
AFRICA, SLAVERY, & THE ROOTS OF CONTEMPORARY BLACK CULTURE

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THE AMERICAS BECAME AN OUTPOST OF WEST AFRICAN CULTURE between the sixteenth and the middle of the nineteenth century. Traces of that culture are still found in the United States in the last decades of the twentieth century in music, folk tales, proverbs, dress, dance, medicine, language, food, architecture, art and religion. African cultural patterns also influenced American slavery as an institution.

From a contemporary perspective, the importance of slavery lies in two areas. First, it has been the major determinant of American race relations. The legacy of slavery led in the nineteenth century to the institution of Jim Crow laws designed to separate blacks and whites, to segregated housing and schools, to discrimination in the dispensation of justice, to the myths about interracial sex, and to economic and political oppression. Second, slavery played a crucial role in the creation of contemporary black culture and the preservation of African cultural elements in the Americas.

At the same time that the African slave contributed much to American culture, he stood as America's metaphor. As long as the black man labored in chains, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution symbolized the American white man's ability to lie to himself. Having lived so long with this lie, American whites found it increasingly difficult to resolve the contradiction between equality and discrimination once they had ended the conflict between slavery and freedom. Although some form of involuntary servitude had existed in practically all societies before the creation of the United States, in none of them did the fundamental documents and philos-

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ophies so unequivocally assert that slavery was a violation of divine and natural law. Because of the glaring contradiction between their belief in freedom and equality and their practice of enslaving and discriminating against blacks, antebellum American whites suffered from a massive guilt complex.

To escape the residue of this guilt in the twentieth century, white historians have tried to prove that the slaves received better treatment than white workers, that the blacks were content as slaves, that none of the social problems afflicting Afro-Americans in the twentieth century have their roots in the peculiar institution, and that slaves were so assimilated that their culture should be stamped, "Made in America." All of these arguments are mythological and have little relationship to the realities of bondage.

The greatest crime committed by slavery scholars in the first half of the twentieth century was their attempt to prove that blacks were inferior. The long-suffering Christ-like Uncle Tom, the unbelievably loyal child-man Sambo, and the Mammy who loved her master more than her own family are unfounded stereotypes of incredible longevity. So many whites accepted these stereotypes and similar ones about Africans that many blacks rejected the study of slavery and Africa. They both were part of a dismal past best forgotten. But just as American whites cannot assuage their guilt by turning to myths, blacks cannot live in a present without roots in the past.

The assertion by some scholars and Afro-Americans in the 1960's that "black history began in 1865" has been productive of much evil. First, it enabled white scholars to ignore the contributions blacks made to more than 250 years of American history. Second, such views discouraged blacks from investigating their own history. Although the ancestors of practically all white Americans were at one time slaves, twentieth-century blacks were led to believe that they were the *only* Americans who were descendants of bondsmen. One significant result of the guilt feelings blacks felt over this was that they had less interest in genealogy than any other group of Americans.

A third result of the denial of the slave past was the virtual destruction of many unique and functional aspects of Afro-American culture as twentieth-century blacks rushed to adopt the values of American whites. It was only in the 1960's that masses of blacks discovered that many of the values and customs of whites were less functional for the survival of an oppressed minority than those of their slave ancestors.

"It is of consequence," America's premier folklorist, William Wells Newell, declared in 1894, "for the American Negro to retain the recollection of his African origin, and of his American servitude." This was necessary, Newell said, because "for the sake of the honor of his race, he should have a clear picture of the mental condition

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out of which he has emerged: this picture is not now complete, nor will be made so without a record of song, tales, beliefs, which belong to the stage of culture through which he has passed." The collection of the data noted by Newell had reached a point by the middle of the twentieth century that scholars could begin to answer the question of the origin of black culture. There is, however, no unanimity. The debate on origins has centered on the folktale.

Richard M. Dorson, in his *Negro Folktales in Michigan* (1956) argued that an overwhelming majority of Afro-American folktales came originally from Europe. Since Dorson compiled his tales in the 1950's, his theory may be correct for the latter half of the twentieth century. Obviously, the spread of literacy, radio and television sets in the twentieth century led to the diffusion of European folklore in the black community. Just as obvious, however, is the fact that the widespread illiteracy of slaves and the absence of mass communications media in the nineteenth century severely limited the diffusion of the folklore of European immigrants in the slave community.

Given the degree of isolation between antebellum whites and blacks and differences in languages and roles, it is inconceivable that European sailors—when transporting Africans to the Americas—or that white plantation owners and overseers—while the slaves were at work or rest—regaled the blacks with European folktales, proverbs, and riddles. Most of the diffusion of folklore in the nineteenth century involved whites borrowing from blacks: slaves customarily entertained their master's children with tales, white folklorists regularly visited the quarters and recorded them, and large segments of the white community read the stories compiled by Joel Chandler Harris, Charles C. Jones, Jr., Alcée Fortier, and others.

Whatever the situation in the twentieth century, about 65% of the folktales of slaves in the American South in the nineteenth century came from Africa. The 200 slave tales recorded by Abigail Christensen in South Carolina, Joel Chandler Harris and Charles C. Jones, Jr. in Georgia, Alcée Fortier in Louisiana, and Hampton Institute's black folklorists all over the South between 1872 and 1900 were generally identical in structure, detail, function, motif, attitudes, and thought patterns to African ones. Rarely did the slave's tales show any trace of the sentimentality and romanticism characteristic of European folklore.

The African origin of nineteenth-century black folktales has long been recognized by the collectors of African folklore. In 1892, A. Gerber compared Afro-American and African folklore and asserted that "not only the plots of the majority of the stories, but even the principal actors, are of African origin." African scholars found striking parallels between the Uncle Remus stories collected by Harris and West African folktales. According to Alta Jablow, the

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traditional West African animal stories "served as the prototype of the well-known Uncle Remus stories." And in 1966, H. A. S. Johnston, after studying more than 1,000 traditional Hausa and Fulani folktales in Nigeria, asserted: "Brer Rabbit is undoubtedly the direct descendant of the hare of African folktales. Not only are his characteristics exactly the same as those of the Hausa Zomo but the plots in at least thirteen of the Uncle Remus stories are parallels of those in Hausa stories."

A number of the nineteenth-century collectors of slave folktales also recognized their African origin. William Owen, in one of the first analyses of black folklore, wrote in 1877 that the slave's tales were "as purely African as are their faces or their own plaintive melodies . . . the same wild stories of Buh Rabbit, Buh Wolf, and other *Buhs* . . . are to be heard to this day in Africa, differing only in the drapery necessary to the change of scene." Although Joel Chandler Harris knew very little about African folklore, one of the scholars (Herbert H. Smith) he contacted about the origin of his first series of Uncle Remus stories wrote: "One thing is certain. The animal stories told by the negroes in our Southern States and in Brazil were brought by them from Africa." Christensen pointed out that the ancestors of her South Carolina informants had "brought parts of the legends from African forests." In fact, one of her informants, Prince Baskins, told Christensen that he had first heard the tales from his grandfather, a native African. Many of the tales collected by Christensen, Joel Chandler Harris, and Fortier even contained African words in them.

The folktale served some of the same functions in the slave quarters as it had in Africa. It was a means of entertainment, inculcating morality in the young, teaching the value of cooperation, and explaining animal behavior. Like the Africans, the slaves were preoccupied with "pourquoi" stories, or why animals got to be the way they were. The why stories constituted 29.5% of the tales recorded by Hampton Institute collectors and 23.5% of those collected by Christensen in the nineteenth century.

Among the slaves the folktale was also a means of training young blacks to cope with bondage. By modelling their behavior on that of the rabbit or tortoise, the slaves learned to use their cunning to overcome the strength of the master, to hide their anger behind a mask of humility, to laugh in the face of adversity, to retain hope in spite of almost insuperable odds, to create their own heroes, and to violate plantation rules while escaping punishment. In many of the tales a slave used his wits to escape from work and punishment or to trick his master into emancipating him. They also reveal the slave's sense of humor:

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Once an old slave used to make it his practice to steal hogs. The way he would be sure of the animal was he would tie one end of a rope around his prey and the other around himself. The old Negro had been successful for many years in his occupation, but one time when he caught one of his master's hogs he met his equal in strength. He was fixing to have a big time on the next day, which was Sunday. He was thinking about it and had the old hog going along nicely, but at last as he was coming up on the top of a very high hill the hog got unmanageable and broke loose from the old fellow's arms. Still the old man made sure it was all right because of the rope which tied them together, so he puffed and pulled and scuffed, till the hog got the best of him and started him to going down the steep hill. The hog carried him clear to his master's house, and the master and his family were sitting on the porch. All the Negro could say, as the hog carried him around and around the house by his master, was "Master, I come to bring your pig home!"

Until the end of the eighteenth century the black slaves retained their African names. Most of what scholars know about this phenomenon comes from ads placed in colonial newspapers by masters trying to recapture fugitive slaves. In attempting to anglicize the names the masters distorted many of them. As they had done in Africa, the slaves continued to name their children according to the day of the week on which they were born:

<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Day</i>
Cudjoe	Juba	Monday
Cubbenah	Beneba	Tuesday
Quaco	Cuba	Wednesday
Quao	Abba	Thursday
Cuffee	Phibba	Friday
Quamin	Mimba	Saturday
Quashee	Quasheba	Sunday

While these and their variants were the most common cognomens, 92 different African names appeared in South Carolina runaway ads alone. African names, indicating a connection to the ancestral home, continued to be marks of status in the free black community throughout the nineteenth century. Significantly, many of them appeared in Carter G. Woodson's list of free blacks included in the census of 1830.

Between five and ten percent of the names of free blacks were African derivatives, with Juba, Cuffy, Abba, Cudjo, Tinah, Quashee, Chloe, Selah, Mingo, Sawney, Ferriba, Garoh, Wan, and Bena being the most popular. Occasionally the free blacks had such African derived surnames as the following:

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Quashy Baham	Wilson Africa	Edward Affricaine	Kedar Africa
Elikaim Bardor	Byer Affrica	Wright Africa	Gadock Coffe
Pyror Biba	Alford Bim	Cuff Cawon	Ally Africa

African appellations disappeared from the lists of slaves in the nineteenth century because masters frequently chose the cognomens applied to their bondsmen. On the South Carolina Sea Islands, however, the blacks clung tenaciously to their African names. Even as late as 1940, the Sea Islanders used an anglicized name in their dealings with whites and an African name in their conversations with other blacks.

"A proverb," say the Yoruba, "is the horse of conversation." Before the arrival of European invaders, West Africans relied on proverbs more than any other people. They were used as greetings, played on drums, included in songs, provided the ending for folktales, and applied as nicknames. Until the last decades of the twentieth century, proverbs served as precedents in reaching judicial decisions. The scholar George Herzog, writing in the 1930's, said that in Liberian "legal proceedings it may happen that at a certain stage most of the discussion narrows down to quoting proverbs." Among the Ashanti, when a master called his slave's name, the bondsman always answered with a proverb. As a revelation of the philosophy of a people and as a way of utilizing the past to cope with a new situation, the West African proverb differed little from those found among Europeans. But West African proverbs had greater flexibility of imagery and application, symmetrical balance, poetic structure, and rhythmic quality than European ones. The correct use of proverbs in African society often involved an intricate and artistic portrayal of abstract ideas.

The primary objective of the proverb was to teach modes of conduct, religious beliefs, hospitality, respect for elders, caution, bravery, humility, and cooperation by drawing on the lessons learned from history, mythology, and the observation of flora, fauna, and human behavior. The proverb survived the coming of the Europeans. One of the major reasons for this was that the moral of tales was stated as a proverb; often the proverb remained when the tale was forgotten. Through the fables of Aesop, the slave trade, and the writings of travellers, many African proverbs were incorporated into the sayings of Europeans, Arabs, and Asians. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that many of them appeared in the language of nineteenth-century slaves in the Southern United States.

Largely banned from acquiring literacy, the slaves remained, like their African ancestors, an oral people. They resorted to proverbs to teach morality and behavioral skills to their children. A compari-

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son of the 382 proverbs contained in the folklore collections of J. Mason Brewer and Hampton Institute with 7,000 proverbs from West Africa shows that 122 or 31% of them were brought by the blacks directly from Africa. Many of the proverbs are identical in form and meaning to West African ones, but often reflect the impact of slavery and the American environment.

About 50% of the proverbs the slaves used reflected the plantation experience. They borrowed less than 20% of them from their white masters. These plantation proverbs contained advice about how much labor the slave should perform, how to avoid punishment, and frequently referred to such activities as ploughing and harvesting cotton, corn, and wheat, religious meetings, corn shuckings and singing. They included such sayings as the following: "The overseer regulates the daybreak. Don't fling all your power into a small job. Don't say more with your mouth than your back can stand (be cautious in talking to the master). You got eyes to see and wisdom not to see (don't tell master everything). Tomorrow may be the carriage-driver's day for ploughing (fortune changes). Tired cutter in the wheat field gets sassy at the end of the row."

It is a testament to the wisdom of the slaves that many of their proverbs (or variants) were still being used by Americans, black and white, in the last decades of the twentieth century. They included: "The sun shines in every man's door once (fortune changes). If you can't stand the hot grease, get out of the kitchen. To wall-eye (show anger). His tongue knows no Sunday (he's too talkative). Mr. Hawkins is coming (cold weather—"the Hawk"—is coming)."

The place the witch, ghost, and medicine man had in traditional African society was occupied by hags, hants, and conjurors in the slave quarters. They shared many identical characteristics. Although similar in many ways to its European counterpart, the traditional African witch was a more malevolent and frightful reality. Possessing the ability to turn people into animals, ride, kill, and eat them, the witch caused sores, incurable diseases, sterility, impotence, adultery, stillbirths, and robbed a person of his money or food. Since witches were persons inhabited by demons, they could change into any animal form or become invisible and enter a dwelling through the smallest opening. The African detected witches by spreading pepper around or through dreams. Amulets, rings, chains, and bags of powder worn on the body or placed in dwellings offered some protection, as did objects placed under pillows, the blood of fowls, effigies, and shrines. Persons proven to be witches were killed.

Ghosts play a prominent role in African religions and cosmology. Viewed as the indwelling spirit or soul of a man which departs his body on his death, the ghosts retain an interest in the affairs of the

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living and punish or frighten them for misdeeds, aid descendants, remain in the vicinity of their graves, and sometimes inhabit the body of newly born infants. The African's belief in ghosts is part of the process of honoring ancestors and functions to preserve social order.

The African medicine man or priest was a mediator between the living and the dead, a discoverer of witchcraft, and a physician. He could prepare poisons to be placed in the food of or on a path frequented by an intended victim. He sold powders and charms to insure success in love, war, planting, hunting and other activities.

There were some inversions and combinations of roles in the transfer of witches, ghosts, and medicine men from Africa to America. The witch, or hag, for example, lost some of its malevolence. Even so, the slaves continued to believe that witches met as a group, took the shape of animals, and rode a person at night. They were invisible, entered a dwelling through a keyhole, and sometimes caused death. If one cut off the limb of a hag while in the shape of an animal, that limb would be missing when the witch returned to its human form. Protection against hags included sticks, sifters, horseshoes, and bottles of salt over the door, or Bibles, forks, and needles under the pillow. Salt and pepper burned the skin of the witch.

Many features of African cosmology regarding ghosts were retained in the Americas. The slaves believed that a person's soul remained on earth three days after death visiting friends and enemies and that ghosts remained near graveyards, communicated with and could harm or help the living, and might return to claim property which had belonged to them. The main function of the ghost in the quarters was, as in Africa, to engender respect for the dead. The slaves universally believed, according to many nineteenth-century observers, that if "the living neglect in any way their duty to the dead, they may be haunted by them."

The conjurer, claiming to have received his power from God and believed by many to be in league with the devil, combined the malevolence of the witch with the benevolence of the African medicine man and priest. In the slave's world the conjurer was the medium for redressing wrongs committed by his master or fellows and served as his druggist, physician, faith healer, psychologist, and fortune teller. Bondsmen believed the conjurer could prevent floggings, guarantee successful rebellions or flights for freedom, cast and remove spells, and cause and cure illness. He was the source of love potions, poisons, and "trick bags." Spells resulted from the ingestion of his potions or simply from walking over ground containing a trick bag. Like the Africans, slaves believed that the conjurer used items of personal property or hair and nail clippings to cast spells. In removing spells and curing illnesses he used what was tantamount to autosuggestion or hypnotism and his knowledge of herbs. Mixing teas made from

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boiling sassafrass, nutmeg, asafoetida, or wild cherry, oak, dogwood, and poplar bark with vinegar, cider, whiskey, turpentine, quinine, calomel, molasses, and honey, the conjurer was remarkably successful in curing the slaves of colds, fevers, chills, etc.

It would take several volumes to describe all of the cultural elements the slaves brought with them from Africa. Some indication of the extent of the African survivals in Afro-American culture appear in a study of Georgia blacks in the 1930's, *Drums and Shadows* (1940). The Georgia investigators found 70 elements of African culture in the region. In addition to the things noted above, they included funeral rites, spirit possession, decoration of graves, taboos, woodcarving, and weaving. Other scholars have noted that the rhythmic complexity and call and response pattern of black music, children's games, religious practices and some dances of American blacks have their origin in Africa.

According to most scholars, the most obvious African retentions in black American culture have been in music and dance. The melody, harmony, rhythm, form, emphasis on percussion, and aesthetics of slave music were all African. In West Africa and among blacks in the antebellum South music was an intimate part of life, of play, religion, and work. Harold Courlander in *Negro Folk Music, USA* (1963) wrote that the black work song "particularly the kind sung by railroad gangs, roustabouts (stevedores), woodcutters, fishermen, and prison road gangs, is an old and deeply rooted tradition. Few Negro musical activities come closer than gang singing does to what we think of as an African style . . . the overall effect instantly calls to mind the group labor songs of Jamaica, Haiti, and West Africa."

The ring games and songs of slave children also originated in Africa. A Nigerian scholar, Lazarus Ekwueme concluded from his study of African and Afro-American forms: "A black Louisiana housewife sings to her crying baby not too differently from the way a Jamaican mother does or an Ewe woman in Ghana. The children's games, 'Ring around the Rosie' or 'Bob a needle,' each with its accompanying song, have counterparts in Africa, such as the 'Akpakolo' of Igbo children in West Africa or the funny game-song of the Kikuyu of Kenya called 'R-r-r-r-r-na ngubiro,' which is a special East African follow-your-leader version of 'Ring around the Rosie.' "

In contrast to the music and games, few of the slaves' omens and signs appear to have come from Africa. The major reason for this was that there was such a difference in the flora, fauna, and weather in Africa and America. The correct interpretation of signs and omens was extremely important in the slave quarters. By carefully observing the habits of animals, the slaves developed (as did most rural people) skill in predicting changes in the weather. Although this was the primary function of signs, the slaves used them for many other

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reasons. First, they utilized them as taboos in an effort to teach good manners to children. Young slaves were taught that bad luck followed when they stepped over grown-ups, washed in water used by someone else, tore their clothes, beat cats and dogs, swore, kept their hats on when entering the cabin, or made fun of a cross-eyed person. Second, the slaves insisted that slovenly housekeeping habits (sweeping the floor or cleaning the table after dark) lead to bad luck and death in the family. Third, they used taboos to promote good work habits: "Don't skip a row in planting or someone in your family will die." A fourth function of the signs, omens, and taboos was to inculcate morality in the young. In an effort to prevent girls from being promiscuous, for example, the slaves said: "If you kiss a boy before you marry, you'll never care much for him."

One of the major functions of signs was to enable the slave to deal with the ever present and always unpredictable specter of death. The actions of owls, kildeer, roosters, dogs, cats, hogs, and rabbits were the most frequent signs of an impending death. Every sign called for a corresponding action to prevent death. Typical ways for stopping the screeching of an owl, for instance, were to put an iron poker, horse-shoe, or salt in the fire, or to turn your pockets wrong side out.

Seeking control over a harsh world where masters and overseers were capricious and irrational, the slaves developed an unshakable belief in the infallibility of dreams and signs as predictors of future events on the plantation. Primarily an effort to determine when whippings and separations were going to occur, these signs reflect the major fears of the slaves: "If your left eye twitches, you will soon receive a whipping. If you dream of your owner counting money, some slave is going to be sold. If you mock an owl, you'll get a whipping. Kildee hollering, patrollers coming. To mock a whip-poor-will is a sure sign of a whipping. To dream about dollars is a sure sign of a whipping. If you mark the back of a chimney, your back will be marked the same way by a whipping. If you have rice, peas, and hominy on New Year's day, you will have plenty to eat all year. If a rabbit crosses your path at night, you'll soon get a whipping. If you burn poplar, just as the wood pops, so will the master pop his whip on your back."

The slaves transmitted many elements of their culture to twentieth-century blacks. The clearest example of this, of course, is the spiritual; many of those religious songs of the slaves could still be heard in black churches in the last decades of the twentieth century. What is less obvious is the slave's contribution to another distinctive genre of American music—the blues. Practically all of the motifs and patterns of the blues were present in the non-religious or secular songs of the slaves. Like the twentieth-century blues singers, the slaves often sang about their work:

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Old cotton, old corn, see you every morn,
Old cotton, old corn, see you since I's born.
Old cotton, old corn, hoe you till dawn,
Old cotton, old corn, what for you born?

The oppression of whites, bouts with patrollers, floggings, and conflicts with masters and overseers represented major themes in the slaves' secular songs. In their ironic and humorous twists these songs became the prototypes for similar characteristics in the blues. The slaves approached artistry when they commented on the hypocrisy of their owners:

My old missus promise me
When she die she set me free
She live so long her head git bald
She give up de idea of dyin' a-tall.

When the slaves sang of love and courting, they probably came closest to the blues. References to unfaithful partners were frequent in both types. According to the slave, "When I'se here you call me honey, when I'se gone, you honies everybody." Metaphoric references to sexual intercourse were often identical in the slave songs and in the blues. For example, the blues singer often uses the word "rocking" to refer to sexual intercourse. In one blues song a woman sang in the 1920's:

Looked at the clock, clock struck one,
Come on daddy, lets have some fun.
Looked at the clock, clock struck two,
Believe to my soul you aint half through.
Looked at the clock, clock struck three,
Believe to my soul, you gonna kill poor me.
Looked at the clock, clock struck four,
If the bed breaks down we'll finish on the floor.
My daddy rocks me with one steady roll,
Dere ain't no slippin' when he once takes hold.

While revealing little of the rhythmic complexity of this song, the slaves obviously referred to sexual intercourse when they sang:

Down in Mobile, down in Mobile,
How I love that pretty yellow gal,
She rock to suit me—
Down in Mobile, down in Mobile.

The slaves also resorted to the double meanings and veiled mes-

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sages of the blues in other sexual references: “cake” and “chicken” meant a woman and “shake” and “pushing” signified sexual intercourse in both types.

One characteristic of the blues frequently noted by musicologists is boasting. The slave singers boasted of their ability to trick their masters:

I fooled old Mastah seven years
Fooled the overseer three;
Hand me down my banjo
And I'll tickle you bellee (belly).

They emphasized their ability to fight, “to get drunk agin,” and their sexual conquests: “When I was young and in my prime, I’s a courtin’ them gals, most all de time.”

Like the blues men, the slaves were always looking for a “do right” woman. They asked “what make de young girls so deceivin? so deceivin, so deceivin”; warned other men “don’t steal my sugar”; lamented “When I got back my chicken was gone”; made the query, “Whose been here since I been gone?”; scorned former lovers who’d gotten pregnant by another man (“her apron strings wouldn’t tie,”) or observed that “Many a man is rocking another man’s son when he thinks he’s rocking his own.”

The women boasted of their ability to steal someone else’s lover: “You steal my partner, and I steal yours.” They enjoined their mates to treat them “good” or suffer the consequences: “If you treat me good, I’ll stay till de Judgement Day. But if you treat me bad, I’ll sho’ to run away.” Another distinctive feature of the blues is a pre-occupation with getting revenge on a lover who has “done you wrong.” This theme also appeared in the slave songs.

I’m going to poison you, I’m going to poison you,
I’m just sick and tired of the way you do,
I’m going to sprinkle spider legs around your bed,
An’ you gonna wake up in the morning and find yourself dead.
You beat me and kick me and you black my eyes,
I’m gonna take this butcher knife and hew you down to my size,
You mark my words, my name is Lou,
You mind out what I say. I’m going to poison you.

Twentieth-century blacks obviously inherited what folklorists call “skill in the verbal arts” from the slaves. Precursors of those most distinctive features of twentieth-century black culture—the dozens, toasts, prayers, sermons, slang, and signifying—appear in collections

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of slave folklore. The slave was the quintessential folk poet. In his courtship rituals, toasts, and greetings he demonstrated those rhythmical patterns characteristic of twentieth-century black speech. The sources permit, however, only slight glimpses of some of these forms in the quarters. The practice of playing the dozens and signifying, for example, involves the use of so much profanity and so many explicit references to copulation that Victorian nineteenth-century folklorists refused to record them. Even so, some elements of signifying and the dozens (parody, taunts, verbal dueling by indirection, allusion and innuendo, and metaphoric references) can be found in slave speech.

In Harlem in the 1940's, the typical answer to the greeting "whatcha know ole man?" was "I'm like the bear, just ain't getting nowhere." The formalized greetings of the slaves were similar; they would answer the question "How do you do" or such variants as "How is all?" or "How do you shine?" in one of the following ways: "I'm kicking, but not high. I'm barking, but I won't bite. White folks calculating to keep me behind, but I have to keep on gwine (going). I'm fat, but don't show it. When you are half dead and running, I'll be up and coming. I'm hanging and dragging like an old shoe. I'm fat and fine."

The verbal "put down" of a protagonist characteristic of the dozens also appeared in slave responses to verbal boasts and threats: "You can saddle me, but you can't ride me. I was never run out of a pond by a tadpole yet. No use clouding up, you can't rain."

Similarities in the verbal art of the bondsmen and twentieth-century blacks are clearly apparent in their courtship practices. According to the folklorist William Ferris, twentieth-century blacks in the rural South have a highly formalized courtship ritual involving the propounding of a series of questions to determine one's availability as a sexual partner. Called "high pro" by the blacks, the practice is a verbal duel.

The prototype of "high pro" was created in the slave quarters where old men taught the young the art of courtship. In order to win a mate, a young man or woman had to "know how to talk." The courtship ritual consisted of riddles, poetic boasting, innuendos, put downs, figurative speech, repartee, circumlocution, and a test of wit. In an effort to determine whether a young lady was free to go courting a young man would typically ask: "Are you a rag on the bush or a rag off the bush? (Answer—If a rag on the bush, free, if off, engaged)." If the lady were not married or engaged, the young man then tried to discover if she accepted him as a suitor: "Dear lady, suppose you an' I was sittin' at de table wid but one dish of soup an' but one spoon, would you be willin' to eat out ob de dish an' spoon

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wid me?" If this question went unanswered, he might assert:

If you was passin' by
And seed me hangin' high
Would you cut me down and lie
Or would you let me hang there an die?

To show that she accepted her suitor, the young girl had to frame a suitably clever response: "I hears dat you is a dove flyin' from lim' to lim' wid no where to res' your weary wings. I's in de same condition an' hopes you kin fin' a place to res' your heart."

Having found someone to "eat out of the dish" with him, the young man would begin boasting of his prowess and proclaiming, through poetic allusions, his love for her: "Dear miss, ef I was starving and had jes one ginger-cake, I would give you half, an' dat would be the bigges' half." Success at this point might move the man to declare:

Dear me, kin' Miss, you is de damsel of my eye,
Where my whole joy and pleasure lie.
If I has some money I'll give you a part,
If I has no money I'll give you my heart.

According to the former slave Frank D. Banks, "on the plantation the ability to understand and answer the figurative speeches of her lover was the test of wit and culture by which the slave girl was judged in the society of the quarters." The blacks interviewed by Ferris in the 1970's felt that through a courtship formula remarkably similar to that of the slaves, "you can test a lady out to see what she is and what she stands for and who she really are."

The more religious slaves displayed their verbal skills in church. The chief medium for this was the prayer. Reduced to formulas, taught to young converts, the prayers were intoned in a musical rhythmic chant with frequent pauses for audience responses (usually moans). The power of the prayers came from their method of delivery and the vivid word pictures, fervid imagery, metaphors, and imaginative flights. The bondsman began his prayer by expressing his humility and then called on God to "come sin-killing, soul-reviving" to "the low grounds of sorrow and sin" and confront sinners and "Hammer hard on their hard rock hearts with the hammer of Jeremiah and break their hearts in ten thousand pieces." God had to come and revive his flock because

We believe that love is growing old and sin is growing bold and Zion wheel is clogged and can't roll, neither can she put on her beautiful

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garments, but we ask you to come this way, seal her with love, type her with blood and send her around the hill sides clucking to her broods and bringing live sons and daughters to the marvelous light of thy glorious gospel as the bees to the honey comb and the little doves to the window of Noah's ark, I pray thee. (Moan)

The slave's religious beliefs differed from those of his master in a number of ways. First, most black Christians believed in conjurers, and according to one observer, they talked "freely at their religious gatherings of 'tricking' and 'conjuring' and tell marvelous tales of the power of those endowed with supernatural gifts." Second, many of the death and burial customs differed from those of whites, with funerals held long after burials and graves being decorated with articles belonging to the deceased. Third, music was more important in black than white churches and had a more complicated rhythmical structure. The conversion experience was a long one and had to end with a definite sign that one had been saved. Blacks considered dreams as messages from God, signs of conversion or of being called to preach.

Among other unique features of the theology of the slave was his belief that it was no sin to steal from masters, that "no white people went to Heaven," and that faith, not acts, was all-important. In contrast to the staid services in most *white* churches, the slave's service was a blur of motion with constant shouting, clapping of hands, and stamping of feet.

Although the first slaves learned of Christianity from white missionaries, they quickly fused it with West African beliefs to create their own religion. The "frenzied shouting" frequently noted by white observers was, for example, a variant of African spirit possession. So was the ring shout, the call-and-response pattern of sermons, prayers and songs, the unrestrained joy, and predilection for total immersion. Ekwueme asserted that religion was an "area in which Africans share a common heritage with their brothers in the New World, as evidenced in the similarity of modes of worship . . . The music, dances, and occult rites associated with Voodoo have equivalents in most parts of Africa. The concomitant ecstasy and quasi-psychical entranced upliftment capturing the minds and physique of participants, achieved more through the medium of music than by any other means, have been adopted by black Christian churches in the United States to the point that they are now a *sine qua non* in religious worship for all black people."

The interpreter of black theology was the slave preacher. Since white ministers were always calling upon the slaves to obey their masters, the bondsmen naturally turned to those men who could discover a promise of their salvation and freedom in the Bible. Pos-

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sessing a memory bordering on the photographic, the black preacher created his sermon from a few details of white church services, verses read to him by whites, or, when literate, his own reading of the Bible, and a close attention to the troubles and dreams of his congregation. Delivered in a musical recitation with pauses for audience response, the antebellum sermon was a model of folk poetry unmatched in its metaphors, figures of speech, and vivid word pictures. The black preacher told his flock that as with the Israelites, God was on the side of the blacks. The historian Eugene Genovese declared that the slaves "guided by their preachers, resisted slavery's psychological assault manfully; they learned to love each other and have faith in their deliverance." In uplifting and guiding the bondsmen, the slave preacher created a style which would later be imitated in evangelical white churches and remained unchanged in its essential ingredients in most black churches in the twentieth century.

In religion, as in other aspects of their lives, the slaves left a legacy to Americans, black and white, which is still evident. However much debate there is regarding the extent of African survivals, many scholars accept the veracity of the Ashanti proverb, "Ancient things remain in the ears." Although fewer of the ancient African practices and beliefs remained in the ears of American blacks than in the ears of those in Latin America, it was the African memory which made the Afro-Americans a distinctive people. Without Africa and slavery, American folklore, speech, music, literature, cooking, and religion would be unimpressive replicas of European ones, barren and somewhat sterile. Without Africa and slavery, America would not have created spirituals, blues, jazz, or rock and roll. Nor would European immigrants in the Americas ever have escaped from the constricting tentacles of the sexual repression they inherited from the Middle Ages. In short, Africa and the slave experience are central to an understanding of the American past and present.