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Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project

Exploring African Diaspora Religious Traditions: A Panel Discussion

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Abstract

This project is an outline of a 5-6 class unit on African diaspora religious traditions built around a panel discussion with local Haitian Vodou and Yoruba/Lukumi practitioners and community leaders. It is designed for a year-long 10th grade World Religions class at a religiously, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse independent Quaker school in downtown Brooklyn. Students prepare for the panel discussion through (1) reading and discussing the Yoruba chapter from Stephen Prothero's *God Is Not One* and excerpts on Haitian Vodou in *Working the Spirit* by Joseph M. Murphy; (2) an historical lesson on the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and life and migration within the African diaspora in the Caribbean; and (3) watching and discussing clips from the film *Legacy of the Spirits* by Karen Kramer. The panel itself ideally includes a demonstration of embodied ritual elements of the represented traditions in order to give students a visceral understanding of how the traditions are lived. Consideration is given to important issues to consider in preparing for and debriefing after the panel.

Context and Background

This project is an outline for an expansion of the current Yoruba religious traditions unit in a 10th grade year-long World Religions course that meets two 50-minute periods per week and usually has about 15 students. Our school is private, shaped by Quaker values, and is located in downtown Brooklyn, in the middle of rich religious, ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic diversity. The majority of our students tend to have a secular background, though we have students who practice a variety of religions, including African diaspora traditions. Our students are also racially and socioeconomically diverse.

The focus of the expansion is a panel presentation and discussion with local Haitian Vodou and Lukumi/Yoruba priests and community leaders. The goal of this expansion is to bring students into

face to face engagement with the people who practice African Diaspora traditions so that they can better understand how it is lived in different communities and hopefully even experience some of the sensory and embodied aspects of the traditions for themselves.

The unit on African diaspora religions will take place after units on both Hinduism and Judaism. This will lend itself to making cross-tradition connections between the questions of polytheism/monotheism and the tension between one and many; the relationship between embodiment and spirit; and the way religions are shaped by exile and diaspora. In addition, the unit will take place after students have worked on dialogue skills utilizing materials from [Generation Global](#).

Learning Objectives

- Students are familiar with some basic practices, attitudes, beliefs of African diaspora traditions and have experienced some first hand
- Students appreciate the internal diversity of these traditions as well as the way they have developed in response to the social context of slavery, violent oppression, displacement, movement and blending (syncretism)
- Students improve their ability to ask interesting and respectful questions of practitioners of a religion other than their own, as well as to engage in dialogue with religious leaders and each other.
- Students deepen their understanding of what might count as religion, how spirit and the material world might be understood in relation to one another, and how religions might suggest alternative moral frameworks to absolutism.

Unit Guide

Day 1

Students respond in writing to some questions and then share in pairs before discussing as a group:

1. Have you heard the term Vodou? What does it make you think of? Do you know what it is.
2. Do you know what religions are or practiced in West Africa?
3. Have you heard of Yoruba Religion or Orishas? What do you think they are?
4. If a group of people who practiced a certain religion were forcibly moved out of their community and kept from practicing their religion in public, how might their religion survive?

Students then read some excerpts from the Yoruba chapter in *God Is Not One* by Stephen Prothero and some short excerpts from the chapter on Haitian Vodou in *Working the Spirit* by Joseph M. Murphy.

Students reflect in writing and then group discussion:

What have you learned? What surprises you? Did you have any misconceptions before reading? How would you describe Yoruba religion and Haitian Vodou to someone who didn't know what they are?

HW: Read remaining parts of *God Is Not One* chapter and *Working the Spirit* excerpts.

Define: Orisha, divination, spirit possession, lwa, konesans, ounsi, oungan, manbo etc.

Day 2

Optional visit from history teacher to lead lesson on Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and life and migration within the African diaspora in the Caribbean, as well as migration patterns from the Caribbean to the United States.

Begin discussion of what are appropriate and important questions to ask panelists.

HW: Short reflection connecting

Students write a paragraph about what they would like to understand better about these traditions and what they would hope to get out of a panel discussion with representatives of the tradition.

Suggest three questions to ask panelists.

Day 3

Students [watch clips from a Vodou Initiation](#) and from the film *Legacy of the Spirits* by Karen Kramer (Documentary Educational Resources, 1985)

Discussion of the following questions:

- What do you notice?
- What is interesting?
- What don't you understand?
- What do you want to know more about?
- What reflects reading we did and what does not?
- What are some differences between Haitian and Cuban/Brazilian traditions?
- How do you think these traditions have been influenced by being practiced in the United States and New York in particular?
- What are some differences and similarities from other religions we've studied or your own religious experiences?

Continue discussion of appropriate and important questions to ask panelists as well as what to expect on day of panel. Share some questions with each other and discuss.

HW: Each student come to panel prepared with two questions they would be ready to ask.

Day 4 (Panel Discussion)

Arrange for students to be able to stay for 1.5 hour panel

I hope to include some of the diversity found in African diaspora religious traditions by inviting panelists similar to those we had during our institute (since school is located in Brooklyn, some of same panelists are possible), including both Vodou and Lukumi/Yoruba priests, both men and women, panelists born in the United States and those born outside the US, and those who have an academic or activist background they connect with their practice and those who do not. I hope that, as at the institute, some panelists might demonstrate some of the drumming, singing, movement, and other aspects of ritual (such as the ve-ve creation) so central to the traditions.

I would plan to speak with the panelists before the event to discuss our goals as a class and practical guidelines, asking them to talk about their everyday practice, their understanding of their tradition, challenges they have faced, etc. I would encourage demonstration of ritual to whatever degree they are comfortable but note that they should not necessarily expect all students to fully participate.

In preparing students for the panel, we will have discussed not only what kinds of questions they want to ask and what is appropriate but also the possibility of being asked to participate in ritualized music and that they are absolutely free to choose not to participate. We will also have discussed the danger of ritual practice demonstrated outside of context feeling somewhat objectifying and perhaps de-sacralizing, as well as the fact that not all experiences and interpretations of the traditions can be represented.

Days 5 and 6

One to two days will be planned after the panel discussion for debriefing and reflection. Time will be taken to respond to anything problematic or confusing that happened during the panel. In addition, students will have the chance to express how they felt about the experience and any concerns they have.

Students will be asked to respond to the following questions as well:

- What was surprising?
- What did you connect to?
- What fit with reading and film clips and what did not?
- What were the differences and similarities between the experiences and points of view of the different panelists?
- What further questions would you want to ask?

We will also take some time to do some written exercises and discussion relating to the following topics:

- What counts as religion?
- What are the options for understanding unity and manyness when it comes to the divine.
- The relationship of body and spirit and the central role of music and dance in African diaspora traditions, as well as the importance of ritual in creating spirit. (Quote from *Working the Spirit*, p. 7: “. . . diasporan liturgies are seen by their practitioners as both works for the spirit and works of the spirit. The reciprocity between community and spirit is expressed in physical work as the community works through word, music, and movement to make the spirit present.”)
- The special features of syncretic and diasporan religion

For information about the Religious Worlds of New York summer institute for teachers, and more resources to enrich your teaching on religious diversity, see: www.religiousworldsnyc.org.