

WORTH YOUR WEIGHT

IN GOLD



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Adapted from *Smithsonian in Your Classroom*

“What is Currency?” May/June, 1998

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PURPOSE:

- Students will learn physical and human characteristics about countries from studying the types and designs of currencies throughout history.

NATIONAL STANDARDS:

- The geographically informed person knows and understands the physical and human characteristics of places. (Standard 4)
- The geographically informed person knows and understands the patterns and networks of economic interdependence on Earth’s surface. (Standard 11)
- The geographically informed person knows and understands the changes that occur in the meaning, use, distribution and importance of resources. (Standard 16)

PASS STANDARDS:

World Studies for Grade 6

- Compare and contrast common characteristics of culture, such as language, shelter, diet, traditional occupations, belief systems, and folk traditions. (Standard 3-2)

World Geography for Grade 7

- Compare and contrast common characteristics of world cultures (e.g., language, ethnic heritage, political philosophy, shared history, social systems and economic systems). (Standard 4-1)
- Identify and describe the relationship between the distribution of major natural resources (e.g., arable land, water, fossil fuels, and iron ore) and developed and developing countries. (Standard 5-1)

GRADE LEVELS:

- 6TH – 7th

OBJECTIVES:

- **Students will understand that throughout history different cultures have used many kinds of objects as currency.**
- **Students will learn how the Akan in Ghana and the North African people used a barter system to exchange gold and salt.**
- **Students will realize how foreign trade and the beginning of economic interdependence influenced the use of money (coins), replacing the age old tradition of bartering and trading of goods.**

MATERIALS:

- **Wall map of Africa**
- **Visual examples of unusual objects used for currency by different cultures throughout history**
- **Visuals of Handa currency from Congo, an Akan scales, examples of weights. ([www. Smithsonianeducation.org](http://www.Smithsonianeducation.org)) Click on Smithsonian Education—Welcome. Go to lessons 2 and 3 listed under “What is Currency: Lessons from Historic Africa”.**

PROCEDURE:

- **Ask students what they think a good definition for money or currency is. They should understand that it is something generally accepted as a medium of exchange, a measure of value, or a means of payment.**
- **Throughout history different cultures have used currencies that we may consider unusual. Discuss with students some items that have been used for currency such as: pigs, cattle, chickens, sheep, rice, kola nuts, beads, feathers, eggs, beans, camels, blankets, furs, tools, drums, shells, ivory, pepper, sugar, tobacco, and cloth. (Show examples of objects used for currency by different cultures throughout history including Handa currency from Congo.)**
- **Tell the class that the Akan people in Ghana used grains of gold or gold dust, which was abundant in their rain forests and rivers, as money to trade with North Africans for salt, which they processed from the sea water.**
- **Locate Ghana (formerly Gold Coast) and the countries of North African on a map.**
- **Ask students if they would want a pile of gold or salt? Which do they think is more valuable?**

- **Lead a discussion on the value of salt versus gold. Even though we can buy a box of salt for less than a dollar, what if we could not get salt? The Akan people feared lack of salt like we fear a shortage of fuel or electricity in our industrialized world.**
- **Discuss the fact that these transactions led to long-distance trade routes that connected very different cultures. Berbers, nomads and Muslims were trading with rain forest dwellers.**
- **Ask students what the mode of transportation between Ghana and North Africa was? (camels and donkeys)**
- **Explain to students how the Akan people used gold dust or grains of gold as a medium of exchange.**
 - ❖ **They determined the price by using a system of brass weights and scales. (Show a drawing of Akan scales.)**
 - ❖ **The buyer and seller each brought their own scales, bronze weights and spoons.**
 - ❖ **The Akan weights were small, durable, and easy to carry around. The weights varied in size and were of two types: geometric shapes or familiar objects and figures, e.g., antelopes, porcupines, crocodiles, fish, birds, weapons, and tools. (A common person owned a few weights while the wealthy owned about sixty. Over several centuries, there were four million different weights used.)**
 - ❖ **It took several hours to negotiate every transaction.**
 - ❖ **The buyer would bring a small amount of gold wrapped in cloth. The seller would begin with a large weight. The buyer would pull out a small weight. The two would bargain back and forth and eventually agree upon a weight.**
 - ❖ **The buyer would then measure out the gold on his scale adjusting it with a spoon until the weight balanced. Then the seller would reweigh using his scales and his weights to insure a fair transaction.**
- **Ask students to give examples of items that are sold by weight today? (e.g., coffee, sugar, potatoes, fruit, nails, etc.)**
- **Discuss with students the beginning of trade with Europeans via ship. European ship owners vied with each other, trying to acquire sole trading rights and therefore sole rights to Akan gold. Akans began charging tolls from European ships anchored off the coast. They collected rent from Europeans operating trade forts along coastlines.**

- **By the mid 1800s, Akan began using coins as currency. The 400 year old tradition of trading with gold dust could not keep pace in a faster moving world and the beginning of economic interdependence. Foreign traders did not want to spend hours negotiating every transaction using weights and scales, thus the gold dust system faded into the past.**

ACTIVITIES:

- **Some citizens of Key West, Florida have campaigned over the years to establish themselves as The Conch Republic. The French in Quebec, Canada have tried to become a separate country. Have students design a currency for either of these places if they were to become a separate country. Students can design a different currency after they research to discover other states or provinces that have expressed the desire to break away and form a separate country, e.g., the province of Tibet in China.**
- **Working in groups, ask students to make a list of equipment that we use for handling money today where it would be impossible to use gold dust. (e.g., cash registers, candy and coke vending machines, casino slot machines, coin operated laundry mats, toll booths, ATMs, public telephones, children’s rides at grocery stores, car washes and stamp machines)**
- **Have students search through newspapers, catalogues, or magazines to identify systems of measuring and pricing such as:**
 - ❖ **Items sold by weight (e.g., 1 lb. 6 oz.)**
 - ❖ **Items sold by size (small, medium, large)**
 - ❖ **Items sold by quantity (pkg. of 3 for \$5)**

RESOURCES:

- **[www. Smithsonianeducation.org](http://www.Smithsonianeducation.org) Click on Smithsonian Education—Welcome. Go to lessons 2 and 3 listed under “What is Currency: Lessons from Historic Africa”.**

ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS:

- Which of the following classified ads represents a barter agreement?
 - A Tourist wishes to house sit during summer visit to Cairo. Please call Tom and Jan, 259-823-2474
 - B Single male visiting Casablanca seeks a simple room for the month of April for \$20-\$40 per night. Call 670- 480-2650.
 - C Family of four looking for a small house to rent in Accra. Call 208-945-7050.
 - D Johannesburg commuter looking for a furnished place to stay during the week in exchange for a beautifully furnished condo on the beach. Call 478-344-8119.

(Depth of knowledge: 1) (Correct Answer: D)

- Identifying types of currency and finding a common currency is most necessary when working with
 - A ethnic groups.
 - B world religions.
 - C economic systems.
 - D political structures.

(Depth of Knowledge: 2) (Correct Answer: C)

- Compare and contrast the value of salt versus gold to the Akan people in Ghana and the North Africans in early African history.

(Depth of Knowledge: 2)

(Possible answer: Salt was plentiful to the North Africans, so gold was valuable to them because they could use it to buy needed items and materials. Although gold was plentiful to the Akan people, salt was valuable to them because they feared a lack of salt in their diet which could lead to illness and even death.)

- Which answer best describes what made trade possible in early historic Africa?
 - A desire for a good standard of living in some areas of Africa
 - B the strength of economies in different parts of Africa
 - C the illegal markets in some regions of Africa
 - D an uneven distribution of resources in Africa

(Depth of Knowledge: 3) (Correct Answer: D)

