



West Africa: Guinea Bissau



Africa covers about one fifth of the world's land area and about an eighth of its people. It is a land of striking contrasts and great natural wonders, from the tropical rain forests of western and central Africa, to the world's largest desert, the Sahara, to vast grasslands, and the world's longest river, the Nile.

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.

Dance is a means of marking the experiences of life, encouraging abundant crops, and healing the sick soul and body. It is also done just for enjoyment. All ceremonial African dances have a purpose. They tell stories and relate history. African music and dance in its essence communicates concepts of life on an elevated level; dance to the African is universal, transcendent language. Traditionally, people throughout the continent of Africa achieve direct communication between themselves and their gods through music and many ritual dances, including many with masks. African dance embodies athleticism and a graceful beauty flowing with rhythm.

Ceremonies

The importance of ceremonies in African society, as in other societies, can be seen as one moves through a typical life cycle. These ceremonies announce changes in one's social status and social relationships with those in the community. Many things about the dances change when they are brought to the stage from their original context in village life. For example, in Africa most dances take place as rituals in which the entire village participates. The dancers are not on a stage, but are interacting directly with the

rest of the people. The people watching are not sitting in seats in an audience, but may sing, play and dialogue with the musicians and dancers. Ceremonies are socially approved methods of participating in pleasurable activities such as music, arts, song, dance and other forms of expression.

Guinea Bissau – Balante people

The Balante are a people from the low lying coastal frontier between the south of Senegal and the north of Guinea-Bissau, West Africa. The Balante, one of five main ethnic groups in Guinea-Bissau, live by hunting in the forest and tend farms for raising beef. They organize big dance parties for occasions such as a celebration for a good rainy season, rites of passage, births, and marriages. In **People Like Me 2002: Face to Face!** the **Sunugal Ballet** will present a masked dance from this region, which celebrates the marriage of the prince.

The dance comes from the village of Mini-Ndame. In this village, when the prince comes of age to marry, the kingdom has a big party, to which every family brings their daughters. The young women compete with their beauty and their virtuosic dancing for the hand of the prince. The prince then chooses his bride, and a celebration ensues.

The masks that are used in this dance include a large **spirit mask** (pictured here on the right) laden with cowry shells, an old woman mask, a young girl mask, and a young man mask. As symbols of family and spiritual connection, the masks play an important role when the community comes together to celebrate with music and dance.



The Sunugal Ballet from Senegal is a group of dancers, led by Coura N'Diaye and Djibi Diop Faye, who grew up together in the city of Dakar. Dancing and drumming for hours on end while young, they received a more formal education from Mansa Gueye, director of the National Ballet of Senegal. After arriving in the United States, they formed the company in 1998 to promote and perform Senegalese dance in the Bay Area. A small subset of Sunugal Ballet performs in **People Like Me 2002: Face to Face!**

They have performed in numerous venues and festivals internationally, including the 2001 San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival, the 1999 Juneteenth Festival in Oakland, and the Santa Cruz Ethnic Arts Showcase. They collaborated with other Senegalese performers residing in the U.S., to produce the Keur Khaley Cultural Dance Concert in Oakland, CA. in 2000 and 2001.