

Off Times of Slaves on the Sea Islands

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Language Arts, Social Studies

Standards Unavailable (To be inserted)

Scope: 7-10 class periods

Introduction

The purpose of this unit is to explore one aspect of slave life on the Sea Islands where rice production was the mainstay of the economy. Here the existence of African American culture can be readily examined. This unit will focus on Gullah language, folk tales, music and games during the “off times” of slaves. The intent is to communicate the legacy of African American culture, which has been preserved on the sea islands of South Carolina and Georgia.

The hours of off time shaped slave culture. After work in the rice fields, the slaves would frolic, hunt, fish, pray, cook, clean, marry, and raise children. Slaves increasingly sought these off times. Here cultural developments were fostered. The home was the arena for storytelling, praise meetings, singings, instrumental music and games. Here the existence of African American culture can be readily examined.

Gullah, the common language of these sea island people grew out of the various traditions of the slaves. Africans of diverse inhabited the islands as late as the mid nineteenth century. The creation of a language was the foundation for building and transmission of a common culture.

Storytelling was a form of inspiration and education. The stories transmitted cultural ideals and social graces. Many of the stories end with a moral comment based upon the experiences of the characters, usually an animal. Alligators, foxes, bears, buzzards, rabbits, wolves-all serve an educational function.

African Americans created hundreds of work songs. The work song, common in Africa, set a rhythm for tasks and relieved boredom. When working on boats, docks, railroad, in the fields and at home, this tradition continued. The lyrics and melodies were simple and repetitive.

Song lyrics had religious meaning, described the work at hand, imitated the sounds of the task being done, or told a story in ballad form. The pattern of call and response developed. Young children used songs to accompany their games and dancing. Ring-play songs contain dance steps, and vigorous hand clapping.

Objectives

- Recognize Gullah words and phrases.
- Read and interpret Gullah folk tales.
- Recognize music in the religious, work, and play realms of Gullah life.

Activities

Whole Group:

The teacher will read selected accounts of slave life from Voices* [See Bibliography] and tell the origins of Gullah [See Appendix #1].

Students will share unusual expressions and phrases heard at home.

Gullah words and phrases will be presented and students will try to attach the correct meaning [See Appendix #2].

Students will view and listen to Gullah folk tales, fairy tales, handclaps and music [See Bibliography].

Students and teacher will review stories and songs for hidden meanings.

Cooperative groups will select topic of interest for additional research to present to class.

Extension

Visit neighboring Nursing home (Willow Park or Harvard Community Center Adult Day Care) to hear about games, music, and tales of seniors.

Interview elderly person in family or church (70+) to learn about games, music, and tales of the past.

Evaluation

Students will illustrate and compile Gullah phrases, songs, handclaps and folk tales to create a book manually or use Power Point.

Bibliography

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