

Introduction:

Nat Turner and the Fear of African Spirituality

On the warm late summer night of August 21, 1831, Nat Turner embarked on a bloody crusade of insurrection and freedom which descended upon Southampton County, Virginia and the plantation owned by Joseph Travis. Turner was born into American enslavement in 1800 and had later been purchased by Mr. Travis, a craftsman who Nat Turner vehemently despised. Believing he had been directed to his mission through spiritual command and intervention, Turner proclaimed himself to be the savior of his people and proceeded to gather and recruit members of Mr. Travis' plantation as well as those adjacent to the Travis estate. As Nat Turner seethed with hatred for his owner, he regressed within himself in the weeks leading up to that fateful night, conjuring his determined mission through visions, omens, and signs. Inspired by a spiritual fervor which was imparted to him from his mother who was captured and brought to America from Africa, Nat Turner believed that he had been specifically ordained to obtain his freedom through the slaughtering of any white person who crossed his path.

Nat Turner's march through Southampton County began following an eclipse of the sun which was taken as a sign from God that his journey was divinely directed. Flanked by four others, Nat Turner approached the Travis family late into the night and murdered them all. With his mission not yet quenched or completed, over the next two days Turner and his small army went from plantation to plantation killing over sixty white men, women, and children. As his pursuit continued, Nat Turner was able to successfully recruit some sixteen others who were willing to follow the self-proclaimed Black Messiah in his bloodthirsty quest for freedom. Akin to a religious jihad, Nat Turner and his followers both shocked and impressively frightened the white community of Southampton County, Virginia placing the entire nation on edge. On August 23, the bloodshed ceased, and Nat Turner remained elusive from capture for the next six weeks.

After Nat Turner's apprehension, the country clamored for his swift execution as those who joined him in his mission were all tried and put to death. With the insurrection still firmly entrenched into the minds of the survivors, Nat Turner was placed on trial and executed on November 11, 1831. While the impact of the uprising penetrated deeply within the core of white America, it was the source of the rebellion, as expressed by John Wesley Cromwell which spoke to the primal fears that slaveholders carried with them during the afterward. In his account of the immediate aftermath Cromwell noted:

“A reign of terror followed in Virginia. Labor was paralyzed, plantations abandoned, women and children were driven from home and crowded in nooks and corners. The sufferings of many were intense. Retaliation began.”

Slaveholders, overseers, and missionaries had dedicated nearly two centuries to the attempted conversion of enslaved Africans to Christianity. Yet, for as determined as their drive seemed to be, resistance to total conversion permeated throughout many of the plantations of colonial and eventually antebellum America. Christianity, it seemed, had failed to successfully push enslaved Africans into the area of compliance despite their status as being nothing more than chattel. For the first century and a half of the slave experience in America, there was but a small number of enslaved Africans who were converted to Christianity, let alone received a significant amount of Christian instruction and knowledge about the religion. Scores of Africans who were captured and placed aboard the many ships awaiting departure from the coast of West Africa were not allowed to carry any tangible item or relic during the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. With no physical items to remind them of the freedom they once shared on the continent, the African slaves managed still to carry the one item that could not be stolen or left behind: their spiritual identification.

Invariably, Nat Turner must have believed that Christianity in America was the white man's religion. Although his mother and countless other enslaved Africans might have had familiarity with Christianity, glaring hypocrisies still loomed. African spirituality represented a oneness of self, communion with the earth, the gods who nurtured the land and the peoples, and societies who converged to foster and populate their respective beliefs. Christianity was a European religion, perpetrated as a saving grace for a people who were identified as heathens in need of religious redemption. Nat Turner's insurrection underscored the difference between European religion and African spirituality and alerted the country to the reality that enslaved Africans were not willing to circumvent their spiritual identification, even as they faced the prospect of death in pursuit of freedom. Thus, African spirituality represented so much more to the enslaved African.

African Spirituality in Africa

Indeed, a wealth of scholarly literature has been produced which comprehensively examines diverse African societies and their separate religions. Works from historians William Ackah, Jualynne E. Dodson, and R. Drew Smith, co-editors of *Religion, Culture and Spirituality in Africa and the African Diaspora* (2017) and Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa* (1995), theologian Thomas C. Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind* (2010), and historian Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black* (1968), have been critical for understanding the heterogeneity of African and later African American religions. Historically, denial of Africa having had a religious and spiritual consciousness prior to a European presence in sub-Saharan Africa was championed by some of Europe's most esteemed scholars. German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel sought to use anthropology to dismiss African religious consciousness by asserting in his controversial work, *The Philosophy of History* that, “in Negro life the characteristic point is the fact that consciousness has not yet attained to the realization of any substantial objective existence.” Hegel's incorrect conclusion that Africa was void of religious and spiritual identification continued with the erroneous claim that “[Africa] is no historical part of the World...Egypt will be considered but it does not belong to the African Spirit.” Through the scholarly and anthropological works and writings by Hegel, among others, the extraction of a religious distinctiveness inside Africa allowed for what could only be surmised as unparadigmatic sins. Clearly, Hegel only helped to exasperate the racist and illogical belief that without European intervention, Africa was left without a conscious understanding of a “Higher Power.”

Peculiar as it may be, the very concept of African spirituality and spiritual identification transcends beyond the continent of Africa as well as the range of immediate persons who have been influenced by its respective precepts. However, the idea of spirituality in Africa may not automatically register the same relationship that is associated with religion. Africans have shared in an approximation, a closeness to their respective faith and beliefs which often have moved past the conceptions of religion. For the sake of this essay, African spirituality will not be addressed in its entirety. The reasoning for this is

because the cultural, political, economic, and personal influences of African spirituality were incredibly diverse.

One way to frame African spirituality on the continent is through the examination of its overarching importance. Prior to the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, the spiritual connectedness which flourished through the various portions of African society was marked and counted through personal interactions. African spirituality would have been viewed as non-traditional, that is universally structured in the same manner as the Abrahamic religions of Christianity, Islam, or Judaism. In fact, each religion is unique to the people among whom it emerged. African spirituality addressed different concerns in life—health, wealth, security, etc., and the hereafter. In the Kongo, prior to the arrival of Catholic capuchins and missionaries, the intersecting of spirituality and life itself was highly visible. In outlining the elements of Congolese beliefs and practices, Aurelien Mokoko Gampiot explained the belief that God, or Nzambi a Mpungu, is the Almighty creator, was the first structural element to Congolese worship. This belief was not found exclusively in the Kongo, however, as other African religions had similar beliefs. In the Kongo, the ancestral spirits were believed to intercede on behalf of the living to Nzambi a Mpungu, much in the same way that modern day Christians believe that Jesus Christ was the intermediary between God and humankind. Certainly, this argues against the myth that African spirituality was nonexistent and nonstructural prior to a European presence in Africa, especially under the definitions of religious structure perpetuated by the Europeans. To suggest that Africans had no known understanding of spirituality—how it was viewed on the larger plane, and how it was incorporated into their overall lives, for example, ancestral protection from evil spirits or the healing and curing of the afflicted by spiritual leaders—is to neglect compelling evidence to the contrary. In fact, it is worth noting that any assertion of a spirit-less Africa is to deny that Catholicism has been deeply influenced by traditional African religions, especially as it relates to the association the Congolese had with Catholic missionaries during the reign of King Alfonso in the late 1490s and into the early 1500s.

Some scholars have even claimed that Africa was the nurturing point of some world civilizations. At any rate, it is difficult to ignore Africa's place in the

evolution of what would become known as universal civilizations. The centrality of African spirituality holds a value that should undoubtedly be recognized and appreciated in the same manner as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. One of the most glaring complications in understanding the influence of African spirituality is the perception of Christianity. Christianity was viewed as the saving grace to a people who were considered sinful, backward heathens. Without the necessity of a protracted missionary sent by European powers to preach the gospel, Africans for millenniums had cultivated their own spiritual beliefs which one could argue certainly mirrored anything that was coming from Greece, Rome, Great Britain, or elsewhere. Africans were anything but sinful, backward heathens. Dominique Zahan noted that in the African religious universe, the Supreme Being was central. As the enslaved Africans were stolen from their homes, their families, and their literal sense of freedom, and sold into European-American slavery, the Supreme Being was virtually the only being on which they could truly rely. In the Americas, they would find a religion fundamentally opposing what they knew. Indeed, while some enslaved Africans were already converted to Christianity or had become familiar with some of the principals of Christianity, for a clear majority of enslaved Africans, their first introduction to what Nat Turner concluded was the “white man’s religion” would be an inauspicious one at best, a brutal one at worse. And yet as the enslaved African arrived on the Atlantic coast of the New World, it would be their spiritual identification which would forge common bonds, become a beacon of hope in the most desperate and dismal of times, and above all, would set the foundation for the quest for liberation through rebellions, uprisings, and insurrections.

African Spirituality in America

“They know that if they would encourage their [slaves’] conversion they must allow them some reasonable time for their instruction; and this would consequently be a hindrance to their work and an abatement of the Master’s. And this is not openly owned and avowed to be the cause of that...yet I may venture to say ‘tis so at the bottom. Nor can some of them forbear to speak out their minds, though they endeavor to justify and excuse themselves by

pretending that the slaves (the Negroes especially) are a wicked stubborn race of men and can never be converted, tho to gull and deceive their Masters, they may put on the air and appearance of religion.”
 – South Carolina Clergy to Gideon Johnston, March 4, 1712.

In *White Over Black*, Winthrop D. Jordan sharply stated, “Despite their intimate contact with Negroes, the American colonists generally made little conscious effort to assess the nature of the people they enslaved and took to bed.” Furthermore, “They felt no pressing need for assessment because both the Negro and slavery were, by and large, self-explanatory. Negroes were people from Africa bought for the purpose of performing labor.” He finishes this thought with a profoundly simple question; “What fact could be more obvious and natural, less demanding of explanation?”

The fact that scores of American enslavers, colonists, and missionaries neglected to understand the very nature of the persons they enslaved related directly to the fundamental doctrines of Christianity in America, and thereby the insistence that “human unity was bound to be made in religious terms.” To the practitioners of American slavery, Christianity was the definitive proof that God commissioned African peoples to be enslaved for life. The failure to appreciate the human nature of Africans provided substance for the spreading of Christianity, both in Africa and across the Americas. If Christianity was meant to save lost souls from their dark and wicked lives, who better to rescue than Africans? It was this illogical yet almost universally accepted belief that massaged the conscious of those who relentlessly asserted the authority of God while conveniently omitting redeeming grace of Jesus.

Contrary to beliefs shared by persons such as Georgia minister Charles Colcock Jones, Sr. (1804–1863), Christianity was not as influential to the slave experience in both colonial and later antebellum America as compared to African spirituality. The truth is that most enslaved Africans did not convert to Christianity in any abundant manner until the years directly preceding the Civil War. This was because of a direct hypocrisy between what was preached and what was practiced by slaveholders and ministers. Recalling the rejection of preachers by the enslaved in the quarter community where he lived, Frederick

Douglass noted,

“It was in vain that we had been taught from the pulpit at St. Michaels the duty of obedience to our masters—to recognize God as the author of our enslavement—to regard running away as an offense, alike against God and man—to deem our enslavement a merciful and beneficial arrangement—to esteem our condition in this country a paradise to that from which we have been snatched in Africa—to consider our hard hands and dark color as God’s displeasure, and as pointing us out as the proper subjects of slavery.”

Another reason for a lack of mass conversion was the uncertainty of what to do with Christian slaves. From a religious and moral point of view, the allowance for religious acceptance continuously posed a perplexing dilemma. While Christianity was most certainly used as a force to deepen the belief that enslavement was to be rationalized through Christian charge, the end result of Christian conversion was often left in question. Explaining that many slaveholders fretted over the reality that their slaves would eventually come to “dangerous conclusions” if they were given too much Christian instruction, James Russell Johnson, quoting William S. Plumer remarked, “All men will have some notions of religion, and if they will not be correct notions they will be erroneous. Wild. Fanatical. Superstitious, or in some other way dangerous.” Additionally, as discussed below, enslaved Africans who refused Christian conversion did so in an effort to retain their own spiritual connections to their home, or as in the example of Nat Turner, was born into American enslavement but whose spiritual roots stretched back to Africa.

Missionaries throughout southern slaveholding states had a contentious relationship with enslaved Africans due in part to the prohibitions of religious teachings held by some slaveholders. As noted, this was because of the fear that Christian instruction might promote rebellion. Thus, efforts to “Christianize” Africans in South Carolina during the eighteenth century were primarily endeavored in Charleston and other settled plantation areas. If Christianity’s role in the lives of enslaved Africans was not as prevalent as has been constructed, it is clear that, instead, African Spirituality’s role was.
 To understand the importance of African spirituality in respect to the slave experience in America,

one must recognize two significant points. The first is diversity. Evidently, not every African who was enslaved was taken from the same region or closely neighboring areas. As it has been well documented, slavers cared little about where slaves originated from. The end game was to acquire as many Africans as possible with the least resistance and loss. With that being the case, those who survived the Middle Passage were usually privy to their own language and religious beliefs, though at times a person may have known the language of another tribe and been familiar with the religious and spiritual practices or beliefs of others. The second point is a lack of familiarity. Indeed, as stated previously, some Africans on the continent were knowledgeable about Christianity. This is especially true as it concerns the Kongolese who were baptized and converted to Catholicism. Yet, a lack of familiarity is critical when attempting to convert a people who do not speak the language of the missionaries. Albert H. Stoddard relayed this point in saying the following:

“Taking such a conglomeration, totally ignorant by all our standards, and thrusting them into a sphere so different as to amount to almost another world, two principal things happened. In the first place, and in common with any immigrant, they had to learn to speak English. It was necessary to teach them as soon as possible so they could understand orders and instructions...When they had acquired a sufficient grasp of English to understand orders they were then left to themselves as to speech.”

The “breaking period” of slave emigration was not resoundingly met with compliance or obedience. It **must be understood** that even though European slavers tapped into a preexisting slave network, the system of slavery operated differently in Africa as opposed to the Americas. For many free Africans, therefore, while they may have known of or even witnessed African enslavement, once they themselves were captured, the reality of enslavement was wildly different than anything experienced in Africa. To be captured, shackled, placed upon a ship, and after up to three months finally arrive on an unknown land and look upon the faces of persons who were so unfamiliar and wicked must have been the worst experience they would have had. To then be “broken” and forced to learn a language that was just as foreign as any other African language must have contributed to one’s determination to rebel. In fact, forced emi-

gration was routinely met with African resistance at every turn.

As enslaved Africans resisted, rebelled, and refused, they began to turn inward to their spiritual connectedness and identities. By returning to their spiritual roots, they gained faith and protection. In some instances, certain African spiritual identities were shared among others, whether they belonged to the same group or a different group. There was a reverence within the confines of African spirituality which was difficult to maintain solely through traditional Christianity in America. Their shared experiences of slavery became a catalyst for a need to share religious and spiritual beliefs.

For many slavers, religion was the least of their concerns. So long as they retained the ability to purchase slaves and maintain a plantation, many planters were not interested in the religious lives of their slaves. The only time a slaver’s ire could be heightened is if it was discovered that their slaves were using African religions or Christianity as a tool to rebel. Slaves early on identified this and began to formulate ways to use their spiritual beliefs to not only relieve some of the atrocities of slavery, but to also reformulate Christianity.

An interesting factor that both planters and missionaries failed to realize is that while in native lands, enslaved Africans, as author Jason Young puts it, “not only received a cultural and religious inheritance from Africa but also actively engaged in the process of putting Africa to use in their own lives.” Maintaining a spiritual identity was one of the most important activities of enslaved Africans. However, more was required to navigate through living enslaved, considered property. The desideratum was to firmly place Africa into their lives to develop a means of transmitting and discovering salvation. As it would turn out, the enslaved African would create for themselves an elaborate structure built upon their various religious and spiritual beliefs and forged by their commitment to freedom. From their spiritual connectedness, the enslaved African formed a developed understanding of God, though the slave master and missionary both reported they had no knowledge of who God was.

African spirituality contributed to a connectedness that was not understood by slave master or missionary. In general, missionaries believed they were doing Africans a favor. When conversion

attempts were made, they were often empty gestures composed of demeaning consciousness. The enslaved Africans not only had personal relationships with God; in many aspects, their relationships were more deeply religiously rooted than some Christian missionaries. Missionaries, earlier on, decided that full-scale conversion was not successful because of the immeasurable devotion to their previous spiritual beliefs that Africans retained. The slaver's encouragement to Christian conversion and worship depended largely on his own pious behaviors. Within this paradigm, enslaved Africans created communities, and while not necessarily sharing the same cultural background or religion, were still connected within the compass of spirituality. As author Clifton Johnson pointedly explained, "The antebellum Negro was not converted to God. He converted god to himself."

Religion and Rebellion

"I finally got religion, and it was Aunt Jane's praying and singing them old Virginia hymns that helped me so much. Aunt Jane's marster would let her come to see me sometimes, but not often. Sometimes she would slip away from her place at night and come to see me anyhow. She would hold prayer-meeting in my house whenever she would come to see me...if old marster heard us singing and praying he would come out and make us stop. One time, I remember, we all were having a prayer-meeting in my cabin, and marster came up to the door and hollered out, 'You, Charlotte, what's all that fuss in there?' We all had to hush up for that night. I was so afraid old marster would see Aunt Jane. I knew Aunt Jane would have to suffer if her white people knew she was off at night. Marster used to say God was tired of us all hollering to him at night."

In *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, Eugene Genovese analyzed the institution of Christianity and how its relationship with the enslaved African affected their consciousness and ideologies. Suggesting that the Christian religion produced a spirit of passivity and submissiveness, Genovese surmised that the Christian religion "softened the slaves by drawing the hatred from their souls, and without hatred there could be no revolt." Indeed, there were enslaved Africans who saw Christianity as the religion of the redeemed and who believed that the only way to live a righ-

teous life was through the conversion, belief, and practice of the slave master's religion. Yet, for just as many enslaved Africans who subscribed to this ideology, there were just as many, if not more, who either turned to Christianity for manipulative and exploitative purposes, or refused to accept Christianity altogether.

Importantly, for the enslaved African, familiarity with Christian faith may have varied from slave owner or plantation. Depending largely upon whether or not the slave owner was a pious individual, the enslaved African may have received religious instruction or may have been prohibited from any Christian training up to attending church services. On its own, the Bible was a conspicuous entity in the relationship between the enslaved and Christianity. Fearing that the Bible may incite their slaves into resistance, many planters directly forbade the Bible from being present on their plantations. In the right hands, it could manipulate and exacerbate the institution of slavery. It could even promote the idea that, as William Wells Brown mentioned in his narrative *My Southern Home* when speaking about pastor Mason, "if you bear it patiently, and leave your cause in the hands of God, he will reward you for it in heaven, and the punishment you suffer."

This ideology was neither foreign to nor controversial among almost all of the southern planters or missionaries who used Christianity and, specifically, verses from the Bible to foster a defense for the creation and implementation of slavery. Many slave narratives spoke to the idea that Christianity was ordained to release the enslaved African from a life of spiritual bondage despite remaining in physical serfdom. The hypocrisy was to be covered through elaborate mixed messages masqueraded as sermons to sustain docility and keep the prospect of rebellions and insurrections held in check. Former slave Lunsford Lane, writing in his own narrative, illustrated the manipulation of Christianity as practiced by ministers who cherry-picked particular scriptures. In his narration, Lane said the following,

"I often heard select portions of the scriptures read...There was one very kind-hearted Episcopal minister whom I often used to hear; he was very popular with the colored people. But after he had preached a sermon to us in which he argued from the Bible that it was the will of heaven from all eternity we should be slaves, and our masters be our owners,

most of us left him; for like some of the faint-hearted disciples in early times we said, 'This is a hard saying, who can bear it?'"

The deliberate and perverted manipulation of the Bible, scriptures, and Christianity by all parties involved to subjugate millions of enslaved Africans is a stark testament to the orchestration of religious control.

"Faithfulness, obedience, and integrity would become rules of living for the negro, and so would substitute moral obligation for fear in his relationship to his master."

As enslaved African were brought to American shores, Christian beliefs stood in contrast to their spiritual identities. One of the most effective modes to break a person's will, to extract their obedience, is to displace their spiritual foundations. Once broken, rhetoric such as the abovementioned quotes become easily digestible. The "breaking" of the slave's will existed in two forms: physical and psychological. Repeated teachings that it was the intention of God that Black people were to be enslaved attempted to place the blame of slavery on an obviously unjust God and the misfortune of being born Black. While certainly the theoretical expressions of American slavery were derived from the unconscious manifestation of white supremacist ideals vis-à-vis the "God curse," it registered only for a small contingent of enslaved Africans. These instances depended on using a manipulated version of Christianity; here, in Western ethnocentrism. In the hands of the slaves, African spirituality could not only pierce but invade the tenants of Christianity for the benefit of the enslaved African.

African spirituality's influence not only on the slave experience in America but also Christianity is one of the most neglected narratives in this country's history. For the enslaved African, conversion to Christianity presented several challenges which needed to be addressed, yet seldom were. For starters, many were not permitted to hold their own services. If a newly converted slave wanted to learn more about Christianity, his or her only means of receiving the teachings might have been to attend church services with whites who forbade them to sit together. Some plantations were more lenient, yet routinely, enslaved Africans were only permitted to obtain Christian religion under strict provisions. Ac-

quiescing to these rules only increased the necessity to forge a common bond between respective African religion and Christianity.

If Christianity was to be accepted by the enslaved African, it first needed to attend to pressing concerns. First, Christianity needed to address the concept of slavery. In his own narrative, Friday Jones remembered a promise he made to God as a young boy: "I promised God I would seek my soul's salvation when I got to be a man." The pretense of this Christianity was one could acquire true salvation only through acceptance of Jesus Christ. Yet this stood in contrast to the condition of the enslaved, as these enslaved persons were aware of their fate. Accepting Jesus Christ did not end their physical bondage. Personal salvation for many enslaved Africans only came through death. Christianity's great paradox therefore became the difference between white Christians and enslaved Christians. To summarize the hypocrisy that blurred the line between the two, Frederick Douglass wrote,

"Between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference... We have men-stealers for ministers, women-whippers for missionaries, and cradle-plunderers for church members. The man who wields the blood-clotted cow skin during the week fills the pulpit on Sunday, and claims to be a minister of the meek and lowly Jesus... He sells my sister, for purposes of prostitution, stands forth as the pious advocate of purity... We have men sold to build churches, women sold to support the gospel, and babes sold to purchase Bibles for the poor heathen! All for the glory of God and the good of the souls!"

Here, Frederick Douglass magnificently articulated the asymmetry between white and enslaved Christianity. As enslaved Africans began to explore Christianity, they had to understand that the religion for whites was inherent disparate from theirs. And it would be through this understanding that they could formulate their own interpretations while maneuvering through Christianity.

One of the most fascinating ways in which the enslaved Africans incorporated their respective spiritual identities into European-American Christianity was the "invisible institution." The enslaved Africans became very resourceful in ensuring they had opportunities to worship without impediment or punishment. For this purpose, they waited until night-

fall and slipped away deep into the woods to pray, sing, and preach. What developed from the souls of enslaved Africans during their late-night worship services was the ritual.

Rituals were known for their worship through song and dance as enslaved Africans expressed themselves in ways that were forbidden on the plantation. In the *Journal of Negro History*, John B. Cade gave voice to the perils which befell enslaved Africans seeking to steal away in order to worship. One account was given by M. J. Jones of Minden, Louisiana who was quoting Hannah Lowery: “When they wanted to sing and pray, they would steal off into the woods. During that time, most of the masters were cruel. If they would hear them (slaves) singing, they would get their whips and whip them all the way home.”

Yet, as a Mrs. Channel gave her account of another plantation in Louisiana, enslaved Africans would not be stopped in their mission to worship: “...religious services among the slaves were strictly forbidden. But the slaves would steal away into the woods at night and hold services. They would form a circle on their knees around the speaker who would also be on his knees. He would bend forward and speak into or over a vessel of water to drown the sound. If anyone became animated and cried out, the others would quickly stop the noise by placing their hands over the offender’s mouth.”

Enslaved Africans faced a clear danger by assembling to worship and seek the guidance of the one whom they believed was more powerful than the slaveholder. The “ring shout,” as these praise and worship services would be known, were often more than just a gathering of bodies to seek comfort and a few moments of relief from their otherwise base lives of enslavement. It further offered a valuable component to the enslaved Africans’ lives, and an even greater danger if discovered by the slaveholder: the rebellion plot.

From historical works to slave narratives, it has been depicted that for many enslaved Africans, communications were given not only through day-to-day conversations, but also through song and worship. Though ignored or mocked by most slaveholders, the creation of the ring shout was less of a creation than an incorporation of Central and West African indigenous dance. As Sterling Stuckey wrote, “the dancing and singing were directed to the ances-

tors and gods, the tempo and revolution of the circle quickened during the course of the movement.” Ring shouts served many purposes for the enslaved, which was primarily that of a hidden form of communication.

For those who toiled on large plantations, those holding dozens of slaves, communication was of the most vital importance. Communication provided through ring shouts varied, depending upon the necessity of its performance. It offered an opportunity to commune with God without the interference, prohibitions, or restrictions of Christian worship or slaveholder objection. Ring shouts allowed for the expression oneself creatively through music and dance which included rhythmic clapping and movement. Furthermore, ring shouts were used as a decoy for possible uprisings. While slaveholders who happened to witness a ring shout naively assumed it was nothing more than a “peculiar service” where “a dozen or twenty jog slowly round a circle behind each other with a peculiar shuffle of the feet and shake of arms,” most were unaware of its ability to camouflage rebellion. Enslaved Africans had a deep understanding of how plantation life worked, and more so, how to properly manipulate the version Christianity disseminated by missionaries and slaveholders. The rebellion plot began to germinate almost as soon as the first enslaved African was brought in chains to American shores. Modes of discovering how to run away or how to create an insurrection figured into the daily lives of most enslaved Africans, though many might have never acted upon it or divulged their internal desires. The ring shout furnished, if even for a short while, the security in self-reflecting and communion with God. That enslaved Africans were ingenious enough to take a religion set against the backdrop of God-ordained slavery and manipulate it to help facilitate their spiritual necessities and to give birth to plots of uprisings, rebellions, and insurrections speak volumes to the character of every enslaved person who took these measures. Many rebellions, whether carried out, cancelled, or in some tragic instances, exposed, covertly used Christianity in concert with the aspirations of the enslaved. However, insomuch as enslaved Africans looked to domestic acts of rebellion as inspiration, it is plausible to speculate they were inspired by insurrections elsewhere.

Indeed, enslaved Africans on American

plantations might have been indirectly influenced by slave uprisings such as the Haitian Revolution. Indeed, no commentary on African slave rebellion can take place without recognizing the self-liberating tactics enacted by the Haitians in Saint-Domingue from 1791 to 1804. The Haitian Revolution and its independence from French colonial rule was the only insurrection in history to lead to the founding of an independent state for the formerly enslaved. As an American ally during the Revolutionary War, the French defeat by Toussaint L'Ouverture and the Haitian army was cause for great consternation. For the then-nation's capital Philadelphia, as mentioned in the book *Dangerous Neighbors*, news of the war for liberation in Haiti was extremely important. Questions of whether the same could occur in America concerned French sympathizers and pro-slavery Americans. In fact, while most Americans decried the violence of the war, author James Alexander Dun remarked that the Haitian Revolution only served to intensify pro-slavery rhetoric by what he defined as proto-Republican commentators.

While there is no historical evidence to support that the Haitian Revolution directly influenced any rebellion in America, it should be noted that the Haitian religion of Voodoo (Voodoo) was believed to have been a spiritual guide. During the Bois Caïman ceremony, through which the Haitian Revolution began, a maroon leader and voodoo priest by the name of Boukman was said to have offered animal sacrifices to voodoo deities. Boukman would later credit voodoo as the source of victory:

"Despite rigid prohibitions, voodoo was indeed one of the few areas of totally autonomous activity for the African slaves. As a religion and a vital spiritual force, it was a source of psychological liberation in that it enabled them to express and reaffirm that self-existence they objectively recognized through their own labor... Voodoo further enabled the slaves to break away psychologically from the very real and concrete chains of slavery and to see themselves as independent beings; in short it gave them a sense of human dignity and enabled them to survive." A little over three decades later, Nat Turner, also divinely inspired by traditional African religions, would wage his insurrection upon the very system of slavery through the massacre of his slave master and neighboring plantation owners.

One of the less fantastical slave revolts in Ameri-

can history was planned for Easter Sunday, 1802 in Virginia, a mere year and a half after the infamous Prosser slave revolts of late 1800. The Easter Sunday insurrection commenced as reportedly "80 slaves met in a field near Norfolk and planned to fire the city and kill the white people." The conspirator of the plot was a man by the name of Ben who, according to records, was owned by Mr. Philemon Bird of King and Queen County. Ben was captured the next day and was subsequently hanged on June 1, 1802. While documents ascertained afterward fail to clarify whether the plot was conspired upon during a religious service, the argument can be made that Ben and the other eighty co-conspirators may have come to this plot by way of a religious gathering.

Slave revolts, plots, insurrections, and uprisings were to varying degrees fixtures in religious services, as services were one of the few times slaves were able to gather and fully question their positions in life. The hybrid of Christianity and African spirituality awakened the spirits of the ancestors and sparked the sense of freedom that was taken as the slaves were shackled and forced into ships bound for the Americas. While white planters, missionaries, and the like all gathered on Sunday mornings in a display of self-gratifying European chauvinism, as essayist Caryl Phillips denoted, enslaved Africans slipped away to the recesses of fields and woods to create a sense of hope.

African spirituality's influence on the slave experience in America challenged Christianity's power in ways that the master class could not conceptualize. The "pious" slaveholder and the "charitable" missionary were only as well-meaning and Godly as their imaginations would dictate. To invoke the spirit of God upon a race of people who were to be in bondage for life was one of the most blatant examples of hypocrisy in the American religious tradition. The enslaved African recognized this and either converted from an appreciation of Christianity that even the slave master themselves could never obtain, or in many instances completely dismissed it. The full influence of African spirituality on the slave experience lies nestled within the want for freedom and the prospect of death. Both concepts were the constant reminders that for the enslaved Africans, their only possessions were their spiritual identities. The fact that from integration of Christianity with their respective spiritual connectedness evolved

hope and a desired sense of liberation is a testament to the persevering spirit of every enslaved African. Thus, African spirituality continued to develop as it cemented itself into the lives of enslaved Africans, resulting in the rise of conjuring and Hoodoo.

Conjuring, Hoodoo, and the Counter to Christianity

The Latin word for conjure is *conjurare*, which is defined as “banning together by an oath or to conspire.” In Old French the word is represented as *conjurer* which means “to plot or exorcize.” In African spirituality in America, the composition of conjuring was a banning together by an unspoken oath, and in many respects, was a plot to usurp the powers held by Christian slavers. Europeans, and later Americans, were both ignorant to the complexities of African spirituality. They routinely mocked and were dismissive to what they considered to be mere superstitions. Georgia Presbyterian minister Charles Colcock Jones, Sr. apprised the participants of conjuring with a conclusion that, “they believe in second-sight, in apparitions, charms, witchcraft, and in a kind of irresistible Satanic influence. The superstitions brought from Africa have not been wholly laid aside.” Noted traveler Frederick Law Olmsted shared in the same misunderstanding of spiritual practices when he wrote in his narrative, “A goodly portion of them, I am told, ‘profess religion,’ and are received into the fellowship of the churches; but it is evident, of the greater part even of these, that their idea of religion, and the standard of morality which they deem consistent with a ‘profession’ is of it, is very degraded.” He further states, “they are subject to intense excitements, often really maniacal...I cannot see that they indicate anything but a miserable system of superstition, the more painful that it employs some forms and words ordinarily connected with true Christianity.”

Indeed, slave conjure was neither absurd nor contemptible in the spirits of those who believed in its powers to perform various functions for certain desired outcomes. Planters, missionaries, and travelers often neglected to comprehend the history and culture of slave conjure, insomuch as not cultivating a perspective as to how and why it was retained and maintained from the continent of Africa to the

plantations of America. To the enslaved African who was familiar with conjuring, the significance was to be understood and respected. The conjure doctor, as W.E.B. DuBois eloquently described, was the “healer of the sick, the interpreter of the unknown, the comforter of the sorrow, the supernatural avenger of wrong, and the one who rudely but picturesquely expressed the longing, disappointment, and resentment of a stolen and oppressed people.” Clearly, the central importance of the conjurer in the enslaved African’s life could not in any rudimentary sense be shared or appreciated by the master class because they were the oppressors, never the oppressed. The master class believed that true Christian values and beliefs were threatened by witchcraft, superstition, and paganism. Yet for the enslaved African, as DuBois pointed out, conjurers were the opposite: the healers, the interpreters, and the protectors.

The most important elements and persons of slave conjuring were the conjure bags and the conjure doctors. Jason R. Young, professor and author, explained that the conjure doctor’s primary functions was to, “heal the sick, harm enemies, reveal the unknown, protect themselves [enslaved Africans] from the brutalities of slavery, and achieve countless other aims.” The conjure bag, which could also be known as tricks, charms, tobys, and hands were responsible for storing ritual objects. Root doctors who used medicines to heal the sick or perform special functions were known to either wrap or bind their medicines inside the bag or in some cases seal their medicines inside glass bottles. A conjure bag could consist of roots from the ground, pins, rusty nails, and dirt, with other contents being added depending upon the specializations of the conjure doctor. In *Notes on Negro Folk-Lore and Witchcraft in the South*, late nineteenth-century author Louis Pendleton recorded that in Louisiana enslaved Africans constructed small human models, covered with blood, and pierced through the heart. In a more contemporary definition these “models” are otherwise known as “voodoo” dolls. The conjure bag might have also contained fingernails and hair that could be used to bring about harm or possibly even death upon the conjured.

On the plantations where there was a known conjure or root doctor, many slave masters maintained a distant relationship, which translated into a sense of status and power within the minds of other slaves. Indeed, not every root doctor practiced the

same way, and not everyone specialized in the same areas. However, as it pertained to the ever-teetering balance between African spirituality and European-American Christianity, the influence and power of the conjurer, as with others like herbalists, was embossed upon the sensibilities of the enslaved Africans. The relationship between planter and root doctor, herbalist, or fortune teller was a contentious one, yet there are many accounts where the conjurer was so mesmerizing that he or she could avoid physical labor or even punishment. In his narrative, Henry Bibb spoke to this by saying:

“There is much superstition among the slaves. Many of them believe in what they call ‘conjuration,’ tricking, and witchcraft; and some of them pretend to understand the art and say that by it they can prevent their masters from exercising their will over their slaves. Such are often applied to by others, to give them power to prevent their masters from flogging them.”

In relation to religion, those who had or had not converted to Christianity sought the protection and assistance of root doctors with no certain hesitation. The overall impact that conjuring had upon the slave experience in America was that it stood as a formidable opponent to the structure of Christianity. Because the origins of conjuring derived from West and West-Central Africa, the enslaved African might have been more familiar with the ritual practice of conjuring as opposed to Christianity. Yet as African spirituality, due in part to conjuring, remained pre-eminent in the slave community, it would be Hoodoo which would be claimed by both Christian convert and minsters, as well as non-convert alike.

Both Zora Neale Hurston’s *Hoodoo in America* and Katrina Hazzard-Donald’s recently released work *Mojo Workin’: The Old African-American Hoodoo System* are two of the most detailed and comprehensive writings on the religion that helped to transcend the Lowcountry (southern) region of the United States. Touching upon a litany of subjects, terms, and persons, Hurston’s description of Hoodoo articulated its nuances and was one of the first major works which examined its rich history. Hurston emphasized, “Veaudeau is the European term for African magic practices and beliefs, but it is unknown to the American Negro. His own name for his practices is Hoodoo, both terms being related to the West African term juju. ‘Conjure’ is also freely used by the

American Negro for these practices.” Quite like the enslaved Africans from the areas in which it originated, Hoodoo is one of the most complex and transformative religions that survived the era of slavery. Despite the historical and cultural misunderstandings of West African religions in the United States, misinterpretations of African spirituality have continued by historians and students of American religion.

In *Mojo Workin’*, Hazzard-Donald describes the reason for Hoodoo’s emergence as a “dynamic spiritual form functioning at the boundaries of slavery’s power” due to the enslaved African’s unwillingness to abandon all of the “traditional spiritual and worship practices” they carried with them from Africa. The tenacity of the enslaved Africans to hold onto their spiritual identification was paramount to their daily lives and the circumambient efforts to protect their spirituality was one of the most reflective driving forces which birthed Hoodoo in America.

Hoodoo’s presence and influence could be felt as it grew and manifested itself in the lives of enslaved Africans in the Lowcountry region. Hazzard-Donald explains that there were three southern regional Hoodoo traditions which were established somewhere between the late-eighteenth century and the early-nineteenth century. These areas were, the Southwest (Gulf Coast; New Orleans; Mobile, AL), Southeast (Sea Island, Coastal Georgia, and Florida; the Carolinas), and the Northeast (Maryland; Virginia; eastern Tennessee; North Carolina). Within this large geographic area, enslaved Africans developed and fortified Hoodoo despite the presence of Christianity. Indeed, Hoodoo emerged over time and through time, Hoodoo’s influence on the enslaved African expanded.

As opposed to Christianity, Hoodoo was not viewed as a contradictory, oppressive religion that was designed to impress upon the enslaved African that their bondage had been preordained. Additionally, Christianity stood opposite Hoodoo, as well as other traditional African religions because it was regulated by the slave master who decided when, where, and how enslaved Africans could worship. Finally, Christianity offered no realistic opportunity for liberation. If an enslaved African, who concluded in his or her mind that he or she would be in perpetual bondage for life, then it would be more than plausible that they would at the very least be morally obligated to worship the way in which they could in Africa. For

this, Christianity prohibited enslaved Africans where religions like Hoodoo did not. Hoodoo provided many of the tenants of spiritual worship that had been utilized in Africa which included spirit possession, sacred circle dancing, sacrifice, ritual water immersion, and divination.

African spiritual connectedness transformed the Black southern plantation church where Hoodooized Christianity flourished among the congregation that fused Christianity with Hoodoo rituals. Many of the same practices of enslaved Africans who sought the depths of the woods to hold services through “invisible institutions” were also conducted inside the Hoodoo church. Dancing, prayer, healing, call and response, and spirit possessions were present within slave worship. The influence that African spirituality carried inside the Hoodoo church was so impactful that in some instances, Black ministers of Christian churches left their positions to further develop Hoodooized Christianity.

Conclusion

More can be said, and has been said, about the influence that African spirituality had on the slave experience in America and thereby, the traditional religions of enslaved Africans. That enslaved Africans had the ingenuity, the resourcefulness, and the determination to preserve their spiritual beliefs and practices and created ways to connect their African spiritual heritage with Christian doctrine is truly remarkable. Indeed, the fundamental teachings of Jesus was to love one’s neighbor and to remember that in true Christian worship, none were slave, and all were free. However, Jesus’ commission was tragically ignored in a slave system designed, in part, to use religion to oppress rather than liberate. It was preached as a vessel from the same persons who, as Frederick Douglass conveyed, “sell my sister, for purposes of prostitution.” In short, Christianity on the Southern plantations in America was a means to justify a unilateral approach to a universal religion based solely on the premise that Christians were correct, and the rest of the world was heathen.

Yet forged from the fires of despair, anger, sorrow, and grief, an enslaved people brought forth their spiritual and religious beliefs, worshipped under the ever-present threat of death itself and created for themselves a community within a community man-

aged by the common bond that all men were indeed created equal by God. African spirituality meant much more to the enslaved Africans than Christianity could have standing on its own. Despite the efforts of enslavers and missionaries to insist the slave’s lot in life was God-ordained servitude to the white Christian, the hypocrisy in that assertion was hardly ever missed. In fact, efforts to eradicate what enslavers and missionaries decried as pagan worship from the slave community and the slave specifically could not survive in the long run, and African spirituality was never compromised.

As generations have passed and ancestors have returned to their spiritual homes, the remnants of African spirituality live on through the songs, praise, worship, prayers, and services held at Black churches every Sunday. From being forbidden to worship God as was divinely ordained, to risking one’s life, to manipulating and influencing Christianity for the purposes of supplied hope and prospective rebellion, to finally being free to worship as one chooses, indeed, African spirituality will never have an extinguished soul.