



Why Do World Historians Use Non-Textual Materials From Pre-Literate Societies?

The Luba use “lukasa,” or memory boards, to transmit the history of their communities. The lukasa is a political object used to show who has power, what happened to rulers in the past, and how the ruler is connected to other local leaders. The owners of the lukasa are a mixed group of men and women who act as the community’s historians and supporters of the local leader. They also serve as a check on the power of kings and chiefs. Interpreting

the lukasa is difficult and requires many years of training and practice. The designs on the lukasa also serve as a way to honor divine kings. The local animals and plants are included in the designs to reflect the community’s relationship with the environment. Thus, the lukasa can be read to understand both physical and religious geography of the region.

Questions to Consider

- How do world historians deal with determining how “true” community memory is?
- How much attention is paid to pre-literate peoples in sub-Saharan African in your schooling? Why do you think that African history typically has been allocated less space in American textbooks of world history?
- What themes in world history could be addressed in a world history textbook by including the Luba lukasa?
- Compare the interpretations of the Luba memory boards and the Mayan glyphs. In what ways do historians rely on archaeological and laboratory science to understand the Maya?
- To what extent does the “scientific” knowledge about the ancient Maya seem more reliable than the years of training it takes to read a Luba memory board?

