LESSON 1: THE ROLE OF THE ARTIST

Crown for Yoruba Initiation by José Rodriguez, U.S.

Fig. 1.1
Lesson Summary and Objectives

Through the study of one beaded crown students are introduced to the Yoruba concept of *ase* and the idea that power can be vested in certain individuals and works of art associated with them. Students analyze the multiple meanings and symbolic associations of beads (and their colors) in Yoruba arts and consider how the appearance of a work can affect its emotional presence. Students are introduced to the maker of this work, José Rodriguez, and consider how artists can be pioneers and explorers who push the boundaries of the knowable world through their creations. Students will:

- Explore the multiple meanings of beaded arts among Yoruba peoples in Nigeria and the African diaspora.
- Use the metaphors of color and meanings associated with beads in Yoruba art in writing and artmaking.
- Consider and discuss the affective power of Yoruba arts.

Background Information

For Yoruba peoples of West Africa and practitioners elsewhere, *ase*—the power to bring things to pass—inheres within certain people and objects. *Ase* (pronounced ah-shay) is the divine life force that is present in the beaded crowns made for Yoruba kings in Africa to honor the *orisa*, or deities, and exists in ritual articles made and worn by followers of Yoruba religion in the Americas. The crown covers the outer head while imbuing the inner head with the revered ancestral authority of *ase* (see *Beads, Body and Soul: Art and Light in the Yoruba Universe* by Henry John Drewal and John Mason, 1998, for images).
This crown (fig. 1.1) is the work of New York artist José Rodriguez. A practitioner of Yoruba religion, Rodriguez honors the life-giving wisdom, calmness, and composure of the deity Obatala. Among Yoruba peoples residing in Nigeria, only a king may wear a crown as a sign of his divine capacities. For Yoruba priests in the Americas, however, the crown is a symbol of initiation into orisa worship and reflects the enduring legacy of African traditions, as it has been invested with new meanings and purposes.

Joseph Rodriguez, son of Cuban and Puerto Rican parents, trained as a graphic artist at the Parsons School of Design in New York. In 1988 he was initiated into the Yoruba religion. Many of his works are inspired by Yoruba traditions, which he observed among practitioners in his travels throughout Cuba, Puerto Rico, and at home in New York. While designing beaded works for Yoruba rituals, Rodriguez worked as an arts teacher in New York area public schools.
1. A Crown for an Orisa

The crown was commissioned by the Fowler Museum from José Rodriguez. Using classic texts on Yoruba art, Rodriguez modeled this crown on Nigerian prototypes while adding his own stylistic details. The grand dome-shaped crown is fit for a king but has been designed with tubular blue beads specifically for a devotee of the orisa Obatala. In Nigeria, the crown for royalty is known as an adenla and is worn only by Yoruba kings and queens (oba) descended from Oduduwa, the first king of Ife (r. 1100 C.E.). Other chiefs wear different types of crowns as symbols of their office. In the Americas, the crowns worn by Yoruba priests and devotees are symbolic of the particular orisa into which individuals are initiated.

Activity

Several design elements typically appear on an adenla made for an oba (fig. 1.2)—each has particular significance for a Yoruba practitioner. Students will find these elements on the Rodriguez crown when at the Fowler Museum or as they view figure 1.1.

- **Elephant**: A symbol of longevity and power, the elephant holds a spray of red tail feathers from an African Grey Parrot, symbol of an initiated and protected head.
- **Birds**: A bird at the top surmounts the powerful medicines inserted in the crown's summit. Other three-dimensional birds may be added on the crown body. Birds are references to powerful mothers who guard the heads of righteous and just rulers.
- **Faces**: Their representation is said to honor Oduduwa, who founded the Yoruba kingdom in 1100 C.E., the royal ancestors who are always watchful to protect the living representative of the royal line, and the sea divinity Olokun, who is patron of bead artists and source of beads used to create the crown.
- **Sixteen**: There may be sixteen faces or sixteen other motifs, all making reference to the sixteen sons of Oduduwa and the importance of the number in Ifa divination.
Activity (continued)

- **Interlaced design**: This never-ending design may be Islamic in origin and refers to the continuity and balance of Yoruba life. It is sometimes abstracted as two entwined snakes, suggesting the competing powers of the world and the otherworld.
- **Concentric circles**: Sometimes encircling the faces, they are references to the borders of divination trays and actual strands of beads.
- **Triangles**: These are divided into smaller triangles and diamond shapes, creating a patchwork surface said to “shine.”
- **Beaded veil**: It masks or moderates the penetrating gaze of the ruler, or “God’s deputy.” The ruler’s inner spiritual person is protected, shielded, and enclosed within the beaded fringe.
- **Beads**: The crown is completely beaded as a sign of royalty. The beads of some crowns are of many different colors in tribute to all the oríṣa.

If students have access to books on Yoruba art (see bibliography) they should look for the many examples of the above elements.

**Activity**

Students can create a crown, either in two dimensions on paper or by constructing cone-shaped hats of tagboard with their own interpretations of the elements described above. Keep in mind that, for the Yoruba, the shape and appearance are essential elements in the crown’s effectiveness.
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Fig. 1.2
2. Beads, Apart and Part of A Strand

Beads bestow status, offer protection, serve as separation, signify affiliation, and display continuity. They have been likened to stars, to drops of water, and to precious children. The total abundance of beads in Yoruba regalia and other arts is noteworthy but each bead has importance even as it is combined with others.

As Yoruba scholar Henry Drewal wrote (1998, 17), “A bead—a colored and coloring form that reflects, transmits, and transforms light—also transforms the objects and persons it adorns...When threaded together, beads stand for unity, togetherness, and solidarity...Beads are signs of preciousness and auspiciousness: good fortune in terms of economic wealth and spiritual well-being.” He goes on to say that when a Yoruba “suddenly becomes rich, people ask the rhetorical question:...Has s/he discovered a great deposit of beads?”

The crowns illustrated here are completely covered with beads. In addition to the beaded designs on the base of a crown, many strands of beads cascade from its brim, forming a veil. Veils were intended to cover kings’ faces and obscure their eyes. By doing so, veils worked to block the power of the king’s gaze from those who saw him.

Activity

Either bring to class or have students bring an assortment of beads. Each student should select one and describe it in as much detail as possible, then liken the bead to something else familiar to him or her. Alternatively, combine some beads into a string, necklace, bracelet, etc. and use the combination as the basis for similes or metaphors. Collect sayings that incorporate the image to aid description, as in “beads of sweat,” “beads of dew,” and rain drops are “beads of wealth from the sky, ensuring fertility and continuity.” (Drewal 1998, 174)
Activity
The beaded veil functions to separate both the wearer and observer. Are there ways we set up separations, either by actions or actual physical means? Give examples of how a person’s body language can serve as an obstacle to closeness.

3. Colors and Emotions
The colors of beads are significant. José Rodriguez, a devotee of the orisa Obatala, added tubular blue beads to his almost completely white crown, because these are the colors of that deity. Color is an important aspect of Yoruba art and evokes temperature and temperament—mood or state of mind. Yoruba people classify colors into three groups: (1) funfun which include cold, white hues suggesting composure, old age, and wisdom; (2) pupa for hot, red colors, signifying anger; and (3) dudu, dark and generally cool colors such as black, blue, indigo, purple, and green as well as dark browns, red-brown, and dark grays, suggesting the restraint and tranquility of Yoruba divination and problem-solving.

Activity
Students have had experiences with the emotional content of color in symbolism, and in metaphoric speech and song. If they have not had an opportunity for writing based on O’Neill’s Hailstones and Halibut Bones (1961), this would be a good time to introduce the exercise (i.e., Orange is..., Red is..., etc.)
Students may also give expressions of emotion that use color names and the meanings they indicate. They will find that some are the same as Yoruba interpretation, and others different. We might describe ourselves when angry as seeing red, music described as red hot would certainly not be soft and slow. What color might be suggested by soft, slow music? A sad person is said to be feeling blue, what about a happy person, or an excited one? Give students opportunities to pair emotions with colors.

Activity
They could create a collage to reflect the significant groups of colors so important to the Yoruba. Cut or torn pieces of magazines can be glued to background paper, which may, in turn, inspire creative writing.

4. The Awe of an Royal Crown

Activity
The beauty of the crown helps it to work. Have students discuss how this might be so for the man or woman who is wearing the crown. How might it be true for the person who sees that man or woman? Upon viewing an oba wearing a crown do students think that they would have a sense of awe? How might this reaction compare to the feeling of awe that one would have upon viewing the nkisi in this section of the exhibition?

Also note the other examples of the richness of Yoruba arts in the Intersections exhibition: the egungun and gelede masks, a divination tray, and the palace doors by Nigerian artist Areogun (ca. 1880–1956).
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Useful Readings
Arnoldi, M. J., and Christine Mullen Kreamer
1995 Crowning Achievements.
Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History.

Avins, Lyn, and Betsy D. Quick
Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History.

Drewal, Henry John
1995 “Yoruba Beadwork: Beauty and Brightness” in Faces: The Magazine about People.*

Drewal, Henry John and John Mason
Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History.

O’Neill, Mary
1961 Hailstones and Halibut Bones.*
Garden City: Doubleday & Co.

*Childrens Book

Note to Teachers:
This lesson is part of the curricular materials developed to accompany the exhibition Intersections: World Arts, Local Lives. Although this and companion lessons are self-contained, each will be enhanced when used in conjunction with others in this resource. Addressing several lessons within each unit will facilitate the incorporation of the study of world arts and cultures into your curriculum.

The lesson is based on works in the first section of the exhibition called Art and Action. In this gallery works are introduced that served to make things happen. See “Unit One—Art and Action” for an introductory statement on the unit, along with some provocative “Questions for Thought,” and suggestions that will inspire the students to relate the unit to their own lives.

Images of objects to be shown to students may be printed as handouts (from within each lesson), viewed online at the Intersections web link http://collections.fowler.ucla.edu, or downloaded from the curriculum page on our website.

In this unit the topics and lessons are
Lesson 1: The Role of the Artist: Crown for Yoruba Initiation by Jose Rodriguez, U.S.
Lesson 2: Efficacy and Action: Nkisi Nkondi: A Power Figure of Central Africa
Lesson 3: Beauty and Purpose: Capturing Beauty: Ikebana Baskets, Japan
Lesson 4: Encounters of Ideas, Time, and Place: Textiles of Southeast Asia