

FACES OF ORDER AND CHAOS

KEY TERMS

- Conflict Resolution
- Headdress
- Mask
- Public Masquerade
- Role Models



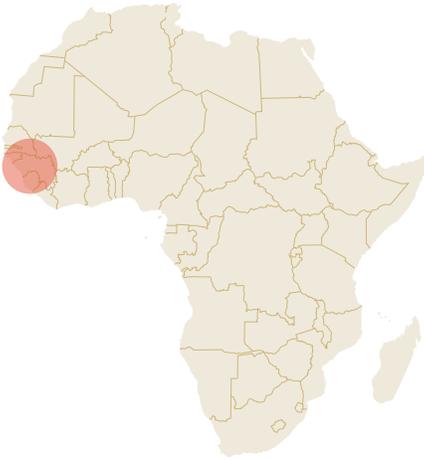
CLOSE LOOKING

FOR THE BAGA PEOPLE on the northern coast of Guinea and the southern coast of Guinea-Bissau, D'mba, or Great Mother, represents ideal female beauty both physically and in her role as a dutiful mother. D'mba (pronounced DIMbah) wears an elegant hairstyle with braids carved in precise parallel rows. Seen in profile, a crest along the center of her semi-circular head creates a series of curvilinear lines that proceed down over her forehead and rise again to the end of her nose.

GREAT MOTHER HEADDRESS (D'MBA) Late 19th-early 20th century

Artist Unidentified

Baga region, possibly Monchon village, Guinea
Wood, copper alloy tacks, and iron tacks
Gift of Alan Wurtzburger, BMA 1957.97



**Baga region,
possibly Monchon village,
Guinea**



Dancing D'mba Baga Sitem, Guinea.

Photo: Frederick John Lamp, 1990

D'MBA IN PERFORMANCE

Africanist scholar and curator Frederick Lamp described a performance as follows:

"The dance of the D'mba begins with the appearance of a line of drummers dancing while beating their drums, in single file, followed by the D'mba dancer.... D'mba executes both sedate and vigorous steps, sometimes twirling, now pacing delicately, occasionally lying down completely on the ground, helped by assistants, and then standing up again. The crowd cheers wildly after D'mba floats around the perimeter of the circle, suddenly whirls around, and stops suddenly."²

Her physical features include large eyes, C-shaped ears, an arrow-shaped nose (when seen frontally), long and slender neck, large flat breasts, and a small protruding mouth. Her wooden surface gleams with high polish, and brass tacks highlight her facial features and braids. Tacks create patterns on her neck and breasts that imitate decorative scarring. These patterns include single and parallel lines, V shapes, and crosses. Between her breasts are small holes that allowed dancers of the D'mba to see through the mask. Standing on four supports that would have rested on the dancer's shoulders, and carved from a single piece of wood, the massive headdress stands just over four feet high and weighs over 80 pounds. Resting on the head of the dancer, D'mba would appear as an immensely tall and stately figure.

ART IN CONTEXT

PUBLIC MASQUERADES IN SOME AFRICAN SOCIETIES communicate valued behaviors and discourage activities considered unhealthy or antisocial. The three headdresses in this lesson are used in masquerades to communicate the importance of duty and harmony or to warn against the danger of chaos.

Not a spiritual entity, but rather a role model, D'mba represents the ideal woman in Baga (pronounced BAHgah) society. Selflessly, the Great Mother has embraced her maternal duty. Prominent flattened breasts indicate that she bore and nursed many children, whom she has guided to become productive members of society. The large scale of her eyes and ears indicate that she sees and hears all things in her community; her small mouth tells us she refrains from gossiping.

In masquerade, D'mba was danced by young men, never women, in part because the colossal headdress weighs 83 pounds. She appeared only during daylight hours, when she presided over weddings, planting and harvesting ceremonies, and funerals. Before every performance, she was polished and her tacks were shined to flash in the sun. D'mba would have been clothed in a costume of palm fibers, called raffia, and a dark cloth cape that hid the mask's supporting posts. Dancers rested her heavy weight on a cloth pad covering their heads and gripped the mask by its front posts. During the masquerade, D'mba was surrounded by a circle of men from her clan group with women forming an outer circle. Her imposing figure, engaged in a dramatic and elegant dance, was intended to set a moral and behavioral standard for all men and women in the community. For the Baga, D'mba's dance was a favorite among masquerades.¹ Her performance was accompanied by musicians playing two kinds of drums, a slit gong, and sometimes antelope horn trumpets.

Baga culture began to erode when France colonized the land in the 1890s, and Roman Catholics began to convert the Baga. The loss of tradition was aggravated in 1958 when Guinea won its independence from France, under the newly formed Muslim government. The new regime confiscated and destroyed Baga cultural artifacts and forbade non-Muslim religious practices. This political situation continued until 1984, when Guinea's first president, who ruled since 1958, died. Elements of Baga culture slowly began to reemerge. In the 1980s, some Baga performances were revitalized under the direction of Baga villagers who had participated in the events prior to 1958.

RELATED ARTWORK

FOR THE WÈ (PRONOUNCED WAY) PEOPLE, the Gbona Gla (pronounced gBOHnah glah), or Mask of Wisdom, appears infrequently, but when it does, it performs the crucial roles of maintaining community harmony and warning of chaos lurking outside the village. The heavily wooded area in which the Wè reside extends from southwest Côte d'Ivoire to eastern Liberia, and the community makes a clear distinction between the safety of the village and the danger of the surrounding forest, inhabited by wild animals and malevolent spirits.³ Gbona Gla, with his bright red face and bulging eyes, represents the forest's uncontrollable forces.

The maker of the mask included physical characteristics of various animals to harness their combined spiritual power. Included in the mask are bird feathers, wild bush cat fur wrapped around a yellow spike under the nose, long animal hair, blue warthog horns, and carved spikes resembling sharp leopard teeth that form a ruff around the mask. Decorated with commercial paint, the mask draws the viewer's eye to the intense primary colors of red, blue, and yellow. The white paint acts as a strong contrast that causes the already tubular eyes and bulging forehead to pop out. Together these features exaggerate the fierce strength of the spirit.

The Mask of Wisdom emerges when a community leader must intervene in a serious conflict because all other means to remedy the situation have been exhausted. Reflecting the gravity of the threat to community stability when conflicts remain unresolved, the verdict of the Gbona Gla is always final.⁴ The Mask of Wisdom acts as a reminder that peace in the community creates order, and that the order of civilization prevents evil spirits of the forest from encroaching upon the village.



MASK OF WISDOM (GBONA GLA)

Mid-20th century

Artist unidentified

Wè region, Côte d'Ivoire or Liberia

Wood, paint, cloth, fur, glass beads, hair, plant fibers, and iron

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Bernard Berk and Mr. and Mrs. Leonard Whitehouse, BMA 1969.11



Detail of Mask of Wisdom



**KÒMÒ SOCIETY HELMET MASK
(KÒMÒKUN)** Early 20th century

Artist Unidentified

Manding or Minianka region, Mali or Guinea

Wood, animal horns, bird skull, plant fibers,

porcupine quills, earth, and glass

Gift of Robert and Mary Cumming, BMA 1983.79



Detail of Kòmò Society Helmet Mask

KÒMÒKUN (pronounced kohMOHkin) is an object of terror. This Kòmò (pronounced KOHmoh) headdress, belonging to the Manding peoples of Mali and Guinea, performs two critical roles: divining answers that will resolve community issues and frightening the young male initiates of the secret Kòmò Society—the most respected and feared of all male associations in the area—into proper behavior.⁵ The mask is made by a Kòmò Society blacksmith who, because he forges iron with fire, is said to be able to harness dangerous power for communal good.

The wooden headdress is carved and then embellished with various objects to capture their individual power. A wide and open jaw that bears sharp teeth is thought to symbolize a hyena, an animal whose jaw is strong enough to eat most living things. It represents Kòmò Society's power to “devour” rule breakers. The animal is also thought to have vast knowledge of the wilderness and thus to be able to impart wisdom to the wearer.⁶ Large curved horns extend from the back of the mask, and porcupine quills—signifying aggression—protrude from the top. In addition, fiber, glass, earth rendered spiritually powerful by the blacksmith, and layer upon layer of sacrificial animal blood and millet increase its power. The bird skull on the mask is significant because birds are masters of both land and air. The skull harnesses both energies that are then channeled through the wearer.⁷

Kòmòkun is masqueraded at night under the light of the moon or by bonfire. Low light levels and the mask's assemblage of parts make

it difficult to see clearly, amplifying the fear that surrounds it. The costume worn by the masker consists of a loose cotton gown to which feathers of a vulture—credited with bringing Kòmò knowledge to earth—are attached.⁸ The masquerade is preceded by a shrill whistle that warns women, young children, and uninitiated males to lock themselves in their houses and not peer upon Kòmòkun for fear of death.⁹ The masker is guided because he is unable to see out of the mask, and he is accompanied by ominous drumming and a cacophony of gongs, whistles, drums, cymbals, and horns.¹⁰ The masker himself is possessed by a spirit and, in a distorted voice, Kòmòkun provides answers to the issues presented to it.¹¹ The masker is accompanied by an interpreter, called the “Mouth of the Beast,” who translates his wisdom.

Following circumcision, Kòmò initiates see Kòmòkun for the first time. The event is designed to terrify these new society members into behaving properly and to prepare them to be brave in the everyday world. Initiates must peer into the jaws of the dreadful mask, after which they are forced to lick Kòmòkun three times and swear they will put the Kòmò above all else in their lives, thus ensuring compliance to community rules.¹²

THE DAN (pronounced dahn) people of Liberia awarded a man who excelled at clearing fields for farmers with his team of workers. Because he worked faster and harder than others, he was honored with the Champion Brush Cutter’s Hat, made of various plant fibers and feathers. The hat is an emblem of respect for his outstanding contribution to the community. For more information on the Brush Cutter’s Hat see http://www.artbma.org/documents/atg/pdf/ATG_10-11.pdf in the Art-to-Go resource section of the BMA website.



CHAMPION BRUSH CUTTER’S HAT

Early 20th century

Artist Unidentified

Dan region, Côte d'Ivoire or Liberia

Plant fibers and feathers

Gift of Catherine O'Carroll Bussell and Robert Bruce Bussell, Arlington, Virginia, BMA 1998.437



Detail of Champion Brush Cutter's Hat

¹ Frederick John Lamp, *Art of the Baga: A Drama of Cultural Reinvention* (New York: The Museum for African Art, 1996), 156.

² Frederick John Lamp, “Sun, Fire, and Variations on Womanhood: a Baga/Bulunits Mask (D'mba),” in *See the Music Hear the Dance*, ed. Frederick John Lamp (Munich: Prestel Publishing, 2004), 222.

³ “Wè,” University of Iowa Museum of Art, accessed January 12, 2015, <http://africa.uima.uiowa.edu/peoples/show/Wè>.

⁴ Marie-Noël Verger-Fèvre, “Mask of Wisdom: a Wè Mask (Gbona Gla),” in *See the Music Hear the Dance*, ed. Frederick John Lamp (Munich: Prestel Publishing, 2004), 42.

⁵ Sarah Brett-Smith, “The Mouth of the Komo,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 31 (Spring 1997), 72.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁷ “Bamana Komo (Komokun) Helmet Masks,” accessed January 12, 2015, http://www.randafricanart.com/Bamana_Komo_headdress.html.

⁸ Frederick John Lamp, “You Haven’t Seen the Wild Beast: a Manding Headdress (Komo Kun),” in *See the Music Hear the Dance*, ed. Frederick John Lamp (Munich: Prestel Publishing, 2004), 235.

⁹ Brett-Smith, “The Mouth of the Komo,” 77.

¹⁰ Lamp, “You Haven’t Seen the Beast,” 234.

¹¹ Brett-Smith, 76.

¹² *Ibid.*, 89.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

ACTIVITY 1:

Exploring Roles and Responsibilities

Grades: K–2, 3–5

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

The teacher will display images of the Great Mother Headdress (D'mba), the Mask of Wisdom (Gbona Gla), and the Champion Brush Cutter's Hat and ask students a series of questions about each object:

- What colors do you see?
- What shapes do you see?
- What textures do you see?
- What forms do you see?
- What materials do you think these artworks might be made from?

The teacher will share information about each object, focusing on the way the artworks were intended to celebrate being a good member of the community (Great Mother Headdress [D'mba], Champion Brush Cutter's Hat) or to resolve concerns and conflicts to ensure the community's wellbeing (Mask of Wisdom [Gbon Gla]).

The teacher will then divide students into pairs and ask them to discuss the following question:

- What is one thing you can do to be a good member of 1) the class, 2) the school, and 3) the community?

After students have discussed their ideas, they will share with the class. The teacher will record student responses on the black/white board. The teacher may add ideas of his/her own and moderate if there are disagreements about whether certain ideas support being a good member of the community.

Providing colored pencils and/or markers and paper, and leaving previous responses visible, the teacher will ask students to draw pictures of themselves contributing to the class in one positive way. Each student's drawing may be placed near his/her desk or around the room as a daily reminder to the class. The activity can be repeated and pictures added over time.

ACTIVITY 2:

Connecting Visual Art and Classroom Culture

Grades: 3–5

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

The teacher will divide students into groups of four. Each group will be asked to look at one of the following images: Great Mother Headdress (D'mba), the Mask of Wisdom (Gbon Gla), the Kòmò Society Helmet Mask (Kòmòkun), and the Champion Brush Cutter's Hat. The teacher will ask students to write down as many things as they can observe about their group's artwork in three minutes. When the time is up, groups will have several minutes to share their observations and make a master list. As a class, students will be asked to share their observations, focusing on the art elements:

- What colors do you see?
- What shapes do you see?
- What textures do you see?
- What forms do you see?
- What materials do you think these artworks might be made from?

As each group presents its observations, the teacher will give information about the meaning and context of the artwork.

Each group will be asked to select a recorder and collaboratively make a list of what a healthy class culture looks like (i.e. respectful, caring, honest, etc). They will share their ideas with the class, while the teacher records the responses on a black/white board. Each student will receive four small post-it notes and place the post-it notes next to the four ideas that they think are most important for a healthy class community. The teacher will tally the four ideas with the most post-it notes.

Student groups will be randomly assigned to one of the four top descriptors for a healthy class culture. Using large sheets of white or butcher paper and pencils, colored pencils, markers, and/or collage

materials and glue sticks, each group will design and create a poster to promote the idea. The teacher will guide students by asking them to discuss and agree upon their understanding of the idea, talk about the best way to visually express the idea, sketch the design, and, finally, make the poster.

When posters are complete, student groups will share their work with the class, explaining the artistic choices they made to convey the theme. The teacher can ask students to observe and remark upon similarities and differences in the visual expressions of the ideas. Posters can then be displayed in the classroom.

STANDARDS AND CURRICULUM

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

English Language Arts

Grade 1

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.1.1. Participate in collaborative conversations with diverse partners about grade 1 topics and texts with peers and adults in small and larger groups.

Grade 2

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.2.1. Participate in collaborative conversations with diverse partners about grade 2 topics and texts with peers and adults in small and larger groups.

Grade 3

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.3.1. Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 3 topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

MARYLAND STATE CURRICULUM

History/Social Studies

Grade 1

1.C.1.a. Identify the rights, responsibilities, and choices that students have in the family, school, and neighborhood.
2.C.1.a. Describe, discuss, and demonstrate appropriate social skills necessary for working in a cooperative group, such as sharing concern, care, and respect among group members.

Grade 2

1.A.1.a. Explain how school and community rules promote orderliness, fairness, responsibility, privacy, and safety.
1.C.1.a. Recognize and describe how making choices affects self, family, school, and community.
2.C.1.a. Identify and demonstrate appropriate social skills necessary for working in a cooperative group, such as sharing concern, care, and respect among group members.
2.C.1.b. Analyze how different points of view in school situations may result in compromise or conflict.

Grade 3

1.C.1.a. Describe the responsibilities of being an effective citizen, such as cleaning up your neighborhood, being informed, obeying rules and laws, participating in class discussions, and volunteering.
2.C.1.a. Identify and demonstrate appropriate social skills necessary for working in a cooperative group, such as sharing concern, compassion, and respect among group members.
2.C.1.b. Analyze how different points of view in school and community situations may result in compromise or conflict.

Visual Arts

Grade 1

1.2.b. Use color, line, shape, texture, and form to represent ideas visually from observation, memory, and imagination.
1.3.a. Explore and discuss the qualities of color, line, shape, texture, and form in artworks.
2.1.a. Observe works of art and identify ways that artists express ideas about people, places, and events.

Grade 2

1.1.a. Describe colors, lines, shapes, textures, forms, and space found in observed objects and the environment.
1.2.a. Describe how artists use color, line, shape, texture, form, and space to represent ideas visually from observation, memory, and imagination.
2.1.a. Observe works of art and describe how artists express ideas about people, places, and events.
2.2.b. Communicate a variety of reasons for creating artworks, such as feelings, experiences, events, places, and ideas.

Grade 3

1.1.a. Describe similarities and differences between the elements of art in observed forms.
1.2.a. Compare and describe how artists communicate what they see, know, feel, and imagine using art vocabulary.
1.2.b. Represent ideas and feelings visually that describe what is seen, felt, known, and imagined.
1.3.a. Describe how the elements of art and principles of design are organized to communicate personal meaning in visual compositions.
2.3.a. Discuss and compare how selected artworks from different times or cultures are similar or different (e.g. common themes, content, form, and style).



Great Mother Headdress (D'mba). Late 19th–early 20th century. Baga region, possibly Monchon village, Guinea. Wood, copper alloy tacks, and iron tacks. Gift of Alan Wurtzburger, BMA 1957.97



Mask of Wisdom (Gbona Gla). Mid-20th century. We region, Côte d'Ivoire or Liberia. Wood, paint, cloth, fur, glass beads, hair, plant fibers, and iron teeth. Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Bernard Berk and Mr. and Mrs. Leonard Whitehouse, BMA 1969.11



Komó Society Helmet Mask (Kómókun). Early 20th century. Manding or Minianka region, Mali or Guinea. Wood, animal horns, bird skull, plant fibers, porcupine quills, earth, and glass. Gift of Robert and Mary Cumming, Baltimore, BMA 1983.79



Champion Brush Cutter's Hat. Early 20th century. Dan region, Côte d'Ivoire or Liberia. Plant fibers and feathers. Gift of Catherine O'Carroll Bussell and Robert Bruce Bussell, Arlington, Virginia, BMA 1998.437