

Meet Daniel "Koo Nimo" Amponsah



Daniel "Koo Nimo" Amponsah is a master of West African palm-wine guitar music, a branch of highlife, which blends indigenous melodies, rhythms, and language, especially proverbs, with western music, employing both western and African instruments. Koo Nimo plays both acoustic guitar, which he formally studied in London while on a chemistry scholarship, and kete drums, the red-and-black-covered court drums that he learned growing up as part of the royal family in the Asante-hene's palace in Kumasi, Ghana. Koo Nimo was the first Ghanaian to produce a compact disc of his music, *Osa-barima*. He has received national acclaim for his ballads now published in English and Twi. He was President of the Musician's Union for ten years and received the Grand Medal for Lifetime Service to Ghana from the Head of State. His most recent CD is *Tete Wobi Ka*, produced by HumanSongs Records.

About the Asante in Ghana

The Asante live in Ghana, which is bordered on the west by the Ivory Coast, on the east by Togo, and on the north by Burkina Faso. The Asante Region of Ghana is located within the West African tropical rain forest. Ghana's largest city is its capital, Kumasi, which is about 150 miles inland from the Gulf of Guinea. The Asante Region is 9,400 square miles and has a population of approximately one million people.



The Asante came to power in central Ghana at the end of the 17th century. The Asante kingdom was founded by King Osei Tutu, who was joined by several small states in an attempt to gain political freedom from the Denkyira. The mystical Golden Stool, believed to be descended from heaven, became the political and spiritual center of the Ashante. The stool is thought to embody the unity of the joined states as well as the power of the Asante Chiefs. (In addition to honoring the Golden Stool, the Asante also pay homage to their departed chiefs represented by other stools that have been blackened). In 1957, the Gold Coast became the first colony to gain independence from European rule.

About the Asante in Ghana (continued)

For the newly independent Ghana, cocoa was the main cash crop. They also grew yams, plantains, cassava, maize, okra, pineapples, oranges and paw-paw and hunted for meat. The Asante were also known for their gold, found in the mines for which the Gold Coast was named. Since the 1950s, however, the Asante region has changed from a principally agriculturally-based area to one that is more urban. Today's Asante village maintains traditional customs and ceremonies overseen by the village's Chief and Elders.

The official language of the Asante is English, but most village residents speak dialects of the language Twi. The use of proverbs is especially commonplace. The Asante, however, are most known for their royal art-work, including staff and umbrella finials, lost wax-cast gold jewelry, and brass gold weights. In addition, Kente cloth, originally woven of silk and now made from synthetic fibers, represents prestige. Typically, Kente was worn by high ranking officials, but its use is more widespread, especially by African American communities in the United States.

Adapted from:

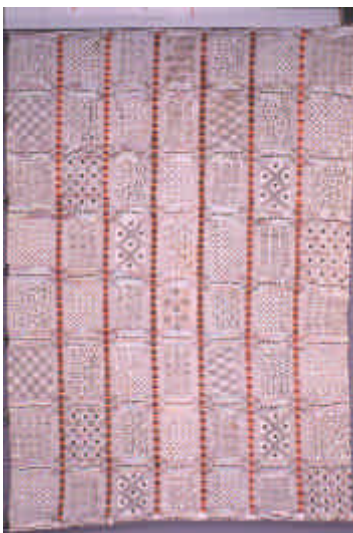
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McIntyre, L. Lee and Christopher D. Roy. "Art and Life in Africa Online." 1998: The Art and Life in Africa Project, <http://www.uiowa.edu/~africart/> January 13, 2002.

A few important points that Koo Nimo would like to share with you about their culture

1. Asante court practices are very sacred, rich, and powerful. The monarch, Asantahene, plays several important roles, that of a spiritual, political, and military leader. He is also the link between the ancestors and the people. The queen mother selects a king, who goes through a series of rituals to learn how to be a king. These lessons include learning how to dance, proverbs, how to behave in public, and how to settle disputes.
2. Proverbs are wise sayings, idiomatic expressions, and ways of saying something to encapsulate a message. They are often used when you don't want someone to understand your conversation, such as parents talking in front of children, or the king and his court speaking in front of foreign visitors. Proverbs embellish one's speech and are the proper language of the court.

Here are some works of art in the exhibition that Koo Nimo would like to tell you about



10. Adinkra cloth
Asante, Ghana
20th century
Imported cotton cloth, pigment, thread
L. 337 cm (132 1/2 in.)
Gift of Katherine White and The Boeing Company, 81.17.472

10. Adinkra cloth
"Adinkra cloth received its name from a victory over a king of Gyaman named Kofi Adinkra. After he was defeated by the Asante, he wore a cloth stamped with a pattern that expressed sorrow for the loss of his freedom and the deaths of his soldiers. This cloth today is translated to mean "to part," be separated, leave one another, say goodbye, and is used primarily for funerals." (catalogue, p. 106)



11. Figurative weight (abrammuo):
Sankofa bird
Asante, Ghana
19th century
Copper alloy
3.5 cm (1 3/8 in.)
Gift of Katherine White and The Boeing Company,
81.17.397

11. Sankofa bird gold weight "One of the most common goldweights is one named Sankofa, a bird with a swirling, backward-twisting neck. It has many interpretations, which include: "Pick it up if it falls behind" (whatever mistakes one has made in the past can be corrected). "Go back and pick" (any aspect of culture that doesn't draw from the past to replenish the present and cast a shadow into the future will die). "When it lies behind you, take it" (use the wisdom of the past), or simply "one foot should be in front of another." (catalogue, p.81)



12. Circular rainbow stool

"In Asante, we have stools. Every stool has its name, nomenclature is very important. This stool is in the form of a circular rainbow called *kontonkorowi* in Asante *twi* (the Asante language). The circular rainbow illustrates the proverb that the rainbow is around the neck of every nation...this is a reference to the power of the Asante confederacy to control and unite all other peoples." (from the audio tour)

12. Rainbow stool 81.17.338
African, n.d., wood
15 1/4 x 22 3/8 x 12 in. (38.7 x 56.9 x 30.5 cm), Gift of Katherine White and The Boeing Company



13. Asantehene Otumfuo Opoku Ware II Seated

"Since the Golden Stool carries the soul of the nation, it is treated extremely carefully. Never permitted to touch the ground, it is always seated on its own European-style chair with an elephant-skin mat. The position signifies that the ruler presides over both human and natural forces. The Golden Stool also has become known as a sign of confirmed leadership. (from the catalogue, p.92)"

13. *Asantehene Otumfuo Opoku Ware II seated in state next to the Golden Stool "Born on Friday" (Sika Dwa Kofi)*, Kumasi, Ghana, 1992.
Photograph © Fred Meyer

Activities you can do back in the classroom

Playing Around with Proverbs:

Time: Two class periods/two 45-minute sessions

Supplies: Paper and pencils

Proverbs are powerful tools of language the Asante use to communicate. During one class period, talk with students about different proverbs or wise sayings they might know or use, i.e. "Don't put all of your eggs in one basket," "It's better to kill two birds with one stone," etc. Discuss how each proverb has a moral or tries to teach a lesson. Have students write down as many proverbs as they can. Working in groups, your students can compare and contrast the different proverbs they have written down. Do any of the proverbs have different meanings for different students? Are any of the same proverbs recited in various ways? What is the moral of each proverb? For homework, students can ask family members about different proverbs they know and write these down.

During the next class period, have each student group write a story that illustrates a proverb each group finds particularly interesting. Students may be encouraged to use songs or poems within their proverb stories. For instance, an animal character may sing about a certain hardship or triumph to get a point across. Students may also illustrate their stories. Have students present their proverb stories to the class. Students can try to guess the morals of the stories. Do different stories have the same moral? Do similar proverb stories have different morals?

Wise-Saying Symbols:

Time: One class period/45 minutes

Supplies: Cardboard, scissors, hole punch, pencils, string, and markers

Discuss with students how the Asante use proverbs or wise sayings during everyday conversations. Talk about how each proverb has a moral or lesson associated with it. Talk about how the Asante use gold weights that have forms like animals or commonplace objects that are symbols for individual proverbs. Ask students to think about different proverbs they know or have heard. Have students choose a proverb and come up with a symbol for it. Students can draw their proverb symbols with pencils on small pieces of cardboard and then cut them out. After decorating their symbols with markers, students can use a hole punch to make holes in their symbols, tie a string through the holes and wear them. Have students present their decorated symbols to the class. Students can try to guess what each symbol is and which proverb it might represent.

Essential Academic Learning Requirements:

Visual Arts 1-4; Communication 1-3; Writing 1-2.

To learn more

Check out Koo Nimo's web page at www.homepage.ntlworld.com/latham/koonimo