



*A production shot from People are Taught to be Different displays the program's trademark simple settings and interpretive movements.*  
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# Progressive Programming at KUHT: *People are Taught to be Different*

*By Emily Vinson*

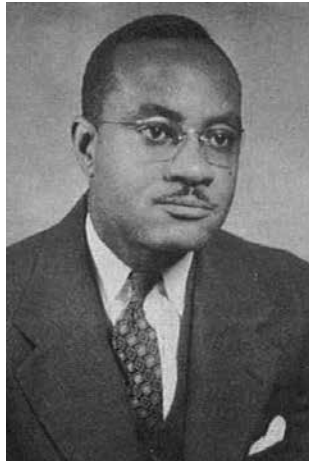
The KUHT television program *People are Taught to be Different* had the noble aim of improving intercultural understanding, and showing viewers that people are, at their core, much the same. Against a simple stage setting, elegant dancers interpreted moments of joy, sorrow, anger, and love across cultures, as the narrator provided cultural context to guide viewers to a better understanding of the universality of the human experience. Lessons in cultural sociology were presented in plain language and focused on the theory that an individual's personality results from the culture in which he or she is raised.

Broadcast in 1958 just five years after KUHT-TV went on air as the country's first noncommercial educational television station, *People* was distributed to educational stations nationwide. Envisioned by Dr. Henry Allen Bullock and developed by Texas Southern University and University of Houston-owned KUHT, the series featured an all-African American cast who, in twelve episodes, explored experiences common to all mankind. The program had a lofty goal — to improve “intergroup understanding by approaching universal crises such as birth, childhood, adolescence, courtship, marriage, and death by showing that different cultural

groups react to these crises differently because they were taught a certain reaction by their culture.”<sup>1</sup> The format, too, was innovative. By utilizing narration and modern dance Bullock and his cast aimed to show, rather than just tell, how personality develops through social teachings. Perhaps most extraordinary is the fact that *People* was even produced in the 1950s.

Located less than a quarter mile from each other today, the University of Houston (UH) and Texas Southern University (TSU) were founded in 1927 by the Houston Independent School District (HISD) as Houston Junior College and Houston Colored Junior College respectively to serve working-class Houstonians.

By 1945 the four-year schools had separated from HISD as a private university system, with Houston College for Negroes as a branch of UH. Following a 1947 lawsuit filed by Heman Marion Sweatt, an African American applicant rejected by the University of Texas Law School based on his race, the State of Texas attempted to establish a “separate but equal” law school. Despite this effort, in 1950 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Sweatt v. Painter* that the new school was not comparable and that educational equality, at the graduate/professional level at least, involved more than facilities. This set a precedent for *Brown v. Board of Education*, which



Portrait of Dr. Henry Allen Bullock, who was the University of Texas at Austin’s first African American faculty member and *People’s* creator.

Photo courtesy of Prairie View A&M University Special Collections/Archives, John B. Coleman Library.

deemed segregated schools unconstitutional in 1954. UH ceded Houston College for Negroes to the state, which renamed it Texas Southern University in 1951 after students petitioned to remove “Negroes” from the institution’s name.<sup>2</sup>

By the early 1950s TSU boasted over 6,000 full-time students and a faculty of 400, making it the country’s largest African American university. Likewise, UH experienced a post-war boom, and in 1951 enrollment reached 14,000 students, up from 2,700 ten years earlier. Despite the Supreme Court’s rulings in the *Sweatt* and *Brown* cases, UH barred African Americans from enrollment until 1962.<sup>3</sup>

Confronted with the challenges of booming enrollment, UH president W. W. Kemmerer saw the potential for distance education and, in particular, the role of radio and television in creating opportunities beyond the classroom. In 1950 UH obtained the nation’s first university-owned radio license and began broadcasting as KUHF-FM. A year later UH applied to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) for a television permit and, within a few months, refiled a joint application with HISD to maximize the station’s potential impact. On May 25, 1953, a year after the FCC lifted a freeze on new permits and granted one to Channel 8 KUHT, FCC commissioner and champion of educational television Frieda B. Hennock attended the station’s dedication and remarked, “With TV, the walls of the classroom disappear, every set within viewing range of the signal is a potential classroom...The accumulated riches of man’s educational, cultural and spiritual development can be spread before the viewers’ eyes.”<sup>4</sup> For the first few years, KUHT productions focused primarily on credit and non-credit granting instructional “telecourses,” though some programming, such as *Listening to Music*, was dedicated to audience enrichment.

The central figure in the success of *People are Taught to be Different* was its creator, Dr. Henry Allen Bullock. Born in Tarboro, North Carolina, on May 2, 1906, Bullock earned his bachelor’s degree in social studies and Latin classics from Virginia Union University. The following year he went on to earn his master’s in sociology and comparative psychology from the University of Michigan, where he completed his doctorate in sociology in 1942 while teaching at Prairie View A&M College (PVAM). At PVAM, Bullock began experimenting with graphic design to effectively communicate social phenomena to large student audiences in auditorium classrooms — a pedagogical method that interested him throughout his life.

In 1950 Bullock moved to TSU where he served as head of the Sociology Department, chairman of the Division of Social Sciences, and director of Graduate Research. Bullock enjoyed a reputation as a preeminent scholar in his field, and lectured internationally. He went on to win a Bancroft Prize for scholarly publication in American history, and became the



John Schwarzwald, KUHT’s first general manager (center), looking on as the station’s chief engineer and cameraman unpack KUHT’s first camera in 1953.

first permanent African American faculty member at the University of Texas at Austin (UT). While at UT, Bullock taught the History Department's first course focused on the "Negro in America History."<sup>5</sup>

At TSU Bullock continued using his innovative approaches to classroom instruction, and his interest in ways to reach large student audiences grew. He developed one method that incorporated visual aids and social drama. One presentation entitled "With Intent to Kill" was so successful that it was "put on the road" and proved to be a hit in several cities and colleges" in Texas. The 1955 proposal for Bullock's *People* series is notably different from later iterations. Titled "Series on Negro Anthropology," this pitch grew directly out of a Bullock lecture series that featured anthropological case studies from the African continent and included performances by TSU dancers and the school's nationally-recognized choir.<sup>6</sup>

To proceed with any production, TSU and KUHT needed funding for film production costs. A natural partner was the Educational Radio and Television Center (ERTC) in Ann Arbor, Michigan, created by the Ford Foundation in 1954 to advance adult education. Later rebranded as National Education Television (NET), the network was an early predecessor to PBS. ERTC did not produce programming nor was it a broadcaster in the traditional sense like commercial stations NBC and CBS. Rather, ERTC partnered with educational stations to subsidize the production of shows that it then distributed to other stations — a practice called "bicycling." This type of syndication involved making copies of films and passing them from station to station, rather than using electronic distribution.<sup>7</sup> ERTC had funded earlier KUHT productions, so in October 1955, Dr. John Schwarzwalder sent in a proposal for the Negro Anthropology series. In his proposal he noted that, to his

knowledge, "the Center has never had material which emanates from a Negro university and...The fact that this would be done in cooperation with the University of Houston might also have extremely favorable connotations."<sup>8</sup>

Over the following months, the concept of what became *People are Taught to be Different* grew to encompass cultures around the world. Each episode followed the same general outline — the narrative began by identifying a universal human event such as birth, courtship, or death, and then three different culturally specific reactions to this event were explored to prove the thesis that human reaction is the result of a cultural framework taught from birth. The method of instruction consisted of a narration by Bullock (who authored all scripts) while dancers "interpret[ed] anthropological data through the medium of dance and scored sound." Naomi Ledé, who helped develop the *People* scripts alongside Bullock, noted in an interview, "Dr. Bullock believed that dancing could be used as a means of teaching, rather than as entertainment only," and therefore partnered with TSU's dance instructor Dr. Marjorie Stewart who created choreography to communicate "human development from birth to death."<sup>9</sup>

A pilot script focused on the "common crisis" of birth in three cultures — Americans from the United States, Manus of the Admiralty Islands, and Kiriwina of the Trobriand Islands — was submitted to ERTC along with a proposed budget of \$26,600 for production costs. In ERTC's reply, program associate John C. Crabbe expressed interest in pursuing the project but also concern for the "technical quotations and classroom lecture language that...might cause considerable adverse reaction when put on the air." Within a month, Bullock responded to these reservations and created a script that was appropriate for students and laymen alike to teach audiences that "many of the so-called

'peculiarities' of other people are more like our own than we often think."<sup>10</sup>

By that time all twelve episodes were outlined. As previously planned, each episode would feature three cultures compared to each other, though now Bullock clearly stated that every episode would compare "the American" to two of the "others." Bullock identified the Manus, Kiriwina, Hopi Indians, the Arapesch, Balinese, Tchumbuli, Southern American Negroes, and "other of preliterate level" as the cultures *People* would explore.<sup>11</sup>

ERTC remained highly involved throughout the production of the series, going so far as to send a screening copy of the pilot to renowned Harvard anthropologist Dr. Clyde Kluckhohn. In a report

UH president Dr. W. W. Kemmerer (left), FCC commissioner Frieda Hennock, and UH Board of Regents chair Hugh Roy Cullen at the dedication of KUHT-TV, June 8, 1953.





*Episodes played with a sociological theory that postulates an individual's personality is a result of his or her culture and presented this concept in a manner accessible to everyday viewers.*

of a phone conversation between Kluckhohn and Crabbe, some concern surfaced that, despite Bullock's reputation, an issue arose about "accepting the authority of Bullock as an anthropologist."<sup>12</sup> Kluckhohn indicated that the program should definitely proceed but suggested that cultural anthropologists with specializations in the societies represented in the series, such as Margaret Mead and himself, be consulted. This approach seemed to satisfy both the ERTC and the Houston team and proved successful.

Filming began in the spring of 1956, with episodes completed at a rate of one per month. Throughout production, recording equipment was loaded into a Volkswagen van owned by KUHT audio engineer Pat Coakley and taken to the TSU auditorium. Reflecting UH's admission policies, the production crew was all-white, including director Paul Schlessinger. TSU dance students performed in each episode, and faculty member Marjorie Stuart choreographed the dance sequences using music composed by Dr. N. L. Gerren and Jack Bradley.<sup>13</sup>

ERTC released the *People* series to its first five educational stations, including KUHT, for broadcast the week of July 13, 1958. Response was overall very positive. In San Francisco an adult education discussion group requested scripts from the series to use it in a home-study course. UH psychology

professor and notable KUHT personality Dr. Richard I. Evans utilized the program in a research project to study if students exhibited a "prejudice toward 'educational' television" as opposed to network productions. E. G. Sherburne Jr. of the ETRC submitted an episode to film festivals, noting that he believed "the films are just arty enough and so off-beat" that they "have an excellent chance of winning something."<sup>14</sup> *People* received second place in the Institute for Education by Radio-Television's international competition.

Currently, the University of Houston Libraries Special Collections holds only three of the twelve episodes of *People are Taught to be Different*. Shot on black and white 16mm film, they were beautifully made and demonstrate high skill at every level of production. These digitized episodes can be viewed on the UH Libraries' Digital Library. The National Educational Television (NET) Collection Catalog Project — undertaken by the American Archives for Public Broadcasting, a collaboration between the Library of Congress and WGBH in Boston — seeks to inventory and preserve U.S. public media history. Thanks to this project, researchers now know the entire series on 16mm film can be found at the Library of Congress.<sup>15</sup>

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