

AFRICAN INFLUENCES IN LATIN AMERICA**

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SUGGESTED TIME: One Classroom period

EQUIPMENT NEEDED: Slide projector, VCR if desired

APPLICABILITY: World History, World Culture, American History, African American History

OBJECTIVE: The student will become familiar with the rich and varied African cultural heritage which exists in many parts of Latin America.

This unit is Unit #15 in *Latin America: Land of Diversity*, a curriculum guide published by the Latin American Resource Center and the Center for Latin American Studies at Tulane University. The original includes slides. If you wish to purchase this guide, an order form immediately follows this section. Or, if you would prefer to borrow just this unit with its slides, its LARC Lending Library call number is **AFLA 02 UNIT C 01.

KEY CONCEPTS/VOCABULARY

Animism: The belief that natural objects such as trees or rocks, natural phenomena such as lightening or the wind, and the universe itself possess souls and therefore spiritual attributes.

Candomble: A religion in Brazil which is a mixture of Catholicism and African religions. Other similar religions include macumba and umbanda.

Cimarrones: The name for runaway slaves in Spanish America.

Feijoada: National dish of Brazil, originally made by slaves with leftovers.

Manumission: Freeing of slaves.

Miscegenation: Mixture of races, yielding children of two or more races.

Palenques: Runaway slave communities in Spanish America; also known as cumbes.

Quilombo: The name for runaway slaves in Brazil. Also, the name of a runaway slave community.

Samba: Famous Brazilian music and dance based on African rhythms.

Santeria: A religion in Cuba which mixes Catholicism and African religions.

Yorubas: Africans from what today is the country of Nigeria.

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Thirty Years

When I think on the course I have run
From my childhood itself to this day
I tremble, and fain would shun
the remembrance its terrors away

I marvel at my struggle endured
with a destiny frightful as mine
At the strength for such efforts: - accused
tho' I am, 'tis in vain to repine

I have known this sad life thirty years
And to me, thirty years it has been
Of suffering, of sorrow and tears
Ev'ry day of its bondage I've seen

But 'tis nothing the past - or the pains
Hitherto I have struggled to bear,
When I think, oh, my God! on the chains
That I know I'm yet destined to wear.¹

The above poem was written by a Cuban slave, Juan Francisco Manzano (1797-1854), and allows us to reflect on the millions of Africans brought to the New World to work for the Spanish and Portuguese colonists. Africans arrived on the earliest voyages of exploration and conquest. At first, their numbers were not large as both Spain and Portugal used Indians as laborers. Epidemic disease, malnutrition and mistreatment reduced the number of Indians available for forced labor and since black slavery had existed to an extent in both Spain and Portugal, both empires looked to Africa for slaves.

By 1600 about 75,000 slaves had arrived in the Spanish colonies, and 50,000 in Brazil.² What kind of jobs did these slaves have? Many panned for gold, worked on sugar plantations and in homes as domestic servants. As the numbers of Indians decreased in areas where before they had been the dominant work force, like Mexico City and Lima, the number of black slaves rose. They came mostly from Africa's West Coast, what today are the nations of Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, and later from the Congo and Nigeria. The Yorubas from Nigeria were one of the last groups to be forcibly brought to the New World and their legacy is the most evident in Cuba and Brazil. They brought with them their religion and political system. Their culture was rich in music, art, dance and an unwritten literature.

¹ Juan Francisco Manzano, *The Life and Poems of A Cuban Slave* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1981), 115.

² *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Latin America and the Caribbean*, eds. Harold Blakemore, Simon Collier, and Thomas Skidmore. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 138.

Not all slaves were unskilled laborers. There were also skilled craftsmen who built many of the beautiful churches in the northeastern part of Brazil and in Peru. African slaves became skilled artisans, makers of clothes, shoes, tiles, ironware and furniture. Blacks in cities were an important part of the colonial economy. White colonists depended upon slaves to do many disdainful but necessary jobs. Women were wet nurses, nannies, and sometimes even forced into prostitution by their owners.

In Lima by the middle of the 17th century, half of the population was Black. Mexico City had the largest Black population in all of the Western Hemisphere at the same time. Owning slaves became an important way of life for many whites. They employed more slaves than necessary because the number of slaves owned increased the prestige and social position of the white colonist's household. Wealthy Latin American colonists were spoiled by the excessive numbers of Black slaves they maintained - doors were opened for them, meals were cooked and served, women were carried on sedan chairs and even the smallest tasks were done by slaves.

The average life span of a Brazilian slave was only eight years after his capture in Africa (if he survived the journey to the New World). Living conditions were poor and many slaves were considered a cheap commodity by their owners. Slave rebellions were common throughout Latin America. Treatment of slaves was determined by the personality of the owners and the social and economic environment, which varied from century to century and area to area, as well as according to the slave's job. Thus a slave working in a house in the city and a slave working in the cane fields on an isolated farm probably received very different treatment.

Runaway slaves in Spanish America were known as cimarrones. Some banded together in remote areas, out of the reach of the authorities. These settlements were known as palenques and cumbes in Spanish America and as quilombos in Brazil. One of the most famous slave republics existed in 16th century Brazil and was called Palmares. It was based on an African tribal monarchy, having a king and a royal council. Property was privately and communally owned. They maintained an army and a class of priests. At one point, Palmares had a population nearing 20,000, and it was so strong and well organized that the colonial government had to send in troops many times before it was able to dissolve this runaway slave republic.

Manumission was relatively common in Latin America. Many slaves were freed upon the death of the slave owner. In Lima between 1524 and 1650, 33.8% of African slaves were freed by their owners. The percentage in Mexico City, 40.4%, was slightly higher for the same period.³ Slaves also purchased their own freedom or had it done for them using third parties. Usually women and children made up the majority of freed slaves. Manumission was easier for slaves living in urban areas than for the isolated rural slaves who knew little of the colony's laws.

Miscegenation was prevalent in Latin America. In the early years, a limited number of white women came to the colonies. Slave owners all over Latin America felt that they owned their female slaves and could do with them whatever they wished, and a mixing of races occurred. Racial distinctions were often difficult as a result, and the

³ Frederick P. Bowser, "Africans in Spanish American Colonial Society," in *The Cambridge History of Latin America*, Leslie Bethell, ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 375.

lighter his skin, the more opportunity a freed slave had for advancement in colonial society and after independence.

What is left today of these black slaves and their African culture? One of the strongest influences is in religion. In Cuba the mixing of Catholicism and African rituals formed a religion known as Santeria, while in Brazil similar religious traditions developed and are known by various names, including umbanda and candomble.

First let's look at Santeria in Cuba. Santeria or Saint's worship mixes Roman Catholic liturgy and sacraments with native religions of people like the Yorubas from Nigeria. Present in ceremonies are Catholic figures such as Saint Barbara, Lazarus and Our Lady of Charity. These Catholic statues are present with the Orishas or divine beings of African animism. Santeria also exists in the United States. It was exported to southern Florida and to New York City when many Cubans fled the revolution of 1959.

If asked, most Brazilians say they are Catholic. However, in Brazil there is widespread participation in both Catholicism and in the African-Brazilian religions. People of all social classes, all races and colors, and all degrees of education may participate. The African-Brazilian religions, such as candomble, macumba and umbanda, combine elements of Catholicism and the African religions. For instance, Catholic saints are often equated with African deities, and the participants pray to them. The African-Brazilian religious ceremonies are lively and are accompanied by dancing and music.

At these ceremonies there is usually an officiator and many participants. The officiator is often a woman, reflecting the pervasive influence of women in African religions. Participants call upon gods or goddesses and go into trances, and often don elaborate clothes. The participants believe these activities will help them communicate with the gods, and that they will tell the participants the future or advise them in what to do. In order to please the gods and encourage them to help, people will leave offerings of flowers, soap cakes, perfumes, etc. on beaches or altars.

The widespread participation in the African-Brazilian religions demonstrates how the Africans learned to adapt to the European society while still retaining much of their cultural heritage. For example, a candomble priestess can often recount the history of her people in detail, tracing the happenings all the way back to the African homeland. They not only preserved their heritage, but also managed to adjust to the European influences—they created a hybrid of both. This can be seen in their gods, which have both the names of Catholic saints and African gods. For instance, the African god Olorun, chief god of the skies, is sometimes equated with the God of Catholicism. The fact that many people of European descent also participate in African-Brazilian religions shows how the Europeans also adopted many African traditions.

African influences can also be heard. Today's music in Brazil and Cuba has obvious African roots. Cuban and much of Caribbean music today has been influenced by African-inspired rhythms. The fast-paced Latin dances known as salsa and meringue developed to these rhythms. Some of the African instruments used in Brazil are the atabaque drums, the ganza (a type of rattle), and the cuica (a skin on a small drum which is pulled to make a hoarse sound), the agogo, a single or double bell played with a stick. Blacks in Brazil danced informally a dance known as the umbigada and today that dance has evolved into the samba, the national dance of Brazil. Samba is

danced by all people regardless of color or social class. Today in Brazil there is samba-rock, samba-reggae and samba-jazz-funk. In Bahia, a state in Brazil with a large Black population, there is a dance which combines the elements of African, Caribbean and Brazilian music--the lambada.

Cuisine is another area where Africans have had a profound influence on culture. Blacks brought with them their own style of cooking and also their herbs and spices. They altered Portuguese dishes in Brazil using their condiments. For example, the national dish is feijoada. It was made from leftovers from the master's dinner and added to a pot of beans and rice for the slaves. Some of the leftovers were ears, tail and feet of a pig. While feijoada was originally a poor man's meal, today this dish is considered a delicacy and people from all over the country enjoy it. It now includes a variety of delicious ingredients, such as smoked and salted meats. Another example of the African influence on food can be found on almost any street corner in Bahia. "Baianas", women from Bahia, sell sweets made of simple ingredients such as coconut, eggs, ginger, milk, cinnamon and lemon. These baianas dress in traditional white blouses and wear big full skirts as they sit and cook traditional Bahian food with a flavor of Africa.

Blacks have contributed a great deal to Latin American culture, and above we have mentioned a few of these contributions. The Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre wrote in his book *The Masters and the Slaves*, "... the influence of the African either direct or indirect or remote...is everything that is a sincere reflection of our lives."⁴ The African culture is a vital contribution to the fusion of peoples and cultures which forms modern Latin America.

⁴ Gilberto Freyre, *The Masters and the Slaves* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1978), 278.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS

10 slides and descriptions.

Nelson P. Valdes. "La Cachita y el Che: Patron Saints of Revolutionary Cuba." Encounters Vol. I (Winter 1989): 30-34.

DISCUSSION TOPICS

1. Discuss what life was like for a slave in Latin America. Did it differ from slave life in the United States South before the Civil War?
2. Why did miscegenation play such an important role in Latin American society? How did miscegenation differ in the United States?
3. What contributions have Africans made to the culture of Latin America, particularly in the Caribbean and in Brazil? What contributions have Africans made to culture in the United States?
4. What was the volume of the slave trade? Where did the slaves come from?
5. What were runaway slave communities? How difficult would it have been to escape slavery? Considering that slaves came from different parts of Africa and spoke distinct languages, how would this affect cumbes or quilombos and the unity which they required to protect their members?

ACTIVITIES

1. Have students read the subject overview and review key concepts/vocabulary as homework the night before class. Review the article with the students using the topic questions and slides included in the packet. Once reviewed, administer the recommended quiz.
2. Have students carefully reread the poem which begins the subject overview. Discuss the poem in class. What is the poet discussing? What has his life been like? What does he expect from the future - the years ahead of him? Why is it unique that the author is a slave yet also a poet? How could he have learned to write? Do students think that he is representative of the average slave? Why or why not? Why would he learn to write against the wishes of his owners (he did!)? This poet was writing for the abolitionist cause in Cuba. Would this poem have effectively persuaded the average white colonist to abolish slavery? A slave owner? This analysis could also be made into an essay assignment.
3. After reading and discussing Manzano's poem, have students write their own poem about slave life (taking inspiration in the facts presented in the subject overview). Students should be asked to read their poems out loud in class or perhaps they could be "published" as an abolitionist message.

4. Have students read the supplemental article which accompanies this unit entitled "La Cachita y el Che: Patron Saints of Revolutionary Cuba". What African cultural traits are mentioned in the article? What impact have they had on modern Cuba? Who is La Cachita? What is her other, more official name? Where does the name Oshum come from? What does it mean? Who is Oshum? Where is the history of revolutionary Cuba on display? Why? What other things are also on display there? What are the African orishas? Each orisha has a Catholic name and what other name (answer: a Yoruban name)? What is a Santo? How do they communicate to practitioners? What African orisha speaks through Fidel Castro? What is santeria? What is animism? What is an ota? How do believers in santeria get what they want from the santos? How is that different from Catholicism? Who are the babalawos? How does the Cuban revolutionary government view santeria?

5. Students may be interested in seeing the short video referenced in this unit which discusses Candomble in Brazil. Students, as an assignment, could research santeria and its impact in the large Cuban-American communities in New York and Miami. An interesting work on this subject available in paperback is Joseph M. Murphy's *Santeria: An African Religion in America*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1988.

6. Students can investigate and give oral reports on the African contributions to Carnival in Brazil. What is the importance of music, the samba, and samba dance schools to this celebration? How do Brazilians participate in and celebrate this famous festival? (Hint: many parade themes revolve around historical topics including slave life.) If Carnival is approaching (the date varies according to the celebration of the Easter holiday, but is always in the early spring), have students create a Carnival mask from construction paper. Some students may wish to compose a song which discusses slave life. See the Queiros Mattoso book referenced in the Additional Readings List for more specific historical details.

RECOMMENDED QUIZ

True or False

1. Africans were used as slaves only on sugar plantations.
2. Many slaves came from Africa's West Coast.
3. Lima and Mexico City never had large slave populations.
4. Runaway slaves were known as quilombos in Spanish America.
5. The more slaves a white colonist had, the more his social position increased.

6. It was illegal for a slave to buy his or her freedom.
7. Brazilian and Cuban music have strong African influences.
8. Different social classes and races participate in candomble ceremonies in Brazil.
9. Miscegenation was the freeing of slaves by their white owners.
10. Africans brought their condiments to the New World.

RECOMMENDED QUIZ: TEACHER'S KEY

1. F
2. T
3. F
4. F
5. T
6. F
7. T
8. T
9. F
10. T

ADDITIONAL READING LIST

Bowser, Frederick P. "Africans in Spanish American Colonial Society." In *The Cambridge History of Latin America*, Leslie Bethell, ed. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984, 357-380.

Lockhart, James and Stuart B. Schwartz. *Early Latin America: A History of Colonial Spanish America and Brazil*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

Mullen, Edward J., ed. *Juan Francisco Manzano: The Life and Poems of a Cuban Slave*. Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1981.

