

## NATIVE AFRICAN ARTS & CULTURES IN THE NEW WORLD; A CASE STUDY OF AFRICAN RETENTIONS IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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**ABSTRACT** Despite the different languages, and cultures in Africa, there is commonality in religious artistic and musical traditions.

Did the native Africans sold into slavery retain any of the traditions in the “New World” in general and in the United States of America in particular?

There is considerable retention in the Latin American countries, because the slaves had many more rights in South America than in the United States.

Consequently, the African slaves in the United States of America gradually lost contact with his past. However, there are certain church rituals and some aspects of the black American music which have been identified as cultural carry-overs in the United States.

**Key Words:** Africa; Slaves; Carryover/Retention; America; Negritude.

Africa is a continent of diverse and rich cultures. According to Beinart (1965: 1-5), Africa is said to have 800 languages and 2,000 tribal divisions. Despite this large number of different cultures now variously grouped into new nations as a result of colonization, some forms of unity in diversity appear to be common to all or most of the indigenous cultures. Beier (1968: 165) stated that “cultures as diverse as say, the Dogon of Mali, the Yoruba of Nigeria and the Zulu of South Africa had certain elements in common which were African and which distinguished them from cultures in other parts of the world”.

Although there are hundred of thousands of shrines, Gods and Goddesses worshipped from Tunis in North Africa to Durban in the South, from Mogadishu in the East to Dakar in the West, for example, what appears to be common to all in religion are the animistic and polytheistic approaches, the accompaniment of music and dance, and the possession and prophecy inherent in the total involvement of the worship.

Apart from using them for religious practices, music and dance appear to be the soul of life in all of black Africa. Prominent among occasions where music and dance are inseparably present include marriage ceremonies, naming ceremonies, funeral ceremonies and recreational activities. To the farmer, the trader, the worker and the craftsman, music and dance are the energizers of the will power and the ameliorators of stress and strain. In addition to the use of music and dance as the basis of musical unity in traditional African cultures, there is the use of unsophisticated equipment common to all. In most cases, the musical instruments are not just instrument of music, but art pieces in themselves.

If there is anything that speaks for the unity of African traditions, perhaps, it is art far more than anything else. Art in traditional Africa finds expression in tools, utensils, images, dresses and every usable material available to man. To distinguish an authentic African art from western art, Sweeney (1935: 21) said:

It is the vitality of the forms of Negro art that speak to us, the simplification without impoverishment, the unerring emphasis on the essentials, the consistent three-dimensional organization of structural planes in architectonic sequences, the uncompromising truth to material with a seemingly intuitive adaptation of it, and the tension achieved between the idea or emotion expressed through representation and the abstract principles of structure. The art of Negro Africa is a sculptor's art. As a sculptural tradition in the last century it has had no rival.

Did the native Africans who were sold into slavery retain any of the traditions in the United States of America? How much of the African traditions were carried over the Atlantic ocean to the new world and how much of them still survive? In addition to finding answers to these questions this article will also examine what the psychologists refer to as "motor habits" that are said to have been retained by the people of African descent in the U.S.. Africanism in the lives of black Americans will be traced to religious, artistic and secular aspects.

There is no doubt that when the slaves first arrived in the new world, they were Africans in their thoughts, modes of behavior, custom, attitudes and desires until the restrictive measures imposed on them started to change their African ways of life. Several studies have shown that there is more considerable retention among the Latin American Blacks than among the Blacks in the United States. The reason for this might be that in Latin America, the slaves were said to have received more humane treatment than in North America. For instance, in Brazil:

The slave had many more rights than in the United States: he could legally marry, he could, indeed had to be baptized and become a member of the Catholic Church, his family could not be broken up for sale, and he had many days on which he could either rest or earn money to buy his freedom. The government encouraged manumission, and the freedom of infants could often be purchased for a small sum at the baptismal front. In short, the Brazil slave knew he was a man, and that he differed in degree, not in kind, from his master (Glazer, 1963: IX-XII).

In contrast, the situation in the United States of America was as follows:

The slave was totally removed from the protection of organized society; his existence as a human being was given no recognition by any religious or secular agency; he was totally ignorant of and completely cut off from his past, and he was offered absolutely no hope for the future. His children could be sold, his marriage was not recognised, his wife could be violated or sold and he could also be subject, without redress to frightful barbarities—there were presumably as many sadists among slave owners, men and women as there were in other groups. The slave could not, by law, be taught to read or write; he could not practice any religion without the permission of his master and could never meet with his fellows, for religious or any other purposes, except in the presence of a white; and finally, if a master wished to free him, every legal obstacle was used to thwart such action. This was not what slavery meant in the ancient world,

in medieval and early modern Europe or in Brazil and the West Indies (Glazer, 1963: IX-XII).

As a result of the strict control of his thought and behavior, the African slave gradually lost contact with his past. His cultural heritage either faded away with the passage of time or was absorbed as the early morning dew is vaporized by the heat of the sun. But it remains to be seen whether the African traditions suffered a total extinction in the face of an unaccommodating environment or rejuvenated in the forms of new traditions with seemingly African traits and Western impact.

Should it be a surprise if real African traditions are said to be in abeyance in America? If, according to Bennett Jr. (1962: 26), "religion to the African, was life; and every event was suffused with religious significance," then disallowing the African slave to practice his religion probably meant a dislocation of the link between his life and death, the tainting of the source of his life expression. As a result, he was forced to abandon his Gods and ancestors, and to practice a religion entirely different from his own. Thus, his religious beliefs and practices were replaced by those of the Christian faith.

While the rites and sanctity of the African religious traditions persisted to a great extent in places as Haiti, Bahia, Cuba and Brazil, there was no clear evidence of such African retentions in the United States. In Bahia, for example, the Egungun (fertility cult of the Yorubas in Nigeria) exist. The Oshun Goddess in Nigeria representing River Oshun also has its counterpart in Bahia. The black and white stool of Ashanti culture in Ghana are also present in Guiana where the stool, though not blackened, is retained by the community head in memory of the dead.

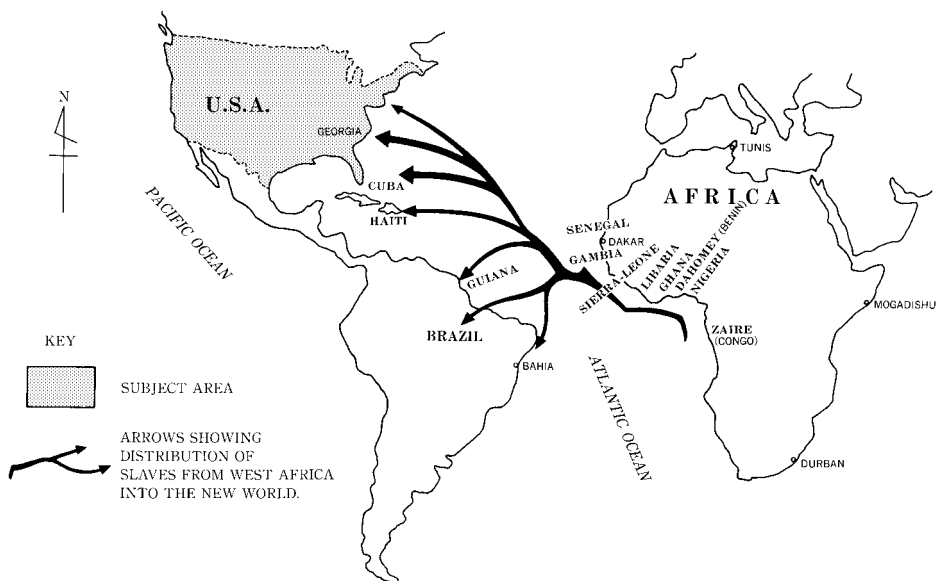


Fig. 1. Distribution of Slaves from West Africa into the New World.

There are, however, African modes frequently cited by experts in support of the claim that African religious practice survive in North America. Very often (Roucek and Kierman, 1970: 150). "Hand-clapping, foot-stamping, the confession and conversion, the jumping and leaping that characterize many church rituals" are cited as carry-overs from Africa to the new World.

Perhaps, the most significant elements of the African religion are to be found not in the confession and conversion as Roucek and Kierman put it, for, these are common citations in the Holy Bible and could not be of African origin. The most likely African elements are in the shouting and ecstasy that are common in the religious worships in some Black American churches. There can be no doubt that they are "carry-over" of the spirit possession in the religion of the Guinea coast of West Africa. A case in point about this kind of relationship with the forces of the under world is to be found in the worship of Esango (Shango) of the Yoruba and Olokun Cults of Benin in the old Western Region of Nigeria.

In West Africa, the spirit possession follows an intensified music and dance climaxed by invocation and prophecy (mostly of calamities) and prescription of sacrifices to overturn the dangers. In Benin, for instance, the possessed is heard shouting, "He-e-e—yo-o", a response to the call of the God, placing herself above mortals and speaking directly to the audience as if she is an agent of the God.

In black American churches, many of which are in the south and where possession is part of church rituals, one sees the same excitement giving cause to the trance. Songs of praise or words as "Hal-le-lo, Hal-le-lu-iah" are frequently heard amidst the frenzied music that fills the air, an evidence of a mixture of Christian form of worship with the traditional African form.

However, it is important to realise that this mixture stops short of the more obvious African religious retentions in places like Bahia where a particular kind of music known as "Candomble music" is dedicated to the worship of Exu (Esu). Names of African gods are also used to designate Catholic saints including Christ: Ogum ("Ogun", an African god of war) represents St. Anthony, Oxossi (the god of hunting) represents St George, while Oxala represents Jesus. The Candomble as well as Oxossi music is a possession music played in order to be possessed by the deities and be able to communicate with them.

Herskovits (1966: 21) said:

The phenomenon of possession is ubiquitous in West Africa, if not in all African religion.... In Bahia and at times in Trinidad, a person coming out of possession goes through a transitional stage wherein he is a state of 'ere.' That is, he does not at once recover his "self." The deity is envisaged as having withdrawn from 'his head' but is replaced by that attribute of the god which is his messenger....

One of the most controversial aspects of the African retentions is that which concerns black American music generally. How far is black music a product of African tradition? Although experts agree that elements of African music cannot be denied in the world-leading black American music today, yet they sharply disagree about the extent of the African impact. One argument is that black American music as we know it today has little or no bearing with the traditional African music. The instru-

ments are at variance with one another and where the artist is separated from the audience in America, they are generally inseparable in Africa. Another argument is that there is great disparity between the African and the black American rhythms and that the philosophical songs (emanating from the principle of indirection) of African artist have no place in black American music.

But there are some experts who hold a positive view include Riley (1972: 134-139), "Black (American) music is the artistic register of Black (African) orality."

Before being taken to the New World, the Afro-American was in a culture in which the oral or spoken tradition was not merely a basic utilization but an honour. The traditional storyteller was a dignified individual accorded a socio-political status second only to those of the ruling class. This was the case because the society did not have devoid of the written literature as in the western world.

Perhaps, this is why Riley (1972: 134-139) said:

the Blues merely extended into America a methodology for maintaining an oral history of what a people were doing, had done, hoped to do... The first Blues-men were indeed, tribal storytellers, keepers of a certain flame, bearers of records.

Is it not true that the black American music today has its beginning in the days of plantation slavery? Like a labourer on the field in black Africa, the slave resorted to singing so as to think less of the burden of the workload and seek refuge in consolatory notes. The blues had begun! It started with the Negro spirituals and today it has gone through many phases, namely, the country blues, the urban blues, the jazz, the ragtime, the reggae, the soul, and now the syncretised music.

As if to clear any doubt about the origin of the blues, Jones (1970: 87-88) said, "The immediate predecessors of Blues were the Afro/American Negro work songs, which had their musical origins in West Africa." "The religious music of the Negro also originates from the same African Music."

What we have among the black American artists today is a complex of musical prowess second to none in the world. It is by far superior to the traditional African music. In spite of the complexity and in addition to having its beginning from the heirs of native Africans, the black American music owes its modes of dancing and its rhythmic complexity to Africa. "Before the coming of the white man, music and rhythm were everyday things in Africa," wrote Bennett (1962: 87):

Music was everywhere and it was grounded into two techniques, which survived, in the New World: polyrhythmic percussive technique and the call-and-response pattern (leader and chorus alternating). The poetry of tom-toms, the symphonies of synchronized bodies: these ebbed and flowed with the rhythm of life. Men and women danced because dancing had a social and religious meaning.

This dancing, reminiscent of black American dance today, involves the shaking of the head, movement of the hands and legs, and twisting of all parts of the body culminating in a unity of the body, the mind and the soul.

Michael Jackson, before he was twenty years of age, captured the world of music and dance. Not only in the Americas, but also in the entire world, Michael Jackson

occupied the pinnacle of musical glory to the admiration of the black race.

In the field of visual art, nothing seems to be an obvious African trait in black American art today. This is further strengthened by the fact that contemporary art all over the Western world bears significant shift from their original traditions to what has traditionally been African. The surrealism and realism of the Western world have given way to subjectivism—the traditional African approach. And this leads us to a number of questions. What role did the early African descendants play in the field of art on the American shores when realism was the order of the day? Did they abandon their original traditions and embrace the western aesthetics or did they remain neutral?

The fact that the slaves were prevented from practicing their religion which was the major source of their artistic inspirations points to the idea that African art traditions must have suffered an obliteration until probably the turn of the 20th century when African art, along with other non-Western arts, became the nucleus of modern art. A table prepared by Herskovits (1966) in “The New World Negro” supports the claim that of all the African retentions in the United State, art is one of the least traceable, if not totally absent. According to the table, music and magic claim the highest rate of the degree of retentions in the United States while social organization and religion appear “somewhat African.”

The table shows that variations of Africanism stretches from the point of greatest intensity in places like Guiana, Haiti, Brazil and Cuba to almost conformity with Western traditions in place like Mexico, Colombia and the United States.

According to Reuter (1958: 4), the idea of African retentions in the New World should be rejected “in the course of capture, importation, and enslavement, they (the slaves) lost every vestige of the African culture.” Yet, not all experts disregard African retentions in the United States. Thompson (1969: 163) wrote: “Contrary to general opinion, important Afro-American and Afro-influenced art exists in the United States.”

Robert Thompson is one of the few authorologists who have done intensive researches on African retentions in the New World. In a series of lectures delivered on the 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> of May, 1972, at the University of Washington, Seattle, he asserted that there were examples of Luba sculptures from Congo-Kinshasa (Zaire) with blue beads positioned in the eyes to indicate the pupils in Georgia. He also stressed the link between the Kente cloth of Ashanti Culture in Ghana and the American print fabric with an identical motif in design and colour.

While no one doubts the authenticity of the presence of Africanism in visual art in America, it is preposterous to suggest that African cloth designs are among the “carry-overs” in the United States. Could it be true that the cloth was printed by an Afro-American? Even if it was, could it not have been a result of the re-newed focus on African traditions dating back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century?

An apparent example of what might be called an African retention in the United States was in New York, where Benin designs and bronze figures inspired fabric designs of a Bedford-Stuyvesant fabric firm.

In 1972, two textile designers, Jesus Amaro and Ainslye Smalls used the “Festac” mask, banana leaf, leopard, fish and cock commonly found in Benin art works for fabric design and ran off fabric for Bedford-stuyvesant (DWBS) in Brooklyn, New

**Table 1.** Scale of Intensity of New World Africanisms.  
(Only the greatest degree of retention is indicated for each group)

	Tech- nology	Economic	Social Organization	Non-Kinship Institutions	Reli- gion	Magic	Art	Folk- lore	Music	Lan- guage
Guiana (bush)	b	b	a	a	a	a	b	a	a	b
Guiana (paramaribo)	c	c	b	c	a	a	e	a	a	c
Haiti (peasant)	c	b	b	c	a	a	d	a	a	c
Haiti (urban)	e	d	c	c	b	b	e	a	a	c
Brazil (bahai-recife)	d	d	b	d	a	a	b	a	a	a
Brazil (porto alegre)	a	a	c	d	a	a	e	a	a	c
Brazil (maranhao-rural)	c	c	b	e	c	b	e	b	b	d
Brazil (maranhao-urban)	e	d	c	e	a	b	e	d	a	b
Cuba	e	d	c	b	a	a	b	b	a	a
Jamaica (maroons)	c	c	b	b	b	a	e	a	a	c
Jamaica (morant bay)	e	c	b	b	a	a	e	a	a	a
Jamaica (general)	e	c	d	d	b	b	e	a	a	c
Honduras (black caribs)**	c	c	b	b	b	a	e	b	c	e
Trinidad (port of spain)	e	d	c	b	a	a	e	b	a	e
Trinidad (toco)	e	d	c	c	c	b	e	b	b	d
Mexico (guerrero)	d	e	b	b	c	b	e	b	?	e
Colombia (choco)	d	d	c	c	c	b	e	b	e	e
Virgin islands	e	d	c	d	e	b	e	b	b	d
U.S. (gullah islands)	c	c	c	d	c	b	e	a	b	b
U.S. (rural south)	d	e	c	d	c	b	e	b	b	e
U.S. (urban north)	e	e	c	d	c	b	e	d	b	e

a: very African, b: quite African, c: somewhat African, d: a little African, e: trace of African customs or absent, ?: no report.

\*\* Carib Indian influences are strong in this culture.

York. The firm started turning out printed fabric which were not only making money but which offered a beginning lesson in African Cultural history.

Who knows if the, “cultural history” will not, in future include the mention that the designs are retentions of Benin art in the United State? Here, I feel strongly that a distinction should be made between what was actually retained by the slave from what modern contacts with and focus on Africa suggest, or a spontaneous development from a diffussionist development.

The above is not meant to imply that Thompson (1969) has not done much to bring to light the subject under discussion. After all, he detailed African retentions in visual arts in such places as Livingston County, Missouri, South Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi, and Fayetteville-New York, where he did not only talk about retentions in pottery, sculpture, jewelry, basketry and funeral rites, traced the histories of individuals who helped to sustain the continuities of the traditions.

Another form of visual art that is frequently mentioned as carry-over is hair plaiting. Thompson in his lecture on the 25<sup>th</sup> of May, 1972 at the University of Washington, showed slides of hair dressing comparable to West African’s.

Herskovits (1970: 8) an outstanding anthropologist found the hair of some Negro women, particularly of small Negro girls, quite distinctive. These “modes of hair dressing,” he emphasized were “ubiquitous in West Africa.” It is the opinion of Herskovits that Afro-American hair dressing is a bona fide African retention.

The African survivals in motor habits present another controversial debate on the subject. Among a number of habits that are regarded as African survival and which



Herskovits detailed in his article are the habits of carrying burdens on the head, the use of mortar and pestle for husking rice in Broughton Island, the wearing of headkerchiefs in the United States, the turning of the head when laughing (regarded as an African etiquette), and the oblique reference in the “song of allusion” – an instance of the principle of indirection in West Africa. Others include family structure in Maco County, Georgia, the attitude of co-operative labor among the Afro-Americans particularly in the South, and open-air markets.

No attempt is being made here to discredit the validity of the so-called motor habits. But suffice it to rejoin that some of the facts are either being exaggerated or not enough facts have been stated to convince people beyond reasonable doubt on the subject. It could be ideal if distinction could be drawn between the Afro-American motor habits and those of the white’s. Such instances of turning the head when laughing and the wearing of headkerchiefs look more universal than survivals of African motor habits. In the open-air markets, one needs to visit the pike market in downtown Seattle to understand that it is not uniquely African. The fact that it is the general way of marketing in Africa today does not mean that Americans did not do the same at one time or another.

One of the most important African survivals in the United State is speech or language habit. Along the Coast of South Carolina and Georgia, both on the island and the mainland, there are isolated communities of Afro-Americans who cultivate rice, cotton and indigo. These people speak a dialect of English that has been so strongly influenced by the languages of African ancestors that it is not easily understood by other Americans. The language is called Gullah. According to Malmstrom and Ashley (1963: 46) “English words of Gullah origin include bango, goober, peanut, cooter turtle, juke, hoodoo (to bring bad luck to some one) and voodoo (magic).”

An interesting discussion of the African language survivals in the United States is the one given by Herman and Marguerite S. Herman (1974: 88) in “A Manual of American Dialects for Radio.” They likened the rhythmic quality in Afro-American song to the rhythmic quality in his speech. “The wide range of pitch can be easily observed in the treatment of ‘Ah KA: in doo dA: it’ (I can’t do that) which may be spoken with the following lilt:”

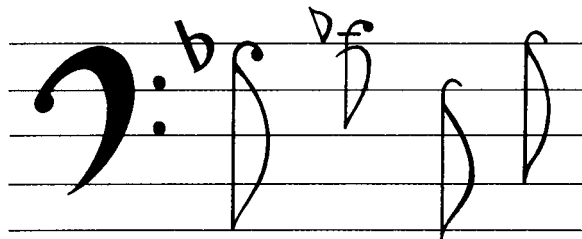


Fig. 2.

Another striking example is the Afro-American accent and English which, though not African, must have been influenced by the original African languages spoken by their ancestor. This fact is further strengthened by what Dillard (1972) said in a T.V. interview: “The history of black English could be traced to West Africa.” (Dillard wrote a book titled, “Black English.”)



## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it must be said that African survivals do exist in the United States, although far more are to be found in West Indies, and Latin American countries. The problem, however, is that many authors see the survivals far beyond the scope of reasonable justifications. Many do not seem to concede the influence of environment as a factor. Apart from music, all other forms of African survivals seem to be the product of two opposing forces. Even the music cannot be truly said to be without Western impact. Besides, the focus on Africa all over the States (particularly the renewed socio-political and cultural alignments between the blacks in the new and “old” worlds) has developed to the point that bona fide African retentions are sometimes confused with the 20<sup>th</sup> century Afro-American rediscovery of their lost culture. A case in point about this kind of alignment is the decision of the American Black athletes in the 20<sup>th</sup> Olympic Games in Munich, Germany, when they decided to walk out of the games along with their African “Brothers” and “Sisters” if the Rhodesian team was allowed to participate. More and more, in modern times, the Afro-American blacks are identifying themselves with African cultures and traditions. Many of them have traced their roots back to Africa.

Perhaps what seem to be the guiding forces in this renewed identity are the principles of negritude which seem to be very popular among the American blacks. (Compare the slogan by James Brown, “I am black and proud” to what J.K. Aggrey of Ghana said in 1919: “Let Africans be proud of their colour, who ever is not proud of his colour is not fit to live.”)

It is true to say that some elements of African traditions as music, language, dance, religion and art survive in the United States. But it must be realized according to Herskovits (1968: 109) that “the culture of the Negro American has been formed by his experience in the American environment and his participation in the making of American culture itself.”

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