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### THE TRANSPLANTATION AND THE PRESERVATION OF THE AFRICAN CULTURE IN THE AMERICAS: EVOLUTION AND IMPACTS

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#### ABSTRACT

*There has been much debate over the origins of African culture in the United States and the extent to which African retentions have been preserved and readapted according to the American diasporic conditions under slavery, forced labour, and racial discrimination. In this light, the present paper questions about whether the Africans in the New World continued to be Africans only in colour or whether any substantial elements of Africa became part of their lives in the New world. The paper also attempts to consider the extent to which the culture of Africa was transplanted and preserved in the New World.*

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#### 1. INTRODUCTION

For many decades, scholars and anthropologists of Africa and America have been discussing the question of the extent to which the culture of Africa was transplanted and preserved in the New World. Some of them believed that African- Americans' religions and other aspects of their lives in the New World had been, to a certain extent, influenced by the West African heritage. On the other hand, another group of anthropologists formerly contended that no substantial elements of Africa could affect any aspect of the blacks in America.

Historians and Africanists like Melville Herskovits and Carter. G. Woodson insisted on demonstrating the way African survivals could shape the life of the blacks in many aspects. African languages, kinship groups, folk tales, African religions, musical and dance forms had been preserved and adjusted according to African-Americans' needs in slavery. In language for instance, words like yam, goober, canoe... and banjo are probably derived from an African background. The

use of folk tales among blacks and later by white writers is also an evidence of Africanism. And in religion too many divinations and cult practices have their roots in Africa.

According to John Thornton, some African medicinal, culinary, artistic (music and dance), cultural and religious practices were very significant for African slaves' survival in America, particularly on the American southern plantations during the slavery era. He stated:

In the eighteenth century African culture was not surviving: It was arriving. Whatever the brutalities of the middle passage or slave life, it was not going to cause the African-born to forget their mother language or change their ideas about beauty in design or music; nor would it cause them to abandon the ideological underpinnings of religion or ethics-not on arrival in America, not ever in their lives.(John, 1992)

Historian J. H. Franklin, however, believes that the transplantation and the preservation of African survivals in America are probably due to the blacks' exclusion from the white community. The black man was compelled to live in a world apart from the dominant class. These conditions encouraged him to shape a culture of his own. In fact, the black African in the New World was exposed to two environments: on the one hand, the blacks came to America from different African backgrounds with different languages, cultures, religions, and traditions. They melt with other blacks on the plantation. The interaction between people created different sets of customs. On the other hand, the blacks interacted with white Americans, which led automatically, to a change in cultural patterns.

Historian Peter Kolchin also reacted against the authors who refused to link the blacks' American culture with Africa. He wrote:

Historians....performed an extremely valuable service in destroying the myth that slaves were depersonalised samboes and in focusing on slaves as actors who helped shape their own world. In doing so, however, they tended increasingly toward celebration and even mystification of slave life. There consequently appears to be a real danger that in rejecting old myths we are in the process of embracing a new one: that of the utopian slave community (Smith, 1998).

Scholars like E. Franklin Frazier, however, were against the belief that black Americans could be influenced by any aspect of the African heritage on any side. He claimed that nothing existed in Africa that approached civilization, and that there was, therefore, nothing for the Africans to bring with them. Also, sociologists like E. B. Reuter and Robert E. Park believe that they could see nothing in Negro life today which can be traced to the African background.

## **2. AFRICAN-AMERICAN RELIGION**

As far as religion is concerned, Frazier and his followers claimed that the blacks were Methodists and Baptists for the simple reason that Methodist and Baptist churches were among the fewer white denominations to welcome the blacks in their congregations. Besides, the decentralization and the congregation autonomy of these bodies enabled the blacks to be members in these white churches. In addition, religion represented for the blacks a means by which they

could cope with oppression and the cruel conditions they were subjected to. White evangelical Christians- Baptists and Methodists- preached against the evils of human bondage. They freed black slaves and refused to be slave holders. In 1784 the Methodists declared that “slavery was a violent deprecation of the rights of nature...”(Franklin, 1969).

Both Methodists and Baptists succeeded in converting large numbers of blacks, slave and free, and welcomed them as members in their churches. Nonetheless, the blacks were unable to achieve positions of true leadership within the white dominated churches. They were segregated against in communions and baptisms; they were provided with separate Sunday school classes and were allowed to sit in the rear of the galleries only or what has historically been called “Nigger pews” or “African corners”. Besides, by the 1790’s overt discrimination became embedded in the white churches. The whites realised that the Church was responsible for blacks’ gatherings which would lead to their unity. This would, subsequently, lead to the loss of control on the plantations.

The African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church came to birth as a reaction against the white abuses in the churches. The blacks understood that they could never achieve equality with the whites in their churches and decided to found churches of their own. The origins of the AME Church go back to 1787 under the leadership of Richard Allen (1760 -1831). Allen was born a slave in Philadelphia about 1760. During his childhood, he was sold to a planter in Delaware. When he became a young man, R. Allen was converted to Methodism and became a Methodist preacher. With the permission of his master, R. Allen was allowed to organize prayer meetings on the plantation where he used to live. In 1776 he went back to Philadelphia where he could attend the St George’s Methodist Church. He gathered money and could secure his freedom in 1777. On some occasions, he was allowed to organize prayer meetings for the blacks but as the number of the blacks in the Church started to grow in number, some of the white officials opposed R. Allen’s preaching and others refused the attendance of the blacks altogether. When one day Allen and his two friends Absolom Jones (1746-1818) and William White were pulled from their knees during prayer at the St George Church, they understood that the blacks should have a place of worship of their own. With the co-operation of Absolom Jones, Richard Allen founded “The Free –African Society” on 12 May 1787, a mutual aid society with religious purposes-which was a preliminary step to the formation of “The Bethel Methodist Episcopal Church” in Philadelphia in 1794. With the formation of a black church, Allen and his followers believed that “the slaves did not simply become Christian; they creatively fashioned a Christian tradition to fit their own peculiar experience of enslavement in America”(Hill, 1993). They had their own preaching and expressed their common sorrows through “Negro Spirituals (Schoell, 1959), religious singings performed by the blacks in the churches as a medium to flee the existing conditions of bondage. “Dere’s a great camp meetin’ in de promised land, look away in de heaven, Lord ... fo’ my soul’s goin’ to heaven jes’ sho’s you born... Heaven, Heaven, everybody talkin’ about Heaven ain’tgoin’ there’...(Franklin) such was the cry of the blacks in the churches.

### 3. THE EMERGENCE OF BLACK AMERICAN ENGLISH

At linguistic level, conflicting ideas over the origins of the black American language (also known as the African-American vernacular English “A. A. V. E.”) also arose among many anthropologists and socio-linguists. There were those who were in favor of the so-called “dialect hypothesis”. They formerly contended that no linguistic elements of Africa could affect any aspect of the blacks’ speech in the Americas. They believed that the African slaves, upon arrival to the United States, picked up English very slowly and learned it incorrectly, and that their mistakes have been passed down through generations. According to this group of sociolinguists, the African slaves learnt their English from a very small number of British native speakers, namely the indentured servants, with whom they used to live during the colonial era. Other more recent researchers like Labov and Harris advocated the “Divergence Issue”. They have, in fact, given life to the “Dialect Hypothesis” arguing that the A. A. V. E. is, indeed, closely linked to British dialects but has somehow diverged through time. Yet, another group of anthropologists strongly defended the “Creole hypothesis”. They believed that African-Americans’ languages and other aspects of their lives in the New World had been, to a certain extent, influenced by the African heritage.

These Africanists further alleged that black American English was born of slavery between the late sixteenth century and the mid- nineteenth century and followed black emigration from southern states to racially isolated ghettos throughout the United States of America. It was created among the blacks not only as a communicative tool unintelligible to the speakers of the dominant master class, but also served as a mark of social identity and a linguistic bond between enslaved Africans or disparate ethnicities and in later years between African-Americans of unequal socio-educational classes. Today, African-American language is spoken all over the American nation and throughout the globe.

The earliest African-derived words that were used on the American soil had been introduced by the Wolof people between 1670 and 1700. These people who used to serve as house slaves in northern America may have been the earliest Africans whose cultural and linguistic elements were assimilated into the developing culture of America. Among the most common words they had introduced was for instance the term “*masa*” to refer to their mater. Originally, the term was pronounced as “*mansa*” and was used among the Wolof tribes to address the West African kings to mean “chief” or “leader”. As the American slaveholders were persons of authority, the Wolof slaves employed their indigenous word “*ma[n]sa*” standing for the term leader. Among the many other African words that were adopted by the Wolof slaves throughout the plantations and later assimilated into the American culture are the following: “okay” or “o.k.” (originally used as “*wawkay*”: all correct), sambo, and Honkie. Furthermore, many Wolof words became part of the American English because Wolof people used to be employed as interpreters for the European slave traders on the West African coasts during the early years of the Atlantic slave trade. They used Wolof names to name African food stuffs given to slaves transported across the Atlantic along their way to the Americas. These words included: yams and bananas, words that later became part

of Standard English in North America. Other Wolof words commonly used in present-day American English are illustrated in table one:

**Table- 1.**

<b>Wolof word</b>	<b>American English</b>	<b>meaning</b>
Gay	Guy	person/fellow
Dega	Dig	to understand
Jey	Jive	misleading talk
Fuzz	Fuzz	police

The linguistic influence of the other West African groups, namely Twi, Hausa, Yoruba, Akan, Kim Bundu, Bambara, and many other languages, is not to be overlooked. Indeed, since the early years of their arrival on the American soil, and despite the heterogeneity in many aspects of African life, there were sufficient common experiences for blacks in the New World to cooperate in the fashioning of new customs and speech forms. As Africans of different experiences lived together, there was the interaction of various cultures and vernaculars which produced somewhat different set of practices that would correspond to the new environment. Table two below illustrates some African words that have become part of the American language.

**Table- 2.**

<b>Word</b>	<b>Origin</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
<i>Daadi</i> (daddy)	Fante	Affectionate term for father
Adobe	Twi	Palm tree leaves/grass used for roof covering
Goober	Kimbundu	peanut
Tote	Hausa	To carry
Booboo	Bantu	Stupid/ blunder

The A. A. V. E's words are said to be composed of a form (a sound symbol) and a meaning. With some words, both the form and the meaning are derived from a West African background as it is the case for the following examples:

-Bogus "fake/ fraudulent" from Hausa *boko* or *boko-boko* "deceit/fraud".

-Hep, hip "well informed or up-to-date" from Wolof *hepi*, *hipi* "to open one's eyes, to be aware of what is going on".

In some other cases, however, the form is from English and the meaning seems to have its roots in West African languages, as it is shown throughout the following examples:

-Cool "calm, controlled" from Mandingo *suma* "slow" (literary "cool").

-Dig "to understand, appreciate, to pay attention" from Wolof *deg* or *dega* "to understand, appreciate".

-Bad-eye "hateful glance" from Mandingo *nyejugu* "hateful glance" (literally giving one the "bad eye").

The A. A. V. E is in many aspects similar to, and in some other aspects different from English. In terms of its phonology, for instance, the A. A. V. E shares some features that are similar to the other English varieties (mainly American). Other phonological features, however, are unique to the A. A. V. E.

An important phonological feature related to the A. A. V. E. and also found in many other English varieties is the consonant reduction which occurs mainly in word final. The “st” cluster as in the word “best” is reduced to “s” so that “best” becomes “bes”. The reduction of sounds depends largely on the context in which the sound is used. If the following word starts with a consonant, reduction is more likely to take place than if the next word begins with a vowel. Therefore, a phrase like “best player” is pronounced as “bes player”.

Another instance of reduction is related to the regular past form of verbs (grammatically called the “ed” form). Verbs in their past form like “worked, played, and looked” are sometimes respectively pronounced as work, play, and look so that there is no difference between the present and the past tense. In fact, the past tense is conveyed through adverbials like “last night” and “yesterday” or conjunctions like “then”. In the same way, words used in their present participle form have the last sound deleted so that gerunds like talking and taking are respectively pronounced as “talkin” and “takin”.

Among the many other systematic features that are unique to the A. A. V. E. is the pronunciation of the “th” combination which is pronounced as / t /, / d /, / f /, or / v / depending on the position of the word. Indeed, the voiced fricative / ð / is pronounced as / d / when it is used in word initial position as in the word “this” pronounced as “dis”. In medial and final positions, however, the / ð / is pronounced as / v / and a word like “brother” is pronounced as “brover”. On the other hand, when used in initial position, the voiceless fricative / θ / may be pronounced as / θ / or / t / and a word like thing may be pronounced both as “thing” / θɪŋ/ or “ting” / tɪŋ/. In medial and final positions, / θ / is pronounced as “t” or “p” as in the word “mouth” / maθ / which is pronounced both as “mout” / maot / and “mouf” / maof /.

Another feature which is also unique to the A. A. V. E. is the use of the /skr/ cluster in syllable initial position which is replaced by the /skr/ cluster with a certain set of words. Hence, words like “street”, “stretch” and “strawberry” are rather pronounced as “skreet”, “skrech” and “skrawberry” respectively.

At syntactic and morpho- syntactic levels, the A. A. V. E. is characterised by the absence of the “s” of the third person singular in the present simple tense. Thus, the sentence: he sings and dances, is pronounced as he sing and dance. Another peculiarity of the A. A.V. E. is related to the use of “ain’t” instead of “not” to express the negation. “Ain’t” is very often used to stand for “hasn’t/ haven’t”, “isn’t/ aren’t”, and “didn’t” as it is shown in these examples:

- I ain’t been eating in there since December.
- Ain’t nobody got to tell me notin’. You know what I’m sayin’?

Another peculiarity of the A. A. V. E. is related to the use of “gonna” to express the future simple, as it is shown throughout the following example:

I 'm gonna sing and dance all night (I will sing and dance all night).

#### **4. AFRICAN FOLK TALES**

In literature, many folklore stories and tales in America have their roots in Africa and many of these stories found their way into the Americans' culture of childhood as told by slaves. With regard to folklore, Brer Rabbit, Brer Wolf, Brer Bear, and Sis' Nanny Goat originate from the Wolof folklore in West Africa. They reached America via the Hausa, Fula (Fulani), Akan, and Mandinka slaves during the slavery and the slave trade era. In addition, other West African Spider (Anansi) tales and West African tales of a trickster Hare and stories of Uncle Kemus were also absorbed into the American culture of childhood making the foundation for American nursery culture.

#### **5. AFRICAN-AMERICAN MUSIC AND DANCE FORMS**

With regard to the arts, African-American music and dance forms, both vocal and instrumental, with their distinctive styles of movement and rhythm had been, in one way or another, influenced by African dances and music. Their origins may be traced back to the early slavery era. Interestingly, the slave song was not born on the American plantations where the slaves performed rituals and songs as forms of resistance to cope with the oppression and brutality they were subjected to, hoping for a better world where all their burdens would be relieved. Rather, music and song were encouraged by the slave guards on the slave ships during the slaves' passage across the Atlantic on their way to the Americas. In fact, slave guards believed that the slave could better overcome the harsh conditions of the voyage if they were allowed to sing and dance. It was in this way that many African instruments made their way the Americas. As pointed out by [Lawrence \(1977\)](#) "slaves brought the banjo, the musical bow, several other stringed instruments, and a number of percussive instruments with them from Africa"([Lawrence, 1977](#)). Nowadays, the banjo is extensively used by the whites and black Americans in Bluegrass and country music.

Throughout time, African-American music in America had developed into a variety of genres, hence, giving birth to new musical and dance forms from Negro spirituals to blues, ragtime, vaudeville, gospel, jazz, rock and roll, and hip hop and rap nowadays. And what is common with all these dance and musical forms is that all of them have their foundations heavily embedded in the African tradition. Indeed, what African-American music and dance had inherited from African music and forms of dance is for instance hand claps and slapping of hands against the body especially for hip hop dances, and the use of percussion instruments like the drum or drum sound more recently (for hip hop and rap music for instance) which create in both African and African-American music a rhythmic complexity. This African feature of rhythmic complexity that was later retained and adapted in African-American music (especially the jazz, hip hop and rap genres) has been explained by [PortiaMaultsby](#). In his own words:

In both African and African American music, rhythm is organized in multilinear forms. Different patterns, which are repeated with slight, if any, variation, are assigned to various instruments. The

combination of these patterns produces polyrhythms. Polyrhythmic structures increase the overall intensity of musical performances because each repetition produces added rhythmic tension at the same time the repetition of patterns in one part allows for textual and melodic variation in another. (Portia Maultsby, 1990)

Equally important, what the enslaved Africans had also retained of their African tradition of song and dance is the fact of considering music as a communal activity in which everyone has to participate. The involvement of all participants stems basically from West African roots to express the unity of the group. In African-American music, however, this communal quality of music rather expresses the belonging and the community to which they belong to.

## 6. AFRICAN FOLK MEDICINE

African medicinal retentions also played a pivotal role for African-American biological survival in the Americas particularly in the South. It is worth noting that during the slavery period, the African-American blacks used to cure their enslaved fellows and the white indentured slaves too using medicinal remedies which go back to their old tradition in Africa. In his book *Black Legacy: America's Hidden Heritage (1993)*, William D. Pierson insisted on demonstrating the way the African heritage influenced the lives of the African-Americans particularly in medicine. He said: "the African medical knowledge is one example of the many skills that were carried across the ocean to make a major impact on American lives"(William, 1999). Pierson further stressed on the contribution of the black slave practitioners with their herbal healing practices for the development of medicine in America as a whole. "The transference of African medical knowledge" Pierson claimed "permitted black Americans not only to tend their own medical needs, but to contribute to the improvement of American health as a whole"(Ibid). Undeniably, many African medicinal techniques and herbal uses were still unknown to the New World European settlers before being introduced by the Black African slaves. According to Shelley Fisher-Fishkin in his *Reclaiming the Black Presence in Mainstream Culture*, the black African slaves are known to have cured scurvy using lemon juice many years before European practitioners could understand the disease and hence adopt it as a curing technique. Among the many other medicinal techniques the African slave practitioners brought from Africa to the New World is for instance Geophagy which was the practice of eating earthy substances such as clay and chalk for the sake of getting minerals needed for the body. This practice was widespread among the slaves on the plantations who used to eat those substances while working. The black African practitioners were also very skilled at bloodletting (the technique of drawing blood) and cupping (the technique of bringing fresh blood to the upper surface of the skin), and knew how to cure from snakebites and chronic infectious diseases. In addition, they were also well experienced with variolation. Their healing techniques were strongly related to their African heritage which cured the sick according to his/her physical, mental, and spiritual well being.



## 7. SLAVE FOOD AND CUISINE

African-American cuisine also testifies the existence of African heritage which goes back as early as the transatlantic slave trade. During this era, Joseph E. Holloway explained, many African crops were transported across the ocean to be prepared in America. These crops included rice, okra, Tania, black eyed peas, peanuts, watermelon, yams, and sesame (benne) which continue to be prepared according to African tradition up to now. In her book *African Roots/ American Cultures: Africa in the Creation of the Americas* (2001), Sheila Walker further claims that the cultivation of rice throughout the American Antebellum South was successful thanks to the efforts of skilled West African slaves whose agricultural knowledge played a pivotal role for rice cultivation for many centuries. She stated:

Rice culture in the United State, which originally centered in the coastal low country of South Carolina and Georgia, was based on the knowledge and skills of people from Sierra Leone on West Africa's 'Grain Coast' or 'Rice Coast' who were involuntarily 'recruited' because of their well-known expertise in rice production. (Sheila Walker, 2001)

In fact, rice and other West African crops were introduced in the Americas for economic reasons. Above all, these crops were allowed to cross the ocean because the slave holders wanted their African slaves to keep on eating the same crops to preserve their good health in order to achieve better economic profits on the plantations. They were afraid that the slaves would get ill and probably die as a result of eating something they were not used to.

## 8. CONCLUSION

African slaves' religious, linguistic, cultural, artistic, medicinal, and culinary retentions in the Americas were vital for their cultural and biological survival during the period of slavery, particularly in the South. Enslaved Africans maintained ties with their countries of origin in a variety of ingenious ways. At the same time, they reinterpreted and adopted a great portion of their masters' culture. This process paved the way for the establishment of an African American culture which was to last to the present, and this is clearly visible throughout black Americans' behavior and way of life. Nowadays, the influence of these people is still resented through local people's inherited traditions and habits.

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