

# ASSERTING IDENTITY

## KEY TERMS

- Apartheid
- Beadwork
- Identity
- Militia
- South Africa



## CLOSE LOOKING

**THE BEADED BLANKET CAPE**, sewn by an Ndebele (pronounced endeBELay) woman in South Africa around 1950, has at its base a woolen, colorfully striped Middelburg blanket of yellow, green, blue, red, and purple. The commercially made blanket is named for the town of Middelburg in the northeast region of the country, which is home to a large population of Ndebele people.

Lengths of handmade beadwork were woven separately and sewn to the blanket, with narrow widths of striped wool appearing at intervals above and below the beadwork bands. Together, the beading and blanket stripes create an intricate geometric design motif. Beaded patterns in the form of letters, triangles, and horizontal and vertical bands are framed by heavy, black, beaded outlines. At bottom, the blanket is finished with a narrow length of fringe.

## MARRIED WOMAN'S BLANKET CAPE (NGURARA)

Mid-20th century

Artist Unidentified

Ndebele region, South Africa

Middelburg wool blanket, glass beads, and string

Gift of Aaron and Joanie Young, Baltimore, BMA 2002.631

## ART IN CONTEXT

**THIS LESSON FEATURES WORKS OF ART** made by Ndebele, Asafo, and Ejagham people living under Dutch or British colonial rule. The objects represent ways in which ethnic identity can be asserted through visual expression when one's culture is threatened. They may criticize or satirize changes in society as a result of colonial rule or reflect the melding of traditions that occurs as different cultures interact.



Ndebele region, South Africa

Over the centuries, the Ndebele were stripped of rights by white South African settlers. In the 1880s, following prolonged fighting, the land-holding Ndebele were defeated by the Boers (descendants of early Dutch settlers). Their ancestral lands were distributed to Boer farmers, and their people were indentured as laborers on Boer farms. Disruption and relocation continued, particularly between 1948 and 1994, when policies of segregation were enforced through apartheid. The goals of apartheid—meaning “separateness” in Afrikaans (pronounced AfriCAHNS), a language spoken by Boers and their descendants—were to segregate the nonwhite majority from the white minority and split black South Africans along ethnic lines to decrease their political power. More than 80 percent of the land was set aside for the white minority. The other 20 percent was divided into 10 “homelands,” called “bantustans,” (pronounced BANtustans) of Kwandebele (pronounced KWANDeBELay), where the Ndebele were relocated. Black South Africans were forcibly removed from their farms to these homelands, and the government sold the remaining land to white farmers. By the end of apartheid in 1994, when the system was abolished, more than 3.5 million people had been relocated.<sup>1</sup> Today, the majority of Ndebele live in the former bantustans of Kwandebele and Lebowa, located approximately 40 to 80 miles northeast of Pretoria, South Africa.<sup>2</sup>



Sara Mthimunye wearing a front waist garment. Ndebele, South Africa.

Photo: © Margaret Courtney-Clarke, 1986

Ndebele women responded to dislocation, marginalization, and loss of cultural traditions caused by Dutch colonial and apartheid regimes by asserting their identities through increasingly complex mural painting and beadwork.<sup>3</sup> As a visible affirmation of heritage and personal expression, women paint colorful murals of bright, abstract, predominantly flat designs, which are outlined in black with little overlap, directly on their homesteads. This distinctive patterning began around 1948 with the introduction of apartheid.<sup>4</sup> Originally these painted designs, perceived by the white majority to be purely decorative, were used by the Ndebele to communicate resistance through a complex visual language known only to them. Still painted today, these murals act as an affirmation of cultural identity.

The designs on an Ndebele blanket are borrowed from mural painting and vice versa. Worn as a cape by a bride or married woman (only on special occasions), a heavily decorated blanket weighs up to 10 pounds.<sup>5</sup> Testament to a woman's artistic abilities, a beaded blanket is a signifier of social status as well as a means of income. Once the Ndebele were forced off their land, women had few avenues for making money; beadwork became an important revenue generator. Both beadwork and mural painting are art forms practiced by married Ndebele women, and the patterns are taught by a mother to her daughter.



**ASAFO MILITIA FLAG (FRANKAA)**

Early to mid-20th century

Artist Unidentified

Fante region, Ghana

Cloth

Gift of Dawn M. Liberi, Washington, D.C.,

BMA 1998.373

**RELATED ARTWORK**

**SINCE THE 17TH CENTURY**, appliquéd and embroidered flags called *frankaa* (pronounced FRENkah), have been commissioned by Fante men of coastal Ghana for militia companies. Historically, militias, called *Asafo*, served as a defense against threats from neighboring forces such as the Dutch-supported Ashanti, who controlled much of the territory of Ghana before the British arrived in the early 19th century. A close, though fraught, association between the Fante and the British colonials grew as their forces banded together to fight the Ashanti, who were often in conflict with them.



Detail of Asafo Militia Flag

By the late 19th century, the threat of invasion decreased, and the function of the Fante Asafo became more social than martial. Today, companies compete for bragging rights against neighboring units primarily through flag performances. Ceremonies occur at funerals of company members, festivals, or events honoring visiting dignitaries. The flag is carried by a militia member in performances that often recount past battles.<sup>6</sup>

*The dancer may unfurl the flag, flash it to the enemy, and then lie down and sleep on it to express confidence in eventual success.... Some steps are simply marvelous aesthetic embellishments—leaps, jumps, hops on one foot, twirls, and other flourishes—demonstrating the virtuosity of the dancer and heightening the entertainment value.... Upon the success of the “battle,” the flag is paraded victoriously.<sup>7</sup>*

Asafo flags are decorated with symbols that express particular militias' identities.<sup>8</sup> Some imagery was appropriated from the colonizing British Empire. On the BMA flag, a Union Jack, the national flag of the United Kingdom, is sewn in the upper left corner. It dates the frankaa to the early to mid-20th century, before Ghana gained independence in 1957. The meanings of the indigo heart, red linear designs on a white stripe, and enigmatic image of a man chained to animals and other figures remain cryptic. Generally, however, frankaa imagery is allegorical or historical in nature and can include boasts, insults, praise and inside jokes appreciated only by members of a specific Asafo.<sup>9</sup>

**THE HELMET MASK** has two faces, one red, representing a female, and one black, representing a male. The pairing of the two genders on one mask is a form developed by Ejagham artists of the Cross River delta region in southeast Nigeria. Both faces have front teeth carved to create triangular holes in the mouths through which maskers could see

Mounted on the helmet are four carved figures. Two are white British colonial males, identified by their uniforms, who face forward and backward above the red and black faces. A dark-skinned female figure, identified by her elaborate hairstyle as a local woman, faces to one side. Facing the other way is a dark-skinned male, presumably Ejagham, who wears a uniform and cap associated with the Nigerian police force. His position would have been appointed by the British government to enforce local colonial law.

The four carved figures represent people who would have been familia in Ejagham society. The British Empire controlled the area from 1885 to Nigerian independence in 1960. British officers were a ubiquitous presence, as were the Ejagham police officers they hired. Given



Artist Unidentified  
Ejagham region, Nigeria  
Wood, paint, pigment, and iron  
Gift of Barry and Toby T. Hecht, Bethesda,  
Maryland, BMA 1990.161

the mix of the British figures, the Ejagham man in British uniform, and the Ejagham woman, the mask was probably worn in satirical performances that poked fun at cultural difference and criticized changes in society occurring under foreign rule.

<sup>1</sup> "Apartheid," History Network, accessed February 10, 2015, <http://www.history.com/topics/apartheid/print>.

<sup>2</sup> "Ndebele," Encyclopedia.com, accessed April 7, 2015, <http://www.encyclopedia.com/topic/Ndebele.aspx>.

<sup>3</sup> Sabine Marschall, "Sites of Identity and Resistance: Urban Community Murals and Rural Wall Decoration in South Africa," *African Arts* 35, 3 (Autumn 2002): 46.

<sup>4</sup> "The Influence of Apartheid," South African History Online, accessed February 13, 2015, <http://www.sahistory.org.za/influence-apartheid>.

<sup>5</sup> Frederick John Lamp, "The Body as Billboard: Ndebele Beadwork," in *See the Music Hear the Dance*, ed. Frederick John Lamp (Munich: Prestel Publishing, 2004), 48.

<sup>6</sup> Doran H. Ross, "We Will Fight You Day or Night: a Fante Flag (Frankaa)," in *See the Music Hear the Dance*, ed. Frederick John Lamp (Munich: Prestel Publishing, 2004), 82.

<sup>7</sup> Doran H. Ross, *Fighting with Art: Appliquéd Flags of the Fante Asafo* (Los Angeles: Fowler Museum of Cultural History, UCLA, 1979), 11.

<sup>8</sup> "New Materials and Contexts," University of Iowa Museum of Art, accessed February 3, 2015, <http://africa.uima.uiowa.edu/chapters/cultural-exchange/new-materials-and-contexts/>.

<sup>9</sup> "Regalia," University of Iowa Museum of Art, accessed February 2, 2015, <http://africa.uima.uiowa.edu/chapters/governance/regalia/?start=5>.

## CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

### ACTIVITY 1:

#### Exploring Responses to Apartheid

**Grades: 6–8**

**Subjects: English Language Arts, History/  
Social Studies, Visual Arts**

Within a unit that explores the South African policy of apartheid and its effects, students will examine the Married Woman's Blanket Cape and respond to the following questions. The teacher will record responses on the black/white board.

- At first glance, what do you notice most about the work?
- Describe the art elements—line, color, shape, texture, space, and form—that you see in this work.
- What patterns can you find in the work? Describe them.
- Do the patterns in this work look similar to anything you've seen before? If so, what does it remind you of and what makes it similar?

As students are sharing their responses, the teacher will offer relevant information about the object, being sure to include its origin and purpose, as well as the role of the patterns in communicating Ndebele identity in defiance of being marginalized and stripped of rights in South Africa.

Individual students will use print and/or online resources to select and research one other cultural group in South Africa that was affected by apartheid (such as the Zulu) and explore the different ways that the group asserted its identity and protested (such as songs, political protests, etc.). They will share their research in oral reports to the class using visual, video, and/or audio resources, and introduce a new question they have developed regarding their topic. The teacher will then lead the class in a discussion about the range of responses to apartheid.

### ACTIVITY 2:

#### Examining Art and Identity

**Grades: 6–8**

**Subjects: English Language Arts, History/  
Social Studies, Visual Arts**

The teacher will divide students into groups of four and provide each group with markers and a sheet of large paper. The teacher will ask the groups to brainstorm and respond to the following question, recording their answers on the paper.

- What are some ways that people express their identities visually—as individuals and as groups? (For example, wearing a team hat.)

The teacher will post the sheets from each group and ask students to share examples in discussion. The teacher will then share copies of the images of the Married Woman's Blanket Cape, the Asafo Militia Flag, and the Helmet Mask. Students will examine and discuss the objects, guided by questions:

- At first glance, what do you notice most about the works?
- Describe the art elements—line, color, shape, texture, space, and form—that you see in these works.
- Do any elements you see in the works look similar to anything you've seen before? If so, what are they and what makes them similar?

Students will then individually write up to five questions they have about the images, selecting one question to share with the class. The teacher will record it on the black/white board, offering relevant information in response. The teacher will include information about the objects' connections to group identities if the topic did not come up through the previous discussion.

Using posterboard, paper collage materials, glue sticks, and markers (if desired), student groups of four will collage class flags, using images and symbols to represent important aspects of the class. Groups will then present their flags, explaining the elements included in the image.

# STANDARDS AND CURRICULUM

## COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

### English Language Arts

Grade 6

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.6.1. Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 6 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

Grade 7

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.7.1. Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 7 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.7.4. Present claims and findings, emphasizing salient points in a focused, coherent manner with pertinent descriptions, facts, details, and examples; use appropriate eye contact, adequate volume, and clear pronunciation.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.7.5. Include multimedia components and visual displays in presentations to clarify claims and findings and emphasize salient points.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.7.7. Conduct short research projects to answer a question, drawing on several sources and generating additional related, focused questions for further research and investigation.

Grade 8

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.8.1. Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 8 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

## MARYLAND STATE CURRICULUM

### History/Social Studies

Grade 7

2.A.1.a. Apply understandings of the elements of culture to the studies of modern world regions, such as art, music, religion, government, social structure, education, values, beliefs, and customs.

2.B.1.a. Identify cultural groups within a contemporary world region.

2.C.1.a. Evaluate causes of conflict in the global community, such as Apartheid, the acquisition of natural resources, the decline of communism, ethnic persecution, and domestic and international terrorism.

### Visual Arts

Grade 6

1.3.a. Identify and describe how artists use design concepts to organize the elements of art and principles of design to convey ideas, thoughts, and feelings.

2.1.a. Compare stylistic methods used by artists of different cultures to communicate feelings, ideas, and universal themes.

2.2.a. Identify historical, social, and cultural themes in selected artworks that influence the beliefs, customs, or values of a society.

2.2.b. Plan artworks based on historical, cultural, or social themes to communicate personal beliefs, customs, or societal values.

Grade 7

1.3.a. Compare and describe how artists use design concepts to organize the elements of art and principles of design to convey ideas, thoughts, and feelings in selected artworks.

2.1.a. Identify the roles and functions of the visual arts in expressing ideas, events, and universal themes within and among cultural groups.

2.2.a. Describe historical, social, and cultural themes in selected artworks that communicate beliefs, customs, or values of a society.

2.2.b. Plan artworks that use symbolic image and forms to convey selected beliefs, customs, or values.

2.3.a. Describe subject matter, styles, and techniques representative of various cultures and periods of art history.

Grade 8

1.3.a. Analyze why artists may select specific design concepts to convey meaning in artistic exemplars.

2.1.a. Analyze the roles and functions of the visual arts in expressing ideas, events, and universal themes within and among cultural groups.



Married Woman's Blanket Cape (Ngurara), Mid-20th century, Ndebele region, South Africa. Middelburg wool blanket, glass beads, and string. Gift of Aaron and Joanie Young, Baltimore, BMA 2002.631



Asafo Militia Flag (Frankaa). Early-mid 20th century. Fante region, Ghana. Cloth.  
Gift of Dawn M. Liberi, Washington, D.C., BMA 1998.373



Helmet Mask. Mid-20th century. Ejagham region, Nigeria. Wood, paint, pigment, and iron. Gift of Barry and Toby T. Hecht, Bethesda, Maryland, BMA 1990.161