

FROM AFRICA TO THE AMERICAS

1600s to 1700s

AFRICAN DANCES IN THE NEW WORLD

- In today's class we will observe and discuss examples of dances brought to the New World during the height of the slave trade.

COMMONALITIES: CIRCLE DANCES

- Although the dances practiced during the slavery period in the Americas originated in diverse locations in Africa, they had commonalities.
- Therefore, a similar aesthetic could be witnessed in the dances of the Senegambia region and other regions in West Africa, and the dances of West Central Africa.
- One very common aesthetic is the circle dance.
- Circle dances were witnessed by observers in what would be later called the US, in the Caribbean, and in South America.



THE CALENDA

- The Calenda was a circle dance performed in Haiti, the Barbados, and other islands in the Caribbean.
- Père Labat traveled to the Islands of the Americas in 1724.
- He observed and documented the different dances that were performed by enslaved Africans, but he stated that the Calenda was one of the most popular.



CALENDA PERFORMED

- Labat believed that Calenda originated in the Kingdom of Arda.
- Arda was a coastal kingdom in southern Benin.
- According to Labat's description, a large circle is formed for the spectators, the drummers, and dancers who became tired.
- In the middle of the circle are two lines of dancers facing each other.



CALENDA CONTINUED

- Men are on one side and women are on the other.
- A singer sings an improvised song that reflects the issues of the moment.
- Everyone sings the chorus of the song in a call and response fashion.
- During the dance, the dancers hold their arms like they are holding castanets.

CALENDA CONTINUED

- They jump, swiftly turn, approach each other, then retreat.
- When the men and women would approach each other, they would slap each others thighs before they retreated.
- In addition to the drumming there is vigorous handclapping.



CALENDA BANNED

- In 1724, after Labat's book on the Calenda was published, slave owners in the Caribbean banned the Calenda.
- They claimed it was banned because it was indecent.
- However, it was discovered that it was banned due to fears of slave revolts.
- Although it was prohibited, Calenda was frequently performed through the years.

THE CHICA

- The Chica was also a very popular dance in the Windward Islands – Martinique, St. Lucia, Barbados, St. Vincent, and Grenada.
- It was also performed in the Dominican Republic and in New Orleans in the US.
- The Chica originated in the Congo.

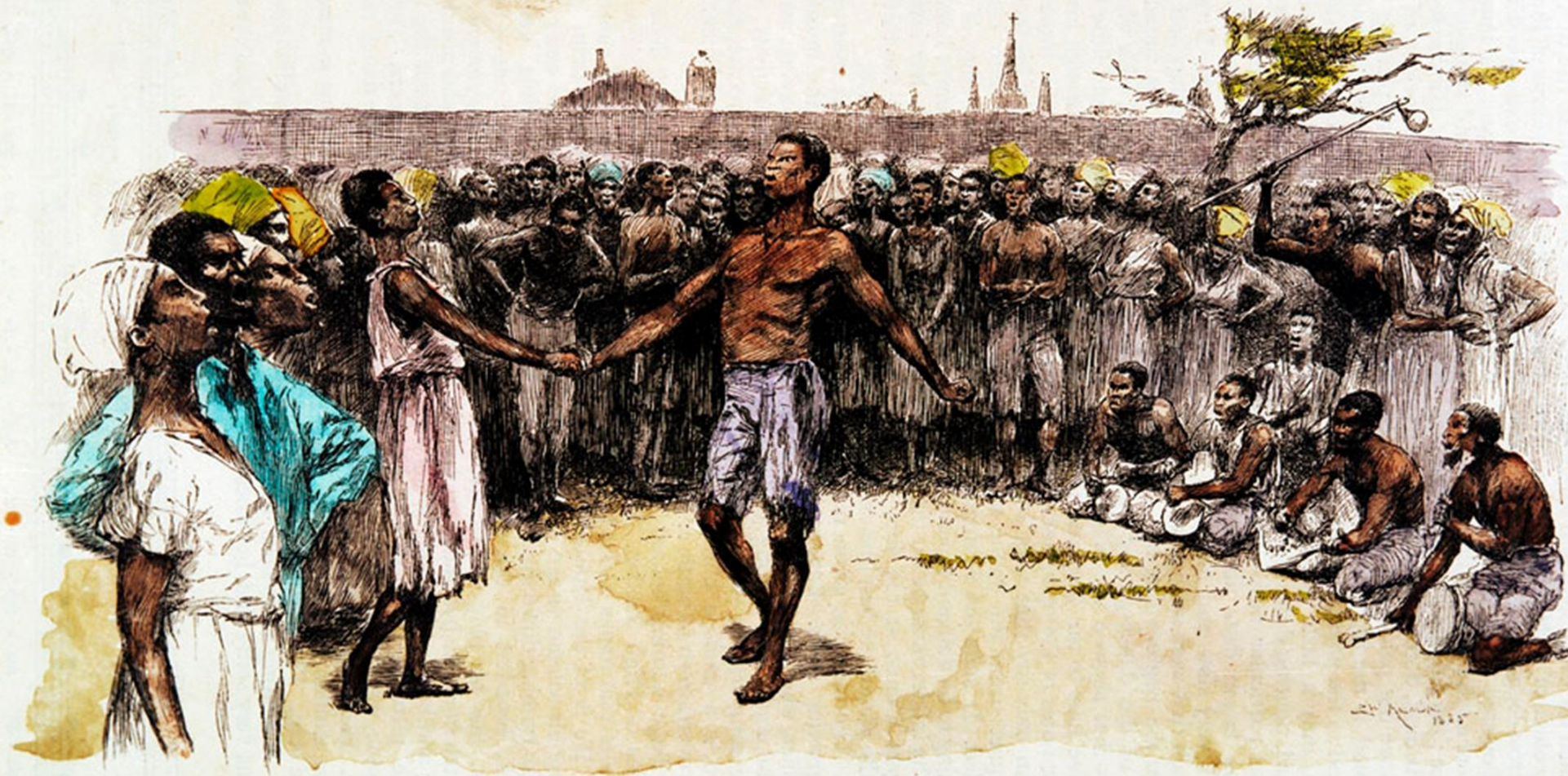


THE CHICA PERFORMED

- The Chica was a couple dance in that it was performed by a man and a women.
- The woman holds the ends of handkerchiefs or the sides of her skirt.
- Only the hips and the lower portions of the body below the waist are moved during the dance.

THE CHICA OR THE BAMBOULA?

- The torso is almost entirely stationary.
- The man approaches the woman while she is dancing.
- He lunges forward and backward in harmony with the woman.
- One of the drums used for the Chica is the bamboula drum.
- Thus, the Chica is was also sometimes called the Bamboula.



THE BAMBOULA.

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Ante la Iglesia de San Francisco

DANCES IN THE US DURING THE SLAVERY ERA

1600s-1700s

CONGO SQUARE

- Congo Square was part of an open field located in 17th century New Orleans.
- It was the central location for cockfights, dogfights, Native American ball games, among other things.
- It was also a place where people came together to socialize and it was an informal market place.
- Occasional dances took place there as well.
- The area was known by many names: Place Congo, Circus Square, Public Square, Places des Negres, and Congo Plains.

CONGO SQUARE EMERGES

- There was a portion of the field where slaves gathered to dance.
- The population of the city increased and as the city grew Congo Square became a section of the poorer area of the town.
- This was in noticeable contrast to the wealthier area at the other end of the New Orleans street.

THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION

- The dancing began early in the 19th century.
- It was the Haitian Revolution of 1791-1803, led by Toussaint L'Ouvature, that transformed Congo Square in New Orleans to the locality that people read about in history.
- During the Haitian Revolution many slave owners fled the country taking their slaves with them.
- They relocated to New Orleans where people spoke French and there was a familiar French culture.



THE DANCE SITE ON SUNDAYS

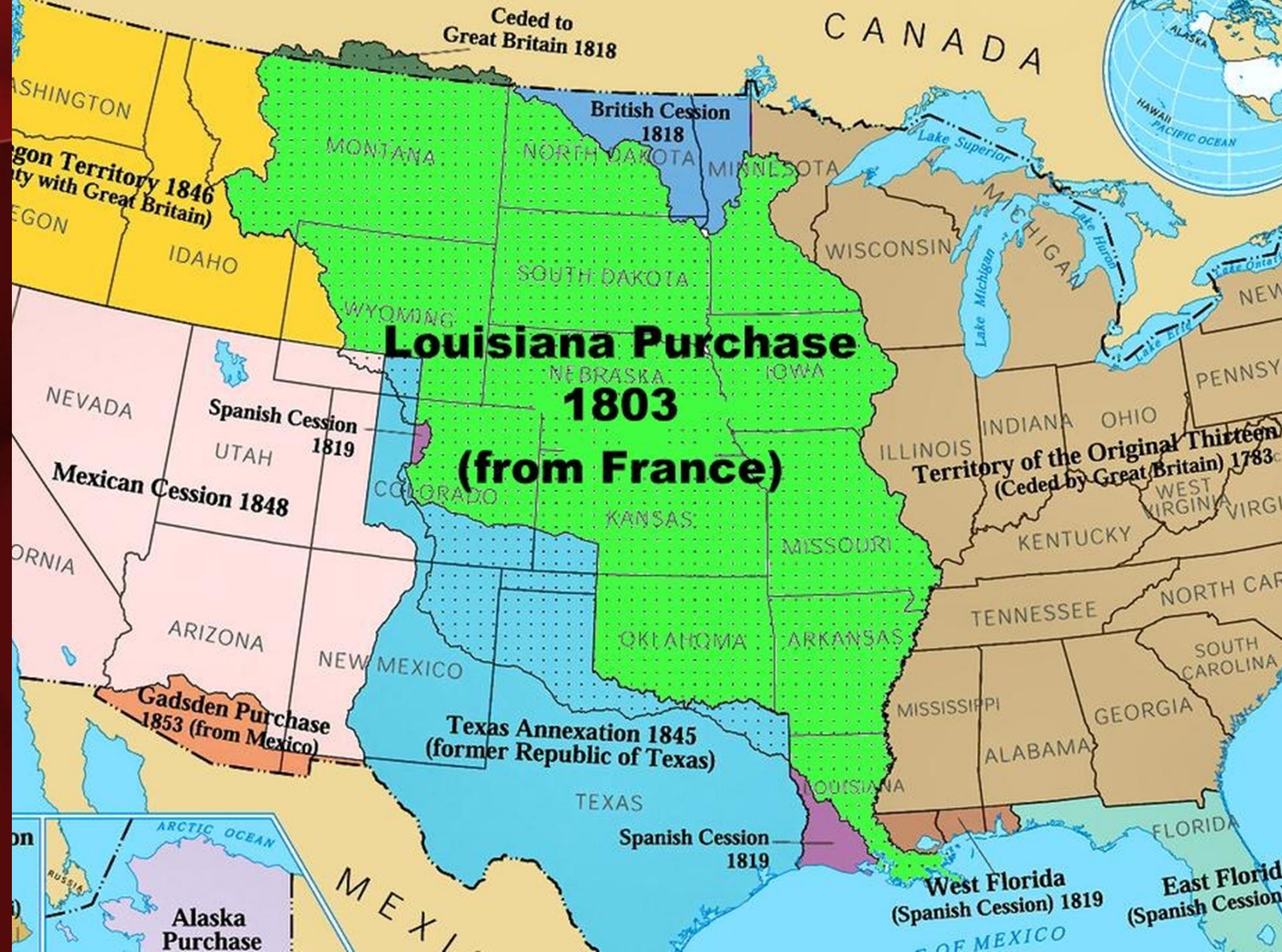
- All of the dances done at Congo Square were African based.
- Additionally, because of the Haitian Revolution, Afro-Caribbean dance was also witnessed at Congo Square.
- In 1817, Congo Square was officially legislated as a site for dance on Sundays.



Legislation

THE LOUISIANA PURCHASE AND CONGO SQUARE

- In 1803, the US bought Louisiana from France.
- African and Afro-Caribbean Dance, the market places, etc., were already occurring at Congo Square at that time.
- The United States was afraid of large slave gatherings, but was equally afraid to stop the activities at the newly acquired Congo Square.
- The reason for both concerns was slave revolts.



FROM CIRCUS SQUARE TO CONGO SQUARE

- The US determined that if it controlled when and where slave dancing and gatherings occurred, it would be able to avert rebellions.
- Consequently, after 1817, Circus Square, also known as Place Publique, and the other names discussed earlier, took on the name of the people who gathered there to dance on Sundays until sundown – Congo Square.



CONGO SQUARE BECOMES OFFICIAL

- The name Congo Square became popular.
- Families and even tourists came from long distances to see the dances performed by the slaves at Congo Square, particularly the dance called “Congo.”
- By the 1850s the dance “Congo” and other African dances had made their way into official records.

JUNKANU

- John Canoe was also known as John Kooner, John Kuner, John Koner, and Junkanu.
- It was a masquerade-dance practiced in North Carolina and the Caribbean at Christmas time.
- John Canoe reached its peak during the 18th and 19th century.
- It was brought from Africa and practiced by slaves in the United States and the Caribbean.

JOHN CANOE ATTIRE AND PRACTICES

- Rags
- Feathers
- Animal skins
- The dancers danced to drumming and chanting.
- The “Kuners” demanded money form their master and other whites who came to witness the festival.

Junkanu in
Jamaica



THE WORD

- The origin of the word is unknown, but several hypotheses are considered by scholars.
- One school of thought posits that John Canoe was an infamous enslaver in Africa in the 1700s.
- Some say the term comes from the Ewe word “dzonko” which means “sorcerer man.”
- Another school of thought claims the word Junkanu comes from a Bamana word “Kono.”
- And lastly, some believe it comes from the phrase “junk anew” to indicate the found materials used to make the costumes.

THE FATE OF JUNKANU

- After the Civil War African Americans abandoned the Junkanu festivals.
- They equated it with slavery and oppression.
- Even the word “kooner” began to signify a foolish person or clown.

THE TRADITION CONTINUES

- However, probably not knowing it was an African tradition, white teenage boys during the end of the 19th century in North Carolina, began to darn masquerade costumes and engaged in what they called “koonering” around Christmas and New Years time.
- Today, historic sites in North Carolina, such as Somerset Plantation in Creswell, and Tyron Palace at New Bern, are re-enacting John Canoe dance-festivals in an effort to understanding the past.

1808

- Because of the British and later the American ban on international slave trading in 1807 & 1808 respectively, the African dances practiced from the 1500s to roughly 1808, served as a bridge to keep enslaved Africans connected to the culture, communities, and way of life they forcibly left behind.
- From roughly 1809 to 1865, they had to create new communities in a strange land. These communities were founded on African foundations, but also reflected their experiences in the Americas.
- They used dance as the glue that held their communities together.
- Dance also helped them to preserve their identities while forging new ones under the brutal dehumanizing system of slavery.



identity

PINKSTER, A NORTHERN SLAVERY DANCE

- In the North, enslaved African Americans were watched closely and under very tight controls.
- There were no large plantation-style establishments so slaves worked primarily as artisans, house servants, etc.
- Because they worked mostly indoors they were constantly in close proximity to whites.

SLAVERY IN NEW YORK

- New York was the capital of American slavery for more than 200 years.
- It lasted from the 1600s until 1827 when slavery was abolished in New York.
- The Dutch arrived in the 1590s and brought their slaves with them, but exponential numbers of enslaved Africans were brought to New York when the British took New York from the Dutch.

THE DUTCH IN NEW YORK

- Dutch traders and other individuals began migrating to New York in the 1590s.
- They purchased or brought their slaves with them.
- Consequently, enslaved Africans can be witnessed in New York as early as the 1590s.



FROM THE DUTCH TO PINKSTER

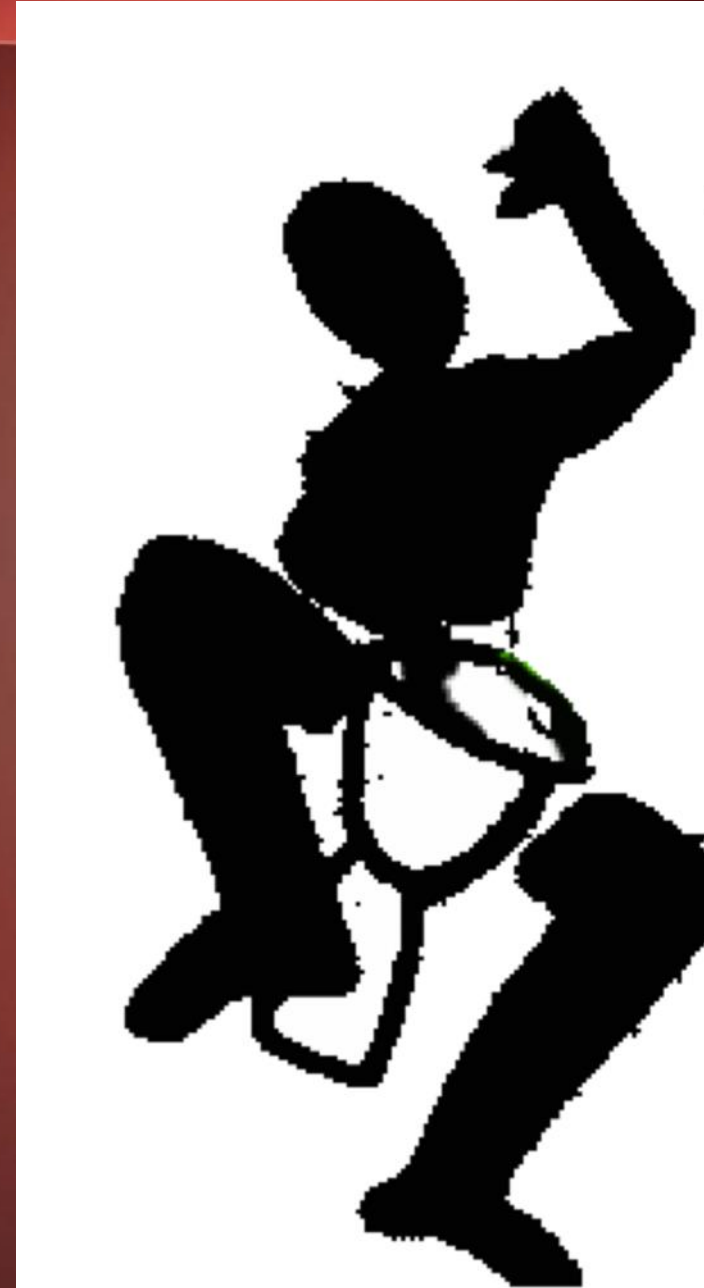
- The Pinkster Festival began as a Dutch Pentecostal festival but by the late 1700s it was solely an African American festival.
- The Pinkster Festival was held between the 1600s through the early 1800s, but it reached its peak between 1790-1810.

THE KING

- Some years of the festival, the enslaved Africans held an election in order to choose a king, although free Blacks participated in the festival as well.
- The king would be responsible for approaching the slave owners and making them aware of the concerns of the slaves.
- The king would also serve as a mediator to settle disputes among the slaves.

THE CRITERIA

- When the enslaved African Americans elected a king, they favored the men that could dance the best.
- It was also favorable if the person elected could play the drums and other instruments well.



THE ELECTED KING

- If a person was directly from Africa, it was a positive trait in the eyes of the slaves who elected the king. They took this into consideration as well.
- During the festivals, the king would lead the dances and dance processionals.
- The Pinkster Festival served as a process that facilitated the rebuilding of communities forcibly left behind in Africa that were ruptured by the transatlantic slave trade.

DISTINCTIONS

- There was an overtly obvious difference between the Pinkster festival and the other festivals in the North.
- The authentically African dances in the Pinkster festivals are what distinguished it from the other festivals.
- Initially, dances done at the Pinkster festivals were from Guinea and other parts of Senegambia.
- Later, probably around the 18th century with the large influx of Congolese and Angolans, Pinkster dances began to take on a different African flavor.

FROM ANGOLA TO GUINEA

- According to an early 19th century witness, King Charles (king of the Pinkster festival at the time) was “leading on the Guinea dance.”
- Although King Charles was a prince in Angola when he was captured, he may have learned dances from Guinea (Senegambia), when he arrived in America which he probably combined with dance practices from his own country.



THE PINKSTER FESTIVAL BANNED

- The Pinkster Festival, eventually spread and as a result was also practiced in New Jersey.
- Pinkster festivals were outlawed in Albany, New York in 1811.