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Caleigh Dwyer
Denison University

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The Construction of the African Slave Identity: Defying Hegemony through Syncretic Religious Practices

Caleigh Dwyer

In the study of African-American religion and culture, there has existed a long-standing debate over the connection between traditional African cultural and religious practices and the practices of African-American slaves. The debate originated between cultural anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits and sociologist E. Franklin Frazier. Herskovits identified certain “survivals” of African culture that remained in the practices of African-American slaves, thereby proving the continued significance of native practices on the cultural production of the slaves. However, Frazier argued that the severe social conditions of slavery made it impossible for African culture to survive in America, and the practices that did survive were decontextualized and lost all cultural meaning. Most contemporary scholars acknowledge that Africanisms have had some sort of effect on African American religion and culture, and yet there remains significant ambiguity about the precise mechanisms of cultural transmission from Africa to the Americas, and even less clarity on the influence African cultural survivals had on slave resistance and rebellion. The African survivals owe their longevity to both the nature of traditional African ontology as well as the adoption of Christianity as a social tool for cultural preservation. These syncretic practices were essential in constructing a collective identity strong enough to counter hegemony and incite rebellion. Today, contemporary black churches continue to carry this cultural thread through collective action. This paper seeks to demonstrate how traditional Africa continued to exercise influence upon African American religion during slavery and upon the fashioning of a distinctive African American collective identity characterized by resistance and rebellion.

The African Past

While the proposition by white travelers that traditional Africans were lacking in religion is entirely rooted in a racist interpretation of the “Other,” there is a grain of truth to the matter. A native, pre-slavery African would not say that he or she “practices” religion; in fact, they would not say that they have a religion at all. This is because in most traditional African tribes, there existed no word for religion. Instead, for pre-enslaved Africans, “the whole ex-

istence [was] a religious phenomenon," which would not require a definable term.¹ The closest we can come to defining this phenomenon is as "African worldview," given that what we consider religion governs how Africans viewed the entirety of their existential position within the cosmos.² In traditional African tribes, there was no line between the sacred and the secular, for they believed that "man is a deeply religious being living in a religious universe".³ This African ontology, while holding God and the spirit world in a hierarchy above man, is anthropocentric. This can be explained by the traditional African understanding of time and chronology. Mbiti argues that the traditional African concept of time is two-dimensional, containing an extended past and living present. He uses the Swahili terms "Sasa" and "Zamani" to represent the relationship between African ontology and chronology.⁴ There was no word, nor any consideration, for the future and future events. Thus African ontology was anthropocentric because it defined earthly existence as the current events carried out by humans and the living memories of those humans. This "living memory" is significant as it represented the African understanding of life after death. Rather than believe in an eschaton, Africans traditionally believed that spirits continue to inhabit their earthly communities until they could no longer be recalled by name by their descendants. Thus, families and communities played an important role in ensuring the extended existence of their ancestors on earth. The intrinsic relationship between African religion and earthly existence required that all members of the community be active cultural cultivators, keeping the memory of relatives and traditions alive for generations.

Contrary to popular belief, there were several parallels that existed between African worldview and the Christian faith. For instance, the spiritual hierarchy amongst traditional Africans had many striking similarities to that of Christianity, particularly Roman Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity. At the top of this hierarchy lay a singular, omnipotent being. The attributes of God in both African and Protestant tradition were incredibly similar, with both traditions worshipping the "omnipotence, justice, omniscience, and providence of God".⁵ Beneath God were several minor deities responsible for different realms of worship. These deities were closer to saints than to the gods of polytheistic traditions like that of the ancient Romans, as they did not carry out acts themselves, but rather were intermediaries who carried the prayers of humans to the omnipotent higher god.

1 John S. Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy* (New York: Praeger, 1969), 15.

2 *Ibid.*

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*, 19.

5 Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2004), 16.

These structural similarities in ontology played an important part in the syncretism of Christianity and the African Past in the New World.

The Hegemonic Project of Slavery

It can be relatively easy to identify the coercive, physical evils of slavery. The cruelty of slavery is written into the bed of American history. One need only read accounts of brutal punishments or the legal jargon that restricted basic human rights to understand its malevolence. However, what often escapes our discourse is the hegemonic character of the institution of slavery. Hegemony is “the process by which one class exerts control of the cognitive and intellectual life of society by structural means as opposed to coercive ones”.⁶ Hegemony can first be observed in the structure of the slave trade. The intention of white slavers, as Frazier describes, was to disrupt the “social cohesion” of the slaves, which was done by separating various cultural units.⁷ Not only were mothers and fathers separated from sons and daughters, but entire communities and lingual regions were fragmented and dispersed. These structural means appeared so extensive, so final that the African slaves could have no hope for the continuation of their cultural identity. The adoption of Christianity amongst slaves appeared to be the final seal on the hegemonic project of slavery, as the Protestant church represented the central propagator of white culture, ideology, and intellect. However, a syncretic fusion of African and Protestant traditions destabilized this hegemony by proffering cultural codes contrary to the “dominant language” of white society.⁸

Parallelism, Syncretism, and Claims for Identity

Aside from the racist propagators of mythological black heritage, it has been surmised by still others such as sociologist E. Franklin Frazier that early African Americans did not generate a cohesive culture upon reaching North America as a result of the tumultuous, dehumanizing landscape of slavery. Noting that “social cohesion” was disrupted by the dissolution of familial, tribal, and linguistic associations within the slave trade, Frazier argued that African slaves took on the Christian religion of their oppressors in order to fill the absence of culture.⁹ However, traditional African culture was not something that could be disrupted by tragedy; so long as there was African existence, there was African religion, culture, and ontology. As African slaves adapted to enslaved life in order to survive, so too did

6 Hans A. Baer and Merrill Singer, *African American Religion: Varieties of Protest and Accommodation* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002), xix.

7 E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York, NY: Schocken, 1964), 11.

8 Alberto Melucci, *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 41.

9 Frazier, *The Negro Church in America*, 11.

these African survivals. Despite the efforts of evangelizing slave masters, aspects of African worldview can be found even within the adopted Christianity of the slaves. The ability of the slaves to seamlessly integrate their own traditions with that of Protestant Christians is due in part to numerous parallels between the two faiths.

There is a bounty of evidence suggesting the existence of African tradition in slave religion, beginning with the process of conversion itself. After the Great Awakening, “conversion became a heavily African-influenced merger and adaptation of the new, white conversion, behaviors, and beliefs. The influences flowed both ways and enriched the faith wherever there were large concentrations of African Americans”.¹⁰ Essential to the success of this conversion were existing parallels between African and Protestant beliefs, such as with the symbolic importance of water. Particularly, the “baptism by immersion” exhibited by the new Baptist faith represented to African slaves a “clear throwback” to the “water rituals in African traditional religion”.¹¹ Mitchell also draws parallels between Protestant “communion services” and the “ever-present African rite of pouring libation”.¹² African survivals can also be observed in the context of black spirituals and the phenomenon of spirit possession. The spirituals sung by African slaves represented a rebellious phenomenon defined by Smith as “style-switching,” in which traditional European hymns were used to cue “spirit possession... based on cultural expectations deriving from folk religion”.¹³ These rites and rituals represent the ability of the African slaves to transform the religious practices of their masters into an expression of their own traditional beliefs. Slave traditions were indeed influenced by the “white models” they embraced, but the African slaves exercised their power in choosing and adapting Protestant rites that best suited their “cultural tastes and existential needs”.¹⁴

Because of the cruel conditions of slavery, there were many that believed that slaves clung to Protestant Christianity for its promise of salvation in an other-worldly heaven. However, the Christianity of the slaves had less of an emphasis on “other-worldly” salvation and more of an emphasis on “this-worldly” salvation. “This-worldly” salvation refers to the belief that the condition of heaven can be achieved on earth. While the slaves justified this belief by looking at Old Testament stories about the liberation of the Israelites, the belief in a heaven on earth dates back to traditional African ontology. Pre-enslaved Africans did not believe in the eschaton, but rather understood life after death as the living memory of

10 Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings*, 13.

11 *Ibid.*, 14.

12 *Ibid.*

13 Smith, *Conjuring Culture*, 118.

14 Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings*, 14.

the village's heritage. Furthermore, a "this-worldly" perspective on salvation has a sense of urgency that more closely fits with the African focus on the here and now. These African survivals of the traditional worldview worked in tandem with Old Testament teachings to motivate African slaves to carve out liberation in the here and now. This focus on earthly heaven is demonstrated by slave songs such as "Steal Away to Jesus" which used codified language to reveal rebellious interests. Thus the traditional African belief in an earthly heaven motivated the slaves not to wait for post-mortem salvation, but to achieve salvation in life so as to achieve freedom in death, demonstrating the rebellious character of the African interpretation of the Bible.

The above evidence of African survivals in slave religion might be dismissed as the "by-product of culture contact throughout the Americas," but the prevalence of syncretism in African notions of Christianity reflects an incisive pattern of black reclamation.¹⁵ Stripped of names, families, and communities, the slaves were susceptible to great psychological damage when posed with the loss of what Frazier would call "social heritage".¹⁶ In order to fight against this trauma, the slaves used African survivals to reassert and preserve their identity and humanity. This process of reclaiming identity through transforming white religion is inherently rebellious as it deconstructs a white institution that was intended to bolster the slavery system. This identity was crafted through the ability of the slaves to "produce new definitions by integrating the past and the emerging elements of the present into the unity and continuity of a collective actor," thereby forming a cohesive collective identity.¹⁷ In fact, slaves solidified their ownership over the white religious institution by renaming their churches "African Methodist," "African Episcopal," and so on.¹⁸ In creating a distinction between their churches and those of the slave-owning society, the slaves produced "collective action" because they defined for themselves, autonomously, their "relationship with the environment" of the institution of slavery (Melucci 43).¹⁹ Thus the Africanization of American Christianity allowed the slaves a space to preserve cultural traditions as well as resist dehumanization through the process of identity formation.

While we can identify evidence of syncretic practices in slave religion, this does not reveal the purpose of that fusion. Why did the slaves accept any form of Christianity, even one which was fused with African tradition? This notion is especially problematic when considering that pre-enslaved Africans did not have

15 Smith, *Conjuring Culture*, 118.

16 Frazier, *The Negro Church in America*, 9.

17 Melucci, *Challenging Codes*, 49.

18 Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc. 1972), 26.

19 Melucci, *Challenging Codes*, 43.

a tradition of formally organized religious structures. To answer this question, we must first acknowledge a distinction between “religion” and “belief.” The beliefs that the African slaves held represented the thread of culture connecting them to their heritage. The formal structure of slave religion in America was the social tool used to protect and prolong those beliefs that constituted African culture. Because of the hegemonic character of slavery, Christianity was the ideal tool for collective identification and formal organization amongst the slaves, and represents a deliberate strategy for resistance rather than a passive acquisition. Thus the slaves took on the framework of the Christian church as a vehicle for their identity production in order to shield their culture and blossoming collective action from the caustic forces of hegemony.

Crucial to the construction of collective identity is a “network of active relationships between the actors, who interact, communicate, influence each other, negotiate, and make decisions”.²⁰ In Africa, this “network” was delimited by the social bounds of a village.²¹ Under the slave trade, this “network” was disrupted by the fragmentation of native social groupings.²² The Protestant church, with its “forms of organizations and models of leadership, communicative channels, and technologies of communication,” was an apt substitute for the social framework of the African village.²³ One example of the substitutive nature of the church’s framework was in its primary “[technology] of communication”.²⁴ African slaves “used Bible wisdom selectively” as a structural substitute for the oral communication of “holy wisdom” in Africa.²⁵ As the institution of slavery quickly necessitated the adoption of the English language, the inevitable diminution of African tongues in America might have otherwise disrupted the passage of “holy wisdom” if not for the deliberate selection of parallel Bible parables.²⁶ Even though the slaves lost a piece of their cultural heritage in losing their native tongues, they were able to craft a new collective identity by defining collective action “within a language that is shared by a portion... of a society” and by preserving “a given set of rituals, practices, and cultural artifacts”.²⁷ Thus the unification of the African tongue through the vehicle of Christianity allowed for the communication of various “cognitive definitions” that preserved, rather than diminished, African culture.²⁸

20 Melucci, *Challenging Codes*, 45.

21 *Ibid.*

22 *Ibid.*

23 *Ibid.*

24 *Ibid.*

25 Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings*, 31.

26 *Ibid.*

27 Melucci, *Challenging Codes*, 44.

28 *Ibid.*

The new collective identity of African slaves set the stage for resistance as it defined “the capacity for autonomous action, a differentiation of the actor from others while continuing to be itself”.²⁹ Living under an institution that was built on their own dehumanization, the slaves entered a “conflict to affirm the identity that their opponent has denied them, to reappropriate something that belongs to them because they are able to recognize it as their own”.³⁰ Thus the very act of claiming identity, through naming white churches as their own and fashioning white traditions to their own cultural tastes, stood as firm opposition to the hegemonic project of slavery.

Collective Action

With the seeds of resistance planted in the pews of the African church, African slaves were well prepared to take up formal collective action. As Wilmore notes, “successful insurrections do not occur without planning and organization,” and so the slave church had become the war room, as Sunday was the only day in which slaves could find some leisure time to gather with peers from nearby plantations away from the eye of the white public.³¹ In claiming this white institution as African, slaves had become privy to a print capitalism of their own which allowed for the dissemination of information regarding insurrections and resistance. One example of this African-American print capitalism and its relationship to both the preservation of African culture and slave resistance was the 1829 pamphlet entitled “The Ethiopian Manifesto, Issued in Defense of the Blackman’s Rights, in the Scale of Universal Freedom”.³² The pamphlet, written by Robert Alexander Young of New York, exhibited “a deep-lying African spirituality, an almost God-madness, a latent enthusiasm for dream interpretation and prophecy” which Young relates to the license of Black preachers to become “oracles of retribution for the white man and resurrection and vindication for Black”.³³ The pamphlet, with its claim as “Ethiopian,” reveals the conjunction of African tradition and the Bible in calls for black “militancy”.³⁴ Wilmore notes that Young’s pamphlet is “one of the earliest expressions of militant Pan-Africanism,” which, though nascent in its development as a movement, demonstrates the breadth and strength of the African identity by the mid-nineteenth century.³⁵ The evidence of slaves reading resistant pamphlets published in Sierra Leone

29 Ibid., 47.

30 Ibid., 48.

31 Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 46.

32 Ibid., 50.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., 51.

35 Ibid.

demonstrates that, by 1792, a “rebellious Black religion had already begun to be communicated back and forth across the Atlantic”.³⁶

With a discourse of resistance conceived by the construction of the African slave identity, the slaves were at last prepared to engage in collective action against their oppressors. African survivals continued to play an important role in slave insurrections as they were used to bolster the psychological disposition of dissenters before entering the fray. There are countless accounts of these pre-battle rituals, including that of the 1712 insurrection in New York City. Recent arrivals from the Carmantee and Pappa tribes of West Africa enlisted the “aid of a conjurer” who had made them “invulnerable”.³⁷ In keeping with African custom, the rebels had “sucked the blood of each other’s hands as a bond and pledge of secrecy”.³⁸ It should be noted that the ranks of these rebels included several “Black Roman Catholics,” revealing that “some volatile combination of Christianity and African religion was one of the precipitants of the revolt”.³⁹ In South Carolina, another “volatile combination of Christianity and African religion” came about in the form of an insurrection led by Denmark Vesey and his comrade Gullah Jack in 1822.⁴⁰ While Vesey found his justification for insurrection in his African interpretation of the Bible, Jack was “a native African sorcerer who had the reputation of being invulnerable”.⁴¹ Jack rallied his co-conspirators by instructing them to “eat nothing but parched corn and ground nuts on the fateful day and to keep a piece of crab claw in their mouths as a protection against harm”.⁴² Thus the amalgam of African traditions and a reappropriated Christian church not only laid the crucial groundwork for revolution but provided slaves with the necessary encouragement to take arms for their freedom.

Contemporary Collective Action Frames

Just as the cultural identity of African American slaves cannot be severed from its African roots, so must the syncretic religious practices of the slaves be integrated into the fabric of contemporary black resistance theory. In describing the Reverend Wright controversy of President Obama’s 2008 election, Jackson defines the “culturally specific space of the Black Church” as the “setting for challenging moral hypocrisy in an oppressive society” as well as a “context for movement

36 *Ibid.*, 80.

37 *Ibid.*, 65.

38 *Ibid.*, 66.

39 *Ibid.*

40 *Ibid.*

41 *Ibid.*, 66-82.

42 *Ibid.*, 82.

organizing and racial unity."⁴³ Black churches have continued to function as a tool for collective action and organizing since their emergence in slave communities. During the Civil Rights Movement, figures like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. were well known for disseminating information and mobilizing communities from the pulpit, not so differently from the likes of Denmark Vesey and other slave liberators. In America, the Black Church has always stood as a "counterhegemonic site of active resistance against the dominant cultural codes of American inclusiveness."⁴⁴ Thus contemporary black resistance theory must reevaluate African culture and traditions not only as a link to the past but as inspiration for contemporary political work and transformation.

Reframing the Cultural Narrative

Though there were many that described Africa as lacking in culture and religion and even some scholars that regarded the survival of African tradition impossible within the slavery system, there are many striking examples of the resilience of African survivals in slave religion. Perhaps most striking is the correlation between these African survivals and patterns of resistance. While it is true that the practices of African worldview did not survive in the same form that they existed in Africa, these beliefs were preserved from generation to generation through a syncretic fusion and transformation of white religion. The fact that African slaves could so entirely and effectively transform a centuries-old, white-dominated institution such as Christianity demonstrates both a spirit of resistance as well as an ability to assert ownership and collective identity. African survivals also encouraged active rebellion in the form of escape in that the traditional African understanding of the afterlife denotes the possibility of heaven on earth. Here too is an example of the proficiency of syncretism in producing black resistance. Through the reclamation of black identity produced by syncretic religious practices, the slaves created a space for collective action that was crucial to undermining both the hegemonic and coercive aspects of slavery. In utilizing the Protestant church as a framework for collective organization, the slaves were able to produce palpable forms of resistance, such as print capitalism and formal insurrections. Thus the syncretic religious practices of the slaves transformed the white Protestant church institution into a vehicle for the formation of the African-American collective identity, thereby initiating the physical and ideological deconstruction of white hegemony in the United States. The powerful role African survivals have played in Black liberation

43 John L. Jackson, "Obama, Black Religion, and the Reverend Wright Controversy." *The Obama Phenomenon: Toward a Multiracial Democracy* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 165-77.

44 *Ibid.*, 170.

calls for a reframing of the historical narrative regarding slave culture in the United States, as well as the significance of religion in social movement contexts. The resilience of African worldview reveals a cultural narrative that is adaptive, rather than episodic, and that has survived through deliberate acts of resistance rather than coincidence.

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