

Nobuntu

Flynn Student Matinee Series Study Guide



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About the Artists

Hailing from Bulawayo, the second largest city in the southeastern African country of Zimbabwe, Nobuntu is an all-female vocal **quintet** (meaning five performers). Their music is performed mainly **a cappella**, without instruments accompanying their vocals. Their music combines traditional Zimbabwean songs with Afro jazz and gospel, creating a unique sound that has won the group international acclaim.



The Nobuntu quintet

While vocals are the group's main mode of expression, they also incorporate dance and traditional percussion instruments such as the **mbira** into their performances. The group was nominated for Best Musician of the Year at the Zimbabwe International Women Awards in London in 2015 and has performed at festivals and concerts around the world including in Italy, Austria, Germany, Belgium, Canada, the Czech Republic, and throughout Africa.

The word "Nobuntu" is a concept that roughly translates to "mother of humanity."

In the **Ndebele** language of Zimbabwe, the

prefix "no" means mother. Ubuntu is a common word in many southern African languages that means the goodness of humanity, encompassing kindness, love, and respect.

The traditional music genre the group performs is an a cappella style called **mbube**, which has historically been a male-dominated form of music. Nobuntu is the first all-female mbube group not only in Zimbabwe, but in the world.

In addition to performing and sharing their music, the group's mission is held in the belief that music can be an important vehicle for change, one that transcends racial, tribal, religious, gender, and economic boundaries. They host a number of community initiatives designed to empower and uplift women. In 2018 they launched the Nobuntu Pad Bank where they gather sanitary pads for young women in underprivileged communities. Based in their home city of Bulawayo, these banks started with a focus on providing free sanitary wear to female artists, and has expanded to reach schools and underserved communities. They also host Sisterhood Talks in which they mentor up-and-coming female artists, sharing advice and lessons they've learned throughout their journey. As group member [Duduzile Sibanda says](#), "working for girls is where our heart is."



Recipients of Nobuntu's pad bank at the Indlovu Youth Center in Bulawayo

Context: Zimbabwe



Zimbabwe is a country in southeastern Africa with a population of about 17 million people. Harare is its capital and largest city. The land-locked country shares borders with South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique, and Zambia.

Zimbabwe has 16 official languages, one of which is called Ndebele or isiNdebele (pronounced iss-SEEN-de-BELL-ay). This language includes a lot of vocal clicks – you can learn how to say the names for different body parts in Ndebele with the help of the Nobuntu vocalists at [this video here!](#) The Shona people are an ethnic group that makes up the majority of the population in Zimbabwe. Along with Ndebele and English, Shona is one of the most common languages spoken in the country.

The largest waterfall in the world is located in Zimbabwe! Called Mosi-oa-Tunya in the Bantu language, meaning “the smoke that thunders,” the waterfall is also known as Victoria Falls. At over a mile wide, it’s twice as wide and almost twice as tall as Niagara Falls! The sound of the

falls can be heard over 24 miles away. It’s one of the Seven Natural Wonders of the World.

Zimbabwe achieved freedom from colonial rule in 1980, making it the last African country to achieve independence from British colonization. The flag of Zimbabwe, which was adopted in 1980, has several components which hold political and cultural meaning. It has seven stripes of green, yellow, red, and black. Green represents agriculture and the rural areas of the country. Yellow represents the minerals in which Zimbabwe is rich, including gold, diamonds, and lithium. Red represents the blood that was shed during the wars fought in



Mosi-oa-Tunya, the largest waterfall in the world

the country's struggle for independence. Black represents the heritage and ethnicity of the country's Black majority. Also on the flag is a white triangle symbolizing peace, a red star symbolizing socialism and aspirations of freedom, and a golden bird known as the Great Zimbabwe bird, which is the national symbol of Zimbabwe.



The flag of Zimbabwe

Music & Dance Traditions of Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe has a rich tradition of music and dance, two art forms that are intertwined in the region. With many different ethnic groups and traditions in the country, there is a wide diversity of traditional music and dance.

Drums and percussion feature heavily in most traditional Zimbabwean music genres. You won't see drums in the Nobuntu performance, but you will see some smaller percussion instruments. These might include the **hosho** (shaker) and **magavhu** (leg rattle). You can see how the leg rattles are used in music and dance [in this video](#)!



A mbira, center, with two hosho shakers on each side

You'll also see the **mbira**, perhaps the most famous Zimbabwean instrument. These are played in the context of both religious ceremonies and secular entertainment. The mbira is a kind of thumb piano, made of 22-28 small metal keys mounted to a wooden soundboard and then often placed inside a large gourd to amplify the sound.

Most of the traditional music and dance from the country is linked to religious and spiritual traditions. Dances are also used to teach social values, share history, celebrate festivals, mourn, and connect with ancestors. Dance is almost always participatory, with spectators being invited to join in.

Nobuntu's music is in the lineage of the **Mbube** singing tradition, a kind of a capella choral singing whose name translates to "lion" in the Zulu language. Mbube is rooted in the call-and-response singing of the Zulu people, the largest ethnic group in the country of South Africa, which shares a border with Zimbabwe. This kind of singing is also **polyphonic**, meaning multiple independent melodies are sung at the same time.

A South African man named Solomon Linda is credited as the creator of the genre of Mbube. In 1939 he recorded a song called "Mbube," which eventually became known as "Wimoweh" as it spread through South Africa. The song had such widespread appeal that it led to the creation of the genre known as Mbube. Listen to [this original recording](#) – if you've seen the Disney movie The Lion King, you might recognize some elements of the song! Unfortunately, Solomon Linda and his band the Evening Birds unknowingly signed over the rights to their music when the band signed with the recording company that recorded "Mbube." Decades later, musicians in the Folk Revival movement in the U.S. began sharing their own versions of songs without giving context or credit to the original creators of the music. "Wimoweh" eventually caught the ear of American arranger and songwriter George Davis Weiss, who added new lyrics and called the song "The Lion Sleeps Tonight."



Solomon Linda (far left) and the Evening Birds

Ever since the genre was conceived, Mbube has remained a traditionally male musical genre. But Nobuntu is changing that. "Traditionally, when Mbube is happening, there will be 7-11 men performing on stage," says Nobuntu member Zanelle Manhenga. "Ten years ago we thought, *where are the girls that are doing Mbube?* Is it set in stone that Mbube should be done by men only?"



Nobuntu performing live

One of Nobuntu's songs is called **Cula** (the "c" is pronounced with a clicking sound) which means "sing" in Ndebele. Check out the [official music video here](#)! In this song, they invite listeners to sing whether happy or sad, because music is always good for us.

In Zimbabwean music, singing is always accompanied by dance! The song Cula is accompanied by a traditional Ndebele dance called **Isitshikitsa** (ee-see-CHEE-gee-CHA). This dance is ceremonial, and was originally performed for the king and during a rainmaking ceremony held during seasons of drought. Today, it's performed at social gatherings and weddings, and is accompanied by clapping and **ululation**, a high-pitched trilling vocal sound resembling a howl.



Umkhathi Theater Works

[Get a glimpse at this dance](#) as performed by Umkhathi Theater Works, a Zimbabwean performing arts ensemble. The dancers wear traditional Ndebele attire, including impala skin and **imisisi**, waist aprons made of animal skin.

Another traditional Ndebele dance is called **Muchongoyo**, a war dance historically performed by men in

preparation for war or upon returning victorious. The signature movement is stamping on the ground, accompanied by dramatic gestures, and it's typically performed with a stick and a shield. Umkhathi Theater Works has [a video of this dance](#) as well!

Learn more about traditional Ndebele and Shona dances [here](#)!

Reflection Questions

Here are some example questions to prompt deeper engagement from your students, both before and after the show:

Before the Show:

- Have you ever been to a theater before? What are some ways an audience is expected to behave in a theater that are different from how you behave in other places you go for entertainment, like a movie theater?
- When you think about Zimbabwe, what comes to mind? Do you have any expectations about Zimbabwean music or cultural traditions?
- What do you think music is capable of doing? Can it tell a story? Can it make you feel? Can it be a tool for activism or social change? How do you think it can or can't do those things?

After the Show:

- How did the show make you feel? Was there a specific moment when it caused an emotional reaction in you? How did it do that? What did the show make you think about?
- If you were to write a review of the show, what would you say? What stood out to you? Would you recommend it to other people? Why?
- Now that you've seen the show, what do you think music is capable of doing? Has your answer changed?
- What percussion instruments did you see? How did they add to the experience of the show?
- How did dance or movement play a role in the show?

Resources

- [Lincoln Center's #ConcertsForKids: Nobuntu](#)
- [Nobuntu Brings the Sounds of Zimbabwe to University of Wyoming](#)
- [Meet Zimbabwe's Mothers of Mbube](#)
- [Isitshikitsha: A Traditional Ndebele Dance](#)
- [Traditional Music in Zimbabwe](#)
- [The Mbira Instrument](#)
- [Bira Dance at Great Zimbabwe](#)
- [Cula Music Video \(Nobuntu\)](#)
- [Muchongoyo Dance](#)
- [Decolonizing the Music Room: Mbube](#)