mission is to provide a deep understanding of the beauty and richness of African culture, uniquely expressed through music and dance.

### About Les Ballets Africains

Les Ballets Africains, established in 1952 by the esteemed Guinean choreographer Keita Fodeba, is the premier dance company of Guinea. Recognized as Africa's most renowned and accomplished dance company, Les Ballets Africains has toured globally, presenting a living demonstration of Africa's rich cultural heritage. The ensemble's performances, which include acrobatics, comedy, and drama, are deeply rooted in the cultural traditions of Guinea and are performed in traditional costumes to the music of traditional instruments.

This famous ensemble, which has toured the four corners of the earth during an illustrious career, is universally recognized as Africa's most renowned and accomplished dance company. For 70 years, Les Ballets Africains has represented its country, continent and culture at some of the world's most prestigious international festivals and venues.

The company's rich and varied repertoire presents a living demonstration of Africa's prodigious cultural heritage, the vitality and authenticity of which is assured by a continuing connection with the daily life of all African peoples.

Each of the ensemble's productions tours internationally for up to two years, presenting literally hundreds of performances across the globe. Since the company's inception in 1952, it has always been its artistic policy to produce works that deal with universal issues within the context of their cultural perspective. For example, in recent years, the company's productions have focused on faithfulness and trust, the protection of the environment and the importance of a good education for the youth of today confronted with the responsibilities of tomorrow.

Under the artistic direction of Manana Cissé, who spent 66 years performing with the company and is now the first female to be the Artistic Director and choreographer Mohamed Cissé, the 35-member company continues to present an inimitable blend of traditional dance, music, and storytelling, captivating audiences worldwide. Each production tour spans up to two years, presenting hundreds of performances across the globe.

### **Symphonie of the Grand Masks-**



The traditional African mask is a symbol of divinity. The masks represent the four principal cultural regions of Guinea: Nyamba of the Coastal Region, Cimier Koniagui of the Lower Region, the Konkoba Djeli of the Higher Region and the Nyamou of the Forest Region. The masks symbolize approval and support for the young men being initiated into adulthood. Considered apprentices, the young men must learn their role in the traditions and in society, symbolized by this rite of passage. The bote' is a small tambour (drum) that is played during these grand festivities and announces the departure of the initiated. A powerful fresh rhythm of sengbe (double drum) shows homage to the Grand Mask Protector as he receives offerings from the families of the young apprentices.

### **The Significance and Role of Masks in Guinean Society:**

#### **Introduction**

Masks hold a profound significance in the cultural fabric of Guinea, playing a pivotal role in various ritual ceremonies such as rites of passage, initiations, harvest celebrations, and fertility rites. Les Ballets Africains, the National Dance Company of the Republic of Guinea, incorporates these traditional masks in their performances to preserve and celebrate this rich cultural heritage for generations to come. This presentation explores the historical and cultural importance of masks in Guinean society and highlights their use by Les Ballets Africains.

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### **The Cultural Significance of Masks in Guinea**

#### **1. Rites of Passage**

**Definition:**

Rites of passage mark significant transitions in an individual's life, such as moving from childhood to adulthood.

**Role of Masks:**

- **Symbolic Transformation:** Masks represent the transformation and new identity of the individual undergoing the rite of passage. They often embody ancestral spirits or deities that guide and protect the initiates.
- **Cultural Identity:** The use of masks during these ceremonies reinforces the individual's connection to their cultural heritage and community values.

**Example:**

- **N'Tomo Masks:** Used in the initiation ceremonies of the Bamana people, these masks signify the transition from childhood to adulthood.

**2. Initiation Ceremonies****Definition:**

Initiation ceremonies are conducted to induct individuals into secret societies or adult roles within the community.

**Role of Masks:**

- **Secrecy and Mysticism:** Masks create an aura of mystery and sacredness, essential for the initiation process. They often conceal the identity of the initiators and symbolize the hidden knowledge imparted during the ceremony.
- **Spiritual Protection:** Masks are believed to offer spiritual protection to the initiates, warding off malevolent forces.

**Example:**

- **Komo Masks:** Used by the Komo society, these masks are crucial in imparting esoteric knowledge and ensuring the spiritual well-being of the initiates.

**3. Harvest Celebrations****Definition:**

Harvest celebrations are communal events that give thanks for a bountiful harvest and seek blessings for future agricultural success.

**Role of Masks:**

- **Fertility and Abundance:** Masks used in harvest ceremonies often symbolize fertility and abundance, invoking the spirits to bless the community with prosperity.
- **Community Unity:** The use of masks in these celebrations fosters a sense of unity and collective gratitude among community members.

### Example:

- **Bwa Masks:** These masks, used by the Bwa people, are vibrant and often depict animals or ancestral spirits associated with fertility and harvest.

## 4. Fertility Rites

### Definition:

Fertility rites are performed to ensure the fertility of the land, animals, and people.

### Role of Masks:

- **Invocation of Fertility Spirits:** Masks represent fertility deities or spirits, believed to enhance reproductive success and agricultural productivity.
- **Ritual Significance:** The masks' designs often incorporate symbols of fertility, such as animals, plants, and celestial bodies.

### Example:

- **Nimba Masks:** Used by the Baga people, these masks symbolize motherhood and fertility, playing a crucial role in fertility rites.

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## Les Ballets Africains: Preserving Cultural Heritage Through Masks



### Incorporation of Masks in Performances

Les Ballets Africains integrate traditional masks into their performances to celebrate and preserve Guinea's rich cultural heritage. By doing so, the company:

- **Cultural Preservation:** Ensures that the knowledge and significance of traditional masks are passed down to future generations.
- **Education and Awareness:** Educates global audiences about the cultural and spiritual importance of masks in Guinean society.
- **Artistic Expression:** Uses masks to enhance the visual and symbolic impact of their performances, providing a deeper cultural context.

### Role in Cultural Continuity

By incorporating masks in their performances, Les Ballets Africains:

- **Revitalizes Traditions:** Brings traditional practices into contemporary settings, ensuring their relevance and continued practice.

- **Global Recognition:** Promotes a greater understanding and appreciation of Guinean cultural heritage on the international stage.
  - **Community Engagement:** Engages with local communities to preserve traditional craftsmanship and cultural practices associated with mask-making.
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## Conclusion

Masks play an integral role in Guinean society, deeply embedded in various ritual ceremonies that mark significant life events and communal celebrations. Les Ballets Africains' dedication to incorporating these traditional masks in their performances is a testament to their commitment to cultural preservation. Through their artistry, they ensure that the rich heritage of Guinea's masks continues to be celebrated and cherished by future generations.

## Program Overview

### *Objectives*

**Cultural Enrichment:** To immerse students in the vibrant cultural traditions of Guinea through authentic dance and music.

**Educational Engagement:** To enhance students' knowledge and appreciation of global cultures, history, and the performing arts.

**Artistic Inspiration:** To inspire creativity and a passion for the arts among students by showcasing world-class performances and workshops.

### *Target Audience*

Our program is designed for:

- Elementary Schools
- Middle Schools
- High Schools
- Colleges and Universities

### *Program Components*

- Interactive Performances

Our performances are designed to engage and inspire students with high-energy displays of traditional Guinean dance and music. Each performance includes:

- Traditional Dance: Showcasing diverse dance styles from various regions of Guinea.
- Live Music: Featuring traditional instruments such as the kora, drums, flute, and balafon.
- Cultural Narratives: Storytelling that highlights the historical and cultural significance of each performance piece.
- Educational Workshops
- We offer hands-on workshops that allow students to learn directly from our master artists. Workshops include:
  - Dance Workshops: Teaching basic steps and movements of traditional Guinean dance.
  - Music Workshops: Introduction to traditional instruments, rhythms, and songs.
  - Cultural Discussions: Interactive sessions where students can learn about Guinean history, culture, and traditions.

## **Lecture Demonstrations**

Our lecture demonstrations combine performance with education, providing students with an in-depth understanding of our art forms. These sessions include:

- Historical Context: Exploring the historical background of Guinean dance and music.
- Artistic Techniques: Demonstrations of the techniques and skills involved in traditional performance.
- Q&A Sessions: Opportunities for students to engage directly with our artists and ask questions.
- Masterclasses
- For advanced students and performing arts programs, we offer masterclasses that provide intensive training in dance and music. Masterclasses include:
  - Advanced Dance Techniques: In-depth training in traditional and contemporary Guinean dance.
  - Instrument Mastery: Advanced instruction on playing traditional Guinean instruments.
  - Performance Preparation: Guidance on preparing for professional-level performances.

## World Tour Component



Les Ballets Africains will embark on a world tour, bringing our educational outreach program to schools and communities globally. This tour includes:

- Global Performances: High-quality performances at major venues around the world.
- International Workshops: Educational workshops tailored to local student populations.
- Cultural Exchange: Opportunities for cultural exchange and collaboration with local artists and students.

## Implementation Plan

### Scheduling

Our outreach team will work closely with educational institutions to schedule performances, workshops, and other activities. We offer flexible scheduling options to accommodate school calendars and special events.

### Partnerships

We seek to establish partnerships with educational institutions, cultural organizations, and community groups to maximize the impact of our program. Partnership benefits include:

Customized Programs: Tailored programs to meet the specific needs and interests of each institution.

Ongoing Collaboration: Long-term collaboration opportunities for continued cultural engagement.

## **Funding and Support**

We offer a range of funding options to make our program accessible to all schools, including:

- Sponsorship Opportunities: Partnerships with local businesses and organizations to support program costs.
- Grant Programs: Assistance with applying for arts and education grants to fund our outreach activities.
- Sliding Scale Fees: Flexible pricing options based on the needs and resources of each institution.

*MANAGEMENT - LA FOUNDATION AICHA*

*COMPANY MANAGER - MAMOUDOU CONDE*

*ASSISTANT MANAGER – SEKOU TEPKA LUNDA CONDE*

*For more information and to schedule our program at your institution, please contact us at:  
CAMI MUSIC.*