LESSON 6: MEMORY AND COSMOLOGY

Mother of the Band: The Ntan Drum, Ghana

Fig. 2.2
Lesson Summary and Objectives

Students study the iconography of a Ghanaian drum and investigate its meanings in terms of the history and cultural traditions of Ghana. As students “read” the drum, they come to understand the verbal/visual messages of the drum’s iconography. Activities also include creative writing and problem solving as students work with the imagery on the drum. Students will

• Study the many images on a Ghanaian drum and investigate their multiple meanings.
• Explore Akan oral literature and proverbs through creative writing activities.
• Collect, document, and then use examples of proverbial language in conversation and creative writing.

Background Information

At social and festive gatherings in Ghana, as in many parts of the world, popular bands entertain their audiences with familiar music. Particularly popular in the 1930s and 1940s were Ntan bands, voluntary associations that provided music for national and community festivals and at weddings and funerals. Central to each group was a large drum embellished with a rich variety of images. These images (and the meanings implied) boasted of the band’s talents, called attention to the natural environment and material culture of the people, and reminded listeners of community values and proper behavior. In the Ntan drum exhibited in Memory and Cosmology, the importance of the band is indicated by the elephant base that supports the drum, suggesting its important social role as supporter of the community’s music.

Ntan drums functioned both as musical instruments and as objects to be read, with visual references to proverbial language. For the Asante and other Akan peoples, visual images illustrate proverbs or other verbal expressions such as praise names, jokes, insults, riddles, boasts, and even longer folktales. The repertoire of imagery includes flora and fauna, objects of daily use, and people involved in social, religious, and political interactions. When used as unique verbal/visual messages, these images define acceptable modes of behavior and underscore essential truths and values of society. This intersection of word and image is essential in Akan art and exemplifies an unbreakable link between art and thought.
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About the Artist
The Ntan drum shown in the exhibition is one of many carved by famed Asante artist, Osei Bonsu (1900–1977). The artist’s father was a drummer and a carver, and his son, Osei Bonsu, practiced both arts while still very young. By his teens, he was already carving works that had been commissioned by chiefs in the region. Along with his father and an older brother, Bonsu was employed as a research associate and carver by famed British anthropologist Captain R. S. Rattray, whom Bonsu accompanied on research trips among the Asante. Bonsu carved for the court, for popular drumming groups, for colonial administrators, and for tourists, while teaching for many years at a British colonial school and later at the University of Science and Technology. In 1975 he came to the United States for the Festival of American Folklife at the Smithsonian Institution.

Curriculum Connections
1. Hearing and Viewing—The Power of the Ntan Drum
At celebrations and other gatherings, Ntan drum groups provided the musical entertainment, and the imagery on the breasted drums suggested biting social commentary and proverbial wisdom. By “reading” the relief images on such drums we can discern clues to the history of Ghana; by interpreting these images we can also gain knowledge of some of the traditions and social mores of the Akan.

Activity
Have the students study Handout NTAN DRUM ON ELEPHANT BASE and Handout NTAN DRUM WITH QUEEN IMAGE (featuring another drum [and its drawing] in the Fowler Museum’s collection), noting the many carved images on the bodies of the drums. In the classroom, these images can be called out verbally, listed on the board, or sketched by each individual student. A notable feature of an Ntan drum is its protruding female breasts, a reference to motherhood. Indeed some drums feature as many as eight breasts, emphasizing the idea of the drum as “the mother of the group.”
Activity
As they study the images carved on the drums, what clues do students notice regarding Ghana’s history? After noting the juxtaposition of images of Europeans and Africans on the drum, let students do some research about Ghana or you may give them the following relevant facts:

• Agriculture has been the main occupation for hundreds of years.
• People came to the area from many parts of Africa, each with their own lifeways. Many groups migrating from the north were Muslim.
• Around 1700, the Asante Kingdom rose to power, led by chief Osei Tutu, and his powerful priest Okomfo Anokye.
• Portuguese arrived in 1471, joined over the following 300 years by Europeans from other countries. They came to colonize and trade in gold, ivory, and slaves.
• Britain remained in control after other European forces left. They made the Gold Coast a crown colony in 1874.
• In 1957 the country became the first country in Africa to gain independence. Its name changed from the Gold Coast to Ghana.
• Kwame Nkrumah led the country, and was proclaimed “President for Life.” During his tenure a Preventive Detention Act led to the arrest of many critics. A military coup brought the end to Nkrumah’s government. Today, however, Nkrumah is held in great regard by most Ghanaians, who are respectful of his leadership in the independence movement.
• Subsequent coups led to repeated changes in government, including periods of democratic rule and military dictatorships. Today Ghana is one of the strongest and most stable democracies in the world.
• Ghana has been a producer of gold for many centuries and today boasts one of the largest and richest reserves of gold in the world.
• Traditions are ongoing and change over time; new traditions are always being invented.
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Activity

Let students speculate on the significance of some of the images, ask questions, and offer answers. For these activities, use Handout NTAN DRUM WITH QUEEN IMAGE.

- Younger students can locate (and count) birds, animals, and sea creatures depicted. Do the same with the various human figures carved on the drum, as well as implements students can identify (i.e., scissors, saw, coffee pot). These can be counted or classified by using a different colored pencil or crayon to indicate a category. Let them select an image from their chosen categories, and incorporate it in a drum or other musical instrument of their design. After students draw their instruments, post them for all to see.

- Older students will gather more subtle information as they survey the images and question their significance. The large figure on one drum is a representation of Queen Victoria with her crown, western-style dress, and jewelry. On her left, seated under an umbrella, is an Akan chief. He wears a crown, as does Victoria, but is dressed in traditional kente cloth. The Akan chief is significantly smaller than the British queen. (What might the carver be saying with the size difference?) Surrounding the queen are members of the British Colonial Native Authority Police wearing traditional uniforms and red fezzes, and carrying items associated with their authority: bugle, sword, musket, handcuffs, key, and the British flag. Traditional court officials around the chief carry an umbrella with bird finial, a sword, a horn, the linguist staff (symbol of his office), and a stool. They are dressed in shirts and shorts rather than indigenous dress but what they carry are Akan signs of office.

- The British flag also appears on a building that resembles a Christian church but, since churches rarely flew flags, this probably represents a coastal fort that was used as a prison. There are also many representations of European artifacts.
2. Proverbs and the Verbal/Visual Nexus

Many of the other motifs on the drums are drawn from the local animal world and announce much more than the animals’ presence in the environment. They serve to remind the band members and their audiences of the vast store of oral literature that uses metaphors to impart wisdom.

Activity

Using the rollout drawings (Handout NTAN DRUM ON ELEPHANT BASE and Handout NTAN DRUM WITH QUEEN IMAGE), students will identify specific images and associate them with Akan proverbs. They may complete Handout AKAN PROVERBIAL WISDOM as follows:

- Before students begin the exercise, have them fold back each page on the dotted line between columns 4 and 5 to conceal the explanation of the expressions. Later they can compare their explanations with those in column 5.
- The first column provides verbal descriptions of some of the motifs seen on the drums.
- In the second column students will draw these motifs using the rollout drawings as a reference.
- Students should read the proverb or expression associated with each image in the third column and try to figure them out.
- In the fourth column, they will give their interpretation of the saying.
- Students may read explanations of the proverbs in the fifth column (drawn from published research by Doran H. Ross, as cited in the bibliography).

Activity

Begin a collection of proverbs already familiar to, or researched by students. Selecting from the list, students should represent the proverb with a motif as the Akan peoples do. Then develop a worksheet modeled after the one given for students’ collected proverbs and distribute it to class members to solve. Students should be encouraged to use these proverbial expressions, as well as those of fellow class members, in their creative writing and oral speech.

Activity

Students may collect proverbs that compare animal behavior to that of humans, as do many of the Akan proverbs cited above.
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Useful Readings
Cole, Herbert M., and Doran H. Ross

DjeDje, Jacqueline Cogdell, ed.
Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History.

Ross, Doran H.

Photograph Captions
Handout NTAN DRUM ON ELEPHANT BASE

Handout NTAN DRUM WITH QUEEN IMAGE
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 second section of the exhibition called Art and Knowledge. In this gallery works are introduced that served to communicate knowledge and a sense of history. See “Unit Two—Art and Knowledge” 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 5: Painting History:** Fineline Painted Vessels of the Moche, Pre-Columbian Peru
- **Lesson 6: Memory and Cosmology:** Mother of the Band: The Ntan Drum, Ghana
- **Lesson 7: Memory and Cosmology:** Creator/Ancestors: The Wawilak Sisters Bark Painting, Australia
- **Lesson 8: Memory and Cosmology:** Cacao and a Ballplayer: Maya Ceramic Vessel, Mexico
- **Lesson 9: Proclaiming Heritage:** Canoes, Carvings, and the Austronesian World
- **Lesson 10: Proclaiming Knowledge:** Teaching about the Spirit World: Katsina Traditions, Southwest U.S.
- **Lesson 11: Proclaiming Knowledge:** Education as Entertainment: Asian Puppetry, Burma
Handout: NTAN DRUM WITH QUEEN IMAGE
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motif</th>
<th>Student’s Drawing</th>
<th>Akan Proverb</th>
<th>Student’s Explanation</th>
<th>Scholarly Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Star and moon</td>
<td></td>
<td>“Although the moon is brightest, the star is more constant.”</td>
<td></td>
<td>The Akan peoples value permanence over changing fortune, reliability over what is flashy but undependable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two crocodiles with separate heads, tails, and legs, but a common body</td>
<td></td>
<td>“Bellies mixed, crocodiles mixed say: ‘let a bit wash down your throat, let a bit wash down my throat, and all will meet in one stomach.’”</td>
<td></td>
<td>A reference to two brothers who are said to “share the same stomach.” Whatever one eats benefits the other—self-interests should be sacrificed for the common good.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hornbill in the grasp of a snake</td>
<td></td>
<td>“By waiting patiently at one spot on the ground, the puff adder was able to catch the hornbill for lunch.”</td>
<td></td>
<td>With ingenuity and patience, one can do the impossible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sankofa bird with its head facing backward</td>
<td></td>
<td>“Pick it up if it falls behind.”</td>
<td></td>
<td>This Sankofa bird, with its head turned back, reminds us that mistakes can always be corrected and we can learn from the past to improve the future.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chameleon and chest</td>
<td></td>
<td>“The chameleon’s ability to change colors affects the clothes he is wearing, not those in his box.”</td>
<td></td>
<td>There are some things a person cannot change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motif</td>
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</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bird with a long neck</td>
<td></td>
<td>“Even if a bird has a long neck, he uses it to eat on his side of the river and not on the other.”</td>
<td></td>
<td>This image and proverb warn against impinging on another’s domain. Land rights are a major economic and political concern in Akan life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frog</td>
<td></td>
<td>“The length of a frog can only be determined after its death.”</td>
<td></td>
<td>The frog’s length is a metaphor for the achievements of an individual, which are often fully appreciated only after death.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antelope with long horns</td>
<td></td>
<td>“Had I known is always at last.”</td>
<td></td>
<td>This proverb and image is a reminder of the futility of hindsight.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elephant with palm tree on its back</td>
<td></td>
<td>“Only the elephant can uproot the palm tree.”</td>
<td></td>
<td>This expression and image asserts the superiority of the animal world over that of the plant and the superiority of one chief over its rivals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Butterfly</td>
<td></td>
<td>“If the butterfly does not like to drink, why is it always found on the path to palm wine?”</td>
<td></td>
<td>The Akan use the insect as a comparison to a person who denies that he drinks, but is always found in bars. Fun is being made of a person who says one thing and does another.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>