

## The Afro-Americans' Cultural Roots: From the Angle of the Afro-Americans' Religious Songs

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### Abstract

As multiculturalism is becoming the common knowledge of all nations, the subculture that has been previously on the edge, is now beginning to share the common sky with the mainstream culture. In this background, the glamour of America's minority's particular cultures are emerging and gradually becoming the hot research question. Among them, the Afro-Americans' culture has drawn many scholars' attention, but one of their culture's fountainheads --- songs has drawn little attention. The passage helps readers to know something about the Afro-Americans' cultural roots by analyzing the features of songs of the early ages --- religious songs, so as to comprehend the Afro-Americans' culture more comprehensively and profoundly.

**Key words:** Afro-American; Religious Songs

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From 1619 when a Dutch ship brought 20 contractual African Negro slaves to Jamestown to 1863 when the last slaveholder captain called Gordon was executed, about 14 million were sold to North America as slaves. Since the Negroes came from different tribes, they spoke different languages although they were similar in the color of skin. Besides, Negroes from the same tribe were sold to different plantations. The slave owners forbade them to play the African drum, for fear that they would transfer information through drum sound to help other slaves to

escape. As a result, little African culture was preserved. But the Africans' concepts were conserved in the religious songs and music of the early ages.

The Negroes as a group had a long religious history. Even though they came from different tribes and their religious belief may vary a great deal, they held the idea of respecting the nature and their ancestors. For example, they naturally worshipped the trees and rocks around them and reverently believed one's soul existed after death. However, people will think of the slavery --- one of the main causes of the Civil War, once mentioning American history. So, did the Negroes acquire real rights after the war? In fact, the slavery was nominally abolished. The major change was that the Negroes could choose their jobs and employers freely. Nevertheless, this didn't mean that they could enjoy the same civil rights, and their circumstances didn't change much.

Those Negroes sold to America inchoately were deprived of all of their rights. Those tools that could speak, could only rely on music to express their inner sentiments due to the tremendous suffering in their life and mind. Most slave owners didn't permit them to dance the African dances or believe in their original religions. As a consequence, the Negroes were pressed to believe in Christianity, through which, these owners hoped to control the Negroes mentally.

At that time, the slaves had to attend the Caucasians' religious conventions on Sunday. They sang psalms and songs composed by the Caucasians passionately and fervently in churches. When night fell and the Caucasians went back to their tents, the Negroes were left to sing songs till late night. It was in this sort of campaign that the Negroes freely expressed their feelings without the restrictions of the white in order to seek the spiritual prop for their miserable and hard life. It brought the slaves hope; that was to obtain rebirth from Jesus Christ. And their unique musical form was combined with religion accordingly. The Africans' values and culture had

permeated their bones, but in the new land away from their hometown, they could only speak English, believe in Christianity, and sing the white's songs. Therefore, the Negroes put the rhyme and style of African songs into these songs, which were called religious songs (or spirituals).

The Negroes' spirituals' coming into being derives from two kinds of music --- the interaction of African and European music. In other words, it is also a product of the interaction of Negroes' life and poems. It differs from the Bible and poems, because it is a kind of poem that expresses the Negroes' gruelling life and it is connected with their destiny. The inspiration all came from the Bible and their common experiences. After the Civil War, the southern America became the Negroes' gathering place. Owing to the ban on their African music, dance and drum, they had no way to express their emotion and need. In this condition, a type of secret gathering named "Bush Meetings" came into being. Slaves who attended this kind of gathering could freely make use of various forms of music, such as African religious rites, characteristic rhythms and sounds to express the struggle of their souls, the confidence of overcoming difficulties and their good expectations for their future life carefreely and lightsomely.

They piously hoped that they would ulteriorly procure their deserved rights by singing musical songs and eulogizing the God. Thus, the Negroes' songs got eloquent. With the desire for the God and the devout affection for the sacred paradise, the spirituals got further development, through which, they wished to extol the God. Some scholars said, as songs were one of the main forms of the early black literature, and they were orally sung and handed down, it was hard to find their exact source. But in essence, it is obvious that religious songs are a new art form that have combined Christian content with the traditional forms of African songs. In addition, they are a type of song modality that make people possess their philosophy through others' expounding. For instance, *Go Down, Moses* is a typical religious song.

The Negroes conveyed their feelings about their life by religious songs. Although the doctrines of Christianity were not totally the same as the Negroes' conceptions, they found hope to get out of miseries. With the abolishment of the slavery, the social status of the Afro-Americans has greatly improved and the wide spread of spirituals contributed to the formation of gospel music. The popularity of gospel music and the help of record companies made it spread more widely. As Bell said, the existence of these religious songs proved the potential values of their spirit of resistance to oppression. It also consisted in the religious songs, gospel music and *Bruce*, which became popular afterwards. Meanwhile, it mixed the three different music forms together, so that they could be shared in many aspects, harmony, rhythm, melody and

timbre included. In the process of subsequent circulation, the successors added a number of special music elements to it, which brought it further development. Before the 19th century, the Afro-Americans' spirituals were attached little importance. They were just spread in the Negroes' limited living areas. However, in the 19th century, they became the floorboard of the Afro-Americans' music themes with religious features.

After the Civil War, religious songs were not dominant any longer, but they were still very popular with the Afro-Americans and the society. In the 1960s when the Civil Rights Movement broke out, these songs were spread and sung and endowed with new significance. They had a diversity of themes, and the lyrics were vivid and death and escape were 2 repeatedly mentioned topics. The Afro-Americans' spirituals showed that they poured out their unfortunate slave life to the God. They hoped to be liberated and prayed that they could cast off the shackle of slavery so as to obtain freedom and good life. From an overall standpoint, the Afro-Americans' religious songs possess the following characteristics:

The first one is to express their feelings with metaphors. The Afro-Americans' traditions' figurative features from the very beginning are the pivotal reason for its preservation. It is because they have to survive in western culture's oppression, their ways of expression will surely be different. For example, when the Afro-Americans are talking about one specific thing, they are actually referring to another one. Hence, in Afro-Americans' religious songs, a word more often than not implies another meaning. For example, "freedom" means "emancipation"; "Egypt" means "the south"; "the promised land" means "the north"; "heavy burden" means "slavery" (Brooks, 1186). The religious songs are also used to disseminate information for slaves who have escaped to the north from the south: the lyrics imply the routes for escaping and the organizations that will meet them, etc. As the religious songs are coalesced with composers and singers' complex experiences and emotions, its expressive force is extremely strong.

The second one is that they are full of poetic quality or flavour, sense of beauty and dramaticism. We can feel the poetic quality or flavour and sense of beauty from the names of some religious songs, such as *Go Down, Moses*; *God's children have wings*; *Quietly ran to Jesus*; *Sometimes, I am like a kid without mama*; *I know moonrise*, etc. Some religious songs' lyrics are full of poetic quality or flavour and give people sense of beauty, which adopt the Negroes' unique languages: "Oh, what a beautiful city under the wine gourd. "We can still clearly find the existence of metaphor from the poems with sense of beauty. To the eye, it is religious content --- *Jordan River*, but as a matter of fact it means *Tennessee River*, the other bank of which is the north --- *Free State*. With the passage of time, some religious songs

begin to show the features of literature creation ---- full of dramaticism and using couplet: my feet were made wet by the midnight's dew and the stars at dawn were witnesses. Jesus mentioned it on the mountain, whose mouth spurted out fire and smoke.

At the same time, religious songs gradually presented the features of regional variations and individualization. Extemporaneousness is the third characteristic. Religious songs belong to folk songs and are adlibbed, so their structures are relatively loose and there are many repeated lyrics. In a performance, one leading singer usually first sing one or several sentences, then a chorus repeats one sentence or sings in chorus. This method of singing can make the improvisation of the members in a chorus fill in the part that the leading singer has forgotten or the vacant part and lead the performance to the expected atmosphere. The leading singer should be a very talented composer who is capable of composing and singing songs rapidly. After the Civil War, these composers mostly became minstrels who sang from place to place with their composed new songs. With the development of society, the content of religious songs advanced with the times, but the features of improvisation did not change. In 1867, the first Negroes' religious song anthology the Afro-Americans' religious song anthology came into being. Religious songs had a big influence in the age of slavery, and talented black singers nearly all sang them. After the 20th century, secular songs such as Labor Song, Match Song, etc began to be widely sung.

Using dialects is the fourth feature. Knowing different American dialects is conducive to the deeper comprehension of religious songs. Although we have to spend time and energy learning dialects, it is worthwhile, because the Afro-Americans' religious songs are written by dialects. If we translate these songs into standard English, it will be like translating Robert Burns' poems written with Scottish dialect into standard English, which immensely damages the innate character and style of the original. While the southern Negroes' dialects are not all the same, creating religious songs with dialect is their common feature.

The dialect in religious songs is actually a very old British English, which was standard English in the 17th and 18th century. With many varieties of dialects from southern and west-southern Scotland flooding into English, the old English gradually was not used in daily life. In 1620 when the first English emigrants reached the North America, English changed again. For example, "fit" was equal to "fought". There are such actors' lines in Congreve's drama the way of the world, "I thought once that they have fitt." In the 18th century, some Cambridge University students from south-western England pronounced "[be]cause" into "kase", "Cornfield" into "Confiel. The "d" in "hand, field, friend" etc. was usually not enunciated. So did the "g" in "dying, thinking,

being" etc. They pronounced "yellow" into "yaller". As a result, there appeared differences between the Negroes' English and the Caucasians' standard English, and it was these differences that made the Afro-Americans' culture colorful.

In addition, the Afro-Americans' religious songs have three typical ways of singing. Firstly, sing a song just line by line. This is the most common and traditional way of performance: the first line is the leading singer, and the second line is the response of the masses. The members' reaction like tidal water closely follows the leading singer's voice. It is billowy and makes people put infinite enthusiasm into it instantly, such as "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot". Secondly, it has the method of performance with innovative melody and harmony. This method responds to parts from singing in chorus to multiple-voiced chorus based on the first traditional form, such as "Steal Away". Thirdly, there are a diverse of forms of singing in chorus. It begins with the members' unison for the opening of a show. In the middle is the leading singer's solo like an announcement. Finally, there's the members' unison as a response. This is a more advanced representation that can sufficiently express the Afro-Americans' music talent and taste, such as "Go Down, Moses".

It is because of their unfortunate slave life and desire for free life in the future that they show their most sincere emotion through the form of music ---- spirituals, which have become part of the Afro-Americans' culture and far surpassed music itself. You can constantly change situations and feel different cultures with the rhythm pausing and the melody varying. It dates back to African culture of several centuries ago and it is precious cultural heritage. Moreover, the religious assembly helps the white and black' culture mix together. From the gospel music that is religious, earthly, artistic and popular, we can easily see its great power. Though it is not a spiritual, it has inherited the hereditary African habits similar to spirituals. For example, when a Negro is singing, he will use syncopation that can uniquely be performed by palms and feet in the Negroes' music. Also, the primitive and barbaric shoutings and tones will appear in the black's songs. These can never be heard in the Caucasians' religious songs. For instance, they will sing, dance together, clap, shout out a certain rhythm and repeat the same lyric in the end in churches. Up to now, religious songs sung by the black' churches, independent singers and choruses still play an significant role in the Afro-Americans' musical culture life. It has become a unique American musical culture phenomenon with the compounded meaning of history, human culture and religious faith. Black people' religious songs are the true reflection of the Afro-Americans' life, the musical language of their spiritual world. Its unparalleled melody, rhythm and form of performance surely make it one of the world' greatest spiritual heritages.

To sum up, black people's religious songs are one of the oldest songs sung in foreign lands; it is the base of various subsequent black people's songs in the aspects of rhythm and style; it plays an important part in the inheritance of African traditional culture and the creation of American distinctive Afro-American culture. Therefore, it is very necessary for us to comprehend the Afro-American culture or even American culture.

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