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Common Ground: Masks from a Cultural Perspective

Curriculum Unit 98.03.06
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INTRODUCTION

Learning about different cultures, and discovering that despite cultural differences we have more cultural similarities than differences, should be an integral part of the elementary school curriculum. This philosophy, however, is not one readily embraced by all classroom instructors.

COMMON GROUND: MASKS FROM A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE has been created to encourage teachers to explore cultures outside of their own, to stir young minds to experience the interconnectedness of art and the human experience, and to help children recognize that by examining other cultures, we learn about ourselves.

My curriculum unit, divided into three parts, is targeted at students in Grades 1 and 2, but can be modified to include Grades 3 to 5. Math, Science, Social Studies, and Language Arts (storytelling, reading, journal writing...) will be incorporated with art, helping students recognize that for many cultures, art is not created for art's sake. Students will be encouraged to use their imagination, to apply their thinking ability and artistic know-how through maskmaking and writing activities noted herein. Completed works will be showcased both within and outside of our school community, in our school's Library Media Center, at the nearby neighborhood public library, and at a well-known neighborhood bookstore.

Part 1 of the unit permits students to take a general look at Native American and African culture. These groups have been selected because they are suited for the framework of our school's Social Studies theme established for Grades 1 and 2. Our general observation of Native Americans throughout North America will run from mid-October through November. Thereafter, as we near the Thanksgiving holiday season, emphasis will be placed on the lifestyles of the Algonquin-speaking tribes like the Micmac, since this group was indigenous to the Connecticut region and is alleged to have been among the first to encounter Europeans. During the first week in December, as winter approaches, we will study and conclude our unit with the lifestyle of the Yup'ik, residents of areas laden with ice and snow.

Our general observation of African culture will begin in December and will run through February. (This study serves as a perfect complement for seasonal holidays that occur during this time of year, beginning with Kwanzaa, an African American cultural holiday held from December 26 through January 1, and ending with the conclusion of African-American Heritage month in February). Ghanian culture, with emphasis on the Asante (also spelled "Ashanti") people, will be highlighted. Throughout our study, we will meet with our school's

Library Media Specialist to access additional information on the Internet: we will search for cultural information, masks specific to indigenous groupings, and general information concerning each culture.

Part 2 discusses a few reasons why and how masks have been used by different cultures. Two maskmaking activities are featured in this section to enhance student understanding of subject matter. (I recommend culminating the study on Native Americans with the provided maskmaking activity, then correspondingly doing the same post the study on Africa and its people.)

Although maskmaking is the focus of our unit, photos of Native American and African culture and a few actual hand-crafted artifacts (e.g., a Micmac-created dream catcher, a Navajo mandala, Asante akuaba dolls, Damomo drum, and other musical instruments from both Native American and African culture) will be brought in so that students can get a hands-on feel of the aesthetic qualities of these artifacts, along with an understanding of the creativity and ingenuity of the peoples who created them. These artifacts will be strategically presented throughout our study, particularly during storytelling, shared reading, and/or center activities. (Note: Keeping in mind that socio-religious philosophies are abstract and often difficult for young children to comprehend, such information regarding these cultures will and should be generalized.)

Section 3, outlining two language arts activities to accompany each students' completed mask creations, conclude the unit. Overall, it is the author's hope that COMMON GROUND will serve as a springboard to foster enthusiastic learning, and a climate where diversity is welcomed, embraced, and celebrated!

PART 1. TAKE A LOOK

Before beginning our study of Native Americans in North America, I think it best to provide our young learners with a visual understanding of the region. Bill Harris' Landscapes of America serves as a spectacular pictorial resource to bring this understanding to light. (I engaged my students by taking them on an "airplane trip" across the North American region. Arms outstretched, we "flew" around the classroom, landed in our Shared Reading Nook, and began an informative, geographic journey. Through this kinesthetic/visual experience, my students envisioned what life must have been like in the west, midwestern, north and southwestern regions of North America, and how one could have survived in the environment: my children also began to verbalize their understanding of why we sing "America." [During this activity, one student, Joshua, noted that purple mountain majesties were the Grand Canyon's south rim].) Subsequently, we began our study of some of the original inhabitants of the region. I recommend using this or your own creative, geographic activity as a prelude to observing Native Americans and their culture. Additionally, keep a map handy so that throughout the unit, students will be readily able to locate the North American homeland of each studied group.

SECTION 1. ON NORTH AMERICAN SHORES

Recommended Children's Books for Shared Reading and Centers:

Brave Bear and The Ghost: A Sioux Legend*
Dancing Drum: Cherokee Legend
Ka-ha-si and the Loon: An Eskimo Legend*
Little Firefly: An Algonquin Legend*
The Rough Face Girl: An Algonquin Legend*

The Quillworker: A Cheyenne Legend*

*These beautifully illustrated selections, accompanied by actual photos, offer both a traditional folktale and background information on the social life and customs of each group highlighted.

Recommended Children's Books for Shared Reading and Centers (Con't):

This series provides valuable information concerning the dwellings in which various Native American cultures resided.

Houses of Bark: The Eastern Woodlands
Houses of Wood: The Northwest Coast
Houses of Snow, Skin and Bones: The Far North
Houses of Hide and Earth: the Plains
Mounds of Earth and Shell: The Southeast

Native Americans in North America: A General View
Vocabulary:

buffalo
prairie
woodlands
arid lodges
hogan
tipi
wigwam
bison
parfleche
mandala
pemmican
dreamcatcher
travois

nomadic
nomad
palisade
buffalo grass

Long before European explorers set foot on North American shores, a diverse group of original inhabitants roamed this vast expanse. Ecological and geographic regional differences within North America dictated the lifestyles of its original inhabitants. Despite locale, the indigenous people of North America took charge of their environs.

Native Americans who dwelt in the great plains regions (i.e., east to west from the Mississippi and Missouri valleys, to the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, and north to south from the Saskatchewan River in Canada almost to New Mexico's Rio Grande) included such linguistic Native Americans as the Kiowa, Crow, Blackfeet, Cheyenne, and Comanche (see YNHTI Resources A, B, and C).

Tipi dwelling tribes resided in the Northern plains (these included the Blackfeet, Crow, and Sioux: further south were the Cheyenne, Arapaho, Kiowa, Comanche. (Note: Tipis were most commonly used by Native Americans who resided in the North American plains [see YNHTI Resource D]. They were made by stretching tanned buffalo skins and using them to cover poles arranged in the shape of a cone. These types of dwellings were suited for the nomadic trend of many of these people. The skins were sometimes decorated with symbols representing guardian spirits, family emblems, or special meanings readily identifiable by their people.)

Climate varied in the plains region, particularly to the west and south where limited rainfall produced arid conditions and semi-desert-like terrain, resulting in what we today refer to as the Badlands. Rainfall, however, was often higher in areas near the Mississippi and Missouri valleys resulting in prairie land where luxuriant grasslands flourished. Indigenous residents of this regionlike the Omaha and Arikaraestablished permanent villages and planted wheat, corn, beans, squash and pumpkins. As a result of the availability of these food sources, the need to hunt buffalo throughout the year was reduced. Farther west, in regions we today call North and South Dakota, Montana, and Kansas, plains animals grazed on short grasses known as "buffalo grass". Bison, as buffalo were interchangeably called, were in abundance and dominated the region. Deemed sacred, these animals were central to many ceremonial and social organizations of tribal groups in this region. The migration of the buffalo resulted in the nomadic lifestyles of many Native Americans in the plains area.

Natural resources in the plains areas were put to great use. Various parts of the buffalo, for example, were used for food, clothing, dwellings, and bedding. Porcupine provided another source of food, utensils, and clothing. The Cheyenne decorated moccasins, breechclouts, and other wearing apparel and leather goods with quillwork, using dyed and carefully woven porcupine quills.

The Navajo, well known for their beautifully designed and hand-woven fabrics, sandpainting, pottery, and silversmithing, lived in the Southwestern portion of the country in what we today know as Arizona and New Mexico. A resourceful people, the Navajo made houses from wooden poles and sticks in the mountains and/or desert. Known as hogans, these dwellings were ingeniously reinforced with mud or stone, making life bearable in the region's challenging terrain.

The southwest was not conducive to agriculture. As a result, the Navajo often migrated in search of food, grazing land, and water. They thrived on small game animals and vegetation (like cactus) found in the region. Rabbit, for example, was used to create tasty meals. It was also used to create protective charms, like the mandala. Used to ensure well-being and good health, rabbit fur, eagle features, buffalo hide, and sinew were masterfully crafted and hung in or outside of the home (see YNHTI Resource E). The Navajo believed man was one with nature and as a result should protect the harmony of nature and respect the spirit of all things. They embraced a belief system in which powerful gods were responsible for ridding the world of evil. These gods and other supernatural figuresoften represented in symbolic decor on woven materials, masks, and other objectswere depicted during ceremonial dance, rituals, and storytelling.

Algonquin-speaking New England tribes in the Northeastern region who ranged down to the Southeastern Atlantic Coast, such as the Micmac, Ojibwa, and Cree, were surrounded by woodlands and coastal shores. These areas were abundant with mammalian life (muskrat, fox, rabbit, beaver, deer and moose.) Some groups were agricultural, raising corn, beans, tobacco, and squash. Edible fruits such as wild blueberries, cranberries, and chokecherries grew nearby, providing additional food sources. Maple sugar sap, collected in birch bark buckets, was a seasonal food used to make candy and beverages. Farming, fishing, wood crafting, and basketry were an integral part of everyday life. Wigwams, used by Native Americans who dwelt in the Northeastern and Eastern woodlands, served as their source of shelter. Some wigwams were dome-shaped. Others were conical, like tipis used in the Plains region. These homes, made of poles that were bent and lashed at the top, were sometimes covered with skins. More often, they were covered with woven mats, evergreen boughs, and birch bark. The Micmac often lived in conical wigwams made of birch bark and grass matting. Their foundation was usually made of lightweight poles tied together with bark. Shingle-like layers of bark or reed mats were used as outer covering.

Up Close: The Micmac

Vocabulary:

- breechclout
- leggings
- wigwam
- mocock
- sinew
- wampum
- birch

caribou
herring
salmon
forest
woodlands

The Micmac resided in the Northeastern region of North America, near the Atlantic provinces of Canada and the seaboard of the United States to North Carolina, separated from the interior by the Appalachian Mountains. They are believed to have been one of the first Algonquin groups to meet European settlers.

Abundant in the region, birch trees served as invaluable natural resources for the Micmac. Used for wigwams and bedding, their bark could be rolled up, preserved, and used repeatedly should the villagers migrate. Birch bark was also used to make large, beautifully crafted canoes, and basketry. One type of basket, called the mocock, was used to collect maple sap.

The Micmac were mindful of the precious gifts provided by nature; they respected their natural surroundings and the Great Spirits that made these resources available: Expectedly, they knew how to capably remove birch bark without destroying the tree. Using a pocket knife, the outer bark of the birch was carefully cut from a place as high as one could reach down to the root portion of the tree. Using two hands, the bark was removed from the tree in a clockwise motion. The size of the bark determined its use. Thicker pieces, for example, were used to create canoes. Other durable, pliable pieces were used for wigwams. Thin, pliable grades were used to create containers, trays, and beds.

During winter months, the Micmac were surrounded by an environment filled with beaver, otter, moose, caribou, and bear. At the onset of spring, herring, shellfish, salmon and waterfowl were abundant. Adept hunters, the Micmac made full use of these resources for food, clothing, and utensils.

The Micmac were communal: despite abundant and/or scanty periods in the circle of life, they believed in sharing with one another for the well-being of all. Micmac women made clothing, cooked, and took care of the children: the men crafted canoes and weapons and were responsible for hunting.

Central to their way of life was the belief that man was an integral part of naturenot outside of it. Because they were part of nature’s tapestry, they could not find it in themselves to exploit the environment. Rather, they made use of the earth and its natural resources and gave thanks to the great spirits for them. (According to Brother “Long Thinker” Brookman, a Micmac descendant and one who I had the opportunity to befriend, one would speak to a tree before removing its branches to create any object. During the time he shared this information, he was demonstrating how to make a dreamcatcher. He added that each object found in the dreamcatcher reflected something very close to him and his people.)

The Micmac, as did many of their Algonquin brethren, believed that all living things had a living spirit within: they also contended that each individual had a guardian spirit, and it was important to pay heed to the advice

that spirit proffered. Special song and dance rituals and special ceremonies for births, deaths, the hunt, harvesting, and healing were often held on behalf of those guardian spirits. Images of these guardian spirits and other supernatural beings were often depicted in masks and ornamentation.

Up Close: The Yup'ik

Vocabulary:

Eskimo
igloo
karmak
tupik
mukluk
Tunghat
harpoon
floe
tundra
waterproof
waterfowl
caribou
walrus
whale
sea lion
seal
sea otter
umiak
kayak

The Yup'ik-speaking inhabitants of Southwestern Alaska and the Inuit of Northern Alaska and Arctic Canada, more commonly and inappropriately referred to as "Eskimos" (translated meaning "eaters of raw meat"), survived on or near extensive coastlines and tundra, land masses that offered rich feeding grounds for caribou, reindeer, fish, whale, seal, walrus, sea otter, but also icy challenges during winter months. These indigenous people adapted to the grueling environment, making ingenious use of its resources.

Depending on the season, and whether they resided along riverbanks or in the Arctic's icy interior, the Yup'ik resided in igloos, karmaks, or tupiks. Igloos were made of carefully packed snow blocks built up in a spiral until the entire dwelling, excluding a tunnel-like entrance, was enclosed. For some, the karmaksimilar in shape to

the igloowas more often used for year-round shelter: it was comprised of an excavated circular pit of specific dimensions, usually five to six feet deep. A dome-shaped wood and whalebone frame covered with turf enclosed the dwelling. The tupik, a portable tent, was made of seal or caribou skins.

The Yup’ik were adept land and sea hunters, pursuing whales, fish, and wildlife resources in the interior. Those residing in the Arctic Region experienced dramatic seasonal changes in light and migratory animal resources. During the spring, summer, and fall, the Yup’ik would travel into the interior to hunt migrating wildlife. During early autumn, as the sun disappeared, caribou, reindeer, wild geese, and ducks departed from these regions. These animals were used in various capacities by the Yup’ik, from food to clothing. Reindeer and caribou, for example, were used as food sources and to create clothing, like the well-known parka. This outer garment was made from the skin of these animals, carefully sewn together with the hair side turned in, providing warmth to the wearer. During the winter, the Yup’ik relied heavily upon reserves of stored food. In spring, upon the return of migratory animals, the Yup’ik once again skillfully hunted and captured their prey, wasting no part.

A tightly knit people, Yup’ik village societies maintained territories large enough to support their needs. Permanent villages often aligned riverbanks. Each village contained many single family homes and one or more qasgiqslarge, communal dwellings for the men. Single family dwellings were the domain of the women. There they sewed, cooked, and raised children, which constituted the bulk of their responsibilities.

At approximately age six, boys moved from the home of their mothers to the qasgiq. Moving out signaled entering adulthood. Within the confines of the qasgiq, training to take on manly responsibilities took place. Young boys learned technical skills for survivaland their place in the universe. The Yup’ik believed that ill-considered actions of an individual could offend the spirits, resulting in an imbalance between “the people” and “the universe.” According to the Yup’ik, inappropriate behavior and wrongdoing could result in illness, poor hunting, or inclement weather. A necessary and integral part of growing up, therefore, was learning correct behavior.

Like many Native American peoples throughout North America, the Yup’ik believed all objectsanimate and inanimatehad spirits (yuas) of human form. Masks were often created to please and/or appease the animal spirit that was ultimately in control of animals. Often made of bone, animal skin, feathers, and fur, masks were created to look like images of bears, wolves, and otters. They were often worn during dance ceremonies in the belief that this would cause the hunt to be fruitful. Weapons and hunting equipment made of whale bone were exquisitely carved and fashioned to please the yua of the prey, urging the animal to give itself up to the hunter. That spiritual connection was frequently conveyed in clothing sewn by the women. A hole in the palm of a thumbless hand design, for example, symbolized the game that the tunghat (potentially malevolent spirits) allowed to escape from the skyworld for the consumption of the people. Special headgear was often worn to please the spirits of the animals hunted by the Yup’ik.

Being one with the universeanother embraced philosophywas also depicted in Yup’ik attire and artifacts. A common circle and dot motif depicted on many Yup’ik items represented their oneness view of the world.

The Yup’ik also believed in two different worldsthe visible and the invisible. They contended that these two worlds occupied the same visible space. Birth, death, and puberty marked times where the boundary between these worlds was permeable and, at times, transparent. During these transitional periods, proper rituals and dance ceremonies were held as not to release the tunghat.

SECTION 2: ON AFRICAN SHORES

Before beginning this section, our class refers to a world map, locates the African continent, and compares its size to other land masses noted thereon. Waters that surround the area and the location of Africa [north, south, east, and west] as compared to other continents are briefly examined. We subsequently begin our journeythis time through music and dance. (As a prelude to this portion of the unit, the children listened to More Drums of Passion, a recording of rhythmic African melodies created by renowned Ghanian percussionist Babatunde Olatunji. My students energetically danced over to our Shared Reading Nook.) Mirella Ricciardi's photo essay, Vanishing Africa, serves as a photographic introduction to our study of African culture. During the days that follow, Maya Angelou's Kofi and His Magic and My Painted House, My Friendly Chicken, and Me, Akihiro Yamamura's Senegal, and Yosef ben-Jochannan's Africa: The Land, The People, The Culture provide additional fascinating information and photographic images of the diversity and flavor of portions of the continent. The tone set, we begin our adventure.

Recommended Children's Books for Shared Reading and Centers:

Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters: An African Tale

Talk, Talk: An Asante Legend
Why The Sky Is Far AwaySpider and the Sky God

Masai and I+
Joshua's Masai Mask+

Moja Means One*
Ashanti to Zulu*
Jambo Means Hello*

Storytelling was a means by which African culture, values, traditions, and history were handed down. Each of these works provides its reader with insight into the richness of African culture and the philosophy of being one with the universe.

+ These fictional works give all children an opportunity to understand the legacy of African culture and tradition.

*These beautifully illustrated works acquaint the reader with the uniqueness of African life and provide

general information about the differing groups of people who live within the continent, their language, homes, and other aspects of African culture.

Africa and Its People: A General View

Vocabulary:

desert
oases
savanna
plateau
coastlines
rasslands
agriculture
extended family
Bedouin
nomadic
caravan
huts
adobe
arid
temperate
tropical
cassava
millet
maize
durra
mahogany
ebony
Ashanti
trade
shadoof

It was a misconceived notion that Africa was a dark, jungle-filled continent, overflowing with savage inhabitants. This second largest land mass in the world is actually an immense plateau, and is rather a beautiful land, overflowing with dense equatorial forest, broadleaf evergreens of all varieties, as well as pockets of swamp land and savannas (grasslands). Divided by mountainous regions, and in some areas bordered by narrow coastal plains, the continent varies greatly in every direction. Many of its indigenous people dwelt in cultural centers found in ancient Mali, Timbuktu, and Egypt long before other civilizations had ever existed. As held true for Native Americans, the lifestyles of African people throughout the continent were affected by geographic and ecological factors.

To the north lay the Sahara, the world's largest desert. The northern countries of Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, and Sudan are impacted by its limited rainfall and arid terrain. Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco are mostly arid with minimal fertile farmland. Oases fertile places sporadically located in desert areasprovide water, food, and farmland for their inhabitants. People who live on oases reside in adobe-type dwellings. Sun-dried mud, used to make thick walls and roofs, keep the inside cool and protect residents from the tortuous sun and desert heat. Camels and camel caravans are often used as a source of travel. Some people, known as Bedouins (nomadic people who reside in the desert region) live communally. Cattle raisers and traders of hand-crafted goods, livestock, and other merchandise, members of these nomadic tribes learned to survive the arid environs. Some ingeniously use water-filled ostrich-egg shells as canteens, strategically burying them beneath desert sands for use when needed. This practice is also embraced by those who reside near the desert areas like the Kalahari in southern Africa.

In Egypt, civilization flourished. Its people worked together, chose leaders (Pharaohs), and in time formed an organized civil government. Egyptians developed ways to nourish crops on otherwise infertile land. For thousands of years, they knew how to irrigate farms, weave flax and other fibers into cloth, and make fine pottery from clay. Adept in mathematics, they learned how to keep time by observing the position of the sun, moon, and stars. These African people also used that mathematical know-how to build the great pyramids. Made totally by human labor, these structures were used to house the bodies of the Pharaohs after death. Every stone used to build the pyramidal structures was accurately cut, hauled, and placed by hand. The great pyramids stood tall and today remain a mathematical wonder.

Egypt is mostly desert. Without the Nile, the world's longest river, and a few oases scattered throughout the area, the land would be barren. The Nile River provides fertile soil and water for irrigation. During ancient times, and today in some areas, Egyptian farmers used a simple device called a shadoof to irrigate surrounding land with waters that flowed from the Nile. A bucket attached to the end of a long pole was operated by one man and used to lift water from the Nile. Water was subsequently poured onto land where needed.

In the eastern and central portions of the continent, crocodiles, and hippopotamuses live in tropical rivers and swamps. Chimpanzees and monkeys dwell in the forest. Flamingos, pelicans, and storks thrive along the eastern seaboard and southernmost parts. Cheetahs, hyenas, jackals, leopards, and lions are found throughout the grasslands. For centuries, people residing in these regions and throughout Africa have respected the environment and lived as one with their surroundings and the indigenous creatures therein. Strength, cunning, and mischievous attributes were evidenced in these animals. Their qualities were and continue to be often depicted through storytelling, ceremonial song and dance, and in artifacts that accompany these events.

In Africa, the needs of a region and types of materials used are directly correlated with the land. Near tropical

forest, huts are often built of wood; walls and floors are covered with mats containing geometrical designs. Objects, often reflective of spiritual beliefs and familial/tribal significance, are hung on walls or placed somewhere within the home. Grassland homes are often made of adobe, adorned with symbolic carvings and decorative articles. Gourds and calabashes, baskets, and ceramic pots often consist of symbolic design and are used as functional, not decorative objects.

Most Africans depend upon the land for their living, and in most African societies the land belongs to the entire tribe or nation. Independently, land has no value: the work that its people put into it give the land its value.

The majority of the indigenous people residing in West and Central Africa are farmers. On western shores, fishing, mining, and weaving also flourish. Cocoa, coffee, peanuts, and palm trees are the main products. In Central Africa, corn, yams, and cassava are the major crops. For those who reside in East Africa, cattle raising is the major occupation, and the possession of cattle is a sign of wealth. The Masai are the most renowned of Africa’s cattle herders. The Masai, as have many indigenous people of Africa, capably use animal hides for clothing, footwear, drum skins, and a wide variety of leather goods.

Inhabitants of the southern region make their livelihood as both farmers and herdsmen. They grow corn, maize, millet and other crops. They live in large households, and the people use a common pasture for their herds. Very protective of their livestock, during evening hours men gather their animals and keep watch to protect them from other wild animals.

Only a small portion of South Africa is farmland: durra (a vegetable that resembles corn), sugar cane, cotton, tobacco, bananas, pineapple, and grapefruit are raised in this region. South Africa, rich in precious minerals such as gold, copper, diamonds, is today the continent’s largest producer of gold. Its indigenous inhabitants, past and present, have made use of these mineral resources in woodcrafts, metalwork, and adornment. Note that these resources are found in mines. Most of the diligent effort that goes into extracting these minerals is done by Africans. European and other countries have benefited from the mining industry, however, many Africans do not share in the enormous profits of the mining industry.

Overall, Africans are very communal people. Extended family is embraced throughout the continent. Everyone helps to care for the children. Terms of endearment like “mother, father, and aunty” are often bestowed upon friends of the family and others outside of what the western world identifies as the nuclear family. Elders are cherished and looked to for advice: the family as a whole helps members conduct social, business, legal matters, and other affairs. African dance, ceremonies, rituals, and artifacts reflect their beliefs, traditions, and customs.

Like the Native American, many Africans believe that everything has a living spirit: trees, animals, rivers... all have a powerful inner spirit. These spirits are believed to influence events in man’s day-to-day living, and the African acknowledges the presence and power of those spirits. For example, if a fisherman desires to obtain a bountiful catch, he will appease the spirit of the river through ritualistic giftgiving. If a woodcarver desires to sculpt a mask from a mahogany tree, the spirit of that tree is summoned, thanked and praised before carving begins. The philosophy that man is one with nature was and is prevalent throughout the continent.

The majority of people throughout Africa follow traditional African religions, most of which are monotheistic. In some religions, however, it is believed that God can be reached only through lesser gods. These forces take the form of either ancestors or spirits. Wood carvings, masks and related costumes, and other artifacts are carefully crafted to reflect these beliefs, traditions, and customs.

For many Africans, the world is comprised of the visible and invisible, i.e., people and things that can be readily seen, and also ubiquitous unseen spirits. Objects are said to become temporary homes for a spirit. Many Asante women, for example, wear a round-headed akuaba doll (fertility dolls) on their back to ensure a spirit of well being and the birth of fine healthy girls. Square-headed figures are toted to ensure the birth of fine healthy boys. This and other symbols of fertility are often depicted in African woodcarvings and metalwork.

The Asante:Up Close

Vocabulary:

manioc
plantains
yams
millet
sekere
sansa
omele
sakura
Asanthene
Ashanti stool
akuaba doll
agrarian
cowrie
millet
metalwork

The Asante were an agrarian people: their most important crops were plantains, yams, and manioc. They also cultivated millet, sweet potatoes, peanuts, and many fruits. A very communal people, they are indigenous to the area today known as Ghana. Ghana was one of the first great kingdoms of West Africa, and the Asante were the largest and most powerful ethnic group in that country.

According to African History Professor Dr. Ben Jochannan, the name of the Asante people was derived from a powerful, ancient empire called Ashanti. The ancestors of today's indigenous residents once ruled that nation. Located in a part of present-day Ghana, Ashanti consisted of several states that united to engage in peaceful projects and military related matters. Ashanti, which remained a powerful nation until the British began their

conquest of the area in 1873, was ruled by the Ashanthene, its king. He was considered to be divine, just as the Pharaohs of Egypt and other rulers of great African empires had been so designated. It was generally believed that divine power was bestowed upon the Asanthene from god, whose spirit was alleged to have dwelt in a golden stool that had come down from heaven when the Ashanti nation had come into being. The Asanthene stool was considered a sacred symbol, representative of faith, power, and authority. Today, the Ashanti stool is often depicted in sculptures, other woodcraft, and fabric designs. It continues to connote authority and royalty, power, and faith.

Gold and ivory, once abundant in Ghana, was beautifully crafted by this indigenous group. Gold, in particular, was often used by some African countries as a medium of exchange. In the Ashanti kingdom, gold belonged to the king. Common people were allowed to use gold, but it was often held in trust by the king and primarily used for trading. These resources, along with copper and silver, were used in the metalworking arts, and the art of metalworking itself held mystical and spiritual significance. For many Africans, gold was synonymous with the sun and the king. Silver metals were often used to reflect the color of the moon and represented the queen. The Asante used these natural resources in wood carvings, ornamentation, and jewelry to symbolize wealth, power, and well being.

The Asante were and continue to be renowned for producing colorful kente cloth, an intricately woven fabric overflowing with symbolic colors and patterns. Like Native Americans in North America and other African peoples, the Asante contended that man was one with nature. They too believed that both animate and inanimate objects had a living spirit. Most embraced the concept that all animals, objects, and places had lives of their own. Woodcarvings and other crafted materials again often reflected those beliefs.

PART 2. MASK-MAKING: AN ART, A TRADITION

Before beginning our maskmaking activities, I ask my students to close their eyes and envision masks they may have seen or worn. “Why do people wear masks? Why do they create them?” They are given a few minutes to answer, and when they do, responses are surprising. “To celebrate a special event, to protect their faces, for fun, to trick people, to worship their Gods, to disguise themselves...” Another question is introduced. “What do you look for or notice in a mask? Responses again vary but indicate that a lot of thought has gone into their replies: the way the mask was decorated, the way the masks looks the same on the left and right sides, patterns and designs, colors used on the mask, the weight of the mask, whether it took on the shape of animals or mystical figure, its width and height, geometric shapes, the materials from which the mask was made... The explanations run the gamut, but through this line of questioning, I observe that my students put previously learned Math concepts into action, i.e., they recognize and identify patterns, symmetry, and geometric shapes found within these objects. I also discover to my pleasure that my young learners are sophisticated enough to describe an artifact with a keen eye and can perhaps embrace masks from a mature, socio-cultural perspective.

Our question and answer period is followed with a pictorial look at masks created by both Native American and African peoples (refer to annotated bibliography for helpful pictorial resources).

Masks and The Reasons Behind Them

In contemporary American society, masks are often worn during festive occasions or used for decorative purposes, as wall hangings or show pieces in homes, museums, and cultural centers. In Native American and African cultures, masks were not used for mere aesthetic purposes. They instead held more meaning and significance, usually serving as part of a costume for ceremonial dance, ritualistic, spiritual and physical healing, religious teaching and/or storytelling purposes. Often but not always symmetrical in form, masks took on much symbolism. Images depicted thereon were intentionally designed, often to invoke, appease, and/or depict a great spirit and/or traditional beliefs (see YNHTI F, G, H, I, and J).

Materials used to create Native American and African masks were closely related to the geographic locale in which they had been created. Most were of vegetative origin. The Cherokee, for example, made one type of mask from gourds (see YNHTI Resource K). Known as booger masks, they were used during a burlesque dance known as the Booger Dance. The dance served as a reenactment of the arrival of Europeans to the their native land. The maskmaker would cut off gourd necks and later use them for noses and horns. Carefully cutting two additional circular openings so the gourd necks would fit snugly therein, the maskmaker inserted the gourd necks, forming the eyes and nose segments of the mask. Using dye from natural charcoal or black walnut, the paint-like substance was carefully applied with fingers to add the finishing touches.

In the Arctic, masks were frequently made from wood, animal fur, and walrus ivory. Sinew, gut, nails, and bird feathers served as additional adornments. Masks were used to illustrate supernatural beings and visions, the environment in which the supernatural beings resided, personal narratives, or symbolized the relationship between a ceremonial dance participant and an animal yua. Throughout most Native American cultures, birds (for the indigenous inhabitants of the North American plains, the eagle) were thought to be a link or messenger between the natural and supernatural world. Thus, it was not unusual to find bird feathers surrounding the mask.

As previously noted, the Yup'ik believed all objectsanimate and inanimatehad yuas of human form. Masks made of bone, animal skin, feathers, and fur were created to look like images of bears, wolves, and otters and were created to appease the animal spirit that was ultimately in control of animals. Some masks depicted the spirit of the physical elements that surrounded the animate or inanimate object (see YNHTI Resources L and M). The wearer was said to have taken on the characteristics of the depicted spirit. The masks, often accompanied by costume, were worn during dance ceremonies to help ensure the hunt would be fruitful.

Similarly in traditional Africa, masks were used during spiritual, ritualistic and/or ceremonial dances and ritualistic events. They comprised part of a costume and were often worn as helmets or face coverings. African masks were usually symmetrical and static. Power was implied through symbolism: elephants, crocodiles, rams, buffalo, or antelope were used to reflect this quality. Some pieces were adorned with metal inlays. Cowrie shells, stones, beads, bones, copper, silver, and gold inlays honored the mask and the entity depicted. Such adornments often connoted wealth, power, high social standing, and respect. Cowrie shells, in particular, held religious significance because of their shape, which had a feminine image. They were often used for mask ornamentation. Bead patterns connoted distinctions between tribes, and castes within a tribe. Skins, wool, feathers, ivory, teeth, horns and other types of shells constituted additional adornments. Hardwood trees, often indigenous to the home of the sculptor, were used to create masks and other wooden objects. So that woodcrafted objects could be preserved, camwood powder was used to help keep termites from attacking the wood and subsequently destroying carved figures.

As in Native American culture, natural resources such as trees were not used without asking or thanking the

creator for their use. Birds, snakes, and beasts embodied human form, man and add symbolic power to the entity depicted in the mask or to the wearer him/herself. These images were often carved into the shape of the mask or were reflected in beaded and painted patterns thereon (see YNHTI Resources N and O).

Maskmaking Activities: Bringing Us Closer

Our students have taken a glimpse at the lifestyles and culture of Native American and

African people. Now, they will all have an opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of this subject matter: they will create their own masks and provide an imaginative, detailed explanation for their creation. Of course, we will be unable to work with natural resources as were used by the people we have studied. Nevertheless, our children will let their creative juices flow with our art materials and related resources.

Mask Project 1: Great Spirit Masks

Task: Pretend you are a Native American, and you are creating a mask that takes on the quality of an animal spirit. Think of an animal whose character trait is similar to a personality trait that you possess (i.e., cunning like a fox, slow like a turtle, precise like an eagle). Envision yourself creating a mask that represents that characteristic. Think of colors, shapes, designs, images that represent your feeling. Recall some of the Native American masks you have observed that reflect similar images. Keeping all of this in mind, create your mask.

Skills Focus/Content Areas: Identifying assorted shapes; identifying line design (horizontal, vertical, diagonal); developing fine motor skills; distinguishing size and color variation; using fine motor and logical thinking skills through layout and design; sorting and identifying body parts, with emphasis on facial components. Math, Science, Social Studies, Art.

Required Materials:

- seven rolls of 4 x 180 inch rolls of plaster gauze (cut into 2 to 3 inch x 3/4 to 5/8 inch widths); this amount will comfortably accommodate a class of 26.
- newspaper and smocks
- soap
- paper towels
- a large jar of Vaseline petroleum jelly

one bowl of water per table of four students

tempera or acrylic paint in assorted colors

wide and small bristled paint brushes

assorted colored feathers

construction paper, twine chenille sticks, and yarn

glue sticks (one per student)

Elmer's glue (with nozzle; one per student)

The maskmaking process that follows is similar to that of a physician applying a cast to a broken arm. A fun-filled effort, the face of each child will be used to lay the foundation for the mask. You will need two days per group to complete this project; each day will require about 45 minutes work time.

For first graders, extra hands are helpful in completing this project. Encourage parents to come in and volunteer to assist in this wonderful maskmaking experience. I have found that in Grades 2 and 3, attentive students who carefully follow directions can serve as small group leaders. I recommend this activity be conducted in groups of four or five, preferably used as a center-based activity. You may, however, desire to work with an entire class. Whichever approach is used, encourage students to pay close attention and follow directions, as not doing so will result in an "facelifting" experience and a disfigured mask.

Before beginning this activity, have the entire class help in cutting the plaster gauze strips. We made it into a counting and fine motor skill activity, i.e., children counted the number of strips while cuttingand they were often able to count way up into the hundreds. Through this preparatory activity, concrete number concepts were reinforced. Additionally, for those students who generally had difficulty using scissors, this activity served to strengthen fine motor skills. Also, ensure that participating students wear smocks. Equally important, have students with long hair or who wear bangs push or fasten their hair back so their face is totally exposed and no hair is in the way.

Step 1. Cover the table with newspaper. Place a large bowl of water and a shoe box filled with the pre-cut plaster gauze strips in the center of the desk. Have participating students sit in the proximity of these supplies.

Step 2. Cover the face of each participating student entirely with petroleum jelly. Gently smooth it on as close to the hairline as possible. (Note: it is best that an adult assist in this effort to ensure that no facial area is overlooked.) Go around the eyelids, and add a thick layer over the eyebrows. Continue applying Vaseline around the entire nose area, including beneath the outer nostril openings, the mouth, all the way down the jaw line to beneath the chin.

Step 3. Have students close their eyes before applying plaster gauze. Inform them to keep their eyes closed while plaster gauze strips are being applied. Emphasize that despite how funny it may appear, do not laugh, for doing so will result in being unable to create the mask.

One at a time, quickly dip the plaster gauze strip into the water (enough to cover it completely but not enough to oversaturate it). Allow excess water to drain off. Apply the moistened strip to the upper portion of the face, along the forehead area as close to the hairline as possible without touching the hair. Repeat this procedure, working your way down over the eyebrows, along the contour of the eyes, over the nose, beneath the nostrilsand be sure to leave these openings exposed. Cover the lips completely or follow the contour of the outer lip area, leaving an opening. Go to the edge of the chin. Each time a moistened strip is applied, lightly rub its surface until smoothened. Two coats of plaster gauze will result in a sturdy mask: if necessary, apply additional strips in areas that appear to be thinly layered.

Have the child sit until the gauze has hardened: this takes usually no more than four to five minutes. My students determined how long it would take for the mask to dry by looking at the clock and counting the minutes that passed by. During this brief waiting period, students were so eager to see the results, not a bit of laughter occurred.

Step 4. Tap lightly along the forehead, cheek and chin area of the mask to determine whether the mask is hard enough for removal. If set, carefully use the three middle fingers of both your left and right hands and run them slowly beneath the chin area of the mask. Lift gently. The mask will come off with ease, and a perfect replica of the child’s face will have been created. Allow the mask to dry thoroughly, preferably until the next day.

Step 5. Set up assorted colored paints. (Usually, tempera paints are the only ones on hand; if you are able to obtain acrylic paints, use them, as they give a nice gloss to the final creation.) Orange, black, red, blue, green, yellow, and brown are colors often used in Native American masks. Make these colored paints available, or encourage students to mix primary colors to create desired hues. Also, remind students to recollect some of the Native American masks they have previously experienced. Keep in mind patterns, line, design and begin. Advise students not to oversaturate the mask when painting it, for doing so will result in its becoming disfigured and/or collapse.

Step 6. If desired, students can adorn their masks with feathers, fake-fur fabric, twine, pre-cut assorted colored construction paper, chenille sticks, and other available materials. Affix adornments using carefully applied, small amounts of Elmer’s glue.

Mask Project 2: Simulated Wood African Masks

Task: Envision yourself creating a mask that represents the way you feel about yourself, your family, your people. Overall, think of colors, shapes, designs, and images that represent your feeling. Recall some of the African masks you have observed that reflect that same quality. Keeping all of these factors in mind, create an African mask.

Skills Focus/Content Areas: Identifying assorted shapes; identifying line design (horizontal, vertical, diagonal); distinguishing size and color variation; using fine motor and logical thinking skills through layout and design; sorting and identifying body parts, with emphasis on facial components. Math, Science, Social Studies, Art.

Required Materials:

- newspaper
- pre-cut oval and rectangular shaped cardboard (approximately 8 x 10 inches)
- small metallic sequins and/or beads in assorted colors
- assorted, pre-cut cardboard shapes (squares, rectangles, ovals, circles, triangles, semi-circles, trapezoids, parallelograms) in 1/2, 1, and 2 inch proportions
- assorted, pre-cut metallic wrap shapes (pliable copper, silver, aluminum, or tin foil available in sheets or on rolls)
- scuff coat brown shoe polish with built-in applicator (one bottle per student)
- small-tipped bristled paint brushes
- glue sticks (one per student)

Elmer’s glue (with nozzle; one per student)

The following mask-making activity can be conducted in groups of four or five, and used as a whole class or center-based activity. Art supplies noted above are available at local craft and art specialty shops. Students can bring in their own bottles of Elmer’s glue and scuff coat shoe polish; ensure that “scuff coat” is emphasized, as this polish results in a mahogany-colored finish on cardboard. Also note, I found it best to have boxes containing the assorted cardboard shapes, metallic pieces, and the like strategically placed in the center of the table, reachable by all students participating in the activity.

Step 1. Have students select the 8 x 10-inch cardboard shape they would like to use for the framework of the mask. Have them select as many pieces needed to create the facial features and surrounding decor. Encourage them to overlap shapes, adhering them to the mask foundation with glue sticks to create two and three dimensional eyes, mouths, headdress, and collar areas. Cover the workspace with newspaper. Before students actually begin their layout and design, emphasize the use of symmetry and patterns when creating the maskto be creative. Encourage the children to apply the glue stick completely on the back of the pieces before adhering them to the foundation. This will ensure tenacity.

Step 2. Layout complete, students are ready to give the mask its wooden appearance. Scuff-coat shoe polish will be used to give this effect. Before conducting this portion of the activity, demonstrate the application of shoe polish so that the children will not oversaturate the cardboard. Using the applicator-tipped bottle, make vertical or horizontal strokes along the grain of the cardboard. Touch up missed areas with a small bristled paint brush. Allow at least 15 minutes to dry. Then have the children turn the mask over to the reverse side and repeat the application process. Allow the reverse side of the mask to dry before. Then, turn it back over so the facial features are once again revealed. Touch up where necessary. Allow all completed masks to dry for approximately 10 to 15 minutes.

Step 3. Using pre-cut metallic pieces and colored sequins and small dots of Elmer’s glue, have students to decorate the masks. Allow to dry overnight.

The results of both of the above-noted student maskmaking efforts are impressive. Finished products can be mounted on vibrantly colored cardboard and showcased on bulletin boards or in a designated display space.

PART 3: PUT IT IN WRITING

Task: To have students demonstrate their knowledge of subject matter through written presentation; to have children also present that understanding in verbal form.

Skills Focus/Content Areas: Effective use of descriptive language, developing and demonstration of sequencing and logical thinking skills. Language Arts and Art.

Required Supplies:

Tape recorder

Sharpened pencils and lined paper
Lined paper, a pencil and/or computer
A camera or snapshot of each student
(to accompany completed work)

Through storytelling and hands-on activities, students have experienced cultural traditions, folkloric tales, and artifacts created by Native American and African people. Young learners have also had the opportunity to create their own mask and to think about the purpose behind the creation of their masterpieces. Students will now have the opportunity to put those thoughts on paper.

Writing and related language arts activities should immediately conclude each completed maskmaking project. Because each child will surely want to participate in the activities that follow, and the attention span of children ages five through seven can at times be very short, it is suggested that visual/auditory and writing activities be spread out during the course of a week and conducted in groups of four or five during 45 minute sessions. Final works can be hand printed and/or typed on the computer and mounted beneath each corresponding mask.

You will remember that students were asked (1) to create an African mask that represented how they felt about themselves and (2) to pretend they were Native American and about to create a mask of themselves representing the character trait of some animal spirit. Writing their background description papers will surely be a challenge, for describing the reason behind the creation of their masks in writing is a sophisticated task for young learners. It may, therefore, be necessary to assist them in feeling comfortable with expressing themselves on paper.

Setting the Tone. Role-play demonstrations initiated by the instructor often enable children to get a firm handle on how to respond. Tape-recording responses is a terrific ice breaker. (With tape recorder set on record, I held up a mask I had created, stood before the class, and softly mumbled, “My name is Trina. I made a mask. It is pretty. It is red and green. I like it.” I stopped, and played back the tape. By this point, the children are in hysterical laughter, aware that my presentation was not what was desired. [Note: At the beginning of the school year, I set the tone that students should persevere even when they make a mistake. In this instance, I feigned crying, and asked, “What should I do?” The response was and usually is a unanimous “Don’t cry, just try!”] I repeated my presentation: “My name is Trina Mullins. In my class, we learned about African people and African masks! I pretended that I came from Ghana, and I created a mask that shows how I feel about myself, my family, and my people. I used triangles and circles for my eyes and nose because I have beautiful triangular eyes and oval full lips. I put short pieces of twine around the top of the head to show my beautiful corn-rowed braids. I glued gold-colored metal circles and parallelograms on my collar to represent members of my family. I used gold because having family means I am rich!....” I continued, speaking clearly and audibly, holding up the described mask with pride. I stopped, and played back the recording once again. The children get the idea and are subsequently called on to give their presentation.)

Ready, Set , Record. Call on a few students to stand before the class with mask in hand. Encourage them to

talk about why they created their mask, and to use complete sentences when responding. Let them know their responses will be recorded. Request that they first identify themselves, then subsequently explain why and how they created each of their masks. Urge them to highlight why they used specific shapes and colors, and whether the use of shapes, patterns, and design held significant meaning. Student comments should be played back and re-recorded should the student so desire. Play back of recorded responses can take place immediately following student presentations, or during center time and group meeting sessions. Know that listening to their explanations provides students with a jump-off point for their written work.

Word Walls. Urge students to use inventive spelling (i.e., spelling words based on phonetic recognition), refer back to text previously read stories and text, or to make use of words strategically placed and found throughout the classroom environment (word walls). Word walls serve as a living resource for students, where new words are added as classroom studies continue. (Because our school is equipped with Macintoshes and Compaqs, words posted on our word walls are visibly enlarged, printed, and posted. Handwritten word list can also be used.) Using these self-empowering writing tools help students to minimally rely on classmates and teachers when completing their work and allows them to concentrate on the subject matter.

And We're Off. Allot a scheduled time for children to create their written descriptions. This activity should take place a minimum of three days per week, for a period of at least 30 to 40 minutes. I have found that early morning hours or immediately after lunch prove effective for my first and second graders to participate in writing activities. While creating their written work, remind students to make use of inventive spelling and words contained in the classroom environment.

Edit, Edit, Edit. During the course of the school year, my students do a lot of journal writing and are taught to draft, revise, and share their written work with one another as it progresses. Continuing in this vein, I give my children time to put their thoughts on paper, to share and critique their literary creations with fellow classmates, to confer with me, and to revise their work accordingly. Allow students to create their description papers, revisit and rewrite them until they are pleased with the outcome.*

Culminating Experiences. I have collaborated with our school's library media specialist, the head librarian at our local public library, and the manager at Barnes and Noble Bookstore. Our children have been invited to have their work displayed in these locales. A sense of pride and accomplishment will surely result from this outreach effort.

A trip to the New York City's Museum of Natural History is on the agenda. Here, children will experience the Hall of Man where artifacts and lifestyles of past European, Asian, African, Hispanic, and Native American cultures are on display. Here, young learners will discover that the masks they have created look similar to many of those on display at the museum.

Should you implement this unit, make every effort to visit art and natural history museums. Extend an invitation for your students' work to be displayed both within and outside of your school. Through such activities, students will experience the interconnectedness of art and the human experience and will make a tangible connection with similarities found in cultural difference!

*I embrace Lucy McCormick Calkins' Writing Process, a motivating approach to encourage children to become meaningful writers. A professor at Columbia University's Teachers' College in New York City, Ms. Calkins and her associates assist educators in seeing the process of writing through the eyes of a child. Using methodology brings

out a lot of untapped creative writing from students. For additional information concerning The Writing Process, refer to Lucy Calkins' work, The Art of Teaching Writing and/or my article, Celebrate A People, found in the American Children's Literature Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Volume II, 1997, Pages 153 - 157.

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Photo Resources

YNHTI photo resources, parenthetically noted as YNHTI Resources A through O in this curriculum unit, are available for use and return at the Yale-New Haven Teachers' Institute. The following resources are contained therein:

YNHTI Resources A, B, and C	Cheyenne, Blackfeet, and Comanche people.	
YNHTI Resource D		Tipis.
YNHTI Resource E		A Navajo mandala.
YNHTI Resources F, G, H, I, and J	Assorted masks by Native Americans of the northwestern region.	
YNHTI Resource K		Cherokee booger mask.
YNHTI Resources L and M		Yup'ik masks.
YNHTI Resource N and O		Ghanian masks.

The Indigena Fine Art Publishers, Ltd. has a selection of photos and postcards depicting Native American life throughout North America. Obtaining permission to photocopy these cards is difficult and time consuming, as Indegena holds copyrights to the photos along with other historical societies in the Northwestern region of the United States. Indigena, however, upon request will make photos and postcards of Native American people, their artifacts, and culture available to teachers for classroom use on a complimentary basis. Simply write and specify the indigenous group on which you desire to obtain information. Contact the company by writing to Indigena Fine Art Publishers, Ltd., Post Office Box 13222, Tucson, AZ 85732-13222, calling toll free at (800) 858-7445, or faxing your request to Indigena at (520) 721-2105.

Recommended Summer Excursions

The American Museum of Natural History

New York City

(212) 769-5100

The Peabody Museum at Whitney AvenueNew Haven, Connecticut

(203) 432-5050

The Smithsonian Institute:

Museum of African Art

Washington, DC

(202) 357-2700

National Museum of the American Indian

The Heye Center at 1 Bowling Green

New York City

(212) 357-1387

Yale Art Gallery

(African Art is currently on display.)

(203) 432-0600

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