

**Music, Drums, Spirituals: Bridging African and Black American Culture**

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**Abstract**

The influence of African culture is visible in the Black American cultural milieu. In Black American Music, which is accompanied by drums; in Spirituals, which is a unique contribution of Black Americans to the world of art, the African influence is clearly decipherable. The tradition of Orality which gives prominence to the spoken word is another legacy of the Africans. The concept of cyclical time, importance attributed to motherhood, the different varieties of music like jazz, funk were all examples of African legacies.

**Keywords:** African Culture, Black Americans, orality, music, spirituals

Black Americans, though they have amalgamated into the structure of American society, still retained some features of the cultural continuity from Africa. It is evident in the cultural productions of the Black Americans. Music, Drum, Orality, Spirituals, curing techniques which were indispensable elements of African Culture found its presence in the creative expressions of Black Americans. Black Americans could not accomplish curing techniques because of the fear of the wrath of their White masters during the times of slavery. But they clandestinely practiced it and lived in the spiritual world of rituals, healing techniques, indigenous medicines and curing rites. This created a parallel world for the Black Americans where they lived a life analogous to their lives in Africa. It enabled their minds to relax and be themselves. Laurie Wilkie rightly comments that “the spiritual realm provided an autonomous sphere, compatible with African-American worldview, which allowed enslaved African Americans to exercise control over their own communities” (147).

Another factor that influenced African American writings is the tradition of orality which plays a prominent role in African culture. In African American narratives, shades of African convention of orality are discernible. Africans used the oral tradition of passing the stories, folktales, history to the next generation. Orality became a part of

their culture. There was no written language or alphabets in most of the ancient African societies. They kept their historical records through spoken language. Thus, voice plays a major role in the lives of Africans. According to traditional African belief, a newborn child is considered as a mere thing, till his father speaks to him/her and gives a name to the child. Nothing in this world can replace the importance of voice in African culture. Dr. Vincent Muli Wa Kituku in his Preface to *East African Folktales* elucidates:

Voice was the vehicle in which knowledge was passed on from one generation to another. Voice unified a family, clan, or community. Enforcement of customs depended on voice. When a person died...his or her voice was no longer to be heard, it was as if a whole library had been destroyed. Voice is important. (2)

The poet who skillfully used his voice to convey truth, was given a special status in the ancient African society. He was respected by the common people as a priest who “reveals what is hidden through divine inspiration and communicate[d] with spirits....and through his poetry links his fellow men with the spirit world” (Finnegan 207). Skilled poets were called upon during special occasions like birth of a child, initiation ceremony during puberty, marriage, celebration of any achievement in life and finally death. The poet will not just recite the poem plainly to the audience. The success of the poem lies in the performance of the poet. Some poets employ the call and response technique, where the audience serves as a chorus, commenting on the gradual development of the poem leading to climax. Techniques like repetition, alliteration, onomatopoeia, parallelism are frequently employed in oral poetry. Yet another device used by the oral poet is the multiplication of consonants/vowels at the beginning, middle or end of a word/sentence. For example, a poet may use “Yee” to express surprise; but an oral poet employs “Yeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!!” to convey his element of surprise to the audience. Okpewho views this kind of usage of African idiophone method as “a phonaesthetic resource” prevalent in East African, South African and West African oral narratives (97). Call-and response technique was one of the popular techniques employed by an oral poet. The listener is given permission to interrupt the speaker to clarify his apprehensions. Sometimes the poet asks questions to the listeners and they respond to the questions. This technique helped the poet as well as the listener to arrive at new interpretations and elucidations regarding the poem.

The tradition of orality was employed in African American families to pass on the stories about the members to the future generations. It was the mothers and grandmothers who passed on the history of their families to younger generations in the form of oral narratives. Stories that were passed on to the younger generation, orally, served to re-establish their African connection which was at stake during the times of slavery. Oral narration of stories about one’s family involved reworking of collected memories. The stories thus narrated become part of history. Babatunde Lawal opines:

...since the process of recollecting also involves reconstructing and vice versa, memory is a form of history and history, a form of memory. Being a recollection or interpretation of the past, memory not only facilitates the transfer of cultural property from one geographical space to another, it is also a catalyst in the construction and negotiation of new identities. (qtd. in Fulton 5)

In Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Nanny says "Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin' on high, but they was'nt no pulpit for me" (64). The significance of orality in the lives of African Americans is evident in these words. Nanny's desire to preach a sermon about successful coloured women signifies the importance African Americans vested to the culture of orality. Dovenna S. Fulton quotes the words of Babatunde Lawal while discussing the tradition of orality in African American culture. Lawal says that syncretization of African and American cultures occurred through two forms of memory- collective and habitual memory (2). The skills achieved through conventions or repetitions come under habitual memory and collective memory refers to the knowledge acquired through education and historical consciousness.

Fulton validates that it is through habitual memory as well as collective memory that "Africans in America, then African Americans propagated the tradition of passing on history orally. In the hands of African American women writers, this cultural tradition became the foundation of a literary tradition" (2).

The concept of motherhood holds an important place in African tradition and culture. The early Africans bestowed supreme importance to mothers as they believed mothers are responsible for giving and sustaining life on earth. They venerated women as supernatural beings who have the special capacity for bringing forth a new life. Charles Finch explains in *Echoes of the Old Darkland* how an ancient man believed woman was solely responsible for giving birth which made him think God as a woman/mother (16). Women were respected in ancient African societies and their words were given due consideration. Even after the discovery of man's role in reproduction, women continued to be respected. They believed in a man-woman bonding for the smooth functioning of life. Women's opinions were seriously considered in all matters and they were sent as mediators in solving disputed matters. Women's strength was recognized and they were given many responsibilities in familial, social, political and economic matters.

Women were placed on the highest levels of the political order as well as the familial order in some regions in Africa. In some provinces of Nigeria the phenomenon of the queen mother was prevalent in the early years before colonial invasion. The Queen mother was the ultimate authority in matters concerning the state. The origin of life is traced to females/female goddesses in many African stories. The Asante society believed that it was a female goddess who descended on the earth from the sky with a group of people who became the founders of clans or lineages. This forms the basis of the belief that children inherit "blood" from their mother.

In some tribes, such as the Bisa, Lala, Lamba, Chewa, Kaonde, marriage is matrilineal, where the husband comes to stay in the wife's house after marriage. The concept of matrilineality emphasizes the importance given to the females in such tribes. Matrilineality too confers power and authority to women. Children gave more importance to their mother and her family rather than their father and his family. Maternal uncles were responsible for the upbringing of the children, their education and marriage. The Africans practiced matrilineal succession, which meant the next successor to the King's throne is not the son of the King, but the son of the King's sister.

Many African tribes placed women on a higher pedestal of authority and economic independence. Among the Kikuyu tribes, women had the authority over their land to maintain it and cultivate it according to their discretion. The women belonging to the Egba tribes had the supremacy to decide on issues concerning trade and commerce.

The African concept of time which is cyclical has influenced the imagination of African American writers. Traditional African culture upholds the concept of cyclicity of time in opposition to the linear concept of time in Western societies. For Africans, time does not run into the future, but comes back into the past as to form a part of the cycle of time. Mbiti, a Kenyan scholar explains the metaphysical concept of time. For the Africans, the present time/ time experienced is called sasa time and once experienced, it moves to the past to become zamani time. Sasa time and zamani time are two manifestations of actual time, one moving to become another. Mbiti explains the concept in detail:

Before events are incorporated into zamani, they have to be realized or actualized within the sasa dimension. When this has taken place, then the events 'move' backwards from the sasa in zamani. So zamani becomes the period beyond which nothing can go. Zamani becomes the period beyond which nothing can go. Zamani is the graveyard of time, the period of termination, the dimension in which everything finds its halting point. (29)

Death of a person means he moves from sasa to zamani time. According to the African belief, death is not an end, but transference in the dimension of time. The unborn do not exist in future; but they belong to the zamani time with the ancestors to experience rebirth. The belief in rebirth asserts the cyclical nature of time.

Another indispensable aspect of African tradition is music. Music has played an important function in the moulding of African Americans' consciousness. In times of despair, music provided solace to their distressed hearts. In times of joy, music doubled their pleasure. The slaves who were brought to the alien land were eager to use drums and sing the remnants of music which they carried in their minds. But the White masters prohibited them from drumming as they believed it was a secret language of the slaves to stimulate rebellion. Herbert Apthekar in his book, *American Negro Slave Revolts* mentions the regulation passed by the Whites to restrict the Black Americans use of drums: "It is absolutely necessary to the safety of this province that all due care be taken

to restrain Negroes from using or keeping drums” (Apthekar 62). Though the Whites succeeded in banning the use of drums by the Black Americans, they could not sever the Blacks adoration for music. The African Americans continued to compose songs and sing while they worked. They succeeded in convincing their Masters that singing reduced the fatigue of labor and were given consent to sing their songs. James Cone writes on the influence of Black music in the lives of African Americans, that it:

...unites the joy and sorrow, the love and hate and the despair of Black people and it moves the people toward the direction of total liberation. It shapes and defines Black being and creates cultural structures for Black expression. Black music is unifying because it confronts the individual with the truth of Black existence and affirms that Black being is possible only in a communal context.

Black music was a form of solace for the African Americans as they worked hard in the White master’s fields. The rhythmic rendering of music lightened their hearts and souls and made their miserable life bearable. In their songs they voiced the predicament they had to face in an alien and hostile land. Their intense longing to escape from the pathetic conditions and their desire to lead a free life were infused in the songs they sung.

Music, for the African ancestors of the African Americans was not something that was used for entertainment. It was something that was deeply entrenched in their culture. West Africans believe that “song is the practice of Nommo” (Davis, Angela 219). Nommo is the philosophical concept which believes in the magical power of the word. A word which is spoken in a particular pitch may have one meaning; while the same word uttered in another pitch will have yet another meaning in African language system. Features of music such as pitch, timing, timbre are applied in African languages as well. The drums form an inseparable feature in traditional music of Africa. The beating of drums serves different purposes as to stimulate the public in a gathering, convey hidden messages to a group who can decipher the meaning of drum beats, perform poetry in reverence of a king/god, and convey the threat of war through the drum beats. The beating of the drum can be related to the beating of human heart which forms the basis of life. The tradition of drumming is so important in the culture of Africa that it can be called the heartbeat of African culture. Jacob K. Olupona, in his book on *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society* mentions the significance of drums:

For the African the drum is sacred. Created by god-like humans, and the drummer is a speaker and communicator of the sacred fixed text...the drummer can be compared to a poet. Just as the poet uses his voice to entertain people, so the drummer uses the drum to entertain. The drummer therefore must not be regarded as a technician alone; he is an artist in his own right. Even if the texts are fixed and unchanging, he still has to learn the words and acquire the special art of drumming. If he is

not a good artist, the message cannot be reproduced fully. In addition, on the issue of the language of the drum being fixed, it was observed that while there may be some sets of phrases, proverbs, and wise sayings that form the drummer's repertoire, the drummer is free to improvise in-between in order to make his message fit the particular occasion. (7)

Drums form an indispensable part in the rituals and performances related to spirituality. Drums serve as an important instrument to conjure the spirits. In healing/curing sessions also drums serve a vital role. The healers believe that the human body is made up of subatomic particles that vibrate. Sound of the drums alters the vibrating rhythm of the human body and enables healing/curing. Some people go into a state of trance as they hear the sound of drums because their minds become one with drummer's spirit and the drum's spirit.

Different varieties of drums are there in Africa ranging from tall drums to wide drums. Most of the drums are made from logs, while some are made by joining together pieces of woods with iron bands. Some of the drums are made from clay or from metal pieces. In West Africa, large gourd or calabash serve as raw material to make drums.

Drumming serves as a method of vocalization for those who can decipher the drum language. Ruth Finnegan explains this aspect of drumming:

Drumming represents the spoken utterances in a way intelligible to the listeners, and as actual words and groups of words. Tonal and rhythmic patterns in themselves would not be enough for full intelligibility, for many words in any language have the same patterns. But there are devices in the drum language to overcome ambiguity. This is partly achieved through having conventional occasions, [phrases], and subjects for drum communication....Thus –to take the drum language of the Kele people in the Congo- the conventional drum phrase for “rain” is “the bad spirit son of spitting cobra and sunshine”, for “money” “the traditional pieces of metal which arrange palavers, for “white man”... “he enslaves the people, enslaves the people who remain in the land”.(120)

Drum poetry validates the interrelation between sound and language. Much importance is given to the phonic element in drum poetry. The use of repetitions, alliteration, parallelism, and onomatopoeia in drum poetry enhances the poetic effect.

Drum poetry is used to invoke ancestral spirits, praise a king/ warrior after a victory in a battle and also during times of war as to invoke the citizens about the urgency of the situation.

The spirituals of the African Americans were their unique contribution to American culture. The spirituals, which bear the stamp of their tradition, are not just religious songs which are to be sung during religious ceremonies. Though the main themes of the spirituals were about the omnipotence of god and the principle that solace and peace would be begotten only in the other world, they were sung during leisure time or while working. According to James Cone, the spirituals facilitated the African

Americans to cope with the alien circumstances in an alien land.

The spirituals are historical songs which speak about the rupture of Black lives; they tell us about a people in the land of bondage and what they did to hold themselves together and to fight back. We are told that the people of Israel could not sing the Lord's song in a strange land. But for Blacks, their being depended upon a song. (32- 33)

Some of the spirituals tell about the conquest of the strong by the weak which offer a ray of hope for the slaves in the midst of misery and desolation. Though the spirituals were mainly about themes related to Christianity, there were undertones of revolt in some of them. The slaves found analogies between the religious references in spirituals and their own plight. Some of the terms like 'Promised Land' indicated Emancipation from slavery or escape to the North; the Jew's bondage in Egypt indicated the predicament of the slaves in US; reference to crossing river Jordan meant crossing Ohio river as a way to escape to North.

Harriet Tubman composed many spirituals which were infused with the call for freedom. Earl Conrad in his article "General Tubman, Composer of Spirituals" gives evidence that through her spirituals Tubman educated the slaves to choose the path of freedom. Tubman's spirituals facilitated in creating a collective consciousness among the slaves about the necessity to be freed from the clutches of slavery. The spirituals served as a secret code language for Tubman. Earl Conrad cites example that if Tubman sang the spiritual "Hail, oh hail, ye happy spirits", to the fugitive slaves for a second time, it meant they are safe to leave their hiding places. But if she sang the spiritual, "Go Down Moses", it meant they are in danger and should hide themselves (302).

Sojourner Truth was another black woman who is known for her spirituals. One of Truth's famous spirituals is about the black people's struggle for freedom.

I am pleading for my people  
A poor downtrodden race  
Who dwell in freedom's boasted land,  
With no abiding place.  
I am pleading that my people  
May have their rights restored  
For they have long been toiling  
And yet have no reward. (qtd. in Davis, Angela 223)

The spirituals helped the African Americans to forge a sense of community, to nurture resistance against oppression, encourage endurance and boost the morale of the African Americans.

The blues songs, which bear the stamp of African American tradition, were another contribution of the African Americans to the cultural world of America. The rise of the blues songs in the early twentieth century was not an all-of-a sudden phenomenon. It rose from the spirituals and the work songs of the African Americans. As the word

suggests, blues express songs of sadness or gloom and the sorrowful expression of their condition. The blues songs reflect the depression and disillusionment of the African Americans on their plight.

The picture of the individual singer pouring his heart in the form of songs with the accompaniment of a guitar created an entirely different and hitherto unseen picture of the African American. The Blues were secular songs with no religious tinge associated with them. Ellison in his definition of blues says that it:

...is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of brutal experiences alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically. (22)

Gertrude Ma Rainey who is often called "Mother of the Blues" was a performer in circuses, minstrel and tent shows. Ma Rainey's songs were about the trials and tribulations of the Blacks and the need to create unity among the Blacks.

Jazz, is a comparatively recent form of music developed as a blend of spirituals, opera, blues, Native American music, marching songs and work songs. Critics opine that adopting a native African method in the rendering of Jazz is a deliberate move on the part of African Americans to reject the Euro American stylization in music. According to Black Nationalist scholar Frank Kofsky, such denunciation of Euro-American style in Jazz, "possesses obvious social implications above and beyond the artistic ones. In point of fact, it mirrors the larger decision of the Negro ghetto to turn its back on an exploitative and inhumane white American society (140)". Jazz developed as a distinctive African American music throughout the 60's giving rise to various forms like cool jazz, free jazz, and quasi-model jazz. The popular jazz performers were Sidney Bichet, Louis Armstrong, Josephine Baker, John Coltrane, Nina Simone, and Miles Davis. The artists used music to interact with the audience, to critique the ways of American Government and to voice their needs. Other African American music categories include Soul, Disco, Funk, Boogie Woogie, Rap and Hip Hop.

The socio-political condition of the 70's replete with poverty, unemployment, lack of opportunities created a suspension in the development of Jazz. This resulted in the creation of a new genre, Rap or Hip-hop music. Rap severed its ties with music and harmony and stressed the importance of rhythmic wit. Rap was used as a tool to criticize the authorities who were ignoring the African Americans. The use of pungent wit in the lyrics combined with rhythm made rap an effective device to express their miseries. The artists and audience interacted with each other throughout the performance which is similar to the call-and-response method prevalent in African societies.

A new genre called "funk" evolved in African American music during the 1970's. Jazz musician, Julian Cannonball Adderly is said to have given popularity to the word, funk. The connection of funk is traceable to its African roots. Rickey Vincent makes this clear in his book, Funk: the Music, the People and the Rhythm of the One:

Funk is deeply rooted in African cosmology—the idea that people are created in harmony with the Rhythms of nature and that free expression is tantamount to spiritual and mental health. If we look into this African philosophy, the African roots of rhythm, spiritual oneness with the cosmos, and...aspects of the body, we could find that funkiness is an ancient and worthy aspect of life. Thus, funk in its modern sense is a deliberate reaction to--and a rejection of--the traditional Western world's predilection for formality, pretense, and self-repression. (4)

Funk musicians experimented with new rhythms and techniques. In the lyrics also there was an audacious social criticism that impressed the audience. The reaffirmation of African roots in Funk increased its appeal among African Americans.

African American art forms created a distinct place in the American cultural world. For the African Americans, the art forms were a medium for conserving their ethnic African culture which was facing the risk of destruction in the racist White society. Through the art forms, tales of oppression as well as resistance were given representation which indeed influenced the conscience of the audience.

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