

The Sacred Fire: Africanisms in “Negro Spirituals”

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Abstract

The Africanisms controversy is an age-old debate on the cultural retentions of slaves in the New World. Initially, scholars used inadequate research methods and racist ideologies to justify that slave spirituals were “mere copies of European melodies.” With the development of cultural anthropology, these perspectives developed into more well-founded arguments based on fieldwork and the theory of acculturation. After decades of discourse, scholars finally agreed that African American spirituals were grounded in African-derived musical practices shaped by the United States sociocultural experience. Although it took many years to come to the conclusion that spirituals were syncretic, I will argue that African cultural retentions were presented in the earliest writings by explorers in African and colonial figures who observed the religious and secular celebrations of slaves in the New World. By analyzing primary and secondary source readings on African cultural survivals in relation to the sacred music traditions of African American in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, I have shown the early evidence for African survivals previously overlooked by early scholars. Through an analysis of the qualitative, or non-analytical perspectives of the music and its place in culture, and quantitative, an analysis of an African American religious song, I demonstrate the clear and present evidence for African Survivals.

O Black and unknown bards of long ago,
How came your lips to touch the sacred fire?
-James Weldon Johnson (1871–1938)

Early scholarship on African American music is a divided on the basis of multiple ideologies with regard to the influence of African tradition on African American sacred song. Some scholars argue that there is no semblance of African tradition in spirituals; that the fusion of enslaved people's cultures and the cruelty of slavery left African peoples with no collective heritage. Other early scholars such as Richard Wallaschek (1893) and Newman Ivy White (1928) argued that African American music was largely European melodies, ineptly copied by a "primitive race."¹ Conversely, others such as Henry Krehbeil (1914) and James Weldon Johnson (1925) argued that the traditions of Africans remained prevalent in the music sung by slaves; similarities such as form, delivery method, and texture demonstrated a unified cultural tradition.² The debate attracted much attention in the nineteenth century, and continued on into the mid-twentieth century with scholars such as Melville J. Herskovits (1941) and E. Franklin Frazier (1939). This new breed of scholars used anthropological and sociological perspectives to argue for and against cultural Africanisms, respectively. In this essay, I will use both musicological and anthropological research methodologies to justify the influence of African tradition on African American sacred music. By exploring primary source texts, as well as secondary readings in both anthropology and ethnomusicology, I will observe Africanisms in a musical and cultural context. Additionally, I will comment on both the qualitative and quantitative aesthetic similarities between African and African American musical styles.

¹ Richard A. Waterman, "On Flogging a Dead Horse: Lessons Learned from the Africanisms Controversy," *Ethnomusicology* 7, no. 2 (May 1963): 83.

² Portia K. Maultsby, and Mellonee V. Burnim, *African American Music: An Introduction*, New York, NY: Routledge, 2006. 12.

Richard A. Waterman's 1963 article, "On Flogging a Dead Horse: Lessons Learned from the Africanisms Controversy," best summarizes the inherent problems with early scholarship on Africanisms. The earliest problem with the Africanisms controversy came from the view that African American music either had to be copied from the music slaves or their descendants were exposed to, or that the slaves had to invent these songs out of thin air in order to express the sorrows of their condition.³ This view was reinforced by Erich von Hornbostel's examination of Dahomean singers and dancers⁴ in 1928, in which he attempted to find connections between African American spirituals and Dahomean music.⁵ From this, Hornbostel gave his opinion that the music of Africa and Europe was so different that there could never be a blending of the two.⁶ Early scholars such as Wallaschek and White had also never compared West African musical characteristics from an anthropological perspective to African American songs. As a Vienna native, Wallaschek himself had never experienced African or African American music, and regardless, advanced an analysis that "as a rule they [slave spirituals] are mere imitations of European compositions which the negroes [*sic*] have picked up and served again with slight variation."⁷ Arguments for Africanisms prior to 1930 were equally unfounded in anthropological data. James Weldon Johnson took a literary approach and merely shrugged off dissenting opinions by citing that their perspectives "can be traced ultimately to a prejudiced attitude of the mind, to an unwillingness to concede the creation of so much pure beauty to a people they wish to feel is absolutely inferior."⁸ Although Johnson could have been, and probably was correct in his assumption, his argument for Africanisms was not well founded. These perspectives, which

³ Waterman, "On Flogging a Dead Horse: Lessons Learned from the Africanisms Controversy," 83.

⁴ The Dahomean people are in reference to an African kingdom in the present-day Republic of Benin on the Southwestern coast, which lasted from 1600 until 1900.

⁵ Waterman, "On Flogging a Dead Horse: Lessons Learned from the Africanisms Controversy," 84.

⁶ *Ibid* 84.

⁷ Burmin and Maultsby, *African American Music: An Introduction*, 11.

⁸ James Weldon Johnson, *The Books of American Negro Spirituals*. Edited by James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson. 1969 ed. New York, NY: Viking Press, 1969. 14.

were held until the late 1930s, changed with the advancement of anthropological theory concerning acculturation, increased knowledge of West African music, and the awareness of music in a cultural context.⁹

As the debate moved into the mid-twentieth century, anthropological and sociological perspectives were applied to both sides. E. Franklin Frazier, a prominent sociologist who focused on the effects of slavery on African American family life, asserted that "...never before in history has a people been so nearly stripped of its social heritage as were the Negroes [*sic*] who were brought to America,"¹⁰ meaning that the horrors of the middle passage and subsequent enslavement was enough to erase any cultural memory that slaves could have possibly brought with them. Melville Herskovits, who also focused on African American family forms, viewed social structures as an aspect of "culture" while observing family forms in Haiti, Trinidad, and West Africa.¹¹ While Frazier was debating that African Americans were simply Americans who failed to acculturate fully due to oppression, Herskovits argued that African Americans were essentially Africans who, by keeping their traditions, were culturally different from the rest of America.¹² These two views, based on ethnographic data collected through fieldwork, would dominate the "origins" debate until the late 1960s, when agreements on the syncretism of African American culture, and music were finally made.¹³ In time, it would be acknowledged that African spirituals were grounded in African-derived musical characteristics that were ultimately shaped by the United States sociocultural experience.¹⁴ However, I believe the African

⁹ Waterman, "On Flogging a Dead Horse: Lessons Learned from the Africanisms Controversy," 84.

¹⁰ Sidney W. Mintz, and Richard Price. *The Birth of African American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1976. 62.

¹¹ *Ibid* 63.

¹² *Ibid* 63.

¹³ Burmin and Maultsby, *African American Music: An Introduction*, 12-13.

¹⁴ *Ibid* 13.

cultural survivals were evident in the earliest writings about slaves brought abroad when compared to existing documentation of traditions of Africans on the Gold Coast.

Although slave music was not written about in detail until Wallaschek's, *Primitive Music*, documentation of slave's musical culture was not entirely absent. Journals and correspondences of missionaries, explorers of Africa, and colonial figures are all excellent indicators that musical activities were an important part of slave life. Specifically writings about African American religious institutional practices and Slave celebrations of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries clearly demonstrate Africanisms retained. African American religious institutions, such as the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E.), led by Richard Allen (1760-1831) and the St. Thomas African Episcopal Church, led by Absalom Jones, even published their own collections of hymns for their congregations.¹⁵ African musical practices, such as improvisation, hand clapping, percussive instrument use, and call-and-response can be seen in the writings of English and Scottish explorers, Thomas Edward Bowdich (1819) and Mungo Park (1800). Park, in his *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa*, remarks on the improvisatory nature of African music, and the use of hand clapping as an important part of the musical experience.

They [Africans who housed Park] lightened their labour by songs, one of which was composed *extempore*, for which I was myself the subject of it. It was sung by one of the young women, the rest joining in a sort of chorus...¹⁶

Extempore, meaning impromptu or carried out without prior preparation, is in relation to the improvisatory nature of many African songs, and is a term often used in journals such as Park's to remark on such. The passage also alludes to a sort of call-and-response between one of the

¹⁵ Eileen Southern, ed., *Readings in Black American Music*. 2nd ed. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1983. 52.

¹⁶ *Ibid* 5-6.

young women and the rest of the group. In another section, Park lists the African instruments he encounters and remarks on hand clapping

—the *balafou*, an instruments composed of twenty pieces of hard wood of different lengths, with the shells of gourds hung underneath to increase the sound; —the *tangtang*, a drum open at the lower end; —and lastly, the *tabalu*, a large drum, commonly used to spread an alarm through the country....and at all their dances and concerts, *clapping of hands* appears to constitute a necessary part of the chorus.¹⁷

This passage mentions the use of percussive instruments and the overall communal nature of music in Africa. The comment, “*clapping of hands* appears to constitute a necessary part of the chorus,” is an example of the participatory nature of communal music making for Africans, and can be paralleled to the communal, participatory aspects of African American Church life.

Bowdich, in his account of his experiences on the African coast in *Mission from the Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee*, likewise focuses on the instruments of the Africans he encountered

The rest of the instruments can hardly be called musical, and consist of drums, castanets, gong-gongs, flat sticks, rattles, and even old brass pans. The Drums...are hollow's trunks of trees, frequently carved with much nicety, mostly open at one end, and of many sizes: those with heads of common skin...are beaten with sticks in the form of a crotchet rest...they [smaller drums] are mostly played with the inside of the fingers, at which the natives are expert...¹⁸

This observation demonstrates the wealth of percussive instruments used in traditional African music and can be compared to the use of improvised percussion instruments during slave holidays such as the Pinkster festival and “Lecture” day. Bowdich also comments on the performance style and dialogue-like call-and-response of African music

Their graces are so numerous, some extempore, some transmitted from father to son, that the constant repetition only can distinguish the commencement of the air: sometimes between each beginning they introduce a few chords, sometimes they leave out a bar, some-times they only return to the middle, so entirely is it left to the fancy of the performer...The singing is almost recitative, and this is the only part of music which the women partake; they join in the chorusses [*sic*]...¹⁹

¹⁷ Southern, *Readings in Black American Music*, 7.

¹⁸ *Ibid* 14.

¹⁹ *Ibid* 14-5.

This passage remarks on the “extempore” nature of the music, including the use of artistic license through repetitive passages to create variation. Also can be seen the call-and-response nature of the music.

The same African musical characteristics can be seen in the writings of New World missionaries in the eighteenth century and other colonial Americans. A correspondence between Presbyterian minister, Samuel Davies (1723-61) and “a friend and member of the Society in London for promoting Christianity,” shows the ease and fervor in which Africans in the New World embraced and adapted European musical traditions.

The books were all very acceptable, but none more so than the Psalms and Hymns, which enable the [i.e. the slaves] to gratify their peculiar taste for psalmody. Sundry of them have lodged all night in my kitchen, and sometimes when I have awakened about two or three-o’clock in the morning, a torrent of sacred harmony has poured into my chamber and carried my mind away to heaven. In this seraphic exercise some of them spend almost the whole night.²⁰

Although this passage does not directly reference Africanisms in the African American sacred tradition, it does show the qualitative adaptation Africans were capable of, instead of the often cited quantitative, physical changes. Colonial writings on the Pinkster day, a holiday of Dutch origin, transformed into a sort of African festival by free blacks and slaves in the North and South show some of the quantitative adaptations Africans made in the New World.²¹ The following is an excerpt by James Fenimore Cooper in the mid-nineteenth century

Nine tenths of the blacks of the city [New York], and of the whole country within thirty or forty miles, indeed, were collected in thousands in those fields, beating banjos [and African drums], singing African songs [accompanied by dancing]. The features that distinguish a Pinkster frolic from the usual scenes at fairs... however, were of African origin. It is true, there are not now [1845], nor were there then [1757], many blacks among us of African birth; but the traditions and usages of their original country were so far preserved as to produce a marked difference between the festival, and one of European origin.²²

²⁰ Southern, *Readings in Black American Music*, 27-8.

²¹ Portia K. Maultsby, "Africanisms in African-American Music," in *Africanisms in American Culture*, ed. Joseph E. Holloway (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), 196.

²² Quoted in Maultsby, "Africanisms in African-American Music," 196.

These obvious African survivals can further be seen in the writings about the Pinkster festival in Albany by James Eights in 1867

The music made use of on this occasion, was likewise singular in the extreme. The principal instrument selected to furnish this important portion of the ceremony was a symmetrically formed wooden article usually denominated an *eel-pot*, with a cleanly dressed sheep skin drawn tightly over its wide and open extremity... [the player was] beating lustily with his naked hands upon its loudly sounding head, successively repeating the ever wild, thought euphoric cry of *Hi-a-bomba, bomba, bomba*, in full harmony with the thumping sounds. These vocal sounds were readily taken up and as oft repeated by the female portion of the spectators not otherwise engaged in the exercises of the scene, accompanied by the beating of time with their ungloved hands, in strict accordance with the eel-pot melody.²³

The passage clearly demonstrates retention of African aesthetic values for celebrations, including call-and-response, use of percussion, and the communal aspects of African musical life. Similar aspects of communal musical participation and call-and-response can be seen in writings about African American sacred music.

Writings about Church practices in Southern "praise houses" of slaves demonstrated the African aesthetic survivals that permeated the music of these establishments.²⁴ These practices were often considered unorthodox by missionaries in the South, who often expressed disapproval of these slave-led services and were especially critical of the music.²⁵

The public worship of God should be conducted *with reverence and stillness on the part of the congregation*; nor should the minister—whatever may have been the previous habits and training of the people—encourage demonstrations of approbation or disapprobation, or exclamation, or response, or noises, or out-cries of any kind during the process of divine worship; nor boisterous singing immediately after its close. These practices prevail over large portions of the southern country, and are not confined to one denomination, but appear to some extent in all. I cannot think them beneficial.²⁶

The call-and-response and improvisatory nature of the musical practices of slaves were not acceptable to the European standards of sacred music and church practices. The original religious songs of African Americans—as distinguished from the standard Protestant hymns that they

²³ Southern, *Readings in Black American Music*, 45-6.

²⁴ Maultsby, "Africanisms in African-American Music," 196.

²⁵ *Ibid* 196

²⁶ Quoted in Maultsby, "Africanisms in African-American Music," 197.

sang—were references in the writings of men who lived or visited in Philadelphia in the nineteenth century, and would later be known as “Negro spirituals.”²⁷ Further disapproval for these spirituals can be seen in the writing of John F. Watson, a Methodist minister in the early nineteenth century in Philadelphia. The following mentions similar aesthetic principals discussed earlier

In the *blacks'* quarter, the coloured people get together, and sing for hours together, short scraps of disjointed affirmations, pledges, or prayers, lengthened out with long repetition *choruses*... With every word so sung, they have a sinking of one or other leg of the body alternately; producing an audible sound of the feet at every step... If some, in the mean-time sit, they strike the sounds alternately on each thigh... after the public devotions had closed, and there continue the whole night, singing tune after tune... scarce one of which in our hymn books. Some of these from their nature, (having long repetition choruses and short scraps of matter) are actually composed as sung, and are indeed almost endless.²⁸

The use of improvised bodily percussion, communal musical experience, and improvisatory singing were the most common qualitative Africanisms that were documented in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. In fact, even Hornbostel with his assertion that “never the twain shall meet,” remarked

Still there is one feature in American Negro songs which is not European but African, namely form consisting of leading lines sung by a single voice, alternating with a refrain sung by a chorus. This form, it is true, occurs in European folksongs, but in African songs it is almost the only one used.²⁹

Despite Hornbostel’s earlier assertion, he confirmed the call-and-response aspect of African American music.

Now that the more qualitative aesthetic similarities between African and African American music have been explored, a quantitative analysis of an African American folk spiritual can be used to show the African musical characteristics retained in the sacred music tradition of slaves and free blacks.

²⁷ Southern, *Readings in Black American Music*, 62.

²⁸ *Ibid* 63-4.

²⁹ Quoted in Burmin and Maultsby, *African American Music: An Introduction*, 55.

Several common musical characteristics of African American spirituals were syncopation, pentatonic scales use, and traditional call-and-response, verse/chorus form. While the communal nature of African American spirituals plays into the qualitative analysis of the music, the verse/refrain form of call-and-response is an important quantitative aspect of African American sacred music as well. The following excerpt (example 1) of “Go Down Moses,” is taken from James Weldon Johnson’s *Books of American Negro Spirituals* (1925), and demonstrates both syncopation and pentatonic scale use

Go Down Moses

J. Rosamond Johnson

Slowly (with majestic impulse) *f*

Go down Mos-es

Way down in E gypt land, Tell me Pha-ra-oh to

let my peo-ple go.

Example 1: “Go Down Moses” Arr. J Rosamond Johnson from *Books of American Negro Spirituals*

As one can see in example 1, syncopation on the word “down” and the second syllable of “Moses” occur on the second beat, instead of the third beat, creating a distinct syncopated feel. It next occurs on the word “land,” between beats three and four of the sixth measure, and in the following measure, the word “ole” falls between beats one and two. Finally, before the resolution in measure ten, the second syllable of “people” begins half way between beats three

and four. This syncopation, as well as the accenting of uncommon syllables such as “down” on the second beat, instead of the first or third used most commonly in the Western music tradition, is a common aesthetic trait found in Negro spirituals and imparts on the song the uneven, jagged qualities that were most often mentioned in early writing.

Another common quantitative aesthetic similarity found in Negro spirituals is the use of the pentatonic, or similarly gapped, scale. Many spirituals are based on the five-pitched pentatonic scale, which roughly corresponds to the first, second, third, fifth, and sixth notes of the standard Western scale. Henry Krehbiel (1914) confirmed this penchant for pentatonic scale use after examining 527 spirituals

[T]he tones which seem rebellious to the negro's sense of intervallic propriety are the fourth and seventh of the diatonic major series and the fourth, sixth and seventh of the minor. The omission of the fourth and seventh intervals of the major scale leaves the pentatonic series on which 111 of the 527 songs analyzed are built. The fact is an evidence of the strong inclination of the American negroes [*sic*] toward this scale.³⁰

“Go Down Moses” is one of these 111 spirituals Krehbiel analyzed, and is no exception to his conclusion. The piece is keyed and sung entirely in the F pentatonic minor scale, containing the pitches F, A-flat, B-flat, C, and E-flat. Only once does it deviate from this in the seventh measure of the eight bar phrase, when the seventh scale degrees are raised by a half-step.

Although it is not expressed in the score for “Go Down Moses,” the spiritual would have been sung in the traditional verse chorus form. The verse portion would have been sung by a song leader or similar solo vocalist, often the leader of the religious congregation and the refrain of “Let my people go” would be mirrored by those assembled. Natalie Curtis-Burlin explained the performance of spirituals as

The Negro Spiritual (prayer songs) open with a choral refrain or burthen, followed by a freely declaimed extemporaneous verse or even just a few words of solo sung by a single voice. Then

³⁰ Henry Edward Krehbiel, *Afro-American Folksongs: A Study in Racial and National Music*, 4th ed. New York, NY: G. Schirmer, 1914. 73.

comes the chorus or burthen again; another verse or solo; again the chorus; more verse, and so on, indefinitely, until the song ends with the chorus—a rounded whole³¹

“God Down Moses,” when performed in a traditional setting, would have likewise followed this verse/chorus form, alternating between the solo vocalist and assembly, until ending with a resounding “Let my people go.”

Despite the debate on the conflicted origins of African American music throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries it is clear that, with objective analysis, evidence for African aesthetic survivals can be found in the earliest writing about, and transcriptions of, African American sacred music. Through the study of primary texts and use of musical analysis, the presence of Africanisms in African American music, particularly spirituals, is obvious. Both qualitative and quantitative aesthetic survivals are present and can be observed through the writings of those that observed Africans and African Americans making music in the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries, as well as through an analysis of the spirituals as written.

³¹ Quoted in Earl L. Stewart, *African American Music: An Introduction*, Belmont, CA: Schirmer, 1998. 26.

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