

Received: 19/01/2020

Accepted: 25/10/2020

Published: 03/11/2020.

Reviving the Past: Memories of African Slaves' Culture in America

إعادة إحياء الماضي: ذكريات من ثقافة العبيد الأفارقة في أمريكا

Saadia Ouldyaerou¹, Faiza Senouci Meberbeche²

¹University of Mustapha Stambouli Mascara (Algeria),

sadia.ouldyaerou@univ-mascara.dz

²University of Abou Bekr Belkaid Tlemcen (Algeria),

senoucif@hotmail.fr

Abstract:

Adopting the qualitative approach, mainly exploring and describing some aspects of the African culture as case study, this work aims to accentuate the extent to which the remnants of Blacks' cultural heritage in America have been preserved. Indeed, Blacks would never be Americans if they were not one day unwillingly shipped to America from Africa as slaves. From 1619, they endured a new life laden with too much drudgery without one iota of opportunity to get their freedom whatsoever. It was not until the end of the American Civil War (1861-1865) that slavery became permanently illicit and equal rights of citizenship were guaranteed after the adoption of the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth constitutional Amendments in 1865, 1868, and 1870 respectively. The results show that Blacks neither got rid of their culture nor retained it completely; they tried to adjust themselves to the new status quo, creating a new African Culture.

Keywords: African Culture; American Citizens; Blacks; Cultural Heritage; Slaves

المخلص:

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى إبراز المدى الذي استطاع فيه الأفارقة في أمريكا الحفاظ على تراثهم الثقافي و ذلك من خلال الاعتماد على المنهج النوعي، و بشكل خاص استكشاف ووصف بعض مظاهر الثقافة الإفريقية. في الواقع، لم يكن الأفارقة ليصبحوا مواطنين بأمريكا لو لم يجبروا يوما على الانتقال إلى هناك كرقيق. فمذ 1619 تحملوا حياة جديدة و ظروف معيشية قاسية بأمريكا ولم يكن مسموح لهم بتاتا بطلب الحرية.

استمر الوضع على حاله حتى 1865 حيث نتج عن انتهاء الحرب الأهلية الأمريكية حظر العبودية في أمريكا و ضمان الحقوق المدنية دون تمييز عنصري و ذلك بعد الاعتماد على التعديلات الدستورية الثالثة عشرة، سنة 1865 ; الرابعة عشرة، سنة 1868 ; و الخامسة عشرة، سنة 1870. و قد أسفرت نتائج هذه الدراسة أن الأفارقة لم يتخلوا عن ثقافتهم في أمريكا و لكن لم يحتفظوا بها كليا ; و إنما حاولوا التكيف مع الوضع الذي كان مرده خلق ثقافة جديدة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أمريكا; ثقافة الأفارقة; رقيق ; العبودية ; مظاهر الثقافة الإفريقية

Corresponding author: Full name, e-mail: authorC@mail.com.

1.INTRODUCTION:

The emergence of America as a New World in 1492 had its own negative implications on the Africans whose relations with their homeland were torn up. Being unwillingly transported to America, Blacks were supposed to perform and bear the intensive plantation work on the behalf of the new European settlers. 1619 noticed the arrival of the first Blacks as slaves on the American shore. Coerced to adapt with a rigid regime,

Blacks were deprived of nearly all their basic civil rights and forced to succumb to their landowners' control. Europeans, indeed, considered the Africans as the most luxurious and sought after laborers as confirmed by Klein, "[Blacks deemed to be] kinless and totally mobile laborers"¹. It was not until the end of the American Civil War (1861-1865) that a wave of change swept the American land when slavery became permanently illicit and equal rights of citizenship were guaranteed after the adoption of the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth constitutional Amendments in 1865, 1868, and 1870 respectively. Years later, the Civil Rights Movement in the twentieth century could change the freed Blacks' status, so they became fully American citizens, mainly after the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965.

Subsequently, sociologists and anthropologists like the Americans E. Franklin Frazier and Melville J. Herskovits questioned the retention of the African culture in America. They argued over the ability of the Africans to preserve their culture from the moment they came as slaves to the instant their descendents became fully American citizens. Frazier believes that the vehement desire of the Europeans to enslave the Africans for a long time and to make great profits wiped out the slaves' culture. According to him "Black culture" is imitative of, results from, or reacts to "white culture"². However, Herskovits contrasts this view by insisting upon the survival of the African heritage and its importance in understanding the African American culture³. In his work *the Myth of the Negro Past*, Herskovits strives to eradicate the myth that the African Diaspora's remnants are without a cultural past, and that the Negro man is faceless, and was just selected from a "poorer stock with childlikeness characteristics"⁴

Advocates of Herskovits' view were Lorenzo Turner, and John Blassingame whose works *The Gullah Dialect* in 1949, and *The Slave Community: Plantation life in the Antebellum South* in 1979 respectively, assert the presence of African Culture's features in the European and American ones. They confirm that the slaves' cultural heritages did not fell prey to the Europeans' desire to pull them down; rather they contributed to shape the New World culture⁵.

On the other side of the fence, appeared the supporters of Frazier's point of view like the sociologists Gunnar Myrdal and Patrick Moynihan who endorse the idea that the thread between the African American cultural heritages and Africa was totally smashed⁶.

On the premise of what have been said, hence, the present work endeavors to ponder over the debate more scrupulously by exploring and describing some of the features of the African slaves' culture, including language, religion, music, dancing forms, folklore, folk medicine and cuisine. Accordingly, the kernel of this paper is to answer the following question:

- To which extent is the African culture retained in America?

1. African Culture in American Motion Picture:

Movies like *12 Years Slave* (2013) and *the Help* (2011) along with series such as *Roots* (2016) and *the Underground* (2016) did not only expose America to its darkest historical part, but also enhanced to enrich aspects of slaves' culture. Given the fact that the motion picture plays a crystal role in discussing matters through its different cinematographic techniques, Hollywood had for years eschewed from depicting the harsh reality of slavery, revealing what is believed to satisfy the whites 'needs only⁷. Blacks were not even allowed to join the industry and once represented; it was thanks to the blackface technique of

coloring a white man to perform a character of a black one. Most of the roles assigned to Blacks were of servants and maids, creating more racial stereotypes as asserted in the New York Times, “Through most of the 20th century, images of African-Americans in advertising were mainly limited to servants like the pancake-mammy Aunt Jemima and Rastus, the chef on the Cream of Wheat box.”⁸

Yet, with the release of the *Roots* series (1977) that later was remade in 2016, viewers could have an in-depth idea about slavery itself and Blacks whose adherence to their culture was revealed the moment its protagonist Kunta Kinta refused to accept the new name given to him by his master though he was brutally punished.

2. African Slaves’ Languages:

Caught by the zeitgeist of the fifteenth century; the European powers like Spain, Britain and Portugal enjoyed transporting as much as possible black human cargoes to provide labor not only in Europe, but also in the Americas. Reluctantly, the Africans were forced to leave their homeland and their dearest families. Thus, family separation was a constant intimidating threat under which the Africans were compelled to live. Even when they reached the New World, they would have been abruptly shocked at any time by the slave owners’ decision to sale and purchase one or more of their family members. Severing up ties between slaves was for the Europeans an effective way to inhibit the process of communication especially between those who used to speak the same dialect⁹. Thus, slaves would gradually lose a crystal element in their culture which was language. Yet, a new dialect appeared instead: the Black English also referred to as Black Vernacular English, African American English, and Ebonics, leading to the appearance of the Creolist and the Anglicist theories¹⁰.

Linguists who are in favor of the Creolist theory acknowledge that the action of inhibiting slaves who speak the same dialect from communicating with each other coupled with prohibiting them from education as well, blazed the trail for the emergence of pidgin that helped them to conduct the process of communication with each other and with their owners, as Boyer comment that “before slaves could develop a common culture they needed a common language”¹¹. Accordingly, some features of this new developed English pidgin was the drop of “to be” from speech, for example instead of saying “Mary is in the cabin”, they said “Mary, he in cabin”¹². Words like banjo and goober (peanut) became part of Standard English and southern white slang respectively¹³.

On the other side, advocators of the Anglicist theory insist that slaves learnt English as a result of their exposure to the native British speakers during the colonial era¹⁴. Thereby, gradually and incorrectly, they created their own English which is deemed to be the African American English.

3. African Slaves’ Religion:

Religion for the slaves was a twofold aspect. On the one hand, it represented one of the most crucial components of their culture that they were not willing to get rid of. On the other hand, it served as a sword against intolerance and racial prejudice. The former, indeed pertained to their original heritages and crossed with them the Middle Passage as they forcefully quitted their homeland; whereas the latter emanated from the conditions they were living in.

As a matter of fact, when the slaves came to the American land, they brought with them a miscellaneous and rich religious culture. Failing to understand the nature of the African religious practices, the Europeans pulled their weight to encumber them from freely practicing their rituals. They used to describe them

just as “pagan”, “primitive”, and “fetish” religions¹⁵. Religion for the African slaves was very significant and synonymous with a way of life.

By the same token, as far as the ability of the Africans to adhere to their religious heritage is concerned, historians have long argued over this matter. Melville Herskovits, Lawrence Levine, Sterling Stuckey, and Albert J. Raboteau view that the African traditional religion had successfully survived in the New World by pointing at the spirit possession, musical forms, dance patterns, conjuring practices, and the presence of the African divinities along with saints in Roman Catholic folk piety, as a set of evidences to uphold their claim¹⁶. As an illustration is the West African Voodoo which was able to be transmitted and perpetuated in the American soil. Based on the worship of spirits and different ritual traditions, this African tribal religion owes its origins to the African slaves who had left their homeland in Dahomey (a kingdom in western Africa that has developed in the 18th and 19th centuries and is now known as southern Benin) in the seventeenth century. From Africa to Haiti to Louisiana, the West African Voodoo experienced a long journey that resulted in the emergence of the New Orleans Voodoo and Haiti Voodoo¹⁷.

By contrast, E. Franklin, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Robert E. Park confirm that the African traditional religions have slowly but surely withered away if not totally died¹⁸. They assert that Blacks were Methodists and Baptists¹⁹. They explain that while the white evangelical Christian Baptists and Methodists succeeded in converting a copious amount of Blacks to Christianity, Blacks could therefore, devise their own religion yet related to Christianity as pointed out by Robert Park,

It was not until the coming of the new, free and evangelistic types of Christianity, the Methodists and Baptists, that the masses of the Black people, that is, the plantation Negroes, found a form of Christianity that they could make their own.²⁰

4. Slaves' Music, Dance Form and Folklore:

Music, dancing and folklore constitute crucial elements of the African culture. Harking back to history, slaves availed themselves of singing and dancing to alleviate the degree of the harsh conditions they were suffering from. But fearing that they would dispatch messages to each other in order to hush up their intention to revolt, some slave owners hampered them from owning drums, horns, or other louder instruments. Others hoped that the enslaved African would work harder if they could break the chore by dancing, singing, and beating drums; hence, they did not prevent them from doing so.

Slaves' songs are known as spirituals. They embraced hidden meaning, such as the directions that they had to follow while escaping, or information about a confidential meeting. Example of this kind of songs is the one labelled "*Follow the drinking Gourd*" (See Appendix 02). Others, however, were spirituals which embodied slaves' great sorrow like the one named "*O Freedom*" (See Appendix 01). In addition to that, there were songs of faith that helped slaves overcome their hard days and encouraged them not to lose their stamina. Miscellaneous kinds of dances, related mainly to the body movements, therefore, were developed such as the Pigeon Wing and the Cakewalk, to name but a few. It is in this way, that some of many African musical instruments had survived as pointed out by Okpewho et al., "Certain African musical instruments, such as lamellophones and various drums, have been adopted in recent years, especially by Jazz musicians where they have a symbolic as well as a

musical function.”²¹ Gradually those spirituals and dances forms have evolved to create other forms of songs in America such as ragtime, blues, jazz, gospel music, rap, vaudeville, rock and roll and hip-hop.

In the same vein, Africans used to tell stories and tales to their children and to each other in order to keep the thread tight between past and present. Being vehemently denied the right to education, Africans tightly adhered to their oral traditions in order to transmit knowledge, information, and mainly wisdom. While bearing the harsh conditions that they were living in, slaves devised distinct tales with various animals such as rabbit, fox, bear, and wolf, to mention but a few. Nicely and intentionally created, those tales aimed at expressing slaves' feelings and experiences. Not only those stories had the ability to entertain slaves and to boil down their sorrows, but also they conveyed significant lessons and morals to the listener.

African folktales were first written in the 19th century, and published later by the journalist Joel Chandler Harris. In doing so, folktales could pave its way to the American literature. Besides they were able to keep the stories as well as histories of slaves alive. One example of a still vivid story is the one named *Brer Rabbit*.

5. Slaves' Folk Medicine:

African slaves were also known for their unique medical practice that accompanied them while crossing the Atlantic Ocean to the New World. Using roots and herbs, African slaves contributed in ameliorating the field of medicine and introducing new effective health practices such as healing small pox yaws and syphilis; discovering vaccination to inoculate children; and developing ways to cure for rattlesnake bites²². Thereby, the African medicine has played a crystal role in the American soil as asserted by Pearson, “The transference of the

African medical knowledge permitted black Americans not only to tend their own medical needs, but to contribute to the improvement of American health as a whole²³.

6. Slaves' Cuisine:

Inevitably, the African cuisine impacted the American one. This influence owes its origins to the period of slavery. Crossing the Atlantic Ocean, Europeans transported wide range of crops from Africa including rice, okra, Tania, blackeyed peas, kidney, lima beans, millet, sorghum, guinea, melon, watermelon, yams and peanuts. Slowly but surely these crops were incorporated in the American culinary. Thus, slaves could skillfully prepare and cultivate them. They also used them for different activities such as the use of okra to produce abortion.

Besides, the situation of slaves did not allow them to eat better cuts and meat; rather they ate the owners' leftovers. Consequently, they could engender what is today known as "Soul Food" in which they have produced tasty dishes with their own African touch. Some of the different slaves' foods are *Cala*, *Fufu*, and *Gunger Cake* to name a few²⁴.

7. CONCLUSION:

In a broad of view, the African cultural heritage's sphere is a deep ocean to delve in. When it comes to its relation to the American soil, it evokes one's curiosity to question its survival there. Albeit, African slaves were cut off from their homeland to be transported to the New World, they were not propelled to relinquish their adherence to their culture. While striving to retain their cultural traditional heritage under the harsh conditions that they had fallen prey to, African slaves adapted some of their masters' culture to fit in the new quo. So, they blazed the trail for the emanation of a culture that would stand out from the crowd and keep the past alive: the African American culture.

8. Appendices:

Appendix 01: Lyrics of the Song “O Freedom”

O freedom, O freedom,
O freedom after a while,
And before I'd be a slave, I'd be buried in my grave,
And go home to my Lord and be free.
There'll be no more moaning, no more moaning,
No more moaning after a while,
And before I'd be a slave,
I'd be buried in my grave,
And go home to my Lord and be free²⁵ . . .

Appendix 02: Lyrics and Meaning of the Song “*Follow the drinking gourd*”

Chorus

Follow the drinking gourd

Follow the drinking gourd

*For the old man is a-waiting for to carry you to
freedom*

Follow the drinking gourd.

When the sun comes back, and the first quail calls,

Follow the drinking gourd.

*For the old man is a-waiting for to carry you to
freedom*

If you follow the drinking gourd.

(Chorus)

The riverbank makes a very good road,

The dead trees will show you the way.

Left foot, peg foot, traveling on,

Follow the drinking gourd.

(Chorus)

The river ends between two hills,

Follow the drinking gourd.

There's another river on the other side,

Follow the drinking gourd.

(Chorus)

When the great big river meets the little river,

Follow the drinking gourd.

*For the old man is a-waiting for to carry you to freedom
If you follow the drinking gourd.*

(Chorus)

Meaning of the hidden codes

Question: What does the line “Follow the drinking gourd” mean?

Answer: The Big Dipper was the constellation of stars known as the drinking gourd. This line in the song meant to follow the North Star, one of the stars in the Big Dipper, and travel North to the free states or Canada.

Question: What does the line “For the old man is a-waiting for to carry you to freedom” mean?

Answer: This line means that the runaway slaves would eventually meet someone who was a member of the Underground Railroad, a secret society that helped African Americans find their way North to freedom.

Question: What does the line “When the sun comes back, and the first quail calls” mean?

Answer: This line means that people should plan their escape from the plantation by starting to travel during the late winter or the early spring when the sun shone more and the migrating birds had flown back to the South.

Question: What do the lines “The riverbank makes a very good road” and “The dead trees will show you the way. Left foot, peg foot, traveling on” mean?

Answer: These lines mean that there were dead trees along a riverbank on the way North that were marked with pictures of a left foot and a peg foot. These marks could be followed North to freedom.

Question: What do the lines “The river ends between two hills” and “There’s another river on the other side” mean?

Answer: These lines mean that when a certain river ended, people were supposed to keep walking over the hills and then travel north along the next river they found, which was the Tennessee River.

Question: What do the lines “When the great big river meets the little river” and “For the old man is a-waiting for to carry you to freedom” mean?

Answer: These lines mean that people would come to the big, wide Ohio River after they followed the Tennessee River. By now, they would have been walking for almost a year, and it would be winter again. The Ohio River would be frozen and easy to walk across. A guide from the Underground Railroad would be waiting for them on the other side to help them finish their trip to freedom²⁶.

9. Bibliography List:

¹ Herbert S. Klein, “The Atlantic Slave Trade”, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010, p20.

² Craig Steven Wilder, “In the Company of Black Men: The African Influence on African American Culture in New York City”, NYU Press, New York, 2005, p10.

³ Albert J. Raboteau, “Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South”, Oxford University Press, USA, 2004, p48.

⁴ Melville J. Herskovits, “The Myth of the Negro Past”, Harper Brothers, New York, 1941.

<https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1525/aa.1944.46.1.02a00150> (accessed November 20th 2019).

⁵ Leslie M. Alexander and Walter C. Rucker, “Encyclopedia of African American History”, ABC-CLIO, Santa Barbara, 2010, p14.

⁶ Brown, K.A. “Black Culture”, *International Journal of Education and literacy studies*”, Vol.1. No.1, 2013.

⁷ Tom Brook, “Slavery on film: What is Hollywood’s problem?”, 2014. <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20131015-hollywood-scared-of-slavery> (accessed November 29th 2019).

- ⁸ Brent Staples, "Black Characters in Search of Reality", 2012. <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/12/opinion/sunday/black-characters-in-search-of-reality.html> (accessed November 29th 2019).
- ⁹ Andre Koen, "Diversity Workbook", 2010, p4. <https://books.google.dz/books?id=MN3OAgAAQBAJ&pg=PA21&dq=Andre+Koen+publisher&hl=fr&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiq4OzFoo7nAhVNTxUIHUnHD10QuwUILjAA#v=onepage&q=Andre%20Koen%20publisher&f=false> (accessed December 11th 2019).
- ¹⁰ Philip Strazny, "Encyclopedia of Linguistics," Fitzroy Dearborn, New York, 2013, p1140.
- ¹¹ Paul S. Boyer, "The Enduring Vision: A History of the American People", Wadsworth Publishing Co Inc, California, 2010, p362.
- ¹² Ibid
- ¹³ Ibid
- ¹⁴ Ibid
- ¹⁵ David Musa, "African-American Religion: A Confluent of African Traditional Religion and Christianity", Author House, Indiana, 2015, p134.
- ¹⁶ Ibid
- ¹⁷ Barbara-Simone Brandstotter, Voodoo in New Orleans, 2013. <http://archive.is/ubxb6> (accessed December 23th 2015).
- ¹⁸ Meberbeche Senouci Faiza, (2010). "Pan- africanism and its impact on the Sierra Leonean Elite up to 1945", University of Abou-Bekr Belkaid, Tlemcen, 86.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ Stanford M. Lyman , "Militarism, Imperialism, and Racial Accommodation: An Analysis and Interpretation of the Early Writings of Robert E. Park", University of Arkansas Press, 1992, p295.
- ²¹ Isidore Okpewho, Carole Boyce Davies, Ali Al' Amin Mazrui , "The African Diaspora: African Origins and New World Identities", Indiana University Press, Indiana, 2001, p380.
- ²² Joseph E.Holloway, "African Contribution to American Culture", 2010. <https://www.coursehero.com/file/42273465/Holloway-AfricanContributionstoAmericanCulturepdf/> (accessed December 25th 2019).
- ²³ William Dillon Pierson , "Black Legacy: America's Hidden Heritage", University of Massachusetts Press, Massachusetts, 1993, p99.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Nancy I. Sanders , “A kid’s Guide to African American History: More than 70 Activities”. Chicago: Review Press, Chicago, 2007, p 97.

²⁶ Ibid.