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# African Drumming in Drum Circles

By Robert J. Damm

Although there is a clear distinction between African drum ensembles that learn a repertoire of traditional dance rhythms of West Africa and a drum circle that plays primarily freestyle, in-the-moment music, there are times when it might be valuable to share African drumming concepts in a drum circle. In his 2011 *Percussive Notes* article "Interactive Drumming: Using the power of rhythm to unite and inspire," Kalani defined drum circles, drum ensembles, and drum classes. *Drum circles* are "improvisational experiences, aimed at having fun in an inclusive setting. They don't require of the participants any specific musical knowledge or skills, and the music is co-created in the moment. The main idea is that anyone is free to join and express himself or herself in any way that positively contributes to the music." By contrast, *drum classes* are "a means to learn musical skills. The goal is to develop one's drumming skills in order to enhance one's enjoyment and appreciation of music. Students often start with classes and then move on to join ensembles, thereby further developing their skills." *Drum ensembles* are "often organized around specific musical genres, such as contemporary or folkloric music of a specific culture" (Kalani, p. 72).



Robert Damm: It may be beneficial for a drum circle facilitator to introduce elements of African music for the sake of enhancing the musical skills, cultural knowledge, and social experience of the participants.

**A**cknowledging these distinctions, it may be beneficial for a drum circle facilitator to introduce elements of African music (culturally specific rhythms, processes, and concepts) for the sake of enhancing the musical skills, cultural knowledge, and social experience of the participants in a drum circle. Admittedly, the drum circle, by definition, would temporarily become a drum class or drum ensemble. Given that some proponents of African drumming characterize drum circles as meaningless chaos, and some drum circle facilitators follow long-established guidelines to “never teach” and “never introduce culturally-specific rhythms,” it is difficult to propose exactly how to balance these disparate approaches. A unique perspective may come from committed drum circle facilitators who have studied African drumming with master teachers from Africa, have gone on to teach lessons and classes in African drumming, and effectively apply these complex cultural concepts in drum circles.

### ENSEMBLE PHILOSOPHY

Drum circles are known and valued for helping people connect to each other through music, for celebrating life through a shared drumming experience, and for promoting a spirit of participation, teamwork, and community. A number of social principles in African music correspond to philosophical concepts of community drum circles:

- Communal participation affirms togetherness (Agawu, 16).
- “The ensemble environment allows the amazingly skilled to make music alongside the less skilled” (Agawu, 167).
- “A shared point of temporal reference guarantees the coherence of the whole without discouraging the exercise of individual creativity” (Agawu, 167).
- “Competence is assumed on the part of *all* members of the community” (Agawu, 167–168).

Certain elements of African music might easily be integrated into the drum circle. Kofi Agawu, in *The African Imagination in Music*, defined the philosophy and practice of African ensemble performance as having four components: handclapping, time lines, polyrhythmic textures, and lead-drum narratives (169). These four elements, in varying degrees, may be introduced or emphasized within the context of a drum circle.

**Hand clapping** is an “integral part of music making in Africa” (Agawu, 89). “The normative musical function of clapping is to reinforce the emergent beat of music. Clapping compels involvement and synchronicity; it acknowledges foundation. Clapping typically consists of patterns constrained by the beat and/or patterns with distinct shapes that counterpoint the beat” (Agawu, 170).

**Time line** is a “short rhythmic pattern normally entrusted to the bell and played as an unvarying *ostinato* throughout a particular dance drumming. Time lines are patterns rather than mere pulses; they are integral to the music” (Agawu, 171–172). An example of a time line would be the iron bell rhythm known in Afro-Cuban music as *clave*. Time lines and their repetition contribute to the essence of African music, which is *groove* (Agawu, 14–17).

**Polyrhythm** is the “simultaneous use of two or more contrasting rhythms in a musical texture. A crucial feature of polyrhythm is that each constituent part is subject to extensive repetition. We might think of a polyrhythmic texture as one in which several osti-



Alisha Ross: When I introduce a specific rhythm, I ask the participants to first say it, then say it and clap it.

nato patterns are superimposed” (Agawu, 176). The polyrhythm in African music results from the timelines, accompanying rhythms, and lead drumming. The accompanying rhythms serve a “less fixed function entrusted to a set of support drums that ensures the heart of the polyrhythmic texture” (Agawu, 168).

**Lead drum narratives** refer to “telling stories on the drum using a variety of patterns. The stories are sometimes highly elaborate and original, sometimes conventional, and often framed in liaison with the other musicians’ patterns” (Agawu, 184). The lead drum narrative is “a relatively free section that rides on the texture provided by the rest of the ensemble” (Agawu, p. 168).

### INSTRUMENTATION

Drum circles typically include the drums, bells, and rattles associated with West African drum ensembles. In particular, dunduns, jembes, slit drums, iron bells, and shekeres are frequently a part of the acoustic soundscape of the drum circle. Africa has a spectacular variety of musical instruments. Drums come in a wide variety of sizes; they may be played with sticks, hands, or some combination of stick and hand (Agawu, 93). “Many African drums have a relational pitch dimension that endows them with a joint melodic and rhythmic function” (Agawu, 94). “Iron bells are among the most common and ancient of African musical instruments. Bells can be played by children and adults, and by highly skilled and modestly skilled musicians. In the performance of popular Ghanaian dances... the bell is typically entrusted with a signature rhythmic pattern that it repeats without variation for the duration of the dance composition” (Agawu, 97). “Rattles are for the most part accompanying instruments, often marking the beat or playing one of the simpler, unchanging rhythms within a polyrhythmic texture” (Agawu, 97).

For those who value community drum circles and are also knowledgeable about African drumming traditions, the information provided here is intended to inspire you to thoughtfully and respectfully share elements of African drumming in selected drum circle settings. The following suggestions represent responses from a survey sent to drum circle facilitators also known for their interest in African drumming. This is not in any way an exhaustive list, but rather a sampling of strategies for integrating African concepts into drum circles.

# Using African Rhythms as a Foundation for a Drum Circle

By Rick Mattingly

A few years ago, a colleague at the high school I teach at asked if I could do drum circles with his Spirituality classes. I knew that most of these students had probably never played a musical instrument before, and this was going to be a one-time event. The students were excited about spending a class period playing drums, but I detected some “performance anxiety”; they weren’t sure just what they were going to be asked to do, and they certainly didn’t want to embarrass themselves. If I had dived right in to leading a traditional drum circle, in which everyone could play whatever he wanted (I’m not being sexist here; it’s an all-boy school), it could have just become a free-for-all. I had to find a way to control the situation

I decided to begin by teaching them a simple, three-part African rhythm I learned from Yaya Diallo. He referred to the piece as “Don,” which he said meant “dance” in Mali, where he was born. Here are the three jembe parts; the bottom line is the bass tone, the middle line is the open tone, and the top line is a slap:

## Don

Traditional Mali

pattern 1

pattern 2

pattern 3

Since I was only going to work with each class once, I did not teach the slap technique. I just showed them the bass and open tones, and anything notated as a slap I played as an open tone.

I started with the top pattern. After a couple of minutes I stopped playing but motioned for them to continue. Typically, the group sped up, but they usually sped up together, which gave me the opportunity to compliment them for listening to each other.

I then told them I was going to start them again at the original tempo, but I was going to quickly switch to a different, faster pattern. I said that if they listened to my pattern and heard how I was filling in the spaces between the notes they were playing, they would probably find it easier to play the original pattern without speeding up. It worked.

I then taught the second pattern. We played it together, and then I switched back to the first pattern while they continued with the second pattern.

Next, I split the group in half. I started half the group on the first pattern, and once they had that going I started the other half on the second pattern. If either group started sounding disjointed, I would stand in front of them and reinforce their pattern, but I could usually stop playing after a couple of minutes and let them play by themselves. Then I would have the group that previously played the second pattern play the first pattern, and vice-versa. Once they had it going by themselves, I would start playing the third pattern with them.

After I taught the whole group the third pattern, I split them into three groups, with each group playing a different pattern. I rotated the groups

so that each group played each pattern. They generally sounded pretty good with all three patterns going, but I told them that, standing in the middle of the circle, I was very aware of each group. Our goal was to make one unified composite sound, so I had them count off by threes. I started all the “ones” on the first pattern, started all the “twos” on the second pattern, and started all the “threes” on the third pattern. After they played together for a while, I rotated the parts and started again. I repeated that once more so that each student had a chance to play all three parts.

My goal in doing this was to give them the experience of playing together and listening to each other, and also to give them a very basic rhythmic vocabulary that they could use in a more traditional drum circle setting. I explained the premise of a drum circle was that everyone could play whatever he wanted, as long as it fit into the overall pulse of the group. I said that I was going to start out by playing the first pattern we had learned, and each of them could play any of the three patterns, but he didn’t have to play them the same way we learned them. For example, instead of playing pattern 2 this way...

...it could be played like this...

...or like this.

I also said they could switch back and forth between two (or all three) patterns, or they could combine patterns. For example, patterns 1 and 3 could be combined like this:

I told them that if they wanted to just keep a steady pulse, that was fine, too. I also told them that once we got going, I would play some different rhythms besides the ones we had learned, and if someone heard me play something he liked, he should feel free to play that rhythm. Finally, I said that they could make up their own rhythms as long as they fit the overall pulse of the group.

Working with three to five classes a year for eight years now, that approach has been successful. From learning and playing a simple three-part African rhythm, they gained the confidence to participate, and they also had a small rhythmic vocabulary to work with. Some students stayed with those original patterns, others experimented with variations of those patterns, and a few tried some rhythms of their own. But from playing the African piece, they quickly learned how to listen to each other and play different parts together.

## HAND CLAPPING

**Robert Damm:** Start a piece by having one half of the group clap the beat and the other half clap a bell rhythm. The piece could gradually expand into additional rhythms played on body percussion and eventually transition into drums and percussion instruments. The luba drum rhythm, as taught by Toeknee Bailey, features hand clapping; this two-part composition works well in drum circles.

B = bass  
o = open tone  
C = clap hands

**Jeff Holland:** I use clapping to teach clave, bell, and kata patterns (rhythmic sequences that relate to many Haitian and rumba rhythms); call-and-response, Keith Terry *Body Music*; TaKeTiNa (rhythm workshop involving stepping, clapping and chanting); audience participation; and teaching parts.

**Ed Mikenas:** Introduce clave by having the group clap "Play Music, It's Fun!"



John Yost: I sometimes use ethno-specific patterns as a platform lesson that morphs into an in-the-moment piece.

**Alisha Ross:** When I introduce the patterns for a specific rhythm, I ask the participants to first say it, then say it and clap it. Then we begin to play on our drums, very gradually speeding up as needed.

**Sule Greg Wilson:** I always begin with clapping and singing. I use singing and body percussion to create an internal sense of the music before anyone touches an instrument.

**John Yost:** I use clapping to keep space between beats in a fun way, as a way to shift away from drumming during a transition point, and to bring the circle volume down to create a window for vocal or quieter sounds.

## BELL PATTERNS ORIGINATING IN AFRICA

**Robert Damm:** I start a samba groove by having the bass drums play a two-measure 2/4 pattern of mute, bass, mute, bass-bass, add an agogo (double bell) part by vocalizing "samba rhythm, oh how we like it!" and direct the shakers to play four sounds on a beat (sixteenth notes) by vocalizing chika-chika, chicka-chicka.

**Jeff Holland:** I use 6/8, 12/8 long and short bell patterns.

**Ed Mikenas:** Play agbekor bell rhythm with "Mother Rhythm" drum patterns (bass-tone-tone-bass-tone-tone using alternating R-L-R-L-R-L hand sequence) as a way of teaching how a three pulse and a four pulse can work together with the same rhythm.

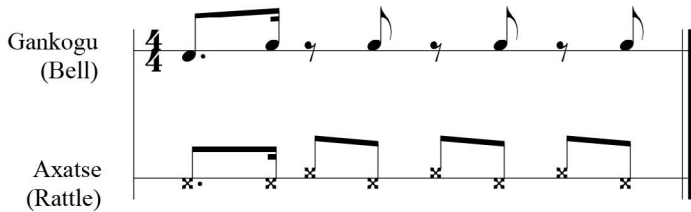
B = bass  
o = open tone

**Alisha Ross:** I introduce a bell (cowbell or gankogui) for call-and-response, and I often tell the participants that this is the “timekeeper” or “metronome” of African drumming in many cultures.

**Sule Greg Wilson:** If possible, I use Adowa, 3/2 or 2/3 clave, or a 12/8 pattern.

**John Yost:** I sometimes use different 6/8 patterns and Afro-Cuban patterns to push the groove forward, mark the pulse, and create melody.

**Tom Teasley:** Mostly I use the gahu gankogui pattern.



### RATTLE/SHAKER PATTERNS ORIGINATING IN AFRICA

**Robert Damm:** Shakers usually intensify and support the beat by playing ostinato patterns of quarter notes or eighth/sixteenth-note subdivisions.

**Ed Mikenas:** I emphasize eighth notes.

**Frank Shaffer:** I do a 1-and-3 pattern (half notes) or something similar and suggest similar patterns to others.

**Tom Teasley:** Mostly I use the gahu shaker pattern.

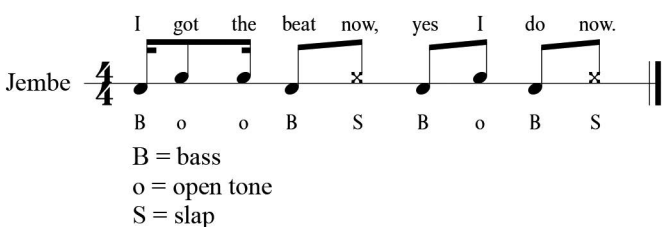
**Sule Greg Wilson:** Shona hosho patterns fit well, as does a Cuban six on shekere.

### DUNDUN, BASS DRUM, OR SUPPORTING/FOUNDATIONAL DRUM RHYTHMS ORIGINATING IN AFRICA

**Robert Damm:** The bass drums can play a foundational rhythm for many African-influenced or African-inspired rhythms such as New Orleans swing, various 6/8 grooves, clave-based grooves (e.g., the Bo Diddley beat and bamboula), fanga, and traditional dances such as kuku.

**Jeff Holland:** I pass out bass drum parts for kuku, madan, and fanga as well as rhythms that are not culturally specific, and I use the bass drum for call-and-response.

**Alisha Ross:** One rhythm I love to use, especially with children and populations with special needs, was taught to me by Kalani. He and Ryan Camara introduced macru in a way that stuck with me: “I got the beat now, yes I do now.”



I often introduce the rhythm as a celebration rhythm from West Africa, and we will jam on some of the supporting rhythm patterns

until participants feel comfortable enough to begin to make up their own within the framework of macru. I also do this with “Fanga Alafia” from time to time, especially in cases with senior citizens in assisted living/memory support because the song is simple enough to remember. I like to use these types of rhythms as guideposts for beginning a rhythmic jam session that is accessible to all and sets participants up for success. I remind them that if ever they get lost in the rhythm, return to the simple “heartbeat” of the groove and work on keeping the beat steady for the group until they feel comfortable enough to make up their own rhythms.

**Sule Greg Wilson:** I use samba surdu and contra-surdu patterns. Mande Lamba dunun and songba parts can usually blend quite well. As for structures, there is the Nyabinghi “Lub-Dub”/Heartbeat, and any number of what I refer to as “claves” that are used to offer cohesion to group drumming situations.

**John Yost:** I sometimes use kuku, kassa, dunumba, and other ethno-specific patterns/arrangements/drumsongs as a platform lesson that morphs into an in-the-moment piece.

### POLYRHYTHM

**Ed Mikenas:** Teaching African dance forms typically involves three different rhythms. I make sure that participants are able to play each rhythm.

**Jeff Holland:** Sometimes I explain that music can be felt in duple meter, triple meter, or both. A quick activity is playing “Both—right-left-right” with hands on lap.

**John Yost:** This I do in the beginning “dictator phase” or in a debriefing.

**Tom Teasley:** I frequently take the traditional 12/8 bell pattern and have the circle step from a perspective of two and then change to a perspective of three.

### LEAD DRUM SOLOS

**Jim Greiner:** I bring the volume of the circle down and cue people to solo on top of that. I first demonstrate simple ways to construct solos based on the person’s original pattern.

**Jeff Holland:** Besides allowing good soloists to take turns (talk) in a circle, I usually encourage self-expression through 3+1 or 7+1 phrases.



Tom Teasley: I encourage soloists to play in a call-and-response manner.

ing depending on tempo and ability. The group grooves for three measures, then the soloist takes one. I usually go around the circle a couple of times, depending on the number of participants.

**Ed Mikenas:** Participants are first required to be able to play all the supporting parts and execute the “call.” They are then asked to think of language that they are inspired to express and “say it” on the lead drum.

**Alisha Ross:** I often use the encouragement to “play what you feel.” Although my rhythmic instruction is very deeply embedded within West African drumming traditions, I am usually leading interactive rhythm sessions in which learning African music is not the goal. I use my own knowledge of African rhythms to help keep a steady, grounded beat for circles; to help me introduce basic rhythm-keeping concepts to participants in an accessible way; and to share the spirit of community with the participants so they can experience the fun, the energy, and the empowering feeling that is the drum circle. With children soloists, I encourage them to play what they feel (we often experiment by playing feelings of anger, happiness, sadness, frustration, energy, etc.) and also encourage the ensemble to keep a steady beat for the soloists so they have a rhythmic framework within which to work.

**Tom Teasley:** My approach is more from the jazz tradition than traditional African. As a result, I encourage soloists to play in a call-and-response manner. I encourage the use of space and conversational concepts.

**Sule Greg Wilson:** Playing lead can only happen if the player understands how the rest of the parts being played are connected,

support each other, and create the whole. Lead patterns can then double, reverse, or dissect any part being played and improvise via addition/subtraction around the clave/fundamental pattern upon which the ensemble’s participation is based.

**John Yost:** I facilitate lead drumming through echo, call-and-response, and creating reveals by sculpting particular people who are soloing, showcasing players, and switching to others.

## INSTRUMENTATION ASSOCIATED WITH WEST AFRICAN DRUM ENSEMBLES

**Robert Damm:** Jembes, tubanos, frame drums, bass drums, iron bells (gankogui, atoke, frikywa), wide variety of shakers (shekeres, tube shakers, gita), and donkey jawbone rattle.

**Jeff Holland:** I use jembe, dunnuns, shekeres, and occasionally a balafon player. Dancers sometimes add various shakers.

**Ed Mikenas:** djembes, iron bells (ogun), shekeres (some made from recycled gallon fruit punch bottles), carillon (scrapers made from brass pipe), and gongogui.

**Alisha Ross:** Mostly I utilize djembes, both traditionally made wooden/goatskin as well as commercially manufactured ones. I also use several Remo Bahia drums and the lowest tubano drums, which I refer to as the “heartbeat” drums because of their low bass sound. I often explain that in many African drumming traditions there is a bass drum (dundun) that acts as a grounding mechanism for drummers and dancers alike, which can lead us back to the basic beat or “heartbeat” if we ever feel lost in the rhythm.

**Frank Shaffer:** I use a shekere and iron bells and encourage others to use them if they wish.

**Tom Teasley:** Jembe, iron bells, shakers of various sizes, and several instruments from the North African and Middle Eastern traditions as well as West African.

## HAND DRUM TECHNIQUES (E.G. SLAP, TONE, BASS) ASSOCIATED WITH AFRICAN TRADITIONS

**Jim Greiner:** I teach tone and bass techniques at the beginning of circles. I note that slaps are one of the primary techniques of hand drums, but slaps should be learned and practiced in private since they are more challenging.

**Jeff Holland:** I always teach basic sounds and suggest correct technique. There are so many ways, but I showcase the sounds in repetition or with a common pattern. For more advanced drummers, I use call-and-response. Sometimes I teach a few rhythms such as fanga or kuku just to get people comfortable.

**Ed Mikenas:** All of my hand techniques are taught using English because that is the vehicle through which most of my students have been expressing themselves since they were born. I use “bass,” “edge,” and “slap” as the way of introducing students to proper hand placement, which would ultimately lead to good tone production and develop proprioceptivity (relating to stimuli connected with the position and movement of the body) as an ancillary tool.

**Alisha Ross:** I introduce hand drumming to participants in the context of playing the West African djembe. With adults and teens, I call them bass, tone, and slap, but with children, I only introduce two sounds, the “boom” (bass) and the “tap” (tone). Later, if I’m introducing a basic rhythm, I’ll augment phrases with the corresponding booms and taps. If the children are showing a particular affinity and want to take it further, I’ll introduce the slap as well,



Sule Greg Wilson: Playing lead can only happen if the player understands how the rest of the parts are connected, support each other, and create the whole.

and they will work a bit on making their tones and slaps sound distinct from one another.

**Frank Shaffer:** I just use the bass and tone concept when first giving instruction on the various sounds of the drum.

**Tom Teasley:** I teach slap, tone, and bass, but supplement that with conga techniques including heel-tip applications of American rudiments.

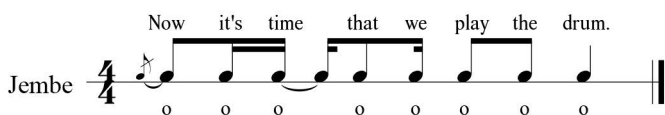
**Sule Greg Wilson:** After people are able to sing, stomp, and clap parts and can hold their own with folks playing other parts, then we can move to doing the same thing on whatever given instrumentation people have.

**John Yost:** In the teaching/dictator phase, I teach techniques such as bass, tone, and slap.

## DRUM CALLS AS SIGNALS TO BEGIN, TRANSITION, OR END A COMPOSITION

**Jeff Holland:** I use drum calls to start, stop, signal breaks, signal dancers, and more. We have a strong West African drumming influence in our area, so many drummers in our circles are familiar with drum calls. If not, they catch on quickly.

**Alisha Ross:** I utilize a technique that I learned from Tom Foote, the director of Rhythm Kids. The opening drum call for a 4/4 rhythm would be "Now it's time that we play the drum" and the corresponding call to conclude the rhythm is "Now it's time that we stop the drum."



These days, I focus more on the concept of taking a group from "I" to "we" in a way that feels intuitive to the group, so I don't utilize drum calls as much. Usually, I say the standard Arthur Hull "One, two, let's all play!" and I count down from four to one with a stop cut to end a rhythm. I also show these cues to the children and teens I work with so they can lead the group themselves!

**Sule Greg Wilson:** I usually use "Shave and a haircut, two bits," since that's something that folks already know. From there, we use call-and-response to teach other phrases.

**John Yost:** I use drum calls in drum classes and in circles where people already understand the references/signals.

## CALL-AND-RESPONSE PROCEDURES

**Alisha Ross:** I often lead call-and-response with my groups but not in a culturally specific way. I introduce the concept of echoing a rhythm (repeat what I play), and then if there's time I will introduce the concept of "I play something, you respond with something else." With children, the easy way to do this is what Kenya S. Masala suggests, which is "When I play 7, you play 3." Utilize various numbers so the group can count them out and not get lost in the response. Encouraging adults to respond with something different than what I play is a challenge! Many beginners want to simply copy what I play because they are used to following directions and don't feel comfortable creating something on their own. My challenge is to introduce more interactive activities throughout the session that will demonstrate that it's okay to be creative, it's okay



**Jeff Holland:** I use drum calls to start, stop, signal breaks, signal dancers, and more.

to make a "mistake" (which is really just a solo or a chance to play something new!), and we welcome rhythms and ideas that are new and different.

**Sule Greg Wilson:** I sometimes use drum patterns common to the Guinea Ballets or to Brazilian batucada.

**John Yost:** I use call-and-response in vocal windows and as an orchestral or musical tool in community drum circles.

## CULTURALLY SPECIFIC DRUM RHYTHMS

**Jim Greiner:** I learned fanga from and performed it with Babatunde Olatuni.

**Jeff Holland:** I teach fanga, kuku, sinte, morribayassa, lenjin, yankadi, macru, and jingo.

**Ed Mikenas:** Dansa and ta-ri from Mali; djole, kuku, mandjiani, and soko from Guinea; fanga, gwo-ka (Guadeloupe); Haitian conga and yanvalou (Haiti); junkanoo (Bahamas) mambo, rumba, and tumbao from Cuba; Nigerian highlife; and titidan (Ivory Coast) are all pieces I have used at one time or another in classroom/workshop/drum circle settings. I would select rhythms according to the length/focus/need of each group/workshop/circle.

**Sule Greg Wilson:** I usually teach folks the first and second accompany parts to Lamba mixed with Shim Sham Shimmy from the U.S. That's enough to hold, entertain, and challenge most participants.

## DRUM MNEMONICS

**Jim Greiner:** I use bass, tone, and pa (for slaps). I use a very simple "say and play" method to help people immediately overcome the fear of making "mistakes" by first vocalizing rhythmic patterns. During my two years of drumming in Africa, I often noticed that people would be vocalizing the patterns they were playing. It occurred to me that by vocalizing their rhythms, they were internalizing them. This "say and play" method is also a great way to help people feel comfortable verbally communicating with one another during corporate team-building drumming sessions.

**Jeff Holland:** I use Babatunde Olatunji's "gun-dun-go-do-pa-ta" mnemonics, but also "Be-De-Ba" from Bolokada Conde and others, as well as "musical sentences" and various "drum languages."

**Sule Greg Wilson:** What I teach as "And a bit o' butter," I learned from native Mande speakers as something like "Brang-ga, bing-y



brang-ga," a phrase that takes into consideration the tonality of their particular drums.

**John Yost:** I usually make up my own poems or djembe mnemonics. I have many and I make up vocal mnemonics during classes when I teach kassa, kuku, djan, zouli, sinte, and too many other rhythms to mention.

### ENGLISH OR AFRICAN WORDS AND PHRASES TO TEACH RHYTHM

**Jeff Holland:** I use phrases such as "I like to play vil-lage rhythms" for fanga and "ba kum bede" or "I love to drum" and "kookoo for koko puffs" for kuku.

Jembe

I like to play vil - lage rhythms

B = bass  
o = open tone

**Ed Mikenas:** I use phrases in the English language to teach rhythms. This is a much easier way for beginning students to remember both the rhythms and what hands are supposed to be doing. For example, the three rhythms of mandjani would be taught as "It's too hot!," "Pass the pizza," and "ro-ni, pep-per-ro-ni."

Jembe 1

It's too hot It's too hot!

S o S S o S

Jembe 2

Pass the piz- za Pass the piz- za!

S o S B S o S B

Jembe 3

ro- ni pep- per ro- ni pep- per

S S o o S S o o

B = bass  
o = open tone  
S = slap

**Alisha Ross:** Here I borrow from the great facilitators who have been my mentors. In almost all circles I lead (children, youth, adults, seniors), I utilize Jim Donovan's rhythm seeds technique; you introduce a short, simple pattern that is easily repeated and then encourage participants to layer in whatever they feel like playing. Some of my favorite Jim Donovan rhythm seeds that make an "instant drum circle" groove are "Hey you, play that drum," "Come on it's getting late," "Meatball, meatball, I want spaghetti," and "I play drums with you."

Meat - ball Meat - ball I want spa- ghet - ti

**Tom Teasley:** I sometimes have students use the syllables of their names as a starting point to teach rhythmic phrasing.

**Sule Greg Wilson:** "And a one, and a two, and a pebble in my shoe" is a way to teach a basic pattern. I demonstrated seven such patterns on my DVD.

### INTEGRATION OF DRUM RHYTHMS AND AFRICAN DANCE

**Jeff Holland:** I integrate dance with drumming for fanga, kuku, sinte, morribayassa, lenjin, yankadi, macru, and jingo.

**Ed Mikenas:** I always mention that in African culture, dancing and drumming are one activity, each requiring the other.

**Sule Greg Wilson:** What I share depends on the levels of proficiency of the people present. Just stepping and alternating side to side, as in Gambian Serouba, is difficult for many to do while playing and singing.

**John Yost:** Fanga; and kuku, sinte, and dununba [from Guinea].

### INTEGRATION OF DRUM RHYTHMS WITH AFRICAN SONGS

**Jeff Holland:** I integrate songs with drumming for fanga, kuku, and che che kule.

**Alisha Ross:** Sometimes I will utilize "Fanga Alafia" with senior citizens in assisted living and Alzheimer's/dementia populations. Both the African and the English words are easy to sing and remember. If we are playing macru, I occasionally introduce a macru song that I learned from Kadiatou Conte-Forte of the Balafon West African Dance Ensemble.

**Sule Greg Wilson:** If teaching African songs, I generally use "Shosholoza" (a Ndebele folk song that originated in Zimbabwe but was popularized in South Africa), "Maim-Bo" (which is the beginning of a repetitive phrase song for the Kakilambe dance/music from Guinea), or a Diondong song from Senegal.

**John Yost:** "Ara Mi Le" (on Babatunde Olatunji's *Healing Session* CD), "Fanga Alafia" (in *Drums of Passion Songbook: The Songs of Babatunde Olatunji*), "Moribayassa" (on Mamady Keita's *Afo* CD; the rhythm is in his book), various songs with kuku, "Baga Guinea" (in Famadou Konate's book with CD: *Rhythms and Songs of Guinea*), with kassa, and "Amatie" (a song I learned in Guinea) with djole.

### INTEGRATION OF DRUM RHYTHMS WITH AFRICAN STORIES

**Robert Damm:** I use stories such as "Anansi and the Secret Name," "The King's Drum," and "The Leopard's Drum" and poems such as "The Distant Talking Drum" and "Toodle-loo! Toodle-lei" for school programs.

**Jeff Holland:** I've used many African fables. I also have a tall ngoma drum with animal carvings I use in school programs when I tell stories.

**Alisha Ross:** Baba Lyons, in South Florida, is an amazing storyteller who has internalized many traditional African stories and folklore. He integrates repetitive phrases and rhythms that encourage listeners to actively participate in the stories. Baba mixes fictional Zulu, Ashanti, Yoruba, and Benin stories and songs with actual events in order to enlighten today's youth with a stronger sense of history and self. The stories invite audience participation and incorporate traditional African musical instruments such as kalimba and drums. Baba concludes his program with a participatory sing-along in a native African language and a "drummers' circle" where the children learn an African rhythm.



**Jim Greiner:** I use a simple “say and play” method to help people overcome the fear of making “mistakes” by first vocalizing rhythmic patterns.

**Tom Teasley:** I frequently work in partnership with a colleague who uses the poetry of Langston Hughes that we integrate with the student ensembles.

### HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL INFORMATION

**John Yost:** I tell the tradition/purpose of the rhythm when teaching it.

**Robert Damm:** I explain the role of jembe and other drums to call people to the celebration. Before beginning an African-inspired rhythm, I give a brief introduction to its geographical origin and cultural function. I sometimes use ubuntu as a theme for a drum circle and share quotes that describe the philosophy throughout the program. Before we play a clave-based groove, I give a brief history of the rhythm as an iron bell pattern in West African dance music, its function as a rhythm stick (clave) pattern in Cuban music, its importance as the “Spanish tinge” of early jazz, its role in mardi gras and second-line music in New Orleans, and its influence in rock-and-roll and funk music (e.g., the Bo Diddley beat).

**Jim Greiner:** I introduce every drum circle with the fundamental traditions of four instrument families. I do this to help people realize that they will become a part of the rich worldwide tradition of playing rhythm instruments in order to build community bonds and to celebrate together. These instruments include the djembe, the tambourine with skin head, the tambourine without skin head, and maracas. The djembe comes to us from West Africa and the ancient Empire of Mali, which was one of the world’s most advanced and creative cultures in the 13th century. The name “djembe” is thought to have originated from the Bambara people of that region from their words for “gather” and “peace.” The tambourine with a skin head is one of the most ancient of drums and is a member of the frame drum family that goes back at least several thousand years to early Mesopotamian cultures. It was then played primarily by women who were honored and valued as integral to the spiritual and healing rites of the people. The tambourine without a head, or jingle ring, is one of the most popular of hand held percussion instruments in contemporary Western-style popular musical forms including rock, funk, rhythm & blues, and others. The maracas, shakers often played in pairs, are found in Caribbean and Central American music, though rattles on handles are also found in many cultures worldwide. They are used in both performances and ritu-

als. I bring these instrument families together to demonstrate how the various timbres combine to create a unified sound—a great active metaphor for different people to combine their unique skills for group success.

**Jeff Holland:** I explain what each rhythm means and where it originated. I also tell how the instruments are made.

**Ed Mikenas:** I talk about drumming for the important stages of life, helping the aged with gardening, and the hunting culture.

**Alisha Ross:** With children and youth, I often explain the social purpose of the drums, and introduce the concept of playing drums as part of lifecycle events (birth, marriage, healing, death, etc.). I explain the concept that everyone has rhythm (starting with the most basic concept of all living beings: the heartbeat) and that we just need a few simple tools to bring that rhythm out of us and utilize it in a way that can empower ourselves, our group, our community, and the greater good.

**Sule Greg Wilson:** If we have Cuban instruments, I talk about the Yoruba and Kongo influences. If there’s an ashiko, I share the history of how that drum came to the States.

### OTHER ELEMENTS ASSOCIATED WITH AFRICAN DRUMMING OR CULTURES

**Jim Greiner:** One of the many elements I brought back from my African drumming journey, and that I integrate into all of my corporate and community drumming sessions, is the importance of getting into a groove—of staying with a rhythm, or anything in life, long enough to internalize it.

**Jeff Holland:** I always offer information for people to find lessons and other cultural information.

**Ed Mikenas:** I wrote a play titled “Two Different Faces of a Moment” based on an African story. The play brought together drumming, dancing, storytelling, and the Yoruba concept of “enactment.”

**Alisha Ross:** In many West African cultures, everyone drums and dances. This is an especially difficult concept for adults to understand, since it’s been ingrained in their brains from childhood that only those with “talent” can participate in musical experiences. Many adults will tell stories of a teacher who discouraged them from playing an instrument, or singing, or dancing due to their lack



**Frank Shaffer:** I just use the bass and tone concept when first giving instruction on the various sounds of the drum.

of talent. Within the context of West African cultures, drumming and dancing is a matter of course. Sure there are professionals, but pretty much everyone knows a few drum rhythms and some dance moves, beginning when they are able to walk (toddlers dancing in Senegalese sabar circles comes to mind!).

**Tom Teasley:** I frequently use digital looping and other technology in my very nontraditional drum circle facilitation.

**Sule Greg Wilson:** I teach people to use tradition-based techniques of playing and orchestrating, to allow them to begin to glean how to play the instrument they have chosen to learn. From there, they may go as in-depth as they wish. It would be good for people to know that dedication and work are demanded, and that success as a player—even a recreational one—takes respect for the process, and the history, of any instrument.

## CONCLUSION

Drum circle purists and African drum ensemble purists alike may be opposed to the suggestion that a drum circle is an appropriate place to introduce African drumming. However, as John Fitzgerald explained to me: "There are plenty of folks doing drum circles who already offer traditional rhythms. The biggest distinction between teaching specific traditional rhythms in a drum circle versus a formal class is in the atmosphere of inclusion and emotional safety that a great facilitator creates. Of course, there are traditional teachers who create that atmosphere with their students and who would never identify themselves as drum circle/rhythm facilitators. Arthur Hull and other facilitators acknowledge Baba Olatunji as their inspiration for creating drum circles. Arthur had a lot of time with Olatunji, so there was actually a close association with African drumming for the earliest drum circle facilitators."

Sule Greg Wilson shared a number of profound insights concerning the topic addressed in this research project: "Drum circles and African drumming are both about creating community, but they use different cultural norms to achieve community. Drum circles

take place in a circle as a metaphor for a safe place, where there is no 'leader.' That's never the case in African drumming. Africans and Post-Africans freely acknowledge those with the expertise and wisdom to lead and direct the experience through the music or through the dancers in symbiosis with the lead musician; that's their "safe place." African ensembles have a 'master drummer/dancer' who, through breaks in the music, song, and dance, signal changes in the music. The trained musicians and dancers respond accordingly. Drum circles, following classical European musical/cultural norms, have a conductor/facilitator who, through gestures or signals, tells the ensemble what to do. Drum circles emphasize participation through playing instruments provided by the facilitator. In African and Post-African cultures, with the spiritual power released through the music, instruments are not shared with strangers, much less passed around time and time again.

"To generalize, most people who come to drum circles do so out of curiosity and to engage in 'recreational percussion,' but not to learn any given instrument. Africans and many Post-Africans have used drum and dance as a way to connect with ancestors and culture. So, to introduce African drumming elements into drum circles might just entail that drum circle participants do not drum. Instead, they follow a different paradigm in which they absorb the song, the dance, and the music, and take responsibility for knowing it and co-creating it rather than having these elements be the responsibility of the conductor. In this case, we might need to create a distinction between a drum circle that functions as a recreational event and a drum circle—with a different name—that is an occasion for learning and developing proficiency on African drums and other percussion instruments deeply based in African traditions.

"Fundamentally, drum circles are disparate from the basic tenets of African drumming. Each group comes to the table with different expectations, and assumptions. Understanding and bridging that is where the 'intersection' will be found."

Arthur Hull wrote in a recent *Rhythm!Scene* article that recre-



Ed Mikenas: In African culture, dancing and drumming are one activity, each requiring the other.

ational drummers and culturally specific drummers are actually “two sides of the same coin”: “On my life’s rhythm journey, I not only discovered that the essence in one of those rhythm cultures was the seed of the other, but that each rhythmaculture had something that the other sorely needed. From one was the ability to explore and express rhythmical improvisation, and from the other was the understanding of basic fundamentals of music making.”

Given that there has always been a connection between drum circles and African drumming, that the social principles in African music correspond with philosophical concepts of drum circles, and that the characteristic practices of African music align with drum circles, it may be beneficial to selectively integrate African drumming into drum circles. The author hopes that the list of sample strategies for sharing African concepts in conjunction with the resources found in the bibliography will be helpful to facilitators who wish to make a direct connection to African drumming in some of their drum circles.

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