

Headline: UMSL'S AFRICAN CULTURES LAB OFFERS STUDENTS
MEMORABLE, HANDS-ON INSIGHT\ DANCING AND MUSIC BRING HISTORY
ALIVE

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Body Text: Diadie Bathily swooped down and picked up the gently rounded bamboo tray and then began to dance with it. Wearing his traditional skirt, he leaped and kicked his legs and shook the woven tray.

Around him, the wide-eyed seventh-grade geography students of Kirby Junior High School watched. Later, they joined him on the dance floor as he shouted phrases in Jula, a west African language, and they responded, "Yo!" The performance was at the African Cultures Lab at the University of Missouri at St. Louis. Almost 3,000 elementary- and secondary-school students from throughout the metropolitan area have visited the Center for Human Origin and Cultural Diversity at the university. The center in Clark Hall includes the African Cultures Lab, which opened last May, and the Human Origin Lab, which opened in 1996.

Visitors such as the Kirby students say they feel as though they are traveling to another continent and through time - for a few hours anyway.

Bathily, whose name is pronounced JAH-jay BAh-chee-LEE, comes from the lush Ivory Coast. He spent a large part of his life in Mali, with its desert-like grasslands. The visiting dancer is an artist in residence at the culture lab.

As musicians pounded drums, Bathily showed the Kirby students a traditional dance that told a story of rice planting, harvesting and winnowing. He danced across a floor covered with tape that traced traditional family lines. Nearby on a wall was a poster of Mount Kilimanjaro and proud elephants in Tanzania. Bathily also teaches dance in the university's continuing-education department, and he choreographs for the St Louis African Chorus.

For the Kirby students, the pages of their textbooks seemed to come alive. Their teachers, Mike McLaughlin and Frank Smith, brought them to the lab in Black History Month so they could learn about the roots of many African-Americans and the contributions of Africa to diverse cultures.

"This is a great, active learning opportunity," McLaughlin said as he watched his students dance and clap to the pulsating rhythms of African drums and follow Bathily's steps. "They'll remember this 10 years from now. They'll probably remember it all of their lives."

McLaughlin, who chairs the social studies department at his school, said his students "learned how to grind corn, and they learned how people farm. They spoke Swahili and sang a Swahili song. They learned about African hunters." He praised the university for opening up the center to student groups.

Student groups can visit by appointment only on Wednesdays and Fridays. The week before the Kirby students visited, groups from Webster Groves and Normandy were there.

Arriving visitors receive make-believe passports and separate into groups. They get a glimpse of life in remote villages and life in high-tech industrialized cities, hear storytellers and learn to prepare food in traditional African ways and play rhythms on African cowbells, drums and shakers. The experience touches on math, science, geography, geology, archaeology, language, literature, music and dance.

Jacquelyn Lewis-Harris is director of the center. Before coming to the university, she worked at the St. Louis Art Museum for 10 years and was co-curator of the museum's recent Central African Art exhibition. A former Peace Corps volunteer and United Nations worker, the native St. Louisan, teacher and art historian has lived around the globe, in Papua New Guinea, in Liberia, in Arizona, where she worked with American Indians and Hispanics, and in urban classrooms in St. Louis and Boston.

With this center, Lewis-Harris said, "I want to reach most of the adults and students in the area. We need to be aware of other cultures. I want to help people see the common threads, and they'll learn more about themselves as people." Her experiences have taught her to see similarities among people of different cultures.

The Human Origin Lab displays the origins of humans in East Africa and subsequent migrations and biological diversity, says Lewis-Harris.

Lewis-Harris says she hopes to expand the center's outreach programs. "I would like to see a real interchange of ideas," she said.

She is assisted by a staff of three: Pam Ashmore, the associate director; Susanna Vaihinpaa of Finland; and Okonga Akura of Nairobi, Kenya; and about a dozen interns and volunteers.

On a typical day, visiting student groups such as the Kirby class will move from station to station at the cultures lab with their passports.

In the Nairobi living-room station, Okongo Akura of Nairobi talks about life in a large, urban center. He shows students slides of the city skyline and the interior of large luxury high-rise hotel. "It blows their stereotypes," Lewis-Harris said.

The living room has a telephone, television and boom box but also displays African maps and more traditional art and photographs. Akura teaches students a song and greetings in Swahili, originally a trade language mixing Persian and Arab words with Bantu.

"Jambo bwana," says Brittany West, 12, one of the Kirby students. She liked learning the traditional hello greeting.

From Nairobi, the student visitors travel 3,000 miles to Abidjan, Ivory Coast, just by walking to the next room. They visit a hunters' association's headquarters and hear stories about traditional male roles. Drums of all sizes and shapes fill a nearby corner; and in the next room, students learn to prepare food with mortars and ceramic pots and metal pots.

They also learn about cooperation and women's roles in the traditional culture. Inside a hut are blacksmith's tools. Flasks from Ghana in the shape of fish and other objects of art fill nearby shelves, and colorful, bright fabrics drape walls.

Lachona Thames, 13, a Kirby student, liked learning to grind corn. Natasha Ursery, 12, said that she was concerned that some people in Africa were still poor and added that she now appreciated her own modern conveniences more.

Dusty Revelle, 13, another Kirby student, was intrigued. "It was so exciting. I learned about everything about Africa, and I liked the dancing best," she added, while wiggling a step.