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VISUAL AND VERBAL ARTS OF THE AKAN AND TRANSMISSION TO AFRICAN-AMERICAN CULTURE



Chief's crown, 20th-century, Baule people, Côte d'Ivoire, black velvet, wood, gold-leaf, 3¼ by 7 inches.

The Birmingham Museum of Art. Gift of Ellen and Fred Elsas.

VISUAL AND VERBAL ARTS OF THE AKAN AND TRANSMISSION TO AFRICAN-AMERICAN CULTURE

BY EMILY HANNA AND PAULA EUBANKS

INTRODUCTION

The visual and verbal arts of the Akan people of West Africa are closely linked. Art objects instruct Akan people how to live through symbols that refer to proverbs or other wise sayings. Art in the United States communicates cultural wisdom, too. We can better understand the Akan and American cultures by examining and comparing the role that the arts play in communicating wisdom in both cultures. Art of African-Americans presents a rich source of examples to make the comparison with art of the Akan peoples. Such art is distinctly American, yet because of its ties to the West African culture, it helps us make comparisons and see cultural links through art.

In this instructional resource, which is designed for middle school students, we compare values of Akan and African-American cultures and works of art that embody these values. Activities and questions help students discover similarities and differences in symbols and their meanings, in cultural wisdom and how it is expressed, and in ways that values are communicated through the visual arts.

About the Akan People

The Akan people live in the southern coastal region of West Africa, in the present-day countries of Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire. This region was named "Gold Coast" and "Ivory Coast" by foreign traders because of the abundance of those precious substances found in the area. The word *Akan* is the name of a language family and a broad culture that includes many ethnic groups, such as the Ashanti, Fante, Baule, and others.

Many West African cultures prior to colonization, including the Akan, were primarily oral in their communication. In oral cultures, history, literature, poetry, and proverbs are memorized and recited, and great emphasis is placed on the capacity to speak eloquently and truthfully. An educated Akan person is expected to learn many proverbs and be capable of offering a fitting and

helpful saying in any situation. Akan artworks are decorated with visual symbols that refer to proverbs and can be "read" much like a written text. Akan symbols and sayings remind people how to live, see, love, work, and worship according to the ancient wisdom of their culture.

QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

The Akan communicate their collective wisdom and cultural values through their proverbs. Proverbs are also prevalent in the United States and encapsulate values in our society. Many proverbs come from the Bible, and some seem to have evolved from popular wisdom such as, "When life hands you lemons, make lemonade." Other proverbs have authors such as Benjamin Franklin who said "A penny saved is a penny earned"; H. Jackson Brown, Jr. who said "You can't stuff a great life into a small dream"; and

John F. Kennedy who said “Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country.” Some proverbs have origins in the many cultures that make up the United States, such as the Japanese saying “Good critic—bad worker.”

Make a list of proverbs and analyze them. How many of these refer to consequences? How many involve comparisons? How many describe attitudes? How many do you think offer questionable advice? Do any of them have visual symbols that communicate the meaning of the proverb? Who creates proverbs? Select a proverb and write a song or poem that communicates the message. Create a symbol that is a reminder of the proverb.

Proverbs are often about consequences. Using one of those proverbs, make a fold book or draw a comic strip that explains the proverb in terms of cause and effect without explicitly stating the proverb. Trade these books and match them with the proverbs they illustrate.

About the Akan Crown

Chief's crown, 20th-century, Baule people, Côte d'Ivoire
Black velvet, wood, gold-leaf
3 1/4 x 7"

The Birmingham Museum of Art: Gift of Ellen and Fred Elsas

Most Akan groups, including the Baule, are governed by kings and chiefs. This traditional form of leadership today co-exists with the leadership provided by the legislative, judicial, and executive branches of government in those countries. In both the past and present, much Akan royal art consists of gold, is decorated with gold ornaments, or is wrapped in gold-leaf. Gold (*sika*) is a substance associated with the power and warmth of the sun, as well as the souls of human beings. Because kings and chiefs are actually considered earthly counterparts to the sun, their presence is always accompanied by impressive displays of gold, in the form of jewelry, crowns, clothing ornaments, staffs, swords of state, fly whisks, fans, and even gold dust, which is worn as a cosmetic.

This crown is made of black velvet and adorned with wooden emblems covered in gold leaf. The artist is unknown to us, but would have been well known in his community. The crown was worn by a chief, who is considered the intermediary between the human realm and the invisible domain of deities, spirits, and ancestors. The top of a chief's head is an important physical point of contact between worlds, and as such is adorned with head wear that display symbols referring to his or her power and strength. Some of the crown's emblems include hands, single horns, and royal shields, all of which refer to the chief's will and ability to protect his people. The front of the crown depicts a mask of a human face framed by two crescent moons. The mask refers to the chief's connection to the ancestors, and

the moons are feminine symbols alluding to recurring cycles and faithfulness. The crown is topped by an elephant, an Akan symbol of force and intelligence. There are countless proverbs related to elephants, including “When an elephant steps on a trap, it does not spring.”

About the African-American Head Wrap

Adisa Orido, United States, Georgia (Atlanta), 1999
Sized rayon fabric made of plain and metallic yarns;
12-18" x 12-18" x 12-18"
dimensions of the flat fabric, 24" x 60"
Anonymous collection

This elaborate head wrap was made by Adisa Orido. The wrap is made of very stiff Nigerian fabric manufactured especially for this purpose and shaped into its sculptural form with pins and sizing, a kind of starch that is used to make fabric stiff. Sometimes the insides of head wraps like this one are stuffed with fabric or paper to help the wraps keep their shape and volume. Head wraps such as these are inspired by wraps worn by African women; however, they are now worn by African-American women and women throughout the world who appreciate African fashion, style, and artistry. Women may pin or tie their own wraps, or for a very important event, go to a specialist like Adisa Orido who may spend hours shaping the head wrap. Because the sizing may be washed out, the wrap can be restyled at any time. For Africans and Africans in the diaspora, hats and head wear establish a unique sense of style and individuality, as well as identity. Women who chose to wear Afro-centric clothing are celebrating their African roots and showing pride in their cultural heritage. Also other kinds of hats that African-American women wear to church indicate their status, or desire for status, in the community, just as the crown indicates the status of the Baule chief.

QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

Head dress is important to Akan, African-American, and to many other cultural groups in the United States. There are many ways in which our hair and our hats signal who we are and what we value. Hats can have variable meanings such as baseball caps, worn by baseball players and fans. Turn the baseball cap around, and it communicates a different attitude. Make an illustrated list of hats and hairdos that people wear in our culture to communicate something about themselves and tell what meanings are attached.

What are some symbols in our culture that, like the elephant in the Akan, stand for force, strength, intelligence? In what ways is the meaning that people in the United States attach to elephants similar to meanings expressed by the Akan? In what ways is the meaning different? What are some animal symbols seen in the United States, and what meanings are attached to them?



African-American head wrap, United States, Georgia (Atlanta). Artist: Adisa Orido. Date: 1999. Sized rayon fabric made of plain and metallic yarns; 12-18 inches by 12-18 inches by 12-18 inches, dimensions of the flat fabric, 24 by 60 inches. Anonymous collection.



Asafo Flag; Fante people; Lowtown, Ghana. Artist: Kweku Kakanu, circa 1940. 3 feet, 3 inches by 5 feet, 6 inches. Cotton cloth, cotton embroidery floss, machine stitched, hand stitched, pieced, fringed, appliquéd, embroidered. Photograph courtesy of Eric Robertson.

About Asafo Flags

Artist: Kweku Kakanu, Fante people; Lowtown, Ghana, circa 1940. 3'3" x 5'6"

Cotton cloth, cotton embroidery floss, machine stitched, hand stitched, pieced, fringed, appliquéd, embroidered. Photograph courtesy of Eric Robertson

This flag was made for a Fante men's organization, called Asafo. Asafo companies evolved from traditional warrior groups who were not part of the ruling family. Asafo companies serve as an important balance to the power held by the king or chief and also address the religious, political, and social concerns of their communities, much like U.S. civic organizations such as Rotary or Kiwanis. These flags appear in parades where they are incorporated into choreographed performances or displays by specially trained flag-bearers, and they are also used to adorn Asafo shrines. The flags are decorated with images referring to the power, courage, and strength of the company members. Each company holds exclusive rights to certain motifs, colors, and patterns, all of which refer to proverbs.

This flag depicts an elephant with its trunk wrapping around a palm tree. A bird is perched on a branch of the tree, and a man holding scales and a knife stands beside the tree. The small flag in the upper left corner is the British flag, which is called the "Union Jack." Asafo flags evolved during the colonial period in Ghana, and the Union Jack indicates that this flag was made while Ghana was still a British colony. Doran Ross, a U.S. scholar who has studied Akan symbolism, suggests that there are many layers of meaning in this flag's imagery. The elephant, an ancient symbol of power and strength among the Akan, was also adopted as a colonial emblem by the British, and appeared on crests of trading companies and special staffs given to chiefs who held positions of authority in the colonial government. Proverbs that refer to elephants and palm trees include "Only the elephant can uproot the palm tree," and "Since the elephant could not defeat the palm tree, he made friends with it." According to Ross, in the Asafo flag the man holding the scales is weighing the strength of the elephant versus the tree.

About the Harriet Powers Quilt

Pictorial quilt, United States, Georgia (Athens) 1885-1898; Harriet Powers, (American, 1837-1911)

Pieced, appliquéd, and printed cotton, embroidered with plain and metallic yarns. 69" x 105"

Bequest of Maxim Karolik

Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA.

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The artist who made this quilt is Harriet Powers, an African-American woman who was born into slavery in Athens, Georgia, on October 29, 1837. Historical records show that by 1870 she had been freed and was married with three children. Mrs. Powers probably learned quilting while still living on a plantation and then continued the art form on her own once she was free. She made the quilt using a technique called *appliqué*, which means that the figures on the quilt are cut out and sewn onto a whole cloth, rather than being pieced and sewn together. This is the same technique used to create Fante Asafo flags and other traditional textiles in Ghana and neighboring West African countries.

The style of Powers's quilt is similar to *appliqué* textiles made along the coast of West Africa, but the imagery on her quilts is different. Her images are largely based on biblical stories that she may or may not have been able to read. Powers was born at a time when it was illegal for her to learn to read and write. Nevertheless, she communicated her values and beliefs through visual images. Some biblical scenes from the quilt include Jonah being swallowed by a whale and the serpent being lifted up by Moses. She also reported remarkable historical events of her time through pictures. For example, she reported falling stars on November 13, 1833, and that a hog named Betts ran 500 miles from Georgia to Virginia. Powers explained the meaning of the images to a woman named Jennie Smith, who bought the quilt and recorded Powers's words. Quilting is an art form brought to the Americas along with the first European colonists. African-American women first began to practice the art of quilting under duress during slavery when they were required to make quilts for their masters. They also made quilts for their own families and continued to make quilts as free women. They added distinctive elements of form, style, and content that may have been based in their memory of African textile arts.

QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

The Powers quilt is very special because we know about the artist, about her life, and the stories she told in her work. Do you have any quilts in your family that have written histories to go along with them? Are there people you could interview about the quilts in your family? What kinds of questions would you ask?

It is unlikely that either Powers or the maker of the flag could have predicted that their work would one day be in a museum. What kinds of things do people make today for practical purposes that might one day be exhibited in museums as works of art? What qualities would an object need to have to be on your list of possibilities?

Asafo flags are made for and used by particular groups or clubs. Who has flags in the U. S., and how are they used? Make a list of all the different flags you can think of in your community. What kinds of symbols are on them?

ASSESSMENT

The objective of this instructional resource is to better understand the Akan culture as well as our own. The following activities could be carried out in large or small group discussions by making charts that visually organize student responses. On the chart, make a column for the Akan and another for the United States. Answer the following questions: How do people in the Akan cultures and the United States communicate their wisdom and cultural values? In what ways do people in both cultures use art to communicate cultural values? Similarities could be highlighted in one color, differences in another.

Emily Hanna and Paula Eubanks are assistant professors of art history at Georgia State University. The authors wish to thank Elizabeth Daugherty for her information about proverbs.

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Pictorial quilt, United States, Georgia (Athens) 1885-1898; Harriet Powers, (American, 1837-1911). Pieced, appliquéd, and printed cotton, embroidered with plain and metallic yarns, 69 inches by 105 inches.
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