

African Religions in the Americas

Elias Bongmba and Mary Ann Clark

(Early Summer Session: May 18-June 1 Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m.-12:00 noon)

This course will map out the transplantation and development of African religions in the Americas. It will include an introduction to Santería, Vodoun, Candomblé, Rastafaris and various revivalist movements with African connections.

Instructors

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Goals and Evaluation

This course will explore how traditional west African religious ideas and practices have interacted with the cultures of North and South America and the Caribbean. We will look specifically at the religious expressions found in Haitian Vodoun and Bahian Candomblé as well as Cuban-American Santería, Rastafari and Black Christianity. This course is designed to:

- Introduce the students to the similarities and differences between and among these religions.
- To develop in students an awareness of the uses of religion in society in order to develop more informed consumers of religion.
- To develop in students an ability for logical and critical analysis.

Students are expected to engage the material through readings, in-class discussions, and a personal research project. The research project should be presented in the form of a paper (8-10 pages for undergraduates, 15 to 25 pages for graduate students). Paper topics should be discussed with the professors by the end of the first week of class. Project will be due 6/7.

Schedule

Day 1 Introduction to West African Traditional Religion

Film: **Mammy water** [videorecording] : in search of the water spirits in Nigeria / [written and directed by Sabine Jell-Bahlsen]. Jell-Bahlsen, Sabine.

Unit 2 Looking at Non-Western Religions

Day 2 "Working the Spirit"

read Murphy Chapter 1 & 7, Pinn Introduction

Day 3 and 4 Santería

read Clark (handout), Brandon, Murphy Chapter 4

Unit 6. Afro-Diaspora Religions: Santería

Day 5 and 6 Vodoun

read Brown, Murphy Chapter 2

Film: **Voodoo and the church in Haiti** [videorecording] / Nine Morning Productions ; produced by Andrea E. Leland, Bob Richards ; written by Andrea E. Leland ; directed by Bob Richards. Leland, Andrea E.

Unit 4. Afro-Diaspora Religions: Vodoun

Day 7 and 8 Candomblé

read Murphy Chapter 3, Voeks

Guest Speaker, Santería priest talking about herbs

Film: **Bahia, Africa in the Americas** [videorecording] / produced, written and translated by Geovanni Brewer. Brewer, Geovanni.

Film: **Iawo** [videorecording] : initiation in a Gege-Nago temple / production, Moses Kondler, Geraldo Sarno ; direction, Geraldo Sarno ; English version by Latin American Film Project ; [produced by] Sarue Films and Mariana Films. Santos, Juana Elbein dos. Nàgô e a morte.

Unit 5 Afro-Diaspora Religions: Candomblé

Day 9 and 10 Rastafari

read Chevannes

Film: **Before reggae hit the town** [videorecording] Gorney, Mark.

Day 11 Black Christianity

Murphy Chapter 6

Unit 7. Afro-Diaspora Religions: Black Christianity

Day 12 Conclusions

Pinn Chapter 1, 2, 5

Texts (Available in Bookstore)

- Brandon, George. *Santeria from Africa to the New World: The Dead Sell Memories*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993.
- Brown, Karen McCarthy. *Mama Lola*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Chevannes, Barry . *Rastafari* Syracuse, N.Y. : Syracuse University Press, 1994.
- Murphy, Joseph M. 1994. *Working the Spirit: Ceremonies of the Africa Diaspora*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Pinn, Anthony B. *Varieties of African American Religious Experience*. Fortress: 1998.
- Voeks, Robert A. *Sacred Leaves of Candomblé*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997.

Notes

Rice University is an independent, coeducational, nonsectarian, private, research university

dedicated to undergraduate teaching and to graduate studies, research, and professional education in selected disciplines. The fall 1998 student body consisted of 2,743 undergraduates and 1,525 graduate and professional students.

This course was presented in 1999 as a summer school session of four-hour classes four days a week for three weeks. It was designed and taught as an upper division course. Although the class was small, only four students, it got good evaluations from them.

Pedagogical Reflections

This course worked surprisingly well. The students were enthusiastic and faithful. The films helped to break up the long sessions while also providing context to the readings. Co-teaching provided additional benefits in that each of us brought different insights to the material. Our biggest problem was too much material to cover in the short timeframe of a summer session. Two field trips, one to an African American church and one to a African restaurant were also well received.

If we were to do this again we would consider dropping the unit on Rastafari and substitute a unit on the religion of the Gullah people using Margaret Washington Creel's material and perhaps the movie **Daughter's of the Dust**. The religion of the Gullah has its roots in the same African environments as the other religions considered in this course, while Rastafari would fit better into a course with a different organizational scheme.