

Student Information Sheet: Retentions: Our African Past

“Ancient things remain in the ears.” Proverb from Ghana, West Africa

Countee Cullen, a poet, novelist, critic and journalist was born 1903. He was an important writer during the Harlem Renaissance, a movement of unprecedented creative achievement among African-American artists during the 1920s in Harlem, New York. An excerpt from one of his most well known poems is “Heritage (For Harold Jackson.)” In it he asks:

What is Africa to me:
Copper sun or scarlet sea,
One three centuries removed
From the scenes his fathers loved.
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
What is Africa to me?

What thoughts do you have about our African past? Are you imagining the magnificence of ancient Egypt, or perhaps thinking about the trade and commerce of the West African empires of Ghana, Mali and Songhai? Would you consider living in a lush agricultural area, or a vibrant city in Benin 300 or 200 years ago? Read the following excerpts from three writers who give their impressions.

Olaudah Equiano, born in 1745 was kidnapped from Benin (present day Nigeria), later bought his freedom in 1766 in the last location of his enslavement, England. He published the best seller, *The Interesting Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vasa in 1789*. A passage from his autobiography states:

Our land is uncommonly rich and fruitful, and produces all kinds of vegetables in great abundance. We have plenty of Indian corn, and vast quantities of cotton and tobacco. Our pineapples grow without culture; they are about the size of the largest sugar-loaf and finely flavored. We also have spices of different kinds, particularly pepper, and a variety of delicious fruits that I have never seen in Europe, together with gums of various kinds and honey in abundance. All of our industry is exerted to improve those blessings of nature. Agriculture is our chief employment, and everyone, even children and our women, are engaged in it. Thus, we are all habituated to labour from our earliest years. Everyone contributes something to the common stock, and as we are unacquainted with idleness we have no beggars. . . .

Discussion Questions:

- Summarize Equianos' feelings about the crops grown in Benin.
- What was achieved by everyone participating in agriculture or farming?

R.H. Stone, an American missionary, published his book *In Africa's Forest and Jungle: Or Six Years Among the Yorubans* in 1899. Upon seeing the Yoruba city of Abeokuta (in what later became Nigeria) he wrote:

What I saw disabused my mind of many errors in regard to Africa. The city extends for nearly six miles and has a population of approximately 200,000... they were dressed and were industrious... (providing) everything that their physical comfort required. The men are builders, blacksmiths, iron-smelters, carpenters, calabash carvers, weavers, basket makers, hat makers, mat makers, traders, barbers, tanners, tailors, farmers and workers in leather and morocco... they make razors, swords, knives, hoes, billhooks, axes, arrow heads, stirrups... women most diligently follow the pursuits that custom has allotted to them. They spin, weave, trade, cook and dye cotton fabrics. They also make soap, dyes, palm oil, nut oil, all the native earthenware, and many other things used in the country.

Discussion Questions:

- How did the size, population and economic activities of the people of Abeokuta affect this writer?
- Were you surprised at some of the occupations the men and women had in Abeokuta during the late 1800s? Select and explain three of them.

Antonio de Castro Alves, was born in 1847 in Salvador, Bahia. He was an abolitionist, poet and playwright. Alves was called the "O Poeta dos Escravos" or the Slaves' Poet and died at the young age of 24 from tuberculosis. An excerpt from his famous poem, "Navio Negreiro" (Black Slave Ship) describes the journey on the Middle Passage from Africa to Brazil:

*Yesterday plain freedom
The will for power. . .
Today immense cruelty
Even not free to die . . .*

*Fastened at the same chain
Ironed, dismal serpent-
In the links of slavery.
And so, mocking from the death,
Dance the dreadful cohort
At the sound of the lash. . . Disdainful!*

*God of the unfortunates!
You tell me God,
If it is madness . . . if it is the truth
So much horror below the skies!
Oh sea, why don't you erase
With the sponge of your waves
From your mantle, that blot?
Stars! Nights! Tempest!
Roll down from the immensities
Sweep the seas, typhoon!*

Discussion Questions:

- How does Castro Alves describe the past and present condition of the enslaved?
- What is a powerful image in this excerpt?