Gedes:
Haitian Day of the Dead Practices

Grade Level: 5-8
Subject: Social Studies, Arts
Key Words: Haiti, Day of the Dead, religious practices
Time Frame: 1 lesson
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Summary: This lesson focuses on Gedes, Haitian Vodou Lwas, and traditional practices of Day of the Dead in Haiti all while making connections with other parts of the Americas, particularly New Orleans and Mexico.

Student Objectives:
- Students will gain an understanding of the Gedes or the Haitian Vodou Spirits of the Dead;
- Students will gain an understanding of traditions of Day of the Dead in Haiti.

Materials:
- Colored pencils or crayons or other art supplies (black, white, and purple)
- Gede coloring images
- Images/videos
- Projection equipment

Introduction

This brief lesson introduces traditions of Day of the Dead in Haiti. The celebration of Day of the Dead in Haiti is a combination of vodou traditions and Catholic influences, which led to the celebration of the Gedes on November 1st and 2nd, All Saint’s and All Soul’s Days in the Catholic tradition. The lesson consists of three parts: 1) a brief background on Haiti; 2) a brief overview of Haitian Vodou and its roots; and 3) a discussion of Gedes, Vodou Spirits of the Dead, and their connection with Day of the Dead.

Haiti

Haiti is located in the Caribbean on the western third of the island of Hispaniola, the eastern two-thirds of which is occupied by the Dominican Republic (Figure 1). The name Haiti comes from Hayti, or mountainous land, the name given to the area by the Taino Indians, the earliest inhabitants of the island. The country covers approximately 10,000 square miles, the same area as the U.S. state of Maryland. Although Hispaniola’s first European inhabitants were Spaniards (in fact Christopher Columbus landed on Hispaniola in 1492), the Spaniards had little interest in the island and its
resources, or lack thereof, and Haiti became a French Colony in 1697. Many of Haiti’s traditions come from French and west African influences. West Africans were brought to the island as slaves beginning as early as 1508 and they provided the majority of labor on the island.

Haiti gained its independence from France through the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804). Haiti was influenced by the French Revolution, which had begun a few years previously, and by the harsh treatment of persons of African descent, particularly slaves. Although the revolution began as an uprising concerning the rights of free people of color, with increased French opposition, it became a full-fledged uprising. Toussaint Louverture led the fight for Haiti’s freedom during the revolution. On January 1, 1804, Haiti declared its independence.

The post-independence political history of Haiti is complex, with a mosaic of democratic leaders, military juntas, and dictators. Some of the most prominent political leaders of the country are Jean-Claude Duvalier, the repressive and corrupt dictator of the country from 1957-1986 and Jean-Bertrade Aristide, twice a democratically elected president who was overthrown in a military coup. Haiti was also occupied by the United States from 1915-1934. The occupation of the island was guided by US economic interests and although reforms occurred, many of these reforms were not beneficial to the Haitian people.

Perhaps most recently, Haiti has been in the news for the 2010 earthquake whose death toll reached 50,000-220,000. The earthquake destroyed much of Port au Prince, the capital, and the spread of disease after the earthquake lead to additional deaths.
Connections with New Orleans

Haiti and New Orleans have a relationship both through the routes by which people arrived, the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, and common roots of spiritual and cultural practices which originated in Africa. Both areas are also former French (and Spanish) colonies which gained independence from France around the same time (the 1804 revolution for Haiti and the 1803 Louisiana Purchase for Louisiana).

As former French colonies, New Orleans and Haiti had strong social and economic ties, mostly related to the production, export, and trade of sugar, coffee, and indigo. Both were governed by France’s Code Noir of 1685, and later by a set of Black Codes, which dictated the daily life of enslaved Africans in these colonies. These commonalities extended to the French-centered social structures with a four tiered social strata: White Plantation Owners (Grand Blancs), Plantation Overseers (Petit Blancs), Free People of Color (Affranchi), and Slaves (escalaves). The common social structure and traditions are also seen in the presence of Vodou and Voodoo.

Voodoo/Vodou/Vodun

In areas with African diaspora communities, shared cultural and spiritual practices exist, as a result of a larger west African belief system known as Vodun. These traditions have a variety of names and spellings: Santeria (Cuba); Condomble (Brazil); Vudu (Puerto Rico); Obeah (Jamaica); Vodou (Haiti); and Voodoo (New Orleans).

Vodun, the root of these traditions, is widely practiced in west Africa, particularly in countries Benin, Nigeria, Togo, and Gana (Figure 2). Vodun is a collection of traditional African religions which focus on a collection of spirits which govern the Earth and forces of nature. Ancestor worship is an important part of the tradition, as the spirits of the dead are thought to exist alongside the living. The Vodun tradition, combined with Catholicism in a syncretic tradition, is a root of a variety of spiritual practices throughout the Americas.

The exact roots of Voodoo (and other variants) are hard to trace. For instance, some suggest that Voodoo in New Orleans evolved independently of Haitian Vodou; that it was brought directly to New Orleans from west Africa. Others trace its origins to the massive migrations of Haitians to New Orleans during both the Haitian Revolution of 1791-1804 and the migration of exiled Haitians from Cuba to New Orleans in 1809-1810. Interestingly, it is believed that the family of the infamous New Orleans Voodoo Priestess Marie Laveau is from a southern town in Haiti called Jeremie. The difficulty in identifying the roots of the tradition is exacerbated by attempts to prevent vodou ceremonies from occurring, which can be traced back to attempts to prevent enslaved Africans from practicing their own religions. This trend continues today in negative portrayals of Haitian Vodou in western media practices. The Gedes, the family of Haitian Vodou Lwa known as the Spirits of the Dead, are also misrepresented in media presentations including: White Zombie, James Bond, Pirates of the Caribbean, Princess and the Frog, and American Horror Story.
Haitian Vodou and Gedes

Haitian Vodou features a single central deity, similar to Catholicism. Haitian vodou also includes a number of lesser deities, lwas, which are similar to Catholic saints. Practitioners of Haitian Vodou frequently direct prayers to different lwas depending on the situation (similarly, Catholics pray to different saints on different occasions. St. Sebastian is the patron saint of pincushion makers, and so people of this profession might request intervention from him in times of crisis). Gedes are a subgroup of the lwas and are the spirits associated with the dead and ancestors. They are the spirits of
formerly living people and exercise power in matters concerning death including the passage between the world of the living and the dead.

One of the best known gedes is Baron Samedi, who represents death and controls the passage between life and death. He is usually called on for the healing of those approaching death, as he guards the passage to the realm of the dead. He is depicted wearing a top hot, black tuxedo, and dark glasses and is associated with crosses, coffins, and the colors purple and black. In another example of syncretism, he is sometimes associated with the Catholic Saint Martin de Porres. The Baron is married to Maman Brigitte, another powerful gede. She is commonly associated with the Catholic Saint Brigit of Kildare, as St. Brigit is associated with crosses and gravestones.

Ceremonies involving the Gedes can be private ceremonies in a temple or home, public ceremonies, which are open to everyone, and folkloric performances where religious symbols are used as part of folk art. After the 2010 earthquake, a large public ceremony was held to honor the lives of all those who died in the quake and to ask for protection, healings and blessings (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aiJI0Z7nmT4 and http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dhQN9OhEMQI). Note the attire, demeanor, interaction, singing, and dancing of the participants. Gedes are also invoked in Vodou ceremonies such as those depicted in these videos: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mWDscUQloN4 or http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RqqcFk242y8.

Gedes, and other representations of Hatian Vodou, also provide inspiration for folk art and performances. Visual and performing artists have created flags and contemporary art, as well as folkloric performances, influenced by the Gedes. RAM is a group of musicians in Haiti who have taken the sounds and musical traditions of Haitian vodou and brought them into popular culture. Check out some of their music/music videos (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r9ADfEyh7PQ ; http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wh8ng0QxGOg).

**Gede and November 1st and 2nd**

Gedes, as spirits of death/dead are connected with Catholic traditions of All Saints and All Souls days and celebrations are held in their honor on November 1st and 2nd. People make altars to the dead, and the gedes, and hold ceremonies and gatherings in celebration. Normally people attend church services in the morning of November 1st and then return home and dress similarly to the Gedes – either in ragtag outfits or elegantly as the Baron Samedi dresses – and paint their faces. People go to town cemeteries to clean the tombs of their ancestors and leave food for them.

An altar to gedes might include cigarettes, hot peppers (habaneros), alcohol, images of skulls, crosses, coffins, images of saints, and a top hat and cane (representing Baron Samedi), all in the traditional colors of white, black, and purple. People also include food, including the favorite foods of their relatives. Altars are both private, in peoples’ homes, and public, during community celebrations. Public celebrations include food, music, dancing, and costumes. The November 1st and 2nd celebrations are a happy occasion when people remember their relatives and ancestors; these celebrations are a time for family and community gatherings.

Videos of celebrations of Gedes in cemeteries in Haiti are available on youtube, for example: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J8kpd8I9ljw. This clip has better imagery
of the altars, processions, and food in cemeteries: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2JQrosHgdU8. NOTE: Please be sure to preview clips before showing them to students. You may wish to show parts of the ceremony instead of in its entirety. This clip is of a ceremony in Miami, but may be more appropriate for some students: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QBpWmvAYbo.

Gede ceremonies and other aspects of Haitian ceremonies, and particularly the dance and music which accompany them have also been adapted for folkloric performances. As discussed above, RAM has created rock vodou (see clips above). Haitian dance is also showcased by folkloric groups, one such group is Rara Tou Limon, based in California. You can see their celebration of November 1st in a classroom setting: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0sPrItkGp5Q, or in a public performance: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gdEx3oW2u8w.

Connections with Day of the Dead in other Regions

Although the roots of the celebration of the Gedes differ from other Day of the Dead celebrations, many similarities can be seen between these celebrations and those in other regions of the world. Firstly, these celebrations represent a syncretic tradition, the blending of Catholic and Hatian Vodou traditions. Similarly Day of the Dead in Mexico is a blending of Catholic and prehispanic traditions. Altars are also a common thread; the inclusion of food, alcohol, specific colors, and photographs on altars is seen in many traditions. The specificity of items on the altars and the importance of colors (although the specific colors are different) is another shared thread. Colors used in Haiti are black, white, and purple, while in Mexico orange is the most common color. Another common aspect of these celebrations is the tending of graves of relatives and the festive family atmosphere that accompanies the celebrations. The similarities between Day of the Dead practices across the Americas demonstrates that although the roots and specific aspects of these practices may differ, the celebration of Day of the Dead, and remembering ancestors, is seen across the Americas.
Day of the Day in Haiti Activities

Coloring Activity

Have students color the images of two Gedes. The Gedes here are Baron Samedi and Manman Brigite. Students can color the images in the colors typically associated with these Gedes – purple, black, and white. These images can be used to decorate the classroom or a classroom altar, as images of the Gedes would be utilized in Haiti.
Manman Brigite
Baron Samedi
Compare/Contrast Activity

After introducing the concept of Day of the Dead, and the specifics of Day of the Dead in Haiti to your students, have them create a Venn Diagram of the similarities and differences between the practice in Haiti and elsewhere. It would be helpful to select a specific area (i.e. Mexico) for comparison as this will make it easier to identify concrete similarities and differences between the traditions in different areas. If you have discussed Day of the Dead in multiple areas you could have a three-way comparison using a three circle Venn Diagram. See the comparing Day of the Dead section for some similarities between Day of the Dead in Haiti and elsewhere, but encourage students to be creative and think of other similarities!
Terms

*Louisiana Purchase*: 530,000,000 acres of territory in North America that the United States purchased from France in 1803 for US $15 million.

*Syncretism*: a blending of traditions. Seen commonly when one or more groups of people interact to create new traditions.

*Trans Atlantic Slave Trade*: a large scale movement of people from Africa to the Americas from the mid-1500s to the 1800s. Labor from Africa was the base of agricultural activities and mining throughout the Americas; sugar plantations were one of the largest users of slaves in the Americas. The slave trade was one of the key points of contact between Europeans and Africans during this time period.

*Vodun*: a west African religion, commonly found in Benin, Ghana, Nigeria, and Togo, which has a central deity and believes that all aspects of the world are also imbued with a spirit or deity. Thought to be the roots for the Vodoo/Vodou traditions found in many areas of the Americas where enslaved people were brought from Africa, including Haiti.