

Lesson Plan:

“From Yanga to La Bamba”: An Introspection of Afro-Mexican History Through the Science of Music and Marronage

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Overview

Instructional Goals:

- Historical: Starting with the revolutionary maroon leader Gaspar Yanga, students will learn how an Afro-Mexican diaspora came to be in Veracruz and why this Black population was pivotal to the creation of Son Jarocho’s “La Bamba.”
- Cognitive: Students will learn important dates and events of Afro-Mexican musical and cultural Identity. Students will learn how marronage creates space for scientific innovation and self-determination that alters narratives of enslavement.
- STEM: Students will identify the “La Bamba” or wood like the Spanish Cedar endemic to the Cimarron enclaves and understand the scientific aspects of its utility in the creation of marronage and the musical instruments that defined Son Jarocho.

Materials Needed:

- “From Yanga to La Bamba” timeline from the 1500s to contemporary times.
- Access to YouTube or other musical streaming platforms.
- Arts and craft materials such as markers, gel pens, and colorful paper.
- Spanish to English Translations of the songs “La Bamba’ and El “Chuchumbe.”

Research Question: How has Gaspar Yanga’s Afro-Mexican Cimarron community impacted popular Mexican culture and scientific innovation through its insistence on liberation?

Lesson Description: In this lesson plan, the objective is for learners to connect Yanga’s liberation fight with the creation of Son Jarocho music from the region of Veracruz, which is most informed by Yanga’s resistance and its subsequent scientific metamorphosis. “La Bamba” is the most famous and recognizable song of the genre, and students will link its popularity to the innovation and resilience of Mexico’s African

diaspora. Students will be inspired to envision the 16th-century cimarron communities of Veracruz, Mexico and the technological and creative advancements that arise from resistance to colonial enslavement and exploitation. Students will capture the ways liberation struggles inform popular music. On a deeper level, students will begin to imagine ways science and liberation can be analogous and necessary for our future well-being.

Warm up: 15-30 minutes. Read as a group two accounts given by Europeans who observed Afro-Mexicans in their liberated palenques.

1. [In 1697](#), “The Neapolitan traveler Gemelli Careri visited this town at the end of the 17th century, which he described in 1697 as “situated in the middle of a forest. Since it is inhabited entirely by blacks, it seems like one is in Guinea. Besides, they have beautiful features and are dedicated to agriculture.”¹ -[“The Mexican Mocambo of Yanga,” as described by Padre Juan](#)
2. “We arrived at a fountain placed between two rocks...from whose water the Negroes take sustenance, for although it is far from their town, they have nothing else to drink. Next to the fountain was a large field of tobacco, squash, and corn which [we] destroyed to deprive our enemy of provisions. The spoils that were found in the town and huts of these Negroes were considerable. A variety of clothing that they had gathered, cutlasses, swords, axes, some harquebuses and coins, salt, butter, corn... (Davidson 95-6; Moore 2005, 39).²

After reading, discuss among each other why these men decided to write about the free Cimarron communities in the midst of mass enslavement of African people. What impact do you think witnessing these highly organized communes had on the Europeans who may have convinced themselves of African inferiority? What skills do you think would be necessary to build and sustain a Cimarron community? Do you think the Africans were courageous for doing this, Why or Why not?

- **Activity 1:** Build your own Cimarron Community! What would Yanga do?
- **Activity 2:** Intro to La Bamba and La Negras.
- **Activity 3:** Name That Year! The Matching Game

¹ Giovanni Gemelli, *Journey to New Spain*. Francisca Perujo (prologue, trans., notes) (Mexico City: UNAM, 1976), 246.

² Moore, Amanda, "Maroon Societies in Brazil, Jamaica an Mexico" (2005). *Renée Crown University Honors Thesis Projects - All*. 710.

Activity 1: Build your own Cimarron Community! What would Yanga do?

Overview: Introduce students to the enigmatic figure Gaspar Yanga from the region of Veracruz, Mexico and its African history using the timeline events as reference. Introduce students to the concept of a Cimarron or Maroon community and how Veracruz, known as San Lorenzo De Los Negros in the time of Yanga, grew out of resistance to form one of the oldest free towns in the Americas. What types of traditions did the Afro-Mexican Cimarrons bring to Mexico from Africa? How have these African practices been maintained or obscured in contemporary Mexican culture, especially in the music of Son Jarocho? After learning these concepts the student should imagine themselves as an Afro-Mexican Cimarron and detail through a drawing what their community looks like.

Instructions:

1. Go to the beginning of the La Bamba Timeline and read about the important dates beginning with the arrival of Africans in Veracruz, one of them being Gaspar Yanga in 1579.
2. Read and discuss the accounts left by European travelers, the Jesuit priest, and Spanish Conquistadors. Obtain an idea of the skills and scientific innovation needed to maintain a sovereign community protected from colonial violence. Have students ponder on the military, social, and agricultural science a maroon enclave calls for.
3. Note the treaty Yanga made with the Spaniards in 1609 that established the palenque as San Lorenzo De Los Negros, a free Black town.
4. Talk about the account left by Father Juan Larencio that describes Yanga coming down from the mountains to a cacophony of drums and bells. Imagine these rhythms as the beginnings of Son Jarocho, a music steeped in dissent.
5. Instruct the students to take pens, colored pencils, or digital means to create their own palenque and name five things they would need in their community. Draw a visual rendering of this, or write a paragraph answering the question.

Warm-up: (10 to 15 minutes) Open up discussion with students about their own ethnic musical traditions. Ask about specific folklore styles born out of them. Why are these practices important to preserve? Have these musical traditions stood the test of time? Why or why not? Play a portion of the Riche Valens version of “La Bamba” for students. Ask if they're familiar with it and, if so, when and how they were introduced to it. Go into

the OpenLab image hotpots, click on the pictures of the instruments, and read about the science of Son Jarocho instrument making.

Activity 2: Intro to La Bamba and La Negras.

Overview: This activity serves as the introduction to “La Bamba,” the most famous song out of the Son Jarocho genre, and its little-known Black women contributors: Tona La Negra and La Negra Graciana, both from Veracruz. Discuss the 1946 La Bamba timeline entry about Katherine Dunham’s anthropological work in Mexico and the Ballet “Veracruzana” which helped elevate Afro-Veracruz into the rest of the African Caribbean diaspora framework. Discuss how Dunham’s work coincided with Tona La Negra’s popularity. Discuss how Black women have been pivotal to Afro-Mexican culture, specifically Son Jarocho.

Instructions:

1. Read the Center for World Music Blog entry on [Spanish Cedar](#). The wood used in Veracruz to build the beloved Son Jarocho instruments like the Jarana Jarocho and the Arapa Jarocho, played by La Negra Graciana.
2. Read the article or listen to the nine minute [NPR All Things Considered episode titled “La Bamba”](#) about Riche Valens and the hit song born out of Son Jarocho. Then discuss with students if they’ve ever heard the song, and if so, when did they hear it?
3. After listening, discuss this section of the article:

“At first, Ritchie Valens didn’t feel comfortable commercializing the Mexican folk song. He felt it was demeaning to his culture. And he was reluctant to sing in Spanish because his accent wasn’t very good. So he paid a visit to his favorite aunt, Ernestine Reyes.

“ Well, he came home one day and he says, `Tia, I have to translate this “La Bamba” into English.” Reyes remembers. “I says, `OK. Let’s sit down.’ So we did, in Spanish, ‘cause he didn’t know Spanish at all.” Reyes says since there are some 500 verses of “La Bamba,” they gave up the idea to translate the song, and Valens recorded it in Spanish.”

4. Pose two questions about the section above:
 - A. Why do you think Riche Valens was hesitant to record “La Bamba” and commercialize this aspect of Mexican culture?
 - B. When Richie’s Aunt Ernestine Reyes says there are 500 verses of “La Bamba,” why do you think that is? How does that correlate with

the possibility that La Bamba is a very old song sung by Afro-Mexicans in Veracruz?

4. Read the English translation of the Lyrics of “La Bamba” and discuss them as a group. Compare the lyrics with the 1683 timeline entry and the possibility that the song “La Bamba” was inspired by this pirate raid incident. Remember the “500 verse” comment made by Richie Valens’s aunt. Look further ahead on the timeline to 1779 when the Catholic church bans the Son “El Chuchumbe.” Discussing the lyrics. Why is the Spanish interested in censoring Son Jarocho if it’s not a Black anti-colonial sonic praxis? Discuss.

5. Read the timeline entries on La Tona Negra and La Negra Graciana. Note 1946, the timeline entry about Katerine Dunhman. Read the 1930 timeline entry on Tona La Negra, who brought Veracruzian Afro-Mexican culture to the forefront as one of its biggest stars. Listen to La Negra Graciana’s 1994 version of “La Bamba” playing the Arapa Jarocho. Discuss how Black women have contributed to the Son Jarocho genre.

Activity 3: Name That Year! The Matching Bingo Game

Overview: In this lesson, students will have a knowledge-based learning objective and play a matching game/or quiz to help familiarize themselves with the “Yanga to La Bamba” timeline and its events. This will require two to three sets of five to seven important years on the timeline, printed out for teams or shared digitally for students to match with the correlating event.

Instructions:

1. Have students break up into groups of two or three, or work individually. Pick five or more important events on the timeline. For example:
 - a. **1579-** Yanga is trafficked as a slave to Mexico
 - b. **1609-** Treaty between Yanga and Spanish Crown
 - c. **1779 -** The Catholic church outlaws “El Chuchumbe”
 - d. **1930-** Golden Age of Mexican Cinema “Tona La Negra”
 - e. **1932-** The town of San Lorenzo De Los Negros is remanined Yanga in honor of the legendary Afro-Mexican liberation fighter.
 - f. **1958-** Richie Valens, Los Angeles Chicano records the now popular version of La Bamba
 - g. **1999-** First Encuentro de Pueblos Negros

- h. **2015-** The category of people of Afro-descent included in the Mexican census
- i. **2020-** D Smoke's song "Gaspar Yanga" feat. Snoop Dog

2. Give students Bingo cards with the selected events listed on them and read the events aloud that correspond with the years. Students can answer out loud or place the year on top of the correct event on the paper. The first group or individual to complete the game accurately wins.

La Bamba Lyrics English/Spanish Translation

To dance the Bamba (Para bailar La Bamba)

To dance the Bamba (Para bailar La Bamba)

It takes a little grace (Se necessita una poca de gracia)

A little grace (Una poca de gracia)

For me, for you, ay up, ay up (Para mi, para ti, ay arriba, ay arriba)

Ay, up up (Ay, arriba arriba)

I'll be for you, I'll be for you, I'll be for you (Por ti sere, por ti sere, por ti sere)

I'm not a sailor (Yo no soy marinero)

I am not a sailor, I am a captain (Yo no soy marinero, soy capitan)

I am a captain, I am a captain (Soy capitan, soy capitan)

Bamba, bamba (Bamba, bamba)

Bamba, bamba, bam (Bamba, bamba, bam)

To dance the Bamba (Para bailar La Bamba)

To dance the Bamba (Para bailar La Bamba)

It takes a little grace (Se necessita una poca de gracia)

A little grace (Una poca de gracia)

For me, for you, ay up, ay up (Para mi, para ti, ay arriba, ay arriba)

Repeat 1 x

El Chuchumbé/ The Tallywhacker: [Los Cenzontles - El Chuchumbé \(English translation\)](#)