The Cultural World of the Enslaved African Americans

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Abstract: The research paper explores the process of American scholars' comprehension of the cultural world of enslaved African Americans. The article emphasizes how scholars began to explore this unknown terrain and outlined a new pedagogical approach to understanding the world of enslaved blacks in America. The paper also approaches the realm of contradictions that existed between the two contradictory cultural worlds of the enslaved blacks and their enslavers, who professed to be the beacon of democracy, liberty and individualism while denying the same to those involuntary Africans on whose labour the nineteenth century America embarked on the path of economic prosperity, national growth and strengthening of its political foundations in the nineteenth century America.

Keywords: Paternalism, social separation, racial spaces, memories, tales, folklore, Methodism, Evangelicalism, oral culture, folktraditions

Introduction

Slave culture became an important research topic in African-American history when Stanley Elkins presented a dark aspect of the psychic emasculation of black Americans by an exploitative institution that encountered few societal barriers to its operation. He emphasized on "sambo personality" of the slaves, which left them without culture and self-respect, an "infantilized" personality incapable of rebellion and dependent on their masters.[i] In criticism, black historian John Blassingame stressed the strength and mental independence of slaves due to their association with their group members.[ii] Similarly, Peter Woods emphasized the importance of an Afro-American culture among slaves.In a more complex study, it was E. D. Genovese who combined Marxist interpretation with the study of cultural aspects. He emphasized the moral independence and cultural unity of the slaves and also studied how slave masters set up their

physical and mental powers over the slaves. He considered the relationship between the two as complex and ambivalent based on paternalism in the plantation economic and social system. Paternalism, in this sense, existed from the white man's point of view. As for slaves, the relationship was of exasperation, indignation, distrust and animosity. There always existed a contentious gulf between the two. Slaves knew they were considered beasts of burden maintained by their masters to advance their economic profits and social status. The white master carried this gulf based on a carefully crafted ideology of racism, racial bias and a mental abyss created on the twin foundations of injustice and oppression of blacks.

From 1863 till the almost mid-twentieth century, American scholarship looked towards slave culture from top to bottom– from white to black – guided by evolutionary ideology seeking that Euro-Americans influenced African-American culture and to ensure their enslavement remained permanent. They were projected as 'primitive', 'barbaric' and 'childlike' in their behaviour and therefore needed to be under the paternal control of the 'civilizing' whites. In contrast, the slaves in America experienced not only alien conditions and environment, but in this New World, they encountered new forms of punishment, exploitation and racism in its most cruel forms, aspects and structures.

Growth of Two Antagonistic Cultural Worlds

Over some time, two polarized cultural worlds began to emerge, particularly in the southern region dominated by a slave mode of production established on the aspect of physical differences (racism), then stretching mental and social separation from each other that led to the creation of divided racial spaces where the slaves developed their own unique African-American culture.

According to Paul D. Escott, 'two worlds' existed in the southern states, divided into two opposing zones. The slaves developed their unique cultural world to establish not only their identity as human beings but also to bear the burden of slavery by developing different value systems, codes of ethics, religious realm, the spiritual universe and understanding of their environment with lingering fragile but precious African memories and traditions they continued to pass on from generation to generation to sustain and provide inner strength to their community along with independent thought process.[iii] According to Paul D. Escott, the power of slave culture emerged from three sources: their austere existential experiences of racial exploitation,the development of life-saving skills and internal structures to overcome racism. They created their cultural world of beliefs and practices, along with their code of ethics based on their sense of justice which became an essential element in their everyday struggle against the dark world created by the whites.[iv]

The Cultural World of the Blacks

The whites defined slaves as separate, inferior and sub-human species, denying their existence as independent individuals. As a socially subjugated class, the slave could rise from one form of intense labour to another without bringing about any significant rise or shift in their status, rank or removal of bias against their racial identity. The excessively exploited form of the labour system necessitated the development of their moral system independent of white control and racial regulations. The essential elements of African-American culture were, in reality,an amalgamation of African, Indigenous tribal and European cultures that slaves encountered, experienced and assimilated for their survival in the New World. The fact remains that racial hostility, prejudice, and exploitation led to a sense of loyalty, cohesion and cooperation to prevent the entry of whites into their personal spaces, thoughts and the inner world.[v]

The first step towards the creation of their own 'space' was in terms of their appearance,which became part of their cultural identity, and the 'other' became the 'self' by adopting African hairstyles, headdresses, and clothes a mixture of indigenous tribal encounters and experiences along with European styles. This amalgamation of different types marked a process of identity-building that assisted them in blendinginto their world,separating themselves from the dominant white community.

The outer appearance of difference extended further in terms of their spoken language as they were never educated in the Western sense. Therefore, the slaves developed 'pidgin' in which people with different African native languages could communicate and transmit their cultural traditions with many essential aspects of language borrowed from the language of their colonizers. Sterling Stuckey saidEnglish brought diverse Africans together.[vi] Still, according to Genovese, cultural penetration was a

two-way street as the slaves borrowed from whites and mixed it with their African heritage. Slaves also developed their forms of oral culture through the world of sound: words spoken, chanted or sung through dances and tales. Denial of Western education necessitated the need to develop an internal community mechanism whereby older adults within the slave community became great storytellers along with riddles, proverbs and folktales through which they transmitted aspects of their unique forms of morality and training to live in the environment of an oppressive world. Mysteries or tales, including stories, proverbs, anecdotes and jokes based on the African past and their systems of present experiences, became an essential tool for the transmission of African-American cultural values and education that led to memory training amongst the youngsters, developed the power of reasoning, philosophical questions and development of analytical skill.

Slave tales had hope for the future and were an important tool of survival essential to maintain family ties and the obedience of the parents and elders. It also became a tool for transmitting their own religious beliefs. Their trickster tales had multiple meanings and showed how weak could defeat or manipulate mighty, influential people. Trickster tales narrated parodies of cruel masters and the institution's injustice, hypocrisy and immorality. Sterling Stuckey has pointed out the importance of storytelling for transmitting slave culture to successive generations based on African storytelling traditions. According to Sterling Stuckey, it was through slave culture that slaves belonging to different ethnic African groups were unified in the New World and made it into a distinct African-American community.[vii] The slaves evolved their songs, tales, rituals and ceremonies to construct an African character of slave culture. Their songs were based on nature with a solid relationship to dance and bodily movements. These cultural elements were based on African roots and indicated their cultural self-assertion and psychological release. Even with slave virtues, ideals, manners, and modes of hospitality, the outlook differed significantly from the whites. In this sense, black culture had developed as a source of power and strategy of resistance, rebellion and obedience into a masterpiece of slave art mastery of deception.[viii] The foundations of slave music had distinct cultural traditions created by mixing individual and community expressions. According to John Blassingame, Black music was based on their understanding and adoption of Christianity along with the combination of the musical forms inherited from Africa, Christian imagery, and the English language, made the "spirituals" an original, diasporic and artistic creation that led to use of musical instruments like drums and banjo used even during their religious sermons along with rhythmical melodies and chants to liven up their lives and surroundings liberating their mental world from extreme forms of physical oppression. These traditions, over some

time, created a new genre of musical practice that came to be known as jazz and blues music. Even their varied dance forms based on vigorous athletic movements known as 'patting juba' helped to release their pent-up emotions and liberate their bodies, if only for brief interludes.

Over some time, despite the official policy of denial of education to the slaves, the community, through individual exemplary courage of many African-Americans like a Maryland mathematician and astronomer Benjamin Banneker (1731-1806), considered to be the first African-American scientist that assisted in the survey of District of Columbia in 1791. Banneker published an almanac from 1792 to 1797, and abolitionists cited his mathematical ability as proof that people of African descent possessed all the higher mental capabilities of white people and, therefore, slavery was wrong. Banneker had also sent his first almanac to Thomas Jefferson to persuade him to accept the equality of blacks. African-born poet, Phillis Wheatley of Boston, was known for her poems like Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral (1773). She also wrote poems on George Washington and the Methodist preacher George Whitefield. Her lyrics clearly outlined that African people possessed full humanity and deserved freedom. She also wrote a poem on Scipio Moorhead (ca. 1750-n.d.), a black artist who engraved the front page of her book of poetry.

Even the slave rituals maintained their long-lost African heritage based on their belief in the living dead, conjuration or ghosts or apparitions, and faith in magic traditions and the art of interpreting dreams.[ix] Their universe consisted of spirits who could be invoked or provoked, with belief in magic, and luck was important in their uncertain lives. Slaves brought with them their African techniques of agricultural production. They taught their exploiters how to cultivate certain vegetables, crops like rice, indigo and cotton, gardens, read weather signs, and they brought with them the knowledge of how to deal with varied wildlife and animals like alligators. They developed their own medicine, teas and tonics based on ingredients found in America to cure themselves of common ailments.[x]

According to John Blassingame, the slaves introduced basket weaving, wood carving, pottery, and making unique musical instruments; some African architectural features are notablecontributionsto African-American experiences.

The Black Religion and the Church

Religion provided slaves with a set of ethics and a different view of the universe, providing them spiritual independence and religious justice from white propaganda and oppression as they rejected white man's religious traditions along with a system of praying and preaching that continuously reminded them of their subordinate and subjugated position. In the process, slaves developed a different emotional aspect of their Christian religion. Their moral behaviour also differed when they resorted to stealing and theft. They did not consider that immoralas they took what rightfully and legally belonged to them, which became an integral part of their ethics of justice.

Religion forslaves meant:

- Mental and spiritual freedom and a universe free from enslavement supported liberation ideology.
- Ethical code of behaviour, which supported their various forms of resistance.
- The Spiritual vision of faith in humanity.
- Dignity of human labour.

In slave religion, the most dominant image of the spirituals is that of a chosen people on their way to the promised land, and they maintained personal contact with God. In contrast, Jesus and Moses were considered significant others in the daily lives of the slaves. Their own 'God' in their independent mental space gave them the power of reasoning, rationality, and inner strength to face and resist the exploitative environment whenever the opportunity presented itself.[xi]

The early African American religion came from the bottom up. Black preachers,including some women, were not formally educated; they gained knowledge directly from God or the Holy Spirit. Another facet of African American religion was that it was multiracial and evangelical. Early Methodism and the many independent churches and sects it inspired reflect this dimension. The founder of Methodism was the English Anglican priest John Wesley in Georgia, where the first two people he baptized were enslaved women. Methodist congregations met in homes where people of all races, genders and stations of life met and narrated their own stories of personal salvation. It also led to the emergence of black preachers like Harry Hosier, who was born enslaved (1750-1806) near Fayetteville, North Carolina and was known as 'Black Harry'. Hosier became the first black American Methodist preacher. Another black woman Methodists preacher was Isabella, born enslaved in New York State in 1797 and later gave

herself a new name, Sojourner Truth. She emerged as a gifted preacher in her native Ulster County in the Hudson River Valley in the late 1820s. She later moved to New York after becoming free by a New York law in 1828. By the 1840s, she began turning her power as a preacher toward antislavery and feminist movements.

The third dimension of black religion was organized churches. Breaking away from white congregations in the late eighteenth century, Black Northerners founded their church organizations in Philadelphia. The African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church, the first black church connection, grew out of American Methodism. One black preacher, Richard Allen (1760-1831), had impressed Methodist circuit riders with his piety and preaching abilities and permitted him to purchase his freedom. Allen later settled in Philadelphia, preaching to Black people at St. George Methodist Episcopal Church. As blacks were subjected to stringent regulations, Allen and his colleague Absalom Jones (1746-1818) established their own Free African Society of Philadelphia in 1787. In 1794, they left the white-dominated church and setup their own Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church. After long years of struggle with St. George church over control of Mother Bethel, Allen joined hands with Daniel Coker (1780-1846), the leader of Baltimore's Black Methodists and other black Methodists from Salem, New Jersey, and Attleborough, Pennsylvania. Together, they formed the African Methodist Episcopal Church connection in 1816, which became the first Black denomination Church.

Daniel Coker was a founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and was the son of a white indentured mother and an enslaved black father. Coker spent the years from 1820-1821 as a pioneer in the newly established Maryland colony of Liberia, then spent mostof his life in Sierra Leone. This region was set by free northern blacks and formerly enslaved people who had joined with white American colonization society to create the new colony of Liberia in West Africa in 1820. In Sierra Leone, Coker published several articles opposing slavery.

The roots of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion church were formed in the northern city in the late 18th century New York. Here the black Methodists belonged to the John Street Methodist Church, whose congregation was about 40% black in 1793. Black members of this church formed their African Chapel, known as the Zion Church, in 1796 under the leadership of Peter Williams (1763-1836). The African Chapel became independent in 1801 and becamea separate denomination between 1820 and 1824.

The independent black churches offered ample opportunities to black men but did not welcome women preachers. They, too, obeyed St. Paul's stricture against women speaking out in church even though most members were women.Although most women black preachers were extremely gifted but illiterate, that was an essential basic requirement for church leadership. Women preachers were also least organized and needed help to become ministers. Some gifted female preachers were Jarena Lee (1783-ca. the 1850s) and Zilpha Elaw (ca. 1790-ca. 1850s).

During this time, blacks began developing their art forms based on Christian motifs. Hagar's figure, Abraham's servant and bearer of his child Ishmael, appeared most in the black writings as African Americans could see parallels between her situation and that of enslaved black women and single parents. Black women also made quilts, like Harriet Powers (1837-1911), who made figures of her people and Bible quilts.[xii]

Religion for African Americans became a form of mental resistance against physical oppression. Religion became a weapon of defence, which inculcated in them community values, a sense of compassion and the ability to critically comprehend their masters and reject the ideological rationale for their enslavement.[xiii]

Conclusion

On the other hand, the Southern whites stressed the importance of individual piety rather than social regeneration as Southern politicians, intellectuals, and religions aimed to provide no space for social experimentation. The North witnessed the 'era of reform' through the growth of utopian socialism and trade unionism, feminism, pacifism and abolitionism. The Southerners criticized the development of such 'isms' as they preferred conservatism, order and tradition. Slaves also rejected the interpretation of Christianity as propounded by their masters, who emphasizedobedience, humility and release from suffering in an afterlife rather than in this world. Slaves viewed themselves as chosen people. From the Bible, they were attracted to the stories where people overcame adversity, like Daniel escaping the lion's den, David slaying Goliath and Moses leading his people to a promised land of freedom. In religion, blacks found a vehicle for surviving the experience of enslavement with their dignity intact and, in the church, space to develop a leadership independent of white control.

Eugene Genovese believed that religion was the centrality of the slave world. They used it as a tool of resistance and spiritual comfort and relief to slaves, providingthe power of endurance to the slave community. They developed a distinctive African-American religion that included conjurers, magicians, and Christian preachers who emphasized faith, love, and not rigid doctrine or formal structure. They made their religion into a space of happiness and peace that inspired, according to Albert Raboteau, a strong community sense. According to Lawrence Levine, it provided them with alternative religious standards by creating space with the help of which they prevented legal slavery from becoming spiritual slavery. They extensively practised voodoo, and conjurers influenced the slave community and developed what is termed by Blassingame into syncretic African Christianity. He states that the Black church was the "single most important institution for the 'Americanization' of the bondsman'. Christianity provided both spiritual release and spiritual victory.[xiv] Moreover, in the words of Sterling Stuckey, "Christianity shot through with African values."

Based onthe points mentioned above, Herbert G. Gutman opines that the process of cultural formation among Afro-American slaves began before the American War of Independence and continued well after the civil war.[xv]According to E.D. Genovese, American slavery was chattel based on material possession that could be bought, sold, mortgaged and rented. The control of this property established a racial distinction between master and slave and created an unjust social order based on cruelty and hatred. This socio-cultural world was also based on a land-plantation system where slaveholders had become entrenched as the regional ruling class. Therefore, the Southern slave system was paternalistic as it was based on racism, slavery, and class exploitation. Paternalism was based on the method of superordination and subordination. It created racism, undermined the worth of slaves' sense as black people, and reinforced their dependence on white masters. Once made racially inferior, slaves were exploited to provide high status, authority and prestige to their masters. However, despite all these,slavesretained their self-worth and self-respect through the development of African-American culture.[xvi]

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[ii]Blassingame, John. 1979.*The Slave Community: Plantation Life in Antebellum South*. Rev. ed. New York: Oxford University Press.

[iii]Escott, Paul D. 1979. *Slavery Remembered: A Record of Twentieth Century Slave Narratives*. U.S.: University of North Carolina Press, 95.

[iv] Escott, Paul D. 1979. p. 96.

[v] Escott, Paul D. 1979. pp. 96 – 100.

[vi]Stuckey, Sterling. 1987.*Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory & the Foundations of Black America*, Oxford University Press, New York, p. 77

[vii] Stuckey, Sterling. 1987, p. 77.

[viii] John Blassingame, ed., *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews and Autobiographies*. Louisiana, Louisiana State University Press, 1977.

[ix]Escott, Paul D. 1979. pp. 102 – 104.

[x]Escott, Paul D. 1979, p. 108

[xi]Escott, Paul D. 1979. pp. 112 – 114.

[xii]Painter, Nell Irvin. 2006.*Creating Black Americans: African American History and its Meanings, 1619 to the Present*, OxfordUniversity Press.

[xiii]Segal, Ronald. 1995.*The Black Diaspora: Five Centuries of Black Experience Outside Africa*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

[xiv]Blassingame, John. 1977.

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[xv]Gutman, Herbert G. 1976.*The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925*. New York: Pantheon.

[xvi]Genovese, E. D. 1965.*The Political Economy of Slavery*. New York: Pantheon.