Super-small Sculptures from Africa
Akan region, Ghana or Côte d'Ivoire | Gold-Dust Weights (Abrammuo)

In parts of West Africa, people speak of Sankofa, a bird that stretches its long neck and turns its head backward in order to see what has happened in the past. For the Akan people of Ghana and Ivory Coast (Côte d'Ivoire), Sankofa teaches a valuable lesson. “Pay attention to history,” it seems to say. “Learn from experience and let hindsight be your guide. Honor tradition as you move forward.” A popular Akan proverb puts it this way: *When it lies behind you, take it.*

This miniature sculpture, small enough to fit into the palm of your hand, is just one of thousands of tiny leopards, crocodiles, antelopes, snakes, leopards, fish, insects, and scorpions that the Akan people fashioned out of brass. They made little human figures as well, along with drums, horns, chairs, tools, plants, and cannons. Many are associated with Akan proverbs that encourage us to live a good life, understand each other’s foibles, and stay out of trouble.

Originally, these little brass objects (called “goldweights”) had a very practical purpose. Between the 1400s and the late 1800s, Akan traders and merchants did not use coins or paper money when buying and selling goods in the marketplace. Instead, they conducted their business with gold nuggets or fine grains of gold called “gold dust.”

Using brass goldweights such as this one of Sankofa (which weighs just 41.52 grams) along with a balance scale and spoon, traders could measure precise amounts of gold dust or nuggets and use it to purchase anything they needed—a few nuts or pieces of fruit, a piece of fine fabric, or even a horse.

CHALLENGE FOR STUDENTS

Discuss the proverbs associated with Sankofa, the leopard, and the crocodile on pages 2 and 3. How might they relate to your own life? What might they tell you about the values of a community? Study examples of American proverbs at [http://bit.ly/1uQYgpY](http://bit.ly/1uQYgpY) and discuss what they suggest about American values.

We are accustomed to carrying coins and dollar bills in our pockets or making purchases with the swipe of a credit card, the click of a mouse, or a tap on a mobile device. Through the 19th century, the Akan people had a very different system for buying and selling. Learn more about Akan goldweights and how they were used for barter and trade with a gold-based currency. [http://bit.ly/1CpPzL5](http://bit.ly/1CpPzL5)

PRINT THE IMAGES ON PAGES 2–3 FOR YOUR STUDENTS.
Sankofa

An Akan proverb says, *When it lies behind you, take it. Or One must turn to the past to move forward.*

Discuss: How might you, your community, or your country plan wisely for the future by studying the past?
Artist unidentified. **Gold-Dust Weight (Abrammuo).**


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**Leopard** (above):
An Akan proverb says, *The rain wets the leopard’s spots but doesn’t wash them off.*

Discuss: Is it possible to change a person’s innate character?

**Crocodile** (left):
An Akan proverb says, *Do not insult the crocodile while your feet are still in the river.*

Discuss: What is the best or safest way to disagree with somebody or register a complaint?