

African Masquerades: Art and its Importance in African Cultures

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Overview

Arsenal Middle School is an urban comprehensive middle school in the Pittsburgh Public School system. The majority of the students are African American. The goal of the Pittsburgh Public Schools is to provide academic rigor in all subject areas and to improve academic progress for all students. As a visual arts instructor, teaching sixth, seventh and eighth grade students, I try to use the visual arts as reinforcement for all other academic areas. Therefore, within this curriculum you will find activities relating to language arts, math, social studies, science, technology, and music. All of the activities will relate to the academic subject area as it interacts with the visual arts. In the past, I have done co-curricular units and have found scheduling problems to be difficult to work through. If scheduling would not be a problem in your academic situation I feel it is beneficial to work with another academic teacher and cooperate on this unit. I chose to work with the social studies teacher since Africa is part of the seventh grade social studies curriculum. I will present this curriculum to the pre-scholars class in our seventh grade. In my prior co-curricular unit it worked best to choose one class to participate due to field trip expenses and chaperones. Although this curriculum is designed for seventh grade it can easily be adapted to other educational levels. This unit works well with social studies because of the importance of art as a visual record of societies, cultures, and history.

Information will be given on the African tradition of masquerades and their purposes in traditional African cultures. This curriculum will focus on the historical, social, political, and spiritual aspects of the African cultures and what the masquerades of Africa can teach us about their cultures. The African mask and the masquerade will be the central focus of this curriculum. Students will study the ancient traditions of mask making, understanding the role or function of masks in African cultures, create instruments and participate in class projects.

Rationale

I want to teach this unit because the majority of my students are African American and this is part of their heritage and history. They are also adolescents and the masquerades were very important in African cultures as a transition from adolescence to adulthood. I want the students to relate to this process of becoming an adult in Africa and how it relates to them today. What types of ceremonies and transitions do they participate in to become adults in their culture today? How do they honor their ancestors? What are their spiritual beliefs and how do they compare to the African cultures? What types of interdependence do they have with their community and their environment? African art represents the ideals of African societies. Africa is a continent where generalizations are difficult to make, but many similarities exist between the cultures. African cultures are filled with ceremonies, initiations, celebrations and spiritual events that utilize masquerades and this is the similarity that will be explored in this curriculum. There is little written history within the African cultures themselves. The African people have kept their cultural traditions and beliefs alive through their art, myths, legends, folktales, rituals, prayers, proverbs, and songs. I stress to my students the idea of visual arts as a record of historical events, cultural beliefs, and social customs. We discuss comparisons between their life and what we can discover about the African cultures through their masks and masquerades. I ask my students how they keep their family traditions alive. How are their traditions and family history passed on to future generations within their own families? The more I can relate what we are studying to their life the more motivated they are to learn about it.

In African cultures masquerades are used to assist adolescents to become responsible adults, to foster good health and well-being, to assist the elderly in preparation for death, to spiritually link the living with the dead, sustain food supplies, and to teach interdependence between the environment and the community. In traditional Africa these teachings are passed from the elderly to the young. The masks and costumes are made to embody the spirits, and most African cultures believe the dancer becomes the spirit, needed to promote an interdependent society. This interdependence is with each other, the environment, and the spirits of their ancestors.

The facial characteristics of African masks show astonishing diversity. Despite this fact, they also show many similarities. Masks can be distinguished by the following characteristics: naturalistic (Negroid) features, idealized human features, frightening expressions, abstract features (semi-abstract or highly-abstract), animal features or a combination of animal and human features, and

superstructures. Masks with Negroid features are rare, because the artist's goal was not to duplicate reality, but to provide a place for the spirit. Masks with idealized features or stylized humanistic images are impersonal and usually do not express any human emotions. Masks with frightening expressions were used to embody or repulse malevolent spirits, as in exorcism, and some were used in plays as a comic gesture. Sometimes the abstract forms used for masks were symbolic or refer to their religion. In some cultures the oral repetition of myths describing supernatural powers of animals was what inspired the creation of animal masks. These masks were used in ceremonies to help the African people acquire the strengths of various animals. Again, these rituals reinforce the idea of the interdependence of humans and nature. Often hunters wore animal masks of the animals they killed. This mask would capture the animal's spirit and allow the hunter to control it. The masks that are a combination of animal and human features express the strong fusion between man and animal. The combination of human and animal features in a mask also may represent creatures from out of this world.

There are many superstructure masks with human and/or animal features at the top. Some other types of superstructures are hairstyles, either carved or using actual hair, or additions of fiber, twigs, and cloth. Animal spirit masks associated with powerful animals, such as the hawk, buffalo, and crocodile that live near traditional villages are used to employ these spirits to help and protect the culture. The buffalo-masked dancers of the Nuna culture in Burkina Faso perform at market days, funerals, and initiations to gain the buffalo's protection and blessings. The buffalo mask both threatens and protects. These masks are generally stylized with large round protruding eyes, surrounded by concentric circles. There is a characteristic short triangular shaped snout and the entire surface is covered in geometric patterns. This masquerade is accompanied by drummers and is performed in front of a large audience. The masker begins motionless looking into the distance, suddenly the dancer moves forward stomping his feet and violently shaking his head up and down in defiance of danger. This performance in front of a large audience is how the Nuna families and clans honor the powerful animal spirits in their world and gain their protection and blessings.(1)

Another animal mask of the Nuna culture is the swooping hawk mask. This hawk mask is carved from wood. The geometric pattern on the wings refers to the culture's moral principles. The zigzag lines around the face signify the "path of the ancestors" a difficult moral path that all people must follow if they are to succeed in life. The checkerboard pattern represents ignorance and knowledge, dark and light. Following the rhythm of the drummers the masker

dances in swoops rotations imitating the flight of the hawk. Again the masquerade is done for the hawk's blessing and protection.(2)

A transformation takes place when a mask is worn. The masker becomes the spirit of the mask. The costumes for the masquerades are made of leaves, cloth, beads, raffia and sometimes wood. The idea is to completely hide the identity of the masker. When the masker is in costume he loses his identity and becomes the spirit of the mask. Masquerades are often symbols of the spiritual forces that validate the acts of the elders. They serve as visible expressions of a spiritual force or authority that validates the basic beliefs of a society, and reinforces acceptable social modes of conduct and symbolizes the spiritual authority that eradicates social evils. The costumes can be quite complex and sometimes very heavy and hot. Maskers need to be very strong and agile to perform in many of these costumes. An Igbo mask from the lower Nigeria area weighs over two hundred pounds. It is constructed of wood and covered in multicolored cloth. It can be as high as sixteen to eighteen feet tall and have a diameter of seven to eight feet. This mask combines most of the important symbols of the Igbo culture. This masquerade was usually performed in traditional Igbo cultures at the funerals of exceptionally well-respected, wealthy and titled men.(3)

There are many things we can learn about African societies from the many different masks and masquerades. We know they are used to celebrate initiations from youth to adulthood. The Yaka people from the Democratic Republic of the Congo make several masks for initiation ceremonies. One of these masks called Ndeemba has an upturned nose, is bell shaped, surrounded by a large raffia coiffure, and it is crowned with a projecting disc and decorative extensions tied together at the top. The initiation leader wears this mask during the initiation rites and it is meant to represent the ancestors who began the initiation ceremonies. These masquerades are used to teach lessons to the initiates about life and fertility. These masks also symbolize solar, lunar, and earthly forces of fertility. The circle around the face represents the course of the sun in the sky. The fertilization of the earth is symbolized by the upturned nose. The projecting disc and the bulging eyes signify the lunar cycle and the new and full moon.(4)

Some African cultures use masks in dances and ceremonies to seek the help of the bush spirits. These spirits may help to control the weather, the growing of crops and supplying food. An example of this would be the Baule from Côte d'Ivoire, whose trance diviner dances to invoke the bush spirit to help him determine the future or solve a problem. Some African societies honor women for their beauty and fertility with masks representing strength, the joy of living, love of beauty and their attachment to their customs. Although in most traditional African cultures women do not participate in the masquerades they are

honored in many. The Gelede headdress of the Yoruba culture is used to mark life events or to enlist the aid of the deities. This performance honors the “Mother of All” who has the power over life and death. She gives all that her children need to survive through nature and can also take it away through environmental hazards. Peace and happiness on earth are the ultimate goals of this performance. The Gelede headdress is usually danced in pairs emphasizing the dualism present in the Yoruba cosmology. Even numbers in many African cultures symbolize the positive or the tranquil.(5)

The strong antelope mask of the Dogon people of Mali is the symbol of the hard-working farmer. The antelope is admired for its beauty, strength, and courage. These masquerades are performed by a society of maskers called Awa, composed of young men who perform at funerals and end-of-mourning ceremonies to chase the departed spirits into the wild bush outside the village.(6)

Masquerades demonstrate the spirituality of the African people. They create masks to represent their ancestors and keep their spirits with them to guide them. Many African masks are used to honor rulers. These masks are made with cowrie shells, beads, leopard skins, and fabric to signify the importance, wealth and power of the ruler. Masks that portray rulers are often buried with the king. African masquerades are also used for healing. The noble elder masquerades are used to bring prosperity to the village.

Many African masks are icons of power, such as the helmet mask, Pumba, which is worn by the chief of the Pende people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and is considered the most dangerous. This mask symbolized the chief’s power to execute criminals and make war. This demonstrates the political and legal aspects of the masquerades in African society. Another chief’s mask, the Kipoko mask, the wise protector and healer, is the most popular of the Pende people. In contrast to the fearsome Pumba mask, the Kipoko shows the nurturing and protective powers of the chief. This mask has large eyes, ears and nose signifying the chief’s ability to see and hear everything and to “smell out” sorcerers in his community. The very small mouth gives the idea that the chief should be slow to speak and that hasty words could cause problems. People come to this performance to kneel before the chief and be healed. The elephant mask of the Bamileke People of Cameroon is worn by the powerful members of the Kuosi regulatory society. This society includes members of royalty, wealthy title holders, and ranking warriors of the Bandjourn kingdom of western Cameroon. This bead embroidered cloth has a long front and back panels. There are two large circular ears attached to the head. The lavish use of colored beads displays the wealth of the society. The colors and patterns express the society’s cosmic and political functions. Black signifies the relationship between the living and the dead while the white refers to the ancestors and potent medicines. Red

symbolizes life, women, and kinship. The dominant triangle design represents the leopard's spots, the leopard being a royal symbol of power and mastery like the elephant. The Kuosi regulatory society belongs to the royal court and is in charge of law enforcement.(7)

The Senufo people of the Ivory Coast portray the magical powers of the male Poro secret society in the Wabele helmet mask. This mask is a combination of dangerous animalistic features. These include the horns of the antelope, the jaws of the crocodile, and the tusks of the wart hog. The powers of this mask are directed towards lawbreakers, sorcerers, and malevolent spirits. The substance placed on the top of the mask's head gives it the power to "strike" people. There is a chameleon figure on the top of the mask and he represents one of the five principal animals present at the world's creation. This mask is worn at funeral celebrations for deceased society members and their Poro membership is only made known at this time.(8)

Dangerous forces are present in the Kifwebe mask of the Songye people in Zaire. The Kifwebe society members are said to possess the powers of sorcery. They use these powers in service to political leaders to assist them in maintaining their position of control. The abstract shape and design of this mask symbolizes the supernatural, mystical and ancestral forces from which the Kifwebe members receive their power. The female style Kifwebe mask is white and signifies peace, beauty, goodness, wisdom, and reproduction. This mask is danced at funerals, lunar ceremonies, and regular staged performances. It is believed to activate benevolent spirits that endanger children. This masquerade depicts a bizarre being from another world that is part human, part animal, and spiritual. This mask also combines powerful animal features. You will see the chin representing the snout of the crocodile; the long pointed mouth resembles the beak of a bird, also the "flame of the Sorcerer"; and the eye slits are referred to as "holes of the termites" and "the swelling of sorcerers." The incised grooves on the face depict the stripes of such powerful and dangerous animals as the zebra, porcupine, and snake. You will also see raffia attached to holes in the chin representing the mane of a lion.(9)

It is interesting to note that in most African cultures their language lacks a word for what we call masks, because to them the masquerade is the entire costume including the mask. There are three main styles of the African mask: the face masks, the helmet masks or shoulder mask, and the headdresses. The face mask is the most common form and usually curves over the maskers (person wearing the mask) face, stopping right before the ears. A helmet mask fits over the entire head and rests on the masker's shoulders. The third form, the headdress, rests on top of the maskers head and has a costume of raffia, grass, or cloth to cover his face. The most common material used for the masks is wood.

It can be painted with natural pigments or rubbed with oil to stain it. Many items can be used for decoration, such as: beads, bells, feathers, metal, fur, hair, raffia, and shells. When more expensive materials are used to decorate the mask, this indicates the status and power of the mask's owner. An artist trained in woodcarving, always a man, creates the mask in private. In some African cultures an elder in the community then comes and performs a ceremony to allow the spirit to inhabit the mask and give it power.(10)

There are two main types of masquerades: social rituals and personal rituals. Social masquerades are done in public and the entire culture participates in some manner, although in most cultures women are required to keep their distance from the masquerade, since masks were considered dangerous to them. Some of the social masquerades are used to assist adolescents to become responsible adults, to foster good health and well-being, to assist the elderly in preparation for death, to spiritually link the living with the dead, sustain food supplies, and to teach interdependence between the environment and the community. In personal rituals, private masquerades are held by secret societies where only the members participate, such as the Sande Society of the Mende people in Sierra Leone. This is a society of women responsible for teaching young girls in the skills and knowledge to become a woman. The spirit, *sowei*, appears and provides guidance to the girls frequently throughout the initiation period. The "ideal woman" is represented in the mask worn by a woman. You will notice delicate features in the face, very fanciful hairstyles, and rings on the neck representing feminine beauty.(11)

As stated earlier, this curriculum will fit into the seventh grade social studies curriculum on Africa, the art curriculum under three dimensional art and historical and cultural background, the language arts curriculum for research and appropriate use of oral and written language, math curriculum for computation and graphs, and the science curriculum for the study of the environment and ecology.

Objectives

The main objective of this unit on African masquerades is for the students to identify social customs and rituals of traditional African cultures through their art forms, such as dance, music, and the visual arts. The students will be able to identify and explain the importance of the arts in traditional African cultures and how all art forms have a purpose within their cultures. The students will be able to identify the important events in traditional African cultures that involve masquerades and explain how the masquerades are beneficial to the cultures and bring the community together. The students will be able to compare and contrast the three types of masks created by African sculptors. The students will use a

variety of art materials to create art objects inspired by African art. The students will be able to discuss how masks are used in rituals and how the masquerades help us to understand African cultures and their beliefs. The students will learn how masks educate the young and help them to become active adult participants in their cultural community. The students will be able to compare and contrast the African cultural traditions with some of their own family and cultural traditions.

Strategies

A visit to Chatham College's African art collection and a visit to the Carnegie Museum of Art will be the opening for class discussion and comparison of the African art on exhibit. The lesson plans for this curriculum will include the creation of a mask made from a variety of materials. There will also be lessons related to language arts. As per our Visual Arts Standards in the Pittsburgh Schools the students will describe, analyze, interpret, and judge their mask. They will also write a comparison of masks from different cultures in Africa noting their similarities and differences. As a science lesson, there will be an activity based on the environment and the animals in Africa. The students will then be required to sketch African animals to use for their animal mask. Since music and dance are a significant part of the masquerade there will also be a drum making activity. A math/social studies/technology activity will also be provided where the students will find the population density of the African countries and create a map depicting the population density of each country. The students will be required to research an African culture's masquerades and present their information to the class. I have also found many interactive activities on the computer that will provide the technological portion of this curriculum.

One thing I have learned is to never allow the students down time. I have included in the appendix some extra assignments for those students who finish early. These kinds of activities are very important to have available for the students.

In order to achieve these objectives the students will research African masquerades, engage in classroom discussions, write about and observe the African masquerades and the arts involved in those rituals. This unit will be supplemented by a Carnegie Museum of Art visits and a trip to view the Olkes collection at Chatham College. Museum collections on the internet will also be explored by the students. Traditional African music will be played in class and the possibility of assemblies for the entire school on African music performances, such as the African Drum and Dance Group from Miller African Centered Academy in the Pittsburgh Public School District, should be explored. The Carnegie Museum also has a lending policy for many educational items that could

be utilized throughout this curriculum. The African American Cultural Center of Greater Pittsburgh offers exhibitions, performances, education, and public programs to increase the knowledge and appreciation of the African contributions to cultures and societies around the world. For more information their website is www.africancultures.org. There are also many African Dance ensembles throughout the Pittsburgh area: Shona Sharif African Dance and Drum Ensemble at the University of Pittsburgh, email senegal1@pitt.edu; Umoja African Arts Company, email umoja@stargate.net, website www.umojacompany.com; and the Wacongo Dance Company of Africa Yetu, email ekihona@afrikayetu.org, website www.afrikayetu.org. These could also make wonderful assemblies for your students.

Classroom Activities

Day 1

I will take my students to the computer lab and they will go to <http://worldatlas.com/webimage/countrys/af.htm> and click on their assigned countries. Each student will be assigned 2 countries in Africa to look up, print out the outline map, and answer the questions on the African worksheet (Appendix 1). They will find the population density of their countries and create a pictograph to represent this information on their outline map.

Day 2

The students will go on a field trip to the Carnegie Museum and to see the Olkes Collection at Chatham College. The students will bring along sketchbooks to sketch the masks that interest them the most. If museum trips are not possible for you the internet museum sites are excellent sources for your students. I have frequently used the Metropolitan Museum of Art on line and there are many others with wonderful online exhibits for the students to explore. A follow-up activity is for the students to compare and contrast two different masks utilizing the art elements and principles of design for their comparisons.

Day 3

The students will make sketches from pictures of animals indigenous to the African continent in preparation for the creation of their animal mask. They will create contour drawings of the front and side views for three animals they are considering for their mask. As a member of the Carnegie Museum we are able to borrow taxidermy cases with actual animals, birds, reptiles, etc. encased in them for the students to do life studies from. These will also be brought in for the students to use.

Day 4

Another day in the computer lab researching the African masquerades. Students will print pictures of their favorite masks and describe the masquerade it was part of and what was the purpose of the ritual involved.

Day 5, 6

Papier Mâché Masks (play traditional African music during creative lessons-I borrow tapes from the library)

Materials:

Paper (preferably recycled), wheat paste or Vano liquid starch mixed in equal proportions with water, bowl, spoon, white glue, crumpled newspaper (for form), scissors, black markers, string and other decorative items and paint.

Directions:

1. Make a frame by folding one open sheet of newspaper into a strip of paper 2 x 29 inches and tape the ends to form a circle. Fill the circle with crumpled newspaper. The crumpled newspaper should mound up out of the circle frame in a gentle curve from side to side.
2. Mix wheat paste or starch as directed.
3. Tape crumpled newspaper in place if desired.
4. Begin by dipping the newspaper strips into the paste. Gently squeeze off any extra liquid.
5. Apply moistened papers to the form by overlapping and layering. The mask should be covered with approximately five layers of paper for strength.
6. When the mask is completely dry remove the paper stuffing. You can cut holes for eyes and paint it as desired. To make tempera paints into an acrylic like substance, add 1/2 cup of white glue to 1 cup of paint.
7. Masks must be **completely dry** before painting.
8. Decorate. For more fun, a glue gun can be used to stick on beads, string, fabrics, feathers, sequins, broken shells, coins, beans or macaroni. Be creative!

Day 7

Drum Making

Materials:

32 oz. Styrofoam cups, glue, hole punchers, twine, paper trash bags, oil pastels, masking tape, markers and paper towels.

Directions

1. Glue cups bottom to bottom and let dry.
2. Cut four 6-inch diameter paper circles from paper bags that have been crumpled up and flattened out. Glue two circles together. You will end up with two double-ply circles.
3. Decorate drum.
4. Punch ten holes with hole puncher along the borders of both circles. Place and glue circles on to the top and bottom of drum.
5. Cut several strands of twine and begin to sew from top to bottom.

Day 8

Rattle

Balloons, 1-1/2 inch strips of newspaper, art glue or papier mâché glue, rice or beans, 8-inch long sticks, tape, acrylic paint, brushes and paper clips.

Directions

1. Blow up balloons until they are the size of a grapefruit, and tie a knot at the end. Place a paper clip through the knot and tape the clip together. The paper clip will keep your balloon from moving around and at the end will be used to hang your balloon.
2. Place the strands of paper in papier mache glue or paste and squeeze out any excess glue on your paper. Place the strands of paper over the balloon and be sure they are placed smoothly to create a great rattle. Repeat this process until the balloon is covered. You may recover up to three layers of paper, but make sure that each and every layer is smooth.

3. Hang the balloon by the paper clip on a wall. It should dry in a day or two. When it is dry, take out the paper clip carefully, pop the balloon and remove it from the rattle.

4. You may now fill your rattle 1/3 full with beans or rice (be careful and do not fill it all the way because then your stick will not fit). Place the stick in the hole until it reaches the top of the papier mache rattle and fasten it with tape. Decorate with symbols and create beautiful music.

Day 9

Use the lesson from

http://exploringafrica.matrix.msu.edu/curriculum/lm12/stu_acttwo.html *Module Three: Studying Africa through the Humanities.*

Day 10

The students will cut out their line maps from the first lesson with the population density pictograph on it and glue them together to create a large map of Africa. The students will create a display using their map, masks, drums and rattles to be displayed in the cases near the art room for everyone to see. My students love it when their work is on display.