



EVERSON MUSEUM OF ART

EDUCATOR PACKET

***African Shapes of the
Sacred:
Yoruba Religious Art***

June 16 - September 16, 2007

Introduction

African Shapes of the Sacred: Yorùbá Religious Art, an exhibition organized by the Longyear Museum of Anthropology at Colgate University, includes 90, mostly 20th century traditional objects such as figures, masks, headdresses, divination trays, staffs, vessels and shrine furniture. The art works in the exhibition serve to honor ancestors, venerate the earth and are used in divinity worship. Divinity pieces are used to communicate and give reverence to specific deities as well as for shrine beatification, rituals and festivals.

The Yorùbá people constitute one of the most populous groups in West Africa, numbering more than 20 million people living primarily in Nigeria, as well as parts of the Republic of Benin and Togo. Although the term Yorùbá did not come into use until the 19th century, the people have inhabited this area of Africa since 500 BCE and developed a stable urban life by 1000 CE.

This temporary art exhibit is a unique portal into the world of West Africa, particularly Yoruba art, society, culture and its Diaspora through the western hemisphere. Special care has been taken to represent both the sacred and artistic aspects of the pieces, as well as their utility.

Our Objectives

The EMA has produced this packet to help educators adapt this exhibit's content to individual curriculum needs. In addition, this packet provides educators with the necessary information to maximize the benefit of a guided tour of the exhibit. We hope that educators and students will benefit from the information to use with other projects and to further their knowledge of art and culture.

Overview of Contents

This packet includes

- Overview of Yoruba culture and society
- Glossary
- Lessons to be adapted to most Art, ELA and social studies curriculums
- CD of images
- Yoruba legends/stories

Cultural Context

Yoruba People: Geography, Society and Art

Geography and Society

The Yoruba people originate from the West African country of Nigeria. Nigeria is the most populous of all the African nations, with a multi-ethnic population of 104 million people. Housed within this multi-ethnic nation are the pre-dominant groups of the Igbo, Fulani, Hausa and the Yoruba, all of which speak their own language. Fifty percent of the Nigerian population is Muslim and about 40 percent are Christian, with 10 percent or more practicing traditional belief systems. The official language is English, however, there are over 250 different languages spoken in Nigeria alone.

Nigeria is an oil rich nation, however, in spite of this oil wealth, Nigeria suffers from abject poverty, with much of the population living in or migrating to the urban centers. Nigeria has been wrought with political violence and warfare since British colonization and its independence in 1960. In spite of the current political upheaval and colonial affects, the Yoruba, like many other Nigerian ethnic groups, have held steadfast to their way of life.

The Yoruba are situated in southwest Nigeria in what is often referred to as Yoruba land. The Yoruba name is a more recent name that came from the Yoruba's neighbors, the Hausa. Yoruba in Hausa, literally meant "the people of the kingdom of Oyo," and later was used by missionaries in the 1800s. Yoruba kingdoms reach as far back as the 1400s, many taking root around the Niger River where crops could be easily sown. Oyo was the largest Yoruba kingdom, which flourished along the Niger delta, especially with the introduction of horses by the Portuguese. The Yoruba were traditionally an agricultural people cultivating yams, palm oil, maize and cocoa. The British later introduced cash crops such as peanuts, cotton and beans in the 19th century. In addition to strong military and political systems, the Yoruba developed urban centers and a highly specialized belief system and practiced multiple art forms that served many purposes, but in large part for ceremonies, divination and for beautification of shrines. Many of these traditional art forms are still practiced today.

Belief System

The Yoruba worship many deities or Orishas and ancestors. Deities are specific to certain regions of Nigeria where the Yoruba reside. There are 401 deities or Orishas in the Yoruba belief system. They have often been compared with the Greek Pantheon. However, the Yoruba have their own distinct divination system that pre-dates Greek mythology and is practiced throughout the world today.

In connection with orisha and ancestor worship, the Yoruba also worship twins. There is a high incidence of twin births among the Yoruba and a high rate of infant mortality of twins as well. Often, parents who have lost a twin will have a wooden sculpture made of the deceased child and adorn it with beads or other items. The Yoruba have a belief that twins bring good fortune to the family, hence honoring the deceased twin. There are over 20 twin sculptures in *African Shapes of the Sacred*. These wooden twin sculptures are called *Ibeji*.

There are other honoring ceremonies such as *Egungun* and the *Gelede* masquerade. The *Egungun* masquerade is performed to pay homage to ancestors. The Yoruba believe that the ancestors are always with the living. To honor them a dance is performed with masked dancers that represent ancestors. In the *Gelede* masquerade, mothers are given reverence. This is based on the belief that if the power of mothers is not honored or acknowledged, it bids ill will for the community. Male dancers, who are descendents in a long line of masquerade dancers, dominate these masquerades. Intricate wood carved masks with animal motifs and other designs, as well as woven costumes are worn at these ceremonies. Moreover, drumming, dance and music are the crux of Yoruba ceremonies and masquerades. The objects come to life with the expression of dancing, drumming and song. These are the essential pieces that comprise the foundation for Yoruba cultural and spiritual life.

The Yoruba would not define their belief system as a religion the way the western ideology would. For the Yoruba there is no separation of the secular and spiritual, the spiritual is synthesized into everyday life. And this is clearly exemplified in Yoruba artwork.

Types of Art

Yoruba artisans practice numerous art forms. They work with brass, iron, wood and terracotta sculpture, mask making, textiles, woodcarving, and exquisite leather and beadwork. These art traditions are often practiced by men with the exception of weaving, dyeing, and beading, which are done by both men and women. The pieces featured in this exhibition are from the late 19th and early 20th century. They are traditional Yoruba religious art objects.

Yoruba color theory

The Yoruba artist possesses a strong color philosophy that is infused in his work and understood by the Yoruba people to evoke an emotional and personality aspect of each of the *Orisas* or of individuals. For example, “*Fun-fun*” are a white, blue silver or icy color that reflects cool personalities and associated with the *orisas Obatala and Yemoja*. Where as “*Pupa*” are shades of red that express passionate fiery personalities like that of the *Orisas Oya, Sango and Osun*. “*Du du*” are the earth tones, such as browns, moss greens and leafy greens, which

evoke more stable, grounded personalities and are associated with the *orisas* *Ogun* and *Ochosi*. This color theory is more than a palette of colors, but a way to understand people and deities and is most illustrated in the art of beading.

Beadwork

Beading is another significant art form the Yoruba practice. The skill of beading is not given adequate deference in the art world and is often associated with folk crafts. However, such a misconception robs us of the unique and refined qualities beading offers in art. For the Yoruba beading is not a monotonous, perfunctory exercise, but a “spiritual” experience, with each bead that is strung to create something purposefully and with meaning. This is often exemplified in the beaded crowns worn by *Obas* (kings), footstools, leather pouches and chairs. Though beaded pieces in this exhibition are scarce, it is important to note this art, as it is highly respected and utilized among the Yoruba people.

Woodcarving

In addition to a complex color scheme and beading, the Yoruba hold woodcarving in high esteem. Woodcarvers are master artisans that command their medium in deliberate and precise steps. Woodcarving is one of the most distinguished and notable art forms for the Yoruba because the woodcarvers serve to create some of the most sacred objects such as *Agere* (divination bowls) *Ibeji* figures, dance staffs, *Opon* (trays), *Iroke* (*tappers used for divination*), *Egungun* and *Gelede* masks. The Yoruba believe the head is “the seat of the soul,” therefore, in many Yoruba sculptures you will notice the dramatic emphasis on the head. Exposure of the genitals and breasts are typical of Yoruba sculpture and not meant to illicit or convey obscenity. Rather it is based on the idea of *idi*, or a hidden truth exposed. Often women are the subject of the *Agere* bowls because they are an honored and respected symbol to the *orisas* and the Yoruba. A kneeling woman with breasts exposed, pregnant or with a child strapped to her back denotes maternity, fertility and the power of *ase* (pronounced a shay.) This is a neutral force of energy that can be used to create or destroy. These bowls are used to store sacred objects like *ikin* (palm nuts), herbs and other sacred objects. Other wooden objects such as the staffs are used in ceremonies that honor the *orisas*. For example this exhibition displays a number of double-bladed staffs that honor the *orisa Sango*. The *opon* with animal figures and the face of *Esu* (the trickster *orisa*) are wooden trays that are used for divination of one’s future or to find solutions to problems an individual may be having in life. Often, the *babalowa* or diviner will find that an individual has not paid proper respect to an *orisa* and to rectify the problem they need to atone for their oversight with a sacrifice or an offering of some sort.

It is not important to the Yoruba woodcarver to create a perfect piece, but to create a well-made piece and honor the principles of balance and character known as *Ewa*, thus a piece will not be exceedingly beautiful, but it will not be

homely either. It will not look exactly like a particular person and will “reflect light.” *Ewa and ase* are the underlying and guiding principles for all Yoruba, whether they are women in the market place, *babalowas* (priests) conducting divination ceremonies or artisans creating functional and ceremonial objects. Many pieces in this exhibit are examples of the fine hands of woodcarvers.

African Shapes of the Sacred highlight only a few of the Yoruba art forms. However, with all of the various art forms practiced by the Yoruba it is critical to understand how art is perceived. Yoruba art is not realistic, but abstract and based on concepts or principals. Moreover, much of the traditional art in this exhibit is ceremonial and functional, and not intended exclusively for display, with the exception of the shrine pieces such as vessels, divination bowls, and trays. Though this is a show on the West African Yoruba people, there are common threads that are woven throughout much of Africa in terms of ceremonial art forms.

Diaspora

“Irin ajo la wa, ori gbe wa dele” (we are on a journey, may our heads lead us home.)

The Yoruba cosmos reflects the idea of constant change and through this belief, the Yoruba perceive themselves as “perpetual pilgrims” on a journey. Nothing embodies or reflects this idea more than the transformation of Yoruba art through the African Diaspora. *Diaspora* is a dispersion of language, culture or a people. In the case of the Yoruba and many other West African cultures, this dispersion occurred due to the lucrative slave trade that began with the Portuguese slave traders in the 15th century. Today, there are many descendents with a strong Yoruba lineage living in the United States, Cuba, Haiti and Brazil. With the diffusion of the Yoruba culture, the elements of Yoruba *orisa* worship, dancing, drumming and music have all been additional art forms that have taken root and are actively practiced in the western hemisphere.

We encourage you to further investigate these art forms by referencing the attached ***sources consulted page*** and utilizing the lessons and ideas outlined below.

Ideas for Further Exploration

(Can be modified to elementary, middle and high school levels)

- Discuss with the students the differences between traditional and modern art. Make a t-chart, bubble map or circle map of the qualities that make a piece of art modern or traditional. Refer to the book, *African Renaissance: Old Forms, New Images in Yoruba Art* for modern Yoruba artists, as well as the traditional art images on your CD enclosed in this packet.

Encourage students to make a list of objects that would be considered traditional or modern. Use magazines like *National Geographic* to find pictures of traditional or modern objects and create a collage illustrating the differences.

- Create abstract and realistic portraits or sculptures. Discuss with students the meaning of abstract versus realistic. Use the images from the exhibit to illustrate abstract ideas in African art. Discuss the use of geometric designs and biomorphic forms. Then direct students to sketch both a realistic and abstract self-portrait or create abstract sculptures out of papier-mâché. Refer to the *Gelede*, *Egungun* or *Ibeji* figures of the show to illustrate abstract figures.
- Facilitate a discussion with students about how traditional Yoruba objects are used. Share the information on egungun and gelede masquerades and the masks that are used in the dances. Have students compare this to the New Orleans Mardi Gras costumes or to objects from their own cultural heritage. Have students sketch or paint the object and write a short story, poem or essay on how that object is used in their own culture. For middle or high school level, have students pick an object from ***African Shapes of the Sacred*** exhibit and write a research paper on how that object is used in Yoruba society.

GLOSSARY

- Agere** (a gee-ray): Bowls that hold sacred objects such as ikin.
- Ase** (a shay): Neutral energy or force used to destroy or create.
- Babalowa** (Ba ba lo wa): A high priest or spiritual leader
- Diaspora**: Dispersion or spread of culture, language or people.
- Du du** (doo doo): Represents earth tone colors such as greens and browns in Yoruba color theory.
- Egun** (ee goon): Ancestor
- Egungun** (ee goon goon): Masquerade for ancestors.
- Erinle** (a reen lay): Divinity of waters.
- Ewa** (ee wa): Principal of balance.
- Esu** (e shu): Trickster orisa.
- Fun-fun** (fun fun): Represents cool colors such as white, blue, or silver in Yoruba color theory.
- Ibeji** (ee bay jee): Wooden sculptures that represent deceased twin(s).
- Gelede** (gay lay day): Masquerades that honor mothers.
- Iroke** (ee roe kay): Long wooden implement or tapper used for divination.
- Idi** (ee dee): Represents the idea of hidden truth or genitals.
- Ikin** (ee ken): Sacred palm nuts used in divination.
- Obatala** (O ba ta la): Male orisa that created mankind.
- Oba** (o ba): Means king.
- Ochosi** (o cho- see): Male warrior orisa of the forest.
- Oduduwa** (o du du wa): Male orisa who created earth.
- Ogun** (o goon): Male warrior orisa of technology and iron represented by green.
- Olorun** (o lo roon): Owner of the sky, first orisa of Yoruba Pantheon.
- Opon** (o pon): Wooden trays used for divination.
- Nok**: Ancestors of the Yoruba people.
- Orisa(s)** (o ree sha): Gods or deities.
- Osanyin** (o shan yeen): Male orisa of herbal medicine.

Osun (o shoon): Female orisa of the river.

Oya (o ya): Female orisa of fire and cemeteries.

Oyo (o yo): Great kingdom of Yoruba that flourished in the 15th century.

Pupa (poo pa): Represents shades of red such as oranges, reds and other warm colors in Yoruba color theory.

Raffia (raf fee a): Dried grasses used to decorate sacred and mundane objects.

Sango (shawn go): Great king and ancestor who became orisa of thunder.

Yemoja (yem a ja): Female orisa of water or ocean.

Yoruba (your uba): People of Southwest Nigeria.

Lesson 1: Power Boxes

Grade level: K-4

NYS Learning Standards Addressed:

- ✓ Visual Arts Standard 1: Creating, Performing and Participating in the arts
- ✓ Visual Arts Standard 3: Responding to and Analyzing works of art
- ✓ Social Studies Standard: Global History and Geography

Goals:

- To explore the presence of animals in traditional African art
- To identify animals in several of the objects in the slide show (provided on the CD)
- To discuss the importance of animals in traditional African art
- To create power boxes with animal motifs of personal significance

Materials:

- Shoe box or cigar box with lid
- Hodge podge or glue
- Colored pencils, markers or crayons
- Scissors
- Paint brushes for the hodge podge or glue
- Sturdy white sketch paper or card stock, if possible
- Multi-colored construction paper (optional)

Optional items

- Glitter glue
- Pipe cleaners
- Raffia
- Seed beads

Introduction:

Begin a discussion about Africa. Point out the continent of Africa on a map and ask students what they know about the continent. As students provide their ideas write them down on the board. Ask students what kinds of animals live in Africa. Let students brainstorm this with a peer. Once they have had time to discuss with a peer, let them share with the class as a whole. Make a list of student responses on the board or where they can see them. If possible, draw the animals. Then, using the CD images provided, talk about animals in African art and what they symbolize. Discuss with students that animals hold a very significant meaning in many cultures, especially African cultures. Ask them to think of important animals that come from their own culture. Stress that in

traditional African art, animals adorn many sacred or special objects and symbolize very important ideas such as strength, royalty, beauty, peace or love.

Activity: Power Boxes

- Once discussion has abated, explain to students that they will make a special box and decorate it with animals they deem important to them. Explain that in African art there are bowls or other containers that hold sentimental or sacred items that a person considers special, this is akin to a jewelry or photo box. Show them an example of a jewelry box juxtaposed to an image of an *Agere* bowl.
- Pass out a few sheets of paper per pupil. Ask students to draw their favorite animals on the paper and color them with pencils, crayons or markers. Make sure students leave enough space in between each figure for cutting.
- Students should cut out their finished animal figures.
- Distribute boxes with lids. You may wish to cover the boxes with construction paper prior to the activity to save time, or have the students glue the construction paper on the boxes.
- Once students have colored and cut their animals, using the hodge podge or glue with a paintbrush, tell them to glue the animal figures onto the box and onto the lid of the box, spacing the figures an inch or so apart. Make sure students put glue on top of and under the animal figure.

Additional Decoration

- Students can outline their animals with glitter glue, make different shapes out of the pipe cleaners and attach them, glue on seed beads, or students can hole-punch small holes in the lid of the box or at the bottom of the box, to tie on raffia.
- Make the boxes 3-D by making animal figures out of pipe cleaner and glue them to the box.

Length of Activity:

2-3 half hour class periods (can be modified by editing out certain portions of the lesson or facilitate discussions in mini-lessons.)

Other Adaptations:

For the 5-8th grade level, take the lesson a step further by discussing the diversity of the African continent and its many cultures and regions. Have students look up traditional objects with animal motifs and compare and contrast the animal symbolism between different African groups, such as the Fulani and the Yoruba or the Ashanti and Dahomey people, or students can work in small groups with an assigned African region to research. Let students in each group pick an aspect of the culture, like art, economy or music and create a travel brochure or collage. Then have each group give a presentation of their findings.

***This lesson was adapted from the “Teacher’s Guide to African Art” produced by the de Young Museum of San Francisco California.**

Lesson 2: Terra Cotta Yoruba Sculpture

Level: Middle to High School

NYS Learning Standards:

- ✓ Visual Arts Standard 1: Creating, Performing and Participating in the arts
- ✓ Visual Arts Standard 2: Knowing and Using Art Materials and Resources
- ✓ Visual Arts Standard 3: Responding to and Analyzing works of art
- ✓ Visual Arts Standard 4: Understanding the Cultural Dimensions & Contributions of the Arts
- ✓ Social Studies: Global History and Culture
- ✓ Social Studies: Geography

Goals:

- To explore Yoruba culture and history
- To examine the meaning of conceptual or abstract art within African culture
- To create an abstract terra cotta sculpture, applying the Yoruba concepts of art

Materials:

- Images of *African Shapes of the Sacred*
- Map of Africa
- Self-hardening terra cotta clay
- Clay tools
- Pre-cut card board squares about 8.5 x 8.5 inches
- Paper bowls
- Sodium Silicate

Optional

- Terra cotta clay for kiln
- Antique glaze-reddish brown tones
- Kiln

Overview:

This activity has a dual purpose. First it provides students with a specific cultural context for understanding the differences in realistic and abstract art, by exploring the philosophical and spiritual approach traditional Yoruba artisans take when creating sacred and mundane objects. Moreover, students will investigate the utility of traditional art by examining Yoruba culture. Secondly, it gives students the opportunity to learn how ancient terra cotta sculpture was used and how it has been transformed in today's art world.

In the art world, Africa is most known for its sculpture. More notably and most popular sculpture pieces have come from central Africa. The bulk of sculpture from this region is made of wood. However, stone, mud, wood and terra cotta were other mediums employed. The oldest terra cotta sculptures come from the Nok people, who precede the Yoruba. Archeologists have uncovered Nok sculptures in Nigeria that date from 600 BC to 200 AD, the oldest form of sculpture to date, located in Africa's sub-Saharan region. The Yoruba are descendents of this tradition and style.

From the 12th to the 14th century, the Yoruba began creating terra cotta clay sculpture. By the late 14th century and 15th century, the Yoruba were producing amazing realistic bronze sculptures. This process began with the artisan creating a mold out of terra cotta and then pouring beeswax over the mold. Details would be engraved into the wax and a few more layers of clay would be added to make the mold. The mold would be put over fire to melt the wax. Tubes were inserted into the mold and, bronze would be poured into the mold where the wax was previously. The bronze would take the form of the mold and the clay would carefully be broken off after cooling. These sculptures were often of *obas* (kings) or *orisas*. It is speculated by scholars that women typically made this style of sculpture.

Much of the sculpture featured in this exhibition is wood, some metal and some clay. However, it is important to note that terra cotta clay was one of the traditional mediums used to create sculpture and was often of a realistic style. This begins to change around the 15th century as new methods were introduced. The Yoruba, like many other native African groups, follow an abstract art tradition, but began to practice this around the 15th century. Yoruba art in general is produced from a spiritual concept or ideology, and sculpture is no exception. A sculpture, regardless of its medium, must conform to the principles of *ase* (see above) and *ewa*. To the Yoruba, sculpture must reflect the "presence of a spirit." As you discuss these principles with your class, be sure to point out the exaggerated details of the images featured on the CD and have students speculate on the meaning behind these exaggerated features and forms.

Activity Introduction:

- Brainstorm modern examples of abstract art.
- Have students make a list of specific artists, like Picasso or Pollock or pieces they know about that exemplify abstract qualities.
- Ask them to discuss what makes a piece abstract.
- Then present the slide show on *African Shapes of the Sacred*.
- Using the information presented above on Yoruba art and thought, explain to students how the ideas of *ewa* and *ase* are reflected in Yoruba sculpture. Discuss "spiritual presence."

- Have students discuss particular ideas they would like to convey in a sculpture and ask them to write down their ideas or concepts. For example, they may wish to create a piece that evokes a certain emotion, or reflects an exaggeration of an idea or thing. For example the Yoruba, as stated above believe the head is the “seat of the soul” and often illustrate this by exaggerating the head in sculptural pieces. After brainstorming, instruct students to sketch out their ideas and plans.
- When students are ready, distribute terra cotta clay, clay tools and cardboard squares (use to place sculpture on if air drying.)
- Students may choose to emulate the terra cotta heads of the Yoruba or other Yoruba sculpture featured on the images CD, or work from an original idea.
- **If students choose to create a terra cotta head follow the directions below**
 1. **Wedge clay, roll and hand build a face by symmetrically shaping clay over the outside of a paper bowl, evenly cutting away the edges. Keep the sculpture from drying out by using a spray bottle and keep covered with plastic in between sessions.**
 2. **Score the damp clay and use slip to add facial features, a headdress, or ornaments.**
 3. **Use fine sandpaper to smooth away rough edges.**
 4. Let it dry and apply sodium silicate (2 to 3 coats for desired look) The sodium silicate will prolong the sculptures longevity and give it a smooth sheen. **Do not use acrylic or lacquer sprays**, as they will give a plastic look to the sculpture. You can also use the sodium silicate as a sealant for other self-hardening terra cotta sculptures.

Additional Ideas:

- If using clay for a kiln, allow clay to dry and kiln fire as green ware. Use fine sandpaper to smooth away rough edges. Use antique glaze, brush the terra cotta clay with 3 coats of glaze or leave the terra cotta head or sculpture as is. Once glazed, dry the sculpture and fire in the kiln at cone.05.

***This activity was adapted from the Utah Museum of Fine Arts**

- Take the lesson further and discuss the pros and cons of abstract versus realistic. Which approach involves more thought? Which is more understandable to other people?

SOURCES CONSULTED

African Renaissance: Old Forms, New Images in Yoruba Art. By Moyo Okediji. Copyright 2002 by University Press of Colorado, Colorado State University.

African Shapes of the Sacred: Yoruba Religious Art in the Longyear Museum of Anthropology. By Dr. Carol Ann Lorenz. Copyright 2006 by Longyear Museum of Anthropology, Colgate University.

Nok Head Sculpture. Copyright 2002 by Utah Museum of Fine Arts, University of Utah.

www.umfa.utah.edu.

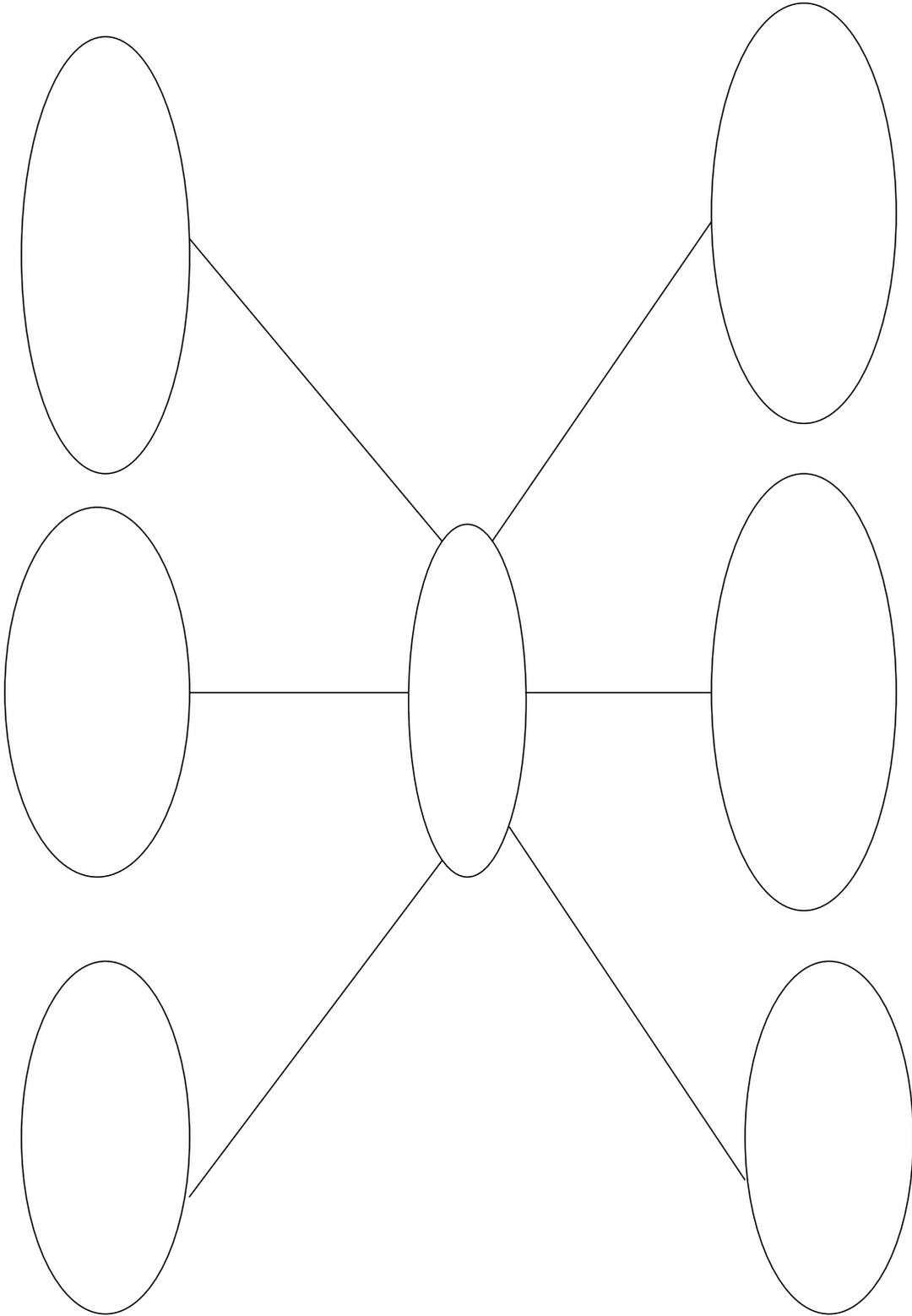
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The Aesthetics of Color: Yoruba Color Aesthetics. By Dr. Roxanne Farrar. Copyright 1998-2001, Georgia College & State University and the Boards of Regents of the University System of Georgia.

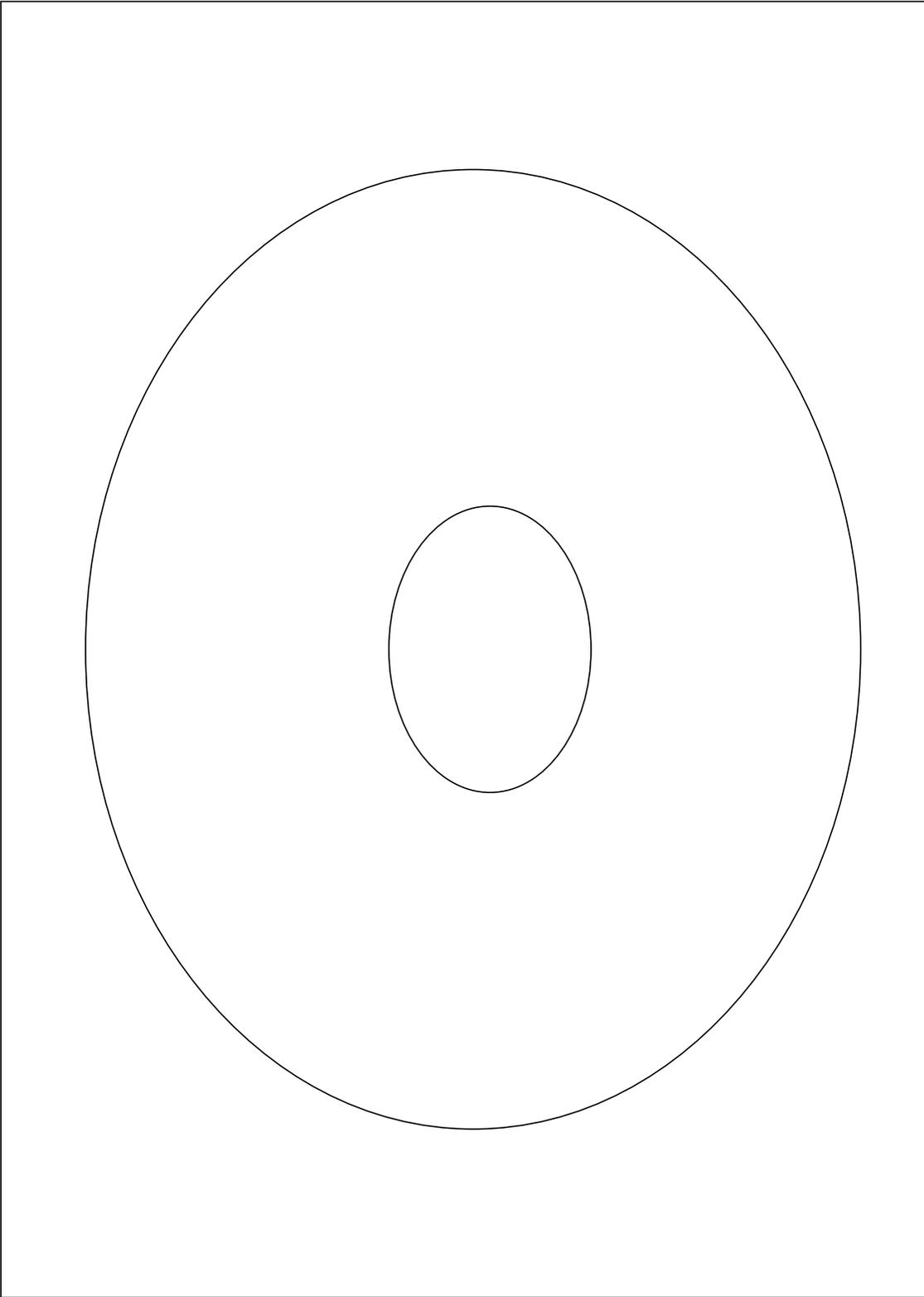
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Yoruba Art & Culture. By Nicole Mullen. Copyright 2004 by Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley.

BUBBLE MAP



CIRCLE MAP



T-chart

Traditional Art	Modern Art