

Resisting Enslavement through Religion

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Abstract

The central question of my research is the degree to which African American slaves resisted their enslavement through religious practices. An examination of the ex-slave narratives from the Works Project Administration (WPA) will show that despite tremendous obstacles, including the threat of death, slaves formed a community in which religion was an integral part and provided a means for autonomy and resistance. According to Albert J. Raboteau, "Slave rebelliousness should not be thought of exclusively in terms of acts such as arson, sabotage, flight or revolt, for religion itself, in a very real sense, could be an act of rebelliousness." This paper builds upon Raboteau's work and recent scholarship on slave Christianity by Paul Harvey and Daniel L. Fountain. Whether through Christian religious practices, African rituals or a combination of the two, enslaved people used religion to resist the oppression of their masters. African rituals allowed slaves to retain their African identity-- an identity that made them separate and apart from the white masters. Unique prayer services, incorporating African traditions, "would annoy de white folks wid shouting and singing" according to the WPA narrative of former slave James Southall. These practices were alien to the white masters and in Southall's words, annoying. It was here that the slaves constructed an identity outside their masters' world. For decades the humanity of slaves was downplayed or even denied. It is important today to understand the methods they used to maintain their humanity -- Religion foremost among them.

Keywords: African-American Slavery, Religion, Christianity

1. Introduction

Resisting or rebelling is typically thought of in terms of violent uprisings. However, the resisters can also find an outlet in subtler ways. American slaves defied their slave masters in their worship. They adapted Christianity to their situation, saw inspiration in biblical stories and even incorporated African religious practices. This defiance proves that the slaves thought independently and developed their religion, culture and community despite slave owners' efforts to subdue them. This fact is a relatively recent discovery by historians who, in the past, overlooked evidence of a unique slave culture and viewed them as completely passive.

2. Historiography

For roughly a century, scholarship on American slavery primarily reflected the white perspective. In the 1960s, Stanley Elkins wrote *Slavery: A Problem in the American Institutional and Intellectual Life*. For Elkins, the conditions of slavery were so harsh that slaves were denied an active personality, could not form a community and were left completely docile. For Elkins, there was no black perspective to consider since in his view slaves were dehumanized.¹ A shift occurred after the Civil Rights Movement when historians began to explore the slave

perspective. One example was Eugene Genovese's 1975 work *Roll, Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made*.² Genovese argued that slaves were far from docile; they actively contributed to a culture and formed a community. This opened the door to revising slave history and the ways in which slaves acted as a community and expressed themselves.



Figure 1. Albert Raboteau ³

The emergence of African American historians and Black History Studies followed the Civil Rights movement and accelerated the revision of slave history. In the 2004 afterword to his 1978 book, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*, Albert J. Raboteau, an African American, acknowledges the influence of the era: "Thus for many of us studying in those 'movement' years, the attempt to research and write about African American history had a personal significance and a political impetus."⁴ Raboteau, a professor of theology, then argued in the 1970s that religion, specifically Christianity, gave the slaves hope for freedom from their bondage. Their secret prayer meetings, hidden from the master, were a form of defiance.⁵

Another scholar who saw religion as an expression of resistance was Charshee Charlotte Lawrence-McIntyre in 1987's "The Double Meanings of the Spirituals." She focused on "the spirituals" as a covert means of communication. The lyrics contained metaphors: Israelites represented the black slaves and Egyptians were metaphors for white slaveholders.⁶ Escape was a common theme in the spirituals. For example, "Steal away, steal away to Jesus" was a reference to escaping to freedom.⁷

There were other historians who agreed that acts of resistance could take subtler forms. In her 1994 article "Representing Truth: Sojourner Truth's Knowing and Being Known," Nell Painter differentiates Sojourner Truth the person from the symbol. According to Painter, Sojourner Truth worked the system to her own ends, and Christianity would drive this pursuit.

Genovese, Raboteau, Lawrence-McIntyre and Painter make a strong case for the independent actions of slaves. They have reversed the long-held belief of the passive slave, stripped of humanity. To believe this, as Elkins did, you have to ignore the abundant evidence expressed in scholarship, slave narratives and even music. Slaves that were "stealing away to Jesus" were using religion to nonviolently resist their enslavement.



Figure 2. Paul Harvey ⁸

The Civil Rights movement, beginning in the 1960s, changed the way scholars thought about slavery. Slaves were no longer docile beings, but rather part of a vibrant and autonomous community. Part of the shift in historical writing included an acknowledgement of the religion as an important facet of slave culture. “Indeed, no study of African American history could suffice without a close accounting for black Americans’ religious thought and practices.”⁹ These are the words of University of Colorado professor Paul Harvey, from his 2011 book, *Through the Storm, Through the Night: A History of African American Christianity*. Harvey has much in common with Raboteau’s views though he does acknowledge some of the non-Christian influences that are the focus of Meredith College’s Daniel L. Fountain’s work.



Figure 3. Daniel L. Fountain ¹⁰

Fountain introduced a new opinion challenging the belief that slaves were predominantly Christian. Fountain published his research in 2010, a much more multicultural era, and also further removed from the Civil Rights movement. Revisiting long-held beliefs about slavery was a good thing, but it may have also introduced a flawed assumption that the current dominance of Christianity in African American life can be “read backwards” to the slave era.¹¹ Perhaps there was some wishful thinking on the part of contemporary ministers to assume the dominance of black Christian churches as far back as antebellum. According to Fountain, conversion to Christianity and emancipation were linked; however, it was emancipation that led to conversion, not the other way around.

Fountain applies a modern approach to examining the WPA slave narratives as well as post-1840 autobiographies. He performs a quantitative analysis to answer a number of questions, including:

1. Was the slave/freeperson a Christian while enslaved?
2. If he or she was a Christian during slavery, what was the age at conversion?
3. Did he or she become a Christian following emancipation/attaining freedom?¹²

Of the 381 individuals, Fountain determined that only a minority, 148, or less than 39% were Christians when enslaved.¹³ To Fountain, this shows that the prevalence of Christianity among the slaves was overstated.

3. Slave Resistance Inspired By Christianity

Raboteau introduced the idea that “for religion itself, in a very real sense, could be an act of rebelliousness— an assertion of slave independence, which sometimes required outright defiance of the master's command.”¹⁴ But could subtle acts really be considered resistance? Given the oppressive nature of their situation, slaves could very well have just given up and become the docile beings that Elkins describes. In spite of harsh conditions, slaves still found ways to resist with the limited options available. The ex-slave narratives bear out not only the dehumanizing conditions the slaves faced, but also their resilience in resisting through their worship.

An important primary source for slave history, at least from a slave's perspective, comes the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) interviews of elderly former slaves in the 1930s. In a number of these interviews, the former slaves recall the oppression in all aspects of their lives, including the ability to worship. Some masters did not permit any religious instruction or practice. Others monitored and controlled the religious messages to support the institution of slavery.

Harry Jackson interviewed former slave Candus Richardson for the WPA narratives. Richardson recalled her time as a slave on Jim Scott's Mississippi plantation. Scott beat her husband repeatedly for praying, however the “beatings didn't stop my husband from praying. He just kept on praying.”¹⁵ Richardson prayed quietly to herself to avoid punishment, while her husband's loud prayers were a challenge to the master, an act of resistance. One time he was beaten so severely, his blood-soaked shirt was red “as if you'd paint it with a brush.”¹⁶ Richardson believed that the prayers of slaves, like her husband's, were responsible for emancipation. Richardson, then 90, was “so happy to know that I have lived to see the day when you young people can serve God without slipping around to serve him like we old folks had to do.”¹⁷

Silas Jackson provided more evidence of the religious restrictions and persecution faced by the slaves. In his WPA interview, Jackson, a former Virginia slave, described his master, Tom Ashbie, as “brutal, wicked and hard.”¹⁸ Jackson remembered when Ashbie found out that his slaves were conducting secret prayer services. One slave asked God to change the heart of the master and for deliverance from slavery. That man, Zeek, disappeared the next day. Ashbie eventually admitted that he killed Zeek for praying and feared he would go to hell over it.¹⁹

Raboteau points to other instances, in addition to Jackson, where fear and guilt was expressed by the masters. On their deathbeds, masters were known to ask for forgiveness from their slaves. The masters feared they would be damned for the treatment of their slaves and needed absolution from their slaves to avoid eternal punishment. This was a real role reversal—now the slave had power over the master. The slave could choose to forgive or to withhold forgiveness. It also confirmed for the slaves that there was some justice in the afterlife.²⁰

The masters' preachers would urge slaves to obey their master and never steal or lie to him. As Raboteau said, “all they ever heard was servants obey their master.”²¹ The masters' religious lessons made the slaves realize that the master was a hypocrite. Raboteau quotes a slave: “You white folks set a bad example of stealing, you stole us from Africa.”²² This shows slaves as far from docile and obedient as they questioned the master's religious teachings. Slaves sought their own secret prayer services despite the risk of beatings if discovered. Again, this is another example of the slaves defying their “Earthly” master to obey the “Heavenly” master.

Slave narratives also provide evidence of resistance through religious deception. Slaves, in the presence of their masters, may seem to comply with the master's religion but practiced their own religious rituals in secret. William M. Adams in his narrative recounts how the white preacher asked the slaves to pray for the south to win the Civil War and asked for the slaves' commitment by a show of hands. All the slaves raised their hands in the presence of the white preacher, but that night, in secret, they would “pray for de North to win.”²³

Showing one side to the master and having another side for one's self was not unique to the slaves in the antebellum south. Sojourner Truth was also “not exactly what she seems.”²⁴ Painter, in her article, “Representing Truth: Sojourner Truth's Knowing and Becoming Known,” explores the Sojourner Truth persona and the individual. Truth the individual is described as a “shrewd observer of other people” but “to beware of Sojourner, for although she seems simple and artless...her eye will see your heart and apprehend your motives.”²⁵ Knowing and using the

power structure was a technique used by the slaves to survive; it was used by Truth and by the slaves in the south. Covert actions to conceal their true selves and religious practices from their master speak to the slaves' ability to forge a life independent from that of the master. Some slaves so valued this little piece of autonomy that they were willing to risk beatings if discovered engaging in their own unsanctioned religious practices. Religion was a way to have an identity separate from that of a slave stripped of humanity.

4. Christian Influence Versus African Religious Influence

Thus far, the discussion of slave religious practices has revolved around Christianity in the slave community. The nearly exclusive focus on Christianity is a plausible criticism of historians such as Raboteau. However, Fountain estimates that less than 39% of slaves claimed Christianity as their religion and "it might be more appropriate to say that a small, strong, and visible Christian core existed within the southern slave population."²⁶ Fountain takes issue with the lack of attention by earlier historians to the role of traditional African religions in the lives of the slaves. "Given the acknowledged similarities between different West African religions traditions, it is quite likely that the slaves did find enough common ground to forge African composite religions rather than merely adapting African beliefs to Christianity."²⁷

Fountain notes that other religions survived persecution so why would we expect African religions to vanish? Furthermore, the African religious rituals are unfamiliar to western historians and may have gone undetected by researchers.²⁸ Raboteau, in the Afterword of the 2004 edition of *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*, addresses this oversight and what he would do differently if he were writing his book today:

Newer work also challenged me to become more sophisticated in my understanding of specific African religions and their transmission to the Americas. The Kongo-Angola area would receive more emphasis were I writing today.²⁹

Fountain's case is also not without its flaws. The number of self-identifying Christians is not the only measure of the church's impact. In his review of Fountain's book, Gardner-Webb University's Joseph S. Moore notes that "Black churches were still vital centers of slave life, and one need not get religion to appreciate the social value of them."³⁰ You can see this a century later during the Civil Rights era as well. In the 1950s-1960s the churches were virtually the only independent African-American institutions and were therefore the centers of their communities. Further, it is fair to wonder how confidently we can draw conclusions on millions of slaves from 381 subjects. Even if 39% was the actual number, we need to put that in context. Harvey makes a strong case in his book review of Fountain:

Should Fountain's figure of slightly under 40 percent, or even Raboteau's estimate of one-third of the slave population claiming Christianity, be seen as very high given the many obstacles to the spread of Christianity among slaves, or very low in comparison to the prominence slave Christianity receives in scholarship?³¹

Forty years ago, Genovese noted that by the time of the Civil War, blacks comprised a large portion of the attendance at Christian services across the south.³² In other words they were as religious, if not more so, than the southern whites. Harvey agrees that the percentage of Christians among southern whites was similar to that of the slaves. Professor Harvey, in a December 3, 2013 e-mail, replied:

...even at its height, Christianity reached a relatively small part of the slave population. But that was true of the American population as a whole (my criticism of Fountain). Anyway, many scholars now are working on non-Christian (or anti-Christian, such as black humanism and atheism) traditions among African Americans.³³

Nevertheless, Fountain makes an effective challenge to the assumptions about the slaves being Christian, but not necessarily about the significance of Christianity or the ability to resist through religion in general. Harvey notes that the controlled exposure to Christianity was intended to keep the slaves content in their predicament. It had the opposite effect as African-American Christianity provided the language for both surviving and even resisting enslavement.³⁴

5. Using African Rituals To Maintain A Separate Identity

Whether through Christian religious practices, African rituals or a combination of the two, enslaved people did use religion to resist the oppression of their masters. African rituals were a way for slaves to retain their African identity-- an identity that made them separate and apart from the white masters. White masters attempted to stamp out any cultural identity that slaves had from their native land, yet many African elements still appeared in slaves' religious practices. The way slaves worshiped in their invisible institution looked very different from the worship of their white masters. WPA ex-slave narrator James Southall describes an Afro-Christian prayer service:

Niggers was very religious and dey had church often. Dey would annoy de white folks wid shouting and singing and praying and dey would take cooking pots and put over dey mouths so de white folks couldn't hear 'em. Dey would dig holes in de ground too, and lie down when dey prayed.³⁵

This passage reveals much about slave prayer life and how their white masters viewed them. In Southall's experience, slaves had an active prayer life that took the form of shouting and singing. Southall is most likely describing the ring shout, a West African method of group singing and dancing in a circle.³⁶ Slaves took Christianity and enhanced it with African traditions to create their own unique religion. These practices were alien to the white masters and, in Southall's words, annoying. It was here that the slaves constructed an identity outside their masters' world.

Ironically, the Afro-Christian ring shout may be rooted in African Islam. The Arabic word "sha'wt" describes completing a revolution around the Kaaba, the holy site in Mecca. Fountain sees this potential link as another reason to revisit the impact of non-Christian influences on the slaves.³⁷

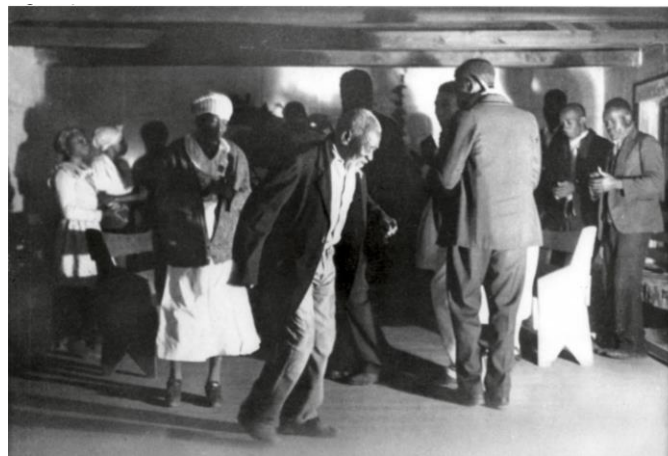


Figure 4. Ring Shout, from the 1930s³⁸

Genovese said that the slave style of prayer or ring shout "could not have been more clearly African."³⁹ When Methodist preachers converted slaves, they told slaves that dancing was sinful. In response, the African-American slaves "shouted" and clapped their hands and moved in a circle, but didn't cross their feet because crossing of feet would be dancing.⁴⁰

Cooking pots are mentioned by Southall as well as other WPA slave narrators who speak of pots in their prayer services. Marjorie Jones interviewed Fannie Moore, an ex-slave from North Carolina, who said the pot was used to muffle the sound at secret prayer meetings: "But de niggers slip off an' pray an' hold prayer-meetin' in de woods den dey tu'n down a big wash pot and prop it up wif a stick to drown out de soun' ob de singin'."⁴¹ Both Raboteau and Harvey found the use of the pot in slave worship to be significant enough to comment on. Raboteau states that the pot was a common device used to preserve secrecy by catching the sound of those praying. He admits that it is not known whether or not there was some symbolism to the use of the pot.⁴² Harvey also observes that slaves used the pots to catch the sound but also offers: "Turning over the pots also allowed the release of the spirits contained within them."⁴³ The scholarly consensus views the pot as a holdover from African traditions.

Other African traditions that the slaves retained included hoodoo or conjure, “a form of healing and counter-harming that drew from both Christian and African elements.”⁴⁴ Slaves sought the services of a conjurer for medicinal purposes and for protection from harm from masters. Harvey also states that whites southerners were also believers in conjure. The WPA slave narratives support the idea that African magical practices were present in the slave community. However, narrators’ stories reveal that while southern slaves sought the conjurer’s help for illness, they were less helpful in providing spells for protection against the abuses of the master. Jane Montgomery, a former slave from Louisiana, describes one magical practice for teething babies, “We used to use nine red ants tied in a sack round they neck to make ‘em teethe easy and never had no trouble with ‘em either.”⁴⁵ David Harper, a former slave from Missouri, doubted the effectiveness of the conjurer, “You know dat if he could do any tricks, he would keep them from whipping him or selling him and dey couldn’t do that or day would have done it long time ago.”⁴⁶ While many slaves dismissed the practice of conjure, some, nonetheless, like Anthony Dawson, reported believing in “luck charms and good and bad signs.”⁴⁷ Historians agree that the aforementioned slave narratives lend evidence to the idea that while slaves may have adopted Christianity, they also adapted it to suit their needs with the addition of traditional African elements.

6. The Spirituals – Resistance Set To Music

While you cannot tell the story of African American history without religion, you likewise cannot tell the story of African American religion without music. The spirituals brought together elements of their African past, clapping, rhythmic movements, with the exposure to American evangelicalism. African American religion “has been defined through musical expression.”⁴⁸ An ex-slave from Kentucky attributed the origins of the spirituals to traditional African tunes and songs.⁴⁹

Slaves were aware that the masters distorted the Bible to justify slavery and to convince the slaves to accept their fate. The slaves resisted this propaganda and responded with the messages contained in their music. The lyrics of the spirituals empowered the slaves, connecting them to biblical plight of the enslaved Israelites:

When Israel was in Egypt's land
Let my people go.
Oppressed so hard they could not stand
Let my people go.
Go down Moses, way down in Egypt land.
Tell old Pharaoh,
Let my people go⁵⁰

The “Pharaoh” was a coded reference to the master and “Moses” was Harriet Tubman. Like the Israelites in Exodus, the slaves were an oppressed people who hoped and prayed for deliverance. While the slaves hoped for an earthly deliverance, deliverance also had a spiritual meaning. For the slave, deliverance could also mean freedom in the afterlife.⁵¹

Spirituals were also a communication network of double meanings. For example, Tubman had a song to announce upcoming escapes: “Dark and thorny is de pathway, Where de pilgrim makes his ways.”⁵² The spirituals were also multi-purpose. They were tools to counter the masters’ propaganda, to express faith, and to secretly communicate. Each facet of the spirituals contained an element of resistance to resist the masters’ effort to control every aspect of a slave’s life.

7. Conclusion

Masters allowed their slaves little autonomy and many restricted the slaves’ access to religious practices and instruction. They allowed an edited form of Christianity (“be obedient to your masters”) or no religion at all. In spite of these obstacles, slaves formed religious communities. The religion of the slaves was not purely Christian as Fountain has demonstrated. African influences remained, as in the spirituals. The lyrics of the spirituals were a way in which slaves communicated in code and used religious themes to voice their resistance, such as “stealing away to Jesus.” Since slaves were forbidden from forming independent institutions, they responded by creating a covert institution expressed through the spirituals and ring shouts.⁵³

Fountain makes an important contribution with his fresh take on the slave narratives. Fountain's strength is in the quantitative analysis, but he is less persuasive in minimizing the critical influence of Christianity. Though Raboteau reflects the time and politics of the era, his work holds up well 35 years later – The slaves did resist through religion. Harvey with the advantage of building on Raboteau, Fountain and others has the most well-rounded approach. Harvey acknowledges the African influences, like Fountain, but he recognizes the primary importance of Christianity. Fountain recently praised the contribution of Harvey in his December 10, 2013 e-mail:

In fact, Professor Harvey's review of my book raised an important view about my research. He suggested that rather than seeing a smaller slave Christian community as a glass half full, that it could reflect the rather substantial religious gains made despite the obstacles created by slavery. In other words, my assertion that there was a vital, vibrant but smaller number of Christians among the slaves was still a notable religious development. I think there is much value in his observation.⁵⁴

Though perhaps a minority within the slave population, Christianity gave the resistance its voice, set to African melodies.

For so long the humanity of slaves were downplayed or even denied. It is important for us today to understand their conditions and how they maintained their humanity. We have an obligation to understand the past, particularly the ugly episodes. Religion is a fundamental element of all human cultures. This was so even under the extreme conditions and restrictions of slavery. Religious practices were a method for resilient slaves to resist their enslavement; secret prayers for freedom, maintaining African rituals and delivering coded messages in the spirituals were all challenges to the masters and allowed the slaves to affirm their humanity.

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