

DANCE STYLE LOCATOR

## West African Dance

Africa covers about one-fifth of the world's land area and about an eighth of its people. Africa is divided into 53 independent countries and protectorates. The African people belong to several population groups and have many cultural backgrounds of rich and varied ancestry. There are over 800 ethnic groups in sub-Saharan Africa, each with its own language, religion, and way of life.

African dance embodies athleticism and a graceful beauty flowing with rhythm. In Africa, dance is a means of marking the experiences of life, encouraging abundant crops, and healing the sick soul and body. It is also done purely for enjoyment. All ceremonial African dances have a purpose, often spiritual. Traditionally, people throughout the continent of Africa achieve direct communication between themselves and their gods through ritual music and dance, including many with masks.



Many things about ceremonial dances change when they are brought to the stage from their original context in village life. For example, in Africa the dancers are not on a stage, but are interacting directly with the rest of the people, who also participate in the ritual by singing, playing and having dialogue with the musicians and dancers. When these dances are done on a stage, they often include innovative elements, illustrating how dance is not static, but changing and growing even as the performers meet new people and styles on their travels.

### **MALI and SENEGAL: Mendeng and Wolof**

A *griot* (GREEoh) or *djialy* (jali) is the keeper of cultural traditions and history of the Mandeng people of West Africa. These traditions and stories are kept in the form of music and dance, containing elements of history or metaphorical statements that carry and pass on the culture of the Mandeng people through the generations. The music will usually follow a form, beginning slow with praise singing and lyrical movements accompanied by melodic instruments such as the *kora*, a 21-stringed harp/lute, and the *balafon*, a xylophone with gourd resonators.

Wolof drumming and dancing, originating in Senegal, features the *Djembe* and *DounDoun* drums, athletic jumps and spectacular up-tempo movements engaging the whole body. In Senegal the Wolof play drums to heal the sick, communicate with the spirit world, and bring communities together, but most of all, they play drums to dance. Wolof drummers accompany dancers by playing strongly marked cross-rhythms that are laced with interjecting calls. Using precise control, the numerous drummers weave intense patterns together.

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(West African dance, continued)



In *People Like Me 2005*, **Djaly Kunda Kouyate** presents "Contante" (Happiness). This piece is based on the Mendeng legend of a young boy named "Soungalo" from a small village in Senegal, who lost both his parents to death. The *griots*, with their music and song, told the boy of his family history and how good his parents were, and reassured him that he need not worry because the people of the village would take good care of him in his growing years. The King called for a big party to celebrate with the *griots* there to sing and dance for everyone in the village.

"Hey Jali ah dah, Allah le ke Jali ala dah" is a song that means "Ah, the art of being a Jali, God created the art of being a Jali."