

Tool Kit I

Cultural Symbols: African Musical Instruments and Anthropomorphism

Objective

Discover how people use **cultural symbols** to establish an identity and communicate beliefs. Explore how decorative elements used on musical instruments can be rich with symbolic meaning. Explore human-like, or “**anthropomorphic**,” features and beliefs associated with many African musical instruments as well as some of their interpretations.

Standards Addressed

- **AZ Arts Standards**
Create, Present/Perform, Respond, Connect
- **Social Studies Standards**
 - History: Economic, Political, and Religious Ideas & the Development of Civilizations, Societies, and Cultures
 - Civics: Process, Rules, and Laws Direct How Individuals Are Governed

Background Information for Educators

Cultures can be described by their **characteristics**, including the ideas, beliefs, music, food, technologies, and symbols that distinguish a group of people.

Cultural symbols are any physical manifestation of a cultural characteristic: corporate logos, school mascots, styles of dress, distinctive foods, etc. Musical instruments can also be powerful cultural symbols that communicate a wide variety of meanings. Does a guitar played by a country western singer look the same as a guitar used by a heavy metal artist? Not typically. In addition, the clothing a musician wears when performing can communicate cultural meanings. Would a hip-hop artist perform while wearing boots and a cowboy hat? Would a Mexican banda musician perform in a powdered wig like George Washington? Probably not. The clothing we wear, like the types of musical

instruments we play, are all symbols of our culture and communicate powerful cultural messages.

Sometimes a **cultural symbol** can be something decorative. For example, a banjo used in bluegrass music that features symbols and imagery depicting an idyllic farm scene might communicate a yearning for a simpler way of life. Alternatively, a *banda tambora* (the bass drum used in Mexican banda music)



Figure 1. Engraved “Owens Mill Deluxe” banjo from Virginia, USA



Figure 2. Banda tambora from Jalisco, Mexico

decorated with symbols from the Aztec calendar may communicate a sense of cultural heritage.

In some cases, the symbols found on a musical instrument can be intertwined with deep spiritual meaning, reflecting beliefs about music's role as an active, mystical force with magical or religious properties. For example, in some African cultures, musical instruments are constructed with human-like features or believed to represent human-like attributes. The attribution of human-like characteristics to a nonhuman object is known as **anthropomorphism**. Anthropomorphism is common all over the world. Many cartoons feature objects such as cars, trains, or other things that have human features. In some African cultures, the human depictions on musical instruments relate directly to beliefs about the nature of life and death and the ancestors and deities that interact with the living from unseen worlds.



Figure 3. Ngombi from Central African Republic (Ngbaka people)

The music of many African cultures is believed to facilitate communication between the living and the dead. In some cases, the sounds of an anthropomorphic musical instrument are believed to literally embody the voice of the depicted ancestor or god. For example, African harps, such as the *ngombi* (see figure 3), are often interpreted as a representation of a female entity, sometimes even a goddess. The resonating chamber from which the strings protrude is commonly interpreted to symbolize a woman's womb from which life and music emanate. In the Bwiti religion of Gabon, the sound of the harp is thought to symbolize the voice of the goddess Nyingwan Mbege (Sister of God) to whom people appeal for good



Figure 4. Figurative drum from Nigeria (Yorùbá people)

fortune. The music of the harp is the sound of her voice and is believed to drive away evil spirits.

Many African drums also feature anthropomorphic decorations. The figures depicted on the drum are sometimes said to symbolize the ancestors or deities living in an unseen cosmos with whom the drum communicates, calling to them from the world of the living or representing their actual voice calling back from the dead. For example, among the Yorùbá people of Nigeria, where there are over one thousand different deified ancestors or *orisha*, figures carved on drums often represent a specific *orisha*. As *orisha* are believed to operate within a hierarchy that mirrors social hierarchies found among the living, anthropomorphic symbols can function as a means of declaring family heritage and establishing rights to hereditary political power. As a result, among the Yorùbá, like in many other traditional African societies, certain drums are reserved for the exclusive use of chiefs or other political figures.

The thumb piano is an instrument with small tines or tongues that produce a gentle sound when plucked



Figure 5. Thumb piano from Angola (Chokwe people)



Figure 6. Thumb piano from Zimbabwe (Shona people)

with the thumbs. Thumb pianos exist throughout the African and Afro-Caribbean world, where they come in a variety of sizes, from the small *chisanji* and *mbira* of central Africa to the very large *marimbula* found in the Caribbean. In many parts of Africa, thumb pianos are played in religious rituals or healing ceremonies to drive away evil spirits. Some are decorated with anthropomorphic features for ceremonial purposes. Among the Chokwe people of Angola, where the thumb piano is known as *chisanji* (see figure 5), the sculpted form of the instrument represents a deceased ancestor;

when played, its sound communicates the voice of that ancestor. Similarly, among the Shona people of Zimbabwe, where the thumb piano is known as *mbira* (see figure 6), the sound of the instrument is also related to the voices of ancestors. While the Shona do not typically decorate their *mbira* with rich carvings, they believe that the *mbira* itself is anthropomorphic. The long and short tines on the Shona thumb piano are said to symbolize individual ancestral mothers, fathers, and children and the voices of their respective spirits.

Across Africa it is common to see metallic rings, bottlecaps, or rattles attached to thumb pianos. These vibrate when the thumb piano is played, creating a musical distortion that many African ethnolinguistic groups believe facilitates spiritual or ancestral communication.

Anthropomorphic symbolism in African musical instruments has connections to religious beliefs and a sense of cultural heritage. An understanding of the meanings associated with these symbols can lead to a greater appreciation of the rich traditions, spiritual practices, and music of many African cultures.

Images and Videos

- [African Drumming](#)
- [African Harps](#)
- [African Thumb Pianos](#)
- [Slides: African Anthropomorphic Musical Instruments](#)

Classroom Activity: Building and Decorating Thumb Pianos

Objective

Explore African culture by building and decorating a thumb piano.

Standards

AZ Arts Standards

Create, Present/Perform, Respond, Connect

Social Studies Standards

History: Economic, Political, and Religious Ideas

Background

The thumb piano is a member of the lamellaphone family of instruments. Lamellaphones are named for the vibrating lamellas, or lamellae (Latin root word for






“tongues”), which make the sound. Lamellaphones and thumb pianos are common throughout Sub-Saharan Africa and among African-descended cultures in the Caribbean and South America. They have many different names, including *mbira*, *sanza*, *marímbula*, and *chisanji*. Originally made entirely from natural materials such as wood or cane, thumb pianos are now commonly made from metal and wood.

Materials

- Small cardboard boxes (e.g., USPS small flat-rate boxes or similar)
- Large, wide bobby pins
- Paint stirrers, rulers, or similar flat rectangular pieces of wood or plastic
- Packing tape
- Rubber bands
- Crayons, pens, paints, and other items for decoration

Continue to next page for activity!

Activity: How Can I Build My Own Thumb Piano?

	<p>1. Assemble your box.</p>
	<p>2. Assemble the lamellas (the small metal bars that create the thumb piano's sound).</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Take the bent side of the bobby pin and gently pull it apart from the flat side of the bobby pin into a V shape. Bend a second bobby pin into a V shape in which one side of the V is longer than the other. Do this by gently pulling the entire bobby pin apart as best as you can until it is nearly flat. Then, using the side of a wooden table or other hard surface, create a new bend somewhere along the length of the flat side of the bobby pin. Repeat this process, creating at least two more bobby pins in which the sides of the V are different sizes. You should have at least four bobby pins with different V shapes.
	<p>3. Organize the lamellas from the longest to the shortest V shape.</p>
	<p>4. Tape the flat side of the lamellas to the box. The lamellas should be arranged in a straight line and should not extend past the edge of the box.</p>
	<p>5. Place the wooden paint stirrer on top of the lamellas and across the part of the box to which the lamellas have been taped. Snug it up as close to the point of the V as possible.</p>

Activity: How Can I Build My Own Thumb Piano? *Continued*

	<p>6. Secure the wooden paint stirrer to the box by placing a rubber band around one end of it, and then stretching the loop of the rubber band around the box to secure the other side.</p>
	<p>7. Decorate your thumb piano using anthropomorphic elements shown in the African Anthropomorphic Musical Instruments slides provided or with other cultural symbols.</p>

Discussion Questions and Writing Prompts

Grade Level	Social Studies Standards	Activity	Discussion or Writing Prompt
Grade 3–5	History: The development of civilizations, societies, cultures, and innovations have influenced history and continue to impact the modern world.	Inquiry and discussion	What are some symbols of your own culture? Are any of the symbols of your culture anthropomorphic?
Grade 6–8	History: Economic, political, and religious ideas and institutions have influenced history and continue to shape the modern world.	Inquiry and discussion	How are beliefs about music, spirituality, and ancestral communication shared in the anthropomorphic symbolism of many African cultures?
Grade 9–12	Civics: Processes, rules, and laws direct how individuals are governed and how society addresses problems.	Inquiry and discussion	How have anthropomorphic features on African drums been used to reinforce claims to hereditary political authority? What symbols of political authority exist in your own culture? (Example: robes, crowns, music such as fanfares, etc.)

Classroom Resources

Slides intended for the classroom use can be found at MIM.org/educator-resources under “Create a Global Classroom II.”