

## **“Rites of Passage” Seen through African Art**

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### **Overview**

I teach English as a Second Language and this unit has been developed with my middle school students in mind although it is also appropriate to use with English Language Learners (ELLs) in high school as well. Students with at least intermediate-level proficiency should be able to do the activities with ease but, of course, with content and language scaffolding, beginner-level students could participate in activities as well. With some adaptations, native speakers can also use the materials in a language arts, art, or world cultures classroom or perhaps even a foreign language class.

This curricula unit, *“Rites of Passage” Seen through African Art* seeks to give students the opportunity to explore the human existence and the universals we all experience regardless of culture or ethnic background. In doing so, the art of Africa is the central focus with the hope that the art will show similarities amongst people from Africa where they choose to see vast differences. A third goal the unit seeks to achieve is broadening the artistic experience of the students who may have little exposure to the artistic tradition of Africa. The unit will focus on cycles of life and the various ways that these events are commemorated. In particular, the unit will focus on births, initiation and death. All of these stages are “rites of passage” with their own symbols and meanings and the unit will attempt to make connections with students through these universals.

### **Rationale**

#### **Pedagogical Considerations**

Focusing on art in the language curriculum can provide a comfort zone for the visual learner in which he can interpret the world through visual images. The learner already has a keen sense of visual literacy so using visual literacy to promote literacy in a foreign or second language allows the student to explore the familiar (the visual world) with the unfamiliar (the world relating to English). Olson cites Feldman who writes (3):

In order to cope with the world, you have to be able to translate from one language to another – from or to a visual language, a kinetic language, an aural language, an oral language. You have to be able to translate what you see into what you say and do.

Whether or not a student is a visual learner, art provides a context for language use and the context allows the students to explore universal, cultural and personal themes, and values.

The arts are essential because they “help integrate our splintered academic world” and they “provide...a language that is universal” (Boyer, 47). Boyer also writes,

Today's students need to hear not just the language of politics and propaganda; they also need to learn languages that transcend the intellectual and ideological barriers that distort the truth and suffocate the human spirit (46).

Infusing art into the second language curriculum can be motivating for students because art provides a context for language discussion that takes students beyond the literal.

Art is also a part of our common culture and it provides an excellent context for exploring culture and cross-cultural differences. Such a context can be really motivating for students learning a second language. African art in particular is an excellent starting point for students learning English in the United States. My district reflects a national trend (albeit on a smaller scale) of an increased number of African peoples settling in our city. A thematic unit on African art can help African students better understand various African peoples and allow students from other cultures to understand not only their own classmates but an important part of the world. In my experience as an ESL teacher, there seems to be a division amongst people from Africa that the study of pan-African art can help alleviate. Two of my African students – one from West Africa, the other from Central Africa – spent time trying to explain why they just didn't like each other and couldn't get along. Their explanations really didn't amount to anything of substance – they just didn't like each other. Exploring cultural differences and similarities amongst Africans through art can create more understanding between students.

Krashen (1981) articulated the value of comprehensible input in an anxiety-free educational setting which does not sacrifice focus on content for focus on form. According to Krashen (1982), language acquisition occurs when learning takes place for real and communicative purposes. Later, Long (1983) stressed the importance of negotiated meaning through social interaction to improve the learners' interlanguage. Swain (1985) argued that comprehensible input and negotiated meaning are simply not enough to foster linguistic growth but rather that "comprehensible output" or good output is crucial. Cummins (1981) also believes that language learning is best when it is embedded in educational content rather than the language instruction, *per se*. Context is important for developing two kinds of proficiency: conversational and academic, which range in variety from context-embedded to context-reduced language. Finally, Hirsch (2006) states that reading comprehension improves with a broad knowledge base rather than from reading skills or strategies so children will read to become better readers if they have more content knowledge.

The theoreticians cited above provide evidence as to why content-based education is beneficial to English Language Learners. Content matter that students find motivating is important to foster negotiation of meaning. Furthermore, art history can involve plenty of subjective interpretation which easily promotes negotiation of meaning.

### Content Considerations

African art, on superficial examination, is one of the few artistic traditions that incorporates itself so naturally into the rhythms and cycles of life. For that reason, this unit will examine objects as they are used in milestones in a person's life. The unit will not focus on any one region or artistic tradition but will attempt to highlight universals as they relate to these milestones. The reason I have chosen this approach (as opposed to focusing on one geographic or cultural area) is

an attempt to include students of all cultures while highlighting similarities amongst African cultural groups. In doing so, the hope is that West Africans and Central African students, for example, will see that they are more similar than different. The milestones the unit will focus on are births, “rites of passage”, and deaths.

The study of African art in the West has been problematic, at best. The West was introduced to African art as early as the 15th century when little was known about the cultures of the continent. Throughout the centuries, the way non-Africans have viewed African art can be categorized as either ethno-centric or gross exoticism. It is a challenge to look beyond preconceptions of African art in the West because of a long-established artistic tradition which has evolved into the notion of “art for art’s sake.” The study or presentation of African art must not impose the Western framework on the art of Africa but requires more of a fusion of ideas from the disciplines of anthropology, philosophy and art, to a lesser degree.

To offer justification for a fusion of disciplines as a framework for the examination of African art, consider that many African peoples do not have a word for art as we know it in the West. Objects are more closely tied to our notion of design which combines the idea of both form and function. Consider, too, that the slave trade brought the West into frequent contact with Africans and their objects. Slaves were considered savages so, of course, the objects they produced could be of no value. Furthermore, the idea of artistic freedom or creativity is not part of most artistic traditions in Africa. In the industrial world, where so much is made by machine, an object which is different because it demonstrates the artist’s creativity is valued. In non-industrial societies such as many of those in Africa, created objects needed to follow a certain pattern or template. Finally, African art was re-introduced to the West through the work of Pablo Picasso who revered African’s work because he believed it was more natural since it was not steeped in western academic tradition. The video, “Through African Eyes” introduces and develops many of these ideas and therefore is a good introduction to the arts of Africa.

In an effort to contextualize African art and view the objects as related to universal themes, the unit will examine objects as they relate to births, “rites of passage” and death. In the video, “Through African Eyes,” an art historian says, “Part of the pleasure that comes from art is knowing.” Her comment is a central theme to this unit. Some may look at art and find the piece beautiful and like it for that reason alone. While African art may not have many of the qualities associated with admired art from other traditions, a closer examination of the tradition and cultures of the peoples who produced it creates more of an intellectual appreciation of the objects.

In Pittsburgh, we are very fortunate to have an extensive African art collection available to us in the Cheryl Olkes collection at Chatham College. The seminar focused on the objects in the collection so, unlike other art history classes I have taken, participants had the chance to view objects first hand and touch them. The adults benefited from this opportunity and children will appreciate it even more. That opportunity, however, is rare. To present the content in a classroom, visual reproductions of the objects are available on several web sites: [www.africanart.org](http://www.africanart.org), [www.africa.si.edu](http://www.africa.si.edu) . For my purposes, I will download images onto a CD to make a slide show because I have access to the technology to do so. I prefer this to having students look at the web sites themselves to be considerate of the students from various cultures

in my class. Many of the objects on the web site show nude figures and teachers generally have their own way of handling this in the classroom. However, I need to think about my female Muslim students, in particular, because it would be culturally inappropriate for them to look at these objects with boys in the room.

In an effort to draw upon universals, the unit will take a pan-African approach except for where specific objects are concerned. It is important to note from where, specifically, an object came but the unit will draw upon legends and beliefs from various parts of Africa. The origin will always be cited with the understanding that the belief is from that culture and is generally held true amongst different peoples of the continent. At first, I thought that this was a convenient academic construct but I wanted to make sure that I was not over-generalizing to simplify my research. In an attempt to see if these concepts held true throughout Africa, I asked various African adults from different regions if the concept could apply to their own culture and conveniently, they said it did. This unit will assume that some broad, world-view ideas are true for most Africans of all regions of the continent but there may be some cultures for whom these beliefs are not true.

### Birth

Students accustomed to the American tradition of celebrating birthdays – especially those of young people -- will undoubtedly want to know if birthdays or the anniversary of a birthday are significant. They are not important in African cultures and for the most part, it is because the child's initiation or "rite of passage" into society is far more important. Perhaps this evolved because of high infant mortality but at any rate, individuals become full-fledged members of society at initiation, not at birth.

### *Ere ibeji*

These objects are small statues or dolls and are typical in the Yoruba culture. They are recently considered "art" rather than object. The Yoruba call the object *ere ibeji*. The Yoruba are the people of southwestern Nigeria. In this culture, twins are magical and any family wishes for the birth of twins because of the playful characteristics twins are said to have. The problem with twins, however, is that they are born before term and have low birth weights so very often, one of the twins dies. The parents are afraid that the deceased child will "call" the other soul to join him/her. Because the spirits of the twins are forever connected, even after death, the family creates a carving – an *ere ibeji* to contain the spirit of the non-surviving baby. The child is portrayed as an adult and the mother feeds, clothes, bathes both twins – the surviving and the non-surviving. Westerners would probably regard the carving as honoring the spirit of the deceased baby but Africans see the carving as containing a living thing and for that reason, I have put the object as it commemorates a birth. The family is obligated to provide the "child" – the statue -- with the best foods and clothing for the remainder of the other twin's life.

### *Fertility dolls*

There are various objects which are meant to ensure the fertility of the carrier. This type of "doll" is a phenomenon in many African cultures and they take on many forms. Some are

carved, some molded from clay, some made of beads and some are nothing more than knotted fabric. Amongst the Luchazi of Zambia, a doll is presented to a young girl at the time of her initiation and if she does not become pregnant soon after the initiation, the woman who prepared the ceremony is fined. The Zaramo of Tanzania send a girl into seclusion with her “doll” which is nothing more than a small wood carving decorated with beads and the girl’s hair. The doll is treated as a living child and when she emerges from seclusion, the new initiate carries the doll until she physically conceives. The Turkana of Kenya regard a childless married woman as no more than a child and therefore, unable to participate in female adult society. The father carves a wooden doll called a ngide and if she treats this carving like a real doll, she will conceive and bear a child.

### “Rite of passage”

The expression “Rite of passage” has been widely used since the 1908 publication of French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep. “Rite of passage” is a ritual used to mark either a life cycle or a period on the calendar. A life cycle ritual marks a transition from one role in the community to another. At the time of transition, the person undergoing the ritual has no clearly defined role in the community. He is at the point of passage and is often considered dangerous or in danger. He is in the state of liminality – similar to being on a threshold. Often, this period is marked by doing things that are not a part of the normal social experience like going to live in the bush, for example, where spirits and ghosts live. The rites of passage, therefore, “are designed to ensure that the person in transition neither acts in a harmful way nor becomes a victim of dangerous forces during the passage” (Cox, xi). Life cycle rituals “typically include rites of separation to ensure proper departure out of the prior status; rites of transition, to ensure safety during the hazardous liminal period; and rites of incorporation, to ensure proper identification with and recognition in the new status” (Taber, 426). On the other hand, a calendar ritual is more of a communal rite of passage and is particularly important for agricultural societies because it marks various times in the planting cycle – the end of the dry season, for example.

### *Kikuyu shields*

When Kikuyu boys are initiated and become men, they wear wooden dance shields on their upper arms. The Kikuyu people have a social hierarchy based on six stages of life and each stage has its own duties and responsibilities. Males are initiated into a particular group and the people who are initiated with them at the same time are considered brothers for the rest of their lives (Haskins, 107).

### *Mende masks*

Most masks in African societies are worn by men but the women of a secret society called the Sande are among the few women in all of Africa to wear masks and perform a masquerade. The Sande society is part of the Mende culture -- a culture of about 1,000,000 people in current day Sierra Leone. The Mende have a proverb: “There is a thing passing in the sky; some thick clouds surround it; the uninitiated see nothing.” The Mende divide people into two groups – those who have been initiated into a secret society and those who have not. Secret society

members are considered enlightened while those who are not members are nothing more than a simpleton (Boone, xi).

The Sande society is international with women in Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia and the borders of the Ivory Coast. It is also numerous in members – possibly over a million and a half. The older members wear wooden masks called *sowei* to celebrate the initiation of new girls into the society. Since it is a secret society, non-members cannot be certain what the group's beliefs are but we know that religious, social, philosophical, educational and artistic aspects of a woman's life are touched by the society. The most important part of the society is the Sande school – a school of initiation in the bush in which initiates are taught to become mothers, wives and full members of the community.

A visual record of Sande masks exists from the early 1900s when a British Commission took photographs while in Sierra Leone. There are two types of masks: a Bundu Devil and the Sowo. The Sowo is the “concrete materialization of the society's precepts and ideals” (Boone, 13). A good Sowo head must be recognized as a good Sowo head – an object whose features deviate from the formula is still a piece of sculpture but not a Sowo. It must be comfortable to wear, shiny black, smooth, balanced and symmetrical with clearly visible features, must appear fresh and new and must have delicate, dainty features. The most distinguishing feature is the hair which is done up elaborately. Neck rings are always part of the mask. They suggest wealth, high status, and vitality and are considered a “sign of beauty” sexually attractive to both men and women (167). Farming communities have seasonal hunger – only the most affluent have enough to eat all the time so the neck rings suggest that the woman had the sagacity in planning and resources to eat well throughout the year. Another distinguishing feature is the mouth which is always closed since most human suffering comes from loose, malicious talk (170). Masks are only brought out for parades which are held four or five times a year; at other times they are kept hidden.

Masks are commissioned by and are the possession of one individual woman. When she reaches a certain mid-level in the Sande society, she commissions a mask which will be hers alone and will project the personality of a particular spirit. She is the only person who evokes the spirit of the mask, so when she retires or moves upward in the society, it becomes valueless, and is either retired, transformed to represent the comedian (163).

There are several recurring symbols in Sande life. One of them is the color white in the form of kaolin or white clay which the initiates wear on their faces and this, not the mask, is the symbol of Sande. The white clay is smooth and shiny and it comes from the water at both the river side and in the river itself. The color of the clay ranges from beige to white with the whitest being hidden far beneath the surface of the water – “the purest clay is the most hidden” (21). White is such a notorious symbol for the Sande that anything marked with white is thought to be Sande property – which is why initiates smear the clay on their faces. Young girls even form dolls out of the clay.

Before a woman can hold important roles in Sande artistic society, she must first, learn to dance because dancing determines her success as a Mende woman. Consequently, part of the initiation process is learning how to dance.

## Death

For the teacher who may be uneasy with the thought of treating death themes with children, a non-Western view of death may rid any apprehension. While the rites and rituals amongst African cultures seem to vary greatly, African myths as they relate to death don't usually have a looming sense of tragedy. African mythologies "treat sadness, suffering, and death as a part of life, not the result of an evil fate" (Altman, 92).

The myth called "Kwasi Benefo in the Land of the Dead" from the Ashanti people is an excellent way of introducing students to the African idea of death. The rendition presented in Altman (93-99) may be somewhat difficult for some intermediate students to follow but it can be rewritten using more simple structures and vocabulary or told orally with gestures.

## *Dogon masks*

I have chosen to focus on Dogon funerary masks because they are well-documented and videos of the masquerades are available.

The Dogon people have lived near the Bandiagra Cliffs in Mali roughly since the 15<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Dogon know that they were not the first people to inhabit this area because artifacts which portray masked dancers were found when they arrived. The Tellem people precede the Dogon and are believed to have produced these artifacts.

When someone in the Dogon culture dies, they believe that the deceased's life would not be much different from the life they had left. The dead still need food, cotton and oil and the family makes sacrifices to provide that. They bury the dead in the cliffs where they are closer to God and it is this proximity which is the only difference between dead and living. The living do not envy the dead at all but they do sometimes ask for spiritual intervention in order to take advantage of the closer proximity to God that the dead have. The dead miss their earthly life and their nostalgia may cause their spirits to haunt the homes of the living, interfere in their relationships and cause quarrels, disease and drought.

There are two types of performances in the Dogon culture to mark a death. One is held once a year, usually in January when families are not tending the fields. This gathering is less elaborate in that it does not usually involve masked dancers; the dance is more of a mock war dance with lots of drinking. A fully-masked dance in the Dogon society is held infrequently – once every 10 – 15 years – to mark the deceased as an ancestor. This dance is called the *dama*. It is meant to comfort the dead and console them so the masquerade is held for their benefit. The dancer's performance is a final glimpse of the world the dead have left behind. The masks are in the form of a bird or an animal, a house, a tree, a woman, or a hunter or a member of the neighboring Fulani tribe. The living hope that this final glimpse will keep the dead happy so

there will be no need to interfere with earthly affairs anymore. For the living, the dance recalls the community's losses and is an occasion to reflect.

Obvious parallels can be made with the Mexican students who celebrate the Day of the Dead each year to remember deceased family members.

### *Senufo masks / Poro Society*

The Poro is a secret society and the male equivalent of the Sande society mentioned earlier. It is a secret society among the Mande people of Liberia, Sierra Leone and the Ivory Coast and Guinea. The largest cultural group to have members in the Poro society is the Kpelle people. By virtue of being in a secret society, it is assumed that the members can keep a secret – otherwise the society would cease to be a secret (Bellman, 8).

The Senufo are a people numbering over 850,000 who live in a large area which encompasses the Ivory Coast, Mali and Upper Volta. They are predominantly an agricultural people but they have blacksmiths, woodcarvers and other artisans. They are an occupationally caste-bound society. Senufos are part of a “divinely ordained social order” (Glaze, 5). Within the Senufo culture is a secret society for men called the Poro society. The Poro have many important roles in the Senufo society. The secret society is so important to the Senufo that a man is considered nothing, unworthy of marriage, if he is not a member. The Poro direct most masking and they perform at funerals. The masks make sure that the soul of the dead person does not remain with the living of the community. The Poro believe that the soul of the newly deceased has a short time to escape or remain in the physical world and that time is the time between death and burial. It is the role of the masked dancer to guarantee that the soul does not escape and leaves the physical world.

A typical Senufo mask is a small face mask with “clear, refined features” (Visona, 149) but it seems that different language groups among the Senufo people have a different mask aesthetic (Glaze, 194). Art and death are closely intertwined in Senufo culture. A traditional Senufo tale claims that death came to the Senufo people because of a Senufo woman who stole meat of a carnivorous bush spirit. To make the bush spirit happy, the woman offered her own daughter to the bush spirit. The spirit later killed the woman. After the woman died, the spirit realized that it had done a bad thing because of how the village wept and cried. But later, they brought out drums and danced and prepared food and ate so the bush spirit thought it had done a good thing. Consequently, the bush spirit remained with them killing people. With the woman's death, “a fatal cycle was set in motion: the village's pleasure in funeral-related art forms and activities...ensured the *madeo's* (spirit's) continued presence in the village, bringing death, which, in turn, engendered beauty and enjoyment of the funeral ceremonies” (195). Again, this illustrates how things are neither wholly good nor wholly bad in much of African culture. As is typical in Africa, only men perform the masquerade even though the mask is feminine. The mask, itself, is packed with symbols understood by members of the Poro Society.

A Senufo funeral uses masks, drums and statues and the use of art and music contrasts greatly with the stark, austere existence of everyday life. The funeral is:

a multimedia event designed to protect the living and to ensure the continuing

integration of social groups and the village community as a whole with the spiritual world of Deity, the ancestors, and the bush spirits. Secondary gains, such as the reinforcement of social values, group integration within the village, the stimulation of the creative arts, and the pleasures of pure aesthetic enjoyment are contingent upon this first and central purpose of the funeral. (149)

A funeral is also a “rite of passage” only it is the final “rite of passage” – the dead become mediators between the human and the supernatural. If the dead leave unhappy, they become a threat to the living. Deaths of infants, uninitiated and victims of violence or accident are handled in a different way from those of “completed people” – initiated members of society who alone qualify for ancestral status. (150)

KaneKwei

The lesson plans for the funerary art of Africa do not include the work of artist Kane Kwei but I do believe that students will find his work to be a novelty and will enjoy looking at it. Kane Kwei was a cabinet maker from Ghana. His uncle was a fisherman and as he grew older, the uncle asked Kwei to make a coffin for him in the shape of a boat because he wanted to continue fishing after his death. The people liked the idea and they commissioned Kane Kwei to make coffins so he abandoned his cabinetry work for making coffins. The coffins reflected the earthly role of the deceased. Farmers commissioned chickens or cocoa pods. Fishermen ordered crabs or fish or boats. Generally, the coffins were not allowed to be a part of Christian burials so people commissioned the coffins but were not buried in them according to the rules of their respective churches. Museums thought they were such a novelty that they commissioned coffins to be made just for exhibition in the museum. The coffins demonstrate the ingenuity and creativity of one particular artist rather than how well that artist can use skills to follow a prototype of what is expected for the art form.

Week One

## **Objectives**

The primary objective for the teacher this week will be to give the students background knowledge about the continent of Africa – primarily the culture, geography and colonial history.

To do this, students will:

- activate prior knowledge about important moments or events in the life of a person from their own cultures and backgrounds. (Reading, Writing and Speaking #6)
- place markers on a map of Africa to indicate where the objects we study have their origins on an on-going basis. (Citizenship #2)
- fill in a blank map of Africa from memory using red pen.
- complete the blank map of Africa using a black or blue pen.
- list the countries of Africa and the corresponding adjectives of nationality.
- list key forces which have shaped current-day Africa. (Citizenship #4)

## **Strategies**

Before any of the objects are introduced, I will ask students to think about the most important times in a person's life. I will lead the discussion to the idea that truly monumental moments in a family are when someone is born and when someone dies. I will introduce the idea of a "rite of passage" next and ask students to name things they remember doing for the first time.

Students will require some background knowledge and vocabulary to better understand Africa. Time will be devoted to labeling a map of present-day Africa and learning the country names and the adjective to describe things or people from that country (ex: Ghana, Ghanaian). Once students have a glimpse of what present-day Africa looks like, I will present the different cultures of Africa and how present-day Africa came to be through colonization. A large map of Africa will be displayed and as the unit examines an object from a new culture, we will label the map to show where that culture is from.

The seventh grade Social Studies curriculum in my district focuses on Africa so perhaps this unit and the activities will reinforce what they have previously learned or perhaps it will prepare them for upcoming content. I would like students to broaden their knowledge about the geography of Africa and for that reason, I will do a pre-test and a post-test. I will ask students to fill out a map of Africa from memory, labeling the countries they can identify. Once they have exhausted their memory, they will use an atlas to fill in the rest. One of the culminating activities will be to engage in the same activity with the expectation that their geographic knowledge will have improved.

As the class continues the study of the art of Africa, we will place markers on the map to indicate the geographic areas we have studied. I want students to broaden their knowledge of the geography of Africa and also be able to state two or three facts about that country and the people who live there.

### **Classroom Activities**

Based on the theme of "rite of passage", students will make a graphic organizer on a poster which lists (or portrays if drawing is more appropriate for the level) how those occasions are acknowledged in their own cultures. They will present the poster to the class and the posters will be displayed throughout the unit to remind students of the themes the unit focuses on.

Once students have explored the theme of the unit – rite of passage – and have related it to traditions in their own cultures, students will state key facts about Africa. A short lecture accompanied by a cloze passage (to make sure students have understood the content) will introduce the "African cake" – the idea that Europe came in and divided Africa up just like a cake. Students will locate Africa on a globe or world map and then label the names of the countries on the continent of Africa. Once students have done that, they will work from a list of African countries and then write down the adjectives of nationality based on the teacher's input.

Week 2

### **Objectives**

The thematic focus of this week is the art related with birth. Students will:

- describe the role and function of *ere ibeji* in the African context. (Arts and Humanities #1, 2, 3)
- locate Ghana on the map, read an article about the Yoruba people and gather important facts about the Yoruba people. (Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening #2)
- describe the character of various *ere ibeji* and present their character to the class in a three-minute speech throughout the week. (Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening #8)
- identify fertility dolls and create one of their own. (Arts and Humanities #4, Family and Consumer Science #3)
- write about how to treat the baby using modals – must, have to, should, could, can, might, may. (Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening #9, 10)

### Strategies

Students will be given plenty of images of *ere ibeji* and fertility dolls – the first half of the week will be devoted to *ere ibeji* and the second half of the week to fertility dolls. When each particular doll is the focus of the lesson, the teacher will model how both types of dolls are used in the African context. The *ere ibeji* will be well-dressed and given food and expensive cologne and the fertility doll will be carried around throughout the lesson for students to see.

### Classroom activities

To begin to understand the Yoruba people, the students will read the Yoruba entry of the book *From Afar to Zulu: a Dictionary of African Cultures*. The teacher will give a cloze outline of the selected passages for students to fill in when they have completed the reading. After I have modeled how *ere ibeji* are part of people's lives, I will introduce the speaking task and model it for my students. My classroom is normally a place where plenty of opportunities for speeches and writing occur so it is natural to incorporate those routines into the unit to create the tone that we are still doing "regular school work" even though we have diverged a bit from the routine. For this particular lesson, I will present several images of *ere ibeji* to the class and ask them to choose the one they like best. I will also present students with a graphic organizer that has a large circle in the middle where they will write their own name and the name of their twin, a circle shooting off from that called "personal characteristics", another called "likes and dislikes", and another called "favorite activities". Students will flesh out a personality for their "twin" and then present that in a three-minute speech. While each student is presenting, the rest of the class will be taking notes, recording some of the important details. An alternative to this activity is to give students time to flesh out the personality of their twin and then to have another student in the class conduct an interview with the living twin. The living twin will speak for both himself and the *ere ibeji*. This task requires more complicated language – question formation on the interviewers part, using the appropriate form of the third person verb in the response and also, the first person plus a clear manner of organizing the speech.

Fertility dolls are a much broader topic in many ways because they are not a phenomenon localized to one particular culture or geographic region – they are truly pan-African. I will begin the lesson with a traditional-looking fertility doll strapped to pique students' interest and then I

will allow them to guess what the doll is for and why it is strapped to my back. We will make our own fertility doll using dowels, string to tie the arms to the body and cardboard and yarn to make a detailed face. Once the doll is constructed, the student's own creation will be given to someone else for them to look after – the names will be drawn randomly. The doll's creator needs to draw up some instructions to describe, in detail, how to treat the doll. To do this, the writer will use modals so some explicit grammar instruction is in order here. The students' homework for that evening is to take the doll and the instructions home, and follow the instructions as well as possible and then return the following day with the doll. Before the doll is returned to the creator, the student will need to write a short paragraph about what the doll did and how the doll was treated. The creator of the doll will give the caretaker a grade – not so much on the content of the essay but more on the treatment of the doll.

### Week 3

#### **Objectives**

The activities for Week 3 focus on “rites of passage”. In the African context, many of my students would be preparing for this time if they, themselves were in Africa because the students are at the appropriate age for the rituals. My over-arching goal is to give students a sense of the responsibility associated with the new role. Furthermore, this is a time in their lives when students have a heightened self-awareness so a discussion of what other cultures find to be beautiful might be of great interest to them. Therefore, students will:

- define “rite of passage” and elicit ways that people in their own culture know that a child has become an adult. (Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening #5, Citizenship #1)
- list adjectives to describe mature people / adults
- order the characteristics in order of importance.
- read a short article on masquerades (Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening # 2)
- list characteristics of beautiful people and explore what shapes people's perception of beauty. (Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Listening #5)

#### **Strategies**

The idea of a rite of passage is a common theme in literature and a theme that is very appealing to young people. Much has been written about the circumcisions which usually are a key part of rites of passage but the topic may be a difficult one to discuss with certain groups of students due to their ages, maturity level or religious background. It would be inappropriate for most Muslim girls to discuss circumcision in the presence of boys. For my situation, I am a female teacher and I have a class of all boys. I am sure that the boys would not talk openly about this topic with me in spite of our communicative and long-standing relationship. I have chosen not to dwell on the topic of circumcision in my discussion. I prefer to draw on more broad, universal themes such as growing up and not the perhaps the shocking details of what marks growing up. I fear the shock value of the circumcision will overshadow the objects.

The Sande Society uses two types of masks in its performances – one which is to symbolize beauty and one which is in stark contrast to the beautiful one and is quite ugly and ungraceful. This is a common theme in literature especially in the Romantic authors. Physical appearances

often reflect what is inside the person. Students will relate to this theme through movies such as *Beauty and the Beast* and *Shrek*.

### **Classroom activities**

Since my aim for this portion of the unit is to introduce broad, universal themes that relate to growing up, my lesson will begin with asking students to brainstorm ways to describe a grown-up. What are some adult characteristics (as opposed to characteristics of a child)? How do you know when a child is growing up? Students will create a word web on a poster to present to the rest of the class.

I will then present some of the Sowo masks of the Sande society with the idea that they are supposed to represent the “ideal beauty” for women of the Mende culture. Students will fill in a chart which asks them to list the traits which are considered beautiful for the Mende culture in one column and then, list physical traits that they, themselves find beautiful. This is not to be done in the interest of vanity but more to help define an aesthetic and help students make some conclusions about what forces come into play to help define that aesthetic. Once they have compiled their lists, we will discuss the role culture plays in how we value and evaluate what we see. Just as this is true with people and their physical characteristics, so this is true of what we find beautiful or not beautiful in art.

Unfortunately, I have not located any video footage of a Sande masquerade to reinforce the idea that the masks are one part of a larger production – the masquerade but I have located many photographs which convey how they are used. To help students with the notion of the masquerade as a performance, I would like them to read the small passage from Yvonne Ayo’s *Africa* which has a section titled “Masquerade Performed”. It presents the broader context for masquerade. At this time, I will show images of the Bundu masks – the masks meant to contrast with the ideal beauty. The class will come up with adjectives to describe the mask and then record them on a list. After that, we will discuss the differences between the Sowo and the Bundu masks and the teacher will help the students to conclude that probably the nature of this initiation or rite of passage for the women involved is instruction on how to be an “ideal beauty” or an “ideal woman”.

To help reinforce the theme which contrasts beauty and ugliness, I will show a brief clip of either *Beauty and the Beast* or *Shrek* and ask students discuss it in a small group. Students will compare the contrast the masks in the masquerade to the beauty and ugliness in either of those films. Students will present their findings to the group in a short presentation.

Week 4

### **Objectives**

Students will

- read an African myth which provides insight into the African concept of death (Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening #2)

- list some of the most important salient features from the myth.
- view relevant portions of the video, “The Art of the Dogon” which has excellent narrative and shows portions of the ritual. (Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening #7)
- describe and state facts about Dogon masks as viewed in the video and on websites. (Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening #2,7)
- describe Senufo masks and invent a Senufo masquerade using the masks. (Arts and Humanities #4)
- describe and state facts about Senufo masks. (Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening #4)
- use good note-taking skills to take notes. (Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening #1)
- write a compare and contrast essay, noting the similarities and differences between the masks of both artistic and cultural traditions. (Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening #4)
- demonstrate how much their knowledge of the geography of Africa has evolved as a culminating activity.

## Strategies

Masks and masquerades are perhaps the art form most typically associated with the African artistic tradition so there is plenty of appropriate material to share with students. An important element of the discussion is the attitude about death and dying. This attitude sharply contrasts with the predominant American attitude and great effort should be made to explore the students’ cultural attitudes about death and dying.

One of the most impressive aspects of the Dogon masquerade is the sheer dimension of the masks involved. The size is obvious from the video and the black and white plates but it will not be obvious to students how it feels to wear something of this grandeur on the head. I would like students to have the chance to experience that and for that reason, I would like to create a large headpiece using cardboard and PVC pipe for support and give students the chance to wear it on their heads.

A critical element to convey about the masquerade is that it is a total sensory experience, not limited to just the performance aspect that can be seen on the video and that the mask is a fraction of that whole experience. This will be more apparent with the Dogon masquerade because it is available on video tape. The challenge will be to make the Senufo masquerade come to life. It would be far more desirable to compare and contrast the entire masquerade and not just the masks but in the absence of video footage on the Senufo masquerade, it is not possible.

## Classroom activities

An important introduction to the topic of death and dying is a presentation of the African attitude towards death through the myth about Kwasi Benufo found in the book *African Mythology*. The first day will be dedicated to reading and understanding the myth in order to gain a better understanding of African attitudes towards death. The following day, I will introduce the Dogon

of Mali and present an adapted reading from *Afar to Zulu: a dictionary of African cultures*, give students a quick summary of the Dogon perception of death and then show the video of the masquerade while students take notes on a graphic organizer. Following that, I will show students selected images of Dogon funerary masks. I will give students a note-taking page that has the image and spaces for notes. We will make comparisons with the masks in the video and I will ask students to write at least three statements about the image on the note-taking page either from students' observations, from what they know, or what they saw in the video. The following day, I will present images from the masquerades of the Senufo culture. Since I am not aware of any video taping of the Senufo masquerades, I will ask students to construct a story of their own which incorporates the images and characters I show them. Before they do that, I will provide students with a similar note-taking page as I had with the Dogon for students to record at least three statements about the Senufo masks. Once all of the information has been collected, I will guide students through the writing process to write a good essay which compares and contrasts the masks of both cultures. The process, of course, includes pre-writing, a rough draft and revising.

### **Annotated Bibliography / Resources**

Altman, Linda Jacobs. *African Mythology*, Berkley Heights, NJ: Enslow Publishers, Inc, 2003. Collection of seven different myths from the Yoruba, the Kono, and Ashanti peoples.

Ayo, Yvonne. *Africa*, New York: Alfred Knopf, 1995.  
Children's text with excellent color photos and brief text – perfect for lower level English Language Learners.

Bingham, Jane. *African Art & Culture*, Chicago, IL: Raintree, 2004.  
Children's book which selects key works from different artistic traditions of metalwork, masks, body adornment and more.

Boone, Sylvia Ardyn. *Radiance from the Waters: Ideals of Feminine Beauty in Mende Art*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986.  
Very academic reading which gives excellent insight into the ritual of the Sande society and insight into the design and symbolism.

Cameron, Elizabeth Lynn and Dorian H. Ross. *Isn't S/He a Doll: Play and Ritual in African Sculpture*, LA: University of California Museum of Cultural History, 1996.  
Looks at play and play things from both a Western and African perspective using an anthropological and art historical approach.

Cole, Herbert M. and Chike C. Aniakor. *Igbo Arts Community and Cosmos*, LA: Museum of Cultural History, 1984.  
Gives a comprehensive account of the religion and world view of the Igbo people, a detailed description of masquerades of five different regions and culminated with a chapter called "Cosmos, World View and Aesthetics" Excellent color and black and white images.

Cox, James, ed. *Rites of Passage in Contemporary Africa*. Cardiff, Great Britain: Cardiff Academic Press, 1998.

A collection of conference papers which address how Christianity and traditional religions have come to terms with ancient practices and rituals primarily in southern Africa.

Cummins, James. "The Role of Primary Language Development in Promoting Educational Success for Language Minority Students." *Schooling and Language Minority Students: A Theoretical Framework*, Los Angeles: California State University; Evaluation, Dissemination, and Assessment Center, 1981.

Academic basis for content-based instruction for English Language Learners.

Delange, Jacqueline. *The Art and Peoples of Black Africa*, NY: E.P. Dutton and Co., Inc, 1974. Breaks down the African artistic traditions according to broad geographic or cultural regions.

Frederick, John Lamp. *See the Music, Hear the Dance: Rethinking African Art at the Baltimore Museum of Art*, Munich: Prestel, 2004.

An exhibition catalog which highlights many specific works and artistic traditions but it is most valuable for its explanation of how the African art trade works.

Glaze, Anita J. *Art and Death in a Senufo Village*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981.

Haskins, Jim and Joann Biondi. *From Afar to Zulu: A Dictionary of African Cultures*. New York: Walker and Company, 1995.

A very student-friendly book complete with maps, photographs and simple text which gives account of social and political aspects of various cultures. Features about 30 different cultures.

Hirsch, E.D. Jr. "Building Knowledge" in *American Educator*, 30:1:2006.

The article makes the case for presenting students with content-rich instruction to improve reading comprehension.

Huet, Michel. *The Dance, Art and Ritual of Africa*, Toronto: William Collins Sons and Co, Ltd., 1978.

Superb color and black and white plates of masquerades.

Jordan, Manuel. *Chokwe! Art and Initiation Among Chokwe and Related Peoples*, New York: Prestel, 1998.

A collection of essays about the Chokwe people with sections devoted to royal arts, initiation arts, art and life.

Krashen, Stephen D. *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*, Oxford, England: Pergamon Press, 1981.

Provides the theoretical basis for the language learning materials presented in the unit.

Laude, Jean. *The Arts of Black Africa*, LA: University of California Press, 1971.

Organizes African Art according to object.

Long, Michael. "Native Speaker / Non-native Speaker: Conversation in the Second Language Classroom". In M. Clarke and J. Handsome, eds. *On TESOL '82: Pacific Perspectives on Language Learning and Teaching* Washington DC TESOL, 1983.

Olson, J.L. *Envisioning Writing: Toward an Integration of Drawing and Writing*, Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1992.

Pern, Stephen. *Masked Dancers of West Africa: The Dogon*, Amsterdam: Time-Life Books, 1982.

First-person narrative of a visit to Mali complete with color plates of the life and people of Mali as well as the masked dances.

Swain, Merrill. "Communicative Competence: Some Roles of Comprehensible Input and Comprehensible Output in its Development" in Susan M. Gass and Carolyn G. Madden, eds., *Input in Second Language Acquisition*. Series in Second Language Research, 1985.

Taber, C.R. "Life Cycle Rites" in K. Crim, ed. *Abingdon Dictionary of Living Religions*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981.

Visona, Monica Blackmun et al. *A History of Art in Africa*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. 2001.

The most comprehensive survey of African art I have found.

## **Appendices – Standards**

Content Standards for the Pittsburgh Public Schools

Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening

2. All students read and use a variety of methods to make sense of various kinds of complex texts.
3. All students respond orally and in writing to information and ideas gained by reading narrative and informational texts and use the information and ideas to make decisions and solve problems.
4. All students write for a variety of purposes, including to narrate, inform, and persuade in all subject areas.
5. All students analyze and make critical judgments about all forms of communication, separating fact from opinion, recognizing propaganda, stereotypes and statements of bias, recognizing inconsistencies and judging the validity of evidence.
6. All students exchange information orally, including understanding and giving spoken instructions, asking and answering questions appropriately, and promoting effective group communications.
7. All students listen to and understand complex oral messages and identify their purpose, structure and use.

8. All students compose and make oral presentations for each academic area of study that are designed to persuade, inform or describe.
10. All students communicate appropriately in business, work and other applied situations.

### Family and Consumer Science

3. All students demonstrate an understanding of parenting skills.
4. All students demonstrate a basic understanding of life stages and their interdependence.

### Arts and Humanities

1. All students describe the meanings they find in various works from the visual and performing arts and literature on the basis of aesthetic understanding of the art form.
2. All students evaluate and respond critically to works from the visual and performing arts and literature of various individuals and cultures, showing that they understand important features of the works.
3. All students relate various works from the visual and performing arts and literature to the historical and cultural context within which they were created.
4. All students produce, perform or exhibit their work in the visual arts, music, dance or theater, and describe the meaning their work has for them.

### Citizenship

1. All students demonstrate an understanding of major events, cultures, groups, and individuals in the historical development of Pennsylvania, the United States and other nations, and describe the patterns of historical development.
2. All students demonstrate understanding of themes and patterns of geography, know the location of major bodies of water, land masses and nations, and describe the relationships between geography and historical, economic and cultural development.
5. All students examine and evaluate problems facing citizens in their communities, state, nation, and world by incorporating concepts and methods of inquiry of the various social sciences.
7. All students demonstrate their skills of communicating, negotiating and cooperating with others.
8. All students demonstrate that they can work effectively with others.