

# Community Arts for God's Purposes

## How to Create Local Artistry Together

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English

*Community Arts for God's Purposes: How to Create Local Artistry Together*

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# STEP 1

## MEET A COMMUNITY AND ITS ARTISTIC GENRES

Step 1 is discovering and describing a community and its arts. When you start to work with a community, observation (research) is very important. You want to find out as much as you can about the community and the community's arts. Art comes from its context, so knowing about a community will help you understand its art.

What community are you targeting? We define a community this way: a community shares a story of events, characters, and ideas that have occurred in its past. Everyone knows and can refer to the past events, characters, and ideas. These shared experiences give the community members a reason to keep gathering together. A community also shares an identity. Markers of this identity distinguishes the group from other communities. Identity markers may be language, food, dress, religion, or shared struggles. Communities also share interaction patterns. Examples of shared interaction patterns include rituals, festivals, family living quarters, visual and tactile symbols and patterns, and many more.

Communities share a story, an identity, and a way of interacting. But always remember that communities change. They are made up of individuals who come and go, make their own decisions, and respond differently to the many situations they encounter.

As you begin exploring your community, write down all your discoveries in one place. A Community Arts Profile (CAP) will help you do this. A Community Arts Profile (CAP) is a database or document where you keep all the information on the community and its arts (see pp. 51–53).

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## Take a First Glance at a Community

A quick look at a community will help you understand the context for developing and performing art. Art does not exist alone. Get initial information about the community's geographical location, language, identity markers, and communication methods.

Decide on the range of your research. Will you study one clan in a village, or everyone in a region who speaks the same language? Describe things from as many viewpoints as possible. The chart below is a question guide. You can get information in other ways, too:

- Ask friends, leaders, and other contacts from the community to show you other resources, including people.
- Read and observe how community members have presented themselves in books, articles, videos, recordings, and other media.
- Read academic research, encyclopedias, and other resources to see what others have said about the community.



**Write down a preliminary description of the community you want to work with. Include these topics: where they are; how many they are and what they are like; what story and identity they share; how the community has changed over time.**

**STUDYING THE COMMUNITY: SOME QUESTIONS TO ASK**

Where is the community and how many people comprise it? This includes basic information like village or town, province, and nation.

What ties the community together? Answers could include factors like language, geography, ethnic identity, and social structure.

How do they communicate with each other and how often? This question involves languages and modes of communication, such as face-to-face, telephone, and electronic social media.

How did they get there? Identify important historical events and patterns that have brought the community to its geographical location and affected its identity.

Figure 5. Studying the Community: Some Questions to Ask

## Take a First Glance at a Community's Arts

We help communities create from artistic resources that they already possess. Using resources already in existence is a core component of our approach. So one of the first things to do is to make a list of existing arts.

### Finding and recognizing artistic genres

Every community has a unique catalog of types of arts, and each community puts unique meanings on each type of art. Your categories of arts will probably not match those of any community you work with. So how do you find them? Fortunately, there are some common characteristics of arts around the world that help us in our research.

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The first commonality is that cultures often celebrate important events and transitions with artistic communication. Events to look at include life cycle and historical events, activities, ceremonies, and nature. If you can identify rituals and special events that exist in a community, you can find out about the arts that are associated with those events.

The second common feature of arts is that they are special kinds of communication that are more stylized than other kinds of communication. Notice when people move in special patterns (dance), sing, act, paint, speak with rhythms or rhymes, or do something in a special performance setting (like on a stage). These characteristics probably point you to artistic genres. The "Make a Quick List of Artistic Genres" activity uses these unique characteristics of arts to get started.

**HOW TO RECOGNIZE ARTISTIC COMMUNICATION ACTS**

**Arts may have a distinctive performance context**
The artistic event is set off from everyday occurrences by such things as time of day, place, language, participants, and so on.

**Arts may expand or contract the density of information**
Certain kinds of poetry, for example, convey a great deal in just a few words. Other forms of artistic expression expand the information through space, music, and repetition.

**Arts may assume more or special knowledge**
Sometimes terminology or alternative meanings of words are specific to a particular artistic genre.

**Arts exhibit special formal structure**
Artistic expressions are often limited by constraints of form which are not relevant to everyday communication.

**Arts may elicit unusual responses**
Artistic expressions often produce a strong emotional or physical response from people who experience them.

**Arts may require unusual expertise**
Artistic expressions often seem to take specialized training to perform; not everyone can do them.

Figure 6. How to Recognize Artistic Communication Acts



### Make a Quick List of Artistic Genres

To make an initial list of artistic genres, gather a few people from a community and ask them questions like this:

- When do people in this community sing? play instruments? dance? tell stories? act? carve? paint? use their bodies in unusual ways? play games? build special structures? Remember that each culture divides up and talks about its forms of artistic communication in unique ways, so learn its vocabulary.
- Do people in this community do anything special surrounding the birth of a child? someone's death? someone's passage from childhood to adulthood? For each affirmative answer, ask them to describe what special things happen and make note of the arts involved.

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Whenever an artistic genre comes up in discussion, jot down a few of the genre's basic characteristics:

- Local name and brief description
- People involved (men, women, youth, children, specialists, a particular socioeconomic group, etc.)
- When it's usually done (events, particular days, seasons, months, times of day, etc.)
- Connotations and associations (celebration, fertility, worship, death, etc.)
- Effects on participants (pride in identity; feelings of solidarity, lust, fear, or courage; motivation to act; remember life-crucial information, etc.)
- Institutions or organizations that are associated with the genre (church, government office, community group, club, etc.)

Don't worry about getting all the details while you're making a survey. You can add more information as you keep learning.



### Put Basic Facts About Genres into a Chart for Comparison

In Step 3, community members will evaluate each genre for use in reaching kingdom goals. This chart will help them do that. Start it now, then add more information as needed. Figure 7 shows a chart with data from Mono arts (DR Congo).

| Genre | Brief Description | Event | Participants | Connotations | Effects | Institutions |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| gaza aga | male circumcision dance | male circumcision rites | young men | war | teach to fight, give courage | Ngakoala—Mono judges |
| Nzembo na Nzambe | European hymns translated into Lingala | church meetings | church members | faith, belief, missionaries | solidarity | Protestant church |
| gbaguru | wisdom songs | private contexts | harp player/ singer, listeners | wisdom, counsel | motivation to act wisely | none |
| Nganga | songs for Zhugwa, god of the hunt | while hunting | Hunters | Zhugwa | give courage, hope for success | none |
| agbolo | children's game songs | where children play | Children | fun, freedom | pleasure, solidarity | none |

Figure 7. Sample Mono (DR Congo) Genre Comparison Chart

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## Start Exploring the Community's Social and Conceptual Life

Developing a broad understanding of the community is important, and a broad understanding of the community comes through anthropological study. Research topics especially helpful to understanding a community's arts include these: how people use languages; how they relate to each other in social groups, especially family; how people get what they need to live (for example, food, shelter, health, education); differences in status or power between people; religious beliefs and activities; and worldview. Wide research in these areas is beyond the scope of this manual. Learn to do this kind of research, or find somebody else who can.

## Continue Your Research

You will never completely understand all there is to know about a community, so you have to keep learning. Some of the best ways to learn have been developed by anthropologists, and you can learn how to do them. These include learning by watching while doing (participant-observation), by doing (learning an art foreign to you), by asking (interviews), by writing (note-taking), by capturing and viewing audio and video (recording), and by taking photographs. Find somebody to teach you these skills, through classes, books, or apprenticeship.

Finally, we want all our interactions with people to be guided by love. In all your research, be loving, humble, generous, and desire the best for your community.



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