



Lesson 3:
GULLAH GEECHEE
SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

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Lesson 3: Gullah Geechee Spiritual Practices

Objective:

Students will explore the cultural significance of traditional practices such as call and response, the ring shout, and Easter Rock, comparing spiritual rituals across the African Diaspora, including the Gullah Geechee and North Louisiana traditions.

Keywords:

Anthropology, Oral History, Call and Response, Ring Shout, Easter Rock

Background:

In the introduction of *Mules and Men*, Zora Neale Hurston wrote, “I couldn’t see [my culture] for wearing it. It was only when I was off in college, away from my native surroundings, that I could see myself like somebody else and stand off and look at my garment.” That’s what studying other cultures allows you to do, whether you’re traveling, reading about other cultures, watching a movie or play involving people who are different from you, or listening to someone tell you about their culture.

Zora Neale Hurston was born in Alabama but raised in Florida. In 1928, she graduated from Barnard College in New York with a degree in Anthropology. Anthropology is the study of people, their cultures, and how they live, both in the past and present, to understand what makes them unique and how they are similar to one another. Hurston traveled all over the world practicing anthropology—Haiti, Jamaica, Honduras, New Orleans, her hometown of Eatonville, and the Gullah Geechee Corridor.

In 1940, Hurston visited Beaufort and St. Helena Island, South Carolina, and documented oral histories and attended church services to learn about Gullah Geechee spiritual practices. Oral history is when people share stories and experiences by talking to each other, helping us learn about the past from the people who were there. While in Beaufort, Hurston recorded a 42-minute black and white film called *The Commandment Keeper Church*.

She wrote, “Its keynote is rhythm. In this church they have two guitars, three symbols, two tambourines, one pair of rattle goers, and two washboards. Every song is rhythmic as are their prayers and sermons.” Some of the rhythm that she observed in the prayers and sermons is attributed to a practice known as “call and response.” Call and response is a way of singing or speaking where one person says something, then others reply or repeat what was said or sung; it’s another tradition that was brought from Africa to the United States.

Another Gullah Geechee spiritual practice that Hurston documented is called the “ring shout.” A ring shout is a dance where people form a circle, move counterclockwise in a rhythmic pattern while shuffling and stomping their feet and clapping their hands, and singing call-and-response songs. The ring shout is another tradition that was born in West Africa, but instead of using a drum as is done in Africa, ring shouters in the U.S. often use a stick to set and keep the rhythm.

The foundation of culture is where your ancestors are from and the traditions they practiced there. People carry those traditions with them while migrating, whether forcefully or voluntarily. Between the 16th and 19th centuries, Africans weren't only brought to North America for free labor. They were also taken to South America and the West Indies. Although the culture adapted a little differently in each place, there are many similarities to this day. Jamaica has a form of ring shouting, for instance, as well as places across the United States.

In June 2024, elders and young culture-keepers representing Louisiana's Easter Rock and Georgia's Gullah Geechee Ring Shout traditions came together to share spiritual practices that date back to our nation's antebellum era. The Winnsboro Easter Rock Ensemble upholds the Northern Louisiana tradition of Easter Rock by bringing the community together in their church on Easter Eve for a vigil ritual that blends West African and Christian elements. Participants form a circle and move (or "rock") counterclockwise while singing sacred music.

Similar to the Easter Eve tradition of North Louisiana, the Gullah Geechee observe a New Year's vigil ritual called Watch Night Service that also blends West African and Christian elements. The service commemorates the night of December 31, 1862, when their ancestors received official notice of their freedom. Ring shouts take place during Watch Night Service. The 2024 performance of both groups demonstrate the commonalities of cultures across the African Diaspora over time. [Watch the Gullah Geechee Ring Shouters & Winnsboro Easter Rock Ensemble Performance video by clicking here.](#)

Unpacking the Meaning: Interpreting the Lyrics of

“Yonder Come Day”

Have students study the lyrics of “Yonder Come Day,” a song sung during New Year's Eve Watch Night services. [Watch a video of the performance by clicking here.](#)

After listening a few times, have them interpret the meaning of the lyrics.

Discussion:

- Discuss the similarities and differences in the Gullah Geechee Ring Shouters & Winnsboro Easter Rock Ensemble Performance.
- Can you think of an example of call-and-response that you've heard or participated in?
- Either describe your New Year's Eve traditions or how you'd like to honor that time.
- What's the mood of “Yonder Come Day”? And what led you to that conclusion?
- Interpret the meaning of Zora Neale Hurston's quote: “I couldn't see [my culture] for wearing it. It was only when I was off in college, away from my native surroundings, that I could see myself like somebody else and stand off and look at my garment.”