Lesson Plan: African Myths and Stories
Provided by the Art Institute of Chicago Department of Museum Education

Suggested Grade Level: 4–6
Estimated Time: 2–3 hours

Introduction
Storytelling has long been an important feature of African life. The storyteller often has a
position of honor in traditional African societies. Stories praise rulers, describe historical
events, reinforce customs, and teach morals and values. By reading and discussing the
vivid accounts handed down from one generation to the next, students may gain a
deeper appreciation of various African cultures and their visual arts.

In this lesson, students read stories associated with a royal altar tusk from the Kingdom
of Benin in Nigeria. They read myths illustrated on the tusk and write a myth or story
related to what they have observed and learned.

Lesson Objectives
• Explore an art object’s origin and function.
• Understand the concepts of myth and storytelling and their functions in African
  oral tradition.
• Listen to myths and stories read aloud and also read silently for comprehension.
• Complete a short creative writing assignment.

Key Terms
• myth
• story
• oral history
• Edo people
• Kingdom of Benin
• Nigeria
• ancestor
• oba
• predecessor
• ivory
• bas relief
• altar
• brass
• viper
• coral
• symbol

Instructional Materials
• What I See When I Really Look Activity Sheet
• oba stories
• tusk diagram
• pencil
• paper

Procedures
Discussion
• Review the description of the Royal Altar Tusk. Show the object to students. If using the Web to view the object, take advantage of the close-up view.
• Have students fill out the What I See When I Really Look Activity Sheet activity sheet. After students have completed this, make the following observations and ask the following questions to encourage a discussion of the object’s form and how it was made:
  o What do you think this object is made of? How can you tell?
  o Describe in as much detail as possible what you see. How are these figures and symbols arranged? (in rows) These pictures tell stories. In what order do you think they are read?
  o How are the figures made on the tusk? (carved) Are they above or below the tusk’s surface? How far do they come out of the surface? (in bas relief)
  o Can you guess how this object was used? Do you think it was used on its own or attached to something?
• Explain that carved altar tusks like this are created for a new oba (king) of the Edo people in the Kingdom of Benin in southern Nigeria. Show students where the tusks are made on the map. (For additional background information on the tusk and the Kingdom of Benin, see the Telling Images teacher manual.)
• Such a tusk is made to honor the oba’s immediate predecessor, his deceased father. Tell students that this particular tusk was made for Oba Adolo (ah-doh-LOH) to honor his father. Oba Adolo ruled around the same time that Abraham Lincoln was president of the United States, in the nineteenth century.
• Tell students that tusks are placed in pairs on brass heads and on semicircular platforms. Tell them that ceremonies are held in front of royal altars to honor and communicate with past obas.

• Tell students that elephant ivory is highly valued and a symbol of the power of the oba. Before the twentieth century, one tusk from every elephant killed in the kingdom had to be given to the oba, and the other had to be offered to him for sale.

**Activity**

• Explain to students that Benin ivory tusks tell stories of the Kingdom of Benin, including the lives and achievements of its past obas. In the past, prior to colonialism, the Edo people didn’t use a written language. Instead, they created pictures and used the spoken word to tell their history.

• Read aloud three oba stories portrayed on the tusk and ask the following questions:
  - Oba Ewuare: The Leopard and the Viper
    - What was dripping on Oba Ewuare’s face?
    - What did Oba Ewuare discover he had been sleeping on?
    - What two symbols represent Oba Ewuare?
  - Oba Ewuare and Olokun, God of the Sea
    - Where does Olokun live?
    - What does his palace look like?
    - What were some of the treasures Oba Ewuare took home?
  - Oba Ewuare and His Coral Crown
    - Describe what Oba Ewuare wore on his head.
    - What did Oba Ewuare need from every man, woman, and child in the kingdom?
    - Can you chant one of the daily greetings Oba Ewuare invented?

• Give students time to read the additional stories about obas and look at the tusk diagram.

• Have students choose one to three figures from the tusk diagram to include as characters in a one- to- three-page story about the life of an oba, his attendants, or visitors. Encourage them to remember they are writing for future Edo people who will wish to know the interesting details of their ancestors’ lives.
Evaluation

Have students show other students which figure on the diagram they chose to write about, describe this figure in detail, and read aloud their story in class. Base students’ evaluations on this presentation, their participation in class discussion, and written work.

Glossary

bas relief
a French word meaning sculpture in which images project slightly from a flat background

Edo
groups of peoples, with a shared language also called Edo, living in southern Nigeria. The Edo trace their origins to the kingdom of Benin, which flourished between the 14th and 17th centuries. Edo groups are ethnically diverse, and their arts reflect cultural borrowing.

oba
Edo word for king

Illinois Learning Standards
Fine Arts: 25, 27
English Language Arts: 1–4
Social Science: 17–18