

Be My Guest: Folk Artists and Community Guests in Classrooms

by Tal Bar-Zemer

Providing opportunities for students, teachers, and artists to work with guest artists is a cornerstone of City Lore's Arts Education Program. We believe that knowledge of historical, cultural, and social events resides in the daily practices, memories and lived experiences of people.

At the Academy of New Americans, a Queens middle school which helps newly arrived immigrant students transition to life in New York City, students are learning about Ghanaian *adinkra* art with City Lore teaching artist Judy Hoffman. N'ketiah Brakohiapa, a teacher at the Fashion Institute of Technology and an immigrant from Ghana, West Africa, has been invited to share his expertise as a professional *adinkra* artist.

N'ketiah begins by describing his family's tradition of *adinkra* printing. He describes the processes of carving *adinkra* stamps from the dried thick skin of a calabash gourd, making dye from the bark of a tree, and preparing the fabric for printing. Then he points to symbol on his shirt, *I chose this symbol because it is very manly, very warrior. I am a commoner. That means I can wear only one symbol at a time. It is only the chief who can wear a combination of several symbols. That's why I wear only one, but I can use it in different sizes to make it*

more interesting. If you are a student in my village, you can wear only one symbol, but your teacher can wear a combination of two or three. That will tell everyone who sees you on the street, "Oh, she's the teacher and you are the student."

If I'm making a print for families in a certain community, I use specific symbols for them. I wouldn't use their symbol on my shirt. We use the symbols in different ways today. But if you're in Ghana, you must be mindful of what these symbols mean. In Ghana, different occasions require different symbols. And there are different symbols for men and women in Ghanaian society. A funeral cloth has all the symbols, very small. They're worn by the men of the home. The women wear black-shaded cloth for funerals.

Judy asks N'ketiah to describe a typical day when he was the age of these students. *At age 12, I was a pro at making adinkra, he says. When you see me, my hands and knees are covered with dye. I would wake up early, 6:30—in Ghana the sun is already high—and make sure we have*

water. I would go to the riverside to fetch water and bring it to where we are doing the printing. We had 4 to 6 drums, and me and my sisters were in charge of filling them. Then I would sweep the whole space and put in the pegs for pinning the fabric. I had to prepare the space for the day's work. I had to make sure we had the dye for printing. I had to put buckets at points along the fabric. I had to make sure that the blocks were dry and not loose. After that I put the ink in pots. My grandfather did the main designs but he left small parts of the fabric for me to print. I would have loved to make my own designs, but the adults knew the sequence of how the design flows. I'm going in my head, "I would like to do that myself." But it wasn't my time. I had to learn. At 8 o'clock things were done and we had dinner.

N'ketiah holds up a large cloth that combines a traditional symbol with a contemporary image of a rose. He asks: *Why did I do this? It is a statement, a combination of influences. Because adinkra is in my blood, I wanted to share that tradition, but I also wanted to create something new, so I introduced blocks of flowers.*

A student asks him, *What do you think is essential to become an adinkra artist?*

First, you have to have knowledge of the symbols, N'ketiah says. You have to know the connections, male and female, old and young. It is essential that you understand what the symbol means and its relationship to society. The other is you have to be from an Adinkra place. But today the world has become a global village and we exchange cultural traditions. We share our arts. When I use the symbols, it's my way of talking through the fabric. You have been taught the processes and now you can use and identify these symbols. That gives you a place in the tradition too.

A boy asks, *What are your favorite*



Guest artist N'ketiah Brakohiapa talks with students about *adinkra* art of Ghana

Photo by Amanda Dargan



N'ketiah Brakohiapa, teaching artist Judy Hoffman, classroom teacher Evelyn Gomez, and students at the Academy of New Americans

Photo by Amanda Dargan

symbols?

N'ketiah points to a symbol printed on a large cloth and explains, *This symbol, sankofa, means a lot to me. If you travel away from your home, this symbol is especially important. It tells you that you shouldn't forget the art that you left back home. I came to this country with my whole adinkra understanding. I couldn't leave it behind. I wanted to share my art, so I went to school to study art. I wanted to be able to connect to everyone else, regardless of where we're coming from. We all have to share.*

Community Guests in the Classroom

N'ketiah's presentation offered a fuller portrait of the *adinkra* tradition and the ways that one artist learned, practiced, and adapted the tradition. It also offered a wealth of potential topics for classroom discussions that follow the visit: the role of gender, social status, age, and occupation in *adinkra* art; the process of making the dyes and tools used to print the fabric from local natural materials and of preparing the space and fabric for printing; the function and uses of *adinkra* cloth in community settings and rituals, such as funerals; the different roles played by children, men, and women in the printing process; the meanings of *adinkra* symbols and what they convey about the wearer; ways of teaching and mentoring younger family members in the tradition; and the way that artists like N'ketiah combine both traditional designs with his original designs. Students learned that *adinkra* symbols and art, like most

traditional arts, are embedded in the rituals and daily lives of the people who make and use them. They express a culture's sense of beauty, but so much more. They communicate personal information about the wearer but also the values of the culture and the community.

Guests offer points of view and a ways of learning that are different from what students might get from a textbook or the internet. In addition to their artistic and cultural expertise, guests connect stories of their lived experience to their practice. Students hear personal stories of events they otherwise might consider to be distant history and gain an understanding of how these events impacted the lives of ordinary people. They learn to see the people in their communities as potential resources for learning about the world. Students also make personal connections to other cultures and moments in history that previously may have seemed remote and disconnected from their own lives. Often awed to be in a room with someone who grew up in these cultures and experienced historical events first hand, they begin to see the people around them as potential founts of knowledge.

Tal Bar-Zemer is Manager of Out-of-School-Time Programs at City Lore in New York City. She has a MS.Ed from Bank Street College of Education.

DEAR MR. N'KETIAH BRAKOHIAPA,

Hello, my name is Asa Shin. I first time met you in the social studies class with adinkra art. I am from Japan and had lived here for almost one year. I never knew about adinkra symbol or clothes until this art project begin. I even didn't know any of African art. When I first time saw the pictures of adinkra clothes, I was amazed by it, because I've never seen clothes designed by stamps. In Japan, there is cloth made using dyeing process, but not with stamps. So I couldn't imagine how to stamp on the fabric. Then Ms. Judy, the artist and teacher of our art project, showed us the videos about how to stamp or make the adinkra symbol.

Also, I learned there is a process... and when or how to wear it. When I heard that, I felt that I want to see people who actually do that. So when you came to our class, that wish came true. By your talking, I could learn more about what native Ghana's adinkra makers do every day. I was surprised when I heard that children also help their family from early morning to night. I didn't have that experience when I was in Japan. I helped my mother sometimes, but not everyday, all the time. So I thought maybe it is tough, but I wanted to experience that, too.

One more thing, I felt surprise that there is rank between people. For example, you said that only the village chief can wear a lot of symbols and others wear only one symbol... Actually, there was like this rank in ancient Japan, too. When people started making rice, there were people who manage that, who make that rice, who make the tool to make rice, and who cook. In that time, people who manage the rice was most admired by people... I learned many things from what you spoke and taught us. Also, it make my ability of understanding more and I learned many knowledge that I can't know from pictures or videos. I'd like to be thankful for that. From this experience, I want to learn more about adinkra symbol and tell people how beautiful and amazing it is. Again, thank you very much.

Sincerely,
Asa Shin