

IKO IKO – Trad Creole (New Orleans)

Arr. B. Farmer

Verse 1

F **C**
My grandma and your grandma were sittin' by the fire.
C
My grandma told your grandma:
F
"I'm gonna set your flag on fire".

Chorus:

F
Talkin' 'bout, hey now (hey now*) hey now (hey now*)
C
Iko, iko, I nay¹
C **F**
Jockamo feeno ai nané, Jockamo fee nané²

Verse 2

F **C**
"Look at my king all dressed in red, iko, iko, unday
C
I betcha five dollars he'll kill you dead"
F
Jockamo fee nané

Chorus

Verse 3

F **C**
My flag boy to your flag boy, were sittin' by the fire,
C
My flag boy told your flag boy
F
I'm gonna set your tail on fire.

Chorus

Verse 4

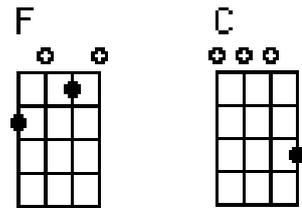
F **C**
See that guy all dressed in green, iko, iko, unday
C
He's not a man, he's a lovin' machine
F
Jockamo fee nané

Chorus

Repeat 1st verse

Chorus

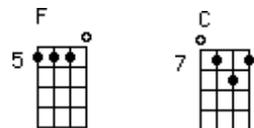
Root position chords



Simplified chords



'Up the neck chords'



¹ Iko Iko I nay is Swahili for "It is mine". In other words – I'm talking about your flag and it is mine!

² This means – "I'm serious" or "Don't mess with me" in the language of some Native American tribes from the New Orleans area (there were many).



Teaching notes for Iko Iko

History; Celebrations; Language (Reading English and MFL); Citizenship (Getting along, Multiculturalism, Race, Competition, Immigration, Emigration); Art and Design.

It's always worth sharing contextual information with the kids – primary school teachers in particular love it, finding uses for the information in their broader curriculum (see the above list), or for hot-topic assemblies. You could try using it as a starting place for **writing a class song** based on team rivalries or whatever fits. Some versions of the song use the lyrics “*My black boy and your black boy; sitting by the fire*” – why not pass on to the classroom teacher to discuss with the young musicians.

You could discuss the idea of ‘cover songs’ or ‘versions’:

1965 Dixie cups (the most famous version): <https://youtu.be/0wNSHPQj0W8> (useful video)

1972 Dr John version: <https://youtu.be/qkX6JUXekXY>

1981 Greatful Dead version: https://youtu.be/Eib7oxEo_og

2001 Captain Jack version (probably don't show video): https://youtu.be/5_8lifQjYuI

Iko Iko is an old song dating back to the earliest Mardi Gras events in the colonial city of New Orleans. New Orleans was a melting pot for many different cultures including primarily the 15 or more Native American tribes of the area, many West African slaves and former slaves and French and British colonists.

This melting pot of cultures gave rise to many language variations and a lack of education in the area meant that lyrics like “Iko Iko I nay” were probably phonetic misspellings of the more common West African phrase “Aiko Aiko I nay”, meaning “It is mine” or “It is I”. The mixture of cultures also gave rise to the Mardi Gras event, where different ‘tribes’ of ‘Indians’ (probably so named due to their mimicry of the Native American ceremonial clothing), compete to become the best ‘tribe’ in the carnival. There are currently around 36 ‘tribes’, who proudly wave their tribal flags at the head of the procession. There is a great deal of rivalry between them and it is this battle that the song describes.

Playing the music

This is a great first song for new players – there's a sense of achievement in being able to play two chords and a full song at the end of a one hour session. I've never found a class (including special needs and early years) who were unable to manage this song. Parents often know the song – it's been used for loads of adverts over the years.

Here are some ideas that I've found useful:

1. To make the rivalry in the lyrics stand out when teaching the song it is sometimes a good idea to split the class in half so that they sing alternate verses, whilst the others can focus primarily on playing the two chords.
2. Make full use of the ‘**call and response**’ in the chorus by making young musicians lift the ukuleles with their chording hand as if brandishing a weapon on ‘hey now’ (body side downwards, like in the image on the right). This **looks great** and helps the players enjoy the ‘battle’ nature of the song (**context and meaning**), whilst also subtly forcing them to get the hang of **holding the instrument** quickly and finding a comfortable position for it – they will be lifting and **adjusting the uke** ten times in the course of one time through this song! I also find that they **learn the two chords faster**, having to find that chord immediately as they lower the ukulele back to a playing position.
3. The **strumming hand** for this song works well as a simple **down-strum** pattern of fours or twos, helping the young musicians learn to count in beats and understand bars; getting their heads around what feels comfortable. There's plenty of opportunity to **differentiate** upwards or downwards as they progress (play the harder chords, using x rhythm or play the simplified chords playing on beat one of each one as they come in – giving plenty of time to get ready for the next one).
4. Chords written above the lyrics really help the young musicians to find their place more quickly and easily than bars and beats, which can easily be introduced once they've got the hang of strumming in time.

