Gahu Dancing: The Social Music and Dance of the Ewe People of Ghana

Percussion instruments are found in nearly every culture in the world and have existed since the beginning of music. People have used percussion instruments for ceremonial, sacred, and symbolic purposes as well as in communication, warfare and even as therapy. One of the most common uses of percussion, especially in cultures that use dance as a social activity, is as an accompaniment for dancing.

In this activity guide, students will have the opportunity to explore the world of music through percussion and dance. Students have the opportunity to become percussionists, composers and even dancers while having fun working in groups.

The student performances used as the basis of this activity guide were recorded as part of the Birch Creek Percussion & Steel Band Summer Academy in Egg Harbor, WI. This nationally recognized camp offers a comprehensive summer education experience for the young adult percussionist through firsthand experience with many performances, small-group instruction, and master classes.

**OUTCOMES**

After studying this material, students will be able to:

- Understand the use of percussion and dance as a form of celebration
- Describe the rhythmic concepts of polyphony and hemiola
- Compare the music of different cultures
- Understand the roles of the drummers in the music of the Ewe people
- Create an African percussion ensemble
- Participate as a drummer and/or dancer
- Compare the African culture of drumming with his/her own culture

**WISCONSIN’S MODEL ACADEMIC STANDARDS FOR MUSIC**

This curriculum guide corresponds with the following Model Academic Standards for Music:

**Music Performance:**
- Singing – A.8.3
- Instrumental – B.8.1-4

**Music Creativity:**
- Improvisation – C.8.3
- Composition – D.8.1-3

**Music Literacy:**
- Reading and Notating – E.8.3-4

**Music Response:**
- Analysis – F.8.1-3
- Evaluation – G.8.1-4

**Music Connections:**
- The Arts – H.8.1-3

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- National Endowment for the Arts
- Friends of Wisconsin Public Television

**Target:** Middle School General Music Classes
History and Culture – 1.8.1-3

BACKGROUND
Gahu (translated as money music because of its social character and elaborate costumes) is the traditional dance music of the Ewe (pronounced a-way) people that inhabit the Volta Region of Ghana on the continent of Africa. The music was adapted by the Ewe people from the Kokosawa music of the Yoruba people from Nigeria with the Ewe increasing the tempo of Gahu making for a very fast and lively music. The music and dance are used in social gatherings such as weddings or other celebratory gatherings rather than religious or spiritual settings.

A traditional Gahu ensemble is comprised of three different instrument types each with a distinct construction, sound, role and rhythmic character. The instrumentation of Gahu includes four different types of drums, shakers and a bell. The lead drum (master drummer) directs the musicians and dancers. The dancers dress in extravagant costumes and move in a counterclockwise circle, alternating men and women. The dancing compliments the fast-pace music, creating an overall high-energy performance.

GETTING STARTED:
World music provides not only an insight into a particular culture but also an insight to the people of that culture. Percussion in many cultures is used as social or celebratory instruments. The people of these cultures consider the playing of percussion as an honor. In Ghana, there is a hierarchy of roles with the master drummer being the director and central leader with the other drummers and dancers taking instruction from this elder source. Students should approach the following activity guide in the same way.

Students should first watch the video resources listed to assist in the following activities. By doing this first, students will gain a foundation of information on which to build.

GENERAL MUSIC ACTIVITIES
Watch the videos listed and then complete the following activities:

I. African Drumming – Providing the Beat to the Dance

A. Find pictures of the following gahu dance percussion instruments and complete the activities:
1. Gankogui (gahn-KOHG-way): One of three timekeeper instruments, this two-tone iron bell’s fundamental pattern remains unaltered throughout. There is only one gankogui in the ensemble.
2. Axatse (ah-HAHT-say): This African gourd shaker is also a timekeeper instrument. There can be between one and five axatse players in the ensemble.
3. Boba (boh-BAH): The boba player is the master drummer that leads the entire ensemble including the dancers. By playing rhythmic cues, the boba player indicates a new section. There is only one in the ensemble.
4. Sogo drum (SOH-goh): This low-pitched accompaniment drum is one of two response
drums. The rhythmic pattern can change in response to rhythmic cues played on the boba. There is only one sogo in the ensemble.

5. Kidi (KEE-dee): This medium-pitched accompaniment drum is the other response drums. The rhythmic pattern can also change in response to rhythmic cues played on the boba. There is also only one kidi in the ensemble.

6. Kagan (kah-GAHN): This high-pitched accompaniment drum is the third timekeeper in the ensemble. There is one kagan in the ensemble.

B. Compare and contrast the African percussion with symphonic percussion instruments found in the classroom.

C. Using the pictures of the different instruments, organize them by the following classifications:
1. Role in the ensemble – Leader, Timekeeper, Response
2. Material – Metal, Wood, Gourd, Other
3. Method of Playing – Sticks, Hands, Other
4. Type of Percussion Instrument – Membranophone, Idiophone, Other

D. Find pictures of the African instruments listed below and what African country is the home for each:
1. Kora
2. Djembe
3. Kalimba
4. Udu
5. Dundun
6. Balfon
7. Mbira
8. Shekere
9. Alagetia

II. The Heart of the Music Is In The Beat

A. Define and discuss the different rhythmic terms and effects listed below:
1. Duple Based Rhythms
2. Triple Based Rhythms
3. Meter
4. Compound Meter
5. Polyphonic, Monophonic and Homophonic
6. Syncopation
7. Hemiola

B. Find musical notation and recordings that represent the different effects.

C. Explore current music for rhythmic effects. Create a chart of the name of the song, performer, style and rhythmic effect used.

III. Creating an African Drum Ensemble In Your Classroom:

A. Find either replicas of traditional instruments or substitutes for shakers, bell and drums. Form an African drum ensemble using the following pattern: Key: X = Play and – = Rest
1. Gankogui:
   X – – X – – X – – X
2. Axatse:
   X – – X X – X X – – X
3. Kagan:
   – – X X – – X X
4. Kidi:
   X X – – – – X –
5. Sogo:
   X – – X – X –
6. Boba (Leader):
   X – – X – – X X – X X – – –

B. Once the ensemble has mastered the rhythm at a slower tempo,
increase the tempo until it flows comfortably.

C. Allow the leader position to move from one student to another.

D. Create a new rhythmic pattern using the same notation.

E. Remember to work in patterns of four, eight or sixteen.

IV. Dancing For Fun – The More Active the Better:

A. Describe the Gahu dance as seen in the videos and answer the following:
   1. How is the Gahu dance different from dances seen in America?
   2. How is the Gahu dance similar to dances in America?
   3. The Gahu dance is known as the money dance. Discuss as a class why the dance is known by this name.

B. Create a class circle dance by doing the following:
   1. Agree on seven or eight moves using arms, legs, head, etc.
   2. Select a step that will move the circle forward.
   3. Determine the direction of the circle – Clockwise, Counter Clockwise or Changing.
   4. Practice the moves one at a time.
   5. Select or compose music to accompany the dance.
   6. Put the music and dance together.
   7. Perform the dance for another class. Then teach the dance to the other class.
   8. When the dance is considered complete, write down the dance moves and notate the music.

C. Select an ethnic dance style from your community and complete the following:
   1. Connect with and interview members of a dance troupe.
   2. Re-create the ethnic dance.
   3. Compare and contrast the selected ethnic dance with the Gahu dance. How are the two similar? How are the two different?

V. Explore The Tradition of Making Percussion Instruments:

A. Using common items such as cardboard tubes, balloons, packing tape, thumbtacks, different sized tin cans, paperclips, seeds and/or rubber bands, create hand drums and shakers. Use the deflated balloons or packing tape as a membrane for a drum pulled over the cardboard tube and secured with thumbtacks. Use the cans to make shakers utilizing different natural items and then close off the ends.

   1. Be sure to represent the different instruments used in the gahu dance music.
   2. Develop rhythmic patterns that are interlocking based on four, eight or sixteen based patterns.
   3. Notate the music and share the score with others.
   4. Allow students to teach the others the parts and then see if the score is re-created correctly.
   5. Record the performance and share.

MAKING CONNECTIONS – CROSS CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES
VI. History - Have students talk about what he/she already knows about Africa and where this information was learned. Allow students to explore these ideas.

A. Explore and discuss the history of Ghana and the Ewe people considering the following:
   1. What is the current government of Ghana?
   2. How does the Ewe people function in Ghana?
   3. What European nations have governed Ghana?
   4. How did European rule affect Ghana? Was it positive or negative?
   5. How did nationalism affect colonialism in Ghana?

B. Have students talk about what he/she already knows about Africa and where this information was learned. Allow students to explore these ideas.

C. Talk about the types of things that Africa provides the world. Be sure to consider the following:
   1. Gold and Diamonds
   2. Cocoa Beans
   3. Timber
   4. Tuna and Other Seafood
   5. Aluminum
   6. Ore and Minerals

D. For what things is Ghana best known? Be sure to consider the following:
   1. Animals
   2. Beaches
   3. Products of Ghana
   4. Birds
   5. Types of Transportation
   6. Sports

E. Explore and discuss the connection of the slave trade considering the following:
   1. Why was West Africa the primary area for the slave trade to the United States?
   2. Was Ghana a primary or secondary location for the slave trade to the United States?
   3. Explore the connection between music in African countries and the United States.
   4. Consider how the slave trade affected music in the United States since slavery.

VII. Geography

A. Locate the following on a map or globe:
   1. The African Continent
   2. The country of Uganda
   3. The country of Egypt
   4. The country of Ghana
   5. The country of South Africa

B. Compare and contrast the location of each country in Africa. Compare and contrast the results.

VIII. Social Studies

A. Research the music, culture, government, weather, flora, fauna and people of each of the following African countries:
   1. Uganda
   2. Egypt
   3. South Africa
   4. Algeria
   5. Congo
   6. Tunisia
   7. Kenya
   8. Ghana

B. Compare and contrast the results of the research.
C. What variables within a country affect the music?
D. Compare and contrast the different instruments and styles of music from each country.

**ASSESSMENT OPTIONS**

**IX. Exams and Questioning**

A. Utilize traditional exams and quizzes.
B. Engage in knowledge based games.
C. Engage in teacher/student discussions.
D. Engage in student directed discussions.

**X. Writing Exercises**

A. Write a descriptive essay.
B. Complete answer based essays.
C. Write a narrative based on activities.
D. Create a portfolio on a specific African Dance.
E. Write a biography about an African drummer or dancer.

**XI. Projects**

A. Build percussion instruments out of common materials.
B. Compose in the style of Gahu music.
C. Create a dance in the Gahu style.
D. Create a poster about Gahu dancing and percussion instruments.
E. Interview performers in an African dance troupe and/or other ethnic dance troupe.

**XII. Retelling the Story/Discussion**

1. Engaging in role-playing activities.
2. Share observations with people outside of the class.

**VIDEO RESOURCES**

- Birch Creek Percussion Video – Gahu Dance
- Performance at Ghana National Theater – Gahu Dance
- Performance by KORYE Dance Troupe – Gahu – Traditional African Dance
- Interactive Multitrack African Drumming Mixer – Great Grooves #1: Gahu

**Added Video Links:**
Performance at Ghana National Theater – Gahu Dance
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYIa5h48A80

Performance by KORYE Dance Troupe – Gahu – Traditional African Dance
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F5SbyBAPIPk

Interactive Multitrack African Drumming Mixer – Great Grooves #1: Gahu