

## **The Importance of African Cultural Continuity Against Slavery** *Donald J. Wilds*

### **Overview**

African cultural continuity is the ability of Africans to remember their African past and use it for motivation by extending their culture from their native land to the New World. It was their African culture that was able to sustain them during the holocaust of the European slave trade and then the ensuing colonial plantation system. The African

cultural response to slavery and oppression in the Americas and the Caribbean began on the shores of West Africa because when they were captured they tried to take some African soil with them in their hands and sometimes in their mouths onto the ships as a last desperate struggle to hold on to a piece of Africa. Slavery was a war against African culture and especially the structure of the African family. African culture reborn on foreign soil became the bonding factor and the communicative system that helped set in motion more than three hundred slave revolts in the Americas and the Caribbean. The Caribbean became the center of a global economic complex that exploited African labor. It was here in this environment, which was very similar to their native homeland in climate, and terrains where they made adjustments and waited for the opportune time to express the mightiest form of resistance to slavery, which was revolting. This curriculum is intended for ninth grade students and will focus on these slave revolts.

### **Rationale**

This curriculum unit is intended to be use with ninth graders in the Pittsburgh Public School System. Our major concern in this unit is how a group of people fought for their existence because of the African “Mfecane” or Diaspora. Despite the harsh treatment and morbid conditions place on them in their journey across the Atlantic Ocean to the New World, most Africans did not accept their situation with docility. The slaves had needs of their own ambitions along with rights and feelings in spite of the contrary. Being in a state such as this, the slaves found themselves in a constant confrontation with their emotions that were in steady conflict to the will and desires of their masters because economic gain was their primary motivational factor. The enslaved on all fitting occasions showed actions of defiance to their own will. This is opposite to the image revealed in some literature about enslaved Africans as accommodating helpless people who were at peace with their conditions. There is insurmountable evidence in history of a very long and horrid resistance to slavery. Therefore insurrection or revolt will be our major area of concern because it is in this setting that we find some gripping factual accounts of how a race in a distant unfamiliar land survived In some ways environmentally the Americas was the right fit for extension of African cultural continuity.

In addition, because of the large expanses of land, more opportunities for revolting began to present themselves. The events began to occur before the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. There was a major uprising in what is to day called Santo Domingo in 1522 and another in Cuba in 1550. The revolt in Cuba initiated a progression of slave revolts by Africans who escaped from plantations and set up rough-hewed strictly conformed governments of their own. These were the African in

the so-called New World to use African cultural continuity to establish and maintain these structures. Africans who escaped from plantations and set up rough-hewed strictly conformed governments of their own. These were the first Africans in the so-called New World to use African cultural continuity to establish and maintain these structures.

The Papal Bull of 1455 gave the Spanish and Portuguese governments permission to put in servitude all non-Christian or non-religious people. Most Europeans involved in the slave trade considered Africans who were not Christians to be devoid of religion and therefore outside humanity. Europeans were not psychologically ready to deal with African culture as a factor in the uprising against slavery and oppression. Slavery was a dilemma for Europeans because Europeans morally and philosophically wanted to present themselves to the world as Christians but they also wanted to continue in the slave business, which was antihuman and therefore anti-Christian (Patterson p.146). The teachings of the Christian Church stressed that all men were equal in the site of God. This became a dangerous situation under these kinds of circumstances. The African perception of man and his relationship to the world had no connection to the Western perception. This was sort of a good thing for enslaved Africans. This would be a problem for planters who tried to use religion as a device for social control over these people. They did not understand the African religions and when Africans converted to Christianity, it did not mean the same to them as it did to the planters. African religious concepts left no room for resignation to fate.

In South America and the Caribbean, enslaved Africans outnumbered the planters greatly. Because of this, planters would try to develop methods of persuasion in dealing with the enslaved to assure their existence of the plantation system, which was being threatened. These methods of persuasion were very important enforcing the enslaved in South America and the Caribbean to develop systems of revolt based on their conditions (Hall p.48). The early methods of buying and distributing slaves help maintain African cultural continuity. Under this system, Africans were able to communicate because they were all put together in close proximity and the fact that they were all from the same general areas in Africa this use of communication facilitated revolts (Moore p. 76). In addition, as plantations grew larger, this meant that more slaves would be needed. The addition of more slaves meant new cultural input because the new arrival's minds were still fresh and they could remember more of their culture.

In South America after revolting against the Spanish planters, fugitive slaves called Cimarrons established communities. The Cimarron meaning runaway this name was given to them by the Spanish later the name became Maroons when the French adopted the term (Moore p.77). In the jungles and forests surrounded by thick tropical growth, these groups set up self contain communities and avoided slavery for years. According to Fernando Ortiz in his, book *Los Negro (Black Slaves)* banded together and settled in hidden spots like mountains where entry was hard. Sometimes they were able to develop farms like the ones they had in Africa. The success of these African colonies largely depended upon the number of women they could attract (Moore p.77). Obviously, because of certain kinds of tasks, these Africans were known as Apalencados and their communities were called Palenques. An Apalencados were escape slaves

in South America who established certain kinds of communities that were able to exist called Palenques. In Cuba for many centuries, they were the prime example of resistance to colonial regimes and slavery. The Cimarrons used guerrilla tactics that demonstrated their cleverness. They also had a high degree of skills for using the topography of the mountainous areas and the jungles and swamps. This enabled them to confuse their oppressor and destroy the militias who were hunting them. In Brazil, enslaved Africans fought the Portuguese who launch fifth teen expeditions against them, but these Africans still succeeded in establishing purely African states of Palmares and Bahia around 1533 (Kent p. 112). These states and their struggles to make it demonstrated the best example of African cultural continuity in the New World. Palmares was Brazil's classic "Quilombo" or slave settlement (Moore p. 79). The settlement was located in the mountainous region that served as a natural fortress. The fruit trees gave early sustenance and the timber trees served various industrial uses for this self-contained community. There were nine revolts between 1807-1805, and these revolts involved several African ethnic groups such as the Hausa, Yoruba, Kwa, Ogboni society as well as the Muslims Glufas. The Portuguese declared total war against these cultural ethnic groups that had established communities. These communities made their food supply ample by hunting and fishing too. These communities cleared the forests and developed farms and governments. They also used what they had learned in Africa along with they learned in Brazil (Higginson p.203).

The Dutch who entered the colonization game rather late establishes their first colony in South America in Guyana and in Northern Brazil. The best-known revolt against the Dutch happened in Surinam by the Surinam Maroons from 1715-1763 and the Berbice in 1763. These were significant events because they threatened an economy based on slavery.

The Maroons of Jamaica predated the Berbice rebellion but the Jamaicans are better known in history because they were relentless in their attacks on the European plantations that place them in states of chaos (Patterson p.162). The Jamaican Maroons have been compared to the European rebels called the Circassians from Circassia a region of Russia in the Northwest Caucasus Mountains on the Black Sea. Unlike the Circassians, though the Jamaican Maroons were never subdued. The revolts in Surinam and Jamaica collectively would help to create the conditions and attitudes that went into the most successful revolt in the history of this period.

The Haitians Revolution. Haitians leaders important to this revolution were Toussaint L Overture, Jean-Jacques Desalines, and Henri Christopher. The outstanding feature of this revolution, which sets it apart from all others, is that the Haitians were able to achieve statehood. African cultural continuity is very clear in this significant event. In the planning stages of the summer of 1791 enslaved Africans used the drums to communicate with each other from many plantations in the Caribbean region. The planters did not suspect anything given their naivete towards African culture. In fact, they thought the slaves were simply worshipping their tribal gods. Because they saw Africans as superstitious, they deemed Africans as children in their mental development. Boukman was a hougan or a celebrated voodoo priest and during the planning stages, he said the gods were pleased. One particular night during their planning lightening lighted up the sky and Boukman told the people that Bon Dieu, which meant the good god, was angry and demanded action for the wrongs done to the enslaved. As the night went on and lightening kept, lighting up the sky Boukman said that Bon Dieu was giving his approval for the revolt. Another example of African cultural continuity during this event was the offering of a

black pig to their gods (Bennett pp.113-114). On August, 22,179 at midnight the Haitians assembled more than 100,000 slaves for the insurrection and by the turn of the century Haiti would be the second republic in the Western hemisphere.

Insurrections on the American mainland were less successful because African cultural continuity was not as strong as it was in South America and Caribbean (Herskovits p.63). The first settlement within the present borders of the United States to contain slaves was where the first incident of a slave revolt took place. The revolt that happened was in the settlement of some five hundred Spaniards and one hundred slaves on the Peedee River in contemporary South Carolina. In November of 1526, slaves rebelled and found refuge in a nearby Native American camp. The Spaniards gave up and went back to Haiti leaving the slaves and their Native American friends as the first permanent inhabitants other than the Native Americans in the United States. In years to come, Africans and Native Americans would join forces to resist slavery. An early incident of this was the African-Indian uprising in Hartford Connecticut in 1657. In the United States, the most famous and significant insurrections or the attempt of one would display some rather interesting people. In each one of these incidents, there was a great leader associated with them like Jemmy, Gabriel Posser, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner. The first incident happened. In 1739 in South Carolina when a group of enslaved Africans under the brilliant leadership of a newly arrive African named Jemmy from Angola set fire to a number of buildings and set out for Spanish Florida. They call out liberty while marching, and beating drums and displaying certain colors of importance to them such as black, green yellow and red in their flags. Approximately twenty-five people were killed before this group was subdued (Bennett p.117). The second incident was the attempted insurrection plotted by Gabriel Posser who was a deeply religious man fascinated with the Old Testament (Bennett p.125). The blood and doom passages of the bible really made his spiritually stand out. Gabriel had dreams of an all-African state in Virginia. The event was supposed to take place the summer of 1800 after several months of planning. Gabriel was well over six feet and wore his hair long in an imitation of his biblical idol Samson. Gabriel was able to assemble two thousands slaves and many weapons. There were two major reasons why this revolt failed: first, major thunderstorms wash out an important bridge and made it very hard to travel and second, he was betrayed by two slaves. As a result, Gabriel was tried, convicted, and hanged. The next attempted insurrection was the one plotted by Denmark Vesey. He was very similar to Gabriel but unlike Gabriel, he was a free man who won his freedom by purchasing a lottery ticket. From around 1822, he worked as a carpenter in Charleston South Carolina where he was able to accumulate money and property. Vesey was an intelligent man but quick tempered and he had been a slave for some twenty years to a slave trader. Vesey carefully planned for four or five years and during this period he would continually remind the enslaved around him that their lives were miserable and even death would be better for them (Bennett p. 127). Denmark was greatly influenced by Toussaint L Overture and the bible and this is where the African cultural continuity with a Christian influence comes in when he reads the scriptures to the slaves about how Moses led his people out of Egypt and bondage. Vesey depended greatly on the skills of Gullah Jack an African born sorcerer who was considered invulnerable. He also received help from the talents of Blind Phillip who proved to be very important in recruiting and persuasion by quoting the Holy Scriptures. Vesey's lieutenant Peter Poyas who had excellent carpentry skills and show great ability in organizing cautioned Vesey about house servant being the greatest danger and those involved ed to be careful not to mention anything around them. Vesey plot would be revealed to

authorities because a slave named Paul Williams would ignore Poyas rules and try to recruit a house slave who would betray them. As a result Vesey and five of his aids would be tried and hanged July, 2,1822. The revolt carry out under Nat Turner would be the most successful one because the plot was not revealed ahead of time. Nat Turner often referred to as “the prophet” likened himself to Jesus going into Jerusalem (Bennett p. 131). The cultural continuity through African spirituality really stands out. Nat was born the year Gabriel Posser died which was 1800. Nat was a mystic with blood on his mind and a preacher with vengeance on his lips. Nat also was a dreamer, visionary and revolutionist. Early in his life, he believed that God had set him aside for a special purpose. Nat immersed himself in religion and like the others before him; he found food for insurrection from the bible. Nat chose four slaves whom he referred to as disciples and they were Henry Parker, Hash Davis, Nelson Williams, and Samuel Francis. Nat Turner chose his revolt from a date that came to him in a vision. The date which came to him was August 21, 1831and the place would be South Hampton Virginia. When it was all said and done Turner and his group had killed some sixty people. The wave of violence that was initiated in this insurrection took place within a system of violence, and therefore this event must be viewed from that context historically and politically.

## **Objectives**

Students once engage in this unit will progress in various stages by working on unit objectives. The students will be able to locate and label given an outline map of the Western Hemisphere Central America, Caribbean, South America, Atlantic Ocean, and Caribbean Sea and areas of resistance between 1500-1831. Students will describe how slavery provided the economic support for the plantation system. They will identify information regarding the various types of resistance used by the enslaved. They will explain why Toussaint L Ouverture was successful in staging the Haitians Revolution. They will discuss the impact that slave revolts had on colonial society. They will cite facts concerning why the Haitians Revolutions was the only successful land base operation in the Western Hemisphere. They also will explain some of the important facts about the following slaves revolts the Stono Uprising, Gabriel Posser Insurrection, the Denmark Vesey Insurrection, and Nat Turner Insurrection.

## **Strategies**

This strategy is an anticipatory set and its purpose is to get the students stimulated in thinking about what the lesson will be like. This type of writing assignment is called writing to a prompt and the cue is given which is contained in the information below so the students can use their imagination to respond. The questions that follow are intended to be used as an anticipatory set too to engage students in a discussion about what they think the lesson will be like. Newly arrived groups of Africans are just off the shores of South Carolina their destination the slave auction block in the antebellum period of the city of Charleston with and its slave culture.

These groups were captured by slave raiding parties who invaded the shores of Angola and then penetrated inwards to the interior swooping down upon villages with the element of surprise. The composition of this group would have the right mixture to extend their culture (cultural continuity) and rise up against slavery to stage a revolt.

These groups were also unique because by coincidence a natural leader emerges referred to as Sikee. They also had the services of a sorcerer named Gola who had a gift in spiritually which enabled him to communicate with their God This would be an important skill later on in the face of adversity in their quest for freedom.

Using the above information as a stimulus student will create by writing a narrative/imaginative prompt where they will connect their memories to experiences of enslaved Africans in this situation. While writing, this prompt try to picture the time, the place, and the people involved. Try to remember everything you can about this experience and show why this experience stand out for you.

### Questions

1. What is meant by enslavement?
2. How did the plantation system make slavery a lucrative business?
3. What part did racism play in the treatment of the enslaved Africans?
4. How did they resist slavery?
5. Why was Toussaint L Overture able to defeat the French and Napoleon?
6. What were some of the details of the following slave revolts The Stono Rebellion, The Gabriel Prosser Insurrection, The Denmark Vesey Insurrection, and The Nat Turner Insurrection.

### **Classroom Activities**

1. The student will place on a map of the Western Hemisphere important geographic features and events. This activity will be use to master the objective concerning geographical information as stated in the section about those objectives. The teacher will guide the students through this activity by using a wall map from the front of the room. Student progress will be asses through teacher monitoring.

2. Placing students in-groups of five, develop strategies to stage a revolt. In the developmental stages decide who the leader will be, when the revolt will take place, where the revolt will take place, why the slaves want to revolt, who will participate, and what possible problems will they encounter in this strange new land. This activity will be use to get students to master the objectives regarding economic exploitation of the enslaved Africans, how revolts are planned and the success of this incident in conjunction with Toussaint L Overture revolt. The students will be provided with handouts about slave revolts and the Haitians Revolution. The students will also be placed in cooperative learning groups and mastery of those particular objectives mention above will be determined by the groups presentation and indication of certain facts.

3. Students will demonstrate by writing a paper on how those people were by placing themselves in those persons experiences to learn about the personality characteristics of the following famous African leaders Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner by giving speeches. This activity will be used to master the objective concerning the four insurrections in the United States from the period of 1700-1831. Students will use the library to gather information. The method of assessment will be to use a rubric with categories of neatness, creativity, research, knowledge and grammar on a scale 1-5.
4. Students will write biographical sketches of Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner. The students will use the library to acquire the information. This activity give students another way to emphasize with the above characters and assessment will be done by using the same rubric mention above.
5. Students will construct a chart indicating the number of revolts in the U.S., Caribbean, and South America. Students will be given a handout concerning all the revolts and where they occurred from a period of 1500-1831. This activity introduces another way to cover the objective about the various types of revolts or resistance. Assessment will be done in the traditional standard way by the teacher using a key and finding the wrong information. Students must have at least seventy percent mastery.
6. Students will explain why there was only one successful land based slave revolt in the history of the Western Hemisphere. This activity will be use primarily to focus on the objectives concerning the Haitians Revolution and Toussaint L Overture. Students will be require to go to the library and complete a report on the above topics and assessment will be base on the same kind of rubric mention before.

### **Annotated Bibliography**

Bennett, L. (1988). Before The Mayflower, A History Of Black America. New York, Penguin Books.

This book discusses the history of African Americans in the United States.

Clarke, H (date). Afro- American Image of Africa Chicago, Black World Magazine.

This book reveals how Africans see their homeland.

Clarke, H. (Ed.) (1970. ). The slave Trade and Slavery. New York, Holt, Rinehart.

This book gives a detail discussion of the origin of slavery and the slave trade.

Gordon, C. (1971). Before Columbus. New York, Crown Publisher.

This text discusses the history of Africans in America before Columbus.

Higginson, A. (date). Black Revolution New York, Press.

This book discusses various revolutions conducted by enslaved Africans.

Herskovits, J. (1958). The Myth of the Negro Past. Boston, Press.

This book deals with the issue that Africans has always had a history.

Hall G.(1971). Social Control in the Plantation Societies. Maryland, The John Hopkins Press.

This book deals with certain practices used in slavery to control the lives of the enslaved.

Johnston,H. (1965). The Negro in the New World. London, Methuen and Company.

This book discusses the experiences of Africans in the New World.

Kent. (date). Palmares An African State. New York, Anchor Books.

This book discusses the first African state in South America established by slaves.

Moore, C. (1995) African Presence In The Americas. New Jersey, African World Press.

This book covers the history of Africans in the Americas from slavery to the present.

Peterson, O. (date). Slavery and Slave Revolts. New York, Anchor Books.

This book gives an analysis of the first Maroon War.

## **Appendix- Content Standards Citizenship**

- 1.** All students demonstrate an understanding of major cultures, groups, and individuals in the historical development of Pennsylvania, the United States, other nations, and describe the patterns of historical development.
- 2.** All students demonstrate an understanding of themes and patterns of geography, know the location of major bodies of water, land masses and nations, and describe the relationship between geography and historical, economic and cultural development.
- 3.** All students describe the development and operations of economic, political, legal and governmental systems in the United States, assess their own relationships to those systems, and compare them to those of other nations.
- 4.** All students examine and evaluate problems facing citizens in their communities, state, nation and world by incorporating concepts and methods of inquiry of the various social sciences.
- 5.** All students demonstrate an understanding of the history and nature of prejudice and relate their knowledge to current issues facing communities, the United States and other nations.