LESSON 12: EMPOWERING LEADERS
Leadership Arts of the Cameroon Grassfields, Africa

Fig. 3.1
A study of the leadership arts of the Cameroon Grassfields provides opportunities to consider how integral the arts are to notions of power and leadership. Students study the works and then consider their functions from background information they have been given. An additional activity centers on a short film, “Pageantry in the Palace,” and students discuss and develop in writing their reactions to the film. Students will

- Explore the integral connection between art and power in the Cameroon Grassfields through research and creative word games.
- Gain insight into the culture of the Cameroon Grassfields by viewing and analyzing a short film on royal pageantry.
- React and respond to notions of pageantry among peoples of the Cameroon Grassfields and compare these to practices in their own lives.

From precolonial times to the present, Africa has been rich in arts that support leadership and governance. The arts have served to uphold and strengthen those in power and their domains. In turn, rulers have often been patrons of the arts with the volume of artistic production dependent on their ability to marshal ample resources.

Among the most powerful leadership arts in Africa are those from the kingdoms of the Cameroon Grassfields, a mountainous region of western Cameroon. The Bamum, Bamileke, Bangwa, and other kingdoms share many cultural traditions. For centuries extensive trade networks, political interactions, and royal gift-giving facilitated cultural exchange and the creation of royal arts in the area. The oldest known Grassfields kingdom of Bamum dates to the sixteenth century.

Communities in the Cameroon Grassfields have historically been organized around large centralized authorities or rulers, known as fon. Prior to the colonial period, fon were religious, economic, and political leaders who were also considered to be divine. Fon redistributed wealth, controlled trade, and were great patrons of the arts. The fon’s best artists often received noble titles for their service, demonstrating the importance of the arts to Grassfields royalty.
The colonial administrations of the twentieth century challenged the authority of *fon* and diminished their position within Cameroon Grassfields societies. Prior to German colonization, the Bamum Kingdom, for example, was highly stratified, with its hierarchy supported by the kingdom’s stunning artistic accomplishments. As the *fon*’s power was restricted by colonial authorities, the amount and quality of royal art diminished. Nevertheless, *fon* have remained important leaders and artistic conventions developed centuries ago have been carried through the colonial and postcolonial eras, continuing to empower those who rule in the eyes of those who are ruled.

The imposing mask shown on the cover of this lesson (fig. 3.1) was owned by Msop, a men’s association that honored leaders in Bamileke society. Msop masks have been observed at enthronement ceremonies, mourning festivals for significant people, and during the *tso* dance, performed at the funerals of kings and queens. During the *tso* dance, the mask was worn on the forehead of the performer, looming over the audience. When worn, cloth or fiber may have hung from the bottom of the mask.
Both men and women created works of art for Grassfields royalty. A 1920 illustration in Suzanne Blier’s book *The Royal Arts of Africa* (1998, 196) shows women creating pottery and baskets and men carving and sculpting. A large number of artists were necessary to create the accumulation of art for the royal treasury and the best artists were rewarded with noble status for the work they produced. The large *tseṣaḥ* mask in the *Empowering Leaders* section (fig. 3.1) was most likely collected in Bamendjo or Bandjoun by the French Protestant missionary Reverend Franck Christol in the very early twentieth century and then entered the Wellcome Collection in 1932. Approximately a dozen similar masks have been attributed to the Bandjoun or Bamendjo workshop, each carrying its own name and belonging to a specific ruler. A kingdom possessed only one such mask at a time. The oldest known masks were made by artists in the nineteenth century, and as late as the 1980s, artists at Bandjoun were still making copies of them.
1. Arts and the Fon

Activity

Distribute copies of **Handout LEADERSHIP ARTS OF THE CAMEROON GRASSFIELDS** so that students can read about power and the arts in this region. At the bottom of the handout there are twelve scrambled words—all are referenced in the narrative—that are to be unscrambled and circled in the accompanying **Handout WORDSEARCH**. Photographs of the twelve art objects named make up the **Handout ARTS AND THE FON** with each of the photos labeled with a letter of the alphabet. On the following **Handout READING ABOUT THE FON**, students will write the twelve words, unscrambled, in the appropriate blanks and will insert the identifying letter in the box at the end of each sentence. A Teacher’s Key follows.

2. Pageantry in the Palace

In the accompanying video for class viewing, narrator Usmanou Nsangou returns to his Cameroon home. The film shows market day near his village and a special biennial Nguon festival. Here we see people filling the city, and we hear their music, sense the rhythms of their dance, and experience their group pride in their heritage.

Activity

As you show the video, have students consider the following questions:

1. How is pageantry played out in front of the palace?
   
   *People surround the king, singing, preceding him by walking backwards, sounding horns, shooting guns into the air, thrusting up and down the umbrellas that shade him, performing with a variety of rhythms, headdresses, and masquerades.*

2. What do we see that tells us that we’re in the presence of the king?
   
   *His garments can be worn only by the king and his ministers, he sits on a royal throne, he is surrounded by ministers, people come to pay him respect.*

3. How do the people honor their king and what do they do to impress him?
   
   *People offer him gifts, they perform for him.*

4. How does the king show care for the people?
   
   *He sits in front of the palace where visitors can freely come to see him. The gate is always open.*
Activity
Pageantry has transformed the community. The video ends with people returning to their outlying homes and the town growing quiet. Have students contrast the lively mood and excited ambiance that pervades the celebration with the empty streets and quiet atmosphere following. Their work could take the form of a “Now/Then” poem. Or they could develop a poem as a group effort, deciding together what they will cite and then contributing lines to describe the event. Some suggested elements:

- Colorful umbrellas twirling
- Curved sticks finding rhythms on drums
- Horns sounding out their calls
- Rifles shooting their announcements to the sky
- Motorcycles caravanning through the town
- Gongs ringing proclamations to the people

Activity
Encourage students to recall an event with elements of pageantry (parades, fairs, holiday celebrations, performances, weddings). What kinds of memories do these events evoke and how did students feel being a part of these events?
Useful Readings

Blackmun Visona, Monica, Robin Poynor, Herbert M. Cole, and Michael D. Harris, eds.

Blier, Suzanne Preston

Geary, Christraud M.

Poynor, Robin

Ross, Doran H., ed.

Photograph Captions

Handout ARTS OF THE FON

A. Beaded headdress for elephant mask, Bamileke peoples, Cameroon. Before 1880. Fiber, textile, beads, wood. H: 47 cm. Fowler Museum at UCLA. Gift of Mr. William Lloyd Davis. X64.86

B. Drinking horn, Bamum peoples, Cameroon. 19th century. Horn, pigment. H: 29.5 cm. Fowler Museum at UCLA. Gift of Peter J. Kuhn. X91.410

C. Chief’s stool, Western Grassfields, Cameroon. Late 19th–early 20th century. Wood, plant fiber. H: 42 cm. Fowler Museum at UCLA. Gift of the Wellcome Trust. X65.1617


E. Ceremonial Chair, Central Western Grassfields, Cameroon. Early 20th century. Wood. H: 81.3 cm. Fowler Museum at UCLA. Gift of the Wellcome Trust. X65.1621

F. Beaded Gourd, Bamileke peoples, Cameroon. 19th century. Gourd, glass beads, textile, felt, thread, cowries. H: 62.5 cm. Fowler Museum at UCLA. Gift of the Wellcome Trust. X65.5813a,b


H. Beaded gourd, Grassfields, Cameroon. 19th–20th century. Gourd, glass beads, textile, felt, thread, wood, cowrie shells. H: 50.8 cm. Fowler Museum at UCLA. Gift of the Wellcome Trust. X65.5815a,b

J. Prestige collar with buffalo heads, Bamum peoples, Cameroon. Late 19th–early 20th century. Brass, copper. Diam: 26 cm. Fowler Museum at UCLA. Gift of the Wellcome Trust. X65.8228

K. Mask (teseh), Bamileke peoples, Bamendjo, Cameroon. Late 19th century. Wood, paint, iron dowel, plant fiber, plant gum. H: 53.34 cm. Fowler Museum at UCLA. Gift of the Wellcome Trust. X65.5820


Note to Teachers:

This lesson is part of the curricular materials developed to accompany the exhibition Intersections: World Arts, Local Lives. Although this and companion lessons are self-contained, each will be enhanced when used in conjunction with others in this resource. Addressing several lessons within each unit will facilitate the incorporation of the study of world arts and cultures into your curriculum.

The lesson is based on works in the third section of the exhibition called Art and Power. In this gallery works are introduced that serve to define and assert power. See “Unit Three—Art and Power” for an introductory statement on the unit, along with some provocative “Questions for Thought,” and suggestions that will inspire the students to relate the unit to their own lives.

Images of objects to be shown to students may be printed as handouts (from within each lesson), viewed online at the Intersections web link http://collections.fowler.ucla.edu, or downloaded from the curriculum page on our website.

In this unit the topics and lessons are

Lesson 12: Empowering Leaders: Leadership Art of the Cameroon Grassfields, Africa

Lesson 13: Negotiating Gender: Portrayal of a Hunter: Ere Egungun Olode, Nigeria

Lesson 14: Negotiating Gender: Powerful Mother: Ere Gelede, Nigeria

Lesson 15: Status and Prestige: To Make the Chief’s Words Sweet: A Counselor’s Staff, Ghana

Lesson 16: Status and Prestige: A Wall of Status and Prestige, Africa, Asia, and the Americas

Lesson 17: Harnessing Spirits: Pacific Northwest Arts, United States and Canada

Lesson 18: Harnessing Spirits: The Hornbill: Bird of Prophecy, Malaysia
Leadership Arts of the Cameroon Grassfields

The fon are leaders of kingdoms and chiefdoms in the Cameroon Grassfields of west Central Africa. Before the Germans colonized the area in 1884 fon had even more importance and a large variety of special arts were displays of that power. Germany gave up their colonies to England and France after World War I, and even though fon were not as powerful as before, and even though not as much art was produced, the leaders and the artistic traditions continued.

Grassland communities still traded with each other and rulers continued to show their alliances with other rulers by exchanging gifts. With the fon still holding control over the people and the arts, each kingdom kept up its own traditions. Fons determined the materials that were used and the kinds of art that were made in their kingdoms. Because of much trading, however, interactions, and gift presentations, the style of one kingdom influenced that of the others.

A fon was important to the arts in many ways. The best artists in the area worked for him and his court. The most expensive and rarest materials could be used only on works for him. In the palace the art was displayed as a demonstration of the importance of the fon. Stools and chairs, drinking containers and vessels, pipes with carved bowls, fly whisks made of horsetail, masks, headdresses, sculptures, necklaces, and other jewelry were all part of his treasury.

Drinking palm wine is a sacred activity for the ruler and his associates. Containers for the wine are usually covered in beautiful designs made from many colorful beads. On important ritual and social occasions people are served the wine in drinking horns made of buffalo, ram, or cow horns.

Often the decorations on the beaded bottles and drinking horns represent animals, especially those associated with royalty. The leopard, buffalo, and ram are noted for their endurance, strength, and their long lives, attributes fit for a king. These animals also appear as masks, especially worn by men whose job is to keep order in the community.

Elephant masks, performed during funerals and public ceremonies, used to be worn by warriors. Now powerful, wealthy men belong to the groups that wear them. Long panels of beaded or stitched cloth flow over the performers’ chests and backs, seeming to be the long trunks of elephants. Round “ears” come out of the animals’ heads.

An especially large mask, called tsesah, towers over the audience when it is worn on a performer’s head at festivals and funerals.

Unscramble these words from the story and circle them in the Handout WORDSEARCH.

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ADBES
LEBTOT
THEEPLAN
LYF SWIKH
DARSHEEDS
NORH

EPPI BLOW
ROPSDALE
SKAM
CAKECLEN
OTOLS
FLABOUF

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- PIPE BOWL
- LEBTOT
- BOTTLE
- ROPSDALE
- LEOPARDS
- THEEPLAN
- ELEPHANT
- SKAM
- MASK
- LYF SWIKH
- FLY WHISK
- CAKECLEN
- NECKLACE
- DARSHEEDS
- HEADDRESS
- OTOLS
- STOOL
- NORH
- HORN
- FLABOUF
- BUFFALO

Fowler Museum at UCLA. Intersections Curriculum
### Handout: ARTS FOR THE FON

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1. This huge ___________ has large eyes, mouth, nose and cheeks. It was worn on a dancer’s forehead. Moving high above the people, it honored the leaders.

2. ___________ and masks are carved into this prestigious chair. It was carved for the king and served as the royal throne.

3. Only the elite had use of horses so this ___________ ___________ made of a horse’s tail, showed the high status of the owner. The beaded handle shows a ram, an animal that stands for the king’s strength.

4. Two beaded animal figures sit on the top of this extravagant ___________.

5. The mighty ___________ is known for its strength. This mask has long panels to stand for the animal’s trunk and large circles to stand for its ears. Only a wealthy, important man may wear this mask.

6. This ___________ is covered with beads. With similar objects it was placed near the fon on important occasions.

7. A ___________ made of a ring with thirty-three metal buffalo heads might be buried with a king as a sign of his wealth.

8. The fon drank palm wine from a vessel made of an animal’s ___________.

9. Some animals, including the ___________, elephant, leopard, and horse are associated with royalty because of their strength, power, speed or cunning, all traits desirable in a king.

10. Multi-colored ___________ were markers of wealth in the Cameroon Grasslands. They form geometric shapes decorating the furniture, masks, clothing and utensils of the fon.

11. The ___________ has carved human figures to support the seat. This is a marker of authority and prestige.

12. Most pipes are quite plain. The carved face on this ___________ ___________ shows that it belonged to a king or another person of high rank.
1. This huge ____MASK____ has large eyes, mouth, nose and cheeks. It was worn on a dancer’s forehead. Moving high above the people, it honored the leaders. (K)

2. ____LEOPARDS____ and masks are carved into this prestigious chair. It was carved for the king and served as the royal throne. (E)

3. Only the elite had use of horses so this ____FLY____ ____WHISK____, made of a horse’s tail, showed the high status of the owner. The beaded handle shows a ram, an animal that stands for the king’s strength. (I)

4. Two beaded animal figures sit on the top of this extravagant ____HEADDRESS____. (A)

5. The mighty ____ELEPHANT____ is known for its strength. This mask has long panels to stand for the animal’s trunk and large circles to stand for its ears. Only a wealthy, important man may wear this mask. (G)

6. This ____BOTTLE____ is covered with beads. With similar objects it was placed near the fon on important occasions. (H)

7. A ____NECKLACE____ made of a ring with thirty-three metal buffalo heads might be buried with a king as a sign of his wealth. (J)

8. The fon drank palm wine from a vessel made of an animal’s ____HORN____. (B)

9. Some animals, including the ____BUFFALO____, elephant, leopard, and horse are associated with royalty because of their strength, power, speed or cunning, all traits desirable in a king. (L)

10. Multi-colored ____BEADS____ were markers of wealth in the Cameroon Grasslands. They form geometric shapes decorating the furniture, masks, clothing and utensils of the fon. (F)

11. The ____STOOL____ has carved human figures to support the seat. This is a marker of authority and prestige. (C)

12. Most pipes are quite plain. The carved face on this ____PIPE____ ____BOWL____ shows that it belonged to a king or another person of high rank. (D)