

## **Lesson Plan 2: The Dogon Door: opens to reveal the Arts of the Dogon People of Mali in Africa** Social Studies, Language Arts and Visual Arts

### **Objectives:**

Explore the artwork of the Dogon People.

Learn to understand that there is more than one way to communicate - writing, drawing, sculpting and performing.

To create a visual story, using symbols based on the student's own experience.

### **Activities:**

Look carefully at the image of the Dogon door and ask the children what they see.

There are carvings of animals - crocodiles, birds, people, snakes etc.

Ask a series of questions:

Do you think this is a door for a powerful person? Why do you think they have carved the door? What is carving?

◆ Fill in "What I see on the Dogon Door Sheet".

What would you carve on your door living in Bermuda?

All the images that you see on the door tell a story.

◆ Tell them about the door and the Dogon people - all information is on the "Dogon Door Sheet" and the "Dogon People Sheet".

◆ They can complete the "Dogon Door Question and Answer Sheet" and the "Dogon People Question and Answer Sheet".

The Dogon people of Mali pass down their traditions, myths and legends by carving or sculpting and using this to orally tell the tale. The dances that are performed, in ritual dress using masks, are not only to entertain but to inform as well. So their artwork isn't only about making their environment interesting to live in but it is an integral part of their lives, re-affirming their beliefs and passing down knowledge. It is a way of telling a story without written words. Though words are not written the Dogons use a vast and complex number of symbols to convey objects and meaning. For example a broken line symbolises water, crocodiles and snakes are part of their creation myth; a snake lead the migration of the people to the land.

In today's society we tell stories with pictures by taking a photographs. Photos immortalise a moment in time by capturing the event as it happens.

◆ Ask questions for example: Does anyone have a photo at home that tells a story? Tell us about it. Now can anyone recall an incident that involves you in a family activity, for example: a birth in the family, your grandma's party etc. It doesn't necessarily have to be a happy event.

◆ Write down this story in a short story format. Guidelines on "What makes a good story? Sheet".

◆ Consider the key persons or event. Write down the things associated with them/it, for example: if it was my grandma it would be the big diamond ring she wears on her finger. I would use this as a symbol for her. Draw these symbols on the "Symbol Sheet".

◆ Look at your symbol sheet and use it to create a final story without words - this can be in any medium or materials, paint, pencils etc. Limit your colours. Typical Dogon colours are red, black and white.

Extension lessons:

◆ Research an aspect of Dogon art - animals, doors, masks, ironwork or people.

◆ Research another African country's artwork and/or life-style; use this information to compare it to the Dogons.

◆ Using their story made from symbols create a relief sculptures such as clay-tiles.

### **Assessment:**

Evaluate answers on "What I see on the Dogon Door Sheet"

Evaluate answers on the "Dogon Door Sheet" and the "Dogon People Sheet"

Assess stories based on your criteria for "Symbols Sheet"

Compare their final visual stories with others in class and see if others can interpret their stories

### **Resources:**

Image of the Dogon Door

What I see on the Dogon Door Sheet

Dogon Door Sheet

Dogon Door Question and Answer Sheet

Dogon People Sheet

Dogon People Question and Answer Sheet

What makes a good story Sheet

Symbols Sheet

Dogon Door Image





## The Dogon People



The Dogon are an isolated African people who live along a 200-kilometre stretch of escarpment called the Cliffs of Bandiagara near Timbuktu. The population is about 100,000.

It was thought that the Dogon had knowledge of the Sirius triple star system long before modern astronomers discovered the third star in the system in 1995 but it is now believed that they obtained this information from a French astronomer. The Dogon say they obtained their knowledge from amphibious beings known as the Nommo who came to Earth from the Sirius star system and who were sent to Earth from Sirius for the benefit of mankind.

### Religion:

Dogon religion is defined primarily through the worshiping of the ancestors and the spirits whom they encountered as they moved across the Western Sudan. The religious beliefs of the Dogon are enormously complex and knowledge of them varies greatly within Dogon society.

The Dogon mythology reveals that humans were biologically engineered. According to the mythology, the alien Nommo combined their DNA with the animals of the Earth to create humans.

Nommo was the first living being created by Amma (the sky god and creator of the universe) and he soon multiplied to become four pairs of twins. The name comes from a Dogon word meaning 'to make one drink', and the Nommos are also called 'Masters of the Water', the 'Monitors', and the 'Teachers'.

The Dogon tells the legend of the Nommos, awful-looking beings who arrived in a vessel along with fire and thunder. The Nommos, who could live on land but dwelled mostly in the sea, were part fish, like merfolk (mermaids and mermen).

### History:

Early history is informed by oral traditions, which claim that the Dogon originated from the west bank of the Niger River (10th to 13th centuries). They emigrated west to northern Burkina Faso, where local histories describe them as Kibsi. Around 1490, they fled a region now known as the northern Mossi kingdom of Yatenga when it was invaded

by Mossi cavalry. They ended up in the Bandiagara Cliffs region, safe from the approaching horsemen.

Economy:

The Dogon grow onions, which are exported throughout the Sudan region. They also grow millet and sorghum, which is consumed locally. Like so many agricultural people of Africa, the land and its bounty plays an important part in the religious views of the Dogon.

Political Systems:

Social stratification among the Dogon involves a complex ordering of individuals based on their position within various social groups defined either by descent or locality. Groupings include clan, village, patrilineage, and, for men, an age-set or -grade. Each of these groups is hierarchically ordered based on age and the rules of descent.

## **Dogon People Question and Answer Sheet**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Circle the correct answer or write the out the question and answer.

Look at the map. Is Mali, where the Dogon live, bordered by countries?

- a. Yes, by 6 countries      b. No, it is on the coast      c. Yes, by 7 countries

The population of the Dogon people is about:

- a. 1000,000      b. 100,000      c. 10,000

The Dogon people have detailed knowledge about:

- a. Bird migration      b. The Sirius star system      c. The life cycle of the worm

Who is Amma?

- a. The sky god and creator of the universe      b. A human being      c. A crocodile

Who are Nommos?

- a. The first living beings created by Amma      b. The creator of human beings  
c. Both a. and b.

The Nommos dwelled mostly:

- a. On land      b. In the sky      c. In the water

Where did the Dogon originate from?

- a. East bank of the Niger River  
b. South bank of the Niger River  
c. West bank of the Niger River

In local history the Dogons were known as:

- a. Kibsi      b. Tellem      c. Gaugonie

The Dogon economy makes money by:

- a. growing onions      b. fishing      c. growing rice

What is consumed locally?

- a. rice and beans      b. millet and sorghum      c. carrots and maize

The political system is based on groupings in a special order. This is called a:

- a. democracy      b. gathering      c. hierarchy

### **The Dogon Door**

The door and the doorway figures are intended to protect the home of the Chief but in so doing they protect the entire community since the Chief himself is the protector of the extended family of which he is the leader. The carvings also enhance his ability to protect by aesthetically enhancing the house that symbolises him and thereby enhancing him. The leader-protector role will not be limited to discussions with other Chiefs and other tribes but with both the natural forces that might threaten the village at any time (like wild animals and droughts) and the supernatural forces, both positive and negative, that require constant attention. So the doorway and its figures represent the protective "home-ness" function not only of the chief's home but of the entire village of which that structure is the centre.

The Dogon are best known for their extensive carving of masks and wooden figurative art. The primary colours used by the Dogon are usually red, black, and white, and popular patterns include spirals and checkerboard motifs, both of which can be traced to their origin stories.

There are 78 different types of ritual masks among the Dogon and their iconographic messages go beyond the aesthetic, into the realm of religion and philosophy. The mask that looks like a dual cross is a *Kanaga* mask and represents a bird known as *kommolo tebu*. It is used for rituals to remember the dead.

There are snakes on the door. This could be due to the cult of Lebe, the Earth God, who is primarily concerned with the agricultural cycle. The chief priest is called a *hogon*. The *hogon* encourages the continued fertility of the land. Lebe visits the *hogons* every night in the form of a serpent and licks their skins in order to purify them and infuse them with life force. The *hogons* are responsible for guarding the purity of the soil. Birds and breasts, which can be seen on the door are also symbols of fertility.

Among all the animals carved on the door there are crocodiles. Crocodiles are part of the creation myth. A Nommo was sacrificed and its body parts were scattered to the four points of the compass and one part in the centre was transformed into a crocodile. In the bottom right-hand corner there is a circle and a dog. This circle could be an allusion to the Sirius star system where their god is believed to have come from. The dog is part of the Dogons mythology in how they came to live where they do today. It is told that when they arrived in the area, the Tellem (the people who lived there before the Dogons) hid the watering holes. The Dogons were dying of thirst. Then a dog ran out with wet paws so they were able to track down where the watering holes lay hidden and after quenching their thirst they were able to dislodge the Tellem.

## Dogon Door Question and Answer Sheet

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Circle the correct answer or write the out the question and answer.

What are the figures on the door intended to do?

- a. welcome                      b. entertain                      c. protect

Who does the Chief need to interact with?

- a. other chiefs, natural forces and animals  
b. natural forces, supernatural forces and other chiefs  
c. supernatural forces, man-made objects and natural forces

What are the Dogons best known for?

- a. clay sculptures of animals  
b. bronze cast figurines  
c. carving of wooden masks and figurines

What popular pattern motifs can be seen in their work?

- a. dots and dashes      b. spirals and checkerboards      c. flowers and circles

How many types of ritual masks can be found among the Dogon Peoples?

- a. 98                      b. 87                      c. 78

How many mask designs can be seen on the door?

- a. 3                      b. 4                      c. 5

One mask type is that of the Kanaga mask which represents:

- a. A dog                      b. A lizard                      c. A bird

A Chief priest is called a hogan and one of their jobs is to:

- a. protect the people                      b. continue the fertility                      c. Both A + B

Crocodiles are part of Dogon mythology. Which myth?

- a. birth                      b. creation                      c. death

Why is the dog important in Dogon mythology?

- a. It found water                      b. It searched for food      c. It guarded their property

## "What makes a good story?" sheet

The best stories have a strong theme, a fascinating plot, a fitting structure, unforgettable characters, a well-chosen setting, and an appealing style. Try for all of these. Good writers often break rules—but they know they're doing it! Here are some good rules to know.

### Theme

A theme is something important the story tries to tell us—something that might help us in our own lives. Not every story has a theme, but it's best if it does.

### Plot

Plot is most often about a conflict or struggle that the main character goes through. The conflict can be with another character, or with the way things are, or with something inside the character, like needs or feelings.

The main character should win or lose at least partly on their own, and not just be rescued by someone or something else. Most often, the character learns or grows as they try to solve their problem. What the character *learns* is the theme.

The conflict should get more and more tense or exciting. The tension should reach a high point or "climax" near the end of the story.

The basic steps of a plot are: conflict begins, things go right, things go WRONG, final victory (or defeat), and wrap-up. The right-wrong steps can repeat.

A novel can have several conflicts, but a short story should have only one.

### Story Structure

At the beginning, jump right into the action. At the end, wind up the story quickly.

Decide about writing the story either in "first person" or in "third person." Third-person pronouns are "he," "she," and "it"—so writing in third person means telling a story as if it's all about other people. The first-person pronoun is "I"—so writing in first person means telling a story as if it happened to you.

Even if you write in third person, try to tell the story through the eyes of just one character—most likely the main character. Don't tell anything that the character wouldn't know. This is called "point of view." If you must tell something else, create a whole separate section with the point of view of another character.

Decide about writing either in "present tense" or in "past tense." Writing in past tense means writing as if the story already happened. That is how most stories are written. Writing in present tense means writing as if the story is happening right now. Stick to one tense or the other!

### Characters

Before you start writing, know your characters well.

Your main character should be someone readers can feel something in common with, or at least care about.

You don't have to describe a character completely. It's enough to say one or two things about how a character looks or moves or speaks.

A main character should have at least one flaw or weakness. Perfect characters are not very interesting. They're also harder to feel something in common with or care about. And they don't have anything to learn. In the same way, there should be at least one thing good about a "bad guy."

### Setting

Set your story in a place and time that will be interesting or familiar.

### Style and Tone

Use language that feels right for your story.

You don't have to write fancy to write well. It almost never hurts to use simple words and simple sentences. That way, your writing is easy to read and understand. Always use the best possible word—the one that is closest to your meaning, sounds best, and creates the clearest image. If you can't think of the right one, use a thesaurus.

Carefully check each word, phrase, sentence, and paragraph. Is it the best you can write? Is it in the right place? Do you need it at all? If not, take it out!

### **The 5 Paragraph Outline for Short Stories**

#### **Paragraph One**

- ◆ Introduce setting of the story
- ◆ Introduce main character(s) and supporting characters
- ◆ Introduce action of the plot

#### **Paragraph Two**

- ◆ Establish the conflict for the main characters
- ◆ Give their initial response to conflict

#### **Paragraph Three**

- ◆ Introduce solution to main conflict of plot
- ◆ Establish character response to solution

#### **Paragraph Four**

- ◆ Main conflict occurs
- ◆ Characters react accordingly

#### **Paragraph Five**

- ◆ Wrap up loose ends
- ◆ Possible open or closed ending

The amount of detail within each paragraph is dependent upon the guidelines given by the teacher. You could ask for a specific number of sentences in each paragraph, or a certain amount of specific detail. This is a basic outline only, and the content of each short story will vary depending upon the focus the teacher requires for the story.