

EXCHANGE IN ART AND CULTURE

KEY TERMS

- Colonial Rule
- Composite
- Gold
- Islam
- Trade



HEADDRESS (BANDA OR KUMBADUBA) Early 20th century

Artist Unidentified
Baga or Nalu region, Guinea or Guinea-Bissau
Wood, pigment, and iron
Partial gift of Valerie Franklin, Los Angeles, and
Purchase with Exchange Funds Provided by
Twenty-Seven Donors, BMA 1990.2

CLOSE LOOKING

THE BANDA (pronounced BAHNdah), meaning “Composite Human Beast,” made by a Baga (pronounced BAHgah) carver, is a fusion of human and animal forms. Carved from a single piece of wood, its human features include a nose, eyes, scarification marks on the face, and a woman’s braided hairstyle that is visible between the eyes and again above the head. The headdress is also decorated with a crocodile jaw and a chameleon tail, antelope horns, and the body of a snake. Each element is painted with a unique design of blue, white, and red to harmonize the disparate parts. The headdress itself is in the shape of a canoe and is, perhaps, a reference to the location of the Baga along the Atlantic Coast of Guinea and Guinea-Bissau. In the center of the headdress, the presence of a two-story Roman Catholic church with



Baga or Nalu region, Guinea or Guinea-Bissau

stairs and colonnades—like those built by European missionaries in the 19th century—speaks to the Christian institutions that arrived in this part of Africa before and during colonial rule.

ART IN CONTEXT

CULTURES ARE NEVER STATIC. Religious conversion, trade, conflict, and migration are just some of the ways in which cultural and artistic changes arise. Sometime before the 15th century, the Baga, meaning “people of the seaside” in the Susu language, migrated from the interior highlands of Guinea to the geographically isolated lowlands of the Guinean coast.¹ This migration was made to avoid conflict with the Muslim Fulbe people (although some Baga did convert to Islam). Christian missionaries arrived in the fifteenth century shortly after Portugal began to trade with the people of coastal Guinea began.² Written sources beginning in the mid-17th century tell of the building of churches, the presence of priests, and Christian conversions in the area.³ Catholic beliefs, represented by the ecclesiastical building on the Banda headdress, were then incorporated into existing Baga cosmology.

Banda was used to entertain senior men at meetings between villages and to protect the Baga from animal attacks and malicious spirits around the time of male initiation rites.⁴ The various elements on the headdress harness and utilize their sources, combined spiritual power to ward off malevolence. The headdress could evoke the strength of the crocodile or ward off its attack. It summoned the antelope for an easy hunt or to give a hunter antelope-like speed while hunting. Perhaps the inclusion of the church acted as a talisman as well. Together, the Banda’s visual elements suggest the complex relationship between the Baga and the earthly and spiritual worlds.

A large raffia cape attached to the underside of the Banda headdress covered the masker from his face to his knees. Loose pants with ruffles of raffia at the bottom and a short cloth cape around the back of the costume completed the outfit.⁵ More than five feet long and very heavy, the mask in performance required extraordinary athleticism on the part of the performer. Not only is the mask very heavy, but the choreography depicted a large number of animals, including a powerful bull and a bird diving for fish in the sea. Below, art historian Frederick Lamp describes one part of a performance he witnessed in 1987 in which a bird was evoked by the masker:

Like a predatory bird fishing, [the dancer] takes high steps, then lunges the headdress downward... crouching low, he puts his snout to the ground, shudders, and makes pecking motions toward the ground, then points the headdress high in the air, like the bird swallowing its fish. As a bird in flight, he circles around the space, tilting the headdress toward the spectators and flinging out the raffia with his hands, prancing with bent knees.⁶



Banda Dance. Baga Mandon, Guinea.

Photo: Frederick John Lamp, 1987

At various points in the frenetic performance, the masker, always a young man, would crouch down and then jump up, lifting Banda high over his head. He would spin, then make multiple figure eights before plunging the headdress close to the ground. The performance would last for several hours. When one masker would tire, another male initiate would step in.

After Guinean independence from French colonial rule in 1958 and during the subsequent Marxist regime, many aspects of Baga culture were prohibited and religious objects destroyed. When the regime fell in 1984, Baga cultural expressions experienced a rebirth, including the reintroduction of Banda. Today, however, the headdress is masqueraded only for village and visitor entertainment.⁷

RELATED ARTWORK

FOR APPROXIMATELY 500 YEARS, beginning around 1400, the Akan of southern Ghana and the Côte d'Ivoire used gold dust mined from their river beds and forests as currency.⁸ The commodity was much desired and made the Akan (pronounced ahCAHN) a valuable partner to both North African traders who crossed the Sahara desert and European merchants on West Africa's coast. The Akan lacked salt, an element necessary to basic health. People in North Africa could easily mine salt; conversely, the Akan could easily mine gold, and a long distance trade route was thus established. North African traders carried bars of salt, cloth, tobacco, and tools to trading centers on the Niger River. The Akan traded for these goods using gold, ivory, kola nuts, pepper, and sugar, as well as enslaved people.⁹ In addition, the Akan traded with European merchants on the Ghanaian coast, exchanging gold for guns and gunpowder, tools, paper, cloth and clothing, livestock, fruit, tobacco, sugar cane, eyeglasses, and glass beads.¹⁰

The Akan and their trading partners used a system of brass weights and scales to determine the price of goods. Both buyer and seller brought their own weights and scale to the negotiation. An Akan tradesman, hoping to get top price for his goods, presented a heavy weight. Wanting to pay less than asking price, the buyer presented a lighter one. Negotiations continued until they agreed on which combination of weights determined the amount of gold dust to be paid for salt or another commodity. Once a price was set, the buyer measured gold dust on the scale until the weight balanced. The trader then reweighed the gold with his system to ensure the deal was equitable.¹¹

From 1400–1900, Akan metalworkers made millions of weights that were commissioned by Akan people and various trading partners.



A handful of gold dust



Salt blocks ready to be traded for gold

Photo: Dan Heller

Weights were made in multiple series, one of which was based on the European ounce and another on Arabic measurements for North African trade. The weights themselves are of two types, the first abstract and geometric and the second figural or representative of everyday objects. The BMA has a collection of more than 650 Akan weights, some in the shapes of fish, snakes, birds, turtles, and scorpions. This weight in the form of two sandals may represent those removed by Muslim worshippers prior to prayer. It is through the North African trade routes that Islam spread across the Sahara desert southwest and into southern Ghana and the Côte d'Ivoire.



GOLD-DUST WEIGHT (ABRAMMUO)

1700–1900

Artist Unidentified

Akan region, Ghana or Côte d'Ivoire

Brass

Gift of Helen 'Muffie' Lippincott McElhiney,
BMA 1988.1205

For information on the Akan lost-wax casting process (used in the late 20th century for casting different kinds of brass objects), see "Akan Brass Casting" in the online resource "Art & Life in Africa" from the University of Iowa: <http://africa.uima.uiowa.edu/topic-essays/show/27>.

For a further exploration of gold weights, teachers and students can refer to the February 2015 issue of Art-To-Go, "Super-small Sculptures from Africa": https://artbma.org/documents/atg/pdf/ATG_2-15.pdf. They can also visit the collections page of the BMA to search for other gold weights at the Museum. (Use the term "Abrammuo" for the best results.) <https://artbma.org/collections/african.html>.

THE ECONOMY OF THE HISTORICALLY nomadic Tuareg (pronounced TWAreg) people is based on trade, livestock, and agriculture. Their trade routes extended from the northern Mediterranean coasts of Algeria and Libya to Mali and Niger along the southern edge of the Sahara desert.¹² Using camel caravans, Tuareg merchants brought goods such as dates, millet, salt, clothes, leather products, and ostrich feathers to the northern coasts, and from there they were traded throughout the world.¹³

The vast majority of Tuareg are Muslim. Soon after the prophet Muhammad's death in 632, Muslim warriors swept from Egypt to Morocco and then south, converting many ethnic groups to Islam.¹⁴ Over the course of several centuries, Islam continued to establish a strong presence in these regions and by the 11th century, many people had converted. A wealthy Muslim Tuareg merchant would have wanted to carry the Koran, the central religious text of Islam, with him on caravans. Containers like the one in the BMA collection allowed for the Koran's safe transport. The box would have been worn on a cord around the owner's neck. Messages in Arabic decorate the case, saying, "It is Allah who sustains the heavens and the earth" and, repeating the first words of the Koran, "In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate." Each letter of the inscriptions is aligned differently, so that the devotee would contemplate its form in order to decode its message. The metal's shine is a metaphor for the light of God's word as told in the Koran.



CONTAINER FOR A KORAN

Early 20th century

Artist Unidentified

Tuareg areas of Niger, Algeria, or Mali

Copper alloy, nickel, and lead

Anonymous Gift, BMA 2002.142

**PERSONAL ORNAMENT**

19th–20th century

Artist Unidentified

Fon kingdom of Dahomey, Benin

Silver alloy and horn

Anonymous Gift, BMA 2002.112

THE FON KINGDOM OF SIERRA LEONE amassed great wealth between the early 18th and mid-19th centuries by conquering coastal states and monopolizing the region's trade in enslaved people with Europe.¹⁵ Upon taking people captive, the nobility singled out artists and retained them to ensure constant innovation in the arts.

This personal ornament in the shape of a gunpowder horn is purely ornamental. It cannot hold powder, because the lid does not open. The object is decorated with filigree, ornate ornamental work made of thin wire formed into delicate shapes. The rosette on the "lid" of the horn is finely formed, and decoration continues with a bird and two-headed snake on one side. The object reflects the artist's familiarity with European Victorian jewelry which is often highly embellished. The Victorian filigree work and gunpowder horn shape are both derived from European antecedents. In this example, silver covers an actual antelope horn.



KONGO (pronounced KONgo) kingdom sculptors of the Loango coast in Democratic Republic of the Congo sold carved souvenir tusks to European traders and officials, beginning with the Portuguese in the 16th century.¹⁶ The images around the BMA tusk depict scenes of merchants trading and African porters carrying heavy boxes and ivory under the watchful eye of European colonials. Figures of African people in traditional dress, African people in European dress, and white Europeans reflect the rigid strata of colonial enforced labor. The spiral composition reflects the Kongo belief that life is a cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth. More than one thousand similar tusks were sold at the peak of the ivory trade in the mid- to late-19th century.

TUSK CARVED IN RELIEF

Late 19th–early 20th century

Artist Unidentified

Kongo kingdom, Democratic Republic of the Congo or Angola

Elephant ivory

Gift of Alan Wurtzburger, BMA 1953.133a

¹ Bruce L. Mouser, "Who and Where Were the Baga?: European Perceptions from 1793 to 1821," *History in Africa*, 29 (2002): 337.

² Lamp, *The Art of the Baga*, 35.

³ Lamp, *The Art of the Baga*, 37.

⁴ "Mask (Banda)," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed January 30, 2015, <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1978.412.307>.

⁵ Frederick John Lamp, *The Art of the Baga*, 146.

⁶ Frederick John Lamp, *The Art of the Baga*, 148.

⁷ "Mask (Banda)," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed January 30, 2015, <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1978.412.307>.

⁸ John Picton, "West Africa and the Guinea Coast," in *Africa the Art of a Continent*, ed. Tom Phillips (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 1999), 442.

⁹ "What is Currency? Lessons from Historic Africa," *Smithsonian in Your Classroom*, May/June 1998, 3.

¹⁰ "What is Currency? Lessons from Historic Africa," 5.

¹¹ "What is Currency? Lessons from Historic Africa," 4.

¹² "Islam and Islamic Arts in Africa," University of Iowa Museum of Art, accessed February 2, 2015, <http://africa.uima.uiowa.edu/topic-essays/show/Islam+and+Islamic+Arts+in+Africa>.

¹³ "Tuareg," University of Iowa Museum of Art, accessed February 2, 2015, <http://africa.uima.uiowa.edu/peoples/show/Tuareg>.

¹⁴ "Islam and Islamic Arts in Africa."

¹⁵ "Fon," University of Iowa Museum of Art, accessed February 2, 2015, <http://africa.uima.uiowa.edu/peoples/show/Fon>.

¹⁶ "Kongo Ivories," Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed March 18, 2015, www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/kong/hd_kong.htm.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

ACTIVITY 1:

Creating a Composite

Grades: 6–8

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

Students will look closely at the Headdress (Banda or Kumbaduba) and respond to the following questions in a class discussion. The teacher will record responses on the black/white board.

- What are the art elements—color, line, shape, texture, and form—you see in the artwork?
- Are there parts of the artwork that look familiar to you? If so, what are the parts and what do they remind you of?

The teacher will share contextual information about the headdress, pointing out the various human, animal, and architectural elements that make the headdress a composite, explaining that a “composite” is something made from parts from different sources. The definition can be written on the black/white board and left up for student reference. The teacher will also share that the purpose of creating a composite headdress was to incorporate all the elements of the Baga cosmos (including elements incorporated from the Portuguese culture with whom the Baga had been in contact) to create one figure.

The teacher will explain that, for this headdress, the Baga used the composite to express spiritual ideas, but students will explore the composite in a secular way, creating a self-portrait that focuses on personal experiences, culture, and environment. Each part of the composite portrait should correspond to the parts of each student’s face. The teacher will provide magazines, newspapers, flyers, and other materials with images of people, places, and things. (For the purposes of this activity, the students should be limited to those images and not use text from the collage materials.) Using these materials and paper, scissors, and glue sticks, students will create

composite collage self-portraits that reflect their interests, experiences, culture, and environment. Students will then share their artistic choices with the class in a group discussion.

For another example of composites in art, explore the composite head paintings of Italian Renaissance artist Giuseppe Archimbaldo. <http://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/arcimboldoinfo.shtm>

ACTIVITY 2:

Researching Gold Weights and African Trade Routes

Grades: 6–8

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

Within a unit on historic African trade networks and the spread of Islam, the teacher will divide students into groups of four and display or share copies of the Gold-Dust Weight and Container for a Koran images from this resource. Each group of students will look carefully at the images, one at a time, using the questions below to guide their discussion.

- What are the art elements—color, line, shape, texture, and form—you see in the artwork?
- Is there anything about the artwork that looks familiar to you? If so, what looks familiar?

The teacher will then invite groups to share their responses, recording them on the black/white board for future reference. As students share thoughts, the teacher will offer information about the objects, explaining how the Gold-Dust Weight was used and how it illustrates the cultural exchange that occurred due to the gold dust currency along trade routes in West and North Africa. (Please note that this object dates to 1700–1900 CE, but it reflects some of the cultural contacts that developed in the use of gold dust beginning around 1400.) The teacher will also share the context for the Container for a Koran.

Though it dates from the early 20th century, the work demonstrates the lasting effect of the spread of Islam in Mali.

Individual students will then use print and/or online resources to research objects from North and West African countries that reflect the spread of Islam.

For further information on the arts of the Islamic world, teachers may visit: <http://www.metmuseum.org/learn/for-educators/publications-for-educators/art-of-the-islamic-world> and students may wish to explore the Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History at the Metropolitan Museum of Art at <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/>. If desired, the teacher may select objects from the timeline for students to choose among.

Students will use the questions below to guide their research. They will then write a one- to two-page essay on the object they have selected.

- What is the object?
- What are the art elements—color, line, shape, texture, and form—you see in the artwork? Please describe the object.
- What was the object made for?
- Can you find out who made the object?
- How does the object reflect aspects of art from the Islamic world, such as verses from the Koran in Arabic, decorative geometric and vegetal patterns, etc.?
- How did Islam come to the place where the object is from? When did this happen?

When students have completed their essays, the class should be divided into groups of four (they need not be the same four as in the first part of the activity). Students will share the results of their research and brainstorm with their group on additional research questions for their topic.

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.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6.7. Conduct short research projects to answer a question, drawing on several sources and refocusing the inquiry when appropriate.

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.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.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.8.7. Conduct short research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question), drawing on several sources and generating additional related, focused questions that allow for multiple avenues of exploration.

MARYLAND STATE CURRICULUM

History/Social Studies

Grade 6

5.B.5.a. Describe the contributions of major African monarchies, cities, and trade networks, such as Ghana, Mali, and Songhai.

6.C.1.b. Explain how the development of transportation and communication networks influenced the movement of people, goods, and ideas from place to place, such as the trade routes in Africa, Asia, and Europe, and the spread of Islam.

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.c. Analyze how cultural diffusion is influenced by factors, such as trade, migration, immigration, and conflict.

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.

2.1.b. Explain how stylistic elements that represent a historical period, social context, or culture, communicate feelings, ideas or universal themes in a visual composition.

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

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

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.

2.3.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.

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

2.3.a. Compare similarities and differences in subject matter, styles, and techniques among various cultures and periods of art history.



Headdress (Banda or Kumbaduba). Early 20th century. Baga or Nalu region, Guinea or Guinea-Bissau. Wood, pigment, and iron. Partial gift of Valerie Franklin, Los Angeles, and purchase with exchange funds provided by twenty-seven donors, BMA 1990.2



Gold-Dust Weight (Abrammuo). 1700–1900. Akan region, Ghana or Côte d'Ivoire. Brass.
Gift of Helen 'Muffie' Lippincott McElhiney, Bethesda, Maryland, BMA 1988.1205



Personal Ornament. 19th–20th century. Fon kingdom of Dahomey, Benin. Silver alloy and horn. Anonymous Gift, BMA 2002.112



Container for a Koran. Early 20th century. Tuareg areas of Niger, Algeria, or Mali. Copper alloy, nickel, and lead. Anonymous Gift, BMA 2002.142



Tusk Carved in Relief. Late 19th–early 20th century. Kongo kingdom, Democratic Republic of the Congo or Angola. Elephant ivory. The Baltimore Museum of Art: Gift of Alan Wurtzbarger, BMA 1953.133a