

**RESONANCE FROM THE PAST:  
AFRICAN SCULPTURE FROM THE NEW  
ORLEANS MUSEUM OF ART**

*Teachers' Guide*



**MuseumforAfricanArt**

## Welcome and Introduction to Educators

Dear Educator:

The Museum for African Art proudly offers this Teachers' Guide for the spring exhibition **Resonance from the Past: African Sculpture from the New Orleans Museum of Art**, on view from February 2005 through June 2005. The exhibition features over 94 works of art from the New Orleans Museum of Art, including masks and figures, ceramics and fabric, beadwork costumes and objects of various peoples from central and western Africa.

This guide is divided into two main sections that will help you to understand the two main themes of the exhibition. The first section of this guide explores the influence of African culture in New Orleans, from the arrival of African slaves to the birth of Jazz. The second section looks into the Yoruba and Dogon, the two largest groups represented in the exhibit. This section provides information on Yoruba and Dogon culture and the socio-cultural roles of objects exhibited in **Resonance from the Past**. Throughout this guide, you will find discussion questions and activities that may be infused with your curriculum as a complement to your museum visit.

This guide encourages interdisciplinary study of visual arts, language arts, and social studies for students, from grades 1 to 12.

The museum offers school tours at group rates. To find out more about school tours and staff development opportunities, please contact the Museum Educator at 718-784-7700 ext. 117 or email [festrada@africanart.org](mailto:festrada@africanart.org).

Sincerely,

Francis Estrada  
Museum Educator

Heidi Holder  
Director of Education

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## I. African Influence in New Orleans

### A. New Orleans



Located in southern Louisiana, 110 miles up stream from the Gulf of Mexico and along the bend of the Mississippi River is the city of New Orleans. It has a population of more than 1.2 million, and is one of the largest cities in Louisiana and one of the major cities of the southern United States. The city is surrounded by swamps, wetlands, and dense woody vegetation. The weather is tropical, with mild winters and hot, humid summers. Its population is often described as a “cultural gumbo” of influences by Africans, Indians, Spanish, French, and Creoles, just to name a few. The city is comprised of a “checkerboard of neighborhoods” where one may come across various ethnicities and degrees of wealth within a small area.

### ***Elementary, Middle, and High School***

#### **Standards and Activities**

##### **Social Studies:**

Geography: *Places and Regions*

History: *Culture, Identity*

##### **English:**

**E3b** Speaking, Listening, and Viewing: *The student participates in group meetings*

#### **Discussion Questions:**

**Note to the Teacher:** Mount a map of New Orleans on the board. See Appendix A for a map of Louisiana and Appendix B for a map of New Orleans.

1. Have you ever heard of New Orleans?
2. What have you heard about this city?
3. Find New Orleans on a map of the world.

## **B. Africans are brought into New Orleans**

New Orleans was founded in 1718 by Jean Baptiste Le Moyne, sieur de Bienville, governor of the French Colony of Louisiana. It was originally named *Nouvelle Orleans* in honor of Philippe II, Duc d'Orleans, regent of France under Louis XV. It was established as the capital of Louisiana and as a fortress to control France's wealth in the North American interior. Because of its reputation as a land of disease, famine, and political and military exploitation, it was difficult to obtain voluntary colonists in France. To solve this problem, French prisoners condemned to galleys were sent to Louisiana to work for three years. Once their three-year work sentence was completed, the prisoners were given a portion of the land that they had cultivated and cleared. By 1719, deportation to the French colony became a convenient method of doing away with vagabonds and troublesome family members.

In 1719, the first two shiploads of African slaves arrived in New Orleans. They were brought in as laborers for plantations. Between the years of 1719 and 1731, the majority of slave ships came directly from West Africa, bringing in slaves mainly from the Bight of Biafra and some from Angola. In these years, the ethnic make up of New Orleans consisted of Indian and African slaves, French deportees, immigrants, and French and Swiss soldiers. The standard of living in the new colony was not at all favorable, and several of its inhabitants left or ran away. With cypress swamps bordering New Orleans, the area's ecology provided excellent refuge for runaways. It was not long until it became a city of deserters, with the population, regardless of race or status, assisting each other to escape in all directions. Often together, Indian and African slaves found shelter among Indian tribes. The city became a frontier society of open interracial relations. When New Orleans became a Spanish colony through the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1763, the communities of escaped African and Indian slaves eventually evolved into permanent settlements under Spanish rule. These settlements, situated near the city, allowed escaped slaves to keep close contact with those who remained with their masters. By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the city's population consisted of a majority of non-white residents.

New Orleans returned to French rule in 1800, but financial and military troubles led Napoleon to sell all of Louisiana to the United States in 1803 through the *Louisiana Purchase*. By 1850, New Orleans was the largest slave-trading center of the South.

### ***Elementary, Middle, and High School***

#### **Standards and Activities**

##### **Social Studies:**

Geography: *Places and Regions*

History: *Culture, Identity*

##### **English:**

**E3b** Speaking, Listening, and Viewing: *The student participates in group meetings*

**E2ca** Writing: *The student produces a narrative account*

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Have you ever been away from your home and family in an unfamiliar place?
2. Did you feel comfortable in this new environment, without anyone you knew?
3. Imagine that you were away from your home, family, and friends- in a place where you could never return, and nobody you knew was around.

**Note to the teacher:** Give a brief introduction to slavery and the Atlantic Slave Trade (how people were taken from their homes in Africa and taken to the *New World*)

### ***Elementary and Middle School***

Create a short story about yourself as one taken into the *New World* as a slave. How were you abducted? How did you feel about being put into a ship for a long period of time, without knowing where you were going? What did you see in the new environment where you were taken?

### ***High School***

Create a short story about yourself as the main character. You are brought to the *New World* as a slave. After arriving in New Orleans, you are not satisfied with your new living conditions and decide to run away. Talk about your experiences: what were your feelings about coming into an unfamiliar environment? How did you escape and where did you go? Did you come across any other runaways or people who befriended or assisted you?

## **C. African Traditions infuse with New Orleans Culture**

The arrival of African slaves marked the beginning of the African influence in New Orleans. The French colony specifically chose to bring slaves from the Senegambian region because of similarities between the Senegal valley and the Mississippi valley. With the majority of slaves coming directly from western Africa, it was inevitable that African culture would infuse with New Orleans culture through language, music, food, dance, and folkloric traditions.

### *Creoles*

The word *creole* has had many definitions that have evolved with time. It originated from the Portuguese word *crioulo*, meaning a slave of African descent in the New World. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the word referred to black slaves born in Louisiana (as opposed to being brought from Africa) as well as black people and people of mixed race born in Louisiana who were freed during their lifetimes. Over time, the word changed to refer to descendants of the French or Spanish settlers in Louisiana. The term can also be used to refer to the language and cuisine that derived from the *creoles*.

New Orleans was unique from other states in the US because of its relaxed race relations. Free black men and women who lived in the city had relations with slaves, at times living with those who were still in bondage. Slave owners in New Orleans also had open relations with their slaves, and at times took financial responsibility of their mistresses and offspring. The offspring soon came to be known as *Creoles of Color*, and received the same privileges of free white men.

## *Cuisine*

Gumbo is one of the foods that come to mind when one thinks of New Orleans cuisine. Gumbo is derived from *nkombo*, a West African word for okra, which is one of the main ingredients in gumbo. Jambalaya, another New Orleans staple, has similarities to Senegambian dishes that African slaves brought to Louisiana.

## *Music and Dance*

In the early 1800's, several visitors to New Orleans recorded their experiences of having seen African music and dance groups gathering in New Orleans' Congo Square on Sundays. There are various written accounts of groups of blacks (both enslaved and free), gathered in large circles as dancers moved to African drum rhythms. Architect Benjamin Latrobe wrote a detailed description in his diary in 1819:

*Blacks were formed into circular groups in the midst of four or which I examined was a ring, the largest not ten feet in diameter. In the first were two women dancing...The music consisted of two drums and a string instrument. An old man sat astride of a cylindrical drum and beat it with incredible quickness with the edge of his hand and fingers. The other drum was an open-staved thing held between the knees and played in the same manner. The string instrument was no doubt imported from Africa; on the top of the fingerboard was the figure of a seated man.*

The influence of Africans in music was also evident in the West African inspired work songs. Slaves continued the tradition of singing in the fields as they worked, to make the task seem easier and time to go by faster. Since African slaves were permitted to sing their native chants, they incorporated traditional African verses into their work songs, further perpetuating the African influence in Afro-American music. Work songs or "field hollers" which were sung by a chorus eventually inspired individuals to create songs about their own sadness and tribulations. The "blues" originated from these "solo songs". A blues singer incorporates the "call and response" style of the field hollers, but responds to him or herself.

The emergence of jazz music from New Orleans is one of the most important results of African influence in American culture. Jazz evolved from the field hollers, spirituals, and blues music that emerged from the plantations of the South. These elements blended with European/American instruments and traditions to create a new form of music: jazz. This new type of music borrowed the African music-influenced improvisation style, where musicians relied heavily on spontaneity. The lack of written music also allowed early jazz musicians to play songs without the need for sight-reading, since most of the new musicians were not classically trained and could not read or write.

## ***Elementary, Middle, and High School***

### **Standards and Activities**

#### **Social Studies:**

Geography: *Places and Regions*

History: *Culture*

**English**

**E3b:** Speaking, Listening, and Viewing: *The student participates in group meetings*

***Discussion Questions:***

1. Think of all the different people in your neighborhood. Can you name the places in the world where they may have come from?
2. Can you think of any areas in the city where you live where immigrants have maintained their cultural traditions?
3. What are some signs that might inform you about the ethnic/immigrant make up of an area?

***Elementary, Middle, and High School*****Standards and Activities****Social Studies**

History: *Change, Culture*

**English**

**E1c:** Reading: *The student reads and comprehends materials*

**E2a:** Writing: *The student produces a report*

**Music**

Making Connections: *Understand the Role of Music*

***Discussion:***

As mentioned earlier, jazz music is one of the most significant products of African influence in New Orleans. But it did not develop in a short period of time. There are many factors and influences that led to the creation of jazz.

***Elementary and Middle School***

Louis Armstrong is considered by most as the greatest American jazz musician. He was born and raised in New Orleans (“the birthplace of jazz”) and helped to spread the popularity of jazz throughout the world. Using print and non-print sources, write a short biography of Louis Armstrong.

***High School***

Using print and non-print sources, gather information to create a history timeline of jazz. Talk about the African slaves’ tradition of field hollers, the creation of jazz, how jazz spread throughout the US, and end with contemporary jazz music.



## A. The Dogon

The Dogon are an ethnic group who live primarily in the administrative district of Bandiagara and Douentza in Mali, between the Niger River and Burkina Faso. It is believed that their ancestors originated from the west bank of the Niger River around the 10<sup>th</sup> century. When the Mossi cavalry invaded the region in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and tried to convert the people to Islam, the people who would become to be known as the Dogon fled to the Bandiagara cliffs in an area that was then known as French West Africa. The cliffs were extremely steep and were located in a very dry region where most people would choose not to inhabit. To escape conversion into Islam, the Dogon chose to live in an environment that was difficult to reach.

The Dogon's escape from the Mossi cavalry did not guarantee them safety. They also had to worry about constant wars between kingdoms and slave raids. Slave raiders targeted non-Muslims in these raids, leaving the Dogon as fair game. Because of the hit-and-run technique of small bands of men who would attack small villages or campsites to capture slaves, the 125-mile long escarpment provided the Dogon with a fair defense.

The cliffs served as a haven, with the Dogon building homes on the plateaus that were only accessible by foot. The height of the cliffs allowed raiders to be spotted from a distance, and loose rocks at the base of the cliffs offered protection from mounted attacks. If pressure from the attacks became too intense, the Dogon could escape into caverns deep inside the sandstone cliffs.

In 1890, the French ended the slave raids and tribal wars and pacified the region, allowing the plains and plateaus to be safe for cultivation. Today, the Dogon live in three topographical regions: the plains, plateau, and the cliffs (majority of the population). Agriculture is their primary source of livelihood; the main crops being millet, sorghum, rice, onions, beans, tobacco, and sorrel.

### *The Bush and the Village*

The Dogon believe in a strong contrast between the village (*ana*) and the bush (*oru*). The bush encompasses the area which is immediately outside of the inhabited village. It is believed that several spirits, though not all malevolent, dwell in the bush. Though one never feels at ease in the bush, the bush can be cultivated. The Dogon believe that the bush harbors positive forces such as animals, rocks, trees; and that life, wisdom, and power come from the bush.

## ***Elementary, Middle, and High School***

### **Standards and Activities**

#### **Social Studies**

History: *Change, Choice, Culture*

Geography: *Environment and Society*

**English**

**E3b:** Speaking, Listening, and Viewing: *The student participates in group meetings*

**Note to the teacher:**

For images of Dogon country and architecture, go to [www.dogon-lobi.ch/dogonalbum.htm](http://www.dogon-lobi.ch/dogonalbum.htm) .

***Discussion Questions:***

1. What role did geography play in the Dogon's decision to move to the Bandiagara Escarpment?
2. Look at photos of where the Dogon live (see referred website). Imagine that you live there. Describe what a typical day may be like.

***Theory of Creation***

Because their history is passed down orally, there are several variations about the structure and source of Dogon mythology. These myths also vary from village to village. There are also varying schools of thought regarding Dogon mythology and history. This section will present ideas by two anthropologists: Marcel Griaule and Walter van Beek.

In the late 1940's, French anthropologists Marcel Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen conducted research on the Dogon based on Griaule's conversations with their priests. Through these conversations, Griaule was able to learn about various myths which he claims to be privileged information that even most of the Dogon do not know about. One of the myths he encountered was their supposed creation myth:

Heaven, regarded as the creator Amma, created the Earth and joined with it. Nommos, the first living beings, multiplied into two pairs of twins. One of the twin Nommos rebelled against Amma and created chaos and disorder. Amma sacrificed another Nommo to purify and restore order to the universe. Its body was divided and scattered throughout the universe, the eight ancestors of mankind were created: Amma Serou, Lebe Serou, Binou Serou, Dyongou Serou, and their four sisters- two sets of female twins. When order was restored to Earth, the eight ancestors necessary for human existence were put into an ark and sent to Earth. To this day, Nommos continue to monitor the universe.

Griaule also wrote about the Dogon's cosmology, which included the stars Sirius A and B (which were discovered before the invention of the telescope). *Sigi tolo*, or Sirius A, is a large star orbited by *po tolo*, Sirius B. He claims that their knowledge of the stars was given to the Dogon by fish-like extra terrestrials from the Sirius System.

There are several skeptics who doubt the authenticity or accuracy of the Griaule school of thought, citing inconsistencies and contradictions within the stories. Particularly critical of Griaule's work is Belgian anthropologist Walter van Beek who began his studies of the Dogon in the early 1980's. He speculates that Griaule may have asked leading questions that led to fabrication of myths. He may have also mixed his own interpretations into his conversation

with the Dogon in an attempt to support his idealized complexities of African religions. In his studies, van Beek was able to speak with some of the same people that Griaule spoke with about thirty years earlier, but reported:

*'though they do speak about sigu tolo they disagree completely with each other as to which star is meant; for some it is an invisible star that should rise to announce the sigui [festival], for another it is Venus that, through a different position, appears as sigu tolo. All agree, however, that they learned about the star from Griaule'*  
 {van Beek, *Dogon Restudies. A Field Evaluation of the work of Marcel Griaule*}

Unlike Griaule's focus on the mythological beliefs of the Dogon, Van Beek's studies concentrate on their worldview, history, and everyday life. He does not dispel the existence of Dogon mythology, but states that there is no such creation myth. Instead, the most important tales recount their ancestors' migration from the semi-historical place called Mande, the area in Southwest and Guinea Mali which was the center of the Mali Empire, to the cliffs.

One of the tales involves Aru, the ancestor of various Dogon villages, who through a supernatural manifestation, came to be the greatest Hogon (central Dogon priest). The tales recount in detail how and in which order people came to settle in the villages. Through these tales, each village knows its history and can recount stories of the first ones to make the stairs on the cliffs, who dug the first wells, and who created the oldest house in town.

### ***Elementary, Middle, and High School***

#### **Standards and Activities**

##### **Social Studies**

History: *Belief Systems*

##### **English**

**E1c**: Reading: *The student reads and comprehend informational materials*

**E2c**: Writing: *The student produces a narrative account*

**E3b**: Speaking, Listening, and Viewing: *The student participates in group meetings*

##### **Art**

Art Making: *Drawing*

**Note to the teacher:** Read aloud or pass out copies of the Dogon theory of creation. (appendix)

#### **Discussion Questions:**

1. What is a myth? What is a folktale?
2. Can you think of a myth or folktale that you have read or heard before?
3. Do you know of any myths from your own culture?
4. Create your own illustrated theory of creation. On one page, make a drawing that could show:
  - what the world was like before life forms were created
  - who created the world
  - how the world was created

### *Objects and Their Use*

The Dogon are well known for their delicately carved masks and figurative wooden sculptures which are often used in rituals and ceremonies. *Resonance from the Past* features several wooden figures which are usually kept in altars. They help in the interaction between people and their gods. According to van Beek, *a statue serves somewhat as an intermediary, addressing the Creator on the supplicant's behalf, directing the gods' attention, which is thought to be of limited span, and refreshing their reputedly poor memories* (van Beek, *Functions of Sculpture in Dogon Religion*).

The use of a figure usually starts with a problem, illness and infertility being the most common. One would first perform a sacrifice at a standard altar to try and correct the problem. If the attempt is unsuccessful, one may decide to have a figure sculpted. The sculptures usually depict the people in need of help, and are made to “pray” on behalf of their owner. During a sacrifice or ritual, a text from the *toro* (basic text for Dogon rituals) is recited throughout the event, invoking their major gods such as Awa, minor gods, various lesser spirits, then to their ancestors, and finishing with the first settlers. The sculptures are kept at the altar since, according to the Dogon, “One cannot always pray and kneel at the altar, but the statue can”.

## **B. The Yoruba**

The Yoruba are made up of almost 20 million Yoruba-speaking people from Nigeria and the Republic of Benin. Archeological excavations have shown evidence of a highly urbanized society that dates back to 800 AD. The Yoruba kingdoms are widespread, with each kingdom acting as independent city-states whose dynasty of kings remain unbroken to the present day. Some of these kingdoms are Ife, Oyo, and Ijebu.

Ife is regarded by the Yoruba as the place of origin of life and human civilization. Oyo, one of their earliest kingdoms, prospered in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century and controlled a vast territory through their feared cavalry. The Ijebu kingdom, located at a coastal region, was the first of the Yoruba to have trading ties with Europeans in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century.

For four centuries, the Yoruba kingdoms prospered, but weakened in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century due to wars within their kingdoms and the rise of the Atlantic Slave Trade. The slave trade spread millions of Yoruba people throughout the world, including the Americas and the Caribbean Islands. Their late arrival to these areas, coupled with the mass number of people ensured Yoruba influence in art, culture, and religion in the United States, South America, and the Caribbean.

### *Yoruba Cosmology*

The Yoruba believe that the cosmos is made up of two realms: *aye*, the visible world of the living, and *orun*, the invisible world of ancestors, spirits, and gods. To the Yoruba, the past serves as an “[accessible and essential] model for the present. They believe that people live, depart, and are reborn...every individual comes from either the gods or one’s ancestors on the mother’s or the father’s side. In addition, rituals are [effective] only when they are performed regularly according to tenets from the past and creatively represented to suit the present.” (Drewal, Pemberton, Abiodun, p.14)

### *Orun: The Invisible World of Ancestors, Spirits, and Gods*

*Olodumare*, the creator of existence, heads the world of *Orun*. Neither male nor female, *Olodumare* is the source of *ase*, the life force of all that exists. Within *Orun* are the *orisa* (gods), *ara orun* (ancestors), and *egbe* (various spirits) who are often involved with human affairs.

The *orisa* are either sacred ancestors or natural forces that have taken on human attributes. They are categorized as being either “hot” or “cool”, without the suggestion of good or evil. Like humans, gods have both positive and negative traits. “Hot” orisas tend to be temperamental and the “cool” are more calm and patient. To enter the living world, orisas possess worshippers through the course of religious ceremonies.

Ancestors are other beings that dwell in *Orun*. They are the spirits of the departed, and may be contacted by descendants for guidance and support, through masquerades in which ancestors visit through the body of the maskers who portray ancestors or *egungun*, they are able to return to the world temporarily. Another way of returning to the world is through partial reincarnations in their lineage.

## *Aye: The The Visible and Tangible World of the Living*

*Aye*, the visible and tangible world, consists of the living as well as the invisible and otherworldly forces that frequently visit and influence human affairs. In *Aye*, inhabitants are divided into two groups: the Knowledgeable Ones (those who are aware of the power of gods, *orisas*, and ancestors) and the Unknowing Ones (those who are not aware of gods, ancestors, and *orisas*).

### ***Elementary, Middle, and High School***

#### **Standards and Activities**

##### **Social Studies**

History: Culture, Diversity

##### **English**

**E2a:** Writing: *The student produces a report*

**E3b:** Speaking, Listening, and Viewing: *The student participates in group meetings*

##### **Art**

Artmaking: Drawing

Making Connections Through Visual Arts: *Recognizing the Cultural, Historical, and Societal Significance of Art*

#### **Discussion Questions:**

1. What is a deity?
2. Can you think of examples of deities in other cultures?
3. What are the purposes or jobs of these deities?
4. How are they honored?

#### **Discussion: Hot and Cold Orishas:**

5. The Yoruba have various deities or *orisas* who all have different “hot” or “cool” personalities. Their modes of action or purposes are what differentiate the numerous *orisas*. For example, Esu Elegba, who is portrayed as a trickster, is honored at the start and end of every ceremony. He is the intermediary force which makes communication possible between humans and *orisas*. Ogun is the god of iron and modern technology, and Shango is the god of thunder. Using this information, create a drawing of your own *orisa* on one piece of paper. Illustrate how your *orisa* looks and add some information or drawings that describe the function of the *orisa*. On a separate piece of paper, write a brief description of your *orisa* (name, function, personality, when how the *orisa* is honored). See Appendix F

#### *Creation Myth*

The Yoruba have a creation myth that has been passed through generations orally, and varies from place to place. One variation states that in the beginning, the world consisted of nothing but the sky and a vast and quiet ocean. The Supreme Being Olodumare sent Oduduwa with a

rooster, some earth, and a palm kernel. Oduduwa descended the heavens on a gold chain that hung from the corner of the heavens that touched the edge of the water. As he climbed down the chain, he realized that there was no place where he could stand. He then spilled the earth onto the surface of the water and placed the rooster on the mound of sand. It began to scratch away at the sand, spreading it as far as Oduduwa's eyes could see. The sand created large piles that turned into hills and mountains, the smaller piles valleys. Oduduwa stood on a one of the hills and named it *Ife*. Then, he dug a hole in the ground and planted the palm kernel. In an instant, it grew into a tree with sixteen limbs, representing the sixteen original kingdoms of the Yoruba.

### ***Elementary, Middle, and High School***

#### **Standards and Activities**

##### **Social Studies**

History: *Culture, Diversity*

##### **English**

**E1c**: Reading: *The student reads and comprehends informational materials*

**E2c**: Writing: *The student produces a narrative account*

##### **Art**

Artmaking: *Drawing*

#### **Make your own illustrated book on the Yoruba myth of creation**

##### You will need:

4 sheets of 8 1/2" x 11" paper folded in half and stapled together (creates 5 1/2" x 8 1/2" book)  
Pencils and coloring materials

As mentioned earlier, the Yoruba creation myth has been passed down orally through generations. They believe that the storyteller has the artistic license to make slight changes to the story as he/she desires. Because of this, there are many variations to the story.

Using print and non-print sources, read at least three different variations of the Yoruba myth of creation (see Appendix F, for internet use: search for "Yoruba myth of creation"). Note that the names of the characters may vary (i.e. Olodumare is also known as Olorun).

Create your own variation of the Yoruba creation myth, using the main characters from the different versions of the stories you read. Improvise on the story and make an illustrated book to be used to pass the story down.

### *Objects and Their Use: Egungun Costume and Festival*

As mentioned earlier, ancestors may return to the world through maskers (*egungun*). *Egungun* masks have many variations that are distinguishable by the kind of materials used in their creation. The performer is covered completely in the mask, concealing the identity of the maskers from the outside world. The costumes are created with an assortment of fabrics, mixed with beads, leather, shells, or other empowering objects. Today, the fabrics used are made of the best fabrics locally and internationally.

Masquerade festivals for ancestors (*Odun Egungun*) are celebrated throughout the kingdoms of the Yoruba with dancing, drumming, and singing. In these festivals, which last for several days, ancestors revisit for remembrance, celebration, and blessings. *Egungun* performances comprise of elaborately orchestrated dances, intricate body movements, and swirling of the fabrics that drape over the costume.

In addition to their participation in the *egungun* festivals, the ancestors can be called upon for their life-sustaining powers during times of crises in the family (death of an elder), outbreak of disease, a problem with life in the village, or witchcraft.

### ***Elementary, Middle, and High School***

#### **Standards and Activities**

##### **Social Studies**

History: *Culture, Diversity*

##### **English**

**E3b**: *The student participates in group meetings*

#### **Discussion Questions:**

1. What is an ancestor?
2. Introduce the idea of ancestors to your students, and tell them that ancestors do not necessarily have to be directly related to them, but could also be other human beings that came before their generation.
3. The Yoruba pay homage to their most significant ancestors. Can you give examples of our highly regarded ancestors? Why are they held in high regard?
4. How are ancestors honored in your culture?



## Glossary

- Amma**- Regarded by the Dogon as the creator
- Ana**- Village area inhabited by the Dogon
- Awa**- The Dogon's major gods
- Ara Orun**- The ancestors of the Yoruba
- Aye**- According to the Yoruba, it is the visible world of the living
- Bight of Biafra**- The eastern section of Gulf of Guinea in western Africa
- Blues**- Songs by individual slaves recounting their sadness and tribulations
- Creole**- (Varied definitions over time) A slave of African descent born in Louisiana; descendants of French or Spanish blood born in Louisiana
- Creoles of color**- Offspring of slave owners and slaves in New Orleans who received same privileges as free white men
- Egbe**- According to the Yoruba are various spirits often involved with human affairs
- Egungun**- In the Yoruba language, means "masquerade"; represents physical manifestation of ara orun
- Field hollers**- "Work songs" sung by a chorus of slaves in the fields, to make their tasks seem to go by faster and easier
- Hogon**- The central Dogon priest
- Ife**- Regarded by the Yoruba as the place of origin of life and human civilization
- Jazz**- Music evolved from the field hollers, spirituals, and blues from plantations in the South, blended with European/American instrumentation
- Nkombo**- Word of West African origin meaning "okra"
- Nommos**- The first living beings, according to the Dogon creation myth
- Odun Egungun**- Masquerade festivals for Yoruba ancestors involving dancing, drumming, singing, and overall celebration
- Olodumare**- Regarded by the Yoruba as the creator of existence
- Orisa**- Sacred ancestors or natural forces that have taken on human attributes
- Oru**- (The bush) The area immediately outside of the inhabited village of the Dogon
- Orun**- According to the Yoruba, it is the invisible world of ancestors, spirits, and gods
- Senegambia**- Region in western Africa around Senegal and Gambia rivers
- Toro**- The basic text for all Dogon rituals

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## Appendix A



Appendix B



**Map of New Orleans**  
 (from Lonelyplanet.com)

## Appendix C



**Map of African Continent**  
(from [politicalresources.net](http://politicalresources.net))

## Appendix D



### **Hermaphrodite Figure**

Dogon Peoples, Mali  
Wood, Patina

## Appendix E

### *Dogon Theory of Creation*

Because their history is passed down orally, there are several variations of Dogon mythology. These myths also vary from village to village. There are also varying schools of thought regarding Dogon mythology and history. This theory of Dogon creation presents an interpretation by Marcel Griaule.

In the late 1940's, French anthropologists Marcel Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen conducted research on the Dogon based on Griaule's conversations with their priests. Through these conversations, Griaule was able to learn about various myths which he claims to be privileged information that even most of the Dogon do not know about. One of the myths he encountered was their supposed creation myth:

Heaven, regarded as the creator Amma, created the Earth and joined with it. Nommos, the first living beings, multiplied into two pairs of twins. One of the twin Nommos rebelled against Amma and created chaos and disorder. Amma sacrificed another Nommo to purify and restore order to the universe. Its body was divided and scattered throughout the universe, the eight ancestors of mankind were created: Amma Serou, Lebe Serou, Binou Serou, Dyongou Serou, and their four female twins. When order was restored to Earth, the eight ancestors necessary for human existence were put into an ark and sent to Earth. To this day, Nommos continue to monitor the universe.

## Appendix F



**Fan for Osun Priestess**  
19th-20th C, Yoruba Peoples  
Nigeria, Brass

Orisa Osun, the goddess who lives in the river, provides medicinal water. For those who want children, she is the beautiful mother. The *olorisa*, or chief priestess, carries a brass fan like this one. Etched on the fan are images of aquatic creatures.



## Appendix G

### Yoruba Creation Myth

from <[http:// www.gateway-africa.com/ stories/Yoruba\\_Creation\\_Myth.html](http://www.gateway-africa.com/stories/Yoruba_Creation_Myth.html)>

In the beginning was only the sky above, water and marshland below. The chief god Olorun ruled the sky, and the goddess Olokun ruled what was below. Obatala, another god, reflected upon this situation, then went to Olorun for permission to create dry land for all kinds of living creatures to inhabit. He was given permission, so he sought advice from Orunmila, oldest son of Olorun and the god of prophecy. He was told he would need a gold chain long enough to reach below, a snail's shell filled with sand, a white hen, a black cat, and a palm nut, all of which he was to carry in a bag. All the gods contributed what gold they had, and Orunmila supplied the articles for the bag. When all was ready, Obatala hung the chain from a corner of the sky, placed the bag over his shoulder, and started the downward climb. When he reached the end of the chain he saw he still had some distance to go. From above he heard Orunmila instruct him to pour the sand from the snail's shell, and to immediately release the white hen. He did as he was told, whereupon the hen landing on the sand began scratching and scattering it about. Wherever the sand landed it formed dry land, the bigger piles becoming hills and the smaller piles valleys. Obatala jumped to a hill and named the place Ife. The dry land now extended as far as he could see. He dug a hole, planted the palm nut, and saw it grow to maturity in a flash. The mature palm tree dropped more palm nuts on the ground, each of which grew immediately to maturity and repeated the process. Obatala settled down with the cat for company. Many months passed, and he grew bored with his routine. He decided to create beings like himself to keep him company. He dug into the sand and soon found clay with which to mold figures like himself and started on his task, but he soon grew tired and decided to take a break. He made wine from a nearby palm tree, and drank bowl after bowl. Not realizing he was drunk, Obatala returned to his task of fashioning the new beings; because of his condition he fashioned many imperfect figures. Without realizing this, he called out to Olorun to breathe life into his creatures. The next day he realized what he had done and swore never to drink again, and to take care of those who were deformed, thus becoming Protector of the Deformed. The new people built huts as Obatala had done and soon Ife prospered and became a city. All the other gods were happy with what Obatala had done, and visited the land often, except for Olokun, the ruler of all below the sky. She had not been consulted by Obatala and grew angry that he had usurped so much of her kingdom. When Obatala returned to his home in the sky for a visit, Olokun summoned the great waves of her vast oceans and sent them surging across the land. Wave after wave she unleashed, until much of the land was underwater and many of the people were drowned. Those that had fled to the highest land beseeched the god Eshu who had been visiting, to return to the sky and report what was happening to them. Eshu demanded sacrifice be made to Obatala and himself before he would deliver the message. The people sacrificed some goats, and Eshu returned to the sky. When Orunmila heard the news he climbed down the golden chain to the earth, and cast many spells which caused the flood waters to retreat and the dry land reappear. So ended the great flood.

Appendix H



**Egungun Masquerade Dance Costume**  
Early 20th Century  
Yoruba Peoples, Nigeria

**Notes**