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

Family Life Among the Ashanti of West Africa

Guide for Curriculum Unit 91.02.04
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This curriculum unit was written in response to my students persistent demand for more opportunities to learn about young people in Africa and “how they really live.” This seven-to-ten day unit is intended for use in the middle and high schools and focuses on family life among the Ashanti of West Africa. The Ashanti are a matrilineal culture where men are the governmental rulers, but family inheritance is strictly through the mother’s lineage. Great importance is placed on family heirlooms which are owned in common, although individually crafted items are individually owned. Childhood, to the Ashanti, is a “play time,” and a child is not considered responsible for any of its actions until after puberty. As puberty draws near, the child is prepared to accept responsibility and celebrate “passage” into adulthood. Descriptions of Ashanti dolls, toys, games and other pastimes of childhood are included in my unit.

Color slides accompany this unit and are an integral part of how I plan to teach students to observe and understand Ashanti culture, particularly Ashanti standards of beauty. The unit encourages student involvement in the artistic process, although a background in art is not a requirement since the unit takes the student through a step-by-step process of discovery. The unit is full of history, to involve the students in the experience of what Ashanti really means through adolescent eyes. Naming rituals, roles played by family members, adolescent ceremonies and marriage customs, all are included with an aim to help the student come to grips with the growing-up process in another culture. A two-day lesson on Ashanti proverbs should challenge students to evaluate their own values pertaining to family life, religion, honesty and friendship.

Additional visual and written resources are available from the author at the Co-operative High School.

(Recommended for African American History, grade 12, and World History, grades 9 and 10)

Key Words

Adolescence American Drug Abuse Art Africa Family Life Afro-Americans African West

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