

Background information into West African culture and life:

African cultures are rich and diverse. In contrast, the slave trade was brutal and dehumanising. The peoples and cultures of West Africa suffered most from the transatlantic slave trade.

African cultures have complex social structures, expressed through artefacts and symbols. However, they also employ sophisticated craftsmanship in their daily lives to make pottery, metalwork and textiles. Music and a range of religions reflect African spiritualities.

Art and Authority

The status and power of rulers in African cultures is often expressed through art.

The many different cultures of West Africa are linked by ideas about how to express the authority of the ruler. Beautiful artefacts, created from rare and precious materials, using exquisite craftsmanship, convey the role of the king, his elevated position above the ordinary people, and the power that he holds over them.

Frequently, objects use symbols and signs to reinforce the power of the king. These objects are made by members of the royal court. Just like court musicians or household servants, these craftsmen were employed because they could use their skills to impress subjects and visitors alike with the prestige and wealth of the king. Sometimes objects were made using imported raw materials like European beads or metal, which were made into these beautiful objects for display.

Some objects, such as the Yoruba Beaded Crown, are worn by the king. Yoruba people believe that beads were invented by the god Obalufon and the crown reflects the power and majesty of the king. The Benin objects were created for the Oba, or king, and his court, using the highest quality workmanship. Asante goldwork illustrates the status of the king through the rarity and beauty of the material.

Like many other cultures in human history, some African societies traditionally kept slaves. These were mostly used for domestic purposes, as an indication of power and wealth.

Ways of Everyday Life

African daily life is characterised by a rich combination of hard work, technical skill and deep spirituality.

African people use experience and skill to make objects that assist them in their daily tasks. Pots, used to transport water, have a practical design intended to increase evaporation for cooling and also to provide a good grip for carrying and pouring. African textiles developed 2000 years ago as cotton was cultivated along the River Niger and used for fishnets and woven cloth. Later, colourful fabrics were made by unravelling and reweaving cloth imported from Asia and Europe. Colours and patterns indicate wealth, occupation and history. (**kente cloth**). Strong contrasting colours ensure African textiles can be read at a distance in strong sunlight. African metalworkers developed sophisticated techniques to work metal before their European counterparts. By working metals like copper and brass they could make all sorts of agricultural objects and weapons. African markets have always provided a place for people to trade and exchange goods and ideas.

Underlying all of this economic productivity and creativity is a deep spirituality. Music is an integral part of all West African cultures. A huge variety of instruments are played at important social and religious occasions, as well as for entertainment. Every culture in West Africa has specific beliefs and ideas. Other religions, such as Islam and Christianity, have been introduced through African contact with travellers and traders.

The rich traditions of Africa still flourish today.

(Refer to image: The first day of the Yam Custom)