

Slave Dances in the Midst of African Drums

Slaves danced to rhythmic music for reasons beyond simply celebration. Exotic rhythms and extravagant dances are the foundation of the culture. African-American slaves had dances and rhythms from Africa embedded into their culture. Every other cultural element is connected with either music or dance. It was only a matter of time before uprooted slaves from Africa emulated African culture deeply rooted in their blood. Eventually African –American slaves would also have music and dance at the base of their developing culture. Music and dancing created integral parts of the life of a slave. To slaves, music went beyond a form of relaxation and beyond a means of celebration, but could be a wail of sorrow. Lyrics to a song could give signals to help slaves reach the Underground Railroad. Spiritual hymns flowed throughout the slave sermons. The beat of a drum encouraged slaves to dance and provide entertainment for their masters. Many slave practices come from the different cultural regions of West Africa. However, only certain key aspects of different West African cultures survived the middle passage and reached the Americas.

Slaves in the Americas recreated many instruments with roots found West Africa. From the drums to the banjo, the music slaves created was very unique and different from the rhythms of European based music. A rhythm is basically an idea. It cannot literally be carried over from one place to another, so it is very profound that even the rhythm of West African music had major influences on the music slaves produced. One of the instruments depicted in the “Musical Instruments of the African Negros” archive is the djembe. According to an afrodrumming website, this West African drum comes from the Maninke culture. Besides marriages, baptism, and other celebrations involving dance, it is important to note that during the sowing and plowing of harvest the Meaninke people would play the djembe. Since some slaves still plowed

and sowed once they were in America, it is no surprise that the djembe drum remained a part of the culture of most slaves who worked directly on plantations. The Malinke people created the Kora, according to the Encyclopedia Britannica. Western Africans used this string-like instrument as background for narration or to honor important people. In many part of West Africa, people passed down stories from generation to generation. Since laws prohibited most slaves from learning to read and write, slaves also passed down their histories down their lineage through stories.

In *Sunshine and Shadow of Slave life*, Williams describes how slaves created instruments directly from animals, such as the banjo or fiddle that “would compare very favorably with an ordinary violin” and with the sound of a “handsome store bought one” (Williams 1821). The banjo is basically the African-American slave version of the Kora. Besides instruments being an important part of slave life, dancing also played a major role. Dancing is a form of self-expression. Bending low to the ground at the knee is a move found in many West African dances. Also, in African culture, flexed joints symbolize energy and life. Dances in African culture took place in groups. The “ring shout,” for example, consists of a group of people getting in a large ring. Bending lower is what many West Africans took part of in ritual in order to get closer to their ancestors. Usually, dancing is associated with joy and happiness. Williams from *Sunshine and Shadow of Slave Life* writes about his excitement after finally escaping to Canada: “We danced around like children and our actions excited the attention of people around us, who, when they found the cause of our extravagant actions, did not blame or make fun of them but cheered loudly, and I joined in, clapping my hands over our new-found happiness.” Most of the time, when people dance they are celebrating. However, the life of a slave contains many instances where dancing is used for other reasons. For instance, when

masters sold slaves, potential buyers would want to see the slave's dance in order to make sure all of their joints were in order. In John Brown's narrative *Slave Life in Georgia* he mentions a similar scene: "They must answer every question, and do as they are bid, to show themselves off; dance, jump, walk, leap, squat, tumble, and twist about, that the buyer may see they have no stiff joints, or other physical defect" (Brown 1854). People called this practice "dancing the slaves". Slave holders used this practice to sell slaves for a higher price, since the ability for them to move quickly after being flogged showed that they were fit (Allen 2001).

On other occasions masters would use their slaves to entertain guests. "After dinner we were compelled to walk, and dance, and kick about in the yard, for exercise; and Bob, who had a fiddle, used to play up jigs for us to dance to. If we did not dance to his fiddle, we used to have to do so to his whip, so no wonder we used our legs handsomely, though the music was none of the best" (Brown 1854). Although with a contemporary perspective this may seem degrading. However, when considering the hard laborious task of a slave, dancing or playing an instrument for the master is a great break from harder work. In the *Sunshine and Shadow of Slave Life* narrative, Williams states that dancing "was the sunshine of slave life, and for a time we would drive dull care away and think not of its darker and gloomier shadows." Williams brings out another reason slaves would dance: "When our masters had company staying with them, they would often collect all their slaves for a general jubilee frolic. The banjo-pickers would take a prominent position and would play all their fancy jigs and liveliest tunes for the jolly dance. Little boys and girls, old men and women, as well as the maidens and youths, would take part in a grand run around, all-off-to-Georgia style, and twenty-five cents was given to the best dancer of a regular break down. It would shake up the risibles of the most solemn individual to see the double shuffle as we did it in those old slave days" (Williams 1821). The fact that masters could

be entertained by their slaves only gives evidence that they developed interest in the emerging slave culture and the traces of African culture. In Louisiana from the early to mid-19th century for instance, there was a consistent gathering of slaves ready to dance every Sunday. Eventually these gatherings became a tourist attraction. In the year 1799, a visitor to New Orleans reported that he saw slaves “dancing in large rings.” Observers of this gathering believed that each ring had a certain tribe or nationality (Donaldson 1984). The vibrant moves of slave dances and the upbeat rhythm of slave music caught many slave masters’ attention, so much so that those of European culture would attempt to emulate aspects of African culture observed through slave life. The dances that slaves brought from Africa would eventually have an influence on the overall American culture—swing dance and jazz for example.

Many slaves accepted the same Christian religion that those who enslaved them also practiced. . As soon as ships brought slaves to America, the overarching European culture challenged original aspects of their culture such as religion. The services that slaves held and those that their masters attended may have used the same bible, but the practices differed. Although Christianity can be viewed as a European influence on slaves, slaves still used African influences to change how Christian sermons proceeded. Music and dancing both also had major impacts on these differences. For example, in a European based Christian church, the sermons are very uniform and there is no extreme behavior. In an African-American religious slave gathering, there was plenty of excitement at each service. African based dances such as the “ring shout” took place. This dance started out in a ring and as the energy of the dance escalated, so did the spirits of the dancers according to the “Sweet Chariot: Story of Spirituals” article .There was also a sense of spirituality that the slaves carried over from ancestor worship in Africa. Call and response type choral music was a major part of the worship portion of a slave church service.

Slaves tended to be more free and liberated during a church service rather than chained to their chair. Through a church service slaves had the opportunity to be in an environment where they could practice small scale liberty. Slaves used this time to be free with their selves with high energy dances and singing. It seems that these sermons acted as a coping mechanism for most slaves. The messages gave those in bondage hope with stories found in the book of Exodus, and the actual services allowed slaves to scream, shout, and dance around. Eventually these aspects of African culture would influence the European Christian culture and the Pentecostal church would arise.

African-American slave spirituals had more than one meaning. Some journalists believe masters taught Christianity to slaves as an indirect extension of their control. From a Master's myopic perspective, Christianity supported the idea of obedient and obsequious slaves.

According to The Double meanings of Spirituals Journal, masters encouraged slaves to use spirituals as a means of "keeping slaves in bondage-mentally as well as physically." On the other side, slaves used spiritual to "obtain freedom". This contrasting meaning behind the slave Spirituals helped keep slave spirituals alive. If master knew what the spirituals meant to the slaves, the spirituals probably be banned instead of encouraged by masters. Many masters believed that slaves who sung spirituals worked more efficiently. The lyrics found in several slave spirituals consist of words relating to the daily mundane tasks of slave life with a dash of Christian ideals. A spiritual from Georgia titled "The Shelf Behind the Door", supports the idea that the spirituals encouraged an servant like attitude: "For Jesus wants the corners clean". Further down in the song, lines like "Lord, I wan' to be a Christian" provides evidence of the acceptance of the overarching Christian religion. However, religious song and singing stems back to West African culture. Africans also worshipped their ancestors and gods through song

(Clothier 1942). In a sense, African-American Slaves carried this part of West African culture with them to the Americas.

Music was a vital coping mechanism for slaves, for it helped them endure the hardships of slave life. William mentions in his narrative that “Music was something we colored people had in our souls. It may not have been very fine, but the heart was there and it expressed all our best emotions, pervading our being and making the nerves tingle with pleasure while the very veins pulsated in sympathy. Thank the Lord for instilling in our souls this taste for the harmonious and for making us naturally light-hearted and cheerful under so many afflictions” (Williams 1821). Through music, slaves told stories. Through music, slaves passed down history. Through dance, slaves renewed their spirits. Through dance, slaves worshiped, entertained, and expressed life. Through music and dance, slaves carried the West African culture to America and created a new African-American culture. Music, from the types of instruments that slaves used to the rhythm that they played, can easily be traced to various West African cultures. Dance in slave culture could symbolize a form of worship or simply be used for entertaining masters. African cultures wove music and dance into each slave’s life and in effect influenced the developing African-American slave culture.

Although physically chained, slaves’ maintained some liberty in choosing which aspects of African culture would become a part of African-American slave culture. The solid foundation of similar dances and music to the African culture promotes the idea that these aspects remained vital to African-American slave culture. The unique style of dance and the upbeat rhythm of music had such a strong influence that it would eventually penetrate and alter European-American culture as well. It is intriguing to think that a people who considered themselves more civilized and superior enough to enslave another people for their personal gain would be

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culturally influenced by those they considered inferior human beings. There must have been something about the dance and the music of Africa that was radically different from aspects of European cultures.

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