

“Express Yourself”:
Using Ghanaian Adinkra Symbols In Musical Compositions

Overview:

In this unit of study, you will discuss the significance of symbolism in the Ghanaian culture and make connections to your school and students' lives. Students will reflect on their own values and choose adinkra symbols that represent themselves as individuals or that represent their school in order to create short musical compositions that communicate who they are to the community.

Grades:

3rd-5th grade

Intended Content Area:

General Music

STEM & Language Arts Connections:

Using adinkra symbols as a form of non-traditional musical notation is a means of literacy and communication.

Essential Questions:

What's the importance of artistic expression?

What is symbolism?

How can culture and tradition create identity in a community?

In what ways are symbols used to express one's ideas, thoughts, or values?

Standard Alignment with NC Standards:

(while the standards listed below are for grade 3, you may adapt as needed for grades 4 and 5)

Performance Based Objective- Students will be able to

MU:Cr1.1.5a

Improvise rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic ideas, and explain connection to specific purpose and context (such as social, cultural, and historical).

MU:Cn11.0.3a

Demonstrate understanding of relationships between music and the other arts, other disciplines, varied contexts, and daily life.

MU:Re7.2.4a

Demonstrate and explain how responses to music are informed by the structure, the use of the elements of music, and context (such as social and cultural).

Learning Intention		Success Criteria
<p>“I am learning...”</p> <p>That symbols can be used to communicate</p>	<p>“I am learning it because...”</p> <p>Self expression is a basic human experience</p>	<p>“I know I have learned it because I can...”</p> <p>Create and perform a musical composition using symbols that represent my thoughts, ideas, and values</p>

Materials:

1. [Google Slides Presentation](#)
1. Spotify, youtube, or other music streaming service
2. [Adinkra Symbols & Meanings](#)
3. [Keetman’s Rhythmic Building Bricks Handout \(for manipulatives\)](#)

Duration:

2-3 days (50 minutes lesson each)

Preparation:

Key Concepts and Vocabulary for this unit

Key Concepts:

Connection - “How is it connected to other things?”

Perspective - “What are the points of view?”

Enduring Understandings

- Values, beliefs, and events contribute to a place’s identity
- There are various symbolic representations of culture and traditions
- People can communicate through the arts

Procedure:

Day 1

- Teacher plays the song “Express Yourself” by Charles Wright & The Watts 103rd Street Rhythm Band as the students enter and get settled in the classroom
[Charles Wright - Express Yourself \(Lyrics\)](#)
- Listen to the lyrics of the song and present the following questions
 - “What do you think it means to express yourself?”
 - “Why is it important to be able to express yourself?”
 - “What are different ways to express yourself?”

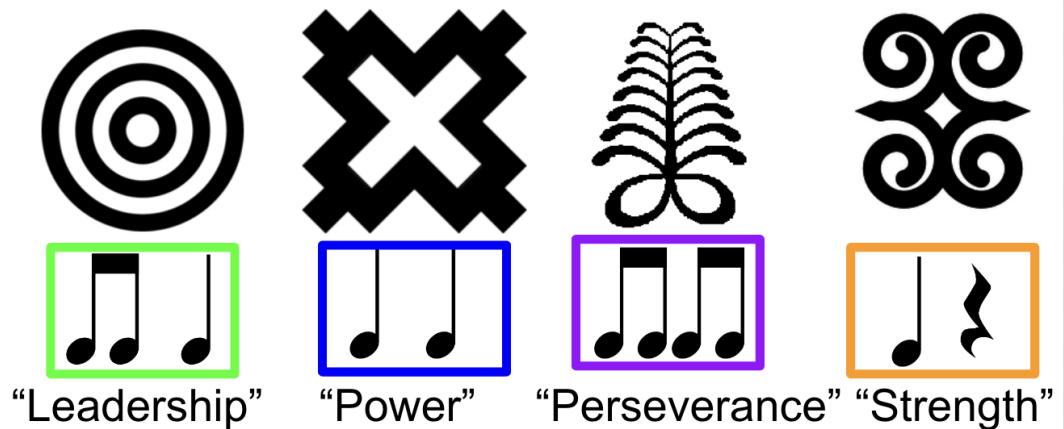
- Segway into a class discussion on symbolism
 - “What is symbolism?”
 - “Did you know that symbolism is a form of self expression?”
 - “What are examples of symbols that you know and how are they used?”
- Teacher posts definition of symbolism
- Show students examples of symbols in the Google Slides presentation. Ask students what they think the symbols represent
 - Example: peace sign, hand sign, and dove with an olive branch (peace)
 - Example: heart, red rose, sign language hand sign (love)
 - Example: smiley emoji, sunshine (happiness)
- Allow students to share examples that they are familiar with and create a list to display for review (additional examples may include: butterfly- represents change, yin yang- represents balance, etc.)

**more examples of symbols can be found [here](#)

- Introduce the idea to students that cultures around the world use symbols for different things.
 - Symbols can be colors, objects, or images that represent or stand for something else.
 - They can have a deeper meaning than what they look like on the surface.
 - There are symbols in everyday life
 - Symbols are used by individuals or groups of people
- Teacher introduces students to the Akan tradition of the adinkra symbols.
(Display images of adinkra symbols)
- Refer to the Google Slides presentation for images and descriptions on the historical stamping process for adinkra symbols
 - “What are these symbols and what do they mean?”
(Print handouts of symbol charts with their definitions for students to hold)
 - These symbols are proverbs in image form. They teach lessons on life, relationships, and human behavior.
 - One of the most recognizable symbols is called the sankofa (it has two forms) and it represents learning from the past
 - In Ghana, there are symbols everywhere. It is common to find adinkra symbols on art, buildings, fabrics, signs, and clothing.
 - Adinkra symbols are symbols that have been around for many years. Historically, they were a means of communication for the Ashanti subgroup of the Akan people.
- Explain to the students that they will be creating a class project. “As a class, we are going to choose adinkra symbols that represent our school and turn it into a visual and musical piece of art to express to our community who we are and what we stand for.”

- Discuss with the class some of the values of the school and/or student body.
 - Examples: IB learner profile, character traits, leadership qualities, positivity project character traits, and/or find keywords in the school’s mission statement or pledge
- As a class group project, select adinkra symbols that may represent the core values of your school and turn them into a musical composition
 - Choose 4-8 adinkra symbols with your students
 - Create word chains using the symbols as a visual representation
 - Turn those symbols into an ostinato pattern that can be performed rhythmically and played on body percussion
 - For example: if your class chooses the aya symbol (the fern), they can use the word “perseverance.” This would be performed with the rhythm of two pairs of eighth notes (ti-ti ti-ti).
 - The class would choose a body percussion (clapping, stomping, patting, snapping, etc.) to perform this word whenever the aya symbol is being used in the group composition
- Display the 4-8 adinkra symbols that the class selected with the word that represents it.
 - Example from Google Slides

Example:



- Have the students practice performing their body percussion as they say the word. Perform these words as a repeating ostinato pattern.
- After rehearsing the body percussion, select students to choose appropriate percussion instruments to transfer the rhythms to.
 - For example: perform the aya symbol (the fern) with the word “persistence” (ta ti-ti) on an unpitched percussion instrument.

- Decide as a class how this may be performed. Explore by rearranging the adinkra symbols in various patterns.
 - Show the students options for form and texture (layering sounds).
- Consider improvising a pentatonic melody on barred instruments using the ostinato patterns made from the adinkra symbols with a steady beat bordun or drum accompaniment

Day 2

- As the students enter the classroom for day two of the self expression project, the teacher plays the song “Express Yourself” by Charles Wright & The Watts 103rd Street Rhythm Band as everyone gets settled in the classroom
- Have the students turn and talk as a review of what they learned and planned last lesson
- Perform the class composition again and review the steps you took to create the composition
- Explain to the students that they will now have the opportunity to create their own small group or individual compositions choosing adinkra symbols that represent them.
 - Select adinkra symbols that resonate with them personally
 - Self reflection: students take time to think about their personal values and/or character. Allow them to choose 4 symbols that resonate with them
 - Choose one word to correspond with each adinkra symbol and figure out the rhythmic pattern of those words
 - The teacher may provide manipulatives with rhythm building bricks, vocabulary words, and adinkra symbols (
 - match the cards up with words and images to arrange their compositions
 - students may choose to repeat words/symbols in their composition
 - Allow time for students to create their own body percussion to be performed with the rhythm cards/adinkra symbols/vocabulary words
 - Transfer the body percussion unpitched classroom instruments
 - Decide the order to perform the symbols (what form? i.e. should the symbol patterns be layered or will students take turns)
- Provide ample time for small group collaborations and time to create and rehearse
 - Choice of expression:
 - creative/interpretive dance
 - using the adinkra symbols for notation
 - creating word chains as ostinato patterns

- Before each small group presentation, the class can echo teacher (after each line) the chant:

“Everywhere we go
 People want to know
 Who we are
 So we tell them
 We are the (school mascot)
 Mighty mighty (school mascot)”

- Perform the compositions in a rondo form where the chant above is the ‘A’ section and the small group presentations as the other sections

Day 3

- Finalize the performance with the adinkra symbols on display

Extensions:

- Consider collaborating with the art teacher in your school and have students recreate their symbols with ink printmaking on fabric or paper to be displayed with their musical compositions (body percussion and a QR code with the classroom performance)

<https://kidworldcitizen.org/adinkra-fabric-printing-from-ghana/>

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