



## The Mask—A West African Ceremonial Object

Curriculum Unit 85.06.06  
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The mask is the result of a vast drama; the masked man gives the universal system movement and color. <sup>1</sup>

Human history until the latest phases is very largely the story of man's interaction with his environment. . . . his art is used in ceremonies intended to control the environment. <sup>2</sup>

Children enjoy acting out the world of makebelieve, especially through the use of masks. The mask is an exciting and intriguing phenomenon, for under its cover, the child becomes free to become someone else. This process of transformation and maskuse is thoughtprovoking: for how does the artistic but inanimate object of the mask contain such power?

For some groups, such as African tribes, the power of the mask lies in its creation. Masks are created for a reason such as to insure fertile crops; the more important the reason to a society, the more powerful the mask.

The African mask plays a constant sacred role in the life of the individual from early childhood until burial. The mask is an instrument; without it, one cannot understand his culture.

One example is the mask which the elder (or leader) wears to hide his personal authority and identity, enabling him to assert an omniscient authority in an impersonal way. With the mask, he is the Law. The mask is not an abstract symbol; its use transforms the wearer into the tangible presence of law and order in the tribal mind.

To continue, the form and details which a mask may take represent a set of cultural beliefs, attitudes, and behavior. Depending upon the ceremony for which a mask is created, each mask's different details will represent what that ceremony needs to accomplish.

By identifying certain characteristics of the mask, students of culture and anthropologists, among others, can gain insight into the culture that created it. Through this approach, the mask provides a fascinating key to unlock and to explore West African culture.

I intend to apply this method in the middle school art classroom to teach both culture and art and the relationship between the two. This approach will help the student understand the significance of maskmaking.

While the student in the art room actually creates a mask, he can experience the relationship between the meaning and the process of art. Maskmaking becomes a more interesting art project because it has a significant purpose; the student begins to understand the reasons for creating such a mask.

## The Kpelie Mask of Senufo

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The Kpelie face mask used by Ivory Coast peoples provides an excellent study because of its numerous applications.

The Kpelie combines a variety of meanings and rituals from the Lo society. The society governs the social life of the Senufos. The face mask combines human and animal features with leglike formations on the bottom and armlike extensions on both sides. Carved palm nuts at the top of the mask symbolize the wood carving profession. <sup>3</sup>

These masks are worn at male, adolescent, and adult initiations. The Kpelie is also used during harvest festivals to thank the ancestors for a good crop, and during the funerary rites to lead the deceased spirit into the Land of the dead.

*(figure available in print form)*

**Figure 1:** Senufo Kpelie Face Mask

## The Carver and His Creation

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The largest number of masks are made of wood because of the natural abundance of forests. The carver often selects the different kinds of wood with various considerations in mind.

First, the African believes that the tree is living matter with a soul, so it is best suited to carry a life source. Second, he believes the tree possesses an inhabiting spirit. Before the tree is cut down, the carver often consults the diviner (spiritual guide), undergoes purification ceremonies, and offers a sacrifice to appease the spirit of the tree, in advance. As soon as the tree has been cut, the carver sucks some of the sap to achieve a brotherhood with the tree. Then he would leave it, for a day, so that the tree's spirit could find a new home elsewhere. The carver also believes that this spirit or force is transferred to the carving and increases the masks power. <sup>4</sup>

The talents of the carver resemble a master technician whose strong intuitive feeling for the wood itself, its grain and structural patterns, all play a role in the mask's creation.

Usually the fresh or green, soft wood is carved, then palm oil is rubbed in to slow down the drying process. Most of these masks are stained or colored with vegetable and earth dyes. The carver then softens the surface with organic materials such as leaves, animal skins, and sandstone. Often the surface shows sacrificial blood; this blood increases the power of the mask with its vital energy.

A mask maker may add to his wooden mask other materials, such as cloth, raffia, cowries shells, beads, teeth, bone, berries, vegetable fibers, and pieces of metal.

## Mask Designs and Forms

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Masks portray a variety of facial characteristics; they may be abstract, animal, or a combination of human features, with exaggerated frightening expressions or superstructures. The Africans' inventiveness in creating masks is further illustrated by the various forms, shapes, and sizes defined by the different types of masks.

The *Kpelie mask* is a fine example of a *face mask*. This mask is not directly attached to the dancer's head but is held to or in front of the face as part of the costume or head covering.

The *helmet mask* covers the head; it can be two or threedimensional. Some are carved from the full trunk of a tree and cover the entire head, resting on the shoulders.

The *headdress* is worn on the crown of the dancer's head, joining a costume which covers the entire body from head to toe. The dancer looks through an opening in the costume's material. The effect is to make the dancer appear unnaturally tall, confirming the belief that he is a supernatural spirit.

## Magical Mask Functions

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The African mask functions in two primary ways: one is for public ceremonies with audience participation; the other provides a private ceremony for members of a secret society. Common major rituals used by these tribes and others are rituals of myth, fertility, funerals, ancestor cults, and initiations.

Mythological animals, heroes, and the moon are represented in these rituals. Fertility and increase of humans, animals, or the earth are among the most vital concerns of the African. The African depends intensely upon harmony with nature and his gods, versus our modernized Western culture. Fertility also plays a part in agriculture and burial ceremonies.

## Agricultural Rituals

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The agricultural festivities are celebrated periodically throughout the different stages of the growing season, from clearing the land to filling the food stores.

The basic concept is the sacredness of the soil which they believe belong to the ancestors. A successful harvest depends on the benediction of these ancestors or upon the good will of the goddess of the earth. <sup>5</sup>

## The African Cult of Death

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Funeral rites or death cult practices, especially those dedicated to the survival of the soul, are among the most widespread rituals in the world. These cults are related to a wide variety of extremely important occurrences, such as the fertility of the earth, its animals and human beings, and the cult of ancestral spirits. These cults believe that those who die and are buried fertilize the earth with their souls. Therefore, the soil belongs to them, the ancestors.

## Secret Societies

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The Lo Society, or 'rites of passage' occur when a man moves from one phase to another in his life cycle. No transition is more important than when an adolescent passes to adult and becomes a responsible member of society. <sup>6</sup>

Masks which are used in secret societies such as the Kpelie mask and in various initiation ceremonies are kept secret. There are various types of secret societies, but their main purpose is to maintain and enforce the laws and exercise social and political control over the communal activities.

## Conclusion

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Cultural awareness is seen through a person's concept of himself, his culture, and its belief systems.

Just as the Africans celebrate their "rites of passage" from adolescence to adulthood, so do Americans. We, as Americans in our culture, often give lavish gifts or use alcohol as a symbol of our own "rites of passage" (18th or 21st birthday). Earning your driver's license, or receiving a car are symbols that also represent authority and responsibility. Alcohol brings about a physical and mental change of perception in our culture. At these important periods in our life we are supposed to be responsible persons in our society; we should have a job, drive a car, and be looking for a partner in our life.

What these symbols illustrate is that different people (African) cultures share the same cycle changes in their lives, birth, adolescence, adulthood, marriage, and death. Although these passages are similar in nature, our interpretations of these rituals or ceremonies differ in their cultural symbols.

## Classroom Activities

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The preceding history of the West African mask, its functions, and forms will be applied to the following classroom activities, and lesson plans. Through classroom discussion this information will lead to imaginative creations of details on their masks and reasons for those details being there.

Among the following list you have additional topics of mask functions that students will find interesting to use

in creating their individual mask:

1. Averting disasters.
2. Welcoming visitors.
3. Casting spells.
4. Warnings about fire.
5. Hunting animals.
6. Healing, Exorcism and fighting sorcerers.
7. Enforcing law.
8. Judging disputes.
9. Providing protective amulets.
10. Providing social control and well being.

This list numbers 110 can offer the students ideas as to what facial forms could be used in these various tribal functions.

## Lesson Plans

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### I. *Animal Face Masks* 5th-8th Grade

A. Objective: To create a hand held animal mask by applying clay and modeling it to represent an animal's face.

1. Discussion of masks: (*Magical Mask Functions*)
2. What type of animal would you like to be?
3. Chose their animal. (Have available photographs, drawings, or magazines of animals.)

### Day 1

#### B. *Creation of the Mask*

1. Form and model clay to 9" round paper plate. Eye holes may be cut through the plate or modeled with clay.
2. Model extensions such as ears, teeth, wings, etc., carefully.
3. Wrap with moist paper towels and plastic so that the clay will dry evenly. Let dry.

### Day 2

4. Apply a thin coat of vaseline to cover the entire clay mask.
5. Moisten your precut "Plaster of Paris" strips with water.
6. Drape them directly onto clay mask alternating horizontal to vertical 3 to 4 times. Let dry.

### Day 3

7. Gently remove the paper plate and clay. (The vaseline makes this possible.)
8. The mask is now a face formed from the clay. Trim any edges with scissors.
9. Paint your animal's face with either tempera or acrylic paints.

***Optional A wooden dowel 10 inches long may be secured at the base of the mask with heavyduty or superglue.***

#### II. *Human Helmet Mask* 7th & 8th Grade

- A. Objective: To create a helmet mask of a human being. This may be a realistic representation or a supernatural being, part human and animal, frightening or with exaggerated features.

### Day 1

#### B. *Creation of the Mask*

1. Inflate balloon (1315 inch diameter).
2. Prepare art paste (wallpaper paste) for your class. (20 minutes before).
3. Dip individual strips of precut newspaper into art paste mixture. Stir paste occasionally.
3. Alternately apply layers 13. Smooth them as you layer the strips.
4. Leave an opening approximately 45 inches in diameter where the balloon is tied.

### Day 2

5. Add layers 4 and 5. Let completely dry.

### Day 3

6. Pop the balloon and remove.
7. Paint with tempera or acrylics the type of face you desire.
8. Cut the eye and neck openings.

**Optional If desired for an interesting effect add yarn for hair, pipe cleaners for eye lashes, beads, etc.**

### III. *Arts Festival*

A. Objective: To create either a face or helmet mask for the festival. The festival can be devoted to famous artists your art class has studied: musicians, singers, painters, photographers, etc.

1. A photograph or picture of artist.
2. Research may be done on life and work.
3. Using lessons I and II. Create the mask.

### IV. *School Festival* (Jackie Robinson Festival)

A. Objective: To create masks in honor of our school's namesake, to boost school spirit, and morale including students, teachers, and administration.

## Art Teachers

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1. Mask or portrait contest of Jackie Robinson. (Prizes awarded)
2. Drawing contest of our school.
3. Display all entries throughout school.

## Additional Staff

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1. Research will be gathered about his life and sports career.
  - a. English, history, and physical education teachers will cooperate.
  - b. Sponsor a Jackie Robinson Face Contest similar to a spelling bee.
  - c. Students will write a short essay.
  - d. English teachers will arrange a play.
2. Ceremony or assembly with slide show or film about Jackie Robinson.
  - a. On his birthday or anniversary of school being built.

## Materials for Lesson Plans

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### I. *Animal Face Masks*

Stiff 9 inch diameter plates.  
510 lbs. of clay.  
510 lbs. of Plaster of Paris strips.  
Buckets (containers) for water.  
Vaseline (petroleum jelly).  
Superglue.  
10 inch wooden dowels 1/2 inch diameter.  
Assorted paint brushes.  
Tempera or acrylic paints.  
One pair scissors per student.

### II. *Human Helmet Mask*

Variety of balloons.  
Art paste.  
Buckets (containers).  
Assorted paint brushes.  
One pair scissors per student.  
Cut strips of newspaper.



## Optional Materials

Yarn.  
Beads.  
Pipe cleaners.  
Shells (sea or macaroni).  
Crepe paper instead of newspaper.

## Vocabulary List

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This vocabulary is important because it associates ART into the Language Arts (English). I have compiled a similar art vocabulary list each school year; my students have learned to enjoy their spelling test each week. Obviously, this improves their overall vocabulary and orients them to believe that art is not a separate subject but part of their whole creativity. ART is not just the fun of creating an object.

## Ideas and Examples of USAGES

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1. Design a crossword puzzle or a word search paper. My students have found them enjoyable and challenging.
2. Discuss and define these words; write a complete sentence using these words.
3. Have students write a short story about Africa, its people, the African mask, or carver by using these words.

## 5th and 6th Grade

African  
earth  
sacred  
animal  
enforce  
society  
beliefs

grain  
soul  
burial  
harvest  
source  
carve  
history  
spirit  
costume  
Kpelie  
surface  
creation  
mask  
symbol  
cult  
patterns  
tribe  
culture  
object  
variety  
disguise  
ritual  
worship

## 7th and 8th Grade

adolescent  
functions  
possesses  
agriculture  
harmony  
purification  
ancestor  
initiation  
religion  
artifact  
instrument  
sacrifice  
authority  
intuitive  
Senufo  
blessing  
Kpelie  
supernatural  
communication  
occurrence  
technician  
diviner  
organic  
transferred  
environment  
organization  
transition  
festival  
political  
various

## Organizations with Specialized Knowledge and Expertise

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I have visited most of these institutions and have found these named to be receptive for you and your class to visit. Contact either these named or the organization itself, due plan date and time.

AfroAmerican Cultural Center at Yale

Park Street, New Haven, CT.

African Art Collection of S. C. S. U.

Buley Library

Contact Mrs. Pospisil/Mr. Ziedenbergs, cocurators.

The Teacher Center

425 College Street, New Haven, CT.

Peabody Museum

Whitney Avenue, New Haven, CT.

## Books

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*Coloring Book on African Art*

Bellerophon Books \$1.50 ea.

36 Anacapa Street

Santa Barbara, CA 93101

*Made in West Africa*

Christine Price

New York: E.P. Dutton & Co. 1975

Illustrated with photos and drawings, this book gives information about West African Art in a great variety of media. (Elementary level)

## Notes

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1. Segy, Ladislav *Masks of Black Africa* pg. 73.
2. Willet, Frank *African Art* pg. 12.
3. Segy, Ladislav *Masks of Black Africa* pg. 34.
4. *Ibid.*, pg. 35.
5. *Ibid.*, pg. 36 (Agricultural).
6. *Ibid.*, pg. 28 (Initiation Ceremonies).

Figure 1. Sharon Lee Mullen

Drawing of Kpelie Mask from photograph in *Masks of Black Africa* , Ladislav Segy.

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2. Banks, George. *African Carvings*  
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Messner Certified Editions
4. McLeod, Malcolm. *The Ashanti*  
Museum of Natural History Press
5. McLeod, Malcolm, *Treasures of African Art*  
Abbeville Publications
6. Robbins, Warren. *African Art in American Collections*  
Frederick A. Praeger Publishers
7. Segy, Ladislav. *African Sculpture*  
Dover Publications
8. Segy, Ladislav. *Masks of Black Africa*  
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Chicago: Childrens Press, 1965

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New York: Greystone Press, 1967

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New York: Grosset and Dunlap 1959

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