

Teacher Information:

African Retentions in the Americas

Africans, torn from their homes and families, remembered their rich, cultural traditions and identities as they were forced to migrate to the Americas during the painful Middle Passage. In *Flash of the Spirit*, Robert Farris Thompson, Professor of History of Art at Yale University, states that as the Yoruba and other West and Central African ethnic groups established themselves under the debilitating, dehumanizing yoke of enslavement, they accomplished this by: “the triumph of an inexorable communal will.”

It was through this communal will, that enslaved Brazilian and American captives survived and executed their knowledge, beliefs, talents and visions in the New World. **Africanisms** or **retentions** are retained elements or practices from African culture. These retentions have often been adapted and transformed by the oppression of enslavement, and later by the convergence of other cultural groups and their practices.

A few **Africanisms** or **retentions** evident from the African past in the U.S. and Brazil are the graceful grillwork on the plantation homes shaped by African iron working methods, and the enormous fields of rice that emerged in colonial South Carolina and Georgia, from Africans who knew cultivation and technical systems from the rice growing regions of West Africa.

In Brazilian and American culture today, **Africanisms** also reflect an ingenious, innovative, creative spirit: the drumming techniques, music, dance, folklore, religion, dress, hairstyles and cuisine are some of the African **retentions** that will be explored.

Your students can click on the digital links under “Internet Links” in “Let’s Learn More About Brazil” and find the **Retentions Section**. Please encourage them to select the links based on their interests!

The Drum

The drum, the heartbeat of African music, was used to communicate between villages, to record history, comment on events, discuss people’s feelings and thoughts, and to deepen religious experiences.

A dominant feature of West and Central African drumming is the use of polyrhythms. Polyrhythm occurs when two or more different rhythms are played at once. Polyrhythms are the foundation of **jazz** music, hip-hop and many other African-American music forms in the U.S. In Brazil, polyrhythms can be heard in the pulsating drum and percussion of the samba, the national dance and music of carnival.

Body Percussion and Rhymed Chants

In the Southern states in the U.S., the use of the drum was outlawed for fear of it being used to communicate or ignite rebellions as early as 1740 in South Carolina. The enslaved Africans used their bodies as “drums” and their hands to create percussive rhythms during enslavement. “Hambone” is an example of body percussion handed down from generations, accompanying songs with rhythmic combinations. It included many body percussion sounds, in addition to the usual twisting of the hands from the thigh to the chest; it also combines stamping, patting, clapping and snapping.

Hand clapping games include: Little Sallie Walker, Looby Loo, and Miss Mary Mack. Body patting and “stepping” group routines are also featured in African American sorority and fraternity step performances.

Capoeira

(kap o WAY ra)

In Brazil, drums, a one stringed bow, the berimbau, and a caxixi or wicker rattle provide the background music for **capoeira**, a once prohibited martial art that was disguised as a dance. This dance form that originated in Angola was used by runaway enslaved Africans defending themselves against those who tried to catch them. Today, it is a stylized dance/fight performed by a pair who use graceful movements of the legs and arms designed to barely miss the opponents. During the simulated fight, the opponents never touch each other. They try to outdo each other with speed and acrobatic skills. After a few minutes of simulated fighting, a new pair of dancers enter the circle.

Call and response

This technique is used in jazz, spirituals, blues, hip-hop, stories, speeches and sermons. A lead person sings or speaks a line and the chorus replies by repeating the line or answering a question asked by the lead person. In

sermons, the congregation will repeat together what the preacher requests them to say.

Musical instruments are often included in the call and response technique. Under the Resources tab, click on the Call and Response Demonstration (in retentions section) by two Jazz musicians, Reggie Jackson and Alvin Atkinson. Reggie asks something using the piano, and Alvin answers on the drums.

In Brazil, the participating singers use a call and response format in the dances, samba de roda and the samba de coca. The solo dancers take turns dancing in the middle of a circle as the hand clapping and layering of percussive instruments continue.

Call and response is also heard in the musical accompaniment of the martial art, dance-like performance of capoeira and other Brazilian music forms.

Cuisine

During the 18th and 19th century, many African American and African-Brazilian women were food vendors who had significant parts of the market economy. They sold foods like: fruits, cakes, nuts, biscuits, pralines and other sweets. Dressed in colorful, colonial attire in Bahia, Bahian women or *Baianas*, also sold prepared foods, like *brigadeiro*, or chocolate balls. Other foods fried in dendê oil, an oil from an African palm tree grown in Brazil, were bean croquettes, fish cakes, and *acarajé*, a fried dumpling made of beans and dried shrimp. Additionally, wonderful dishes of Bahian origin are: a stew with shrimp or fish called *moqueca* (pronounced mo-kek-ka) served with rice or *feijoada* (fei-jo-a-da), a thick bean and pork stew which is the national dish of Brazil.

Enslaved Africans introduced okra, rice, sorghum or guinea corn to Southern American cuisine. European enslavers fed their captive workers as cheaply as possible with leftover foods, and discarded cuts of meat like oxtails and ham hocks. Challenged to cook good food with limited ingredients, enslaved cooks added different herbs and spices to gravies “soul food” and a delicious cuisine evolved: oxtail stew, black-eyed peas, ham hocks, gumbos, collared greens, and deep-fried chicken. In addition, barbeque, macaroni and cheese, sweet potato pies and peach cobbler are contemporary “soul food” favorites.

The Oral Tradition: Proverbs and Folktales

The oral tradition is a community's cultural tradition passed orally, from one generation to the next. It includes poetry, proverbs, folktales, legends, stories and spoken songs. Proverbs are short wise sayings that have been passed down. They are often used to teach children proper attitudes toward their elders. As the Akan people of Ghana say, "You do not give a talk to a wise child, but you tell him a proverb."

Folktales and legends were told for entertainment and to teach the young valuable lessons. Trickster tales, common in Africa for a long time, used the main character Anansi, the spider. He could turn into a man, and often would outwit his neighbors, friends and other animals. Stories about him began in the Gold Coast and arrived in Jamaica, Cuba and the United States hundreds of years ago. Another much loved trickster character in the United States was Br'er Rabbit, who was small, but always able to outsmart the larger animals like Br'er Fox and Br'er Bear.

In Brazil, the turtle appears in over 100 tales and survives his challenges, in spite of his slow pace, due to his persistence. Other animals that often appear in other folktales are: the monkey, rabbit, parrot, and the toad. They respond with great wit and speed to the mighty jaguar, the main victim of these animals.

Saci Pererê (Sah-SEE Peh-(d)eh-(D)AY) is the most famous human character in Brazilian folklore. He is a one-legged, black or brown mischievous boy who smokes a pipe and wears a magical red cap. His cap allows him to disappear and reappear. He is a prankster whose antics are annoying; however, he will grant wishes to anyone who traps him or steals his cap!

Hair Braiding

Ancient hair braiding and hair knotting in complex designs have been a part of African tradition for thousands of years. In West Africa, designs often indicated social position, age group, marital status, wealth and power. Elaborate patterns were done for special occasions, weddings, and social ceremonies.

The harsh conditions of enslavement made it difficult to continue the elaborate hair braiding traditions in America. Cornrows evolved into a

functional style of keeping the hair in place, rather than a source of pride and beauty, as in Africa.

Today, braided hairstyles have become popular throughout Brazil, Central and South America and in the United States, and a new level of popularity and style has emerged with the addition of hair weaving, (often called extensions) by adding real or synthetic hair.

Religion in the U.S.

Plantation owners tried to systematically and forcefully forbid religious African practices. Despite the religious conservatism exerted by the plantation owners, carryovers from West Africa remain in African-American churches including: emphasis on the Holy Spirit, emotional conversion, and spirit possession. Religious ceremonies played a critical part in preserving and passing on various elements of African music such as: heightened rhythm, texts sung responsively, and active, collective participation.

In African American churches in the 1800s, less common, but still present today, congregants performed the “Holy dance” and individual “shouting” in ecstasy. Enthusiastic, hand clapping, foot stomping, jumping, and “speaking in tongues” were also used. The spirituals were sung in church; their coded messages of salvation were often used to aid those escaping from enslavement, especially on the the Underground Railroad.

Candomblé in Brazil (kahn-dom-BLAY)

Even though they were baptized in the Catholic church of Brazil, Africans brought their gods, music, musical instruments and dance with them; the African-Brazilian religion of Candomblé (kahn-dom-BLAY) evolved. The gods of Candomblé are called orixás,(o-ree-SHAS) and are divine powers that govern natural forces such as water, air and fire. Yemanjá (ye-man-JA) is the goddess of the ocean and the mother of all the orixás; Xangô (shan-GO) is the god of lightening and thunder.

Each orixá has a distinct story, personality, and is associated with special food and certain colors. Many of them are also honored and identified with a Catholic saint or holy person. During ceremonies sometimes orixás take possession of Candomblé initiates’ bodies and the initiate will dance in honor of the orixá.

These are a few of the Africanisms or retentions present in the Americas. Some others that were not mentioned, but still can be traced to African antecedents are: the shotgun style houses from Haiti to New Orleans; the influence of Bantu and other African languages in English and Portuguese; the diverse hand-crafted Brazilian musical instruments, and the roles of the ancestors and elders in traditional African cultures.