

## **Teacher Education Institute (TEI)**

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### **Synopsis 8 Teaching the Ancient African Civilization of Kush**

Let us begin by posing some questions.

1. How many of our students, when they study the ancient cultures of Mesopotamia, Egypt or Greece, are aware that at the same time as these civilizations existed another major civilization thrived in the interior of Africa? That at the time of the Minoan and Mycenaean cultures of Greece, the pre-Aryan cities of India, and the Sumerian cities of Mesopotamia there was a major civilization in the interior of Africa.
2. How many students would be aware that the 25th Dynasty in Egypt was a Dynasty of Kings from an African culture south of Egypt?
3. How many students would be aware that a Roman army at the time of the Emperor Augustus was challenged and defeated by an African army led by a strong and powerful queen?
4. And let us ask this last question. How many girls in our classes, when learning about the mighty Roman Emperors, the great pharaohs of Egypt, and the male leaders and decision makers of Greece, are also aware of the female leadership of an African civilization? That through all of these periods a civilization existed that was ruled, for some of the time, by powerful queens.

If the answer to these questions is, “not many, if any at all,” then it is time to bring the ancient civilization of Kush into the middle grade curriculum. Six Reasons why it is important that all students learn about Kush.

1. An Erroneous Message, 2. The Female Role in Kush, 3. Ruled by Queens, 4. Queens of Kush
5. Understanding Concepts: Acculturation, 6. A Challenge for the Future

#### **1. An Erroneous Message**

Many people are concerned with the fact that many African-American students first encounter people from their ethnic historical background when studying the era of slavery. As well as studying this era it is very important to introduce all students to ancient societies from the interior of Africa. If we neglect to do this then we indicate to our students that nothing of importance happened historically in the interior of Africa B.C.E. and that Africa had no early civilization as did the rest of the world. Some teachers recognize this and introduce civilizations from the interior of Africa during a study of the Middle Ages. They study the civilizations of Ghana and Mali. However, a curriculum that neglects to include Kush as one of the major ancient civilizations suggests to students that Africa had no ancient civilizations as did the rest of the world.

Without this inclusion students are left with the impression that the first civilizations of B.C.E. were all located around the Mediterranean, or in India and China. They are unaware that a civilization, equal to those, thrived in the African continent and that features we look for in a civilization were all present in Kush. They were present in the Kerma society of c.2500 B.C.E.; the Napatan Period, c.1070 B.C.E. and the Meroitic period, c.300 B.C.E.

#### **2. The Female Role in Kush**

It is particularly important that girls study Kush in their middle grades history curriculum. For the most part, when they study other ancient civilizations they come into contact with societies where leadership roles and decision making were in the hands of the men of the society. Only on very few occasions are they able to identify with those in society or those who have played an influential role. The study of Kush enables girls to study a society where women took on roles of leadership, a society where women were highly respected and held positions of power alongside men. For example, a queen in Kush was portrayed in art as of equal size to the king. Compare this to Egypt where the queen was portrayed in art as much smaller than the king indicating comparative importance.

#### **3. Ruled by Queens**

Furthermore, Kush during part of its history was ruled by strong and powerful queens, and it was a queen that led the Kushite revolt against the injustice of Roman rule and the imposition of Roman taxation on the Kushite economy. Some time back I was at the British Museum in London I stood before the beautifully sculpted head of Augustus, the very one that Candace Amanirenas, Queen of Kush removed from a life size statue when her army plundered the city of Aswan. The very same sculpture she took back to Meroe and buried in the sand at the palace entrance so that it would lie beneath the sole of her foot each time she entered or left the palace.

#### **4. Queens of Kush**

Queens of Kush were full figured African women. Kushites saw their beauty, wealth and power reflected in the large size of their queens. These rulers were very elegant, using make up in a similar manner to their neighbours, the Egyptians, paying special attention to their eye make-up. This elegance also showed itself in their long manicured nails. The Kushites believed that long and beautiful nails were an indication that the person was rich and powerful enough never to do any manual work.

#### **5. Understanding Concepts: Acculturation**

There are also other reasons why it is important to study Kush. The study of Kush gives teachers the ideal opportunity to teach a number of concepts; concepts and themes that are important goals in our social studies curriculum. Let us look at one example. Students need to understand the historical concepts of cultural diffusion and acculturation.

The relationship between Egypt and Kush gives the ideal opportunity to learn about these concepts. However, in order to use these two cultures as examples or illustrative material students need to have a sound knowledge of both societies.

The period 1550-1070 B.C.E. is ideal material for this. Egypt had conquered the Kerma society of Kush and the New Kingdom pharaohs used a policy of Egyptianizing Kush in order to keep control of the Kushite people. We can give students an experience of this period if we guide them to stand in the shoes of a Kushite boy, leaving his home to live and receive an education at the court of the Egyptian pharaoh. He then returns as an adult to take up a position of power in Kush, bringing back to Kush the Egyptian customs, manners, fashion, etc., that he learned at the Egyptian court.

Students are thus well prepared for understanding, at first hand, the idea of acculturation. Furthermore in studying this period of both Egyptian and Kushite history, students have an opportunity of understanding cultural diffusion and acculturation used as a planned policy of how one society can control another.

The Egyptianization of Kush is, therefore, a clear example of acculturation. This example of acculturation can be compared with the experience of different cultures settling in America today. The process of the Egyptianization of Kush went on for 500 years.

#### **6. A Challenge for the Future**

During my visit to the British Museum I also admired the many examples of Meroitic script and I was able to examine closely this intriguing script that was left behind on temple walls in Kush. A unique script for a long forgotten language. There is a wealth of written material available but as yet the meaning remains a mystery to us, for no one has cracked the code.

Not so long ago historians faced a similar challenge with Egyptian hieroglyphs. Champollion, whom we credit for deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphs, first took up the challenge when still a boy. Learning that the picture writing on temple walls and on ancient papyrus in Egypt was a complete mystery to the modern world, he vowed that one day he would crack the code. As teachers we know only too well the importance of sowing rich seeds of inquiry at receptive times in a student's life.

### **Syllabus: Teaching the ancient African civilization of Kush**

#### **Details of Syllabus**

Introduction, Brief Overview, All students should study Kush, Six Reasons why it is important that all students learn about Kush - An Erroneous Message, The Female Role in Kush, Ruled by Queens, Queens of Kush, Understanding Concepts: Acculturation, A Challenge for the Future.

#### **Pointers in Teaching Kush**

- A. Initial introduction to Kush (Aida)
  - B. Hairbraiding - Linking past and present
  - C. Relevance of storytelling
- Exercises

Besides the above, other courses available include "Reducing Stress", "Line Dancing (various)", "Public Speaking" and "Forming Relationships". Dr. David Mollet [tei@cox.net](mailto:tei@cox.net) US tel: 1-619-463-1270