

Rituals/Traditions with Gullah religion  
Joyce Bettencourt/AB Hart Middle School  
Sixth Grade

## OVERVIEW

During the late 1600s, English settlers in the new colonies needed more workers to farm thousands of acres of land on Sea Island plantations. Although some of the workers were Native Americans, most were Africans brought to the American colonies as enslaved Africans. South Carolina provided some of the main ports for the European ships that carried people from West Africa and the West Indies.

Many West Africans were skilled farmers and builders. Plantation owners wanted people from this region to farm indigo, rice and cotton. Rice, a crop that the Africans had cultivated for centuries, was highly desired throughout the world. By 1700, rice became a major export from the Sea Islands. At this time rice was almost as profitable as gold. It brought great wealth to the families who owned the plantations. Although the slaves provided the much needed labor, they were not paid for their work. However, Africans were rich in something that money could not buy. They were rich in their cultural heritage they brought with them from their homeland.

Gullah communities are located where enslaved Africans once lived and worked on Sea Island plantations that were owned by American colonists. Native Americans were also part of these communities. The unique blend of the West African culture, combined with European and Native American influences, resulted in the distinct culture that is known as Gullah.

After the Civil War ended in 1865, slaves were freed. Since most plantation owners were not able to produce crops without slave labor, some of the land was sold to plantation workers. Most of those who remained on the islands made a living by farming and fishing. They had little contact with the mainland because the only way to travel off the island was by boat. Given this geographic separation, Native Islanders were able to sustain their folkways and language.

In the 1950s, bridges were built to connect some of the South Carolina and Georgia Sea Islands to the mainland. The bridges provided access to the new resorts that had been developed in the coastal area. Island communities became more modern with the arrival of outsiders and the introduction of new technologies, such as radio and television.

There is no island in South Carolina named Gullah Island. Gullah is a culture that is associated with the Low country area of South Carolina. The Gullah people of the Low country and coastal areas of South Carolina are culturally the most distinctive African American population in the United States. The Gullah language, spoken by some of the Low country African Americans, is a combination of King's English, American English, and an African dialect. The Gullah culture is most prevalent in the Low country area of South Carolina around Charleston, Beaufort, and the surrounding islands and towns

Gullah, also referred to as Geechee in some parts of the South, are the descendants of African slaves brought to the United States by European planters during the 18th and 19th centuries. Many still live on or near islands off the coasts of South Carolina, Georgia, and North Florida. The Gullah represents a unique branch of black history.

Because they have preserved so much of their African cultural history, they are arguably the most authentic African-American community in the United States.

You don't have to go far on the island to find someone selling sweet grass baskets, a thousand-year-old art form. In fact, many of the basket weavers still use tools made of bone as they practice this ancient craft. Gullah food is also reminiscent of African cooking. Traditional fares include such ingredients as rice, okra, shark, and field and pigeon peas. And then there is the Gullah language. Gullah is the only surviving English-based Creole in North America. It is part Elizabethan English and part African, spoken very quickly and rhythmically, making it difficult to understand, even to those who grew up around it.

In the 1950s, bridges were built to connect some of the South Carolina and Georgia Sea Islands to the mainland. The bridges provided access to the new resorts that had been developed in the coastal area. Island communities became more modern with the arrival of outsiders and the introduction of new technologies, such as radio and television.

The development of the land and increased tourism caused the decline of farming and fishing. Many Native Islanders now work at the local resorts or in the coastal towns and cities. Many feel that their traditions and language are endangered, the Gullah have survived change and held onto their past.

This five day unit is on the focus on a Gullah tradition within their Christian religion.

**SUGGESTED READING FOR TEACHERS**

Garvin Fields, M., Fields, K. (1983). *Lemon Swamp and Other Places: A Carolina Memoir*. New York, New York: The Free Press

Joyner, C. (1984) *Down by the Riverside*. Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press.

## **SOCIAL STUDIES SCOPE AND SEQUENCE**

Regions and People of the World Regions. The concentration is geographic rather than historic. Students study some of the earliest people who lived in each region in order to understand how humans interacted with the environmental conditions at that time. Connections are made to present-day world regions including characteristics of government and economic interactions.

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### **Standards**

Strand II – People in Societies

Describe how the customs and traditions of immigrant and other groups have shaped American life.

Compare the gender roles, religious ideas or class structures in two societies.

### **Scope**

Five day unit for 40 minute class periods

### **Unit Goals:**

Students will understand and discuss the definition of ritual and tradition.

Students will list rituals and traditions they experience in their lives.

Students will compare their rituals and traditions with the religions from prior lessons, Christianity, Islam, Judaism

Students will use their writing and oral skills.

Students will listen to guest speaker and interview speaker with prewritten questions.

Students will create an essay as a final project using what they have learned for the week.

### **Vocabulary:**

Ritual: A form or systems of rites. The baptism, marriage, and burial.

Tradition: A handing down of beliefs, traditions, and customs.

Seek

Spiritual Mother

Dream Interpretation

## **Lesson 1**

**Motivation:** Students understand the difference between ritual and tradition and recall rituals and traditions of their own and share with the class.

### **Daily Objectives:**

Students will define the words in the dictionary independently.

Students discuss the definition and understand the definition.

Students create a list of their rituals and tradition.

Students share their lists with the class.

### **Learning Activities:**

Involve the class in a discussion.

Students homework will be to go and ask their guardians to list more traditions and rituals in their family.

**Materials:** Dictionary, pen, paper

### **Discussion Questions:**

Questions should link to compare their rituals and traditions among the class.

How do some of your traditions relate to some of the things we have learned in the past.

How do some of the rituals you listed relate to the cultures and religions we have learned from the past.

## **Lesson 2**

### **Objectives:**

Discuss the homework activity.

Review tradition and ritual definitions.

Students will write down one of their dreams that they can recall.

Students will listen to the tradition of a seek from teacher.

Students will participate in discussion.

**Learning Activities:**

Recall definitions of tradition and ritual

Students will listen to teacher discuss the concepts of seek.

Share the seek story of Bishop Jefferson. Ask questions about what they thought of the story.

Students will take notes.

Have students write down their opinion of this tradition with a minimum of two paragraphs. Students will follow their writing standards.

Students will voluntarily share their opinions.

**Materials:**

Pen and paper

Overview of a seek for teacher

**Overview for teachers:****Seeking****Before becoming a Christian one must perform a Seek**

- Not used as common tradition today on the Sea Islands

What is a seek?

- Sherman Pyatt provided a short explanation of seeking in his book Dictionary & Catalog of African American Folk life of the South.

- Seek or Seeking Jesus – Several Sea Island residents explained that many African Americans sought their confirmation with God by going out into the wilderness or a secluded area and pray for several hours.

- In my short interview with Mr. Pyatt, who is also the archivist at the Avery Institute, he stated the seek was not a rite of passage because it was not forced. A person was not forced to become a Christian.

A seek was generally at the age of 12 but can be older.

- One would choose on his or her own to seek Jesus to become a Christian.
- A spiritual mother would be appointed to be the spiritual leader and interpret the dreams.
- The one performing the seek would go into the wilderness to dream.
- In the very early morning with a white band around their head to hold the dream in they would visit the spiritual mother to share the dream.
- If it was a victorious dream and the confirmation of finding Jesus was interpreted by the Spiritual Mother it was accepted. The seeker would then go before the Right Hand Of Fellowship at church to begin their catechism.
- If the dream was not accepted by the Spiritual Mother one would have to continue to go to the wilderness and dream until they found Jesus. This could go on for months if needed.

- Why twelve years old?

–Per Sherman Pyatt, the bible stated that at the age of 12 Jesus wandered from family. He was found in a church seeking his father, God.

- What was the significance of the white band around the head after a dream?

–The white band that held the dreams in one's head was symbolic of purity and sterilization.

## **A Story of Seeking**

- Bishop Jefferson, Garden of Prayer Pentecostal Church, told us that his mother, Rebecca Bailem Jefferson, performed a seek.

- She performed her seek in 1959 at the age of 43.

- She went into the wilderness for four days during hurricane Gacy

- Her dream

–A spider came down and wrapped its web around her wrist and cut the wrist. She was entangled in the web.

- The interpretation of the Spiritual Mother

–The spider was Jesus

**Discussion Questions:**

What other ways the dream could have been interpreted?

How do you feel about this tradition?

**Lesson 3 – Video Conference with someone who experienced a seek from Charleston, SC. Contact Avery Institute for contact.**

**Objectives:**

Students will participate in a video conference with Loretta Fleming.

Students will participate in interviewing the guest speaker.

Students will take notes on the guest speakers answers.

**Teaching Strategies:** Allow the students to be creative with their questions. Have students take good notes so they may use it for their final presentation.

**Materials:** A pen and paper for student to take notes for their final project. Computer , video conference and LCD project hooked up to an internet.

**Discussion:** Ask questions from the interview.

**Lesson 4****Objectives:**

Students will listen and interview guest speaker from Mosque.

Students will write down notes for their final presentation.

**Learning activities:** Representative from a Mosque will be a guest to discuss the origin of the seek concept. He will discuss the connection with his religion as it exists today.

**Teaching strategies and methods:** The concept of a seek derives from an Islam belief. Make sure you tell representative from the Mosque that you are focusing on the seek. He should be able to give the history of the concept and how it has changed to the tradition the Gullah used.

**Materials:** Notebook and pen

**Discussion:** Ask how the guest speaker compared to the video conference. What did they learn from each of them.

## **Lesson 5**

### **Culminating Activity**

**Objectives:** Students will create an essay in 3 paragraphs with 5 sentences in each paragraph.

Students will write a comparative essay.

Students will use their notes for assistance.

**Materials:** Pen, paper, and notes from the week.

**Teaching Strategies:** Essay will include 3 paragraphs with 5 sentences in each. Students are to watch their punctuation and spelling. The essay is titled, “How young people in the church grow to make a spiritual commitment”. Students are to discuss the seek tradition and compare it to what they know about religion today. Since they had a mosque speaker they may use Islam. The students may use their prior knowledge of other religions to compare.

## RUBRIC FOR ESSAY

### Concept of Seek:

1	2	3	4
Falls far short	Partially Covered	Fulfills	Goes Beyond

### Compared concept

1	2	3	4
Falls far short	Partially Covered	Fulfills	Goes Beyond

### Three Paragraphs:

1	2	3	4
one or less paragraph	2 paragraphs	Fulfills	Goes Beyond

### Each Paragraph Requires 5 Sentences

#### First Paragraph:

1	2	3	4
less than 3 sentences	3 to 4 sentences	Fulfills	Goes Beyond

#### Second Paragraph:

1	2	3	4
less than 3 sentences	3 to 4 sentences	Fulfills	Goes Beyond

#### Third Paragraph:

1	2	3	4
less than 3 sentences	3 to 4 sentences	Fulfills	Goes Beyond

**Total : \_\_\_\_\_**

## Bibliography

Daise, R., (1986). *Reminiscences of Sea Island Heritage Legacy of Of Freemeen on St. Helena*. Orangeburg, South Carolina: Sandlapper Publishing Inc.

Garvin Fields, M., Fields, K. (1983). *Lemon Swamp and Other Places: A Carolina Memoir*. New York, New York: The Free Press

Joyner, C. (1984) *Down by the Riverside*. Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Pyatt, S. E., Jones, A. (1999). *A Dictionary and Catalog of African American Folklife of the South*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press.

