



Dancing with the Ancestors: A Study of the Egungun Masquerade and Nick Cave's Soundsuits

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Standards:

Dance:

PK.1.1, PK.1.2, PK.2.1, PK.3.4, PK.1.4

Visual Arts:

PreK.1.1, PreK1.4, PreK.2.1, PreK.2.2, PreK.2.3, PreK2.4, PreK2.5, PreK.2.6, PreK.4.4, PreK.4.1

Time Frame: Four (4) weeks

Age Group: Pre-K3 & Pre-K4

RATIONALE

I am African-American, born and raised primarily in Washington, DC. I did, however, spend many of the formative years of my childhood living in Africa - in Tanzania, Mozambique, and Eswatini, specifically. After college, I won a Fulbright to conduct research in Brazil - the country with the largest population of Afro-descendants outside of Nigeria. My experiences living throughout the African diaspora had a profound impact on my personal development. These experiences transformed me into a global citizen. They allowed me to witness firsthand the many commonalities that people of African descent share around the globe and affirmed my racial and cultural identity.

As a Black teacher that has taught in educational settings with predominantly Black students, I strongly believe that teaching about Africa and its many cultures is key to creating culturally relevant content that affirms my students' identity(ies) and expands their world view. The most impactful learning experiences provide both window and mirror opportunities for students through which they learn about themselves and the greater world around them. Connecting learning about other diverse others to students'

own experiences and identities renders learning more accessible and relevant. By learning about diverse others, students learn more about themselves and the greater world around them. While learning about Africa is essential for all students, regardless of demographic, I argue that it is particularly pertinent for African-American students. Learning about Africa in the classroom allows Black students to better understand their own history, heritage and culture. Learning about Africa allows Black students to learn about the many ways in which they are connected to a larger, interconnected global community.

FOCUS

In this unit, students explore the ways in which Egungun masquerade is used by Yoruba people to honor their ancestors. Students identify parallels between the Yoruba Egungun masking tradition and their own cultural/ familial traditions that celebrate ancestors. Students explore the works of contemporary artist, Nick Cave, whose *Soundsuits* draw inspiration from Egungun masquerade. Drawing from traditional Egungun masquerade and Cave's *Soundsuits*, students create their own masquerade ensembles to honor their ancestors. The lesson focuses on the performative nature of the Egungun masking tradition and *Soundsuits*, encouraging students to work together to create full-body ensembles that move and come to life for their formative assessment.

In southwestern Nigeria and southeastern Benin, Yoruba people honor their ancestors through Egungun masquerade. The name 'Egungun' means powers concealed. Egungun masquerades render interactions between humans, ancestors, and gods possible. In Egungun masquerades, mask wearers move throughout the town embodying the ancestors. Masqueraders both bless and punish members of the community, while spectators seek favor from the Egungun. Egungun ensembles, which cover the entire body of the masquerader and conceal their identity, vary across the regions of Nigeria and Benin. While some are made of natural materials, such as grass, most are made of brightly-colored, multi-textured panels of cloth. The panels are decorated with a variety of materials, such as patchwork, patterns, sequins, beads, tassels, and amulets. The amulets contain medicines that protect the masquerader from enemies. As the masquerader dances, the panels fly, emitting a breeze that blesses its spectators. Movement and dance are the most important elements of the masked performance. Yoruba people engage in spiritual dialogue with the masked ancestor through dance. According to Akinwum Isola, a professor of African studies from Ife University, "the physical is there to serve the spiritual." "The dancing body," says Isola, "opens up a gateway between this world and the world of the spirits".

To provide a contemporary example of artists inspired by the Egungun tradition, students study the work of American artist, Nick Cave. whose *Soundsuits* were greatly influenced by Yoruba masquerade. Nick Cave is a visual/ performance/ sculpture artist whose background in dance greatly influences his visual art practice. Cave's *Soundsuits* are colorful, life-sized wearable sculptures made out of found objects, such as buttons, sequins, textiles, and sticks. The *Soundsuits* are also highly expressive in the movement and sounds that they make when worn. The performative elements of the *Soundsuits* are fundamental to the body work. They were made to be worn and performed.

Nick Cave created his first *Soundsuit* in response to the Rodney King riots in 1992. His first suit was made out of twigs that he found at the park. Cave identified with the discarded twigs in that moment because he too was feeling devalued, less than, dismissed



and marginalized as a Black man in America. Cave refers to his suits as 'secondary suits' and 'suits of armor,' which make noise when they are worn. For Nick Cave, the *Soundsuits* call attention to, and simultaneously provide protection for, the Black body which is often devalued, disregarded, and attacked in American society. As found in Egungun masquerade, Cave's Soundsuits cover the entire body of the masquerader to both conceal their identity and protect them from enemies. Both forms of masquerade are pieces that are meant to be worn and performed through dance.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES OF UNIT

- Unit Objective 1: Students identify and describe key elements of the Egungun masking tradition.
- Unit Objective 2: Students examine their own cultural/ familial traditions that honor ancestors.
- Unit Objective 3: Students draw inspiration from the performative elements of the Egungun masking tradition and Nick Cave's *Soundsuits* to create and perform their own masquerade ensembles.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. What is an ancestor to you?
2. How do families celebrate or remember their ancestors?
3. Why is it important for people to remember their ancestors?
4. How are ways of celebrating ancestors similar and different?
5. Why are celebrations important to people?
6. What objects, events, colors, and/ or foods remind you of your ancestors?
7. What is a masquerade?
8. What is an Egungun masquerade and what does it look like?
9. What is a performance?
10. What does it mean to perform a mask?
11. Who is Nick Cave?
12. What are *Soundsuits* and what do they look like?
13. Why did Nick Cave create the *Soundsuits*?
14. How is Egungun masquerade similar to Nick Cave's *Soundsuits*?
15. How is Egungun masquerade different from Nick Cave's *Soundsuits*?
16. How can you use what you learned about Egungun masquerade and the *Soundsuits* to make your own full-body mask?

UNIT

LESSON	GUIDING QUESTION(S) & LEARNING OBJECTIVES	SUMMARY
<p><u>Lesson 1:</u> What is an Ancestor?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What is an ancestor? ● Who are your ancestors? ● Why is it important to know who your ancestors are? ● How does your family/ culture celebrate your ancestors? <p>Students engage in group discussions to generate a definition of what an ancestor is.</p> <p>Students create visual representations of their definition to be displayed in the classroom.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Students watch a <u>video</u>. 2. Students engage in a group discussion about what they think an ancestor is. Students work together to generate their own definition that encapsulates their ideas. 3. Teacher will initiate a conversation with students about the ways our families and cultures honor ancestors. 4. Students reflect on the discussion and create visual representations of their ancestors and/or cultural celebrations of ancestors in their visual journals. The teacher engages in one-on-one in-process conversations with students to ensure that they understand the concept and answer questions. 5. Teacher conducts a 'gallery walk' for students to share their work with the class. Students engage in a discussion about the commonalities and differences they observed in their classmates' work. 6. Students collaborate to create a "We Celebrate Our Ancestors" collage of their work. The collage will be accompanied by students' definitions of what an ancestor is. This collage will serve as a visual aid to support and guide the students' art making.

Lesson 2:
What is an Egungun Mask?

- What is an Egungun mask?
- Where are Egungun masks from?
- What do you see on the Egungun masks and costumes (colors, animals, shapes, symbols, figures, etc.)?
- What materials do you think the masks and costumes are made of (sequins, cloth, buttons, shells, yarn, etc.)?

Students develop a foundational understanding of the Egungun masking tradition.

Students identify the various physical characteristics of the mask and full-body ensemble.

Students explore learned concepts in visual journals.

1. Students are shown multiple images of Egungun masks and costumes. They are given background information as to where the masking tradition comes from (referencing a map of Africa and/or globe) and what it signifies.
2. Students examine the images and analyze the aesthetic of the Egungun mask and full-body ensemble.
3. Students explore imagery discussed during the lesson by drawing pictures of what they've learned in their visual journals.
4. The teacher engages in one-on-one in-process conversations with students to assess their understandings.

<p>Lesson 3: How are Egungun masks performed?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What is a mask? ● What masks do we see in our cultures? ● What is a performance? ● How do you 'perform' masks when you wear them (e.g. on Halloween) ● How does the Egungun mask wearer perform the mask? ● How would you describe the music that you hear during the performance? ● What is a spectator? How do the spectators engage and interact with the mask? ● How does the mask move as it dances? ● How would you describe the sounds that the mask wearers and costumes make as they move? <p>Students discuss the importance of performance in the Egungun masquerade.</p> <p>Students explore the concept of masquerade through dance and movement.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Students engage in a general conversation about performance and mask/ costume wearing in their own lives. 2. Students watch a <u>video</u> of an Egungun costume being performed. 3. Students engage in dialogue about what they observed and learned from the video.
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<p>Lesson 4: Who is Nick Cave and what are the Soundsuits?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Who is Nick Cave? ● What are the Soundsuits? ● Why are Nick Cave’s full-body masks called Soundsuits? ● Why did Nick Cave create the Soundsuits? ● What are some of the materials that Nick Cave uses to create his masks? ● How do these Soundsuits look similar to the Egungun masks? ● How do the Soundsuits look different from the Egungun masks? ● How are the materials that Nick Cave uses different from the materials used to create Egungun masks? <p>Students examine the characteristics of Nick Cave’s Soundsuits.</p> <p>Students analyze elements found in Nick Cave’s Soundsuits and Egungun masquerade.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Teacher introduces Nick Cave and the Soundsuits to students, emphasizing the socio-political context in which the body of work was created and how it connects to their previous study of Egungun masquerade. 2. Students watch a <u>video</u> of Soundsuits being performed and are invited to dance along with the video. 3. After viewing the video, students discuss the characteristics of the Soundsuits. 4. Students view a short PowerPoint presentation where images of the Soundsuits are placed next to images of the Egungun masks. 5. Drawing from knowledge obtained in the previous lessons, students compare and contrast the masks and discuss their observations.
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**Lesson 5:
'Experimentation Station'**

- What sounds do different materials make?
- How do different materials move?
- How do the textures/ shapes/ colors of the different materials make you feel?
- How can you manipulate the materials? Can you tear/ cut, rip/ fold/ bend them?
- How can you combine the materials to create something else?
- How can you manipulate and/or combine materials to make art that you can wear?

Through experimentation, students gain a foundational understanding of how to manipulate non-traditional materials to create movement and sound in wearable art.

1. The teacher engages in a whole group 'Discovery Discussion' with the class. In the discussion, The teacher introduces a 'discovery box' of a variety of materials to students. The teacher presents each material from the box to the students, inviting the students to touch and manipulate the materials to produce movement and sound. The teacher discusses how the materials can be combined and/ or manipulated to produce different effects.
2. The teacher sets up an 'Experimentation Station'. The 'Experimentation Station' is a variety of materials placed in containers placed on student tables. The teacher explains that students will engage in an independent discovery of materials similar to what was done in the 'Discovery Discussion'. The teacher discusses behavioral expectations, establishes clean-up procedures, and models the proper use of the 'Experimentation Station'.
3. Students are invited to peruse the buffet, choose materials and bringing them back to their work tables
4. At their work tables, students manipulate and experiment with their materials. Teacher engages in one-on-one conversations with students to answer questions and encourage play with materials.
5. Students present the discoveries about the materials that they chose from the 'Experimentation Station' to the class.
6. The teacher explains that students will build upon understandings gained about materials in this lesson to create their own full-body masks in the next class, The teacher highlights the importance of movement in the masking traditions that have been studied and how the materials chosen must facilitate/ emphasize movement.

Lesson 6:
Mask
'Blueprint'

- What ideas/ feelings/ objects/ food/ colors from the “We Celebrate Our Ancestors” collage do you want to use in the creation of your mask?
- What colors will you use to create your mask?
- What kinds of sounds do you want your mask to make?
- How will your mask move?
- What feeling(s) does your mask communicate to the people that look at it?
- How do you want your mask to look?
- What materials will you use?
- What sounds will those materials help your mask make?
- How will your materials make your mask move?

Using the understandings gained in the previous lesson and ideas generated in the “We Celebrate Our Ancestors” collage, students work in groups to brainstorm mask assembly.

1. In a whole group discussion, the teacher explains that students will work together in groups to create full-body masks inspired by the Egungun masquerade and Nick Cave’s Soundsuits. The teacher explains that students will work together to combine and manipulate materials that create movement and sound when worn. The teacher encourages students to share the discoveries that they made during the previous lesson’s ‘Experimentation Station’ with the group and use those ideas in the assembly of their masks. In today’s lesson, students create a ‘blueprint’ for their mask making. They also begin to choose and manipulate their materials. Teacher tells students to refer to the We Celebrate Our Ancestors Collage from Lesson 1 as they begin to brainstorm ideas for their collaborative work.
2. The teacher separates the students into small groups of 3-4 students. Each group will sit at a designated work table. In groups, students discuss ideas and begin to create mask ‘blueprints’. The teacher observes conversations and engages in in-process conversations with each group.
3. Once brainstorming is complete, the class engages in a whole group discussion. In the discussion, each group presents their ‘blueprint’ to class.

Lesson 7:

Experimentation & 'Buffet of Materials'

- What did you learn about the different materials?
- How can you manipulate the material to make sound?
- How can you manipulate the material to make it move?
- What sound does the material make?
- What movement does the material make?
- How would you use these materials to make a full-body mask?
- What is a panel?
- What materials will you choose to decorate your panels?
- What materials will you choose to create your full-body mask?
- What colors will you choose for your mask?
- How do the materials work together to create sound and movement?

Students experiment with manipulating 2D and 3D materials to produce sound and movement.

Using the ideas outlined in the group's mask 'blueprint,' students begin to compile and assemble materials for their mask making.

1. The teacher explains, in today's class, students will work together in their groups to choose the materials that they will use to create their full body masks.
2. Prior to choosing materials as a group, students engage in a group activity where they experiment with materials. Teacher provides a variety of 2D and 3D materials and models how to experiment with how each object makes a different sound and/ or movement. Teacher separates students into groups of two to experiment with the materials. Groups share what they learned from their experimentation and manipulation of materials with the class.
3. The teacher explains that the masks will be made out of panels and each panel will be created using long strips of fabric (old sheets/ burlap/ shower curtains).
4. The teacher presents the teacher prototype to the class. The teacher engages in a conversation with students about their creative process, the materials that they used to create the mask. The teacher wears the mask so that students can see how it moves and the sounds that it makes.
5. The teacher sets up and introduces the 'buffet of materials' to students. The teacher models the proper use of materials, discusses behavioral expectations and establishes clean-up procedure.
6. Sent to their work tables, the groups are encouraged to review their blueprints. Two groups at a time are invited to peruse the 'buffet of materials' to begin choosing their materials.. Each group is provided with a cardboard box where they can store their chosen materials.
7. Once they have chosen their materials, groups return to their work tables. At their work tables, students begin manipulating and experimenting with their materials. The teacher engages in

		<p>conversations with each group to assess their understanding of the task and assist in mask planning.</p> <p>8. Once students have decided upon the placement of materials, students can use paper clips and binder clips to temporarily affix materials to the panels. Students store work in each group's cardboard box.</p>
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Lesson 8:
Mask
Assembly

- How can you perform your mask?
- What sounds and movements does your mask make?
- How do the materials you used work together when you wear the mask?
- What do you feel or ideas do you have when you wear your mask?
- Would you change/ add any materials to your mask? If so, why? How do these materials change the mask?

Students finalize their mask making.

Students analyze the elements of movement and sound that their masks produce when worn.

Through this examination, students gain a deeper understanding of the performative nature of masquerade.

1. The teacher explains that in today's class students will begin to glue materials to the panels. The teacher explains that once the panels are decorated, the students will glue them to cardboard slabs, completing the assembly of the mask. Each cardboard slab will have two holes punched into the top so that students can tie them together using yarn or twine. This creates a cardboard 'poncho' that enables students to wear their masks. The teacher refers students to the teacher prototype, explaining how they attached the panels to the cardboard pieces.
2. The teacher models the proper use of glue to students, discusses behavioral expectations, and establishes the clean-up procedure. The teacher explains that, should the students have difficulty with attaching certain materials to their panels with glue, they can use the low temperature glue gun - only with the help of the teacher at the teacher's desk. Model proper use of the glue gun to students and discuss behavioral expectations.
3. Students sit at their group's designated work tables and collect their materials from their cardboard box. One student from each group collects glue from the teacher and distributes them to their group. Students continue to work on mask assembly by gluing materials to the panels.
4. Once the panels are complete, one student volunteer collects two slabs of cardboard from the teacher and brings it to the work table. Students work together to attach the panels onto the cardboard using glue (*Tacky* glue or a teacher supervised, child-friendly glue gun)

		<ol style="list-style-type: none">5. Once dry, the students tie the decorated slabs of cardboard together using yarn or twine, thus completing the ensemble.6. The class meets for a whole group discussion. In the discussion, the teacher reminds the class, like in the Egungun masquerade and Nick Cave's Soundsuits, each mask must be worn and performed. The teacher explains that each group must choose a person to serve as the group's masquerader. The masquerader will wear and perform the mask in the final lesson. The teacher encourages each group's masquerader to try on and move in their full-body mask for the whole group to observe.7. After each member of the group tries on the full-body mask, the teacher invites students to reflect on how they felt wearing the mask in their visual journal. Students share their journal entries with the class in a group discussion.8. The teacher holds a conversation with students during which he/she/they provide/s guidelines for students to engage in joyful, respectful performances of their mask ensembles.9. Students return to their group work tables. They choose a member of the group to serve as the masquerader. The teacher monitors this process. The masquerader puts on the full-body mask, modeling it for the group. The group observes the mask, assessing the performative elements of their masks and paying particular attention to the sounds and movements it produces when performed. The teacher engages in conversations with each group, recording their observations, and asking questions to guide their discussion. The
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		<p>teacher allows students to make any necessary changes to the mask to enhance said elements.</p> <p>As the groups finalize their work, the teacher continues to engage in conversations with students. In the conversations, students are prompted to discuss their creative processes, the materials they chose, the results of their mask making, and title their work. The teacher uses this dialogue to create an artist statement to accompany the group's work.</p>
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<p><u>Lesson 9:</u> Masked Performance</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How do the masqueraders move to perform the mask? ● How do the masks move while being performed? ● What feeling do you have when you wear the mask? ● What feelings do spectators have when they look at the mask? ● How did the masqueraders interact with the spectators? ● How did the spectators interact with the masquerader? <p>The lesson culminates in a final performance of their full-body masks. By interacting with, wearing, and moving in the masks, students gain a deeper understanding of masks as performative, wearable art forms.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The teacher reiterates that students will perform their masks in today's lesson. The teacher explains that they will meet in their groups to practice and discuss their performance. The teacher emphasizes that students do not need to create elaborate dances or choreographies. The masquerader needs only to move with the mask in both the way that the group sees fit and the masquerader feels comfortable. 2. The teacher models performance by performing their teacher prototype for the class. The teacher models behavioral expectations during performance. 3. Students meet in their groups to discuss and perform their masquerade. They, with the help of a teacher, choose the music that they want to be played during the performance and how the masquerader moves. The group helps the volunteer masqueraders put on masks and prepare their music. 4. The masqueraders perform, along with all other members of the group, for the class. After each performance, students discuss the performative and aesthetic elements of their classmates' masks. To close the unit, students engage in a dance party along with the masked performers.
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VOCABULARY

- celebrate
 - ancestor
 - performance
 - materials
 - manipulate
 - experiment
 - movement
 - sound
 - panels
 - masquerade
 - masquerader
 - spectator
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- Africa
 - Yoruba
 - Nigeria
 - Benin
 - Egungun
 - Nick Cave
 - *Soundsuits*

ASSESSMENT

Formative Assessments

- Group discussions
- Collaborative “We Celebrate Our Ancestors” Collage
- Visual Journal Entries
- One-on-one in-process conversations
- Group Mask Blueprint

Summative Assessment

- Collaborative Full-Body Mask
- Accompanying Group Artist Statement

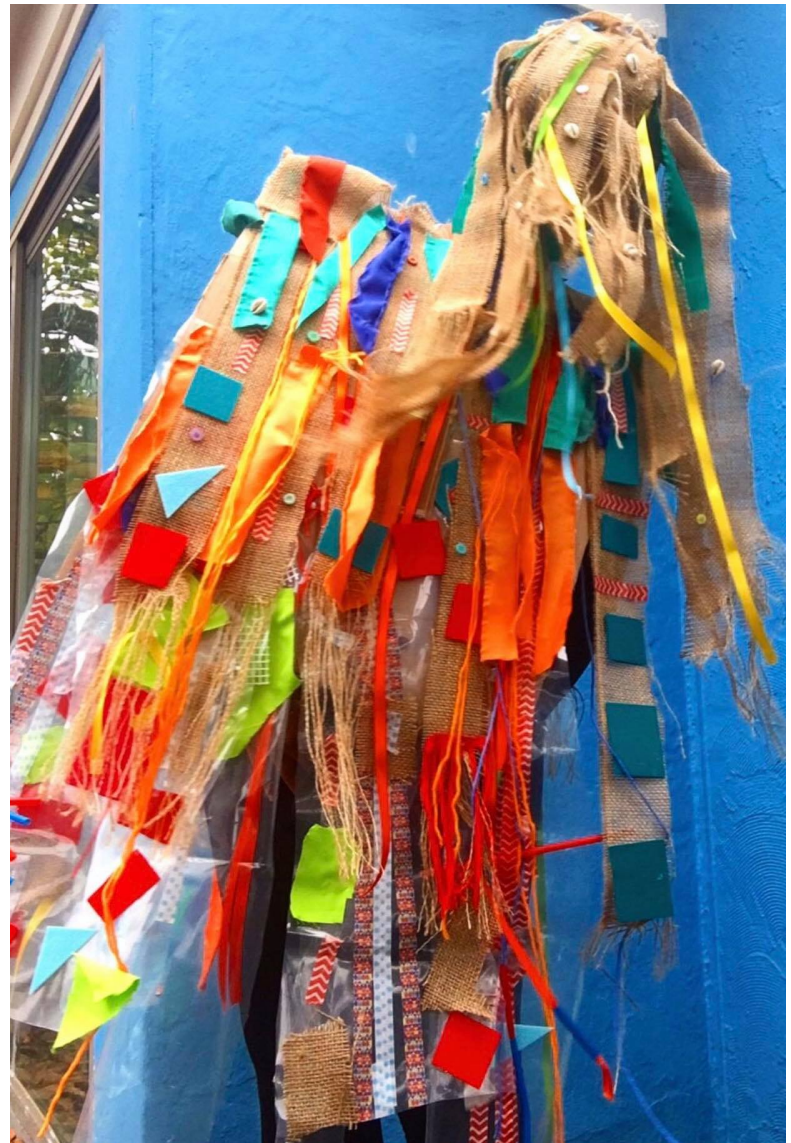
DIFFERENTIATION FOR DIVERSE LEARNERS

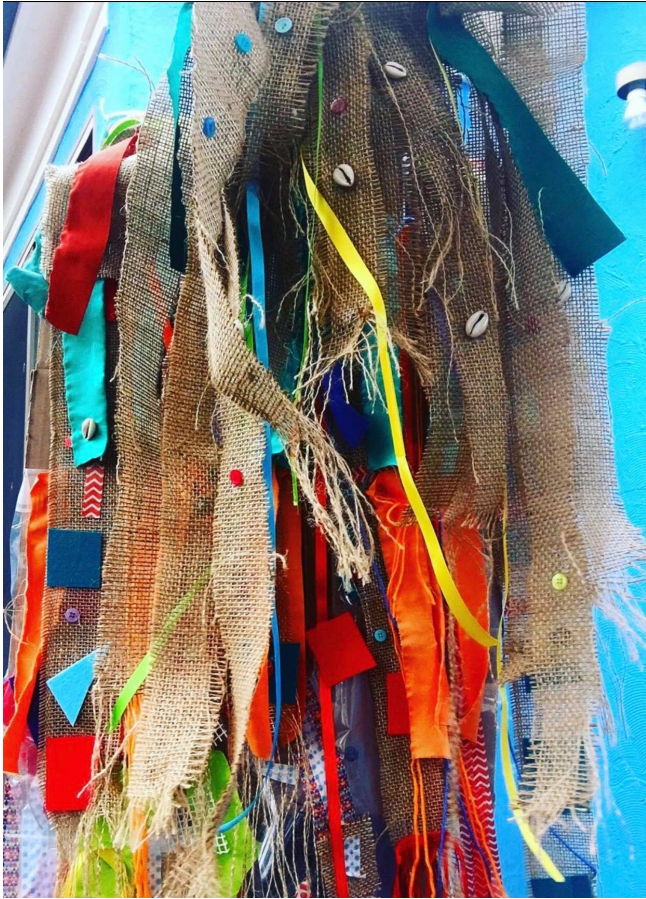
The unit can be modified to accommodate individual student’s needs. Upon request, students with special learning needs will be provided with a visual list of instructions to complete the different activities. Students that need additional assistance

with fine/ gross motor skills will be provided with pre-cut/ pre-torn fabric that students can add onto the group masks for the final project. Students with speech, language and communication needs can participate in group discussions by drawing images of their ideas so that they can be shared with their classmates and submitted to the teacher. If drawing their ideas proves to be difficult for the students, the teacher can work with the students' dedicated or ELL aids to create additional differentiated instruction tailored to the particular needs of the student.

TEACHER MADE PROTOTYPE

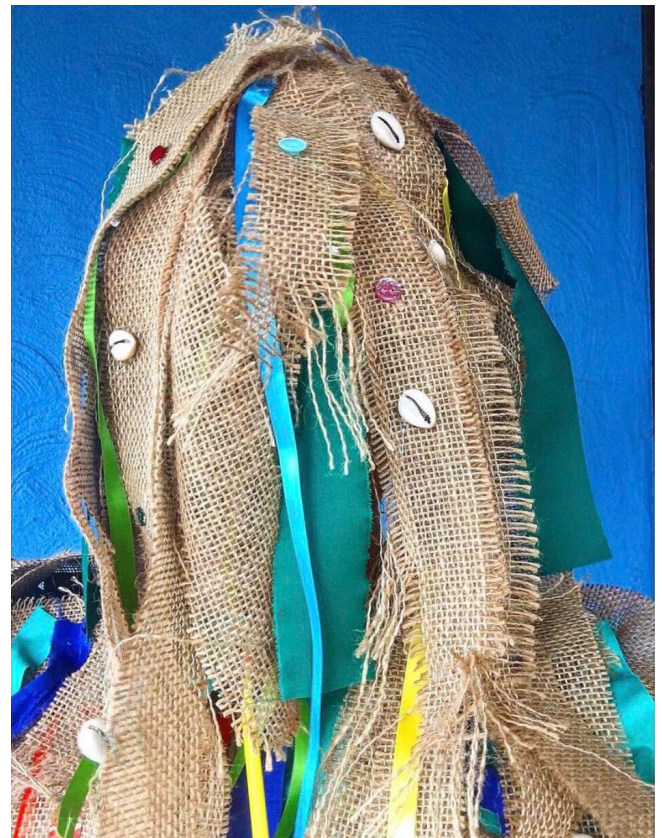
This prototype was made to honor the matriarch of my family, my great-grandmother, and to celebrate my West African ancestry. I created the full-body mask by decorating 'panels' (strips of burlap, and shower curtain) with a variety of 2D and 3D materials including: yarn, *Washi* tape, burlap strips, fabric scraps, felt, strips of recycled shower curtain, shells, buttons, and ribbons. The materials that I used were representative of my individual and collective ancestors. The shells harken back to my ancestral connection to West Africa. The prototype also references Egungun masquerade through its shape and form. The use of fabric scraps, buttons, and ribbons represents my connection to my great-grandmother, who was a seamstress. While I never met my great-grandmother, my mother would often tell me stories about her growing up. The story that particularly sticks out in my mind is of my great-grandmother teaching my mother how to sew buttons onto shirts. The materials I used in my full-body mask pay homage to my great-grandmother by incorporating many of the tools of her trade.





To create the prototype, I layered the 'panels' on top of two large pieces of cardboard. The cardboard pieces were cut so that they created a poncho shape. I stapled the 'panels' down onto the cardboard pieces. I then punched two holes into the top of the cardboard poncho pieces, pushed a piece of twine through the holes, and tied the pieces together.

I created a head piece to extend the mask. To make the head piece, I glued shorter panels of burlap, fabric, and ribbon onto a cardboard headband that rested on the top of my head. The panels completely covered my face and neck, but I was able to see through holes in the burlap.







MATERIALS

- burlap
- bed sheets
- standard roll paper
- shower curtains
- elastic
- cardboard
- twine
- yarn
- ribbons
- buttons
- tissue paper
- newspaper
- shells
- felt
- scrap fabric
- *Tacky* glue
- paintbrushes
- child-friendly glue guns
- *Washi* tape
- clipboards
- white cardstock paper
- black *Sharpie* permanent markers
- mixed Media Journals
- *Paint Stix*
- glue sticks



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with Nick Cave at the Institute of Contemporary Art/ Boston [Video]. YouTube.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ndvl8L_a72A
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STUDENT RESOURCE PAGE

LINKS

[The interactive outline world map](#) by ArcGIS

[Egungun Series](#) by Beninise photographer, Leonce Raphael Agbodjelou available for viewing on Sothebys.com

VIDEOS

["FamilySearch - What is an Ancestor?"](#)

["Nick Cave: Hear Here at Cranbrook Art Museum"](#)

["Egungun Festival Remo 2019"](#)

["Blitz the Ambassador - Shine"](#)

["Yoruba Egungun Masquerades in Motion"](#)

["Chicken in the Kitchen"](#)

BOOKS

Cameron, D., Ellertson, E., & McClusky, P. (2010). *Nick Cave: Meet me at the center of the Earth*. Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. Okorafor, N. (2015). *Chicken in the kitchen*. Lantana Publishing.

