

## **Anthropologists and the Three Rs of African American Culture: Religion, Resistance, and Recreation**

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### **BACKGROUND**

Although slavery in the United States ended many years ago, it seems to be one of the most commonly recurring themes in my ninth and tenth grade Developmental English (Resource English) classes. In my predominantly African American male classrooms, the focus is always on the institution of slavery rather than the lifeways that evolved during this period. The students seem to identify only with the degrading and inhuman conditions of enslavement, and not the adaptive and unique skills that evolved from this part of America's history. To some extent, the students are aware of the many accomplishments made by some of the extraordinary African American men and women, but the students cannot identify with these distinguished individuals. It is the common people, the everyday, unknown, and unnamed slaves, which they recognize as their ancestors. The students do not realize anonymous slaves created African American culture and the culture was developed and assembled in the United States.

African American culture represents a creolization of many African ethnic groups, American born blacks, Native Americans, and other immigrants. By utilizing the anthropologists' artifacts, research, and investigations, students will be introduced to slavery from another viewpoint. They will learn about the adaptive skills, survival skills, creative skills, and lifeways of their ancestors, therefore, giving them a different perspective about their culture, and their self-worth. As the students study and learn about the strength and courage of Africans and African Americans who survived the hardship of slavery, they will be able to recognize that they are descendants of these unknown heroes.

From experience, I have learned to select and adapt material that will capture the interests and attention of my students. The students are eager to learn when they can relate to their topic. Learning about African American culture from the anthropologists' perspective will entice and stimulate my students desire to learn. This semester long curriculum will give students the motivation required to become life-long learners. The curriculum unit will demonstrate how the enslaved used religion, resistance, and recreation to overcome their dehumanizing circumstances and create African American culture.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Slavery was not a new phenomenon fashioned in the seventeenth century by the Europeans, nor did the Royal African Company of England launch slavery. Africans initiated the institution of slavery on the continent of Africa thousands of years before John Hawkins made his first voyage to the New World. Hebrews are just one of history's notable groups of slaves in North Africa; they were enslaved and freed thousands of years before the Portuguese and Dutch developed their lucrative human export business.

Then, there are the well-known Roman and Greek slaves. These slaves were treated as members of the family. They were given holidays and free days (days the slaves were not slaves) and often you could not tell the slave from a regular citizen. Many of their slaves were secretaries, clerks, attendants, executioners, scribes, and accountants (King). Mussio claimed, "The police force in ancient Athens was made-up mainly of slaves, even the clerks at the treasury office were slaves." King continued by explaining a number of ways a Roman slave could obtain their freedom and explained the laws which forbid a master to kill or mistreat his slaves. Roman and Greek slavery was not ancestry-based slavery but social-based slavery (based on social status).

Of all the slavery that has existed in the world, there has been none as cruel, harsh, and as inhuman as the institution of slavery developed and established in the Americas, including what has become the United States of America. Because of slavery in the United States, many people lost much of their heritage, ethnicity, and culture. Therefore, they had to create and recreate a new culture.

## **CULTURE**

Merriam-Webster defines culture as ". . . behavior particular to *Homo sapiens*, together with material objects used as an integral part of this behavior. Thus, culture includes language, ideas, belief, customs, codes, institutions, tools, techniques, work of art, rituals, and ceremonies, among other elements." Based on this definition of culture, African American Culture did not come into existence until an African female gave birth to a child in the Americas and passed on her heritage to her child (Brown). Brown continued, "the people in the quarters had to interact" and their interaction contributed to the birth of African American culture. For this curriculum, African American means the descendants of Africans in the United States of America.

Just as the Europeans had several cultures to contribute to the American culture, so did the West Africans. The West Africans that came to the United States did not come from one culture or one single ethnic group; they came from many different societies and nations. Each ethnic group had its own identifiable language, beliefs, customs, rituals, and ceremonies (Brown). Mintz described how different West African ethnic groups could experience the same event and have diverse reactions, therefore ending any dispute and

confirming the facts that the African American culture is a mixture of nations from West Africa, European nations, and Native Americans (*Ibid* 10).

From the fifteenth to the nineteenth century, historians have estimated that of the 12 million captured, kidnapped, and exported West Africans forced to journey to the Americas, only 10.5 million actually arrived (Walvin xiii). The first groups of African slaves came from the coastal area of West Africa. In his article *African Roots of African American Culture*, James Perry structured and calculated the percentage of each ethnic group that arrived in North America (United States):

. . . Enslaved Africans sold to North America came from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. About 25 percent came from ethnic groups such as the Bakongo, the Tio, and the Mbundu, groups from the Congo-Angola region. About 23 percent came from the Yoruba, the Fon, the Nupe, and the Ibo, ethnic groups from an area from the Benin River to Cape Lopez, now contemporary Nigeria, Toga, and Gabon. About 16 percentages came from the Alkans, who inhabited the Gold Coast, now contemporary Ghana. The Wolof, the Fulbe, and the Serer, Senegambian captives made up 13 percent of the captives came from Sierra Leone, 4 percent from the Blight of Benin, and less than 2 percent from Mozambique and Madagascar.

Other historians and anthropologists added the Faint and Ashanti from Ghana (Johnson 19) and the Igbo (Walvin 28) to the list of ethnic groups exported from the West Coast of Africa. Blassingame contributed, “A majority of them (enslaved West Africans arriving on slave ships) belong to the Ibo, Ewe, Biafada, Bakongo, Wolof, Bambara, Ibibio, Serer, and Arada people. Because members of the large, well-organized Africa states like the Yoruba, Dahomey, Ashanti, Fulani, Kom, Mandingo, and Hausa, with their centralized governments, fast moving cavalries, or disciplined standing armies, rarely fell into the slave trader’s hands” (Walvin 5). Blassingame continued, “. . . these peoples were almost immune to enslavement . . . these were the nations which made war on their more peaceful neighbors and sold them and the peoples who fell under their political, economic, military, and cultural hegemony into bondage.” Walvin elaborated, “Most Africans arriving as slaves on the coast had been kidnapped or taken prisoners in warfare or for crimes . . . We need to remember, however, that long before most of the Africans slaves were handed over to the Europeans, they had been slaves in Africa” (31-32). The status of a slave in Africa was completely different from the status of a slave in the United States. Africans, like most other people, treated their slaves as family members and they were allowed to marry members of their master’s household and eventually gain their freedom. Their condition was not dehumanized nor was it race-based as it became in the United States (Brown).

Although many of the exported human cargo went to various locations in the New World, the focus here is only on the dehumanized and bewildered West Africans forced to

make North America their home. The West Africans arrived in a strange hostile land, almost naked, alone, without possessions, stripped from their “political and social system” and unable to understand the language and the lifeways of their shipmates and kidnappers (Raboteau 3). Yet, they survived and established an exclusive and exceptional culture. Despite the cruelty placed on American slaves and without family and kinship systems, they were still able to develop, create, and assemble a rich and unique culture in the United States (Mintz 5). The well-known African American author Maya Angelou made inquiries into the development of African American culture; she asked, “We have been lynched and drowned and beleaguered and belittled and begrudged and befuddled. And yet, here we are. Still here. . . . How, then have we survived?” (*Ibid* 125). How did the West Africans survive? How did they adopt, assimilate, and adapt to their new environment and circumstances? The phenomenal development of African American culture and the survival of the West Africans and their descendants are the investigation and study of this curriculum unit.

## **THE GROWTH OF SLAVERY IN THE NEW ENGLISH COLONIES**

There was a great demand for tobacco in Europe, and the American settlers realized this product would be a profitable export. Woods enlightened, “By 1617 Jamestown was caught up in a tobacco-producing frenzy . . . (and) nothing could dissuade the settlers from putting all their energies into tobacco production . . .” (*Ibid* 71). Plantation owners in Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina needed a large number of young healthy males to cultivate and prepare the tobacco for market (Wood 88). Although tobacco was one of the main crops in the Chesapeake Bay Area, sugar was the main crop that required a large importation of West Africans into the New World and later, into the United States.

Sugar plantations were developed and cultivated in the Caribbean where there was a large population of imported African slaves (Brown). Sugar plantations in the United States were extensions of the Caribbean. “From the beginning Carolina Lowcountry represented an extension of Barbados to the North American mainland” (Wood 64). Barbados was well known for its vast sugar production. Since sugarcane is a product that requires processing within a twenty-four hour period, the planters needed a two-shift (day and night) male workforce (Brown). In the middle of the seventeenth century, tobacco prices dropped and the planters decided to produce “rice, cotton, indigo, and foodstuffs (Brown 13).

During the eighteenth and nineteenth century, rice became the main source of income for the planters in coastal South Carolinas and Georgia. Labor was harsh on the rice plantations and the work often took a toll on the workforce. The task system was used on most rice plantations. The task system is a system in which a person is given an assignment and once the project is complete, the person is free to participate in other activities. Rice plantation required an integrated workforce (male and female) and due to growth of the colonies, there was always a need to expand the slave population.

When Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin in 1793, cotton became king and slavery increased at an unprecedented rate because cotton plantations required a large male and female workforce. Ten years later in 1803, the Louisiana Purchase was made and the plantation owners set out to make New Orleans the “sugar capital” of the world. Since cane was used for sugar, fuel, molasses, and as a base for making rum, it was considered an ideal crop. Sugar plantations required a physically rigorous workforce and planters used young black male gangs to meet their labor needs (Walvin 2-3, 5, 13, 15-17, 50-52, 54-56, and 71). Raboteau stated, “The Atlantic slave trade found it more economical to supply their demand for slaves by importation rather than reproduction” (Walvin 91).

As the United States expanded in the south, so did the need for free labor. The requests for slave labor increased from planters in the South and Southwest and since slavery in the Northern states was no longer profitable, the Northern and Northeast slaveholders found a new commodity to sell – slaves (Brown). Between 1790 and 1860, “. . . slaves were moved from Maryland, Virginia, and the Carolinas to Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas” (Lehrman). During this period, “slaves were frequently sold apart from their families or separated from family members” when they were sold to southern planters. (Lehrman). Selling seasoned Creole slaves became a new profitable business for the businessmen in the north (Brown). Although Louisiana is included as one of the states that received Creole slaves from the North, they disclaimed slaves in Louisiana were from a diluted bloodline. Siler, program coordinator at the Louisiana State Museum cited Dr. Gwendolyn M. Hall:

Louisiana’s undiluted retention . . . of African culture . . . stems from an unbroken line to African culture. Almost all slaves introduced to Louisiana came directly from Africa. Slaveholders and slave traders met ships coming directly from Africa . . . purchased new Africans, and transshipped them to Louisiana.” Siler concluded, “African cultural traits, which have persisted throughout the history of enslavement in Louisiana were not filtered through another environment.

Therefore, this statement implies enslaved people from Louisiana maintained their West African culture longer than some other enslaved people in the United States did.

## **WHY WEST AFRICANS?**

### **Indentured Servants**

As the Europeans began to appreciate the business opportunities available in the New World, they needed a workforce to work their tobacco and sugar plantations. The entrepreneur’s first workforces were indentured servants. This workforce was made up of mostly white and a few black employees who worked for a designated period. At the end of their contract, the indentured servants could purchase land, marry, and take on the

other activities that would be profitable to their economic growth. There were numerous problems with a workforce consisting of indentured servants.

First, the contracts were not lifetime contracts; they ended after a few years and often the indentured servants would break their contracts by running away. The white indentured servants had a better chance to remain free than the Africans because of their skin color. It was easier for the white fugitives to blend in with the majority of the population during the Colonial Era. Second, the environment on the plantations was not suitable for most Europeans; the strenuous work, long hours, hot and humid weather, and diseases aided in the elimination of the indentured workforce. Third, once the indentured servant completed his or her contract, “[there was] absolutely no incentive to reenter the labor market as hired hands, and most did not make that choice” (Wood 83). Fourth, “the English Civil War greatly disrupted the flow of migrants to the New World, and the stabilization of wages in the English economy during the postwar decades served to diminish the . . . economic reasons for emigration” (Wood 85). Wood concluded, “This system of labor did not provide them (planters) with a permanent workforce . . . and by the second half of the seventh century . . . the planters no longer had a need for indentured servants” (83, 91).

### **Native Americans**

The next group of people the planters decided to recruit was the local Native Americans. The Native Americans were not at all the ideal selection. They often refused to work and had a problem understanding the European economic system. The major problem the planters had was their lack of information; they did not understand the Native Americans’ lifeways. First, the Native American concept of agriculture was completely different from the Europeans; Native Americans viewed it as “women work.” Next, the male Native Americans were warriors, hunters, and fishermen and they were extremely familiar with their homeland. They knew the land and their surroundings better than the Europeans knew the land, and they often ran away and returned to their people. Finally, the Europeans were a problem to the Native American workforce; the European diseases (smallpox, measles, influenza, and syphilis) were fatal to the natives (Blassingame 5). Wood concluded, “. . . if the English hoped to retain any credible commercial and trading links with . . . [Native] Americans, it was scarcely good business practice to force some of their number to work against their will” (75).

### **West Africans**

The last and final group the planters selected to enslave were the Africans. They were successful in their efforts for several reasons. First, Africans were “accustomed to hard continuous labor and a sedentary life” (Blassingame 50). Next, they were from tropical and semi-tropical areas; therefore, they were accustomed to the environment. Another reason Africans were the right workforce for the planters was their partial resistance to

malaria (due to the sickle-cell trait). In addition, once Africans arrived in the New World, they were in unfamiliar territory and were considered less of a flight risk than Native Americans were. McKissack informed, “. . . the slavery that evolved in the colonies was ‘designed for maximum economic gain’ and . . . race and racism provided the excuse Slave owners needed to own slaves without feeling guilty” (16). Wood stated, “. . . [Africans] were cheaper than indentured European servants and had long been enslaved in the New World’s other . . . economies” (50). Once the Europeans had discovered their ideal workforce, they developed the concept that “slave work” could only be done by black people and this “was work which white people should not undertake” (Walvin 59).

## **DEVELOPMENT OF RACE-BASED SLAVERY (TIMELINE)**

### **Before 1700**

The first twenty, Angola West African kidnapped, indentured servants arrived in Jamestown, in August 1619. Ten years later, the Europeans introduced slavery into the Connecticut colony, and twenty-one years later, in 1650, the colony legalized slavery. Maryland began to import their human cargo in 1630, and by 1641 Massachusetts became the first colony to recognize slavery as a legal institution (Johnson 41). In 1645, New Hampshire established and recognized its need for slavery. Sixteen years later, in 1661, Virginia legalized slavery, and a year later in 1662 the state passed a law that declared all pagans in the colony were automatically slaves (only Africans, Native American pagans were not enslaved). New York and New Jersey did not become slave states until 1664; in the year 1682, South Carolina legally recognized the institution of slavery and by 1700 Boston had become the slave-trading center for the New England colonies (Becker). From 1619 to the 1700s, slavery expanded in the colonies at an incredible rate. With the growth of slavery, there was a large inoculation of West Africans arriving in the New England Colonies. For profit and opportunity the English were willing to “make of Africans what they were unwilling to make of any Europeans: slaves for life” (Scherer 27).

### **After 1700**

By 1703, Rhode Island began to recognize the institution of race-based slavery. Six years later in 1709, a Slave market was created on Wall Street (Becker). It was not until 1715 that North Carolina accepted the institution of slavery. A year later, slave ships began to deliver slaves to Louisiana, and in 1740, South Carolina passed an act that prohibited teaching slaves to write and determined all slaves to be “chattel.” Ten years later, in 1750, Georgia became a slave state. Twenty-four years after Georgia recognized the institution of slavery, the Continental Congress of 1774 barred the importation of slaves, and Virginia and Connecticut banned the import and sales of slaves, because it was no longer profitable (Brown). Two years later in 1777, Vermont became the first state to abolish slavery and in 1783 Massachusetts and New Hampshire followed suit (Becker). By 1792, Kentucky had become a slave state and four years later Tennessee recognized the institution of

slavery (Becker). Scherer reports, “. . . the colonies could not have achieved economic success without slavery . . . [and] every socially and political prominent figure in the southern colonies rose on the backs of enslaved Africans: Byrd, Laurens, Washington, Jefferson, and scores of others” (24, 52).

## **CREOLIZATION**

### **Prior to 1730**

After the introduction of slavery in the English Colonies in 1624, the West Africans began a transformation. As stated earlier, prior to 1730 there was always a need to replenish the slave population, due to the expansion of plantations in the Americas and importation of Africans was an economically sound method to maintain the required workforce. There was a high mortality rate, due to the trauma of the middle passage, forced enslavement, shock of life in the New World, and exposure to new diseases. Therefore, many of the West Africans died within three to four years after arriving in the colonies (Walsh 138). Since the majority of West African slaves were male field hands, laboring on tobacco and sugar plantations without a large female population, the reproduction apparatus was not available. Regardless of the gender, the assignments for both men and women were “physically taxing” labor performed from “can see to can’t see,” except on Sundays, and in extremely hot weather. During harvest, the slaves would work seven days a week fourteen to fifteen hours per day. Many of the slaves died from “overwork and malnutrition” (Scherer 51). The life expectancy of a slave was half that of the whites (Lehrman).

When the females did become pregnant, they were forced to continue their regular duties. Therefore, there was a high rate of spontaneous abortions and stillbirths due to chronic undernourishment and exhaustion (Lehrman). Fett alleges, “Even planters who advocated less strenuous field work for pregnant woman nevertheless pushed slave women to the limits of physical exertion during harvest” (27). In addition, during the early periods of slavery in the colonies, the West African women were only producing an average of three offspring (Kolchi 39). Therefore, before 1730, because of a low birth rate and a high infancy death rate due to malnourishment, there was not a natural increase in the slave population (Brown).

Even before the Africans arrived in the New World, they underwent a creolization. Mintz give details, “Enslaved Africans . . . were drawn from different parts of the African continent, from numerous ethnic and linguistic groups, and from different societies” (2). The offspring of African slaves were a mixture of different West African nationalities. Their parents may have come from different ethnic groups and occasionally a different race: Europeans or Native Americans (Brown). The children of the West African slaves were called Creoles. They were a mixture of nationality and ethnic groups; they were American born slaves with mixed blood (Kolchin 39).



## After 1730

After 1730, there was a “. . . population increase that came almost entirely from natural growth rather than from . . . forced immigration” (Walsh 135) and “what emerged” from the importation of the West African slave was a locally-born African-American population that we called “Creole Black” (Perry). The American born female slaves (Creole Blacks) were bearing children at a younger age than their mothers, breast-feeding their infants for a shorter period, and were producing an average of six offspring (Kolchen 39). Once there was a balance of the male and female population, the need for importing West Africans decreased. The African population was now a Creole population (Perry). Perry clarified, “the Creole population . . . [was] built upon what they knew of the culture of their fathers and mothers . . . it was not entirely Europeanized or Americanized population [and] it drew upon the strengths of the African cultural.” Mintz elaborated, “African-American cultural forms were forged in the fires of enslavement . . . (and they) literally built their life-ways to meet their daily needs” (82-83).

The new American-born slaves were different from their ancestors. They were born into a caste system and had never experienced freedom. They had never undergone the horrors of the middle passage and had not experienced the psychological shock of becoming a slave. Eventually, the American-born slaves did not have a language barrier with their masters or with the people in their environment (Brown). Unlike their ancestors, who once understood a more human type of slavery from their homeland, the American-born slave only knew one kind of slavery; dehumanizing race-based slavery of the white American planters (Brown). American-born slaves knew what was expected of them; they understood their masters’ psychological make-up and knew how to employ this knowledge to suit their needs. The Creole slaves built on a greater understanding of their environment and were able to “put more effort into creating and maintaining some autonomous private life . . . and devising ways to survive as comfortably as possible . . .” (Welsh 150). Mintz was able to enlighten us on the African and the American-born slave culture, “[a]ll slaves must have found themselves accepting . . . out of necessity the countless ‘foreign’ cultural practices, and implied a gradual remodeling of their own traditional ways of doing things” (47). The anthropologists and historians both agree that African-American culture emerged between 1720 and 1760 created by the Creole Blacks. Angelou concluded:

Black(s) . . . whose ancestors were brought to the United States beginning in 1619 have lived through conditions of cruelties so horrible, so bizarre, the [blacks] . . . had to reinvent themselves. They had to find safety and sanctity inside themselves or they would not have been able to tolerate such torture. They had to learn quickly . . . to survive as wholly and healthily as possible in an infectious and sick climate (41-41).

## **THE THREE Rs: RELIGION, RESISTANCE, AND RECREATION**

It is well known that the imported West African and the American-born slave had to discover methods to survive the horrible and inhuman conditions that were bestowed on them. Scherer defined the status and condition of a slave: “. . . a slave was to lose one’s humanity (and) to be reduced to the level of beasts” (25). However, to continue their existence and to maintain their self-worth and identity, the slaves had to employ their knowledge of religion, resistance, and recreation. For the curriculum purposes, **Religion** is a belief in a Higher Power than man, a Supreme Creator and all religions have ritual. **Resistance** is the will and ability to go against what the power structure sets as the “norm.” **Recreation** is having fun, dancing, singing, storytelling, and socializing. The slaves’ religion, their resistance, and their recreation overlapped, intertwined, and became inseparable.

### **Religion**

Christian religion has been used to save souls as well as to spread propaganda to enslave souls. It is ironic that European Christian religion was implied to justify slavery. The English utilized Christian theology to enslave the blacks that were non-Christian. Their perceptions indicated that the Africans were less human, more like an animal rather than a man. The Christians proclaimed that Africans look different; they were black, which meant they were diseased. The Africans were the curse of God upon the descendants of Ham: they talked different, were oversexed, and were uncivilized. They were heathens, without religion or they were worshipers of all kinds of abominations. Thus, the European Christians agreed the West Africans were not human, were non-Christian, and were an inexpensive work force. They were prime beasts for slavery (Scherer 25-27). Wood added, “Christian theology suggested that all humanity originated from a single source, Adam and Eve, who were assumed by Europeans . . . to have been fair-skinned . . . (the Europeans) . . . could not . . . satisfactorily explained . . . the blackness of Africans” (23). Therefore, the “West Africans were not part of the common creation . . . they were not human” (Wood 23).

All West Africans believed in a Supreme Being, one that controls the elements of the environment and sets things in order. They believed that the Higher God was the God over all gods, and he had the ability to distinguish between good and evil. Some of the slaves were Muslim that had read the Koran in Arabic before coming to the new world and after arriving, they would ask their master for a Koran (Raboteau 46). The Muslim Africans were praying to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the same God the European Christians and Catholics prayed to. Regardless, of their religion, their rituals, and ceremonies, the West Africans used song, dance, and storytelling in the process.

A few years ago, Dr. K. Brown, anthropologist and professor at University of Houston, found a collection of blue beads in the Conjuror’s Cabin on the Levi Jordan

sugar plantation in Brazoria County, Texas. Since he was able to establish the fact that some of the occupants on the Levi Jordan Plantation were from Africa, it is a possibility they were Muslims. From his dig site, we know that the blue beads are either Muslim praying beads or the conjurer beads to ward off evil spirits. Brown confirmed the importance of the blue beads in the slave community and declared the “widespread uses of blue beads are to ward-off evil spirits.”

African American religions actually began out of necessity. The captured West Africans needed something greater than themselves to sustain them during the horrible middle passage; all they had where their (God) gods and their belief in the roles of their ancestors’ spirits (Brown). As they entered the English colonies, there was a need to administer the rituals for special events, such as birth, marriages, death, illness, and other events that required a ceremony. Anthropologist Sidney W. Mintz explains:

We can probably date the beginnings of any new African-American religion from the moment that one person in need received ritual assistance from another who belonged to a different cultural group. Once such people had exchanged ritual assistance in this fashion, there would already exist a micro-community with a nascent religion that was, in a real sense, its own (45-46).

African American religion started as a Creole religion with a heavy influence from a variety of African ethnic groups and European Christianity and has remained the same for years.

Before the slaves were introduced to Christianity, and even afterward, the West Africans believed in spirits. Many of them believed in giving libation to their ancestors before special events and on holidays. Even today, many African American Christians believe in spirits. African Americans call these spirits Holy spirits, evil spirits, and/or apparitions (which are usually ancestors). Regardless of the adjective used with the word “spirit,” it is still a spirit. West Africans and African Americans needed something to ward off the evil spirits, so they used ju ju, gris-gris, blue beads, and other charms to protect them. Angelou and Brown both stated that ju-ju and gris-gris were religious amulets, just as the Muslim beads and Catholic rosary are religious amulets.

The other groups of religious leaders were the conjurers, healers, and midwives (often they were the same person) that knew how to use their special “magic” for good or evil. These rituals and dogmas are called Voodoo, Hoodoo, and/or Witchcraft. Fett argued, “Conjuration . . . also called voodoo or rootwork was and (and still is) an African American practice of healing, harming, and protecting performed through the “ritual harnessing of spiritual forces”” (85). African American music, dance, and songs were used to set in motion the powers of these doctrines (Haley) and the Christian doctrines. Newman alleged, “Music and dance were vital dimensions of daily African life, and if slaves could not carry physical cultural artifacts with them to North America, they could,

and did, bring their extensive and complex expressive cultures.” Raboteau continued, “Perhaps the most obvious continuity between African and Afro-American religions is the style of performance in ritual action. Drumming, singing, and dancing are essential features . . . [in most] African and Afro-American ceremonies” (35). The slaves combined their African ethnic religion, Muslim religion, and Christianity to form what is called the “Invisible Institution.” Since slaves were secretive, a necessity for survival: the whites were not aware of the Creole religion. The “Invisible Institution” was only invisible to the white world, because the African American religion was always visible to the blacks. The customs and styles of the slave religion are still present in many of the African American and white Southern churches in the United States.

As early as, 1688 the Quakers were using Scriptures to protest against slavery but had no black members due to Virginia Legislation of 1672 forbidding blacks from joining the Quaker Organization. The law did not stop the Quakers from becoming extremely active in the resistance movement of runaway slaves. In 1706, the Puritans began their humanity debate using anthropological grounds to justify introducing Christianity to the slaves. The Puritans believed once the slaves became Christians, they would become better servants and more productive. The Slaveholders rejected the idea of making the slaves Christian and argued, “Christianity would make their slaves not only proud but ungovernable, and even rebellious” (Raboteau 103). The Slaveholders’ main reason for not introducing Christianity to their slaves, “was the fear that baptism would emancipate their slaves,” (Raboteau 98) therefore, making the slave an equal. Regardless of the Quakers, Puritans and Slaveholders’ beliefs, the slaves wanted to adopt Christianity because they realized the Master’s God had more power than their god did (Brown).

Regardless of the reason given by the majority of Slaveholders, a few believed in introducing their human chattel to Christianity. In 1758, William Byrd constructed a church on his Virginia Plantation for his slaves. The African Baptist Church/Blue Stone Baptist was the first African American church in the United States and is still a very active and well-known church among the African American Baptist Association. Since Brown has proven blue stones were used by conjures and healers to warn away evil spirits and since the church actually originated in the bush arbors (hush arbors), it is possible that the members wanted their Christian services to be protected from their enemies. Therefore, the original name Blue Stone Church had a significant and coded meaning. The next oldest African American church is located in Savannah, Georgia; it was established in 1788. The Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church of Philadelphia was established in 1816 by Richard Allen and is recognized as the first established black Methodist church, and the first known black church to become radically and actively involved in slave resistance (Tobin 59-60).

Religion was one of the methods used by slaves to help them forget about their suffering, it gave them a form of liberation from their everyday misery. Religion became a method of therapy designed by the enslaved to aid them in their physical and mental

survival of slavery. It became a part of their life. It was their life. Religion was an inheritance from their African ancestors. Genovese cited G.J.A. Ojo, "African life in general is thoroughly permeated by religion. It is no overstatement to say that religion is not just one complex of African culture but the catalyst of the other complexes" (210). Ojo's statement is a correlation to African American slaves and their religion "The religion faith . . . conquered the slaves' fear of the master . . . [The master] could inflict pain on the body but could not harm the soul" (Blassingame 147).

African Americans continued to use religion as a security blanket during the dark days of Jim Crow. Even today, the religion that was created by the slaves is used as a means of salvation. Religion has been the moral fiber of the West Africans and their Creole descendants. Raboteau explicates, "As the gods of Africa gave way to the God of Christianity, the African heritage of singing, dancing, spirit possession, and magic continued to influence Afro-American spirituals, ring shout, and folk beliefs" (92). The black church, whether it was in a building or bush arbor, became the most influential institution in the slave community and later, in the black community (Peters).

As slavery grew and slaves exchanged their gods for Christianity, (except Muslims, their God was the Hebrew God) they had a desire to participate in their newfound religion. After 1710, many of the Slaveholders were not against the slaves attending religious services, as long as the master and his family members accompanied the slaves, and/or other whites that agreed with his religious philosophy. Slaves were allowed to sit in the balcony or in the back of the church. However, slaves did not trust the white ministers' interpretation of the Scriptures. White ministers only lectured on the significance of a slave's loyalty to his master and the evil and consequences of stealing from his master (Blassingame 132). The white ministers' usual text was Colossians 3:22, "Servants, obey in all things your masters" (Newman). The slaves saw the hypocrisy of their masters when "they would pray with them on Sunday and beat them on Monday" (Haley). The slaves preferred their own preachers. Their preachers lectured about freedom and a better life after death. The slaves were willing to risk their lives to participate in the ceremonies forbidden to them.

### ***Slaves' Preachers***

The slaves' preachers were slaves or free blacks, many knew how to read and comprehend the Bible to suit the needs of their parishioners. These preachers usually had learned to read from the Master's children, other slaves, and/or were self-taught. Whenever they had an opportunity, they would read the Bible to the adult slaves and would teach the slave children to read. Slaves' preachers usually would travel between plantations and the slaves would depend on him to deliver and exchange the current news and events. Slaves' preachers believed by the power of the spirit they had been called by God to preach the gospel and their parishioners believed their preachers were sent by God to be watchmen

over their souls. Even today, African American ministers and preachers call on the Holy Spirit before delivering their Bible-based sermons.

Black preachers' interpretation of the Scripture was different from the white ministers. The Bible is full of spirits and unexplainable events and black preachers' Bible-based sermons were about these occurrences. Black preachers spoke about freedom, Moses parting the Red Sea and leading God's people out of bondage. Slaves' preachers recounted the story of a shepherd boy named David, who killed a giant with a sling. David became King, and was once "so full of joy, he danced out of his clothes." Black preachers preached about meal barrels replenishing themselves because of a widow's kindness. They would inform their parishioners about Job's encounter with Satan. The black preachers explained how Satan took Job's family, Job's wealth, and Job's health away from him. Then black preachers would elaborate on Job's patience, Job's loyalty, and his faith in God and explained how God rewarded Job for these characteristics.

Some of the black preachers' Bible-based sermons were about spirits. They told their members about a **spirit** informing Mary, a virgin teenager, that she was impregnated by a **Holy Spirit**. They continued their sermons about miracles performed by Jesus. They told how Jesus could raise the dead, walk on water, heal the sick, and feed the hungry, and then he suffered, died, and came back from the dead. These preachers spoke about Holy spirits, evil spirits, healing, and supernatural incidences and occurrences. These phenomena were understood by Africans and African Americans because "it fit in with the slaves ancestral beliefs of spirits" (Brown). Slaves could relate to Moses, Job, David, and Jesus because these men were performing acts that were not everyday occurrences; but acts that the slaves believed were possible through God and the spirits.

Slaves recognized God as their salvation on earth and beyond. The slaves' preachers, with their musical voices and their rhythmic body movements were able to replace the slaves despair with ecstasy. Blassingame describes, "The sermon of the black preacher was a singular performance. Marked by call and response, his allusions to earthly trials and heavenly rewards were punctuated with groans and gestures designed to engage the audience's attention" (131). Slaves' preachers were a danger to the Plantation owners.

Slaves' preachers were categorized by Haley as ministers, exhorters, self-appointed preachers, and cult leaders. Ministers were the blacks who had served under a white minister and were ordained by the white preachers. Exhorters were not ordained and had been selected by the master to "assist members in their Christian walk." The self-appointed were the radical black preachers, who believed they were called by God to deliver his people from slavery. Haley stated the cult leaders were "the ones who practiced voodoo. Haley did not identify the conjurer and midwife as members of the plantation's health care system. Haley's interpretation is an example of how many of our students have been miseducated. This statement is a myth. He did not base this statement on the research of anthropologists and archeologists. Regardless of the category, all

African American preachers faced danger from the ruling class. If caught preaching the gospel without permission, their punishment could range from flogging and imprisonment to death.

The slaves could and would receive similar punishment for attending the prayer meetings and religious services performed by slave preachers. The slaves had to “steal away” to the brush arbors (hush arbors), located in the woods, swamps, thickets, and ravines, to be with God. Slaves would turn a pot upside down and sing the song “Steal Away” to inform the other slaves about the secret prayer meeting (the same song used in other circumstances enclosed another coded message). To avoid detection from the Plantation owners, they had the wisdom to “use wet rags and quilts to keep their voices for penetrating the air” (Raboteau 215) or they would turn iron pots upside down to catch the sounds from traveling to the ears of their master. Brown located several fragments from cast-iron pots and kettles at the Levi Jordan Plantation. These items were located in the Conjuror’s cabin. Since the Conjuror was a major entity in the slave community, the pots and kettles could have had several purposes: to catch evil spirits and to aid in the plantation’s health care system. In their Praise House, they could worship God in a fashion similar to their African ancestors.

In the brush arbors, and later the Praise Houses, slaves combined their African and American knowledge of worship to create a unique religious ceremony (Brown). Genovese elaborates, “the (slave) community worshipped God in a way that integrated the various forms of human expression, song, dance, and prayer, all with call-and-response, as parts of a single offering, the beauty of which pays homage to God” (234). Although the body movements of the slaves during religious services have been referred to as dancing, it was not actually a dance, it was shouting (Geraty). Brown elaborates, “It is only dance, if you cross your feet, since they did not cross their feet it was not dancing, it was a religious performance.” He continued by describing the “ring shout” of the Gullah people in the Carolinas. The ring shout was similar to the dances performed by the BaKongo and other ethnic groups from West Africa. Regardless of the name, the movement of the body and the singing caused the slaves to go into a condition similar to a trance (frenzy). When this condition occurred, the Holy Spirit had entered the body and the slaves were not aware of their movements, but they did know they were in full and complete communion with God. The aftermath of this experience was the height of ecstasy.

### ***Conjuror/Midwives/Root Doctors***

Part of the slave religion included the conjurer. Fetts claims, “Although located outside the institution of the Christian church, conjuration was an important black ‘metaphysical tradition’ at the center of the religion of the enslaved communities” (107). Some historians and religious groups have argued that conjuring was evil and the “conjurer was the preacher’s chief rival” (Raboteau 237). However, some slaves’ preachers were intelligent men, who understood the nature of their parishioners; and would work hand in

hand with the conjurers. Genovese clarifies, “The slaves stayed close to their conjurers, and the preachers who could reach them knew enough not to force the issue” (244). The issue was not between good and evil but between knowledge and lack of knowledge.

What the conjurer/midwife/root doctor actually had was the knowledge of herbs, roots, plants, and astrology and the appropriate skills to use them. Kolchin states the conjurer/midwife “was usually the most intelligent female” in the slave community (105). Brown informs, “Conjuring was nothing more than, the ‘Health Care System’ on the plantations”: it was the means used by the slaves and plantation owners to keep their chattel healthy. Fett adds, “Among the art of African American doctoring, conjuration most explicitly reflected the relational vision of health and healing” (85). In addition, Raboteau elaborates, “Conjure could, without contradiction, exist side by side with Christianity in the same individual and in the same community because, for the slaves, conjure answered purposes which Christianity did not and Christianity answered purposes which conjure did not” (288). In conclusion, conjurers were considered and respected as a valuable necessity in the slave community.

Conjurers were often called hoodoo doctors, root doctors, goofer men, two headed doctors, root workers, and voodoo priests. Voodoo is considered a cult religion. It is often interchanged with a conjurer by mistake or by those who are not aware that the two are different. Nevertheless, the conjurer was a vital person in the slave community and respected by slaves, Slave owners, and many white doctors. Fett cited John Blassingame who suggested, “At the top of the slave social ladder was the conjurer” and W. E. Du Bois described the conjurer as the “healer, interpreter, comforter, and avenger of the plantation slave quarters” (95). Anthropologists, archeologists, and historians, except Haley, agrees that conjuring was the “Plantations’ Health Care System.”

Not just anyone could be a conjurer. Some of the slave community believed conjurers had to be the seventh son of a seventh son or born with a caul over his/her face, indicating he/she had second sight. They were extremely tall and dark or extremely short, African born, with red eyes and blue gums, and had supernatural powers (Fett 97). Regardless of the features, all conjurers were herbalists and many of them had studied under another conjurer. The conjurer/midwife had to be educated and well informed about plants. They had to be able to identify the plants at various stages of growth and had to know when to harvest these plants. The conjurer/midwife was familiar with the lunar cycle because plants had to be picked at a certain time for them to be effective. They were knowledgeable about the different parts of the plant and familiar with the quantity to use in order for the plant to be effective. The practice of herbalism was “strongly shaped by the Yoruba” (Fett 77) and other African cultures. The talent of these herbalists was a sacred art form and a God-given talent.

The conjurer/midwife/root doctor would use a pestle and a mortar to pound the herb required for curing. They had learned to use dogwood tea for fever, snakeroot, and peach



tree leaves for stomachache and upset stomach, and pokeweed tops for external remedy for boils. The conjurer/midwife/root doctor had to know what part of the plants to use in order for them to reach their desired results. The sassafras tree leaves were used for flavoring foods and the root of the tree would be used for purifying and balancing the blood in the body (Fett 72-75). They would use leaves from the calico brush as a cure for itch and jimson weed to cure headaches and dropsy (*Ibid* 70-72). Women doctors/conjurers/midwives/root doctors knew how to mix gum tree bark to stop menstrual cramps and how to prepare syrup made from boiled rat's vain (wild arsenic weed) to cure colic and toothaches (White 124-125 and Fett 70-72). One of the most popular remedies for snakebite and poisoning was plantain root and wild horehound. Fett claims the remedy was stolen from a root doctor by a white doctor and later placed in a medical journal as the white doctor's discovery (68).

Anthropologists have found slave-made pottery called colonoware marked with cosmograms (cross-like figure) used in Kongo rituals to get in touch with the spiritual powers (Fett 77). They had the knowledge to use the elements in their environment, to their advantage and to provide the correct combinations of these elements to benefit their patients and clients. Brown located a conjurer's kit on the Levi Jordan plantation that contained such items as pins, medicine bottles, a thermometer, shells, and other conjurers' paraphernalia.

The conjurers believed that God had given roots and herbs to cure any illness, but before curing an illness, conjurers had to consult with God (Fett 79). Conjurers often spoke of "encountering a deity" before implementing the necessary medication for a cure, the deity they spoke of was the Christian God. Conjurers/root doctors believed they had to listen to the spirits of the plants and Fett added, "[with any] medicine you need a divine intervention" (79) and conjurers depended on the powers of the Christian God. Brown was able to confirm Fett's belief by locating where the "conjurer/midwife had sanctified the floor space of (her) cabin for its use within the ritual performance of curing, conjuring, and possibly giving birth" (23). Again, the anthropologists confirm the historians' beliefs.

Conjurers used a variety of items to perform the required services their patients needed. Dance informs us that "Significant in the potions the Conjure Doctor concocted included graveyard dirt, blood (especially menstrual blood), pins, needles, candles, horseshoes, a variety of herbs and roots, tea, silver five-cent coins, salt, red pepper, ashes of selected burned animals, and various parts of animals" (555). Brown actually located several of the above items under the conjurer's cabin during his excavation on the Levi Jordan Plantation. In addition to the above items, he also located cut copper coins, niski, and a BiKongo cosmogram (23). Regardless of the services offered by the black doctors, there was a fee for their conjuring services. Some would charge money (silver) or cowie shells, other would ask for clothing items, whiskey, or some trivial item. Fett concluded, ". . . the daily medicinal practices of enslaved communities in the United States rested on a notion of a spiritually enlivened landscape drawn from both African cosmologies and

African American Christian theology . . . the practice of African American herbalists for whom gathering and making medicines was (considered) **holy work**" (78).

## **Resistances**

West Africans were not docile people that had a desire to become slaves. The white planters and others who wished to make a profit from slavery believed the propaganda that slaves were happy and contented. From the beginning, from the time they were placed on slave ships, they began to resist. Many of the captured slaves would commit suicide by jumping off the ship when the opportunity presented itself. Others would use self-mutilation and arson to protest against slavery. Many mothers would kill their babies at birth, especially babies born on slave ships.

Then there were the rebels who would work slow, fake illness, and break tools, anything to keep from giving free labor. Some slaves would leave gates open for livestock to stray. Women would fake pregnancy and fake fits to avoid work. They would "play the lady" and the conjure/midwife/root doctor would inform the overseer the female was too sick to work (Whit 80). To avoid giving master another human commodity, female slaves asked the conjure/midwife/root doctor to prescribe an abortifacient to aid them in miscarriage, the healer would prescribe a mixture that might include "herbs of tansy and rue, the roots and seed of the cotton plant, pennyroyal, cedar berries, and camphor, either in gum or spirits" (White 85). There are court cases where females were sold as barren and after emancipation they give birth to several children (White 85).

Added to this list were truancies, runaways, and armed rebels. All defiant slaves were a danger to the Slave owner "for they [defiant slaves] set examples for others" (McKissack 17). The truancies caused the slave owners to lose money and the runaways caused him to lose valuable property. However, the most dangerous and most feared were the armed rebels and the discontented female house servants (cooks and house slaves). They were the most dangerous because they were known to take the lives of slaveholders and his family.

The profile of a runaway was male, between the ages of 16 to 35. White informs, "slaves escaped because of . . . cruel treatment or the fear of it, fear of sale or sale of loved one, or just the desire to be free" (72). Of course, there were more male runaways than females. Females in this age group usually were in their childbearing years and pregnancy and child (children) often affected their decision to run. Men had a better chance to obtain their freedom when they ran alone or with other males. They were able to take longer steps and moved faster and endured the environmental elements better than the females and children. Underground Railroad conductors were anxious about transporting females with children, because there was "three times the risk of failure" (White 72).

The historians have estimated that 75 to 85 percent of the runaways were males and females counted for a large percentage of truancies. White claimed, "Truancy seems to have been the way many slave women reconciled their desire to flee and their need to stay. Studies of female runaways demonstrate the females made the most likely truants because they were more concerned with breaking family ties" (74). The enslaved female knew it was hard to runaway with her child (children) and her child (children) would increase her rate of capture. If caught, her fear was not the whip or death, but she feared losing her child (children). Often the truants would leave the plantations and live in the woods and swamps for an undetermined amount of time. Some would return every evening and others would return after anywhere from two days to several months. Seldom did these women come to ill faith, but a few women died from this type of resistance.

For any revolt or escape to be successful, it required planning, skills, knowledge, and luck (Tobin 64). McKissack described, "The communication network among slaves (was) . . . amazing. They used songs, stories, and coded language to confuse and bewilder their masters who never really understood how it was done" (17). Secrecy was extremely important for the success of the slave community. Tobin added, ". . .(the) need for the secrecy is understandable when we consider that from the time of slavery until today secrecy was one way the black community could protect itself" (123). Living in a hostile environment required the oppressed to keep secrets.

African and African American slaves were forbidden from playing drums, because drums could talk and they often carried a message. Therefore, they depended on the keepers of the fire, the Mende culture of Sierra Leone were blacksmiths, who had herbal knowledge as well as the ability to turn their anvil, hammer, and bellows into a communication system (Tobin 36-37). In all slave communities and after emancipation the blacksmiths were always highly respected because they were skilled artisans and carriers of information. Brown added, "the blacksmith was also the most feared" because he could take something that was natural and turn it into something unnatural. Slave owners would often hire out their blacksmiths to other plantations during lean times on the home plantations. The blacksmiths would observe the surrounding area, map out an escape route, and carry news of planned escapes. They would bring back information to slaves about family members who had been sold or had run away. The blacksmiths were valuable players in the information network.

As mentioned earlier, black preachers were always a problem to the slave owners and are still a problem to the power structure even into the twenty-first century. The majority of any resistances, revolts, and revolution on large and small scales were usually initiated in the black churches (Peters). Evidence of this statement is true, after reviewing the actions of the following African American religious leaders: Vesey, Turner, Garvey, Yates, Mohammad, Malcolm X, Davis, and King. This short list is composed of only a few religious leaders from slavery to the twenty-century proving the power of the black preachers in the black community. Whether violent or non-violent, the black preacher was

the leader in the African American community against injustice. He was the carrier of news and information. Not only did the slaves' preacher carry heavenly news; he also carried earthly news. Black preachers played a major role in the area of resistances.

Many of the radical leaders and revolutionaries were black preachers or religious leaders. Praise Houses and even the brush arbors disregarded the laws that made slaves chattel. The black churches and brush arbors were locations where the slave children and adults were taught to read and write and they were safe houses for the runaways. Runaways could obtain food, rest, and a run bag (a compass, knife, food, and some coins) to help carry them to their next location. Black churches, Praise Houses, and bush arbors were major players in slave resistances.

Music was another method of resistance. The slaves would create and sing spirituals that had coded messages to aid the slave in escape. Spirituals had a way of telling a runaway slave when to leave, where to go, and what to look for along the way. Tobin cites Fredrick Douglas as saying "singing was a necessity on the plantation. Not only was singing during daily as well as religious activity an African tradition, but singing was also essential to the field slaves who had to prove his/her industriousness to the suspicious plantation overseer" (132). The slaves would sing their coded songs in the fields in the presence of the overseer and plantation owners. When the slave sang the song "Follow the Drinking Gourd," they were giving directions to a runaway, "to follow the points of the . . . Big Dipper – to the brightest star, the North Star" (Tobin 119). Another spiritual used to aid in the resistance movement was "Wade in the Water," this song would tell the runner which way to walk and a code telling when to run. This song was a favorite of Harriet Tubman and Denmark Vesey, who has been given credit for writing the song (Tobin 141). They continued to use such songs as "Swing Low Sweet Chariot," "This Train is Bound for Glory," "Gospel Train's a Comin'," and "Steal Away." The song and music of the slaves were coded and had dual messages just as the many of the songs today.

Female slaves would use their sewing skills to support the resistance movement. The females would use quilts to communicate with each other and with runaways. When the slaves saw a quilt with the monkey wrench designed, it was an indication for those who were planning to run, to prepare to run (Tobin 87). This design on a quilt informed slave(s) to prepare mentally for their journey. The slaves knew to be alert, cunning, read the body language of the people in their surroundings, and obtain as much knowledge as possible for the journey north. The streak of lightning design was a zigzag design on a quilt informing the runner not to travel in a straight line. Since evil travels in a straight line, this was a sign for the runners to travel in an indirect route (Tobin 130). The bear's paw on a quilt would indicate to the fugitive to follow the bear's path, because there would be food and water on this trail. There were many quilt designs used to give messages to a secret traveler.

There were other items used to facilitate the safety of a fugitive slave. They had to be aware of the colors used in quilts. If a quilt was blue and white, it indicated to the runaway this was a safe location, no evil lurks here. The Underground Railroad used grains of corn, pepper, charcoal, folded material, and cowrie shells arranged in codes to relay a message (Tobin 77). Along with well-known active participants in the Underground Railroad, there were the black Sailors and members of the Prince Hall Masons who rendered support in slave resistances. Runaways were successful due to spirituals, quilts, coded language, coded items, coded messages, religion, secrecy, and people working together to end an injustice.

## **Recreation**

Under no circumstances can slave recreation be called recreation by today's standards. Their recreation consisted of religion, music, dancing, proverbs, and storytelling. It was through their storytelling, known as folktales, that the slaves would entertain and educate their children. In the African American folktales, there was always an animal who was a trickster. The most famous folktales were the Brer Rabbit tales, which were similar to the African animal stories.

Newman cited Benjamin Mays, president of Moorehouse College, "the creation of the spiritual was no accident. It was a creation born of necessity, so that the slave might more adequately adjust himself to the conditions of the New World." Along with the spirituals were the work songs, love songs, shouts, and railroad songs all derived from the imported Africans and their Creole offspring. All were part of the slave culture. On his website, Lehrman sums the African American religion, resistance, and recreation in the following statement:

Through their families, religion, and music . . . African Americans resisted the debilitating effects of slavery and created a vital culture supportive of human dignity. Slave religious and cultural traditions played a particularly important role in helping slaves survive the harshness and misery of life under slavery . . . . Conjurors adapted and blended African religious rites that made use of herbs and supernatural powers. Slaves also perpetuated a rich tradition of West and Central African parables, proverbs, verbal games, and legends . . . Through folklore, slaves . . . sustained a sense of separate identity and conveyed valuable lessons to their children.

Based on this statement, the students will study the proverbs, Brer Rabbit Tales, rhymes, work songs, riddles, verbal tests, superstitions, recipes, and other African American beliefs found in Daryl Cumber Dance's book *From My People: 400 Years of African American Folklore*. The focus of this curriculum will be on the positive, untaught contributions of Africans to the United States culture and African American culture. Using African

American culture as a theme, the class will make use of several lesson plans recommend by Project Clear.

## **WHY STUDY THIS TOPIC?**

Most students view people from Africa as a single culture, and they still believe people from the continent of Africa are swinging in trees and living in the brush with lions, elephants, and other wildlife while Europeans brought civilization and religion to the continent of Africa. Many of the students' believe the people of Africa are uneducated, all speak the same language, and all come from the same ethnic group. They use the word "African" as a derogatory term and perceive the people in the same manner. The students are unaware of the important roles the people of Africa performed in the creation and development of the American and African American culture. The students' education of African American culture arrived from the viewpoint of historians. Early historians and religious leaders' concepts of African and African American culture are different from those of anthropologists. This unit will allow the students to receive an education based on "hard evidences" from the findings of anthropologists and archaeologists. Young minds are suspicious of new information; therefore the anthropologists will give them the "truth and the proof" about African people and African American culture.

As mentioned earlier, 99.98% of my students are African Americans and 60 to 80% are males. This unit is designed to delete the misconception of African people and African Americans and to increase the students' knowledge of other cultures. In addition, the unit is designed to facilitate African American teenagers in their search for their identity and to give them the self-confidence needed to be successful in their goals. Once the students have discovered the truth about their heritage, they will develop a new pride in their ancestry. Given this opportunity, they will have a desire to learn more about their culture and the culture of others. By introducing African American culture to the students from the viewpoint of the anthropologists, many of the biased and negative concepts about African people and African Americans should be deleted. Non-African American students will be able to view African Americans from a different perspective and increase their respect and knowledge of other cultures. All students will benefit from being exposed to other cultures and discovering the contributions made by these cultures. In addition, they will learn to respect their own culture and the cultures of others.

The students will receive an updated education on African American culture. They will learn of the culture from its origin in Africa to its birth in the colonies and its development in the United States. Philip Koslow, a professor of history at Oxford University, informs, "as archaeologists . . . explored the sites of former African cities they found evidence of a high level of civilization . . . [that] existed hundreds of years before the arrival of Europeans." After the students explore the African cultures, African ethnic groups, and African societies, they will focus on the creolization of the African population in the colonies. Then, they will explore, exam, and learn about the astonishing African American religion, resistance, and recreation from informed historians, anthropologist, and

archeologists. By exploring American slavery and African American culture from the viewpoint of anthropologists, the students will be able to re-evaluate their beliefs and develop a new perspective of African American culture.

## **IMPLEMENTATION**

This unit is intended to increase students' academic skills by planning and using several rigorous and relevant lesson plans, strategies, and instructions. Students will use a variety of strategies to recognize and develop their vocabulary and they will actively participate in literacy activities. Students will learn how to take notes recording important facts and details that address specific concerns or topics of research from all written sources using a system of note cards or an organizing grid. They will learn to use "writing as a tool for learning and research" and produce "visual images, messages, and meanings that communicate with others" (HISD). In addition, this unit will require students to prepare accurate, truthful, organized, and ethical oral presentations. By using the writing process, they will continue their writing skills by producing error-free writing and demonstrating their control over grammatical elements (HISD).

The unit will start with a short classroom discussion and lecture from the teacher, based on the research and narrative from this unit. Students will be introduced to West African history and culture from a book published in 1995 by Chelsea House Publishers, *Centuries of Greatness: The West African Kingdoms, 750-1900* and written by Philip Koslow. Once the students understand African Americans' origins, again using the narrative from this curriculum, the teacher will introduce the students to the "invisible institution," African American religion. Next, students will be introduced to slave resistances and finally, the unit will end with folklore, music, storytelling, and tidbits of African American culture. Tidbits will include food, artifacts, customs, painting, sculptures, proverbs, riddles, and dance. The unit will end with students displaying and entering their creative work into a variety of school contest and programs.

Throughout the unit the students will continue to expand their vocabulary by using note cards as a learning tool. The vocabulary word will be written on one side of the card and the definition on the back. Students will be encouraged to use their vocabulary words in their writing and their daily conversation.

### **Lesson Plan 1 – The Beginning: West Africa**

**Objectives:** Students will read culturally diverse texts to develop skill in reflection and communication; they will summarize text for a variety of purposes and use reading as a tool for learning and research. The students will apply the rules of usage and grammar to communicate clearly and effectively in writing and use writing as a tool for learning and research (HISD).

### **Materials Needed**

*Centuries of Greatness The West African Kingdom: 750-1900* by Philip Koslow  
(Paperback book published by Chelsea House Publishers 1995)

Highlighter

Note cards

Presentation materials

Since the book contains many foreign words, it would be more effective if the students would follow along as the teacher reads. Making transparencies of the first 35 pages and using an overhead projector, the teacher will read and demonstrate how to “turn key phrases into notes” and later into complete sentences. The teacher will stop at selected intervals and with a probe from the teacher, students will engage in constructive conversation based on the current section and/or from previously read sections.

### ***Students Assignments***

Once the book is completed, students will be placed in groups ranging from two to four students. Each group will select a West African ethnic group (select a topic) and using the “writing process” the group will create an informative report and present a presentation. Groups will use a web diagram or KWL chart to determine how they will approach their topic. Using “The Big Six” method designed by Mike Eisenberg and Bob Berkowitz (<http://big6.syr.edu>), the school’s library and Librarian, the students will gather information for their research paper. The teacher’s responsibility is to guide the students through each process of their research and the writing process. The group will develop a draft, evaluate and revise their draft several times, engage in student/teacher writing conferences, receive feedback and constructive criticism from the teacher, proofread and rewrite final report. Finally, each group will produce and construct visuals for a presentation on their selected topic. After each presentation, there will be a question and answer period.

### **Lesson Plan 2 – “Invisible Institution”: Religion Created by African Americans**

***Objectives:*** Students will listen and respond attentively, actively, and purposefully in a variety of settings for a variety of purposes. Students will take notes from oral and media presentations with attention to summarization of important facts and details, organization of content and evaluating the content of the presentation (HISD). They will use the writing process to compare and contrast a variety of elements related to African American religion.

### ***Professional Lecture***

On African American religion and plantations health care system

*For teachers in the Houston and surrounding areas contact:*

Kenneth L. Brown, Professor of Anthropology and Archeology, at the University of Houston (KLBROWN@uh.edu)



*All others use the following website:*

<<http://www.publicarchaeology.org/webarchaeology/html/tableof.htm>>

### ***Activities***

Using the narrative from this curriculum, the teacher will introduce the students to the “invisible institution,” African American religion.

1. Teacher will locate and book a university anthropologist to give a lecture to the class on African American Religion and the plantation health care system.
2. Students will view South Carolina ETV video “God’s Gonna Trouble the Water,” an educational video about African Americans in South Carolina, known as Gullah people.
3. Students will view and/or listen to the sermon “The Eagle Stirreth Her Nest” by Reverend C. L. Franklin. This will give the students some concept of how African American preachers and ministers delivered their sermons. (school, public, and/or universities library will be able to obtain this recording).
4. Since conjuring is the part of the health care system and part of African American religion, students will be introduced to “Medical Help” and “Cures for Rheumatism” on pages 563 and 564 of the book *From My People* by Dance.

### ***Assignments***

1. Students will use the writing process to complete a 100-150 word paper, comparing Franklin’s sermon to one of their pastors’ sermons or to a sermon given by Martin L. King.
2. Students will write a letter to a friend telling them about the Gullah culture and comparing the Gullah culture to their culture.
3. Students will interview their parents, teachers, and elders in the community to obtain knowledge about home remedies and medical cures and share them with the class.
4. Students will select and research a topic related to African American religion and/or African American health care system during slavery
5. Using the writing process students will complete a 200-word paper on their selected topic.

### **Lesson Plan 3 – Slave Resistance**

**Objectives:** Students will choose and develop a research topic, take notes from relevant and authoritative sources, evaluate their research, draw conclusions, and frames new questions for further investigation. Student will write a research paper on an assigned or self-selected topic (HISD).

### ***Materials***

*Rebels Against Slavery* by Patricia C. and Fredrick L. McKissack. This book is a Coretta Scott King Honor Book and an ALA Best Book for Young Adults about freedom fighters.

### ***Assignment***

1. Along with this book and additional research and using the writing process, the students will write a 250+ page paper on their selected rebel.
2. Student will give a presentation on their selection. Students will be given an opportunity to use their creativity.

### **Lesson Plan 4 – Slave Recreation**

#### ***Definition***

Slave Recreation is storytelling, folktales, and etiological tales that have been used by West Africans and African Americans for education, recreation, and entertainment. The trickster Anansi appears in many of African, Haiti, West Indies, and African American folktales. Music and song have always been identified with African Americans and were always part of their religion, resistance, and recreation. Again, using Dance's book, *From My People*, the school's library and Music department, students will explore the music and songs used in African American religion, resistances, and recreation.

***Objectives:*** Students will select and use recursive writing processes for self-initiated and assigned writing (HISD).

#### ***Materials***

##### **Books**

*From My People* by Daryl Dance

*Retold African-American Folktales* by David Haynes

*The Cow-Tale Switch* by Harold Courlander and George Herzog

##### **Recorded Music**

*Personal Religious Recordings of Tom Jones*, Band Director at Jack Yates High School  
School's library and Music department

#### ***Activities***

1. Teacher will select and read a variety of short stories and initiate a class discussion after each reading.
2. The class will listen to religious songs sung in a style similar to the style used by the enslaved.
3. The students will explore work songs, blues, and other songs composed by the enslaved and African Americans

#### ***Assignments***

1. Students will use the writing process to write a folktale or etiological tale. They will share their writing with the class.
2. Students will write a coded song and a song that tells a story.

## Lesson Plan 5 – Tidbits

**Objective:** The students will produce visual images, messages, and meanings that communicate with others.

### **Materials**

A large room located on campus that contains a table, chairs, and electric outlets.

### **Activities and Assignment**

1. Students will locate people from a variety of African cultures and American cultures who are willing to prepare food for a group of people.
2. Students will use a variety of artifacts from different African cultures and African American cultures to decorate a room.
3. Students will display and/or perform their works of art, stories, etc.
4. Students will invite guests who are willing to share their knowledge of different West African or African American religion, resistance, and recreation.
5. Students will plan and prepare this program.

**NOTE: This is not a Black History program – this program is designed to introduce food, clothing, storytelling, music, and other tidbits of African American culture, the parts of African American culture that are not in most history books.**

## ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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This is a historically based book of essays on African Americans from Africa to the Americas. A section of this book will be included in a lesson plan.

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