

## Exploring Asante Proverbs on a *Ntan* Drum

Osei Bonsu (Ghana, Asante, 1900 - 1977), [Ntan Drum](#), Ackland Art Museum, 2000.6

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**Overview** Students will look closely and carefully at images of the Ackland Art Museum's *Ntan* Drum and consider how the imagery on the object communicates Asante proverbs. Students will articulate connections between *Ntan* proverbs to their own lives/culture.

### Essential Questions

- What does art tell us about the values or point of view of the artist? What does it tell us about the culture that made or used this object?
- How do people use, experience, or take in art?
- What ways do the arts – visual art, music, dance, theater - connect to each other?

**Grade Level** 3-5

**Content Area:** Visual Art

### Standard Alignment with NC Standards

Visual Art 3.V.1 – 5. V.1	Use the language of visual arts to communicate effectively.
Visual Art 3.V.2 – 5. V.2	Apply creative and critical thinking skills to artistic expression.
Visual Art 3.V.3 – 5. V.3	Create art using a variety of tools, media, and processes, safely and appropriately.
Visual Art 3.CX.1 – 5.CX.1	Understand the global, historical, societal, and cultural contexts of the visual arts.
Visual Art 3.CX.2 – 5.CX.2	Understand the interdisciplinary connections and life applications of the visual arts.

**Suggested Length of Time:** One or two 30–40-minute session

### Materials needed

- [Ntan Drum Power Point slides](#)
- [Printable PDF of Ntan Drum and carved image details](#)
- [Printable PDF with Asante Proverbs](#)
- Audio from the [Smithsonian Folkways Music of the Ashanti of Ghana - Ntan and BK Amankwa](#) or on [Spotify](#) with a free account.

### Activity

1. Using the slides and/or printed artwork images of the *Ntan* drum (full length and perhaps two different sides), have students look closely at the drum and begin a conversation about the things that they see. What do you think this object is and how do you know? What might it be used for? What details has the artists included on this object? Consider making a list of the details the students see on the drum. Note: Students may indicate that they notice protrusions near the top of the drum – these are breasts, similar to humans, and indicate it is the "mother drum," often the largest drum in the group.
2. The carved images on this drum represent **proverbs**, or short, popular sayings that contain a piece of wisdom or advice. Proverbs usually include figurative language to convey its message, rather than stating its actual meaning. In the United States, common proverbs include:
  - "An apple a day keeps the doctor away"  
**Meaning:** Eating fruit is good for you and will keep you healthy.
  - "Actions Speak Louder than Words"  
**Meaning:** What you do is more significant than what you say.

- "Don't count your chickens until they hatch."  
**Meaning:** Do not depend on something hoped for until you know for certain that it will happen.
- "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink."  
**Meaning:** You can't make someone do something they don't want to do.

For the Asante people who live in Ghana, they too have their own proverbs. The Ghanaian artist, Osei Bonsu (Ghana, Asante, 1900-1977), carved images onto this drum to show common proverbs people in his community would know just by looking at it.

3. Show the slides with image details or print the detailed images and proverbs. Students will match the Asante proverbs with the images and discuss their meaning.

- **Image of star and the moon**  
**Proverb:** "The star outlives the moon"  
**Meaning:** The Asante see the star as a sign of reliability because although the moon is brighter, the star is more constant.
- **Image of dish and the grinding spoon** [front of drum, below star and moon]  
**Proverb:** "If the grinding spoon is as good as it thinks it is, then it should grind the palm nut and not the cocoyam leaves."  
**Meaning:** If you say you are good at something, don't do it the easiest way -- the *Ntan* group should not just play easy pieces of music, but show skill by playing difficult music.
- **Image of the rooster and hen**  
**Proverb:** "Although the hen knows when it is dawn, she leaves it for the cock to announce"  
**Meanings:** Proverbs may be interpreted in more than one way, depending on the experience and perspective of the interpreter. This is a good example. For some, the rooster and hen symbolize men's power: Although knowledge is not specific to gender, men are the decision makers. This can also be applied to the role of men in *Ntan* bands and the community. For others, this imagery refers to the power of women, which may be less visible: The hen has the information, but she allows the rooster to feel that he is the one in control—she lets him announce the dawn.
- **Image of woman bending down to pick up crab**  
**Proverb:** "When you bend down to pick up the crab you expose your buttocks to god"  
**Meaning:** If you can catch a crab by sneaking up on it from behind, but god is aware of all deceptions.
- **Image of Elephant and tree**  
**Proverb:** "It is only the elephant that can uproot the palm tree."  
**Meaning:** This is an image of power, often associated with the power of traditional rulers.
- **Image of chameleon and locked box**  
**Proverb:** "The chameleon's ability to change colors only affects the clothes he is wearing, not those in his box."  
**Meaning:** There are some things a person cannot change.
- **Image of snake catching a frog**  
**Proverb:** "Every part of the frog belongs to the cobra."  
**Meaning:** Everything the frog does eventually benefits the cobra that eats him. If applied to the performances it could mean that every musician works for the music association.

- **Image of coiled snake catching a hornbill**

**Proverb:** "By waiting patiently at one spot on the ground, the puff adder was able to catch the hornbill for lunch"

**Meaning:** With patience and ingenuity, one can accomplish the impossible.

4. After discussing the proverbs and images, show the slide of the drum again and share the following information about the drum:

- Popular in the 1930s and 1940s, drums like this were used by *Ntan* music and dance associations and clubs. Volunteer musicians in *Ntan* bands played both for Asante rulers and for audiences at family celebrations and community festivals. While performing, they displayed alongside their instruments, sets of figures representing the chief, queen mother, and members of the court. Although seldom played today, some *Ntan* drums are displayed in front of the music groups as they perform.
- *Ntan* drums often feature elaborate relief carvings referring to Asante proverbs or to images of their colonial past, (i.e. the teacher with blackboard which might refer to the lessons that all the other images teach). The largest drum in a set, referred to as the mother drum, has prominent breasts. On this drum, most of the tension sticks and wires at the top of the drum, used for tuning and holding the animal hide surface, are replacements – only one or two may be original.

Now that students know that *Ntan* drums were used during community festivals and family celebrations, why do you think the artist included these images of proverbs on the drum? These visual messages define acceptable modes of behavior and underscore essential truths and social values for the Asante community.

5. Consider playing a portion of the *Ntan* drum music from the Smithsonian Folkways album *Music of the Ashanti of Ghana* (1979). Have students describe the music. What does it sound like? How might movement be a part of the performance? What movements might the audience do when listening to the music? Have the students try to replicate a similar beat on their laps or desks. What other instruments might be in the band with the drum?
6. Share additional information about the artist – Osei Bonsu – and consider showing students similar drums he created (now in other museums).
- Osei Bonsu was chief carver for several Asante rulers and also attracted patronage from rulers of other Ghanaian cultures. In addition, Bonsu, whose father was a drummer and a carver, is well known for the drums and figures he made for *Ntan* bands.
  - Look closely at some of the other drums Osei Bonsu carved. What are the similarities and differences?
7. Conclude by reviewing some of the information discovered during these activities. Ask the students to share one thing they learned either in a pair share or as a written reflection. As a possible extension, have students research popular proverbs from the United States or other countries, illustrate these proverbs, and share their findings with the class.

Additional Resources:

- [Ntan Drum K12 classroom activity](#), National Museum of African Art, Washington, DC
- [Art of Osei Bonsu by Doran H. Ross](#). African Arts, Vol. 17, No. 2, (Feb., 1984), pp. 28-90, Published by: UCLA James S. Coleman African Studies Center
- *Ntan* drums in museums made by Osei Bonsu (Ghana, Asante, 1900 - 1977)  
[Ntan Drum](#), c. 1935, National Museum of African Art, Washington DC  
[Ntan Drum](#), c. 1930s, High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia  
[Ntan Drum](#), ca. 1935, Fowler Museum at UCLA