GOLD OF AFRICA

Written by Janice B. Ruttenberg

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SUDANIC EMPIRES AND THE GOLD TRADE

The growth of the great West African empires from approximately the 8th to the 15th centuries, was irrevocably tied to the existence of a highly organized trans-Saharan trade. By the end of the 7th century A.D., adventurous Muslim traders from North Africa were regularly traversing the Sahara, taking copper, precious salt, and European luxury goods to the south where it could be exchanged for ivory, kola nuts, and, especially, gold.

Gold was valued for its beauty and rarity as well as for the ease with which it could be transformed into currency and splendid objects of ornament and regalia. Until the exploitation of the gold fields of the Americas by the Spanish in the 16th century, Africa was virtually the only source of the precious metal. Its use in coinage in North Africa, Italy, Spain and other parts of Europe was made possible by the dangerous, difficult, and highly complex network of commercial caravan routes across the great African desert.

The location of gold mines and the market towns involved in this enterprise prompted the growth of great cities, kingdoms, and empires in the West African Sudan. In addition to the obvious benefits to merchants and traders, the commerce also had profound effects upon the economies of those states situated near trade routes and gold sources. Kings and chiefs were able to tax all products entering and leaving their domains and often had a monopoly on all gold mined within their kingdoms as well. Gradual consolidation of these territories resulted in vast wealth and created the great Sudanic empires of Africa.

The first of these was Ghana, also called Wagadu, which flourished from about 700 to 1200 A.D. Contemporary reports described the magnificence of its court, detailing the gold-embellished trappings of royal horses, the gold-covered shields and swords of royal attendants, and the golden threads braided into the hair of royal princes. The picture which emerged from these accounts is one of stately pomp and splendor, replete with the luxury items universally associated with immense wealth and vast resources.

Although the Soninke inhabitants of Ghana welcomed Muslim traders, merchants, and scholars into their midst, they retained traditional African beliefs at the core of their religious life.
Increasingly frequent religious wars with Muslims, however, ultimately resulted in the decline and dissolution of the kingdom and the acceptance of Islam as the dominant religion in the area.

After a period of confusion and lawlessness, the region witnessed the rise of Mali, the second of the great Sudanic empires. One of Africa’s most celebrated heroes was Sundiata, an early king of Mali, who fought wars of conquest and consolidation. Sundiata also encouraged and protected the resumption of the trans-Saharan trade which was essential to the prosperity of his kingdom.

A century later, under the fabled Mansa Musa the Magnificent, the Malian capital was renowned as a center of trade and learning. Mansa Musa established peace and order within his realm and enlarged it to the point that it was, to quote a contemporary traveler, "four months in length and at least as much in breadth." Although he ruled a kingdom that was one of the largest in the world, Mansa Musa is remembered today chiefly for his spectacular pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324. He was so lavish with gifts of gold while in Cairo, that its value in Egypt was effectively ruined for many years. The trip became such a sensation that it attracted even more traders, merchants, scholars, and religious leaders to Mali, spreading the fame of the kingdom throughout the Muslim world.

As the Malian Empire declined in the 15th century, it was succeeded by Songhay, the last and largest of the mighty West African empires. One of its kings, the brilliant and ruthless Sunni Ali Ber, expanded the imperial territory to the point that, at the height of its greatness, Songhay’s dominions equalled all of western Europe in size. Like the great states which preceded it, Songhay’s prosperity was due in part to control over both gold sources and trade.

It was at the height of Songhay’s ascendancy that Europeans, notably sea-faring Portuguese, embarked upon their voyages of discovery, landing on the coast of Africa for the first time. Brisk trade with the kingdoms of the coast and, through them, with the inland empires, brought African gold directly to European markets. The mutually beneficial commercial association which characterized this early relationship between Africa and the West was not, unfortunately, sustained. Since subsequent events and attitudes have obscured the history of the great civilizations of Africa, it is imperative that we begin to look at this history thoroughly and accurately.
TYPES OF GOLD OBJECTS

Sahel Jewelry

The women of the Sahel, Sahara, and Senegambia have long been known for their love of jewelry, especially the elegant ornaments produced by the highly skilled smiths of the region. As much as two hundred years ago, an English traveler to Mali described in his journal the heavy, hammered, four-lobed gold earrings worn by fashionable women of the time, which can still be seen in the region today. (Slide 1)

Among other traditional jewelry forms still worn are small twisted gold rings which are used as ear, nose, hair, and forehead ornaments as well as filigree beads and pendants in a great variety of shapes and sizes. (Slide 2)

Pectoral Discs

These discs of cast or beaten gold, found among the Akan of Ghana, are multi-functional objects used in a variety of contexts. Often referred to as "soul washers' badges," they were traditionally worn by the okra, a royal official who was responsible for "washing" or purifying the chief's soul. The discs were also sometimes part of the regalia of royal messengers, linguists, sub-chiefs, heralds, and war leaders. In some Akan groups they were exhibited by young girls during puberty ceremonies and by principal mourners at funerals.

Usually worn suspended by cords made of pineapple fiber, these pendants vary in size and design, with rosette and radiating geometric patterns predominating. (Slide 3) It is believed that the form of these objects may have been inspired by the jewelry of the Sahel region, by early North African gold coins (dinars), or by Muslim amulets worn as protection against the evil eye.
Sword Ornaments

Ceremonial swords have long been used and elaborately embellished by the Akan people. Some time before the beginning of the 18th century, the practice of casting such objects in gold was developed. In addition to the beaten gold leaf which covers the carved hilts, trophies or emblems such as shells or animal skulls were often attached. Later, it became common for the cast gold sword ornament to take the form of the head of a defeated enemy.

In 1924, the Asante king returned to power after many years of exile. The need to restore the royal regalia at that time provided the opportunity for the creation of scores of gold ornaments, and the motifs became much more varied and numerous. Like goldweights and linguist staff finials, sword ornaments now often refer to well-known Akan proverbs which have a moral or educational intent.

The double crocodile ornament (Slide 4) represents a proverb which stresses the need for unity in a family or state. Members should not quarrel, but rather work in harmony for the benefit of all. The lion ornament (Slide 5) is a motif borrowed from the English heraldic lion, referring to a number of Akan proverbs which comment upon the strength or bravery of the chief.

Linguist Staff Finials

The Akan place a high premium upon cultivated, subtle, and elegant spoken language, especially in the effective use of proverbs and traditional sayings. The primary advisor and formal spokesman for the king or chief is called the linguist. He is skilled at applying the richness of Akan proverbial speech to many different, and sometimes difficult, situations, thereby serving a diplomatic and advisory function for the ruler.

The staffs held by these officials as badges of office may have developed from the silver-headed canes acquired by Gold Coast chiefs from European traders. Court officials sometimes carried the canes as an indication that they were representatives of the king. As the royal regalia became more ornate, these staffs were
surmounted by carved, gold-leafed images, or finials, which had proverbial and symbolic content. (Slide 6)

Slide 7, Figure a, shows a linguist staff finial in the form of a man holding an egg, a reference to an Akan proverb which likens the authority of a chief to an egg which must be held with care. The finial in Figure c, a sculpture of a bird looking backwards, illustrates the proverb, "Pick it up if it falls behind you." In other words, "learn from your experience."

Goldweights

The system of weighing gold against brass counterweights of precise values may have originated in North Africa, traveling southward along established trade routes to the Sahel and the Gold Coast. The earliest brass weights, cast from the cire perdue or lost-wax process, were probably abstract and geometric. There does not appear to be any relationship between the shape or motif of the object and a specific weight.

Despite its probable origins, the goldweight form is associated almost exclusively with the Akan. From about 1700 onward, the style of the geometric weights became more ornate and representational weights began to appear. These weights usually illustrate proverbs or epigrams expressing the great richness and variety of Akan precepts and morals. As objects for commercial transactions, the weights depict virtually all human secular activity. Religious subjects and the strict artistic conventions governing the production of religious objects are markedly absent from the goldweight repertoire. (Slide 8)

Royal Regalia

An Akan chief or king enhances his personal prestige with the display of royal regalia, including gold jewelry, sandals, headgear, ceremonial swords and flywhisks, and sumptuous colored cloths. (Slide 9) Such magnificence is an essential part of court ceremonial, affirming both the dignity of the person and the power and majesty of the state. At the same time, the jewelry motifs function as symbols and metaphors for qualities that are essential in a ruler, such as wisdom, patience, and strength.
The rings that may be worn on every finger depict Akan adages or proverbs. They often refer to some exalted quality of nature or character exemplified in the office or person of the chief. (Slide 10) The bulky bracelets, made either of cast-gold or wood covered with gold leaf or foil, may be a highly stylized version of the mudfish, a common royal symbol. (Slide 11) Even the gold ornaments which cover head and foot gear are both decoration and symbol, with each device suggesting a proverb or protective talisman.

**Goldwork from the Côte d'Ivoire**

The goldwork of southeastern Côte d'Ivoire has historical links with that of the Akan of Ghana. However, Ivoirian goldsmiths have traditionally concentrated more on objects of personal adornment, such as gold beads and pendant heads, and less on the elaborate type of regalia found among Akan chieftaincies.

The beads produced primarily among the Baule are generally quite simple and abstract. Each is fabricated separately of wax threads, cast in gold, and strung together to form striking ensembles. (Slide 12) Usually worn by women and children, they occasionally adorn wooden sculptures and are sometimes suspended in front of a chief on public occasions.

Illustrating the great stylistic variety of Ivoirian goldwork, the pendant heads produced in Baule and Lagoons workshops have been described as "portraits" of friends or lovers, ancestors or kings. (Slide 13) Unlike similar cast gold heads created by the Akan to represent enemies fallen in battle, Ivoirian heads are meant to commemorate persons worthy of esteem. They are objects of personal adornment, worn attached to the hair, suspended from a necklace, or affixed to clothing, and may be owned by anyone who can afford one.
SOME GOLD-PRODUCING CULTURES OF WEST AFRICA

Maures

Long known for their elaborate jewelry, the Maures live throughout the western Sahara as far north as Morocco, and in towns and villages in Senegal and Mali. Like the Taureg, their neighbors in the eastern Sahara, the Maures are descendents of both North African and sub-Saharan peoples and played an important historical role in the trans-Saharan gold trade.

Sarakole

Descended from the founders of the ancient kingdom of Ghana, the Sarakole (also known as Soninke or Marka) live in widely scattered towns and villages throughout the Sahel. Arab travelers to the sumptuous court of Ghana in the 11th century left vivid descriptions of the highly developed art of the Sarakole goldsmiths.

Tukulor

The ancestors of the Tukulor, who settled along the Senegal River in the first millennium A.D., played a prominent role in the trans-Saharan gold trade. Like many of their neighbors, Tukulor women adorn themselves with quantities of gold jewelry, including twisted gold rings, chains, pendants, and intricately-designed gold beads.

Peul

Also referred to as the Fulbe or Fulani, the ten million Peul are an aggregate of many different peoples. They live throughout the Sahel and Savannah, from Senegal to Chad and Cameroon, and are both nomadic cattle traders and sedentary merchants. Peul women wear resplendent collections of jewelry, including twisted gold rings on earlobes, forehead and nose; great filigree beads; and large, four-lobed earrings.
Malinke, Khassonke, Bamana and Diula

Inhabitig Mali and Guinea, these groups were instrumental in the development of the Middle Niger gold trade and have been active as merchants and goldsmiths for centuries, especially around the commercial centers of Jenne and Timbuktu.

In the 13th century, the Malinke created the Empire of Mali which covered the whole of the middle Niger area. They controlled virtually every access to major gold fields which ensured their fabulous wealth. Visitors to the court of Mali described in awe the lavish use of gold in regalia, personal ornaments, and even musical instruments and weapons. Mali's prosperity lasted for several centuries, establishing a rich goldsmithing tradition that still thrives today.

Sonrai

The Sonrai live in towns along the middle Niger from Jenne and Timbuktu to Gao. Their ancestral lineage is a combination of Northern and Sub-Saharan African peoples. By the late 900s, the small kingdom of Gao had become a wealthy trading center. Defeating the kingdom of Mali in the late 15th century, the Sonrai (or Songhai) kingdom was transformed into a great empire which remained strong and wealthy until falling to the Moroccans in the 16th century.

Wolof

With a population of 1.5 million, the Wolof is the largest ethnic group in Senegal. In the 16th century, the various kingdoms of the Wolof had become prosperous from trade of all kinds but especially from the gold trade. They were among the first peoples to make contact with the Portuguese in the 15th century, developing a brisk commerce in both gold and silver with the Europeans.
Akan

The Akan are a large group of related peoples living in the forest regions of central and southern Ghana. Numbering in excess of six million people, they speak a variety of dialects of the Twi language. With rich gold deposits scattered throughout the territory, the Akan are renowned for the abundance and quality of their goldwork.

Akan towns on the northern edge of the forest became commercial centers, attracting traders from great distances, including the Mande of Mali and Guinea. The Mande introduced the Akan to the concept of utilizing gold dust as currency and to the use of counterweights with which the dust could be weighed precisely. Early Akan gold jewelry and regalia were influenced by the Islamic forms probably also brought to Ghana by Mande goldworkers and traders.

In 1701, the Asante, an Akan people previously known to the west as the Ashanti, began absorbing dozens of independent Akan kingdoms into an Asante-dominated federation with its capital at Kumasi. In both 1874 and 1896, the British invaded and sacked Kumasi and seized vast quantities of gold jewelry and regalia, much of which can be viewed in London's Museum of Mankind today.

Restored in 1924, the Asante kingdom has replaced many of its lost gold artifacts with twentieth-century interpretations of classical forms. Splendid Akan court ceremonial objects in the tradition of the past are still in use in modern Ghana.

Baule and Lagoons Peoples

The Baule and Lagoons peoples of eastern and coastal Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast) are related culturally and linguistically to the Akan of Ghana. Until recently, the goldwork of this region consisted primarily of objects of personal ornamentation. With the introduction of a hierarchical political system by the French colonial authorities, objects of chiefly regalia in the Akan tradition have found their way into more common use.
GLOSSARY

Amulet: An object worn, especially around the neck, as a charm against evil or injury.

Brass: Copper and zinc alloy.

Bronze: Alloy of copper and tin, and sometimes iron. Most so-called African bronzes are brass.

Casting: The technique for the creation of metal objects in which molten metal is poured into a mold, allowed to cool, and removed from the mold. Two of the most common casting methods in West Africa are:

Lost wax casting -- the method in which a sculpture is modeled in wax and covered with a layer of clay. The whole mold is then heated so that the clay is hardened and the wax melts away, leaving a cavity in the shape of the object to be created. Molten metal is poured into the space where the wax had been, which, when cooled, becomes a metal casting of the original wax model.

Direct casting -- the method used to create a metal sculpture by substituting a natural object, such as a seed, shell, fruit, or insect, for the wax model.

Dinar: Any of several units of gold and silver currency used in the Middle East beginning in the 8th century.

Filigree: The metalworking technique in which the smith uses very fine gold threads to create intricate surface designs, especially for jewelry.

Finial: Any ornamental terminating part, such as the screw on the top of a lampshade.

Gold Coast: The coastal area of present-day Ghana, formerly a British territory. So named for the richness of its gold industry.
**Gold Leafing:** The process whereby a wooden object is covered with thin sheets or leaves of gold, affixed with glue or staples. In this way, objects of great visual effect may be created at minimal cost.

**Granulation:** The method in which many tiny spheres of gold are soldered on to a larger gold object, producing a vibrant, shimmering surface effect.

**Hammering and Cutting:** A technique for the production of a metal object. The metal is hammered into a sheet of the desired thickness and then cut to shape.

**Mande:** A branch of the Niger-Congo subfamily of languages spoken in West Africa; or a member of any of the ethnic groups who speak these languages, including the Malinke and Bamana.

**Pectoral:** An ornament or decoration worn on the chest.

**Repoussé:** The raised relief designs produced by hammering the reverse side of sheets of metal to create the desired pattern.

**Rosette:** An ornamental design resembling a rose or having a generally circular combination of parts.

**Sahel:** Region in Africa on the edge of the desert between the Sahara and the Sudan.

**Savannah:** A flat, treeless grassland of tropical or subtropical regions.

**Senegambia:** Region around the Senegal and Gambia rivers in the West African countries of the same names.

**Sudan:** A broad climatic zone in northern Africa, south of the Sahara and Libyan deserts, extending from the Atlantic to the Red Sea. Near the desert, the region is characterized by open, grassy parklands which gradually turn to denser woodlands in the south.

**Talisman:** An object marked with magical signs and believed to confer on its bearer supernatural powers or protection.
DISCUSSION SUGGESTIONS

Akan Proverbs:

A proverb is a short popular saying containing some familiar truth or useful thought in expressive language. Proverbs familiar to Americans may include: "Better late than never," "A stitch in time saves nine," and "Don't cry over spilt milk."

Make a list of some common proverbs and discuss their meanings with your students.

Akan speech is filled with proverbial references. A well-spoken man, highly respected in Akan society, has a store of knowledge of such proverbs and is able to use them appropriately in many different situations. Much Akan secular sculpture draws heavily from this tradition, creating visual images of the lively verbal arts that teach, comment, advise, and inform. The following are examples:

If you beat a lion, it is your own head that aches. (If you are disrespectful to a chief, you will suffer for it.) See Slide 5.

The egg says, "I am like authority. If you hold me too hard I break; if you let me go I fall and break to pieces on the ground. (A chief should be neither too severe nor too lenient; he must exercise his responsibilities with care and moderation.) See Slide 7, Figure a.

One head does not make a council. (There should be consultations when an important decision is to be made.) See Slide 10, Figure d.

The porcupine whose spears cover its back, who is able to conquer it? (A reference to the invincibility of the Asante in battle.) See Slide 10, Figures f and g.

The brown scorpion: when it stings you the pain goes until nightfall. (If you incur a chief's displeasure, you will feel it for a long time.) See Slide 10, Figure j.
Côte d'Ivoire Pendant Heads:

How do we create and preserve images of people we want to remember?

How did people who did not have access to photography create such images?

Discuss Slide 13. What are the objects in the picture? Can you tell what they are made of? How does the material used reflect the value placed upon these objects by their owners? Do you think these faces are accurate representations of the way people look? Why might a "portrait" be created that doesn't actually look like the person it represents?

Status Symbols:

Discuss the concept of status. What constitutes status in our society? What objects or possessions reinforce the notion of status in our society?

Discuss Slides 1 and 2. What kinds of ornaments are worn by these women? Can you tell what kinds of materials were used to make these ornaments? What does the jewelry tell us about the status of these women in their societies?

Discuss Slide 9. Can you assume anything about this person from his pose, clothing, and ornaments? Is there anything in this image that gives you information about this man's status?
BIBLIOGRAPHY

General:


**Bibliography for Teachers:**


**Bibliography for Students**


SLIDE IDENTIFICATION

Slide 1: A contemporary Peul woman wearing a superb pendant of gold, together with other traditional jewelry, such as four-lobed earrings and amber beads. Photo: M. Renaudeau, Agence Hoa-Qui

Slide 2: A Wolof butterfly brooch of silver-gilt filigree can be seen among the rich jewelry worn by a lady of Dakar, Senegal, half a century ago. Photo: Dakar, 1942, Photothèque IFAN, Dakar


Slide 4: Ghana, Akan. Asante sword-bearer holds a ceremonial sword adorned by a large double cocodile ornament of gold. Photo: courtesy of René and Denise David


Slide 6: Ghana, Akan (Fante). Linguists and their staffs. Photo: Herbert M. Cole


Slide 8: Ghana, Akan. Small brass weights used for weighing gold. Some are abstract and geometric, others are representative, illustrating Akan proverbs and sayings. Photo: Archives Barbier-Mueller


CREDITS
