Black history exhibit helps instill African cultural identity

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A piercing African drumbeat sounded and a dozen children gathered around the hollow, log-shaped object.

Boom! Boom!
The sound got louder and louder as more children stooped to pound the smooth wooden "talking drum," as it's called.

"Hello; listen," the drum is saying, Alice Maw, assistant director of the LSU International Student Office told the children.

The drum was one of the louder attractions Saturday at an all-day black history celebration at the Bluebonnet Regional Library, which featured African artifacts, African foods and African head-wrapping and hair-braiding sessions.

The kids who gathered around the "talking drum" learned that natives from Zaire sound the drums to call people to town meetings from as far as 13 miles away.

The event helped to inspire a sense of cultural identity in the adults and children who attended, but it also pointed out the gulf of differences that lie between cultures in Africa and life in the local African-American community.

Eleven-year-old Billy Raymond wondered how African villagers manage to keep the huge woven baskets of food on their heads.

As it turned out, the trick is to place a woven, disk-shaped ring of fabric on top of the head and steady the basket on that.

"Geography comes alive to children when they see things they can touch and feel to give them a concept of who they are," said Maw, who grew up in Zaire.

The braiding and head-wrapping session taught Linnie Bourgeois Raymond a few lessons in styling black hair.

"We used to do a lot of hair-braiding coming up and the Africans do it similarly to the way we did it," she said.

She learned, too, that hair-weaving and hair extensions are ideas that originated in Africa.

Khadija Mohammed of Nigeria spent most of her morning teaching the women hair braiding and how to make head-wrappings. Three dozen braids take about two hours.

"It's as natural for us to go with a head wrapping as it is for people here to go without them," she said.

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—Khadija Mohammed
For the past year, Mohammed said she's noticed more black women and men wearing African attire that reflects their ancestry.

"Black Americans need to know Africa more than they do," she said. "They perceive Africa differently than what it really is."

Some perceive Africans as uncivilized people who walk around nude carrying sharp spears.

"But growing up in Nigeria, I lived in a brick house, with a stereo and a TV," said Mohammed, debunking that myth.

"When I first came to Baton Rouge five years ago, people thought I didn't even know how to use an oven," she said. "When you come here they think you don't know anything about modern life."

Viewing African exhibits and talking to African natives can help black Americans correct some of those misconceptions, Mohammed said.

Even food helps to bridge some of the cultural gaps, she said.

Pepper fish soup was on the day's menu for people curious about West African food dishes.

They also learned that some things are the same in both cultures.

In America, the dish would be called "yummy," which is an expression derived from the Nigerian language.

The day ended with lectures on African names, African languages and a parade of African dress and dance, all part of ongoing black history month observances.