The Mask of Obedience:
Male Slave Psychology in the Old South

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> Oppression driveth the wise man mad.
>> Benjamin Drew, *The Refugee*[1]

IN AUGUST 1788, THOMAS FOSTER, A DIRT FARMER of Spanish Natchez, purchased for $930 two slaves—"dos negros brutos," the deed said, meaning that they were recent imports from Africa. One of the slaves was named Samba, "second son" in the Fullah language of his native locale in the Futa Jallon country of modern Guinea. The other captive had a much more unusual name and finer pedigree: Abd-al-Rahman Ibrahima. He was the son of Sori, the *alimami*, or theocratic ruler, of the Fulani tribal group, whose capital was Timbo, an inland center that traded with distant Timbuktu, where Ibrahima had received Islamic training.[2] Some months earlier, at the head of a cavalry detachment in his father's army, Ibrahima had been assigned to punish coastal tribesmen interfering with Fulani trade. He had been ambushed, captured, and sold to *slattees*, or native African slave traders.[3]

Through some means, Ibrahima conveyed to Foster the possibilities of ransom for himself in cattle and other valuables, perhaps including slaves, of which there was a great supply in Futa Jallon. But Foster had more immediate prospects in mind. The master dubbed his new prize "Prince" and at once had Ibrahima's long plaits of hair cut, although it took several men to restrain him. Intentionally or not,

[1] Benjamin Drew, *The Refugee: A North-Side View of Slavery* (1855; rpt. edn., Reading, Pa., 1969), 4.

[2] There are a number of terms by which the Fulani are known, but for the sake of clarity I use only this form in singular, plural, noun, and adjectival position.

[3] This account is based on Terry Alford, *Prince among Slaves* (New York, 1977), esp. 3–38. See also Charles S. Sydnor, "The Biography of a Slave," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 36 (January 1937): 59–73; "The Unfortunate Moor," *African Repository*, 3 (February 1828): 364–67; and Thomas H. Gallaudet, *A Statement with Regard to the Moorish Prince, Abduhl Rahhaman* (New York, 1828), 3–4. There are inaccuracies, however, in these accounts, so Alford's careful researches are to be preferred. See also Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformation in Slavery: A History of Slavery in West Africa* (Cambridge, 1983), 114–15; and entries for March 9–12, 1794, in "Journal of James Watt in his expedition to and from Teembo in 1794 copied from the author's own hand," MSS Afr. 22, Rhodes House Library, Oxford University.

Foster had deeply shamed his black antagonist. In Ibrahima's eyes, he, a Fulani warrior, had sunk to the level of a tribal youngster.[4]

Other and worse humiliations followed when Ibrahima refused to work. The Fulani were pastoral folk among whom even the lowliest herdsman looked on manual labor with disdain. Agricultural work was the task of the Jalunke, many of whom the Fulani had conquered and enslaved.[5] After one of several whippings, Ibrahima ran off to the woods. Like most runaways, African or Creole, he probably did not stray too far from the Fosters' five-acre clearing. Weeks passed, and Ibrahima realized the hopelessness of his situation. Since suicide was a serious violation of the Koran, he was left to assume that Allah had intended his predicament. According to a story long remembered in Natchez, he appeared in the doorway when Thomas Foster's wife Sarah was alone. Looking up, she saw the tall and ragged frame of the missing slave, eyes fierce and staring. But rather than recoil in terror, she smiled, according to the story, and offered her hand in greeting. Ibrahima took it, then knelt on the floor and placed her foot on his neck.[6]

IBRAHIMA'S EXPERIENCE WITH BONDAGE offers us clues about male slave psychology. The discussion is best limited, it should be added, to male slaves because they were considered the most troublesome, and therefore on them fell the greater demands for signals of full compliance. For newly acquired Africans, the requirement of docility and abject obedience, masters believed, had to replace traits associated with manly independence and self-direction. For those males born in slavery, danger-ous signs of resentment or resistance were bound to meet prompt reprisal. In the struggle for control, masters ordinarily had less reason to fear open rebellion from their female property: the women could be coerced with threats against their men or their young. Slaveholders expected that the women would fall into line if the men were subdued and that mothers would raise their children with an understanding of the system and their circumscribed roles in it.

Few anecdotes—or even legends—explain how newly arrived Africans reacted to this regimen, which commanded not only their labor but also their change of behavior, even personality. We are accustomed to think in terms of stereotypical and anonymous figures like Samba, the other slave that the New Orleans trader had sold to Foster. Yet there was a connection between the Timbo prince's bad luck and what has come to be called "samboism," the expression of complete servility.[7] In fact, Ibrahima's gesture of submission can symbolize for us that process of learning the demands of servitude as well as what servitude meant for the millions once in bondage. Although they learned subservience, Ibrahima and countless other blacks retained independent judgment. As Erik Erikson has pointed out, "it

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[4] Alford, *Prince among Slaves*, 23, 44.

[5] In Futa Jallon, Ibrahima's region, slaves constituted a majority of the population. See Paul E. Lovejoy, "The Characteristics of Plantations in the Nineteenth-Century Sokoto Caliphate (Islamic West Africa)," *AHR*, 84 (December 1979): 1273.

[6] Alford, *Prince among Slaves*, 45–47; and Steve Power, *The Memento: Old and New Natchez 1700 to 1897* (Natchez, Miss., 1897), 13–14.

[7] Joseph Boskin, *Sambo: The Rise and Demise of an American Jester* (New York, 1986), 17–41.

takes a well established identity to tolerate radical change."[8] The Fulani warrior had that kind of resiliency, pride, and dignity. His religion and former place in African society prepared him to make the best of things without losing his sense of who he was.

More important to our purposes, community life in American slave culture, as in all societies, can be rendered unstable with differing effects on individual members, as circumstance, temperament, and the general situation shape their responses. Under oppressive conditions, which traits are most affected may be subject to debate, but the issue of damage itself must be faced. We simply cannot continue expatiating on the riches of black culture without also examining the social and psychological tensions that slavery entailed.

Three approaches can help explain male slave psychology: the behaviorist, the Freudian, and the cultural. None of them can be wholly separated from the others. The first involves role-playing, which can be oversimplified as a superficial performance without internal effect on the actor. A more sophisticated perception suggests that role-playing does involve inner feelings. Pressure to conform to bondage, to recite the script as given, can lead to self-deprecation or even self-hatred. The problem is not confined to slaves alone. In the eyes of others, "deviants" of one description or another must meet the obligations of their assigned stereotypes. According to Erving Goffman, the response of the victim to such requirements may be "hostile bravado," "defensive cowering," inarticulate-ness, or some other ineffectual reaction. Eugene Genovese found the behavioral model inadequate in explaining slave behavior, but role-playing is itself part of one's identity.[9] If we are brave or timid, confident or self-doubting, these traits will be registered by others. As Robert Park pointed out, "It is probably no mere historical accident that the word person, in its first meaning, is a mask." In all social circumstances, everyone plays a part. By these roles "we know each other," Park observed; "it is in these roles that we know ourselves."[10]

The second approach, the Freudian, has been somewhat discredited, owing to the disfavor into which Stanley Elkins's *Slavery*—and Sigmund Freud himself—has fallen. The pioneer scholar of slave psychology had adopted Harry Stack Sullivan's concept of the "significant other." As Elkins applied it, the Sullivanian theme was a variation on Freud's oedipal theory, which the historian used to describe the totalitarian relationship of white master and black slave. According to this analysis, the "sambo" personality was derived from that loveless, brutal connection, one in which neither black culture, black family life, nor white institutions of church and

    [8] Erik H. Erikson, *Insight and Responsibility: Lectures on the Ethical Implications of Psychoanalytic Insight* (New York, 1964), 96.

    [9] Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963; rpt. edn., New York, 1974), 17; Eugene D. Genovese, "Toward a Psychology of Slavery: An Assessment of the Contribution of *The Slave Community*," in Al-Tony Gilmore, ed., *Revisiting Blassingame's "The Slave Community": The Scholars Respond* (Westport, Conn., 1978), 27–41.

    [10] Robert Ezra Park, *Race and Culture* (Glencoe, Ill., 1950), 249.

state played any major mitigating role.[11] Yet, for all its defects, which need not be recited here, Elkins's thesis was more Freudian than Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese have characterized it and is the stronger for that foundation.[12] Clearly, the slave in relationship with the master does not literally undergo the child's evolution from "object-choice" to identification with the master's superego as Freud described the process. Yet, in slavery, the power as well as the authority to demand dependency and total obedience was analogous to the impact of father on child, as the proslavery, "patriarchal" ideology emphasized.[13] Elkins recognized that subservience carried hidden psychic costs, which, even at the height of the controversy over *Slavery*, his more discerning critics acknowledged as well.[14] Moreover, Elkins introduced a topic that has now almost receded from historiographical consciousness, a circumstance that does injustice to the complexity of the matter.[15] As Moses I. Finley, the Oxford University classicist, wisely observed, "Nothing is more elusive than the psychology of the slave."[16]

A third approach combines elements of the first two but in addition stresses the cultural aspects of slave psychology. The focus is less on the individual psyche and more on the social character of the slave personality itself. As Bernard Meltzer reminded us, "The mind is social in both origin and function. It arises in the social process of communication. Through association with the members of his groups, the individual comes to internalize the definitions transmitted to him."[17] Moreover, such a characterization is particularly applicable to the small-scale, face-to-face community settings in which slaves and masters were placed. Under those circumstances, there was less room for the kind of individualism that modern societies encourage, with regard not only to the slave but also the master as well. The combining of behavioral, psychoanalytic, and cultural factors provides a much sturdier basis for understanding slave behavior and motivation than the adoption of one alone. In one of the few recent studies of the topic, Genovese and

[11] Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago, 1959); "Slavery and Ideology," in Ann J. Lane, ed., *The Debate over "Slavery": Stanley Elkins and His Critics* (Urbana, Ill., 1971), 325–78; "The Slavery Debate," *Commentary*, 60 (December 1975): 40–54.

[12] Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, *Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism* (New York, 1983), 91–135, esp. 102–05, 117–25.

[13] See especially Sidney Axelrad and Lottie M. Maury, "Identification as a Mechanism of Adaptation," in George B. Wilbur and Warner Muensterberger, eds., *Psychoanalysis and Culture: Essays in Honor of Gèza Róheim* (New York, 1951), 168–84. Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (New York, 1933), is briefly and lucidly explained in Peter Gay, *Freud: A Life for Our Time* (New York, 1988), 415–16.

[14] See Kenneth M. Stampp, "Rebels and Sambos," in Allen Weinstein, Frank O. Gatell, and David Sarasohn, eds., *American Negro Slavery* (New York, 1979), 240, 252 n.39 and n.40, 241; James P. Comer, *Beyond Black and White* (New York, 1972), 174–75.

[15] Compare Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York, 1987); Boskin, *Sambo*, 17–41; Mary Frances Berry and John Blassingame, *Long Memory: The Black Experience in America* (New York, 1982), 11; Robert Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery*, 2 vols. (Boston, 1974), 1: 228–32. For a more realistic appraisal of bondage and black reaction, see Willie Lee Rose, *Slavery and Freedom*, William F. Freehling, ed. (New York, 1982), 164–76.

[16] Moses I. Finley, *Economy and Society in Ancient Greece*, Brent D. Shaw and Richard P. Shaller, eds. (New York, 1983), 108.

[17] Bernard N. Meltzer, "Mead's Social Psychology," in Jerome G. Main and Bernard N. Meltzer, eds., *Symbolic Interaction: A Reader in Social Psychology* (Boston, 1972), 13.

Fox-Genovese recognized the value of this strategy: "Historians need some sensitivity to personality structure and unconscious mental processes as well as to material conditions in order to understand the cultural patterns to which the newly enslaved clung, the ways in which they compromised with their enslavement, and the cultural order they forged for themselves."[18]

Africans transported to the Western world were already acquainted with the dictates of absolute rule and absolute servility, the latter a condition that encouraged a resignation severely inhibiting thoughts of rebellion. Slave rebellions were as rare in Africa as they were in North America, perhaps because Americans combined a familial bondage—the African mode—with commercial cropping on relatively small estates. The purely commercial, impersonal, and large-scale plantations in the West Indies, by contrast, resulted in much greater degrees of unrest.[19]

The African past and the servile present that Ibrahima symbolizes had in common a cultural pattern both parties understood: the ethic of honor and shame. Indeed, the culture from which Ibrahima—and so many of the blacks enslaved in early America—came resembled much more the honor-shame paradigm I have proposed for the white South than the conscience-guilt model of the northern section. But the power exercised over the slaves complicated the situation. Slaves were forced by circumstance to adopt the amoral posture of shamelessness, a pose intended to avoid the excesses of their victimization but that resulted in personal and social instability for them.[20] Three major types of servility can be distinguished. The first is exemplified by Ibrahima—ritualized compliance in which self-regard is retained. The second is the socialization of subordination, a natural acceptance of circumstance that involves the incorporation of shame. The third type of subordination is the adoption of "samboism," as it may be called, or shamelessness. None of the forms of subservience is exclusive, for each merges into another with as much variation and contradictoriness as might be found in any individual. Samboism was a disengagement from, a denial of, the conventional ethic, though a part of the social order that both whites and blacks recognized. As a strategy for dealing with whites, samboism did not in itself signify mental aberration or perversion. It did, however, involve character disorder, an insensitivity to others, and a dangerous selfishness. The untroubled sambos served masters and themselves, sowing suspicion in the quarters and thus adding to the troubles of all. In other words, the slave who played sambo did not suffer much psychic injury, because, lacking a sense of morality at the time of taking the role, he lacked conflict. It was instead slaves of some sensitivity who had the real dilemma: how to maintain dignity in the face of shamelessness by masters and even

[18] Fox-Genovese and Genovese, *Fruits of Merchant Capital,* 109.

[19] James L. Watson, "Slavery as an Institution: Open and Closed Systems," in Watson, ed., *Asian and African Systems of Slavery* (Berkeley, Calif., 1980), 3–13; Allan G. B. Fisher and Humphrey J. Fisher, *Slavery and Muslim Society in Africa: The Institution in Saharan and Sudanic Africa and the Trans-Saharan Trade* (New York, 1971), 109.

[20] See Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York, 1982); Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982).

by fellow slaves. In fact, both shame, as accepted by the slave, and shamelessness, as sometimes adopted, were involved in community but not necessarily personal instability. In poorly run or cruelly mismanaged plantation households, however, emotional confusion, misdirected violence or scapegoating out of repressed anger, severe or mild depression, self-contempt, and collective paranoia and mistrust could easily arise.

First, let us review the chief aspects of the honor-shame culture. It differs from the conscience-guilt style of conduct—the introspective, democratic, and individualized patterns that we like to think guide our own lives. "Whereas," wrote Gerhard Piers, "guilt is generated whenever a boundary . . . is touched or transgressed, shame occurs when a goal . . . is not being reached. It thus indicates a real 'short-coming.' Guilt anxiety accompanies transgression."[21] On the other hand, shame involves a total failure of the individual: the incapacity to do, think, and feel the "right" way after recognizing the low opinion and disrespect in which one is held by others, who have respect and power. The excitation of shame involves a sense of defenselessness against the opinion and possibly the physical threats of others who claim superiority. Still more serious, a person shamed also suffers, as Norbert Elias, the German sociologist, pointed out, an internal conflict "with the part of himself that represents this social opinion. It is a conflict within his own personality; he recognizes himself as inferior."[22] In the case of the male slave, shame operates to affect his relations with other slaves whose good opinion he wishes to have in order to enhance his own self-esteem. To some extent, shame also conditions him to seek the good will of his master, so that the master is less likely to shame him in front of his fellow slaves and the white world as well.

Just as shame and guilt are distinct, so too are honor and conscience. Here, honor refers to the expression of power through the prism of reputation and rank based on such factors as gender, skin color, age, wealth, and lineage, rather than on meritocratic criteria. Those who deviate from the accepted moral standards appropriate to their rank or who, by their race, color, or lowly occupation, are rejected by the group are subject to the sanctions of shame.[23] Honor distinguishes between kin and alien, friend and enemy, in very obvious terms. Group and personal esteem is tied to family and to friendship as well as to vengeance against betrayers of one or both. It follows that kinlessness and friendlessness are the marks of shame and disgrace in all honor cultures. For Africans like Ibrahima, the great fear was "unhappy solitude," the dread of being alone. The same was also characteristic of white southern life.[24]

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[21] Gerhard Piers quoted in Helen M. Lynd, *On Shame and the Search for Identity* (New York, 1958), 51.

[22] Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, Vol. 2, *Power and Civility*, Edmund Jephcott, trans. (1939; rpt. edn., New York, 1982), 292–93.

[23] See Julian Pitt-Rivers, "Honor," in David L. Sills, ed., *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York, 1968), 6, 503–11.

[24] Paul Riesman, *Freedom in Fulani Social Life: An Introspective Ethnography*, Martha Fuller, trans. (1974 French edn.; Chicago, 1977), 67.

Deference to illegitimate authority could not be countenanced by a man of honor. That was a principle that Ibrahima had come to live by. But, if enslavement was one's fate, the Fulani tribesman believed resignation to be the only response possible because divine forces had ordained it. The gesture that Ibrahima employed was the traditional emblem of unconditional surrender in West Africa. Orlando Patterson has called enslavement "social death," a literal reprieve from actual death.[25] By formalizing his subjection in this way, however, Ibrahima was not merely prolonging his life. He was helping to smooth out the hills and valleys of his emotions into a level plain. Rituals serve to inhibit and control wild feelings of total despair. Similar if less dramatic rituals of slave deference served that function for other slaves. Since honor was something that all whites shared in contrast to the shame of all blacks, acts of homage lent—or were intended to lend—predictability to a situation that offered no permanent security.

For Ibrahima, the act of subjection was the beginning of unlearning his old self and teaching himself to present a new face of conformity. But he determined not to confess to dishonor, not to lose self-control. The Fulani people from which he came were well versed in the connection between male honor and the ideal of emotional restraint. To lose control was to forfeit honor and authority, to acknowledge unmanliness. No doubt, his success in maintaining dignity prompted his master to recognize his leadership qualities. Ibrahima became Thomas Foster's chief driver, to whom other slaves, some of them also from Futa Jallon, had to defer.

THE SECOND CATEGORY OF SUBSERVIENCE, the inculcation of shame, can also be illustrated by reference to the Fulani experience in Africa. In the Fulani areas, the condition of slavery was one that anthropologist Paul Riesman argued "most clearly expressed everything that is the opposite of Fulani." Slaves and captives belonging to that people were labeled "black, fat, coarse, naive, irresponsible, uncultivated, shameless, dominated by their needs and their emotions."[26] Slavery was a status given to strangers who were captured or bought; they became and remained kinless and subordinate, a traumatic experience in a society based on lineage and kinship networks.

More to our purposes are the slaves born into that condition in another Fulani corner of West Africa today. Anthropologist Bernd Baldus has recently studied the slave systems of Fulani herdsmen in the Borgu region of northern Benin. The Batomba are agriculturalists and have lived side by side with the Fulani since Fulani migrations began in the eighteenth century. Like other West Africans, the

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[25] Riesman, *Freedom in Fulani Social Life*, 66, 68–69; Paul Riesman, "The Art of Life in a West African Community: Formality and Spontaneity in Fulani Interpersonal Relationships," *Journal of African Studies*, 2 (Spring 1975): 39–63; Allan Hoben, "Social Stratification in Traditional Amhara Society," in Arthur Tuden and Leonard Plotnicov, eds., *Social Stratification in Africa* (New York, 1970), 195; O. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*; Alford, *Prince among Slaves*, 47.

[26] See Riesman, *Freedom in Fulani Social Life*, 117, 135. Although slavery was practiced by many tribes from whom transatlantic slaves were drawn—Wolof, Yoruba, Azande, Ibo, Congolese, and Angolan—there were great variations in household incorporation, intermarriage, and means to emancipation.

Batomba have long believed that, if a child's teeth appeared first in the upper jaw, fearful disaster would afflict the kinspeople and tribe. Parents underwent rites of purification, but the affected babies were killed. After the Fulani had settled, the Batomba gave or sold the infants as slaves to their new pastoral neighbors, whose Islamic beliefs did not include the dental taboo.

Called *machube* (singular: *machudo*), the stigmatized slaves and their descendants thereafter stood lower than those subject to three other forms of servitude in the area. As a result, when slaves of Borgu were freed under French colonial rule eighty-odd years ago, the *machube* continued in bondage more or less by force of custom alone. (Except briefly and ineffectively at the time of official abolition, they have not risen up against their masters.) Today, the Fulani use neither physical nor legal means of coercion to enforce their will. When Baldus recently interviewed the slaves, he found that they had internalized their lowly status, ranking themselves below the Fulani and Batomba. Baldus discovered that the *machube* blamed themselves, not their superiors, for their plight. Their sense of humiliation was so powerful that, much abashed, they hesitated to account for their bondage until the anthropologist explained that he already knew. Somehow, the *machube* were convinced that the Fulani provided them with special status. Whereas a Fulani master assumes authority as a right, a *machudo* accepts slavery out of a mixture of awe for Fulani magic and a sense of gratitude. Said one: "I work for the Pullo [another term for Fulani] because he has taken me as a child from the Batomba. He has raised me, washed me, he has given me milk . . . For this reason, as a sign of recognition, one carries out all his commands."[27] This mode of adaptation to an oppressive system very much resembles what Anna Freud called "identification with the aggressor" as a "potent" means for surviving danger.[28] According to Robert A. LeVine, an African anthropologist with particular interest in the Fulani and Hausa peoples of Nigeria, the incorporation of an individual's status into patterns of childrearing requires a generation or two. Eventually, though, parents learn to shape their children's playing and acting to ensure a match between how the children perceive themselves and the social and occupational positions they are to take up in maturity. Those who adopt the strategy of imitative subserviency are by no means irrational or "childish" in some pejorative sense. In fact, in a patron-client society such as that from which Ibrahima had come, "social incentives" tend to favor "the subservient follower" who understands human relations over the less politically minded, "independent entrepreneur or occupational achiever."[29] Nor are their actions altogether selfish, as the whole group may benefit from a greater sense of security.

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[27] Bernd Baldus, "Responses to Dependence in a Servile Group: The Machube of Northern Benin," in Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff, eds., *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives* (Madison, Wis., 1977), 446; also 435–58.

[28] Anna Freud, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense* (New York, 1947), 117.

[29] Robert A. LeVine, *Dreams and Deeds: Achievement Motivation in Nigeria* (Chicago, 1966), 41; also 19–22.

Cosmic ideas also reinforce *machudo* docility. The slaves adopt a fatalism similar to Ibrahima's Islamic faith of centuries ago but more intense. They find safety, protection, and even ultimate salvation by doing exactly as their forebears had done and Allah commanded. "It has always been that way" and "we have found it this way from the beginning" were typical *machube* comments to explain their situation. Also, they responded with such aphorisms as, "If you have a cock, then you do with the cock what you want, don't you?"[30] This identification with the owner's perspective rather than their own suggests the mimetic feature of dependence: the desire to imitate the master's ways. By this means, something of the status of the Fulani master is supposed to be accessible to the slaves. They want "to look like a Pullo," dress like him, talk like him, swagger like him. In error-ridden and inappropriate ways, they adopt some of his exclusive customs despite the mockeries and derision of the Batomba and Fulani. The point is not to win favor from the masters. Instead, an acceptance of the master's power involves adaptation to his ways. As one former slave in America lamented, "The nigger during slavery was like the sheep. We have always had to follow the white folks and do what we saw them do."[31] Like the *machube*, American slaves imitated in order to raise their own low self-esteem and create a distance between themselves and whites whose position in society was equally low. When American slaves belonged to "quality folks," they often disdained "po' white trash."

This kind of behavior is part of the cultural order. Conventions of shame come out of the group's accepted wisdom, arising from necessity, not voluntary adoption. Just as whites in the Old South assumed their status over blacks and the sanctions and alleged superior worth that a higher position conferred, so slaves, as a means of day-to-day survival, accepted their position, only questioning it, consciously resenting it, when crises arose. Eugene Genovese claimed that such slaves had adopted "a paternalistic pattern of thought."[32] Frederick Douglass, with reference to the country slaves among whom he grew up, recognized the effects of ignorance and vulnerability. Alternatives to servitude were unimaginable because "life, to them, had been rough and thorny, as well as dark." Douglass, on the other hand, had experienced relative freedom as a slave in Baltimore, a circumstance that broadened his awareness of options and heightened his revulsion against bondage itself.[33]

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[30] Baldus, "Responses to Dependence," 446, 447; also 446–58. The *machube* were Islamic in conviction as were their masters, a common identification of faith, as Max Weber first theorized regarding the nature of slave religious belief. So too does Weber's hypothesis apply in North American slavery. See Weber as discussed in John C. Gager, *Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1975), 105–06.

[31] B. A. Botkin, ed., *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery* (Chicago, 1945), 14–15.

[32] Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974), 143–44.

[33] Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, William L. Andrews, ed. (1855; rpt. edn., Urbana, Ill., 1987), 111. For examples of black identity arising from skills and social status, see the account of John Drayton, lumberjack, in Botkin, *Lay My Burden Down*, 11–12; and of May, harpoonist, in Louis D. Rubin, Jr., *William Elliott Shoots a Bear: Essays on the Southern Literary Tradition* (Baton Rouge, La., 1975), 1–27.

Internalization of the master's values was often so complete that slaves ignored opportunities to escape. Josiah Henson, a slave who eventually escaped to freedom, lamented that in his youth he, like other country blacks, had long assumed the legitimacy of his own bondage. Moving his property prior to a sheriff's sale, his master had assigned Henson to guide some eighteen slaves from Virginia to Kentucky. "My pride was aroused in view of the importance of my responsibility, and heart and soul I became identified with my master's project of running off his negroes." Even though they floated past the wharves of Cincinnati, where crowds of free blacks urged them to flee, Henson suppressed excited talk of freedom. As he sadly recalled, he "had a sentiment of honor on the subject." Accustomed to obedience and "too degraded and ignorant of the advantages of liberty to know what they were forfeiting," the crew heeded his orders, and the barge journeyed southward.[34] The incident was tragic, as Henson later realized in anguish, but most understandable. Plantation blacks who had little experience with autonomy were seldom quick to repudiate a humble conservatism that had long served as a means of survival.

To return momentarily to the African experience with bondage, Baldus argued that our Western notions of corrective conflict, whereby the oppressed inevitably rise up in moral indignation as if by scientific or Marxian law, may simply not apply to the forms of socialization found in the northern Benin culture.[35] Other evidence from Africa supports his generalization. Observing "a prescribed code of conduct," T. J. Alldridge, an English trader, recounted how Mende slaves were accustomed to "cringe up and place their two hands one on each side of their master's hand and draw them back slowly . . . while the head is bowed." Similarly, on one occasion, a recently imported African from Futa Jallon, possibly an enslaved Jalunke (a non-Fulani black), met and recognized Ibrahima in Natchez. "Abduhl Rahahman [Ibrahima]!" he cried in wonder and fear. At once, he prostrated himself on the ground before him.[36]

Although American bondage was different in purpose and context from that of the Borgu tribes, Baldus's insights are pertinent to understanding servility in the Old South. Long-acculturated American slaves, whose concepts of liberty were far more sophisticated than those of slaves serving the Fulani, held to a peasant caution, with its own sanctions and rituals of allegiance, as part of their cultural heritage. Even after emancipation, as Leon Litwack has observed, some country blacks found it hard to break old habits of deference—much to the gratification of previous masters. South Carolinian Louis Manigault, Litwack recorded, was

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[34] Josiah Henson, *Father Henson's Story of His Own Life* (1858; rpt. edn., Williamstown, Mass., 1973), 48, 53.

[35] Baldus, "Responses to Dependence," 448; also 448–56.

[36] Alldridge quoted in John J. Grace, "Slavery and Emancipation among the Mende in Sierra Leone, 1896–1928," in Miers and Kopytoff, *Slavery in Africa*, 419; Alford, *Prince among Slaves*, 61. Jacob Stroyer, a former slave of South Carolina, recalled that "the [slave] boys were required to bend the body forward with the head down and rest the body on the left foot, and scrape the right foot backwards on the ground while uttering the words, 'howdy Massa and Missie.'" Stroyer quoted in Thomas L. Webber, *Deep Like the Rivers: Education in the Slave Quarter Community, 1831–1865* (New York, 1978), 33.

pleased that former slaves were still "showing respect by taking off their caps."[37] That attitude of mind was not just a casual matter: it was handed down from parent to child to prevent disaster. The trickster stories, which instructed as well as entertained, explained not only how shrewd and manipulative behavior could outsmart the powerful foe but also how, sometimes, the trickster's defiance led to trouble, defeat, even death. Recalling a ghost story from slavery days based on a real incident, ex-slave Silas Jackson, ninety years old, told how a slave, overheard praying for freedom, was killed by his master. "After that down in the swamp," he said, "you could hear the man who prayed in his cabin praying."[38] As such tales and interpretations of events indicated, children of oppression had to learn the hard ways of the world. Said another old-timer, interviewed in the 1930s, "I tells the young fry to give honor to the white folks and my [black] preacher tell 'em to obey the white folks, that they are our best friends, they is our dependence."[39]

It would be inappropriate to claim a universality of response from either such American examples or from the *machudo*'s experience. This form of slavery is unusual in its sole reliance on self-blame and on perpetual subjection. Undoubtedly, the American slave had access to different and more liberating values than did the *machube*. Even in Africa, other forms of slavery flourished along different lines and provided for the slaves' more secure incorporation into the local society. Sometimes, descendants were allowed to marry into the nonslave community. When told on one occasion that African and American slavery were much alike, Ibrahima disagreed, "No, no, I tell you, [a] man own slaves [at Timbo]—he join the religion—he very good. He [master] make he slaves work till noon, go to church, then till he sun go down, they work for themselves." Alas, Ibrahima exaggerated the benignity of his homeland institution, just as white masters did in America. As timocratic or honor-guided societies, the Fulani and other slaveholding tribes looked on slavery as a means to procure "basic needs." Likewise, the southern ethic of honor upheld slavery just as slavery served honor.[40]

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[37] Leon Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York, 1979), 253.

[38] Quoted in Norman R. Yetman, ed., *Life under the "Peculiar Institution": Selections from the Slave Narrative Collection* (New York, 1970), 177.

[39] Botkin, *Lay My Burden Down*, 35. Dependence of this kind by no means implies servile gratitude, a sentiment arising from a balance of felt indebtedness and sense of independence. In a clientage or slave system in Africa, America, or anywhere, dependency leads directly to hostility when trust, ability, or exigency to protect the client is snapped, a situation that occurred on a massive scale with Civil War emancipation. So-called slave ingratitude and hostility to former, often "kind" masters, especially by domestics and others well-treated, grew from resentment of slavery (enforced dependence), from justifiable bitterness at abandonment, and from contempt for the once "superior" whites' loss of honor and power. Given the honor-shame ethos of bondage, white expectations of slave gratitude were ridiculous. See O. Mannoni, *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization*, Pamela Powesland, trans. (New York, 1950), 44–48; see also Daniel E. Sutherland, "A Special Kind of Problem: The Response of Household Slaves and Their Masters to Freedom," *Southern Studies*, 20 (Summer 1981): 151–66, which provides examples.

[40] Alford, *Prince among Slaves*, 49, but see also 208 (note for p. 8); John Grace, *Domestic Slavery in West Africa with Particular Reference to the Sierra Leone Protectorate, 1896–1927* (New York, 1975), 10, also 1–19. "Introduction," in Miers and Kopytoff, *Slavery in Africa*, 3–81, shows the diversity of African slavery but stresses the severe marginality of the slaves' status. Watson, "Slavery as an Institution," 3–15, criticizes Miers and Kopytoff for underplaying the "closed" types and the "property" aspect of slavery

Nonetheless, the African experience of bondage involved only the issue of caste or status, not race as well.

The first two forms of servility, the ceremonial type that Ibrahima epitomized and the more common pattern of cultural response to subordination are somewhat different in character. The first involved less internalization than the second. Both, however, entailed outward demonstrations of fidelity beyond simply work faithfully performed. (Masters, for instance, liked to hear their slaves singing in the fields; silence was too ominous.) In keeping with that expectation, Ibrahima became what one of the Fosters' Pine Ridge neighbors described as "a faithful, loyal servant." To please his American-born wife and Sarah Foster, his owner's wife, Ibrahima even attended Baptist services on a regular basis after 1818, although he did not entirely forgo his Muslim religious practices.[41] Drab and demeaning though the role was, servility and its rituals were for him raiment to cover nakedness and vulnerability. By such means, one suspects, as his master's driver, he remained an aristocrat, never forgetting *pulaaku*, that is, the quality of character that identified the Fulani warrior as virtuous and honor-proud. He expressed his feelings by never smiling, or so one white acquaintance who observed him for years reported. The withholding could well have signified his submission to Allah's will, not to man alone.[42] Ibrahima's style represented the requisite obedience that all slaves had to display in the daily presence of whites, a demeaning ritual but not one that required internalized self-abasement. The second form of servility, a pattern that began with childhood and formed part of the social order of the slaves themselves, was more deeply ingrained and did require a degree of low esteem.

THE THIRD INGREDIENT IN THE FRAMEWORK OF MALE SUBSERVIENCE is the traditional sambo himself—one not so habitually deferential as the *machudo* example nor so reserved and dignified as Ibrahima. Elkins erred in defining this character as a whole personality. Sambo was in fact a guise, adopted and cast aside as needed. When a slave took the role—some resorting to it more often than others—he made use of the third proposition in the system of honor and shame, namely,

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in all societies. See also M. G. Smith, "Slavery and Emancipation in Two Societies," *Social and Economic Studies*, 3 (December 1954): 243.

[41] Alford, *Prince among Slaves*, 48; also 17, 79–81. See also "Letter from a Gentleman of Natchez to a Lady of Cincinnati . . . April 7th, 1828," in *National Intelligencer* (Washington), May 8, 1828; *African Repository*, 3 (February 1828): 364–67; *African Repository*, 4 (May 1828): 77; (October 1828): 243; (February 1829): 379; John W. Blassingame, ed., *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge, La., 1977), 682–86. In Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 470–74, Omar Ibn Said, another formerly highly placed Fulani, enslaved in North Carolina, refused inquiries about returning to his homeland; he also submitted to Christian convictions after years of serving Allah in America.

[42] In 1828, Ibrahima claimed to be a loyal Muslim but "anxious" to have a Bible in Arabic. See *National Intelligencer* (Washington), May 8, 1828; Alford, *Prince among Slaves*, 57. Gallaudet, *Statement with Regard to the Moorish Prince*, 3, asserted that Ibrahima's "wife, and eldest son have been baptized, and are in connexion with the Baptist Church." Paul Riesman, as quoted by Patterson, noted that, like "chivalry," *pulaaku* signifies "at once certain moral qualities and a group of men possessing these qualities"; O. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 84.
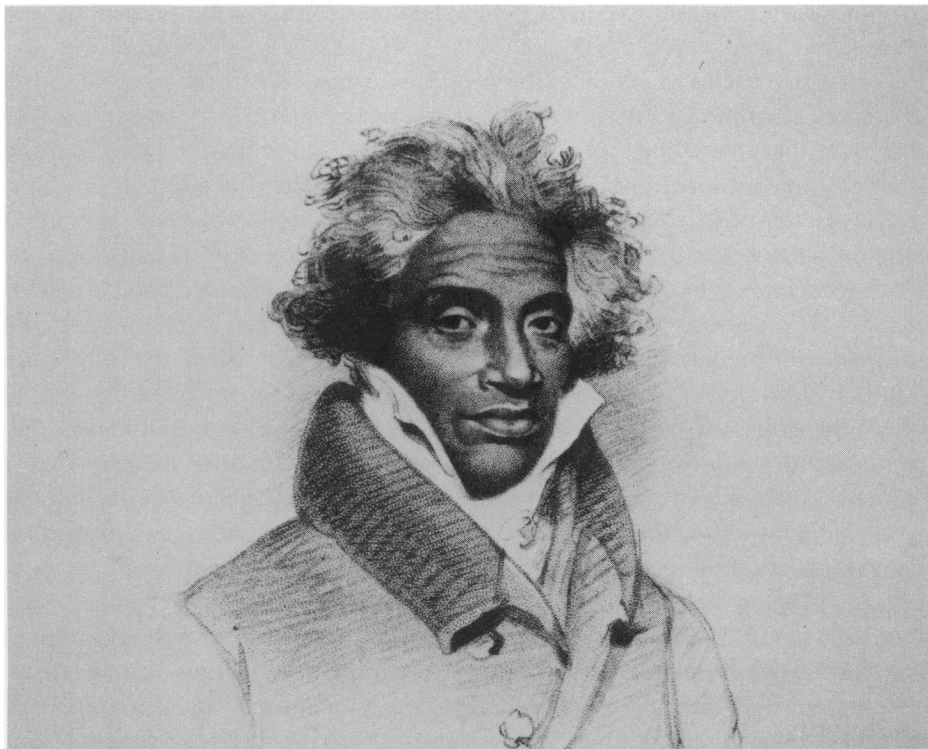
Ibrahima, as he appeared in New York, October 1828. Drawing by Henry Inman. From the Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress. Photo courtesy of Professor Terry Alford of Northern Virginia Community College.

shamelessness.[43] As Elkins correctly argued, naked power, unchecked by any custom or institutional restraint, morally but not necessarily emotionally deforms both victimizer and victim. In other words, repudiation of ordinary and mediated ethics on the master's part could have induced an excessive servility and sense of unworthiness on the part of the slave. As Anthony F. C. Wallace has noted, "shame—awareness of incompetence in any sphere, whether growing from self-observation or information from others—may arouse so much anxiety as to inhibit further the person's competence."[44] Such individuals were probably rare in the slave quarters, because most could find some skill or expertise to counteract the contempt of the whites.

Even though Elkins failed to recognize the different responses that slavery could elicit, he was essentially right that Sambo behavior was authentic—but as ritual behavior, similar to but not identical with Ibrahima's alleged gesture. A reminder

[43] Julian Pitt-Rivers, "Honour and Social Status," in J. G. Peristiany, ed., *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society* (Chicago, 1966), 40–43; Charles Joyner, "The Trickster and the Fool: Folktales and Identity among Southern Plantation Slaves," *Plantation Society*, 2 (December 1986): 149–56.
[44] Anthony F. C. Wallace, *Culture and Personality* (1961; rpt. edn., New York, 1966), 182–83.

of how well this model of servility could be acted out appears in the diary of that remarkable South Carolinian, Mary Chesnut, at the close of the war:

We had a wonderful scene here last Sunday—an old African—who heard he was free & did not at his helpless old age relish the idea. So he wept & prayed, kissed hands, rolled over on the floor until the boards of the piazza were drenched with his tears. He seemed to worship his master & evidently regarded the white race as some superior order of beings, he prostrated himself so humbly.

The whites rewarded his gratifying performance with a blanket and other throwaways.[45] The observers knew how insincere the beggar was, and all parties involved appreciated his immunity from moral responsibility in adopting the role.

The samboism of the roguish, coarse, and deceitful slave describes only one role slaves might play, but in all honor-shame societies in which slavery is a key institution, one finds the same ritualized and highly expressive practice: in Muscovite Russia, Greece, and Rome, in Brazil, the West Indies, in fact, nearly everywhere save parts of Asia. In all such societies, the slave was perceived as childlike and womanlike in character, only more so—violent (when spoiled) but usually passive, even affectionate.[46]

The necessity for adopting the trickster role lay in the unpredictability of the master's behavior, a point that Elkins convincingly made. The slaveholder could be shameless in rule and the slave shameless in protestations of dependency, driven by the emotions of the moment in a childish way. The survivor was the conscienceless "chameleon" who adopted the coloration that the totalitarian slave regime—or the master's whim—imposed. An example from contemporary society appears in Nien Cheng's *Life and Death in Shanghai*. In Communist China, "chameleon" is the term used for those able to adjust quickly to authoritarian changes of policy.[47] Both southern slaveowner and servant could act with a lack of decorous inhibition and yet not be mentally "damaged" or neurotic.[48]

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[45] C. Vann Woodward and Elizabeth Muhlenfeld, eds., *The Private Mary Chesnut: The Unpublished Civil War Diaries* (New York, 1984), June 4, 1865, p. 256.

[46] See W. Thomas MacCary, "Menander's Slaves: The Names, Roles, and Masks," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, 100 (1969): 277–94; Philip Whaley Harsh, "The Intriguing Slave in Greek Comedy," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, 86 (1955): 135–42; George E. Duckworth, *The Nature of Roman Comedy* (Princeton, N.J., 1952), 249–50. On slave tricksters in other slave societies, see Nerys W. Patterson, "Honour and Shame in Medieval Welsh Society: A Study of the Role of Burlesque in the Welsh Laws," *Studia Celtica*, 16–17 (1981–82): 73–103, esp. 91–93; Keith Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves* (Cambridge, 1978), 121; Richard Hellie, *Slavery in Russia: 1400–1725* (Chicago, 1982), 313–17; Lionel Caplan, "Power and Status in South Asian Slavery," in Watson, *Asian and African Systems of Slavery*, 169–94; James H. Vaughan, "Mafakur: A Limbic Institution of the Margi (Nigeria)," in Miers and Kopytoff, *Slavery in Africa*, 95–96.

[47] Nien Cheng, *Life and Death in Shanghai* (New York, 1986), 363.

[48] Ebeneezer Hazard, a New Englander visiting Georgia in 1778, remarked, "The *Country Gentlemen* are . . . accustomed to tyrannize from their Infancy, they carry with them a Disposition to treat all Mankind in the same manner they have been used to treat their Negroes. If a man has not as many Slaves as they, he is esteemed by them their Inferior, even though he vastly exceeds them in every other Respect." Entry for February 25, 1778, in Fred Shelley, ed., "The Journal of Ebeneezer Hazard in Georgia, 1778," *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 41 (September 1957): 318–19 (citation kindly supplied by George Crawford). See also Solomon Northup, in Gilbert Osofsky, ed., *Puttin' on Ole Massa: The Slave Narratives of Henry Bibb, William Wells Brown, and Solomon Northup* (New York, 1969), 338.

In pre-modern societies, men and women lived in a very public style over which collective opinion reigned supreme.[49] Among the classical Greeks, explained Kenneth Dover, to "be regarded as" virtuous was the moral equivalent of our more individualistic desire to *be* virtuous.[50] "I *wish* to be thought servile," says the sambo, in effect; not, "I *am* servile." But the shameless individual has no need to appear virtuous at all. As Orlando Patterson's study points out, those outside the circle of honor "aspire to no honor" and therefore "cannot be [made to feel] humiliated." In that freedom from the restraints and rules of dignity, the male slave exercised a certain level of autonomy in response to the willful and uncontrolled power of his owner. Probably the most eloquent form of shamelessness as a device for self-protection and enhancement was the wildly articulate lie. Mention has been made of the conscienceless trickster, Br'er Rabbit and others, in black tales for children and even adults. According to the stories' common moral lesson, the mouth and brain, not the arm and weapon, were the best protections available to the slave. As Charles Joyner observed, many of the tales provided a fantastic story of triumph in which the wolf (master) is not only outdone by the weaker animal (slave) but also thoroughly humiliated. In these little narratives, victory for the slave lies in cunning and highly competitive action, but, as earlier remarked, sometimes the trickster is himself outwitted. The moral lesson was double: subterfuge was necessary to win against the stronger party but it was equally imperative to avoid being foolish and embarrassed oneself. Thus even thievery from the master, particularly appropriation of food, served as an implicit rejection of master's honor and slave's dependency on one level and a practical answer to hunger on another—without the insupportable risk that conspiracy to rebel involved.[51]

Not surprisingly, black manhood was connected with the capacity to think, talk, and act quickly. More significant than the moral lessons of folk tales, role-playing—"playing the dozens" as it is now called—taught by doing. In this children's game, one boy insulted another's family so that the second boy felt obliged "to defend his honor" (and that of his family). The challenges and replies escalate, while the group eggs on the participants with laughter and groans. The game served a number of functions—as group sport, as an outlet for aggression that could not be directed toward whites, as a way to pick leaders for verbal agility, but also, most important of all, as a device for making the repression of deep feelings habitual. A black psychologist explained it as the participants' experiment in keeping "cool and think[ing] fast under pressure, without saying what was really on their minds." Even if only half-believed, an elaborate alibi could reduce the chance of white revenge. Yet this kind of activity was amoral—shameless—defiantly so, since the

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[49] Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, vol. 1, *The History of Manners*, Edmund Jephcott, trans. (1939; rpt. edn., Oxford, 1978).

[50] Kenneth James Dover, *Greek Popular Morality in the Time of Plato and Aristotle* (Berkeley, Calif., 1974), 226.

[51] O. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 79, quoting from Julian Pitt-Rivers. See Pitt-Rivers, "Honour and Social Status," 19–78; and Pitt-Rivers, "Honor," 6: 503–11; Alex Lichtenstein, "'That Disposition to Theft, with Which They Have Been Branded': Moral Economy, Slave Management, and Law," *Journal of Social History*, 22 (1988): 413–40.

honor-shame nexus left no room for individual expression except in the form of the dramatically deceptive self.[52]

Like honor and shame, sporting insult of this kind was another example of Afro-American cultural transference with modifications designed to meet new circumstances. In Ibrahima's homeland, games of verbal abuse today enable elders to discipline children and to vent tensions against others in a ritualized context, but the major objective remains teaching and learning how to show restraint under provocation. Fear paralyzes the tongue, so worthiness to belong among peers can be achieved through the exchanged tauntings. One Africanist called it "familiarity with a vengeance."[53]

An early and instructive example of how the male slave hid personal feelings and articulated servile responses to authorities can be found in recorded testimony before the Governor's Council in South Carolina, 1749. A group of slaves, most of whom belonged to James Akin, a Cooper River planter, had to testify before the council about an insurrectionary plot hatched by a former overseer on one of Akin's plantations a year or two before. The slaves' confessions before the dignitaries not only identified black conspirators on their own and other plantations but also named some white transients as guilty of complicity. The whole group, they claimed, was preparing to canoe down river to Charleston, burn the city, blow up the magazine, and seize a ship to sail for Spanish St. Augustine.[54] Other planters, including Akin's brother Thomas, eventually informed the council members that no such plot ever existed but was a concoction of Akin himself. Upon reexamination before the royal governor, one imprisoned slave named Cyrus recanted. He explained that, prior to their first appearance before the council, Agrippa, another alleged conspirator, had told him and Scipio to leave the talking to him, as he "knew how to go before Gentlemen . . . had waited before on his Master in the Council Chamber, and was used to it." But, Agrippa had warned, keep Kent quiet because he "was a Fool and did not know how to Talk before White People." Indeed, Cyrus continued, if Agrippa had not "stood by and Pinched him, he would have told all & blown them." Scipio also said that Kent had been deeply afraid and that Scipio had "hunched him to make him speak as he ought to" before

[52] See Harry G. LeFever, "'Playing the Dozens': A Mechanism for Social Control," *Phylon*, 42 (Spring 1981): 77; also 73–85; Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York, 1977), 358.

[53] Riesman, *Freedom in Fulani Social Life*, 124; also 76–79, 198; John Dollard, "The Dozens: The Dialect of Insult," *American Imago*, 1 (November 1939): 3–25; Roger Abrahams, "Playing the Dozens," *Journal of American Folklore*, 75 (July–September 1962): 209–20, esp. 213; Donald C. Simmons, "Possible West African Sources for the American Negro Dozens," *Journal of American Folklore*, 76 (October–December 1963): 339–40; Millicent R. Ayoub and Stephen A. Barnett, "Ritualized Verbal Insult in White High School Culture," *Journal of American Folklore*, 78 (October–December 1965): 337–44; William Labov, "Rules for Ritual Insults," in Thomas Kochman, ed., *Rappin' and Stylin' Out* (Urbana, Ill., 1972), 314; Amuzie Chimezie, "The Dozens: An African-Heritage Theory," *Journal of Black Studies*, 6 (June 1976): 401–20; Walter F. Edwards, "Speech Acts in Guyana: Communicating Ritual and Personal Insults," *Journal of Black Studies*, 10 (September 1979): 20–39.

[54] South Carolina Sessional Papers, Minutes of Council, December 1748–December 1749, Journal 17, Part 1, Public Record Office, British Manuscripts Project, Reel 34, I.C.O. 5/457, microfilm, January 27, 1749, pp. 55–120, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia.

the governor. Some slaves could dissemble, as the testimony shows, especially those who had frequent contact with the master class. Others were unable to do so and were thought in the slave quarters to be "fools."

When it became obvious during the hearings at Charleston that truth *would* prove more advantageous than falsehood, again the shameless sambo type seemed the most articulate and credible. George, another slave, began his confession by saying: "Sir I am in your presence, my Master tells me that you are head of the Country. It is true I am not a white Man but I have a soul as well as others, and I believe there is a Heaven and a Devil." He claimed to be afraid that "God Almighty" would punish him if he continued to lie, and he was "glad he was sent for, that he might tell all."[55] The ease with which the stories changed to fit the exigencies of the situation, the care with which the slaves shielded themselves from blaming any white, especially their master, the contrast between the articulate sambos and the frightened mutes like Kent, and the unreliability that coercion had forced all of them to exhibit showed how smoothly slaves could function in the honor-shame context.

Nonetheless, the system of southern oppression was bound to have unhappy consequences for slave community and personal well-being. Black personality under bondage was partly dependent on the social climate that masters provided. Bitterness, hatred, or even the sense of security could be determined by a master's disposition.[56] Insofar as black honor under bondage is concerned, the true psychological limitation of slavery lay not in acceptance of honor-shame strictures but rather in the absence of rules and structure—anarchy, sometimes legalized anarchy. Plantation chaos and cruelty could place an emotional strain on the slave that is hard for us even to imagine. In other words, Ibrahima's maintenance of high character depended in part on the reliability of his master. Had Thomas Foster been monstrous, his princely driver's actions might have been different.

THUS A RANGE OF DIFFERENT DEGREES OF DEFERENCE and inner acceptance existed, with each slave adopting or, at times, rejecting servility as the plantation environment, personal temperament, mood, and even unconscious motive allowed. A small number may well have fit Elkins' unhappy description and lived lives of self-deprecation and deception. At the other, more inspired, extreme of samboism, some slaves took positive delight in the jesting, roguish performance. Almost all varieties of servility involved some degree of shamelessness, for that signaled an inner contempt for the values of honor on which the master rested his authority. But, in dealing with each other as opposed to the requirements of

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[55] *Ibid.*, 64. Sambo, a witness, declared that they had collected no arms, at once a signal that no plot was underway. The head of the conspiracy was supposedly an overseer named James Springer, who had left for a northern colony long before the hearings and therefore could not be made a material witness. See *ibid.*, 73, 85. See also Philip D. Morgan and George D. Terry, "Slavery in Microcosm: A Conspiracy Scare in Colonial South Carolina," *Southern Studies*, 21 (Summer 1982): 122.

[56] See, for instance, the story of Essex in John George Clinkscales, *On the Plantation: Reminiscences of His Childhood* (1916; rpt. edn., New York, 1969), 12–36, a runaway slave who exhibited all these reactions in the course of a lifetime.

slavery, slaves avoided extremes for the most part. Some gave out contradictory or ambivalent signals. Such, for instance, was "Runaway Dennis," a slave belonging to Katherine Du Pre Lumpkin's grandfather in middle Georgia. Dennis so constantly quarreled with fellow slaves that they "'fought shy' of him" but protected him as well, she recalled from family retellings. When called to account by the black driver, the overseer, or the owner, Dennis would vanish. None of the slaves ever betrayed his whereabouts. He "shamefacedly" reappeared only when word reached him through the quarters that he had been promised amnesty, usually through the intercession of Lumpkin's grandmother, whom he revered. For a short time, Dennis was once more a model of conscientiousness and servile compliance. After freedom, the unreconstructed former slave remained as "friendless" in the black community as he had been during slavery but showed his loyalty to Lumpkin by voting Democratic.[57]

Konstantin Stanislavsky, the famous acting instructor, would have appreciated such attention to proper slavish behavior—the shuffling feet, hunched shoulders, downcast eyes, aimless gesturings of hand and body, along with the shrewd or self-deprecating remark to entertain overseer or master. As Stanislavsky noted, "an actor lives, weeps, laughs on stage, but as he weeps and laughs he observes his own tears and mirth."[58] This "double existence" could make "art" out of samboism. Unfortunately, the black slave, unlike the actor, had only one role to play before whites. No doubt that limitation had much to do with the rejection of shame that was part of the sambo role itself. "He who is ashamed," wrote Erikson, "would like to force the world not to look at him, not to notice his exposure." But, he continued, "too much shaming does not lead to genuine propriety but to a secret determination to try to get away with things, unseen—if, indeed it does not result in defiant shamelessness."[59] Thievery, the breaking of tools, and other "subversions" by slaves should be seen in this light, not as rebellion but as a covert means of gaining advantage and, also, staining the vaunted honor of the master. "I was never acquainted with a slave who believed, that he violated any rule of morality by appropriating to himself any thing that belonged to his master, if it was necessary for his comfort," declared Charles Ball, a fugitive slave.[60] Caught like a child in the grip of a demanding, arbitrary father, the slave might react in open shamelessness. Richard Wright in *Black Boy*, describes firsthand how an elevator operator named Shorty, playing the slavish clown, maneuvered a Memphis white man into giving him a quarter in exchange for a kick in the rear. Wright was

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[57] Katherine Du Pre Lumpkin, *The Making of a Southerner* (1948; rpt. edn., Athens, Ga., 1974), 80; also 32.

[58] Konstantin Stanislavsky, *Building a Character*, Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood, trans. (New York, 1949), 167.

[59] Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (1950; rpt. edn., New York, 1963), 252–53. Whereas guilt involves transgression of one's own moral sense, shame arises from loss of pride, fear of ridicule, and anxiety of failure to achieve self-set, often unrealistic, goals. See Helen B. Lewis, *Shame and Guilt in Neurosis* (New York, 1971), 18–23.

[60] Ball quoted in Peter Kolchin, *Unfree Labor: American Slavery and Russian Serfdom* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), 242.

disgusted with the triumphant Shorty. "'But a quarter can't pay you for what he did to you.' 'Listen, nigger,' he said to me, 'my ass is tough and quarters is scarce.'" Anything goes so long as it means survival, as Elkins asserted. Ethically, however, the southern black lived in two worlds.[61] To please those in one sphere could well mean loss of respect in another. Since ultimate power lay with the master, the temptation to rely on his largess and good favor was understandable.

To escape the dictates of shame and humiliation, then, male slaves had to repress emotions and maintain confident behavior under pressure. But, even so, the unpredictability of masters, the difficulty of avoiding white surveillance, the powerlessness of any slave in jeopardy could result in self-devaluation and especially doubt, what Erikson called "the brother of shame."[62] Ball explained these feelings in the case of his own family under slavery. Helpless to prevent the sale of his wife, Ball's father, once a man "of a gay social temper," turned "gloomy and morose . . . and spent nearly all his leisure time with my grandfather, who claimed kindred with some royal family in Africa." To avoid sale himself, Ball's father had to run away, and only the grandfather remained to raise the boy, doing his best to endow Ball with a sense of selfhood based, like Ibrahima's, on the family lineage.[63]

The male slave's abuse of women—sexual violence, desertion, insult—recapitulated white men's assaults on the black male ego, even as it arose from feelings of personal dissatisfaction.[64] These emotions of rage, depression, and stony resentment—often inwardly directed and involving alcoholism—are constantly emphasized in modern black autobiography and fiction, sources that put in artistic form some realities of black alienation.[65] The situation was the classic issue of neurotic conflict as Karen Horney portrayed it in *Neurosis and Human Growth*.[66] Although condemned for his unrealistic portrait of the historical Nat Turner, William Styron presented a picture of anarchic cruelty as the basis for such reactions, cruelty that blacks adopted in whole or in part to protect selfhood.[67] The very pecking order of the plantation—mirror image in the slave quarters of the patriarchal, male-dominated, honor-obsessed rankings of the white society—encouraged shamelessness, disesteem of others, and self-abnegation. Household servants were contemptuous of field hands, drivers of their underlings, lowly male slaves of their women, and women of the inferior members of their own sex.

[61] Richard Wright, *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth* (1945; rpt. edn., New York, 1966), 250.

[62] Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, 253.

[63] Charles Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains* (1858; rpt. edn., New York, 1971?), 12; also 12–13.

[64] Robert Staples, *Black Masculinity: The Black Male's Role in American Society* (San Francisco, 1982), 62–71; Ronald L. Braithwaite, "Interpersonal Relations between Black Males and Black Females," in Lawrence E. Gary, ed., *Black Men* (Beverly Hills, Calif., 1981), 83–97.

[65] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York, 1947); Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York, 1940); Alice Walker, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (New York, 1970), and *The Color Purple* (New York, 1982); Ernest J. Gaines, *Bloodline* (New York, 1964), to name a few.

[66] Karen Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth: The Struggle toward Self-Realization* (New York, 1950).

[67] William Styron, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (New York, 1967); John Henrik Clarke, ed., *William Styron's "Nat Turner": Ten Black Writers Respond* (Boston, 1968); but see James R. Huffman, "A Psychological Redefinition of William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*," *Literary Review*, 24 (Winter 1981): 279–307.

Accepting white standards of physical beauty, slaves often expressed a preference for light skin.

Deep mistrust and rivalry rent the harmony of the slave quarters. Such problems had potentially tragic consequences. The darker side of "shamelessness," for instance, was that busy sambos made untrustworthy companions. They might have been and probably were emotionally undamaged. The male slave who acted the part but felt it contrary to his nature was a likely victim of his own rage and conflict. But an imperviousness to moral controls made the effective trickster dangerous to the stability of the slave community. In a novel, W. E. B. Du Bois created one such figure named Johnson, whom a Colonel Cresswell called "'a faithful nigger.' He was one of those constitutionally timid creatures," the narrator said, "into whom the servility of his fathers had sunk so deep that it had become second nature," but to the other Negroes, "he was a 'white folks' nigger,' to be despised and feared."[68] According to a recent study, Du Bois believed that the psychic damage of slavery was "an intense self-hatred" that made "racial solidarity an alien concept." Distrust and insecurity among blacks themselves multiplied as a result.[69] Of course, it is possible that sambo-like behavior—playing dumb or unconcerned—could well mask other designs or fool the white onlooker—to the satisfaction of the performer and his colleagues.[70] Nonetheless, one wonders how much effort, time, and emotional stress had to be directed toward self-protection alone, leaving less energy for more creative pursuits and self-development. What saved the situation from complete demoralization was the strength of family ties in a wide, extended-family kinship network characteristic of both North American black and African culture. Although circumstances differed on both continents, sources of security outside the family were not available. In the American South, it did not pay to trust others in the quarters under such circumstances.[71] Du Bois observed that blacks responded to the disruptive, unreliable world around them with a "double-consciousness," that is, a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks

[68] James B. Stewart, "Psychic Duality of Afro-Americans in the Novels of W. E. B. Du Bois," *Phylon*, 44 (June 1983): 99. Du Bois expanded on this theme in *Dark Princess*, explaining that "the white always felt a Negro was watching him and he acted his assumed part . . . of strutting walk, loud talk, and swagger . . . accordingly. And the Negroes did watch from behind another veil. This was the veil of amusement or feigned, impudent humility" (Stewart, "Psychic Duality of Afro-Americans," 102).

[69] Stewart, "Psychic Duality of Afro-Americans," 101. For a study of an analogous situation under colonial rule, see Leroy Vail and Landeg White, "Forms of Resistance: Songs and Perceptions of Power in Colonial Mozambique," *AHR*, 88 (October 1983): 883–919.

[70] See, for instance, Walter L. Williams, "The 'Sambo' Deception: The Experience of John McElroy in Andersonville Prison," *Phylon*, 39 (Fall 1978): 261–63.

[71] Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom 1750–1925* (New York, 1976); and Mitchell A. Green, "Impact of Slavery on the Black Family: Social, Political, and Economic," *Journal of Afro-American Issues*, 3 (Summer–Fall 1975): 343–56. On Afro-American family interconnections, see Raymond T. Smith, "The Nuclear Family in Afro-American Kinship," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 1 (Autumn 1970): 55–70; Niara Sudarkasa, "African and Afro-American Family Structure: A Comparison," *Black Scholar*, 11 (November–December 1980): 37–60; and Herbert J. Foster, "African Patterns in the Afro-American Family," *Journal of Black Studies*, 14 (December 1983): 201–31, both of which essays argue for Afro-American extended kinship patterns.

on in amused contempt and pity." How different from the studied and voluntary doubleness of the stage actor.[72]

Equally damaging was the sheer physical punishment that masters could inflict. The point is so obvious that I hesitate to belabor it, but even the most knowledgeable historians of slavery have underestimated its frequency and psychological effects.[73] The prospect of 150 lashes would make almost anyone a cringing coward. In fact, slaves exercised remarkable control. Their fortitude certainly had African roots. In some tribes, thrashing ceremonies, called in northern Nigeria the *sheriya*, tested stoic manhood. In any event, the physical effects could be very severe even under law rather than simply under the arbitrary passion of an irate master. Corydon Fuller, a pious young bookseller traveling through Louisiana, recorded that, in Claiborne Parish, Louisiana, 1858, a slave who had inadvertently struck his mistress in the face with a bridle was sentenced to "*one thousand* lashes to be inflicted 100 each day for ten days. Many think he will die."[74] Such punishments were scarcely everyday occurrences, but neither were they rare.[75]

From the psychological point of view, whippings had three major effects. They degraded the victim, shut down more normal communications, but, most important of all, compelled the victim to repress the inevitable anger felt toward those responsible for the pain and disgrace. As a result, even the merest hint of violence obliged the victim to retreat into as compliant a pose as could be managed. Edward Wilmot Blyden, an early nationalist and advocate for Liberian settlement, declared, "We have been taught a cringing servility. We have been drilled into contentment with the most undignified circumstances."[76] White oppression stirred both compliance and fierce resentment, as Genovese explained in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*.

In addition, less physically injurious cruelties abounded. We need not mention the threat of sale and separation from family and community, a sudden and often

[72] Jean Lee argued that, at least until the 1780s in the Chesapeake, "no group of enslaved Afro-Americans was ever free from the threat of disruption," a circumstance that severely limited slave community development. Jean Butenhoff Lee, "The Problem of Slave Community in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 43, 3d ser. (July 1986): 341; also 333–61. Peter Kolchin found problems of instability in community life for antebellum slaves on small holdings; see "Reevaluating the Antebellum Slave Community: A Comparative Perspective," *Journal of American History*, 70 (December 1983): 584; W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; rpt. edn., New York, 1961), 16–17. On the internalization of the deferential mode, see John Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (1937; rpt. edn., New York, 1949), 175–87, 286–313, pointing to a diversity of reactions, including degrees of deference and hostility.

[73] Herbert G. Gutman, *Slavery and the Numbers Game: A Critique of "Time on the Cross"* (Urbana, Ill., 1975).

[74] See Pearce Gervis, *Of Emirs and Pagans: A View of Northern Nigeria* (London, 1963), 183–84. Corydon Fuller Diary, June 21, 1858, in William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

[75] See, for instance, *State v. Dan* [Mrs. Letty Barrett's], September 22, 1862, *State v. Sam* [Robert H. Todd's], November 14, 1863, Magistrates and Freeholders Court, Anderson County, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia; Lawrence T. McDonnell, "The Whipping Post: Politics and Psychology of Punishment in the Slave South," unpublished paper, Social Science History Association, Toronto, October 26, 1984.

[76] Blyden quoted in Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth* (University Park, Pa., 1982), 51.

unpredictable event with sorrows hard to imagine. Also, masters sometimes used shaming rites, ones that could enlist the other slaves into enjoying the spectacle, thereby doubling the misery while keeping the slaves disunited. Bennet Barrow, a slaveholder of Louisiana, once threatened to put an offending slave on a scaffold in the yard, wearing a red flannel cap. In another example, a slave with an insatiable craving had stolen an enormous seed pumpkin from his master's patch. The other slaves told on him, and the master easily recovered the unconcealable object. He made the slave eat a "big bowl of pumpkin sauce." The old slave who recalled the incident declared, "it am funny to see that colored gentleman with pumpkin smear on he face and tears running down he face. After that us children call him Master Pumpkin, and Master have no more trouble with stealing he seed pumpkins."[77]

With all the psychological, social, political, military, economic, and educational advantages that whites wielded, slaves could scarcely avoid feelings of oppression—and therefore of repression in a part of their social personality. To be sure, an essential self remained inviolable. Behind the mask of docility, the male slave was still himself and gave the lie to southern claims of "knowing" their blacks. As W. J. Cash pointed out, "even the most unreflecting must sometimes feel suddenly, in dealing with him, that they were looking at a blank wall, that behind that grinning face a veil was drawn which no white man might certainly know he had penetrated."[78] And yet the cost of building that impenetrable wall was high: repressing the hatred of the oppressors, bearing the slave's own powerlessness and the slavishness of other blacks. Male honor was richly prized in the slave quarters, and a defense of it established rank among fellow slaves. But slave honor was confined to the slave quarters, a restriction that may have made them all the more brutal out of frustration. Judge Nash of the North Carolina Supreme Court once declared that the slaves "sometimes kill each other in heat of blood, being sensible to the dishonor in their own caste of crouching in submission to one of themselves." Such behavior betokened a self-despising that sought a scapegoat in another person. For instance, Dan Josiah Lockhart, a fugitive in Canada, but once a plantation driver, admitted, "I was harder on the servants than [my master] wanted I should be." From his account, he was clearly taking out his resentment against his owner for selling his wife to a farmer an unreachable eight miles away.[79]

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[77] Edwin Adams Davis, ed., *Plantation Life in the Florida Parishes of Louisiana, 1836–1846, as Reflected in the Diary of Bennet H. Barrow* (New York, 1945), entry for December 24, 1869, p. 175; pumpkin story told in Botkin, *Lay My Burden Down*, 6. For a similar acceptance of white perceptions in labeling of deviant slaves, see Bessie Hough Williams, "Memoir of the King Family," William Rufus King Family Papers, Alabama State Department of Archives and History, Montgomery.

[78] See John W. Cell, *The Highest Stage of White Supremacy: The Origins of Segregation in South Africa and the American South* (Cambridge, 1982), 241–43. Some planters were determined to insist on dependence for food, denying their slaves garden plots for fear of encouraging self-reliance, confidence, and laxity when working for their master. See "Governor [James H.] Hammond's Instructions to His Overseer," in Willie Lee Rose, ed., *A Documentary History of Slavery in North America* (New York, 1976), 348; Botkin, *Lay My Burden Down*, 25, 35, 93; W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York, 1941), 319.

[79] Nash quoted in Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 630; Lockhart quoted in Drew, *The Refugee*, 31.

Another sign of self-hatred can be located in the examples of sabotage or apparent plantation "accidents" that historians have largely attributed to motives of subversion rather than to racist ideas of black "laziness" and irresponsibility. For instance, James Redpath, a journalist with strong antislavery convictions, reported that, on a trip through the South, he had witnessed a slave drayman lashing the horses, legs unmercifully as they hauled uphill a two-ton load of plaster. "This is a fair specimen of the style in which Negroes treat stock," he remarked. Frederick Law Olmsted offered similar testimony. Planters, he said, used mules more often than horses because "horses cannot bear the treatment they always must get from negroes" whereas "mules will bear the cudgeling."[80] To take out disappointments on a hoe or horse would, then, be less politically calculated than an impulsive expression of anger against personal miseries in the quarters as well as in the slave system itself. We are unlikely ever to know.

Likewise, historians understand little about how mothers reared their slave children. One suspects that at some point early affection had to give way to stern and perhaps arbitrary discipline—a cuffing without explanation—to turn the child toward automatic obedience and toward staying out of trouble with the white man. Male children more than female would have to be so trained. Wright implied in *Black Boy*, his autobiographical novel, that the reason why his mother, grand-mother, and other family elders cuffed, slapped, and beat him was not only a venting of their own miseries against a smaller creature but also an expression of a desperate love for him: without such treatment to curb his uncalculating independence, he would surely one day become, they thought, a white mob's victim.[81] "How many mothers and fathers had to punish severely children they loved so as to instill in them the do's and don'ts of a hideous power system in which a mistake could cost lives?" asked Genovese.[82]

Evidence of similar patterns in the experience of the Fulani slaves provides further insight. Bernd Baldus noted that the Fulani and Batomba superiors consider the *machudo* slave "uncivilized" or "wild." The *machube* are demoralized to the point of extreme aggressiveness toward each other. They never assault the mocking rulers but instead fall on one another in often fierce violence. "Mistrust" and lack of internalized controls are "pervasive, covering even close social ties among neighbors, friends, or family members." The experience of the *machube* was different from that of American slaves, who had the benefit of a Christian humanitarianism and more sophisticated attitudes with which to forge the bonds of a community. But such unhappy conditions could well have existed on those plantations where masters sought to destroy any sense of black collectivity.[83]

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[80] James Redpath, *The Roving Editor: or, Talks with Slaves in the Southern States* (1859; rpt. edn., New York, 1968), 241; Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States, with Remarks on their Economy* (1856; rpt. edn., New York, 1968), 47; see also Raymond A. Bauer and Alice H. Bauer, "Day to Day Resistance to Slavery," *Journal of Negro History*, 27 (October 1942): 388–419.

[81] Wright, *Black Boy*, 94, and *passim*.

[82] Genovese, "Toward a Psychology of Slavery," 33.

[83] Baldus, "Responses to Dependence," 450–58; Clyde W. Franklin II, "Black Male–Black Female Conflict Individually Caused and Culturally Nurtured," *Journal of Black Studies*, 15 (December 1984):

In the last few years, the darker side of slave life has regained scholars' notice, but generally historians place the emphasis on the remarkable endurance and even joyousness that slaves extracted from harsh conditions. Significant and valid though the brighter view is, the costs of honor, shame, and shamelessness should not be ignored.[84] If repression and its manifestations in inappropriate ways was one of the chief emotional problems of bondage, another was the related problem of communal mistrust and its effect on the social personality of the slave.

NAT TURNER'S RECURRENT NIGHTMARE IN William Styron's novel about the great Virginia slave revolt involves Nat seeing himself floating down a river and on a hill stands a white temple, familiar but closed to him. As he drifts by, all Nat can do is worship from afar the power of the whites' world that the edifice represents. The river takes him nowhere, just as the real Nat Turner's rebellion, for all its

The great mosque at Timbo. Louis Tauxier, *Moeurs et histoire des peuls* (Paris, 1937). Photo supplied by Terry Alford.

139–54; Richard Staples, "The Myth of Black Macho: A Response to Angry Black Feminists," *Black Scholar*, 10 (March–April 1979): 24–32.

[84] See Bertram Wyatt-Brown, review of O. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, in *Society*, 21 (March–April 1983): 92–94; Kolchin, "Reevaluating the Antebellum Slave Community," 579–601. See also Lawrence T. McDonnell, "Slave against Slave: Dynamics of Violence within the American Slave Community," unpublished paper, American Historical Association Convention, December 28, 1983; and "Whipping Post," kindly loaned to me by their author.

celebration in recent times, was futile.[85] Ibrahima also dreamed of water and familiar, distant places. After a lifetime of helping to build his master's estate into one of the great fortunes of Mississippi, Ibrahima hoped to die in his native land. His aged master, Thomas Foster, at last was willing to release him. But Ibrahima died at Monrovia, the home for freed slaves on the African coast, far from Timbo, with only his American kin to honor his memory.[86]

[85] Styron, *Confessions of Nat Turner*, 3–5.
[86] Alford, *Prince among Slaves*, 180–83.