



UNION

Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project

Understanding the Misunderstood: Teaching Vodou in the Haitian Revolution and Beyond

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Abstract

This project incorporates the study of Haitian Vodou into an existing chapter on the Haitian Revolution in our 9th-grade Honors History course. Our general unit on the Atlantic Revolutions, comprising a week-long study each of the American, French, Haitian, and Latin American revolutions at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century, will have to be modified in order to accommodate the two-day study on Haitian Vodou.

The overall purpose of this project is to introduce Haitian Vodou to the 9th-grade Honors History students, to dispel the stereotypes propagated by popular culture, to teach specifically on the role that the Bois Caïman / Bwa Kayiman Vodou ceremony had at the start of the Haitian Revolution, and to trace the diffusion of Haitian Vodou to the American continent, while informing the students on major beliefs and behaviors of Vodou practitioners / sévi lwa in both America and Haïti today.

Description of Course

9th-grade Honors History at Marlborough School begins with the Early Modern Era and continues through the beginning of the 20th century. 11th-grade History courses are devoted to the world history of the 20th and 21st centuries which allows 9th graders to do deeper dives into the period from 1450-1900. Centered around the theme of *Revolution*, the course opens with the Protestant Reformation, followed by the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment, considered the Humanitarian Revolution, which in turn ushers in the Atlantic Revolutions (during which Haitian Vodou will be inserted into the curriculum in the Fall as students learn about the Haitian Revolution.) After a unit on the Islamic Empires (known more infamously as the “Gunpowder Empires”) that feature the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal Empires, the course continues through the Industrial Revolution that radically alters most civilizations throughout the world and leads to the twentieth century, which is where our course closes.

Description of Students in Course

Marlborough School is a 7th-12th-grade independent, all girls' school in Los Angeles, California. The majority of students come from privileged backgrounds, though several young women are awarded full scholarships to attend our institution each year from underprivileged and lower-income areas of Los Angeles, most of whom are Latina. For the most part, the students are quite aware of their privilege and are encouraged both in and out of the classroom to discuss the responsibilities that come with having access to so many resources. These are intellectually-curious young women who seek out activism in their community and who strive to be their best selves inside the classroom. That said, while they are quite advanced in general civic education and are trained to stay informed in current events, the role of religion is a weak spot for most students. Our History Department is striving to go beyond the "dates and doctrines" approach in order to provide a more realistic picture of the significance that religion plays, not only in history, but in their own community.

Essential Questions

The Essential Questions for the general Atlantic Revolutions unit are as follows:

- What constitutes a Revolution?
- How might one evaluate the success and failure of a Revolution?
- What are the long-term, short-term, and immediate causes of the revolutions under study?
- What are the long-term, short-term, and immediate effects of the revolutions under study?
- Evaluate the major similarities and differences in the political, economic, and social structures that exist in at least two revolutions under study.

The purpose of adding a two-day unit on Haitian Vodou during the lesson on the Haitian Revolution will supply the students with two more Essential Questions:

- How significant is the Vodou ceremony at Bois Caïman to the context of the Haitian Revolution?
- Describe the major aspects of the lived religion of Haitian Vodou in contemporary America.

Materials Needed

- The *Choices* lesson on the Haitian Revolution
- Slides Presentation on the *beliefs* and *behaviors* of Haitian Vodou
- Select images and excerpts from *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou* by the Los Angeles Fowler Museum of Cultural History
- Pictures to share from the Vodou Symposium at the Centre Culturel, Traditionel, and Spirituel (July '19)
- The article on Haitian Vodou from Pluralism.org

- The video and article on Haitian Vodou from *The Guardian*
- The article on ancient Haitian Vodou traditions from *National Geographic*
- The Catholic image of Saint Lazarus and his Haitian Vodou counterpart, Papa Legba
- Vinn Diagram between Catholicism and Haitian Vodou

Two-Day Lesson Plan (each class is 70 minutes)

Day One

- * Students will have just studied the general political and social causes of the Haitian Revolution (by reading their textbook and excerpts from the Choices curriculum) the day or two before, and now students will focus their attention on the cultural cause and the Vodou ceremony at Bois Caïman.
- * Students will individually fill out a Stereotypes / Truths / Questions Chart on Haitian Vodou and, when discussing the stereotypes, they will use the formula: “I have heard a stereotype about ...” to which the instructor will ask: “Where did you get this information from / how did you hear about this stereotype?”
- * The instructor will present a Brief Slides Presentation on the West African origins of Vodou and its roots in Benin, the major *beliefs* and *behaviors* of Haitian Vodou practitioners, as well as the events of Bois Caïman as a catalyst for the Haitian uprising
- * To bolster their comprehension, students will work in pairs on the worksheet of main terms: lwa, houngan, manbo, Bondye, sévi lwa, veve, mounting
- * The instructor will use excerpts from the introduction to *Nan Domi: An Intimate’s Journey into Haitian Vodou* by Mimerose Beaubrun as both a primary and secondary source and students will evaluate one primary source according to its origin and purpose
- * For homework, students will read two articles (one from Pluralism.org and the other from National Geographic) and will write a reader response to what they found the most surprising about Haitian Vodou

Day Two

- * Students will pair-share their reader responses to both articles on Haitian Vodou
- * The instructor will explain the term *syncretism* and explain the relationship between Haitian Vodou and Catholicism
- * Students will complete a Vinn Diagram between Haitian Vodou and Catholicism, to be fleshed out in a larger class conversation with the instructor

Students will be asked, in pairs, to evaluate an image of the Catholic Saint Lazarus (description then analysis) before evaluating the same image as Papa Legba

- * After a brief review of *beliefs* and *behaviors*, reinforcing some of the major key terms from the day before, the Instructor will show the brief video of Haitian Vodou from [The Guardian](#) in order to illustrate the concept of *belonging*.
- * Students will be asked to take notes focused on the notion of *belonging* in Haitian Vodou in Haiti (with particular focus on the white French woman's role as a manbo and the gay Haitian sévi lwa) before discussing in a respectful, student-led roundtable their thoughts on *belonging to* this religion
- * Images of objects from Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou will be distributed to pairs of students and they will evaluate them as primary objects according to purpose and historical context
- * The instructor will share the images and video taken from his own experience at a Haitian Vodou ceremony in Brooklyn during the summer of 2019 and describe his takeaways to the class
- * Students will wrap up this brief Haitian Vodou unit by a discussion on the importance of talking about the significance of the study of this lived religion, what takeaways they will remember, and how it helps better inform their worldview as young women and citizens of this country

Day Three

- * If possible, invite a leader within the Haitian Vodou community (ideally, local) to class or to a FlexTime to discuss Haitian Vodou as a lived religion and to field any questions.
 - This would require appropriate preparation for both the students and the guest speaker so an activity would be removed from Day Two's lesson to accommodate the rules and perimeters of what to expect when a guest speaker comes to class

Closing Thoughts:

“The best thing that ever happened to racism was Vodou.” Ira Lowenthal, anthropologist

“Haiti is 70% Catholic, 30% Protestant, and 100% Vodou.” Common Haitian saying

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