



**UNION**

*Religious Worlds of New York* • *Curriculum Development Project*

## Religion in West Africa and the African Diaspora

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### Abstract

This 4 day sub-unit explores African traditional religion as the roots of the Vodou tradition in Haiti. Drawing on a range of primary and secondary sources (see texts and links below) the lessons introduce students to both the historical and contemporary expression of traditional religion in West Africa, and give an academic introduction to Haitian Vodou (sometimes known as “Voodoo”). The lessons conclude with a reflection on how these practices in Africa and Haiti show evidence of cultural diffusion.

This lesson plan is part of a larger unit on African religions that includes other sub-units on Christianity and Islam. The class also has a significant unit on the Transatlantic slave trade. This slavery unit is essential for students to understand how the tradition diffused to Haiti and also the challenges adherents faced once in the new world. The course is a two semester African History designed for upper-level high school students (grades 11 and 12) in a boarding school. Enrolled in this course is usually a mixture of African, African-American and other students.

### Unit Plan

**Day 1:** Introduce major themes of African Traditional Religions and view art. For an outline of the major themes of African traditional religions, see **Document 1** below.

View images from this exhibit catalogue: [Embodying the Sacred in Yoruba Art](http://www.kean.edu/~gallery/docs/Yoruba%20Art%20Catalogue.pdf)  
(<http://www.kean.edu/~gallery/docs/Yoruba%20Art%20Catalogue.pdf>)

Questions such as the following can be used to guide students: What materials were used? What are the objects? What purpose do the objects serve? Do you notice any unifying stylistic themes? [Note: the catalogue includes helpful text for teacher reference; the text is probably too long for a home-work assignment, but you may choose to assign some portion as reading for students]

Homework: read a selection of Yoruba, Fon, and Ashanti oral traditions. For sample myths, see **Document 2** below.

**Day 2:** In class discuss the oral traditions. What important themes were mentioned? What can we tell of the worldview of these people? What are important differences between the stories? How are important facets of culture introduced? What is the difference between the words “myth,” “folklore” and “stories”? Do any of these terms help us understand these texts and their role?

Homework: view this [video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IqQFHmvMOUg) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IqQFHmvMOUg>) of a contemporary Nigerian ritual. Use the following questions to help generate a paragraph response to this video. Who was involved in this ritual? What was the setting? What were some of the activities performed? Did you see any connection between this ritual and the myths that we discussed? Was there any connection between this ritual and the art we previously viewed?

**Day 3:** In class discuss responses to the assigned material and introduce the cultural diffusion of the African diaspora. Students can begin the conversation about the video and art exhibit with their responses to the question prompts completed for homework. Students will be able to recognize several objects from the video and art exhibit as similar: the beaded crowns, divination bowl and authority staffs. How did seeing the objects in the ritual help clarify their purpose? Introduce Diaspora religion. For notes, see **Document 3**

Homework: Read *Introduction to Voodoo* (**Document 4** below) and watch this [interview](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-9P4YXITCyQ) with Rachel Beauvoir-Dominique (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-9P4YXITCyQ>)

Optional Homework: view and analyze [veve drawings](https://uwm.edu/africology/wp-content/uploads/sites/203/2015/06/Symbols-Adinkra-and-VeVe.pdf) found at <https://uwm.edu/africology/wp-content/uploads/sites/203/2015/06/Symbols-Adinkra-and-VeVe.pdf>

**Day 4:** In class discuss African diaspora religion: what are the central themes of Vodou? How do they reflect African origins? How do they reflect the New World setting? How does this description of Vodou differ from stereotypes of “Voodoo” in popular culture?

Homework: Write a one page reflection on the connection between African Traditional Religions and Vodou. The following questions may help guide your work: What are some areas of continuity and change regarding African Traditional Religions and Vodou? How do the various elements of story, ritual and religious objects work together to inform you about these religions? What questions would you want to ask to know more?

## Document 1

Background notes on African Traditional Religions [for reference, see: [African Religions: A Very Short Introduction](#) by Jacob K. Olupona]

- 1) Variety: the African continent is vast, with a social history that dates to the earliest origins of humanity. African traditional religions reflect this rich history and diversity, thereby defying easy categorization. All three words in the phrase “African Traditional Religions” could be seen as problematic since they are overly broad generalizations.
- 2) Common characteristics include a world with three levels: the sky realm (abode of the gods); the human realm, and the earth realm (which may include an underworld). Therefore humans exist in relationship with the gods, the ancestors and other spirits.
- 3) Sacred authority often rests with kings, priests, diviners, healers and prophets. Not every tradition will have all of these roles and two roles may be combined at times in a single person. Belief in witchcraft as a source of damaging power is widespread. Important information about the tradition is handed down orally.
- 4) Rituals and rites of passage that are celebrated across the globe are also present on the African continent. These vary from place to place but are centered around births, initiation, marriages, deaths, weather, successful crops and festivals. The presence of costumes, drumming, music and dancing is common.
- 5) Traditional customs are subject to constant change. Outside influences are felt in every society and among the most powerful of these have been the introduction of Christianity and Islam. The impact of the slave trade, colonization and imperialism is difficult to overstate. One measure of the value of traditional customs is not in their antiquity but in their living practice as an expression of the community. Therefore, what is called “traditional” is a set of evolving practices which hold in tension continuity and change.

## Document 2

Selected African Myths from [A Treasury of African Folklore](#), by Harold Courlander.

### ***Sun God Brings Iron (Fon)***

I do not know if Mawu is a man or a woman. History tells that Mawu created the world. Then when the world was created, Mawu withdrew from the earth and went to live in the sky. After living in the sky, Mawu did not care to come down and live on earth again. But on earth nothing went well. Human beings did not understand how to do things for themselves. They quarreled.

They fought. They did not know how to cultivate the fields, nor how to weave cloth to cover their bodies.

So Mawu sent her only child down to earth. This child's name was Lisa. Now, Gu is not a god.\* Gu is metal. Now, to her son Lisa, Mawu gave metal, and she told Lisa to go down to the earth and cut the bush with this metal, and teach men how to use it to make useful things.

So he came down, and with him he took Gu, this metal given by his mother. With the help of Gu, Lisa cut down trees, and cleared the bush and got the fields ready. Then he built houses. And when all was done, he said to all men that his mother's words were, "Without metal men cannot live." So Lisa remade the world; and he told all men, "To overcome obstacles, you must learn to use metal." When he said this, he went back to the sky. Lisa returned to his mother and gave her back the cutlass called gubasa, which was made of iron.

Mawu said: "Gold is a costly metal. All other metals are dear, too. But iron must serve all mankind." And Mawu said that as Lisa was a good son, and had carried out his mission well, he would have as his reward the Sun to live in. From there Lisa keeps watch over the universe. Gu went with Lisa to the Sun, to serve as his sword. This was a gift from Mawu to Lisa so that Lisa might do his work in the world. From that day onwards this cutlass has been called Ali-su-gbo-gu-*kle*: The-road-is-closed-and-Gu-opens-it.

*\*in other sources Gu is identified as the deity associated with iron*

### ***Iron is Received from Ogun (Yoruba)***

The orishas and the people were living there in the land created by Obatala. They did the things that are required in life, orishas and humans alike. They hunted, cleared the land so that they could plant, and they cultivated the earth. But the tools they had were of wood, stone or soft metal, and the heavy work that had to be done was a great burden. Because there were more people living at Ife than in the beginning, it was now necessary to clear away trees from the edge of the forest to make more room for planting.

Seeing what had to be done, the orishas met to discuss things. It was said: "Let one of us begin the great task by going out to fell trees and clear the land. When this has been done we can plant our fields."

All agreed except for Olokun, who said: "Do what you want, but it has nothing to do with me, for my domain is the water. The land and the trees were not my doing."

Osanyin, the orisha of medicine, said, "I will clear the first field." He took his bush knife and went out to the trees and began his work. But his bush knife was made of soft metal and it would not cut deeply. After a while it became twisted and bent and it would not cut at all. He returned and said to the other orishas: "I began the work, but the wood is too hard. My bush knife is defeated."

So Orisha-Oko, the orisha of the open fields, spoke, saying: "My bush knife is strong. I will cut the trees." He went out. He worked. The sharpness went out of his bush knife. He returned. He said: "Yes, it was the same with me. My bush knife is dull and twisted."

Then Eshu with the powerful body took up his bush knife and went into the bush. He remained there for a while, and when he returned they saw that his bush knife was broken and bent, He said: "I cleared brush and dislodged stone,s but the metal of my bush knife is not hard enough, it lacks spirit."

One by one the other orishas went out and tried, but the metal of their knives was too soft. They said: "What kind of a world are we living in? How can we survive in this place?"

Until now Ogun, who had been given the secret of iron, said nothing. But when the other orishas had tried and failed he took up his bush knife and went out. He slashed through the heavy vines, felled the trees and cleared the forest from the land. The field grew larger, the edge of the forest receded. Ogun worked on until the darkness began to fall. Then he returned. When he arrived he displayed his bush knife. It glittered even in the greyness that precedes the night. It was straight and its edge was sharp.

The orishas said, "What is the wonderful metal lying within your knife?"

Ogun answered: "The secret of this metal was given to me by Orunmila. It is called iron."

They looked at his knife with envy. They said, "If we had the knowledge of iron nothing would be difficult."

Ogun constructed a forge in his house. Because he was a hunter he forged an iron spear for the killing of game and a knife to cut away the hides. Because he was a warrior he also forged weapons of war. As for the other orishas, neither their hunting weapons nor their battle weapons were good. They had to rely on traps to catch their game, and often, when their luck was not good, they had no meat at all.

The orishas discussed Ogun's secret on and on, saying, "If we had the knowledge of iron we would be equal with Ogun." And afterwards they would say to Ogun, "Give us iron so that we too can be great in hunting and war."

Ogun always answered: "The secret of iron was entrusted to me by Orunmila. He said nothing about giving it to others." And so for a long time Ogun remained the sole master of the spear, the bush knife and other weapons.

The orishas did not give up importuning Ogun. At last they came to his house and said: "You, Ogun, are the father of iron. Be our father also. We need a chief. Become our ruler, and in exchange for our loyalty and service give us the knowledge of making iron."

Ogun considered everything. One day he announced that he would accept what they were offering. So they made him their ruler. He became the Oba of orishas in Ife and all the surrounding territories. Ogun taught them the making of iron. He built forges for them and showed them how to make spears, knives, hoes and swords. Soon every orisha had iron tools and weapons. Then humans began to come from distant places asking for the secret of iron. Ogun gave them the knowledge of forging. A time came when every hunter and warrior had an iron spear.

But though Ogun had accepted the chieftaincy over the orishas, he was above all else a hunter. And so when the knowledge of the forge had been given out, he clothed himself in the skins of animals he had killed and returned to the forest to get game. He was gone many days. Life in the forest was hard. He slept on the ground or in trees. He pursued the animals a great distance, arriving at last at a place called Oke-Umo, near where the city of Ilesha now stands. There he caught up with his game. He killed many animals, skinned them and cut up the meat. After that he returned home.

When he came out of the forest he was dirty, his hair was matted, and the skins he wore were smeared and spotted with the blood of his game.

The orishas saw him arriving. They said: "Who is this dirty stranger coming from the forest? Surely it is not Ogun, whom we selected to be our chief?" They were displeased with Ogun. They said: A ruler should appear in dignity. His clothes should be clean. His hair should be oiled and combed. How then can we acknowledge this unclean person as the one who rules us?"

The orishas turned away from Ogun. They went to his house, saying to him: "We expressed faith in you by making you our Oba. But now you are indistinguishable from the lowliest hunter, and the air around you reeks of dead flesh. What we gave we now take away. You are our Oba no longer."

Ogun said: "When you needed the secret of iron you came begging me to be your chief. Now that you have iron you say that I smell of the hunt."

The other orishas went away. Ogun took off his hunting clothes made of animal skins. He bathed, and when he was clean he put on clothes made of palm fronds. He gathered his weapons and departed. At a distant place called Ire he built a house under an akoko tree, and there he remained.

The human beings who had received the secret of iron from Ogun did not forget him. In December of every year they celebrate, in his honor, the festival of Iwude-Ogun. Hunters, warriors and blacksmiths, and many others as well, make sacrifices to Ogun as their special protector. They offer food at the foot of an akoko tree. They call him Ogun Onire, meaning Ogun the Owner of the Town of Ire. And they display animal skins and palm fronds in memory of how Ogun was rejected by the other orishas after he had given them the knowledge of the forge.

### ***The Coming of the Yams (Ashanti)***

There were not always yams in Ashanti. In ancient times, it is said, there were none, and the people often found it hard to raise enough food to last them the year round.

But one day a traveler came through the country carrying a yam among his possessions. This yam was seen by an Ashanti named Abu. It made him think. "If we had this yam growing in our country, we would have something really worthwhile," Abu told his friends. "We wouldn't have to fear famine the way we do now." And Abu decided to search for yams so that his people could plant them.

He took his weapons and began his journey. He walked for many days. Everywhere he went, he asked people if they knew where he could find the country where the yams grew. Sometimes they told him it was this way; sometimes they told him it was the other way. It was a long journey. But at last he found it. He looked at the fields and saw yams growing everywhere. He asked people where he would find the king, and they directed him. He went to the king's house and explained why he had come.

"In my country there are no yams," Abu said, "and the people are often hungry. If you could give me some yams to take back we could plant them, and there would be no more hunger."

The king listened and considered. He said, "I will think about it." And he had Abu put up and cared for in his guesthouse.

After several days, the king sent for Abu and said: "I would like to help your people, but when they are well fed and strong, they may think of going to war against their weaker neighbors."

"This would not happen," Abu said, "because my people are peaceful. And is it not true that people who are hungry may go to war to relieve their misery?"

"Still, if they are ambitious, I would be risking a great deal to help you," the king said. "However, if you will bring me a man from your tribe to live here as a hostage, I will give you the yams."

So Abu returned to Ashanti, and he went to his father's house and told him what he had learned. He said: "Father, you have many sons. Send one of them as a hostage to the king of the yam country, and then we can have yams to feed the people."

But the father could not bring himself to send any of his sons into exile, and he refused. Abu went next to his brothers and told them of the offer of the king of the yam country. He asked them to send one of their sons as a hostage, but like their father they turned away and refused.

So in desperation Abu journeyed again to the yam country and told the king he couldn't find anyone to act as a hostage. The king was firm. He said, "Then I am sorry, but I can't give you the yams without security."

Abu returned home sadly, for he saw no solution. And when he came again to his village, he remembered his sister, who had only one son. He went to her and told her the story. She said to Abu, "I have only one son, and if he should go, I would have none."

Abu said: "Then we are lost. You are the last hope. In many lands there are yams. Here there are none, and the people are doomed to be hungry." His sister listened while he told how yams would change the life of the people. At last Abu's sister consented.

Then he returned to the king of the yam country with his sister's son and gave him as a hostage. The king took the boy into his own house, and he gave Abu yams to take home in exchange.

When Abu came back to Ashanti, he gave the people yams to plant, and they were glad. The yams grew and were harvested, and there was plenty to eat. The yam became the most important of all the crops grown in Ashanti.

As for Abu, he declared: "My father refused to send a son as hostage in exchange for the yams. Each of my brothers refused to send a son. Henceforth I will have nothing further to do with my father or my brothers. It was my sister who gave a son so that we might not go hungry. She will be honored. When I die, all of my property will be given to my nephew who lives in the yam country, for he is the one who made it possible for us to eat."

And so it was that when Abu died, his cattle and his land passed on not to his son or his brothers, but to his nephew, the child of his sister. As for the people of Ashanti, they said: "Abu has done a great thing for us in bringing the yams to our country. We shall therefore do as Abu has done, in memory of his great deed." And from that time onward, when a man died he left all he owned to his sister's son. In honor of Abu the Ashanti people now call the family by the name *abu-zue*, meaning "borrowed from Abu." This is how it came about among the Ashanti people that boys inherit property not from their fathers but from their [maternal] uncles.

## Document 3

Background notes on Religion in the African Diaspora from Working the Spirit by Joseph Murphy

- 1) Haiti was an important conduit for religious practice in the African diaspora because of the sheer number of African slaves that were brought continuously to the region for 300 years. Many of those slaves came from the west coast of Africa, including areas now known as Ghana, Benin, Togo and Nigeria. A central practice of slaveholders was to forcibly strip the enslaved of their cultural traditions. The successful slave rebellion in Haiti (1791-1804) allowed the survivors of slavery to practice their traditions openly for about 60 years before the reintroduction of Catholicism.
- 2) Catholic influence after the revolution led to a blended or creolized expression of the traditions. For example, the many saints of Catholicism merged with, or were seen to represent, the many deities of African descent.
- 3) The Haitian practice of “voodoo” or “vodou” (“spirit”) was seen as frighteningly dangerous by most Europeans and Americans outsiders, thus beginning the characterization of the practice as some kind of nefarious sorcery.
- 4) Vodou is inherently decentralized. Trying to define a specific set of practices is difficult.
- 5) Adherents belong to a specific lineage, “house” or “family” which includes ancestors. At one point these groups consisted of biological family members but this has changed, likely due to the disruption of slavery.
- 6) Spirit possession is a way that an individual is called by the spirit to enter into service; it is both a blessing and a responsibility.
- 7) Services are held for specific days of remembrance, celebration or requests for help. Services may include music, song and dance, blessed/shared food and the invocation of spirits and ancestors.
- 8) The preceding list is a gross generalization but shows the general scope of vodou services to be not unlike many other traditions around the world that seek to unite the living with the realm of the spiritual for mutual benefit.

## Document 4

“Voodoo” excerpt from Encyclopedia of Religion in America, ed Lippy & Williams vol. 4, pp. 2291-4

### Voodoo

Voodoo traces its origins back to traditional spiritual practices of West Africa. *Vodu* refers to its African origins, *vodun* to its Caribbean expressions, and *voodoo* to its development in North America. The latter word has come to refer to a variety of magico-religious customs, reflecting African roots

and New World adaptations. For the Eon-speaking peoples of Dahomey (now the republic of Benin), *vodu* refers to a god, a spirit, or a sacred object. *Vodu* refers to different deities and to a system of religious belief and ritual through which the gods could possess humans who then danced to the movements of the gods. The name suggests “spiritual forces.” In this African worldview, humans interacted with spirits of trees and rivers, and the ghosts of dead ancestors continued to intervene in the lives of descendants. Humans had easy access to spiritual forces for decision making and for achieving healing from harmful forces. Spirit possession was an essential feature of West African religion. In particular rituals individual men and women would allow a deity to enter their bodies. When these persons spoke, it was believed that the deity was determining what was said. The West African tradition gave much authority to fate, with divination considered useful in understanding a person’s destiny, and a sorcerer could often help an individual circumvent an unhappy future. Slaves brought the religion to the New World, and its early history in North America focuses on the South, specifically New Orleans, the Carolina and Georgia Low Country, and rural plantation districts with large slave populations.

### ***Nineteenth Century: Arrival and Growth of Voodoo in America*** **Arrival of Voodoo in New Orleans**

Voodoo, like other circum-Caribbean religions based in African traditions such as Santeria, Shango, and Candomble, had a pantheon of gods and spirits, priests and priestesses who conducted services, a congregation of the faithful, and a defined belief system. Its essentials came to the French Louisiana colony with the earliest slaves. In the first decade of the nineteenth century, some ten thousand people fled the slave uprising that led to the new republic of Haiti and arrived in New Orleans, bringing the Haitian vodou religious traditions with them and easily melding them with the Louisiana version. Haitian vodou began on sugar plantations at the height of the slave trade, with huge African populations and small numbers of French planters. The demographics enabled the recently arrived Africans to replenish their spiritual traditions in the New World for generations. The Roman Catholic Church of the French planters acknowledged the humanity of the Africans and sent priests to convert them, leading to a syncretic faith in which sorcerers from West Africa and their descendants thrived and priests and priestesses became powerful political and social leaders.

The Roman Catholicism of French New Orleans similarly interacted with this African-based religion, resulting in a syncretic new tradition that became voodoo. Slaves received instruction in Catholicism in New Orleans and found congenial its conception of a supreme deity, angels, and saints-- of whom they could relate to their own spiritual being. Just as they had prayed to spiritual beings as intermediaries to higher gods, so they embraced the Virgin Mary as intercessor to Jesus; Africans honored their deities with festivals and prayed for practical assistance, and Catholicism offered parallel experiences. Evidence suggests that nineteenth-century voodoo practitioners identified specific Catholic saints with African deities. Marie Laveau called St. Peter “Laba,” or “Papa Limba,” terms that may have been variants of Legba, a Dahomean spirit who is the guardian of entrances, gate keeper to the spirit world, and a well-known figure in blues music lore as the protector at Mississippi Delta crossroads. The other African deity, in addition to Legba, who appeared often in New Orleans voodoo was Damballa, also called “Li Grand Zombi” and symbolized by the serpent. The snake was at the center of New Orleans voodoo, its image seen in homes of voodoo practitioners; it was a central part of ritual altars throughout the nineteenth century.

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