

# **African Spirituality and the Slave Experience in Pre-Antebellum America**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines African spirituality and its influence on the lives of enslaved Africans in America. Earlier historiography suggested that Christian beliefs had a profound impact on the cultural attitudes of the enslaved black populations. My thesis dislodges this theory and ultimately offers a compelling appraisal to the contrary. Indeed, African spirituality was embedded in the cultural, political, social, and religious lives of Africans prior to the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade, insomuch that during the Middle Passage it was their spiritual connectedness which they held onto. My paper begins with the insurrection of Nat Turner and analyzes the fear that white planters had of African spirituality. Relaying that conversion to Christianity by enslaved Africans was minimal for the first century and a half of the slave experience, I present African spirituality as the paramount influence. Further, my thesis analyzes slave narratives showing how ritual worship was vital to the lives of enslaved Africans. Finally, I investigate the practice of conjuring and the religion of Hoodoo to display the processes through which enslaved Africans both protected themselves and developed a religious counter to Christianity. My findings show that there is a greater need to investigate the impacts of African spirituality on both sides of the Atlantic to deepen our understanding of the connection between African religions and Christianity both during the era of American slavery and modern times.

**Keywords:** Spirituality, Slavery, African-Americans

## **1. Introduction:**

### **1.1 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.<sup>1</sup> Inspired by a spiritual fervor which was imparted to him via 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 came into 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 what he was embarking on 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, yet 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> Scores of Africans who were captured and placed aboard the many ships awaiting departure from the coast of West Africa were not capable of carrying any tangible item or relic with them during the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. With no physical items to remind them of the freedom they once shared on the continent, the African slave 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, the glaring hypocrisies still loomed. In African spirituality represented a oneness of self, in communion with the earth, the gods who nurtured and maintenance the land and the peoples and societies who converged to foster and populate their respective beliefs. Christianity was perceived as 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 down the prospect of death in pursuit of freedom. African spirituality represented so much more to the enslaved African. It is my aim to uncover the reasons why.

## 2. 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 to understanding the heterogeneousness 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 Wihlem Friedrich Hegel sought to use anthology 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."<sup>4</sup> 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."<sup>5</sup> 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 unpardonable sins. However, tragically, 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.<sup>6</sup>

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 could be 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 truly 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 could be viewed as non-traditional, that is universally structured or functional in the same manner as Christianity, Islam, or Judaism. In fact, each religion is unique to the people among who it emerged.<sup>7</sup>

African spirituality addressed different concerns in this 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 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.<sup>8</sup> 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 humans. Certainly, this argues against the myth that African spirituality was nonexistent prior to a European presence in Africa. 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> As the enslaved African was 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 that they could truly rely upon. In the Americas, they would find a religion fundamentally opposite of 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 worst. 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.

### **3. 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.’<sup>11</sup>

--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?”<sup>12</sup>

The fact that scores of American enslavers, colonists, and missionaries neglected to understand the very nature of the ones 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.”<sup>13</sup> To the practitioners of American slavery, Christianity the definitive proof that God had 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 were meant to save lost souls from their dark and wicked lives, who better to be rescued than Africans? It was this illogical yet almost universally accepted belief which massaged the conscious of those who relentlessly asserted the authority of God while conveniently omitting redeeming grace of Jesus.<sup>14</sup>

Contrary to beliefs shared by persons such as Rev. Charles Colcock Jones<sup>15</sup> 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. A reason for this was the realization 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—<sup>16</sup>*

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<sup>17</sup>, 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.”<sup>18</sup> Also, as will be 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 would have a contentious relationship with enslaved Africans due, in part to the prohibitions of religious teachings held by some slaveholders. As noted, this was due to the fear that Christian instruction might promote rebellions.<sup>19</sup> Notwithstanding, in South Carolina during the eighteenth century, efforts to “Christianize” Africans were primarily endeavored in Charleston and other settled plantation areas.<sup>20</sup> So if Christianity’s role in the lives of enslaved Africans was not as prevalent as has been constructed, what was? The answer: African Spirituality.

To understand the importance of African spirituality in respect to the slave experience in America, one need only to realize two significant points. The first is diversity. Obviously 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 Kongoleses 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.<sup>21</sup>

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 experiences they could have. To then be “broken” and forced to learn a language that was just as foreign as another African language might have contributed to the determination to rebel. In fact, forced emigration was routinely met with African resistance at every turn.<sup>22</sup>

As enslaved Africans resisted, rebelled and refused, they began to turn inward to their spiritual connectedness and identities. By reverting to their spiritual roots, they could form bonds with the Creator of all and seek the refuge and protection they most desperately needed. In some instances, certain African spiritual identities were shared among others, whether they belonged to the same group. There was a reverence within the confines of African spirituality which was difficult to maintain solely through Christianity in America. The similar experiences of slavery became a catalyst for the need to share religious and spiritual beliefs.

For many slavers, religion was the least of their concerns.<sup>23</sup> So long as they retained the ability to purchase slaves and maintain a plantation, many planters were not the most interested in the religious lives of their slaves. The only time a slaver’s ire could be heightened is if it were discovered that their slaves were using African religions or more specifically 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 manipulate Christianity.

An interesting factor that both planters and missionaries failed to realize is that while in their 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.”<sup>24</sup> Maintaining a spiritual identity was one of the most important activities that enslaved Africans could do. However, more was required if they were to navigate through their lives as enslaved humans who were only to be considered property. The desideratum was to firmly place Africa into their very lives in order to develop a means to transmit and discover their own 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 would understand God better, even while the slave master and missionary both concluded they had no knowledge of who God was.

As stated previously African spirituality represented a connectedness that could not be related to by the slave master or the missionary. In many ways, the composition of missionary’s thoughts concluded that they were doing Africans a favor. When conversion attempts were made, they were gestures often with a backdrop of demeaning consciousness. The enslaved African not only had a personal relationship with God, but in different ways their relationships were more deeply rooted than some Christian missionaries. One of the main reasons why missionaries earlier on decided that full scale conversions were not as successful as they had originally anticipated was because of the immeasurable devotion to their respective spiritual beliefs that Africans retained and brought with them to America. 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, still connected within the compass of spirituality. To conclude this section, as author Clifton Johnson pointedly explained, “The antebellum Negro was not converted to God. He converted god to himself.”<sup>25</sup>

## 4. 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."*

*"Would your marster allow you to hold prayer-meeting on his place?"*

*"No, my child; 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."<sup>26</sup>*

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."<sup>27</sup> Indeed, there were enslaved Africans who saw Christianity as the religion of the redeemed and who believed that the only way to live a righteous life and thereby one day "see the face of God" 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.

It is important to keep in mind that for the enslaved African, the familiarity with the 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 and including being able to attend Sunday church services. On its own, the Bible was a conspicuous entity in the relationship between enslaved and Christianity. Fearing the possibility that the Bible may in some way incite their slaves into passive resistance or worse, many planters directly forbade the Bible from being present on their plantations. The Bible could be viewed as a live weapon. In the right hands, it could manipulate and exacerbate the institution of slavery and promote the idea that, as William Wells Brown mentioned in his narrative *My Southern Home* when speaking about a pastor, Mr. 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."<sup>28</sup>

This ideology was neither foreign to nor controversial among almost all of the southern planters or missionaries who used Christianity in general and the Bible in specific 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 all while they remained in perpetual 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 and religion as practiced by ministers who cherry-picked respective 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?"<sup>29</sup>

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."<sup>30</sup>*

As enslaved African were brought to American shores, Christian beliefs stood in contrast to their spiritual identities. One of the best 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 came through two forms; physical and psychological. Repeated teachings that it was the intention of God that Black people were to be enslaved was an attempt to place the blame of slavery on an obviously unjust God *and* the misfortune of being born Black. While certainly both the aesthetic and theoretical expressions of American slavery derived from the unconscious manifestation white supremacist ideals vis-à-vis the "God curse", it registered only but to a small contingent of enslaved Africans. As previously mentioned, these instances depended on the opportunity to have a manipulated version of Christianity in the right hands, in this case, Western ethnocentrism. In the wrong hands, as slaveholders and missionaries both feared, African spirituality could not only pierce but invade the tenants of Christianity to exploit it 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 of their new religion might have been to attend church services with whites who, by consequence, forbade them to sit together. Some plantations were more lenient, yet routinely enslaved Africans were only permitted to obtain Christian religion under certain strict provisions. Acquiescing to these rules only increased the necessity to forge a common bond between respective African religion and Christianity.

If Christianity were to be accepted by the enslaved African, it first needed to attend to certain pressing concerns. To begin, Christianity needed to address the concept of enslavement. Writing 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..."<sup>31</sup> The pretense of Christianity was that only through the acceptance of Jesus Christ could one acquire true salvation. Yet this stood opposite the condition of the enslaved, as he or she was well aware of their real fate. Accepting Jesus Christ did not end their bondage. Personal salvation for many enslaved Africans only came through death. Christianity's great paradox therefore became the difference between white Christians and slave 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!"<sup>32</sup>*

Here, Frederick Douglass did not fail to magnificently articulate the asymmetry between white and slave Christianity. The aberration was definite. As enslaved Africans began to explore Christianity they had to understand that the religion for whites could not be the same for them. And it would be through this understanding that they could formulate their own interpretations while maneuvering through the web of dogma Christianity.

One of the most fascinating ways in which the enslaved African incorporated their respective spiritual identities into European-American Christianity was the "invisible institution." The enslaved African became very resourceful in ensuring they had an opportunity to worship without impediment or worse. For this purpose, they waited until nightfall 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 communing with God, the Supreme Being, the ritual would evoke some of the most enthusiastically high charged expressions of emotions to be had by those in attendance. In *Journal of Negro History*, John B. Cade gave voice to the perils which befell enslaved Africans seeking to steal away in order to worship in secret. 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."<sup>33</sup>

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.'*<sup>34</sup>

Enslaved Africans faced a clear danger by assembling to worship and seek the guidance of the Creator of all and the one whom they believed was more powerful than the slaveholder. The "ring shout", as these praise and worship services would also 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 more valuable component to the enslaved African's life which posed an even more ominous danger if discovered by the slaveholder: The rebellion plot.

From historical works to slave narratives, documentation has proven 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 ancestors and gods, the tempo and revolution of the circle quickened during the course of the movement."<sup>35</sup> Ring shouts served many purposes for the enslaved, which was primarily tucked away and hidden from unsuspecting slaveholders.

For those who toiled on large plantations which warehoused 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 the Creator of all 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,"<sup>36</sup> most were unaware of its ability to camouflage rebellion.<sup>37</sup> 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 the creator of all. 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 spirit of every enslaved person who took these measures. Daunting as it were, 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, especially in Southern states, 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 Sanit-Domingue from 1791 to 1804. The Haitian Revolution and its independence over 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*<sup>38</sup>, 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.<sup>39</sup>

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 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.”*<sup>40</sup>

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 American 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.”<sup>41</sup> 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 aspired 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.

As it were, slave revolts, plots, insurrections, and uprisings were to varying degrees fixtures in religious services as this was one of the few times that slaves were able to gather under the stars, as one with the Supreme Being and fully question their position in life. Christianity mixed with African spirituality in a hybrid which awakened the spirits from the past, the spirits of the ancestors from the continent and sparked the sense of freedom that was snatched away as they 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-gratify European chauvinism, as essayist Caryl Phillips denoted, enslaved Africans slipped away to the recesses of fields and woods to create a sense of hope.<sup>42</sup>

African spirituality’s influence on the slave experience in America pushed against Christianity’s power in ways that the master class was not aware of. The pious slaveholder and the would-be 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 not only one of the most blatant examples of hypocrisy but also a massive sin. The enslaved African recognized this and either converted out of an appreciation to the religion 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 between the want for freedom and the prospect of death. Both bookends were the constant reminders that for the enslaved African, other than themselves, all they had was 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 who ever had to spend one day as property of a white planter. In this, African spirituality took one more turn as it cemented itself into the lives of enslaved Africans: conjuring and Hoodoo.

## 5. Endnotes

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