

The exhibition **Gold Road Encounters** presents the meeting of West African religions and cultures with Islam, and opens a window onto these rich and fascinating interactions. The exhibition showcases objects that tell the story of the gold trade route through which Islam reached West Africa, a route that linked religions and traditions. Islam first arrived in West Africa south of the Sahara Desert using camel caravans, as Muslim merchants from North Africa reached an area known as Bilad a-Sudan — “Land of the Blacks.” From there Islam started to spread slowly to the region. The main goods traded across the Sahara between equatorial West Africa and the Muslim world were gold and salt. The lands of Islam needed gold to mint coins. In exchange they provided salt, which was used beyond the Sahara to preserve meat, season food, manufacture textiles and process sea shells. On exhibit are two hoards of Fatimid Caliphate coins made from gold that originated in West Africa.



Fatimid gold hoard, Caesarea, late 11th, early 12th century

Geopolitically speaking, the African continent in general, and its western part in particular, were composed of ethnic groups lacking a permanent political framework, and a number of kingdoms that controlled the trade routes. As early as the eighth century the rulers of these kingdoms realized that if they adopted Islamic customs and strengthened their ties with Islamic trade networks, they would boost both their power and their wealth. For them, Islam was the ticket to the Middle Eastern world of culture and commerce. Nevertheless, they trod cautiously — behaving like Muslims in certain situations and like pagans in others, in order to satisfy both pagan majority and Muslim minority. They extended their patronage to Muslim scholars and integrated them into government while at the same time turning to traditional religious leaders in order to maintain the loyalty of their subjects.

The traditional religions in West Africa were born and developed separately from each other, yet they shared certain animist characteristics — a main deity of creation

Photo: Clara Amih © Israel Antiquities Authority

and spirits who represented the soul of nature and the universe. In communal ceremonies spiritual leaders educated the next generation, linking the members of the community to their origins through stories of mythological figures and animals as well as creation stories and myths dating back to the community's founding. Masks, statues and ritual objects constitute a key component in the ceremonies and rites of these religions. These objects served as mediators for the spirits of the universe and the communities' founding ancestors. They were used during ceremonies that touched all aspects of life, such as weddings, funerals, agricultural events and initiation rites. During these ceremonies, which were accompanied by musical instruments and singing, dancers who were chosen to wear masks entered a deep trance that allowed them to communicate with the spirits of the universe.



Gold dust container with lid,  
Ghana, Ivory Coast  
17th-19th centuries

Photo: © The Israel Museum, Jerusalem

**The exhibition displays a selection of masks, headdresses, ritual objects and items with magic significance that were part of the spiritual life of various ethnic groups in West Africa south of the Sahara. Although most objects date to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they represent traditions that go back much further.**

The Grebo people, who now live in Liberia and Ivory Coast, are one of the cultures that was isolated from other groups in the interior of the continent due to difficulties of access, and managed to maintain much of their culture and beliefs. The main deity of the Grebo is Nyesoa, but most of their rituals are devoted to the spirits of natural elements such as rocks and waterfalls, as well as the spirits of the community's ancestors.

Like other groups in West Africa, the Grebo harbor two secret societies, one for women and one for men. These societies are responsible for initiation rites and internal social order. The masks on display in the exhibition are examples of Grebo ceremonial masks, and they represent a local culture that was not influenced by Islam. The masks were painted and decorated with beads, shells, pieces of metal and nails — made from materials that enhanced their power and value. Some of the masks on display in the exhibition feature prominent, tubular eyes. Masks with multiple eyes were used as spiritual protection for warriors. Pablo Picasso's series “Guitar,” from 1912 and 1914, was influenced by many-eyed Grebo masks that hung in the artist's dining room.



Protection mask, Liberia, 1957

Photo: Dorian Gottlieb, Dina and Michael Weiss Collection of African Art

Another culture presented in the exhibition is that of the Baga people, who live in the western part of the Republic of Guinea, also known as Guinea Conakry, named after its capital city. The Baga zealously maintained their traditions, even after most of them were converted to Islam in the eighteenth century by Muslim clerics, and after the arrival of French colonialist Catholics in the nineteenth century. The Baga, like other groups in the region, harbor two societies, one for women and one for men. These societies are responsible for internal social order in the realms of religion, politics and education. The Baga view belief in the creator-god Kanu and in the lineage of their community's ancestors as the fundamental element of their faith. Each group of the Baga has their own spirits and powers that accompany, protect and help the group, through the men's and women's societies respectively. These supernatural entities also minister separately to the various age groups in the community and help maintain the hierarchical social order between adults and young people.

On display in the exhibition is a Nimba mask, considered one of the best-known masks of the Baga people. In the Baga religion the female entity, Nimba, embodies the ideal of female power. It is the symbol of the birth of culture and the ideal of peace and generosity that unites the Baga. The two main elements symbolizing fertility and abundance are the shape of the breasts and the lines along the face and head. Nimba masks were borne on the shoulders of a dancer during religious ceremonies to ensure fertility and abundance. These masks gained worldwide fame when they were exhibited in museums, and they inspired many works by well-known artists.

Initiation societies also maintain internal social order in the culture of the Bamana people, who live in Mali. The Bamana are part of a larger group, the Mende peoples, whose roots date back to the pre-modern kingdoms of West Africa. In the past, boys would have to be members of all six societies, known collectively as “jow,” to begin their adult lives and to marry. Each society had its own special masks. The exhibition presents headdresses of the Chi Wara, a term that in the Bamana language means “laboring wild animal” and represents the myth of the birth of agriculture. According to the myth, the hero Chi Wara, who was half antelope and half human, came into the world to teach humans how to grow crops. It is therefore revered in festivals held during sowing and harvesting seasons. In these ceremonies, participants wear a wood-carved headdress in the form of an antelope, called Chi Wara, which symbolizes the mythological hero (in the photo that appears on the other side of this brochure).



Chi Wara mask,  
Mali, 1920

Photo: Dorian Gottlieb, Dina and Michael Weiss Collection of African Art

Along with the objects reflecting the religious life and culture of the peoples of West Africa, the exhibition also features displays that highlight Islam's impact on the spiritual lives of various ethnic groups.

For example, the Baga people from Guinea Conakry used a headdress in their ceremonies in the form of a box called Sibondël. In the 1960s, Islamic iconography was added to this traditional headdress. In the Sibondël box featured in the exhibition, six military figures and officials in Muslim garb are depicted sitting. A tail affixed to the back of the box symbolizes al-Buraq, the miraculous, flying creature resembling a horse or Pegasus, which the prophet Mohammed rode from Mecca to al-Aqsa. The addition of this iconography corresponds with Guinea's history. In 1958, following a referendum, Guinea won independence from France and an Islamist-Marxist government was installed. The al-Buraq headdress, which was made in the 1960s, reflects the political change in the region, and shows how Islam in West Africa, and in Guinea in particular, permeated local tradition.



Headdress, Sibondël, Guinea, 1960-1970

Photo: Dorian Gottlieb, Dina and Michael Weiss Collection of African Art

Another example of the use of Muslim iconography is seen in some of the Soweï masks of the Sande, the women's society of the Mende people. The first encounter of the Mende, who live in Sierra Leone and Liberia, with Islam was through Muslim amulet scribes who passed through the region and were much admired for their powerful amulets. Muslim amulets were added to the masks of the Mende people's women's society, carved into the top part of the mask. They contained verses of the Quran in Arabic calligraphy, which were written by Muslim amulet scribes as protection against evil spirits, folded up in cloth or in decorated leather pouches or silver boxes, and were considered very costly. The amulets were usually worn



Photo: Dorian Gottlieb, Dina and Michael Weiss Collection of African Art

around the neck, but in earlier times Mende women wore them in their hair, which is the way they appear on the masks presented here.

Soweï masks of the Sande women's society, Sierra Leone, first half of the 20th century

The Dogon people, who live in Mali and Burkina Faso in West Africa also integrated Muslim elements into local

traditions. The Dogon held ceremonies before embarking on a hunt, during which they wore special attire intended to be a kind of protective armor against wild animals and evil spirits. The clothing was therefore covered with amulets of various types such as mirrors, horns, jewelry and leather containing verses from the Quran. Attaching Quranic verses to traditional clothing and using these verses as part of their array of symbols and amulets show how Islam became intertwined with Dogon customs.



Protective hunter's jacket, Mali, early 20th century

Photo: Elie Posner © The Israel Museum, Jerusalem

Also on display are Qurans and Muslim amulets from the trans-Saharan trade route as well as West Africa and the Muslim world. These objects were part of daily life of Muslim communities in the regions.



Quran box, Sahara, Morocco, 19th century

Photo: Vladimir Naikhin, Rouach family collection

The exhibition **Gold Road Encounters** is an opportunity for the public to get to know West African culture, coming from an unfamiliar geographical region rich in history with a diverse array of cultures and religions.

**Gold Road Encounters**

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Director: Mr. Oded Shoham; Curator: Dr. Sharon Laor-Sirak; Exhibition design: Michael Weiss, Arch.  
Leaflet design: Joseph Jibri; Cover photo: Dorian Gottlieb; English version: Miriam Feinberg  
Curatorial consulting: Dr. Robert Kool



# מפגשים בדרך הזהב لقاءات في درب الذهب Gold Road Encounters