



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1991 Volume II: The Family in Art and Material Culture

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## **Family Life Among the Ashanti of West Africa**

Curriculum Unit 91.02.04  
by Peter Herndon

I am a World History teacher at the Cooperative High School in New Haven. Each year my students challenge me with the question: “Why don’t you teach us more Black History, Mr. Herndon?” I have found that even though textbook publishers are including more chapters about Africa, the students seem to want more than the general facts that a survey course can provide. My students keep asking me what “life is really like” for young African people. In an attempt to help them answer that question, I have chosen to research a West African culture, the Ashanti (also “Ashante”), very rich in tradition, and about which a great deal has been written and is available. I hope that through the lessons presented in this two- to four-week unit, students and teachers alike will not only learn about Africa, but be challenged to examine our own family and educational values in light of African beliefs and practices that have endured for centuries.

I am enthusiastic about the art and “artifactual” approach to learning that the lessons in this unit contain. Many students in my classes are curious about art and artifacts, and are somewhat willing to speculate about them. Objects and visual images often can provide a focal point that brings out insightful comments and revealing observations. Interesting objects can appeal to shyer, less verbal, or less academically oriented students in ways that tend to actively involve them in the educational process. If successful, these lessons will challenge students to participate in a critical thinking process that will prove useful beyond the history classroom and that can affect their learning in other academic disciplines.

Ancient people of Africa became very skilled at fashioning objects of a practical nature made of materials close-at-hand. Most of these artifacts served a utilitarian rather than ornamental purpose. Yet many of these pieces, useful in family life, have a grace and beauty which raise some fundamental questions, such as: What relationship exists, if any, between beauty and function? What do these objects reveal about the persons who created them and the culture in which they were created? What standards of beauty prevailing in that culture do these objects communicate to us? How do these esthetic values compare with those of our own culture? As teacher and student learn together to become observers of objects (bowls, furniture, fertility figures), we may discover that the study of the art of a culture is a valid way to gain insights into that culture and its values.

My unit will focus on family customs among the Ashanti, a tribal group living in Ghana near the West African coast. The Ashanti are a matrilineal people, i.e., an individual’s descent and claim to land is traced through the mother’s lineage. Women have a great deal of freedom and are highly respected. The child, according to the Ashanti, inherits his or her blood from the mother and his spirit from the father. Even though descent is traced through the mother, it is the father’s responsibility to name his children, provide them with an education, and

marry off his sons. Among the Ashanti, children may become “ranked” (given status) through their mother’s lineage, but there are certain titles, such as royal titles, which can only be handed down through the paternal line.

To illustrate how objects can lead to speculation about cultural standards, I shall ask the class to describe an Ashanti figure called an *akuaba* (or akaba). We observe that it is made of polished wood, about 13 inches in height, and stained black. The head is in the shape of a large flat disc. The forehead is high, the nose is flat and the mouth is small. The head is held up by a slender neck, which appears to be composed of a series of rings. The body, neck and arms form the shape of a cross, the arms having no joints or hands. The base is circular, which allows the object to be free-standing. When we compare several figures, we notice that facial expressions and markings vary. Breasts are small, and some figures have a protruding navel. What does this stylized piece of sculpture tell us about Ashanti women? What possible use could it have to the Ashanti? What hidden symbolic meanings can we uncover? For a more detailed series of questions and possible student responses, see the “Strategies” section below. The students will discover that this Ashanti figure is carried on the back of an expectant mother during her pregnancy so that her child will be beautiful, having the same qualities of “beauty” as those expressed in the carving. The figures are also used by sterile women who hope, by keeping an *akuaba* with them, to become pregnant. Little girls often learn how to take care of children by playing with *akuaba* dolls. Sometimes these figures would be decorated with beads or precious stones, indicating ownership by a woman of wealth.

Interesting cultural beliefs and practices may lend themselves to engaging role-playing situations in the classroom. For example, it is an Ashanti belief that the parent, not the child, bears total responsibility for the child’s actions until the child reaches puberty. How, then, might a group of family members handle a misbehaving child who threatens by his actions to disgrace the family name because he will not stop stealing eggs from the neighbors? What threats (“the ancestor spirits will be displeased with you”), bribes (“you will be excused from weeding the garden for an entire month”), or proverbs and fables might the “family council” members discuss among themselves to discourage the child’s inappropriate behavior? This type of role play not only familiarizes students with Ashanti family practices, but emphasizes a cooperative family model of conflict resolution. Another entertaining role-play for female students might be a group of adolescent girls who advise a younger girl who is preparing for her “coming-of-age” ceremonies the next day. In this way students could review what we have discovered about female standards of beauty in regards to hair styles, jewelry, dress, make-up and other aspects of outward appearance.

This unit will attempt to involve students in activities that will give them an opportunity to observe and describe art objects, and to create an art object of their own, based on what they have learned about Ashanti objects. Through the creative process, and with the assistance of our very talented art teacher, students will have the chance to participate in “living history,” as they learn skills and methods that will help them make something uniquely their own, and then help them to analyze and even criticize what they have made.

I hope that this unit encourages teachers and students to become more active learners, and that the ideas and suggestions in this unit are worthwhile in helping cultural history “come alive” in New Haven’s classrooms.

## Unit Objectives

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This unit of study contains certain concepts associated with the topic which students will be expected to understand and use:

### *Student Vocabulary List*

adinkra cloth	Kings Prempeh I and II
afena (sword)	akuduo pot
afenatene (sword)	Kumasi, the Ashanti capital
Akan	
akuaba (doll figure)	legends and myths
Ashante (Ashanti)	
Ashanti Wars	masks, ceremonial and ancestor
asuman (priest)	matrilineal
amulet	“Mother Earth”
ancestor spirits	
Asantahene, the Ashanti king Nyame (God)	
ceremony	
chief	okra (the soul)
clan	Okomfo Anokye
cowrie shells (money)	Opoku Ware (chief)
culture	Osei Tutu (chief)
ethnocentrism	Queen Mother
forowa pot	ritual
	royal stools
Ghana	
Golden Stool	Silver Stool
	status
juju (magic charms)	sunsum (spirits)
Kente cloth	taboo
kinship	tribunals

One primary goal of this teaching unit is to actively involve students in the creative learning process by helping them to develop their powers of observation and by encouraging them to evaluate an “artifact” of their own. I see this as a step-by-step process, beginning with simple observation of familiar objects. I hope to teach my students to observe objects and pictures and do detailed objective descriptions; then to use analytical skills to help them interpret what they are seeing through the eyes of the object’s creator. Through this object analysis, I hope to create an appreciation of the problems the artist had to solve, and an understanding of why he or she created the object in a particular way. In other words, I hope to challenge students to feel an empathy with the Ashanti artist, and by so doing, create in the students a similar feeling for the people of the Ashanti culture.

Where do the Ashanti live? What kind of history do they have? Why are they worth learning about? I will expect students in my course to be able to locate Ashanti territory, identify natural boundaries and landforms,

and know about natural and mineral resources. They will become familiar with the rich history and traditions of the Ashanti as a representative West African culture, including an exposure to Ashanti political, economic, religious and social institutions. Students will come to appreciate how intricate and rich West African civilizations are and were.

The primary emphasis of this mini-course is on familiarizing students with Ashanti family life and customs, specifically through coming to understand the use of Ashanti art and artifacts. Students will become familiar with Ashanti betrothal and marriage customs, birthing rituals, and how Ashanti parents instruct their children in Ashanti ways. Students will distinguish between the pastimes of childhood, youth and young adulthood, and learn about the added responsibilities that accompany the privileges of each new stage in life.

I hope that my students will learn to empathize with Ashanti young people who face having to choose between the “old ways” of cultural tradition and the “new ways” of western civilization, and to see the “clash of cultures” as a genuine dilemma in a young person’s life that may help them to confront similar struggles for self-esteem and self-worth in a world of shifting and value systems and rampant materialism. Admittedly these goals are broad and far-reaching. As a teacher of inner-city high school students whose lives are often at risk, I believe social studies courses must try to challenge young people to set worthwhile goals for themselves, despite pressures of circumstance and peer relationships. By role-playing choices others must make, though in a different time and place, some of my students will be faced with the notion that to make responsible choices is to take a step toward a responsible future.

## Strategies, Lesson Outlines

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I plan to introduce the Ashanti culture to the students in several stages. First, map-reading and map-making. Second, poetry and proverb appreciation, including myths and legends. Third, art and artifact analysis. Fourth, family life. And, last, a course art project. A brief description follows of how I plan to teach each of these subjects within the unit. The question on which I want the students to stay focused throughout the course is, “Who are the Ashanti?” This major question assumes at least three related questions: Where do they live? What ideas are important to them? What do the objects they make tell us about their culture?

The first lesson is a geography lesson. Students will review some basic geographical concepts (direction, scale of miles, latitude and longitude, legend), and learn to use topographical symbols and place them accurately on a map (symbols such as those for mineral deposits, grassland, forest, swampland). Students will be expected to “read” the map and write an essay speculating about the physical environment and possible climate, diet, possibilities for trade, vocations, and even political structure. What area(s) on the map would be ideal for settlement and why? This activity should “warm-up” students to think inductively, an important process used throughout this unit.

Next, we will discuss Ashanti poetry and proverbs in order to discover something about their values. A sample poem follows:

“A charge to keep they have  
The human race to glorify  
All other neighbors to save

And raising human esteem high.” (Tufuo, p.7)

This poem about Ashanti heritage reveals that the Ashanti have set several important goals for themselves. The students should be able to identify these goals and determine some ways they might be able to accomplish these goals. Also, what does this poem tell us about Ashanti regard for themselves, their neighbors and their culture? Students will subsequently learn that Ashanti feel very fortunate to have been born into such a highly advanced civilization. The Ashanti are proud people who have struggled to achieve a unique identity among their neighbors in Ghana, among the Akan people. One author has put it this way:

“The Ashanti thinks that by being born Ashanti he has been ordained by deity to bring into the world all that is the best in the human race.” (Tufuo, p.66)

A sample proverb: “if no time is allowed for cooking, one eats half-cooked food.” What does this tell us about the Ashanti view of being in a hurry, compared to considering matters carefully and planning ahead? What does this tell us not only about food preparation but also about considering the importance of what a person says before he or she says it? Another proverb that applies to family members is this one: “Too much or too frequent undue criticism distracts and disrupts.” An Ashanti poem about courage says: “Death is better than disgrace.” Students should be interested to learn that very few Ashanti soldiers were ever captured alive, and that deserters in the army were no longer considered as men in the village. The women of the village sing a song, “Deserter, may Kobiri (an important goddess) kill you if you speak as a man to a woman.” The Ashanti also believe that ancestral spirits are everywhere, and cowardice (or any other misdeed) will be found out and punished, here in the hereafter. “True justice is God’s justice.” The omnipresent spirits of good and evil will, the Ashanti believe, mete out rewards and punishment; as a result, everyone tries to do right.

Lesson Three is an introduction to Ashanti artifacts. The students will look at a slide of a well-worn *akua-ba* figure (see Introduction above) and asked to respond to a series of questions designed to help them observe and draw conclusions about what they see. If this object were alive, could it speak? (Yes, it has a mouth; no, it’s not human.) Could it see? (Yes, it has eyes.) Could it hear? (No, it does not have ears.) Could it walk? (No, it has no legs.) And so on. Next, does this object remind you more of a lollipop, a cross, or a doll? (Each are appropriate responses; one has a more “human” element to it.) Would you want to touch or pick up this object? (Yes, it seems sad. No, it’s old and mean looking.) What seems to be missing from the object? (Hands, legs, ears, hair.) What do you notice most about it? (Large head, sad eyes, small mouth, high forehead, curved eyebrows, holes along the top, etc.) What shapes do you notice? (Oval-shaped head, oval eyes, round breasts and navel.) Teacher should explain that certain shapes had special meaning to the Ashanti. For example, a circle shape meant either God or the male spirit, a religious meaning. In noticing which objects are round, what might that tell you about Ashanti beliefs? (The Lesson Plan section below has a complete list of the Ashanti shapes and symbols.) Next, the students view several more slides of *akua-ba* figures to demonstrate similarities and differences. Following this, a slide of three *akua-ba* figures, of which only one is authentic; this helps students review what they have learned to observe. The teacher at some point informs the students that these objects symbolize certain Ashanti characteristics of beauty, and that pregnant women carry them on their backs during their pregnancy as a way of assuring a healthy and beautiful child.

Next, the teacher shows slides of other Ashanti artifacts to the class. (See Lesson Plan section below.) There

are four types of objects for the students to discuss: First, Ashanti stools (the Golden Stool and a chieftan's stool) which contain ancestor spirits, and represent the power and unity of the Ashanti chiefs; they are purely ceremonial, not functional; Second, pictures of two pots, one ceremonial (a *kuduo*) and one practical (a *forowa*); Third, two pictures of ceremonial swords (*afena*), which are richly decorated; Lastly, several pictures of animal carvings made of brass and gold, used as gold weights. The first stage of observation should be very general and free-wheeling, describing the objects and speculating about the object's usefulness. (What kind of problems might an artist encounter in creating such an object?) Next, the teacher will assign students to look more carefully at one particular item and analyze it in more detail. This can be done individually or in small groups. Afterward students report back to the entire class, describing the objects in appropriate ways. At the end of the reporting time, the class makes up a "class list" of characteristics that we all feel are important in describing an object. The class then tries to organize our questions into categories: (1) Descriptive (size, shapes, colors, etc.); (2) Interpretative (purpose or use, personal viewpoint and interest in object, deductions about the people who might have used it); (3) Speculative (possible hidden meanings). This final list of questions serves as the same checklist used when students analyze our "test object" the *akua-ba* figure, already described above.

For the "formal analysis" exercise, the students observe a slide of a free-standing sculpture of an Ashanti woman who is pregnant. They will be expected to describe this object on paper, using guidelines we have developed in class. The students then will be asked to compare standards of beauty among three cultures, using slides of an Ashanti *akua-ba* doll, a Barbie doll and an African American baby doll. What are the inherent difficulties of being less than "ideal?" How important is physical beauty in our culture? (Refer to the \$millions spent on cosmetics annually.) Why is this so? (Influence of the media, beauty pageants and commercials.) Who is hurt (if anyone) by failure to meet "industry standards?" (What about sensitive people who can't compete in the areas of slimness, youth, clothing styles, etc.?) What other standards of beauty, besides physical beauty, are there? (Give examples of people with "inner beauty.") Are these qualities important in a culture? Are they important to you? Ask students to give examples of people with admirable qualities whom they see as possible "role models." The teacher should remind students that Ashanti names describe a person's character and that a "good name is better than riches."

Following this, the teacher assigns students to bring in objects or pictures of modern objects that fit into one of the four "types" or categories discussed above in regard to the Ashanti, e.g., stools, pots, weapons, decorative objects. Students describe their objects to the class, using descriptive methods we have already practiced. (What is the size of the object? Its shape(s)? Its color(s)? What material(s) is it made of?) Students encourage each other to ask interpretative questions. (What is the thing's primary use? Its secondary use(s)? Is this a necessary or a luxury item?) In some cases, ask speculative questions also.

During the final few days of the unit, the class will spend time discussing Ashanti family and cultural traditions from a "problem-solving" point of view. To the Ashanti, a successful marriage is very important, and divorce is rarely permitted. How does one go about insuring that a marriage will last? Students will discover how carefully the parents of the couple-to-be investigate the character and private life of the intended bride or groom. Also, there is a three-year traditional "live-in" arrangement before the formal marriage ceremony takes place. According to the Ashanti, what is a "good husband?" A "good wife?" How does a woman prepare for the birth of a baby, and what if she has difficulty becoming pregnant? (A discussion of the *akua-ba* figure's usefulness here.) Students will learn that men and women eat from separate common dishes at mealtime; and that mothers carefully inspect the children's hands and teeth for cleanliness before meals. Women bathe often, sometimes as many as three times a day, to guard against offensive body odors, a possible cause for divorce among the Ashanti!



Life among Ashanti is communal, not communistic. Every Ashanti is expected to be his “brother’s keeper,” so it is expected that good Ashanti will involve themselves in the affairs of their family members or neighbors. Privacy is, therefore, rare and guarded jealously.

The remainder of the narrative of my unit will treat Ashanti history, diet, legal standards, religious rituals and attitudes towards success. In a culture where parents are highly respected and regarded there is an even higher loyalty, expressed by an Ashanti maxim:

“If power is for sale, sell your mother to obtain it. Once you have the power there are several ways of getting her back.” (Tufuo, p.26)

We can assume that among the Ashanti, that whatever sacrifice is necessary, it is important to “go for the gold.” The Ashanti desire to achieve status and political power through obtaining property and wealth is very strong. To be recognized and held in high esteem by the community is a worthy goal, but what of the methods used to obtain such recognition?

## **The Ashanti: A Brief History**

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The Ashanti created an empire the size of Great Britain, 24,560 square miles, by the time the first Europeans, the Portuguese, tried to fight against the military might of these proud people in 1482. In ancient times the Ashanti unified many tribal units and set up a strong government among the Akan-speaking people in the middle part of what is today the independent nation of Ghana, along the western coast of Africa.

The first king to organize the Ashanti confederacy into a military state was king Osei Tutu who reigned from 1700 to 1730 from the modern city of Kumasi. Tutu’s adviser, the Priest Anokye originated the myth of the Golden Stool as a divine symbol of unity. Anokye declared that this Golden Stool contained the spirit and soul of the entire Ashanti nation; the Stool became the symbol of the new nation’s authority. According to Ashanti legend, Priest Anokye called down the Stool from Heaven in a black cloud. Amid loud peals of thunder, the Stool slowly descended and rested on King Tutu’s knees without touching the ground. To this day, the sacred stool is never to touch the ground, and has its own special chair to rest on. According to Anokye, the greatness of the Ashanti was embodied in the stool. It was never to be captured by an enemy or be destroyed. Should this happen, the Ashanti nation would fall. (Budu-Acquah, pp. 27-28)

Using the Golden Stool as a unifying force, the Ashanti conquered its rival neighbors, many of whom were past masters of the Ashanti. Success followed success, victory followed victory. The Ashanti seemed invincible until 1730, when Osei Tutu was killed by the enemy while crossing a forbidden river on his way to conquer his rival kingdom, the Akim.

After Osei Tutu died, King Opoku Ware kept the Ashanti resolve to struggle to maintain their hard-won dominance and kept expanding the Ashanti kingdom. They began to move to the Atlantic Coast, and conquered the people there to protect Ashanti safety and to expand trade with the European nations.

In a series of wars against the Fante, a coastal people who had a monopoly of trade with the British, the Ashanti fought for most of the nineteenth century. During the sixth war that broke out, the British, as allies of the coastal tribes, directly fought against the Ashanti. It took many years, thousands of British troops and cannon before the Ashanti, fierce fighters that they were, were defeated. Finally, in 1902, the Ashanti land

was declared a British colony by treaty. But this occurred only after the famous “YEa Asantewa War” in which the brave Queen Mother YEa Asantewa actually led the Ashanti armies in an attempt to keep the famous Golden Stool that the British Governor had ordered them to turn over. During this final war against the British, the Ashanti unity was broken and many of the Ashanti states, tired of Ashanti control, sided with the British. Even so, it took the British nearly a year to subdue the fired-up Ashanti and capture the Queen.

Even in defeat, the Ashanti remained a proud people and have kept their local rulers and customs alive even to the present day. Ashanti rulers and chiefs were instrumental in helping to achieve a life-long dream, independence of the nation of Ghana, which became a sovereign state in 1957 under the Presidency of Dr. Kwame Nkrumah.

## The Ashanti Way of Life

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The Ashanti king was no figure-head ruler. All power was given to him. He was the maker of all executive decisions and the power behind all Ashanti laws. He was chief justice, and commander in chief of the Ashanti army. In order to choose a new chief, those who were eligible through the Queen Mother’s relatives were assembled, and the clan leaders voted on a successor, chosen on the basis of qualifications of leadership and political ability.

The inheritance rights of the Ashanti pass through the mother’s side of the family. Land belongs to the woman, not the man. Children belong legally to the mother, since they belong to the mother’s clan, called the “matriclan.” When a man marries a woman he agrees that “he will take responsibilities if there by any, but her assets and property should return to the matriclan.” (Tufuo, p. 44) The woman also recognizes her dependence on her husband for protection, and his right, while he lives, to claim what is hers. There is an Ashanti adage which refers to possession of property: “if a woman weaves a shield, she stores it in a man’s room.” (Tufuo, p. 45)

There are strict rules about marriage partners. A person cannot marry within his or her “matriclan.” Parents must approve of the mate a young man or woman chooses, and the girl is expected to be married soon after her “coming of age” (Puberty) ceremony, in which she is officially displayed as “eligible” to the rest of the village. A man is allowed to marry several wives, as long as he can adequately provide for them; this demonstrates his wealth and generosity. Also, among the Ashanti there are fewer men than women, so that polygamy helps to assure that all women will become married, with children, the fulfillment of an Ashanti woman’s goal of success.

When a baby is born, whether it is male or female, there is great rejoicing among the clan. A few days after the baby is born, the mother carries the baby around the village on her back. The people of the village give gifts and money; they wish the mother congratulations and the baby a long life. A special drink ceremony is held “to create the voice and imbue him (or her) with wisdom and intelligence,” so that the baby will resemble a “true Ashanti.” (Tufuo, p. 54)

Everyone joins in the child’s training as the child begins to walk and talk. Aunts, uncles, cousins and brothers and sisters are always there to encourage and instruct the baby in Ashanti ways. The child is never alone and knows he will always belong to the people of his family and community.



The child has a great deal of freedom at home, with parents seeking to guide rather than discipline the child. Children are reasoned with and parents tend to be very patient, even indulgent with their young ones. The home is where customs and traditions are learned and practiced, stories told, and the past relived. Home is a secure place, where everyone is accepted and respected, where values and attitudes are molded. If a child misbehaves, it is considered the parents' fault, and a shame and an embarrassment to them. In court, it is Ashanti custom to penalize parents equally for serious crimes committed by their children. The Ashanti believe that "parents are responsible for the training of their children and if they were trained well they would have behaved well." (Tufuo, p. 35)

Boys are trained by the fathers to be farmers. From the time they are old enough to walk, they are taken out into the fields to help to weed the garden and learn the names of the plants. Later, they are taught to hunt and fish, and learn the ways of the forest. When young, boys and girls play together, but girls are discouraged from playing rougher games and sports. Fathers have regular story times for sons and daughters each afternoon. Girls spend most of their time with their mothers and other women, learning to carry water, prepare meals, keep a clean house, and, in general, take on domestic responsibility. They sing while preparing bath water and helping to prepare the evening meal which is shared by many relatives. They are expected to become active in the community social life and to join a dance group or a musical society. Mothers carefully instruct their daughters how to use special herbs and spices which keep the body smelling clean.

The men eat a communal dinner together. The wives take the food to the father-in-law's house for the men, who eat out of a common dish. Boys can dip their hands in too, as soon as they are old enough to wash their own hands; until then they eat with the women. Unmarried men go to their uncle's house to eat, where all the cousins and nephews gather. Women in the same house eat together, but not from the same dish. Women who are having their menstrual period eat separately from all the others because they are believed to be unclean until their period is over.

Each day at dusk, it is time for stories, games, dancing and singing. Everyone is in bed by ten o'clock because work begins the next morning before sunrise!

When a girl has her first period, it is cause for celebration. The old women of the village sing special songs commemorating the occasion, and the girl's mother pours wine and says a special prayer. The next day the girl's body is shaved and she is dressed in a special dress and adorned with gold necklaces, hair ornaments and leg and ankle beads. Young girls sing songs to her, and friends and relatives give presents. She is given a special bath in the river, followed by dancing and singing. Special traditional foods are prepared and more traditional rites performed. Five days later, she dresses up in her best outfit and goes around the village to thank everyone who had attended the ceremony. (Rattray, Religion, pp. 69-74) There are no similar customs for males among the Ashanti.

In order to marry, a young man must get permission from the bride-to-be's parents, and offer gifts to any members of the clan to whom his bride-to-be directs him. These gifts may be fish, tobacco, salt or gold dust. Once the customary "bride price" is paid, along with the consent of the girl and her parents, a wedding day is set. On the morning of the marriage, the bride dresses up in her best dress adorned with gold ornaments, and is led by her mother to the bridegroom's house, where they thank him for all his gifts. They leave, later to return, when the chief of the village says a few words and performs a short ceremony, including a sip of customary wine. (Rattray, Ibid., pp. 84-85)

As stated above, polygamy is traditional among Ashanti, one wife being the "senior" wife, who would be consulted if any additional wives were contemplated. The Ashanti word for co-wife means, "jealous one,"

although there were apparently families where everyone seemed to live rather peacefully. Whichever wife sleeps with her husband cooks for him, usually for a week at a time. Disputes among wives are not the responsibility of the husband, although he is expected to administer an orderly household. Both husbands and wives can divorce each other. Reasons for divorce among the Ashanti include: adultery, sterility, drunkenness, physical abuse, and refusal to give support (husband). In case of divorce, a married woman's property is totally separate from her husband's; he has no claim on them. The children also, are the mother's, since they are of the mother's clan. (Rattray, *Ibid.*, pp. 97-98) Often, however, in case of divorce, the sons stay with the father.

Generally, private arbitration is the approved manner for legal settlement among the Ashanti, since they do not wish disputes to come to public attention. A minor complaint is usually judged by a family member; a serious matter would have to be taken up by a head of the clan plus two other community members. Juries are not used; the only need for a large group of arbiters would be in the case of two members from different clans, when the village chief, his elders and a local priest may be called in. Young offenders are often excused from guilt on grounds of ignorance. Even adults can be excused from legal punishment if they can reasonably prove that "the commission of the offense has been without deliberate intention and knowledge." (Tufuo, p. 71) The Ashanti believe in justice, but justice with mercy.

The Ashanti culture strives to benefit everyone through the efforts of the individuals who make it up. Competition is seen as something healthy; power and wealth are not to be despised, but ultimately the test to a true Ashanti is to strive toward a unity which benefits everyone. Struggle and disagreements, even jealousy are built into the Ashanti way of life, and the Ashanti proverb says it this way:

"Funtumfuru—afu,  
Denkyemfuru—afu  
Yenyuina y'afuru ako  
Nanso yedidi a, yeko."

Which means: "We are two crocodiles sharing one common stomach; yet when it is mealtime, we struggle with one another." (Antubam, p. 193) Struggle and strife are necessary, but unity born of diversity is worth the price!

## LESSON PLANS

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### ***Lesson One Beauty and the Ashanti, Part One. (Two days)***

#### ***Objectives***

1. To sharpen observation skills;
2. To discover Ashanti notions of female beauty;
3. To understand symbolic meanings in Ashanti art;
4. To learn about artistic skills necessary to create Ashanti art.

## **Methods**

1. Show slides provided with teaching unit;
2. Use handout (see Appendix A below), "Ashanti Beauty-Shapes and Their Significance," to aid in student art project.

**Procedures** Tell students they will be seeing examples of art made by the Ashanti, a West African people who live in Ghana. The modern nation of Ghana is named after the ancient Kingdom, Ghana, famous for its gold and its cities such as Timbuktu. The slides represent different ways the Ashanti express themselves and reveal important ideas and attitudes as well as artistic skills.

*Slide 1.* (Akuaba figure, 1) This figure is important to Ashanti women. It is approximately 13 inches high and made of wood, stained black. This is a fertility figure which Ashanti women carry with them while they are pregnant. What human features are missing? (Hands, feet, ears, hair)

*Slide 2.* Akuaba figure, 2) How is this Akuaba different from the first? (Jewelry, eyebrow and eyeshape, etc.) How is it similar? (Long neck, head shape, body in shape of a cross, etc.) Does one seem more "friendly" to you? Which would appear more to a child? Why? Children sometimes play with these figures and mothers use the dolls to instruct young daughters in child care.

*Slide 3.* (2 Akuabas) This slide shows two Akuabas; the taller one is turned so that we can see what the reverse side of an Akuaba looks like. The oval or egg shape is the ideal female shape to the Ashanti. It is only one of many shapes drawn or carved on Akuabas. What other shapes do you see? (See lesson conclusion for further discussion on this subject.)

*Slide 4.* (Akuaba figure) What is missing from this figure? (Arms) How does it compare to others? (Very sad expression, un-polished, only a few rings around neck, etc.) What feelings do you have about this figure compared to other figures?

*Slide 5.* (3 Akuaba figures) One of these figures is a genuine Akuaba, the other two are "imposters." Can you tell which is the real one? (The one on the right with a cross-shaped body) Give reasons why the others are only "look-alikes." (One has hands and feet and a human-like body; the other has a pair of snake-like ornaments attached to the head and a cone-shaped body, etc.) What is the artist trying to express in creating these stylized figures?

*Slide 6.* (Graphic Akuaba design) Describe what you see in this slide (4 figures; 2 frontal, 2 back views; 2 are upside down; 1 is black, 3 are white, etc.) What does this design remind you of? (An Akuaba) What uses could this design have? (Cloth, pictures, pottery)

*Slide 7.* (Comb, Akuaba design) This is a stylized Akuaba. What has the artist added? (Hands, arms, facial

expression) How would a woman use this article? (Hair decoration) Would she want people to notice it? (Yes, it's large, about 6 inches long) Is it something you or your sister might like to wear? Why?

*Slide 8.* (Comb, Akuaba design) This is another stylized Akuaba made into a comb. How is it different from the first one? (Triangle-shape head and head decoration, no arms or legs, straight nose, no mouth) Is this something you or your sister would wear? Why?

*Slide 9.* (Young women) This is a picture of six girls, all with different hair styles. They are participants in a beauty contest. Which hair styles took the longest to prepare? Which ones seem the most unusual? Which ones would you expect to see at a high school prom? What do hair styles tell us about individual styles of beauty in the Ashanti culture? (There is a great deal of individuality.) Notice the way in which the girls are dressed and the different patterns in these simple, elegant gowns.

*Slide 10.* (Standing pregnant female figure) This is not an Akuaba. How do we know? What Akuaba influences are represented here? (Oval head, long neck, straight nose) This woman is depicted as pregnant; the artist is portraying her as beautiful. What does this figure tell us about Ashanti beauty in women? What styles (hair and jewelry), physical features (long neck, etc.), and qualities (serenity and determination) of female beauty are represented in this figure.?

At the end of the discussion, the teacher shows a picture of a Barbie doll and an Afro-American baby doll to emphasize different aspects of beauty in our own culture.

At the conclusion of the discussion of comparative beauty standards (a list could be made on the chalkboard), the teacher reminds students that the Ashanti use geometric shapes to express symbolic meanings in their art. Using the handout (see Appendix A), "Ashanti Beauty—Shapes and Their Significance," the students discover what different shapes mean in Ashanti.

As the students observe an Akuaba figure (slide or hand drawn figure), the teacher asks to point out shapes and tell what meanings they have. Students should take notes.

The homework assignment is to pencil-sketch symbols for a personal crest that represent important aspirations, goals or beliefs. Students will work on and discuss their crest designs in class the following day. The finished products may be displayed in the classroom, as "Ashanti-American" artifacts.

## ***Lesson Two Beauty and the Ashanti Culture, Part Two. (Two days)***

### ***Objectives***

1. To reinforce students awareness of Ashanti standards of beauty;
2. To compare Ashanti standards with students' own ideas of beauty;
3. To discover what Ashanti qualities of "inner beauty" are.

### ***Methods***

1. To show slides of objects considered beautiful by the Ashanti;

2. To read over examples of Ashanti proverbs that speak of Ashanti character (Appendix B);
3. To create stories based on Ashanti proverbs.

***Procedures Remind students that standards of beauty vary from culture to culture. Review what we've learned about female beauty among the Ashanti. Ask, "what other kinds of beauty are there besides physical beauty?" (Natural beauty, inner beauty of character) This lesson looks at two aspects of Ashanti beauty: (1) Extrinsic, created by Ashanti artists; (2) Intrinsic, qualities created from within. Among the Ashanti, highly admired leadership qualities often result in extrinsic rewards, e.g., gifts of cloth and jewelry.***

Remind students that colors have symbolic meaning also. Gold, for glory and prosperity; white, for virtue and purity; green for the earth; blue, for the sky.

*Slide 11.* (Gold beads) The Ashanti are master craftsmen in gold. Describe the shapes. (round, oval) Notice the detail in the carving. Would this necklace be expensive? Why? (It is gold; it took a long time to make; it is beautiful.)

*Slide 12.* (2 Gold necklaces) Notice how different these are from the first string of beads. How are they similar to one another? (Size, gold disk in each string) What do the shapes remind you of? (Charms on a charm bracelet) What could the shapes symbolize to the Ashanti? (Heroism, success, etc.)

*Slide 13.* (2 Gold disks) Notice the intricate designs on these two medallions, worn as symbols of Ashanti authority by elders, priests and rulers. Which took longer to make? Which is more decorative? Describe each one.

*Slide 14.* (Ashanti cloths) The Ashanti are famous for their cloth designs. These cloths are made from cotton and silk. Can you tell which is which? They are made on hand looms by the Ashanti men. Some designs are family designs, some are strictly for chiefs and rulers. Some cloth is for special occasions, such as weddings and feast days. Which patterns and colors do you like?

*Slides 15, 16, 17.* (Ashanti chiefs and cloths) What is different about these chiefs? (They are wearing different color robes, their ages, the cloth behind them.) What is similar? (All wearing crowns, sandals, jewelry, armbands; all are seated; all have rugs under their feet, etc.) From viewing these picture, how important are beautiful objects (jewelry, cloth) to the Ashanti?

Next, the students look at qualities of inner beauty. The teacher hands out a prepared list of proverbs to the students (see Appendix B) for discussion. Out of the discussion we learn that the Ashanti value reputation, God, virtue and faithfulness in marriage.

The homework assignment is to create a short story or dialogue, using one Ashanti proverb as the central theme. Students outline their ideas at home, then complete them in class, working in small groups. Each group will pick one or more to read to the rest of the class, which will have to guess which proverb is being illustrated.

Another activity for this lesson is to role-play a baby-naming ritual. Students decide which names to give the baby, using information handed to them by the teacher (see Appendix below). This activity stresses the importance of individual names, and illustrate the Ashanti proverb, "Man came to seek a name and nothing more." Names given to Ashanti babies (and later nicknames) are supposed to help them build good character

qualities. As part of this exercise students can research the meanings of their own given names.

## APPENDIX A

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### “Ashanti Beauty—Shapes and Their Significance”

1. The circle. The presence and power of God; the spirit of the father given at conception to the baby.
2. The square. The male aspect to God and man (compares to the oval shape of the female). Often carved on chewing sticks given to the bride by her husband-to-be.
3. The triangle. Strictly a female symbol, if inverted. Otherwise it means charm and friendship. If carved on a chewing stick, it means endless and faithful love from a young man to his bride.
4. The crescent moon. A female symbol meaning the entire female self and its qualities. Also, female bounty, tenderness, grace and serenity. With a star over a crescent, it means female faithfulness in love.
5. The broken circle. A symbol of fertility in females.
6. The oval. The symbol of female-ness; the ideal female shape. The ideal female body is made up of a series of ovals, according to the Ashanti. The oval also means the female power of cleansing.
7. The straight cross. The enduring power and spirit of nature. A symbol of life and death. Also it stands for parental discipline and the power of chiefs.
8. The chevron. Means the new life in growing things, including humans (usually gold in color).
9. The spiral. Symbolizes the female nature of indecision, peace and mercy. Also growth.
10. The zig-zag. Stands for common sense.
11. The wavy line. A symbol for the stream of life.

Source: *Ghana's Heritage of Culture*, pp. 105-113.

## APPENDIX B

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### “Ashanti Proverbs”

#### *Disgrace*

“To be dead is better than to be alive and not respected.”

#### *Adultery*

“The name of him who seduces a woman in the bush remains forever in the bush.”

#### *God*



“God is dependable, a friend, the benevolent God whose first nature is virtue.”

“God who appears on each virtuous road, The praiseworthy God, Who created all the good things of the world.”

#### *Virtue/Goodness in Man*

“Virtue is a rare property.”

“A true friend is hard to come by.”

“Virtue or goodness is better than gold.”

#### *Evil or Wrong Acts*

“God dislikes evil.”

“Vice sours conscience.”

“Evil does not hide.”

“The reign of vice does not last.”

#### *Crime/Criminals*

“The consequences of crime is the individual’s disgrace; but the disgrace of the individual contaminates his clan and reflects on his nation.”

“The criminal will ultimately be discovered, and his offspring will taste of the bitterness of his evil actions.”

“Sweetness is not permanent, It does not remain in any mouth forever.”

#### *Names/Reputation*

“Man came to seek a name and nothing more.”

“A great name is the title only of men of great deeds.”

“One does not name his child after someone who hates him.”

#### *Hospitality*

“The stranger does not sleep in the street.”

“One need not beg to eat.”

#### *Motherliness*

“A woman is a mighty tree with big branches laden with fruits; When children come to you, they find something to eat.”

## Marriage

“Man and woman, the journey of marriage is long.”

“Marriage prospers only in the farm of patience.”

“At best, marriage springs out of love.”

“Marriage only succeeds when the husband makes it so.” (Advice given to a bridegroom.)

“Marriage prospers only upon the hard labor of the wife.” (Advice given to a bride.)

“The contract of marriage is a contract of friendship it is not a bond of blood kinsmen of a clan.”

Source: *Ghana's Heritage of Culture*, pp. 49, 50, 53, 57, 66, 69)

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