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## **The Invented Kingdom or What to Do When a Sixth Grade Class is Giggling at an African Fertility Figure**

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The most impressive and fascinating aspect of African art is the strong visual message from the culture which created it. The message is that the culture presented to us is unlike our own to an extraordinary degree. The artifacts appear full of meaning. They have a grave and solemn presence or they hint at secret jokes. They embody a wealth of symbols but they are closed, sealed, wrapped in mysteries to the point of appearing ominous and menacing. This impression results when the viewer does not share the same culture and is not able to read the messages contained in those objects.

*(figure available in print form)*

Hogon priest and Blacksmith of Dogon Tribe Wood, 42.5 cm.

However, it is not difficult to appreciate the masks and sculpture for their design and form or for their vivid, animated style. On the other hand, sixth grade students are not sophisticated and do not find this level of art appreciation interesting enough to outweigh the problems they have dealing with the stylization of natural forms or the symbolic representation of beliefs and concepts.

Sixth grade students are selfconscious and easily embarrassed by the sexuality of some of the figures. They feel uneasy with the mystery or the unreadability of the symbolic meaning of the artifacts. And they do not respond to art in a manner other than as realistic portrayals of the world and its contents. They are impeded by their own cultural bias from enjoying or being intrigued by or wanting to know more about another culture's art.

No teacher wants students to dismiss a whole world of art because of biased attitudes. Yet, if I bring in objects or pictures of African tribal art, they greet these examples with embarrassment and ridicule. To them, tribal art is the clumsy, inept product of a benighted race of man. Consequently, it is impossible to discuss the stylization of natural forms, or the symbolism used to convey meaning when confronted with cries of, "Oh, we don't want to see that old junk!"

In order to study African art in depth and with serious intent, the students have to be willing to put aside their cultural bias. But more importantly, in order to be able to do so they have to develop an understanding of the culture that created the art. African art exists within its cultural context and cannot be understood without some preliminary groundwork in the study of the tribal life.

Until an atmosphere of receptivity is set up, the presentation and analysis of African art cannot be

accomplished. If African art is treated as foolish nonsense, then the logical corollary is that the culture from which it arises is a nonsensical one. I don't want the students to retain this false impression. The key to understanding the art is to understand the culture and understanding the culture is a key to receptivity of its art.

Therefore, I cannot overstate the importance of finding a device for putting the class into a receptive mood before they are shown African art. Empathy, the imaginative apprehension of another's condition or state of mind, is a method a teacher can use to assist students to a more open and sympathetic attitude towards the art. If students can imagine what it is like to be a member of an African tribe, they will come to realize that the ritual and ceremony have a logic of their own that can be understood through an empathic response to it. And they will understand that the artifacts whose purpose it is to complement or comment on a particular culture's rituals are no longer a closed secret world to laugh at or reject. The message is no longer unreadable.

A device that can be used to create an atmosphere of receptivity is a dialogue. Through a dialogue conducted by the teacher, an imaginary culture can be created by the students that emulates the origin of an African culture. The use of a dialogue allows the class as a whole to participate more fully in the development of an imaginary kingdom and ultimately to understand the creation of its art.

What follows is an edited transcription of a dialogue I conducted with my class. It is not, and because of the nature of the dialogue form, could not be repeated with the same results each time. I include it as an example of how the dialogue might be conducted.

*(figure available in print form)*

Dogon—Kanago Dance Mask

## THE INVENTED KINGDOM

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A transcription of the dialogue between the teacher and the sixth grade students at Conte Arts Magnet School.

T signifies teacher

S signifies student

Imagine that all of you just dropped out of the skies and you find yourselves in Africa. There are 17 of you. You don't know each other. You come from nowhere. You have never seen other people. You are all starting from nothing. You have no past memories about how to remain but you feel it's safer to stay with each other rather than wander away by yourselves.

It's getting dark. You are all tired and hungry. You decide to remain where you are for awhile. What happens now? What's the most important thing that needs to be done?

S We need food.

T Okay. What kind of food can you find?

S We can kill a gazelle.

T How? You have nothing with you.

S We can eat cherries. We can throw a rock at a deer.

Allright let's now say somebody gets the idea of throwing a rock at a deer and kills it. Now that is very impressive. One person has provided food for everyone else so that person is now distinguished from the rest of the group. What position does he or she have in this group?

S The Hunter.

Right. S/he is the hunter. S/he is also the most inventive or creative. S/he thought of putting two different things together, a rock and a deer and made use of that combination to provide food for all of you. Now it's getting dark. You are all going to stay here and sleep but hear strange noises in the dark that you don't understand and they scare you. Someone has to stand guard to wake you all in case of danger. Who do you turn to for protection?

S Ghostbusters!

T Okay now lets get serious again.

S The Hunter.

T Yes. So by providing food and guarding you this person has become even more important. So what does s/he become?

S Chief!

T Okay. It's morning now. You all got safely through the night. Now what?

S We're hungry.

T Okay. The chief goes out with a rock and maybe other people search for berries. But what if everyone decides to stay and live in this spot. What do they need to do?

S Eat.

T Yes but what else?

S Is there water nearby?

T Yes but what else?

S (no idea)

T Let's say someone gets the idea that if they take long blades of grass and braid them, they can make ropes and what if they see that if they tie sticks together with the ropes they. . . .

S Oh I see, they can build a wall to protect themselves.

T Yes and what else can they use this idea of rope and sticks for?

S Oh. I knowhouses!

Yes. They have decided to stay so they need to protect themselves from rain and heat and wild animals. So today you all start building houses. Now you have food and shelter and a chief that you can rely on so let's move on now. What if one of you discovers that if the seeds from the fruit are planted in the ground a new plant starts to grow. Now you have a better reason for staying where you are. You have to wait for the plants to mature so that you can harvest them. Also you have a lot of worries. Is it going to rain enough? Will the sun shine enough? Will the wild animals wreck the garden? Who can you turn to for help?

S The Chief.

T Can s/he be responsible for ordering the right kind of weather?

S No.

T So what can you do to try to make sure you get a good harvest?

S (no idea)

Well think for moment. You need help with the weather. Getting the weather to do what you want it to do is a pretty big undertaking. It's impossible maybe. But you don't want to be stuck with that so if you can't get help from other humans who can help you?

S We could write to America for help. We could pray for rain!

America doesn't exist yet. But you can pray for rain. Who do you pray to? Someone or some god that can insure that you have an abundant harvest right? Now you have the start of a religion. You have a god of harvest. Perhaps now you begin to ask other gods for help. Maybe a god for the hunters to pray to and devise ceremonies for. A long time has passed now and the chief is old and he dies. Now this event is very upsetting. He was the leader so you want to do something special for him. He was an important figure so what can you do for him? You don't want to just throw his bones over your shoulder and forget about him.

S We could put his bones in a pot or in a hollow log.

T Yes. What else?

S Put it in a special place.

T Yes but What else?

S We could squeeze berries and make dye and paint the log.

T Right or you could carve designs in the log that would make it special.

S Where do we get the tools to carve with?

Sharp stones or charcoal hardended sticks of wood. Okay. So you find some way of decorating the log or

T pot to put his bones in so what would you call this activity? What are you doing when you are decorating a log with designs?

S (no idea)

T Why would you put the Chief's bones in a pot decorated in a special way or why would you put his bones in a hollow log painted with designs or carvings?

S Because he is special.

Yes he is special and you want to remember him. What do you call all this decorating and carving? You are making something special or making something that is set apart from nature or natural things you might see about you. What are you doing when you set something apart from nature by decorating it?

S (no idea)

T Now you are creating art!

S Oh yes!

You are making special things to remind you of important people and events. You make extraordinary masks catch the attention of the gods. You don't want to put the Chief's bones in just any old hollow log. You might later forget and use that log for fire wood so you have to decorate it to set it apart from all other old logs. Now when you start making your own masks special you have to choose what your mask is for. Is it a hunting mask, or a harvest mask, or an ancestor mask? The old chief that died would now become an ancestor. An ancestor is someone of your family that died long ago but has famous when s/he was alive and now remembered and prayed to for guidance or help.

You have to decorate your mask so that other people can be able to understand what it is used for. So that if it's a harvest mask, maybe you want to represent those things that will help make for a good harvest—sun or lightening bolts to represent the things needed for a good harvest—or seed designs or rain drop designs. Or if it's a hunting mask perhaps you need to put horns on your mask to represent the animal you want to kill for food or perhaps you want to make the mask look like an animal that you yourself don't eat but one that you have watched hunt and know that it is a very good hunter. Okay let's start!

*(figure available in print form)*

Dogon Satimbe mask for Female Yasiain who can be received into men's awa society.

In the dialogue we went very quickly from having dropped out of the skies to picking berries and hunting deer and then on to setting up an agarian society. What is going on here is actually a time trip through the origins of man from the prehistoric huntergatherer to the agricultural settlements of 30,000 years ago. I chose to conduct the dialogue as though we were starting at the beginning of time when man appeared on earth because I wanted to emphasize the fact that although civilizations and peoples have created a rich variety of cultures through the passage of time, these cultures are all variations on a single theme. We are all human beings, however strange we might appear to one another. We all went through the same process of evolution and made the same moves from simple to more complex societies. This is an important point to be aware of. When we invent a kingdom in the manner of the dialogue, we are also reinventing man and living through all of his stages of development.

It might be helpful to sketch out the chronological sequence of events in the origin and evolution of man so

that the teacher will be better prepared to conduct the dialogue along these lines. In my research, using Desmond Clark, Richard Leakey, and Graham Clark as primary sources, I was most interested in searching for explanations for the transitional leaps from early hunter-gatherer bands, to farming settlements, to first villages then cities then to kingdoms in order to lead the students through the same sequence of events.

Three million years ago, early homonids were living in Africa in small bands in a mixed landscape of rolling grasslands and open woodlands by either a lake or river. Their food consisted primarily of nuts, berries, grubs and meat scavenged from predatory animals. The tools they used were probably digging sticks to unearth roots and tubers and rocks picked up at random for pounding hard shelled seeds. They probably made some sort of shelter for themselves out of reeds or wove mats to sleep on, and had reed or animalhide containers to hold plant foods in as they made their way back to camp. Prehistoric man was already living in a social context. The evidence for this assumption lies in the discovery of numerous campsites found close together. Living together in social units meant that there had to have been cooperation and sharing amongst the members of the band. Judging from the size and type of wear of the molars of fossil homonid man, their diet consisted mainly of tough plant fibers. The usual picture of prehistoric man waving a bloody bone about is a false one. Very early man was primarily a vegetarian.

I have probably written the word 'probably' more often than would seem necessary, but the fossil remains of early homonids can be gathered into a rather large sized shoe box, and the conjectures of archaeologists are based on the remains of artifacts and bones and what we know of the social habits of chimpanzees and orangutans in the wild and huntergatherer communities such as the King of the Kalahari in Africa and Bushman tribes of Australia that are still in existence. There are many instances of observing apes weaving vines and grasses together to build either nests or to while away the time. So it seems reasonable to assume that homonids were able to perform the same operation. The presentday hunter gatherer bands are invaluable models of a similar life style to that of the prehistoric bands of man. At any rate the word 'probably' will continue to crop up, but it is a 'probably' based on the fossil record and models of actual cultures rather than idle conjecture.

The homonids of from two to one million years ago had gradually developed a well defined stone tool industry and had gone from picking up the odd stone and giving it a few whacks, to making core tools, flakes and blades for the purpose of scraping animal skins and cutting meat. The tools themselves tell us that the ability to hunt successfully had been accomplished. The ability to hunt either in pairs or in groups with spears and other projectiles meant that they no longer depended on scavenging for meat. Throughout the long period of time in which prehistoric man lived as huntergatherers, what was developing and being refined was the social evolution of man. Living in bands necessitated cooperation and sharing. One example of this social evolution was the refinement of knowledge of the habits of prey animals and an expanding store of information about plants, which ones are poisonous, which ones could be used for medicinal purposes, which ones were good to eat and at what time they should be harvested. The collection of knowledge demanded a language to communicate the experience to others. It presupposes the desire to communicate, to share and to help others. The accumulating wisdom and the strong social bonds were interdependent.

Here, 300,000 to 100,000 years ago, is a picture of what a more advanced huntergatherer society might have looked like. The campsites consisted of huts grouped around a central clearing. This open space was probably used by the people for storytelling, sharing meat and dancing. The people migrated with the herd animals, following wellworn trails to other watering holes or moving whenever it was time to harvest some wild plant food. They also, like similar cultures today, had an encyclopedia knowledge of plants and animals and were the original natural scientists of their day. The numbers in a band remained around 25. The extent of land,

about 5 square miles that is hunted and foraged, can only support about that many people comfortably. All of these bands were linked together to form a tribe of perhaps 500 people. The advantages of social grouping far outweighed the friction of 'day to day' living because the group environment provided protection from predators and educational opportunities for the young. Their tools became more specialized and more finely carved but the variety did not expand. Their way of life was stable, and did not demand a complex array of implements. The earliest indication of artistic impulse that has been found so far is an ox rib decorated with double curves found in France 300,000 years ago.

The first permanent settlements of 40,000 years ago may have been storage areas that would contain harvests of wild grain or nuts the people could safely leave behind while they followed the migratory herds of deer. As with nomadic peoples today, the bands of people had to limit possessions to what could be carried from settlement to settlement. The miniature figurines from this time attest to this fact, as small objects could be carried more easily.

The last or latest Ice Age retreated 12,000 years ago and at this time the shift towards agriculture became more pronounced. The move toward permanent settlements made the production of artifacts on both a larger scale and quantity possible. The results of archaeological digs in what was once Mesopotamia show from the lowest level upwards, a steady progression from wild cereal grains to cultivated, domestic varieties, and from a diet of deer and gazelle to goats and sheep. There are the remains of house foundations, each with its silo and grain bins, made first of mud brick and later of fired clay bricks. In later settlements, of 6,000 to 4,500 B.C., which could accommodate many more people, there is evidence of utensils for cooking, eating and storage of food, needles, belt buckles of copper, clay figurines, and cosmetics, mirrors of black obsidian, and ornaments of metal and bone. The craft industries were housed in separate buildings, a separation which meant that people had begun to specialize in workstyles. Crude channels were out to irrigate the fields.

What reasons are there for the transition from a huntergatherer society to an agrarian one? Migration of people moving into less hospitable terrains or into colder climates could have forced people to turn to food production and storage to a greater extent rather than exploiting the supply of wild food. Also the possibility exists that huntergatherers were involved in food production and storage to a greater degree than was previously thought. As huntergatherer societies became more complex with the arrival of the fully modern man, *Homo sapiens* 40,000 years ago, alliances and the desire for power involving the exchange of food and goods may have spurred people on to producing more food than they needed for themselves. There is no abrupt switch to new way of living, but rather a gradual concentration on agriculture.

Just as it is impossible to find the 'missing link' between ape and man because of the numerous stages of development, so it is not unlikely that the agricultural revolution took many forms in many places. Due to locale, customs of people, and climactic changes, it too went through many gradual steps from late techniques of storage by huntergatherers to nomadic pastoralism. The agrarian culture progressed from harvesting wild grain to settled landowners keeping livestock for a supply of meat and producing and cultivating domesticated cereal grain for themselves and for barter.

This is a very sketchy outline of the evolution of man. I include it as a guideline of the order of advancement in that evolutionary process. What I emphasize in the dialogue I conduct with my class is the cultural evolution; the awakening of selfawareness as evidenced by prehistoric burial, the beginning of ritual, myth, and religion: and the artifacts that are an expression of these rituals and myths.

After the dialogue is brought to a close with the arrival of the agrarian society, the class begins to create artifacts for their invented community in the form of ritual dance masks, papier mache figures, or depictions of



the animals that live in their environment. To help give them ideas as to how visually to use symbols to represent their 'messages', I show them pictures of African sculpture. Now they are so busy looking at someone else's representation of animals or people for ceremonial purposes and searching for ways to represent the earth or rain or an image that will recall a myth of their own making that they no longer feel that they are on the outside looking into a peculiar world that makes no sense to them.

After the students completed the artifacts of their invented kingdom, they suggested and then created a three dimensional jungle in the art gallery at the school so that they could participate more fully in the environment that they had invented. It had become a real experience, and demanded a real setting.

*(figure available in print form)*

Dogon Grand Masks dancing.

Once the problem of the students' cultural bias is overcome by presenting art through its cultural context, the teacher can use the enthusiasm generated by the invented kingdom to begin a discussion of the art of a real African tribal society.

In discussing an artifact from an African tribe the methodology of material culture is a valuable tool. Material culture seeks to gain information about a culture through an analysis of that culture's objects. These things that are manmade can reveal a great many things both on a conscious and unconscious level about the society that created them. This method of analysis is clearly delineated by Jules Prown in his paper entitled; "Mind in Matter" An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method" in the Spring 1982 issue of *Winterthur Portfolio* .

Starting with a description of the object, the method proceeds from general to more particular details as to material, articulation of parts, iconography, and formal analysis including light, color, line and shape, and texture. A second step involves the interaction between viewer and object, leading to deductions that can be arrived at through an imaginative attempt to make a connection with the object through sensory engagement, intellectual and emotional response. A third and final step is speculation, a summing up of the evidence of the other two steps and the formulation of new hypotheses or questions.

*(figure available in print form)*

Dogon Rider Wood, 32.5 cm

An art object can be passed from student to student in a classroom. That object can then be explored in a systematic way. The method not only helps students to begin to put into words what they see before them, but it allows them to use the vocabulary of art in describing the object. Also the method helps the students to discover things about the culture that created the object.

On the following page is an example of the method in outline form.

# MATERIAL CULTURE METHOD OF ANALYSIS

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## Outline

### *Step One*

Physical inventory

1. material
2. measurement
  - a. height
  - b. weight
  - c. volume
3. articulation
  - a. how many parts
  - b. how pieces are joined
4. iconography
  - a. images that are recognizable
  - b. words, if any, written on object
5. two dimensional observation
  - a. lines
  - b. outlines
  - c. patterns
  - d. shapes—triangles, squares, circles etc.
6. three dimensional observation
  - a. overall volume
  - b. shapes—cubes, cylinders, spheres etc.
7. color



## *Step Two*

### Deduction

#### 1. intellectual

a. what is it

b. what is it doing

#### 2. sensory

how objects feel—rough, smooth, soft, hard etc.

#### 3. emotional

how viewer responds to object

## *Step Three*

### Speculation

1. observations on what kind of society produced this object

2. comparisons with other societies

## **OTHER USES FOR THE DIALOGUE METHOD**

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## **SOME SUGGESTIONS**

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The unit was designed with a studio art course in mind, but the dialogue method of getting students into a receptive frame of mind has other uses as well.

### **History of Art**

After an invented kingdom is created, the teacher can move more easily to a study of African art, showing either slides or pictures of a particular tribe's art. The teacher can explain how those artifacts are symbolic expressions of the religion and culture of those people and also how the actual history of the tribe is translated into myth, and represented in visual terms by the use of symbols.

*Example: The Dogon Tribe of West Africa*

The Dogon are a people who live on the cliffs of the Bandiagara escarpment in West Africa at the center of the bend in the Niger River in Mali. They are farmers who live in widely scattered villages. They do not have a centralized government or a king. What binds them together is their communal participation in the sacred dances and ceremonies and rituals of the Grand Mask or Sigi and in other religious ceremonies.

Within the Grand Mask resides the spirit of the first man who died on earth. The Dogon believe that they were once immortal but that long ago one of their ancestors committed a grave sin and was punished for it by the gods who made him and all his descendants mortal. The Sigi dance is performed every 60 years to coax the spirit to enter the new mask carved especially for it.

The Dogon were driven from their previous home in the Nile Valley by Islamites. They relocated in West Africa and began new farming communities.

As an example of how history turns into myth, the Dogon explain their origins thus: The Blacksmith of the Dogon came down from the sky bearing an ark that held the first grain, the tools of farming, and the ancestors of all men on horseback, and all the animals and plants.

*(figure available in print form)*

Their art is primarily the depiction of mythical events and heroes. In some cases because one figure has to represent an entire legend, such as the story of man's origins, the art is more abstract than other African art. The figure stands as a sign rather than as a visual representation of the event, almost like a three dimensional hieroglyphic.

*(figure available in print form)*

Dogon Iron Sculpture. Iron, 20 cm.

All the people of the Dogon Tribe are artists. They all carve and decorate their own masks. Only the priest, who is also the village's blacksmith, with the help of two acolytes is allowed to carve the Grand Mask which is a hidden secret mask topped by a 30 foot high pole.

The art work on this and other pages is by the author.

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