

You Got A Right to the Tree of Life:  
African American Spirituals and Religions of the Diaspora

Run, Mary, run  
Run, Mary, run I say  
Run, Mary, run  
You got a right to the tree of life.

You got a right, you got a right  
You got a right to the tree of life.  
Little Mary you got a right  
You got a right to the tree of life.  
Hebrew children got a right  
You got a right to the tree of life.  
Weeping Mary, you got a right  
You got a right to the tree of life.  
Cross is heavy, but you got a right  
You got a right to the tree of life.  
Come to tell you, you got a right  
You got a right to the tree of life.  
Children gone, but you got a right  
You got a right to the tree of life.  
Oh weeping Mary....<sup>1</sup> Include a sound clip of this song from Reagon's CD compilation,  
Wade in the Water Vol II: African American Congregational  
Singing, Smithsonian/Folkways, 1994.

## I. Introduction

In 1936, Martiniano Eliseu de Bomfim, an esteemed leader in the Afro-Brazilian religion, Candomblé, was interviewed by a local newspaper in Salvador, Bahia. Seu Martiniano, as he was respectfully known, was a babalawo, a diviner priest. He had been born in the mid-nineteenth century and his parents, both originally from Africa, had been slaves. In the interview, as he reflected on his life, he talked about the traumas of slavery and the meaning of the religion he had inherited from his father and mother. "My mother, I remember well, had a scar on her bottom from where she was burned as a punishment." Seu Martiniano's father maintained an altar room where he regularly thanked and honored Oyá, a Yoruba deity of winds and transformative change, whom the father credited

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<sup>1</sup> Run Mary Run, traditional spiritual sung by The Senior Lights from Johns Island, South Carolina and transcribed in Bernice Johnson Reagon, If You Don't Go, Don't Hinder Me: The African American Sacred Song Tradition, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001; 62-63.

with carrying him through great tribulations. After his father's passing, the son took over the ritual responsibilities of the family altar.<sup>2</sup>

The juxtaposition of these subjects – sufferings under slavery and the accompaniment of sustaining spiritual forces – is echoed in the experience of most of the religious traditions of the Afro-Atlantic diaspora. The wounded mothers of Brazil and the weeping Marys of North America shared an imperative for connection to a source that would comfort them, affirm their humanity and urge them forward on their journeys. Spirituals, like rooms consecrated to the African divinities, are vessels of the sacred – imbued with a dynamic, holy life force that strengthens, blesses and animates being.

The spirituals, the traditional songs of African American religion, were created by enslaved Africans and their descendants in nineteenth century America, and hold generations of trauma and transcendence in their tones. They are the religious form that has most faithfully nourished the link to ancestors and ancestral traditions among African Americans and they continue to be a source of great cultural and spiritual sustenance for all people who experience them.

This essay examines connections between the spirituals, which are the oldest extant religio-cultural form in Black North American life, and other religious traditions of the Afro-Atlantic world. We begin with the assumption, perhaps best articulated by historian Sterling Stuckey, that the spirituals cannot be fully understood “apart from their natural, ceremonial context” and apart from the history that created them. Stuckey writes that too often, the tendency has been to approach the songs as a musical form only, unrelated to dance rhythms and unrelated to ritual.<sup>3</sup> However, as even the most cursory historical examination will attest, these sacred songs were developed in integral connection to a larger complex of African American religiosity, which is essential to understanding their nineteenth century meaning, their continuing influence and their profound connection to Black religions all over the Western hemisphere.

This text explores the conjunction between the spirituals and that “larger complex” in terms of concepts of reciprocity and embodiment; the transformative power of sound; and the development of Black American Christianity. Woven through the narrative are reflections on ways that the spirituals operate in strikingly similar manner to major ritual forms in other

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<sup>2</sup> Julio Braga, *Na Gamela do Feitiço: Repressão e Resistência nos Candomblés da Bahia*, Salvador: EDUFBA, 1995; 45 and Ruth Landes, *City of Women*, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1994 (reprint); 215. Originally published in 1947.

<sup>3</sup> Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1987; 27

Afro-Atlantic religions: sacred stones in Cuban Santeria, healing leaves in Brazilian Candomblé, and ancestral waters in Haitian Vodou.

For readers familiar with traditional African American religion, especially its Baptist, Holiness, Pentecostal and southern rural forms, many of the links between spirituals and other diasporan religions will be obvious. For others, this essay will perhaps suggest new appreciations of the deep forces of history, culture and spirit that bind together the many parts of the family of Africa on this side of the Atlantic ocean.

## II. The Afro-Atlantic Diaspora as a Meaning of Religion

Throughout the Americas, from Boston in New England to Montevideo in the Viceroyalty of La Plata, in every place where African women, men and children were enslaved, there emerged cultural and religious forms reflecting the particular complexities, terrors and exigencies of each situation. Finding themselves sometimes among Protestants, sometimes among Catholics; in gold mining towns in central Brazil; on sugar cane plantations in Jamaica and Cuba; in the coffee-producing hills of Venezuela; on cotton and indigo estates in the southern regions of the USA; and in homes, streets, rivers, fields and even small factories everywhere in between, Africans and their descendants, in generations of bondage, encountered and helped create the New World.

As they settled in the new places – towns and cities often built with their labor, canals dug up out of muck and swamp by the sacrifice of their lives, and whole national economies depending mightily on their unremunerated work – the enslaved people took stock of where they were and who they were now expected to be. By and large, they were expected to be property, a permanent servant class working under duress, with few, if any, legal rights, and at constant risk of losing bodily and family integrity. This expectation, violently enforced, was in unremitting tension with the Africans' own sense of who they actually were. Historian of religions, Charles H. Long, suggests that the meaning of black religion across the Americas, emerges from this tension and from the process of “wrestling” with the question of how to stay human in a fundamentally inhumane situation: blackness as an essentially religious task.

Long defines religion as “orientation in the ultimate sense, that is, how one comes to terms with the ultimate significance of one's place in the world.”<sup>4</sup> For

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<sup>4</sup> Charles H. Long, Significations: Signs, Symbols and Images in the Interpretation of Religion, Aurora, Colorado: The Davies Group Publishers, 1999 (reprint); 7

people of African descent in the Americas, both during slavery and in its long aftermath, religion thus becomes the means by which one remembers and cultivates an alternative understanding of one's humanity, in the face of constant affronts and denials. Not limited to the institutional church, rather spread across the breadth of culture, family, community, and language, this meaning of religion feeds an-other experience of reality that nurtures connection to the divine and sustains a truly human identity.

#### a. Spirituals, Praise Houses and Ring Shouts

With a combination of resources from their homelands and their captivities, enslaved people in the Americas, found ways to negotiate, resist, and in some moments, even transform the afflictions they faced. African American spirituals arose out of black response to enslavement in the United States, not only in terms of evocative, often coded, lyrics, but also in the very circumstance of their creation and development. The songs, almost always accompanied by ritual movement and dance, melded Biblical language to African religious values and New World experiences of struggle. They provided the foundation for the emergence of a distinctive, African American Christianity marked by many elements common to other traditions of the diaspora such as Santeria, Vodou and Candomblé.

One of the most important of these shared religious elements is the circle dance. In the United States, it is known as the "ring shout." This is a ritual combination of music and movement that was widely recognized and practiced in the nineteenth century (although probably in use in some form earlier as well), and though much less common now, is still present in the more limited form of "holy dance" and individual "shouting" in many of the most traditional Black church congregations. It was a ceremonial activity created by people with roots in many different parts of west and central Africa who found themselves together in a difficult new land and were faced with the need to remember traditions that could sustain them in order to survive here. Stuckey and Long both refer to the ring shout as the way that Africans in North America literally re-membered, rejoined themselves to their origins and created a new experience of self and community in the New World.

African Americans felt most free to sing spirituals accompanied by the ring shout dances when they were away from the gaze of masters and overseers, who often forbade the gatherings. When the slave quarters was far enough away from the residence of the owners, black people might gather there in one of the cabins, moving to the side the meager furnishings so that a danced circle could form in the center of the room. The narratives of former slaves mention that sometimes a

large tin basin was overturned and raised to the rafters to “catch the sound” and lessen the likelihood that the gathering would be discovered. Sometimes, the basin or barrel would be filled with water and set in the middle of the room or by the door in the belief that it could serve a similar purpose of dampening down the sound. When slaves had access to their own churches, with moveable benches or pews, the ring shout ceremonies often occurred there, after the formal “sermon” service was completed. But just as often, people gathered in woods bordering the plantations where they lived or in simply constructed “praise houses” or “hush harbors” or sometimes out in the open air, around a fire. There they would raise up the song and move in an easy, slightly weighted step in a counterclockwise ring, starting with a slow tempo and gradually building to a cadence that featured the syncopation of handclaps, feet stomping and percussive sticks to keep and vary the rhythm. And in the repetition of the sung lines and the movement of the circling bodies, the spirit was called and answered.

Throughout the diaspora, enslaved people used their homes, wooded and isolated places, and structures they built with the express purpose of sheltering their gatherings, to meet, to dance, to sing and to thus call spirit into their midst. The barracoons, large warehouse-style sleeping quarters common on plantations in Cuba and other parts of the Caribbean were sometimes, at the end of the long workday or on a Sunday or saint’s day, the site of large gatherings of slaves to dance and drum together; simultaneously remembering traditions that had been brought from Africa and, in the circumstances of bondage, creating new ones. But in Cuba as well as in Brazil and Haiti, the largest gatherings were often held away from the plantations in peripheral areas of difficult access, similar to the practice of praise house and hush harbor worship in the United States.

#### b. Santeria, Candomblé and Vodou: Major Traditions of the Diaspora

Over the course of their presence in the Americas, people of African descent have developed an amazing array of religious traditions in places as disparate as Uruguay, Peru, Mexico, Trinidad and Guyana. Among the most widely practiced of the Afro-Atlantic religions are Cuban Santeria (also known as Lucumí, or Regla Ocha), Brazilian Candomblé, and Haitian Vodou. While there is tremendous variety within and among these practices there are also a number of essential elements that are shared in greater or lesser measure among them all. Like the ring shout, each of these three traditions is characterized by ritualized, collective music and dance rhythms – the primary means by which, on the continent and in the African diaspora, the sacred is honored and called into the human community. In these sister traditions, the circle dance is central to the experience of community and to the experience of worship. Long’s and

Stuckey's observations about the "binding" nature of the circle in the religion of Blacks in North America are strongly echoed in the experience of Candomblé in Brazil, for example, where the roda (sacred danced ring) is the means by which divinities from many different African ethnic communities are ritually called into communion – with each other and with their exiled generations.

Another characteristic shared among many Afro-Atlantic religions is a marked intimacy with spirit; a great sense of close, even familial relationship with divinity. The phenomenon of manifesting the spiritual energy of the deity in one's body, ("possession"), is evidence of the exceptional intimacy between humans and Spirit that characterizes most religions of the Afro-Atlantic diaspora.

The sacred spirits of Africa, in the Americas, are known by various names: Orishas, lwas, voduns, wintis, nkisis, among others.<sup>5</sup> These terms have roots in one or more of the languages of West and Central Africa, but have essentially similar meanings – divinities; the divine presence in nature; manifestations of God; protective spiritual energies. Orisha, a Yoruba word, is probably the most popular single idiom due to the extraordinary visibility and prevalence of Yoruba influences in the New World.<sup>6</sup> There exist hundreds of specific orishas within the pantheons of traditional practice in Nigeria, Benin, Togo, Cuba, Brazil, and Trinidad.

For example, Shango is the orisha of fire, the sacred manifestation of the energy of flame. He is also associated with thunder and lightning, justice, mountains, friendship, self-confidence and virility. He was said to have been a king of the

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<sup>5</sup> The divinities are called orishas in the Yoruba-based traditions of Santeria and Candomblé (albeit with different spellings in each); lwas in Vodou; voduns in Dahomean Candomblé traditions; wintis in the Surinamese religion of the same name; and nkisis in Cuban tradition of Congo-Angola origin known as Palo as well as in the Congo-Angolan lineages of Brazilian Candomblé. See section IV. "Otanés" for more information on African origins.

<sup>6</sup> The pervasiveness of Yoruba traditions in contemporary Afro-Atlantic life is a function not only of the strength of those particular West African practices but also of the history of nineteenth century slavery and the large presence of Yoruba-speaking peoples among the last waves of Africans enslaved in the New World. "Factories" along the coastline of Central and South West Africa were among the earliest and longest-continuing sources of enslaved people sent to many parts of the Americas. Thus Bantu-Kongo traditions laid important foundations of Afro-Atlantic culture which often formed creative continuities with later-arriving West African practices. See Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*, New York: Random House, 1983. For example, Candomblé is a word with roots in Kikongo and other Bantu-based Central African languages, and there is a Kongo-Angola lineage (roughly equivalent to a "denomination") in the Candomblé tradition that cultivates Central African nkisis and uses a Bantu-based liturgical language. Nonetheless, the Yoruba lineage in the tradition is the best-known and has come to symbolize all the others in popular representations of the religion.

Yoruba Oyo kingdom in ancient times and to have become a deity after death. Oyá is a warrior energy, a favorite wife of Shango and is his partner in storm-making and battle. She is a strongly independent female energy who rules transformative change, and is represented in great winds and whirlwinds (hurricanes, tornados) that are capable of radically altering everything in their path. Like Shango, she has a fiery temperament but can also represent the ardor of good friendship. Nanã Buruku is one of the oldest of all the orisha energies – an ancient creative force associated with still, muddy waters, like swamps. She represents a quiet, deeply placed wisdom and is as much associated with death as with life. In some of her myths, Nanã is said to be “older than God.”

The orishas, and the African and Afro-Atlantic deities of other names, represent an extraordinarily rich body of creative wisdom about the nature of the world and connections among all life in the universe. Within these religions, human beings are cared for and guided by protective spirits to whom individuals and families offer a reciprocal respect and honor. The relationship is a mutual one in which the orishas are venerated and cultivated with special foods, songs, dances, gifts and the ongoing energy and attention of devotees. The people, in turn, are assured of help and the constant accompaniment of their deities through the large and small vicissitudes of life.

### III. “Tones to Shake the Soul”: The Transformational Power of the Spirituals

Diarists and travelers through the nineteenth century south frequently noted the peculiar power and beauty of the songs of slaves. Observers sometimes found it difficult to explain the sounds they heard, but many described being moved in extraordinary, and even distressing, ways. George Hepworth, a New England minister visiting Carrollton, Louisiana during the Civil War, wrote of encountering “a large number of refugee blacks, not yet freedmen” who were gathered in the area, “living on three-quarter Government rations and working in every way in which they could.” Hepworth describes entering a simple church the former slaves had built on their new compound and finding therein about a hundred people, in perfect silence:

“At length, however, a single voice, coming from a dark corner of the room, began a low, mournful chant, in which the whole assemblage joined by degrees. It was a strange song, with seemingly very little rhythm, and was what is termed in music a minor; it was not a psalm, nor a real song, as we understand these words; for there was nothing that approached the jubilant in it. It seemed more like a wail, a mournful, dirge-like expression of sorrow. At first, I was inclined to laugh, it was far from what I had been accustomed to call music; then I felt uncomfortable, as though I could not endure it, and half rose to leave the room; and at last, as the

weird chorus rose a little above, and then fell a little below, the keynote, I was overcome by the real sadness and depression of soul which it seemed to symbolize.... They sang for a full half-hour. –an old man knelt down to pray. His voice was at first low and indistinct... He seemed to gain impulse as he went on, and pretty soon burst out with an O good, dear Lord! we pray for de cullered people. Thou knows well ‘nuff what we’s been through: do, do, oh! do gib us free! when the whole audience swayed back and forward in their seats, and uttered in perfect harmony a sound like that caused by prolonging the letter m with the lips closed. One or two began this wild, mournful chorus; and in an instant all joined in, and the sound swelled upwards and downwards like waves of the sea.”<sup>7</sup>

The spirituals are a transforming and transformational music. A principal aim of the songs, when sung in ceremonial context, has been to invoke the presence of spirit. Like Hepworth, other nineteenth and early twentieth century observers remarked at palpable changes in the energy of the meetings and churches where spirituals were being sung. They commented that black singers manipulated timbres in ways unexpected and unfamiliar to ears trained to European music scales. Nonetheless, these “strange” resonances often had signal effects on the spirit of the place and on the listener him or herself. In a Florida guidebook published in 1876, author Sidney Lanier writes:

“I have seen a whole congregation of negroes at night...swaying to and fro with the ecstasy and glory of [their song], abandon as by one consent the semitone that should come according to the civilized modus, and sing in its place a big lusty whole tone that would shake any man’s soul.”<sup>8</sup>

This is one of the most marked ways in which the African American spirituals tradition resembles other religious expressions of the Afro-Atlantic diaspora. In Santeria, Vodou, Candomblé and many other black traditions of the Caribbean and Latin America, a central objective of collective worship is to create the space for the sacred to enter and engage with the people present. The spirit is not simply to be considered and acknowledged, but to be felt, experienced and relished. The combination of chanted or sung prayer, ritual music and dance is intended to transform the space and the individuals present so that they are open to another quality of experience. So too, the spirituals, especially when accompanied by rhythmic movement and the ring shout, were designed to manifestly change the nature of the space. To sacralize it. To sacralize the

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<sup>7</sup> Dena J. Epstein, Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977; 290-291. Originally in George H. Hepworth, The Whip, Hoe and Sword; or the Gulf Department in '63, Boston: Walker, Wise, 1864; 163-165.

<sup>8</sup> Epstein; p. 295. Originally in Sidney Lanier, Florida: Its Scenery, Climate and History...Being a Complete Hand-book and Guide, Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1876; 30-31. Emphasis in original.

singers and the listeners. To make available to all present an alternative experience of being in the world.

It is important to understand that this meaning and purpose of the spirituals was widespread in the first century of the creation of this music. A further example among many was recorded by Clifton Furness in 1926 who attended a prayer meeting held in one of the old slave cabins on a South Carolina plantation. Furness related that the service started with the preacher slowly reading a selection of scripture, gradually increasing his tempo and vigor, until, after a while a steady moaning rose up in the shadowy corners where the women sat. Some of the women, their babies wrapped in bundles, patted and rocked in time to the flow of the preacher's rhythm and several men tapped their feet "in strange syncopation." Furness reported that a vigorous cadence developed in the room, a rhythmic presence that affected all who were there, including himself. "It seemed to take shape almost visibly, and grow," he wrote. "I was gripped with the feeling of a mass-intelligence, a self-conscious entity, gradually informing the crowd and taking possession of every mind there, including my own." As the intensity grew, a man sitting directly in front of Furness, his head bowed, body swaying and feet moving up and down, suddenly shouted aloud: Git right – sodger! Git right – sodger! Git right – wit Gawd!

"Instantly the crowd took it up... A distinct melodic outline became more and more prominent, shaping itself around the central theme of the words, Git right, sodger! Scraps of other words and tunes were flung into the melody of sound by individual singers from time to time, but the general trend was carried on by a deep undercurrent, which appeared to be stronger than the mind of any individual present, for it bore the mass of improvised harmony and rhythms into the most effective climax of incremental repetition that I have ever heard. I felt as if some conscious plan or purpose were carrying us along, call it mob-mind, communal composition, or what you will."<sup>9</sup>

Visitors to African American ritual ceremonies often initially felt a certain physical/psychic discomfort at the nature of the energy present, especially as it grew discernibly in strength. Some then also reported feeling a powerful connection to that energy as it touched everyone present in profound ways. Many who attend ceremonies of contemporary Candomblé, Santeria and Vodou report a similar combination of responses. The percussive rhythms can be so affecting that observers feel an unexplained desire to leave or to cry, as if the

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<sup>9</sup> Lawrence Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom, Oxford, England and New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1977; 27

sounds were influencing them at vibrational levels and frequencies of which they had not previously been aware.<sup>10</sup>

#### IV. Otanes: The motherlode

The Afro-Cuban ritual tradition known as Santería, Lucumí or Regla Ocha has roots in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century dispersal of the Yoruba kingdoms from areas that are now southeastern Nigeria and eastern Benin. In that period, the growth of Islam, a series of internecine wars, and especially, the slave trade, caused the scattering of hundreds of thousands of Yoruba-speaking people. Many of the men, women and children captured and enslaved were sent to work on the plantations and in the sugar mills of the Spanish and Portuguese colonies of Cuba and Brazil, respectively. These individuals were from parts of West Africa with tremendously rich and ancient artistic, intellectual and religious cultures.

Along with people from the Niger delta, the Calabar, the old Dahomey Kingdom, Kongo-Angola communities and other ethnic groups from West and Central Africa, the Yoruba helped form the foundation of what would become Afro-Cuban culture. The Yoruba deities, orishas (called “orichás” in Spanish) became major mythic symbols in Cuban life, and their music, dances, stories, foods and acumen yet inform multiple levels of popular culture on the island and in its diaspora.

The orishas of Santería embody elements of nature. Changó is the mighty clap of thunder in rainstorm; Ochún is the sinuous grace of river water and freeflowing streams; Yemayá is the majestic maternal energy of the ocean; Ogun the solitude and strength of the ironmaking forest-dweller. For those who honor and cultivate these ancestral spirits, their aché (essential sacred energy; vital power) is concentrated in stones. Otanes. These lithic representations of the divinities’ presence and power are collected from places associated with the natural element of each. Ochún’s otanes come from riverbottoms and the banks of freshwater tributaries; those of Ochossi, the hunter king, come from inside the forest; the ritual stones of Changó are meteorites (thunderstones) or from the mountainous places where his energy is said to be strongest; and so on.

These otanes, once identified and collected for ritual purposes, are specifically consecrated with songs, sacrifices, prayers, and words of blessing and power

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<sup>10</sup> It must be said, however, that the power of the ritual music of Afro-Atlantic religions can also have the opposite effect, drawing people to listen and eliciting feelings of unexplained connection to the energies cultivated there.

from the community's priestesses and priests. Most otanes are consecrated for individual devotees, linking their personal spiritual energy with that of the orishas who protect them and signifying that link through the stone. Some of the otanes are regarded as belonging not simply to an individual, but to a family line or an entire ceremonial community.

In Santeria (as in the Yoruba traditions on which Santeria is based) these stones are the motherlode, the place where the essence of the holy is concentrated; where that essence is fed. They are also the site from which that essence feeds back strength and blessing into the world.

The spirituals are the bedrock of Black religion in North America, and in that sense they are otanes of African American tradition. These songs, like the sacred stones, are a way to cultivate the Spirit and give it housing. In their creation – improvised of callings and responses, of chants and catches, of mournings and praises – the new songs, as if new saints, became repositories of the communal and transformational power of African American people. Our aché. And in their singing, over the generations, the aché is renewed and made available to all who add their voices to the songs.

Historian, activist and composer Bernice Johnson Reagon<sup>11</sup>, founder of the women's a capella group Sweet Honey in the Rock, talks about the traditional culture of the rural south as the "motherlode" of African American experience. It is the place where the strain is richest, where the pressed weight of suffering and resistance forced out brightness that has enriched and ennobled the entire nation. Reagon draws heavily in her academic, activist and cultural work from the congregational singing tradition of the Baptist churches she attended as a child in southwest Georgia. In an interview with the Veterans of Hope Project, Reagon talks about the role of singing in those southern churches in much the same language that Santeria devotees talk about the role of otanes:

"I went to a church where you could not sing out loud in the service until you had been saved...And people talked about...spirit, sometimes they called it your soul but everybody had one and it had to be worked on. It wasn't just there. It had to be cultivated, this thing; and you had to feed it like you eat food. And you condition this phenomenon, this part of yourself, your soul, by going to church."<sup>12</sup>

Include sound sample here from the interview

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<sup>11</sup> Bernice Johnson Reagon is perhaps the best-known singer to have emerged from the Southern Freedom Movement of the 1960s. A founder of the Freedom Singers ensemble of the Student Nonviolence Coordinating Committee (SNCC), she writes and lectures extensively on the meanings of African American sacred music and its transformational power.

<sup>12</sup> Bernice Johnson Reagon: *The Singing Warrior*, (video/DVD and study guide) Denver: The Veterans of Hope Project, 2000

The sacred stones, like the power to sing in the southern rural Black churches in which Reagon was raised, are not ritually available until one has undergone initiation. In the language of the church, “until you have been saved.” Their energy and blessing are, however, part of the atmosphere of the Santeria community and, in that sense, accessible to anyone. The *otanes*, once consecrated, represent the most essential part of a person’s being, the part shared with the *orisha*, with God. In Santeria, this essence is ritually fed with food offerings, water, songs, prayers, and the exercise of service to the larger community. Reagon’s reflection on the role of singing, as a “conditioning” and nurturing exercise for the soul, resonates strongly with the way *otanes* are fed. She also talks about the experience of church, and especially of singing the old style music, the spirituals, as effecting “the material you’re made of.” She says:

“...that church experience, those years of sitting up there in that singing and moving into singing yourself, and being surrounded with it – that really does something to the material you’re made of. It really connects you up with a force in the universe that makes you different. It makes you capable of moving with a different kind of access. You’re connected to something else, other than what people think you’re connected up to.”<sup>13</sup>

Include sound sample here from the interview

Reagon’s southwest Georgia community understood singing African American religious music as a way to feed and develop an important internal part of one’s nature. “The part of our being that is tampered with when you run this sound through your body is part of you that our culture thinks should be developed and cultivated, that you should be familiar with, that you should be able to get to as often as possible, and that if it is not developed, you are underdeveloped as a human being...If you go through your life and you don’t meet this part of yourself, somehow the culture has failed you.”<sup>14</sup>

For Reagon and her community of origin, singing spirituals, running the songs through your body, affects the “material you are made of” just as the energy of the *orishas*, running through the bodies of devotees affects the material they are made of. In Brazilian *Candomblé*, (a tradition which also has a practice of consecrating the sacred energies of the universe in stones), the years of initiation and participation in ceremonial community create an experience parallel to that Reagon describes in rural Georgia churches. Cultivating connection to the *orishas* of *Candomblé* and Santeria, through song, dance, ritual offerings, and service to

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<sup>13</sup> Bernice Johnson Reagon: *The Singing Warrior*.

<sup>14</sup> Art Jones, *Wade in the Water: The Wisdom of the Spirituals*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993; 22. Originally from PBS Bill Moyers Program, *The Songs are Free*, featuring Bernice Johnson Reagon; Cooper Station, NY: Mystic Fire Videos, #76204, 1991

others in need of spiritual and material assistance, is understood in those Afro-Atlantic traditions as an important way to develop one's essence. For the southern African American Christian church, as well, as Reagon describes it, singing the traditional music that has been the repository of so much grace and struggle, serves a very similar purpose.

In an essay on Deacon William Reardon, Sr., a master songleader and elder of Southern Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., Reagon writes of the prayer band and congregational singing traditions that kept alive "songs that brought us through times when only a song or a moan could wrap itself around us until change came." Speaking of the deacon at his funeral service in 1997, Reagon said, "He was one who believed that we still needed what could only be reached through the experience of being in the middle of a singing congregation being bathed in the sounds of old spirituals and hymns." As she explains in her text, in this passage Reagon is not talking about songs as music. Neither is she talking simply about songs as singing. "We are talking about what people believed you needed in order to be a whole human being."<sup>15</sup>

## V. Spirituals in the Development of African American Christianity

As we have seen, in the nineteenth century context, before the concertization of black religious music, the ring shout and spirituals were closely associated. It was not possible to have the sacred circle dance without some form of vocal music with percussive accents; nor was it likely, in a worship setting, to experience the singing of the sacred songs without repetitive corporal movement in a circle.

From the sea islands off of South Carolina and Georgia, west to Mississippi and Louisiana and back northeast to Philadelphia, there are reports from travelers, diarists and later, former slaves themselves, describing the sacred circle dances that black people performed throughout the nineteenth and into the early twentieth century. Not all African Americans felt the ring shout an appropriate form of veneration, however. In the 1870s, Bishop Daniel Alexander Payne of the African Methodist Episcopal church expressed an almost apoplectic frustration that the danced circle with rhythmic clapping of hands was virtually a prerequisite for worship and conversion among most black people he encountered at the time.<sup>16</sup> It is, he wrote "the essence of religion" to the vast majority of ignorant masses. At a large revival ("a bush meeting") of Black

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<sup>15</sup> Bernice Johnson Reagon, *If You Don't Go, Don't Hinder Me: The African American Sacred Song Tradition*, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2001; 66-67

<sup>16</sup> Although the bishop was himself African American, he believed, like some of his fellow Black elites, that the ring shout was improper, unchristian and disgraceful to the race.

Christians in Philadelphia, the bishop condemned the practice as “heathenish” and demanded that the local pastor “go and stop their dancing.” Bishop Payne was told, “Sinners won’t get converted unless there is a ring...The Spirit of God works upon people in different ways. At camp meeting there must be a ring here, a ring there, a ring over yonder, or sinners will not get converted”<sup>17</sup>

Another witness to the ring shout was Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who in 1869 published an account of his experience in the South Carolina Sea Islands. He described returning to the camp many nights and coming upon a circle of people moving in “the rhythmical barbaric dance the negroes call a ‘shout’,” singing the music of their ceremony with the measured clapping of hands. As night wore on and the singing and dancing continued in deepening intensity, Higginson noted that eventually everyone present, of all ages, was “drawn into the vortex” of the music. “Such a response,” Stuckey writes, “from the oldest to the youngest, could not easily have been evoked by an appropriation from another culture; rather the magical pull was an expression of traditional values of a people, those that moved the oldest to engage in sacred dance and the young to join them in the circle.”<sup>18</sup>

Scholars of African American history and religion have indicated that the process of “Christianization” of black slaves was much lengthier and more complex than previously thought. Though Africans and their descendants lived and labored in the mainland colonies (and later the new nation) from the seventeenth century, large-scale conversions of African American people occurred from the 1820s forward. Prior to that time, most Blacks were not Christian. And throughout the nineteenth century, the Christianity to which the majority of blacks converted was distinctly influenced by African values and traditions. In the spirituals, as well as in the sermons of Black preachers and in the chanted prayers of congregations, the words, stories and language of nineteenth century American Christianity were welded to African artistic and ritual forms. The rhythms and tones of the preachers’ voices and of the congregations’ singing, the danced movements and the handclaps and tapped beats were all African, although the message was ostensibly Christian. Stuckey writes that even when standard Christian hymns were part of a worship ceremony, African sensibilities were transforming the music. “While a hymn was being sung, rhythms of the ring shout, which were the rhythms of the spirituals, were being applied, as the Africans took possession of the hymn.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Stuckey, 92-93; Originally from Daniel Alexander Payne, Recollections of Seventy Years, New York: Arno Press, 1968 (reprint; first published in 1888); 253-254.

<sup>18</sup> Stuckey, 27-30.

<sup>19</sup> Stuckey, 60-62.

The role of Black ministers and singers in the transformation/creation of Black religion in the United States cannot be underestimated. As they interpreted biblical stories through the lens of their own oppression, enslaved people began to form a distinctive understanding of Christianity that emphasized the liberatory aspects of the Bible's imperatives and Jesus' great compassion and alliance with suffering people. The combination of the "freedom-seeking" impulse in black New World religion; an emphasis on transformative music and rhythmic, percussive movement in worship; and the experience of possession or intimacy with spirit is the hallmark of African American Christianity, setting it apart from other variants of the Christian tradition in the United States. These elements are among those shared profoundly with other religions of the Afro-Atlantic diaspora.

There are interesting parallels between the experience of slaves in Protestant areas of North America and those in Catholic contexts in the Caribbean and South America, in terms of the use of Christian structures to meet their needs. In countries where Catholicism was the dominant religion, blacks often used the hagiography of the saints to create "codes" by which African deities could be identified and worshipped without undue resistance. For example, St. Lazarus – whose bodily sores and association with death and rebirth marked a similarity to the orisha of healing, Omolû or Obaluaiye (Babaluaiye) – became a legitimate and legitimizing representation in Santeria and Candomblé. Like saints, lay catholic brotherhoods (*irmandades*; *cofradias*), were recognized and respected as valid structures for religious experience in Catholic countries. As such, Africans appropriated them creatively to their own uses. In Brazil and Cuba, the *irmandades* and *cofradias* founded by blacks played important mutual aid functions. Furthermore, they were instrumental as institutional formations within which traditional African religious values and practices could be protected, sustained and adjusted to fit New World exigencies. In the case of Brazilian Candomblé, for example, the oldest extant terreiro (temple) in the country, Ilê Axé Iyá Nassô Oká, or Casa Branca, is believed to have been founded by members of a lay Catholic confraternity formed by Yoruba slaves and freedpeople.<sup>20</sup> In the United States, it appears that the Bible (and biblical stories and tropes), congregational singing, and, to a certain extent, the tradition of small churches independent of a large hierarchical bureaucracy, were among the

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<sup>20</sup> The terreiro was first established on a patch of land behind the church of Nossa Senhora da Barroquinha. In that church, there was an important black confraternity, the brotherhood of Bom Jesus dos Martírios among whose largely Yoruba membership were the original organizers of the Candomblé terreiro. The Casa Branca temple subsequently moved several times and is currently in the Engenho Velho neighborhood of the city. See Renato da Silveira, "Jêje-Nagô, Ioruba-Tapá, Aon Efan, Ijexá: Processo de Constituição do Candomblé da Barroquinha – 1764-1851," in *Cultura Vozes*, 6, Nov-Dec 2000; 80-100.

primary institutional structures, legitimated by the larger society, that African Americans applied to their own religious purposes.

Protestant Christianity in the nineteenth century United States encouraged individual reading of the Bible to a much greater extent than did Roman Catholicism of the same period in Latin America. That encouragement was the means by which many people gained a modicum of literacy in North America, including some enslaved people, although slaves were generally forbidden by law and custom to read. Nevertheless, the few individuals in the slave community who did gain this skill often shared what they learned with their fellows. Religious leaders in particular would have been in a position to help disseminate the stories of the Old and New Testaments, and together with the communities they served, begin to create an alternative interpretation, a “freedom exegesis” based in their experiences as people in bondage. The outlines of this alternative, African American interpretation of the Bible are well-known as many elements survive today in the social justice witness of the Black church and in the lyrics of countless spirituals that speak, sometimes directly and sometimes more obliquely, to the inevitable coming of justice, the steadfast faithfulness of God, the compassion of Jesus for those suffering and mistreated, and the right of all God’s children to share in the bounty of the earth.

The spirituals are often recognized as carrying “coded messages” understood by the blacks who sang them but not necessarily by owners or enforcers. Songs such as *Wade in the Water*, *Go Down Moses*, and *Follow the Drinking Gourd*, served unsuspected purposes of alerting slaves that an opportunity to escape was close by. Other songs, like *Run, Mary, Run* and *Oh Freedom* – which respectively included the lines *You got a right to the tree of life*, and *Before I be a slave, I’ll be buried in my grave* – reflected and fed courage to resist slavery by both internal and external means.

Insert excerpt of *Follow the Drinking Gourd* from Harry Belafonte compilation *The Long Road to Freedom*

In addition to these kinds of codes, there is a substrata of cipher in the spirituals that highlights yet another connection to sister traditions of the Afro-Atlantic diaspora. This level of “secret language” was present in the sound of the songs, the way they were sung: the elided tones and repetitions, the humming, the broomstick and stomped feet percussive accompaniments; the chants, the prayers and responsive callings in entrancing rhythm. These distinctive elements of traditional spirituals were echoes and adaptations of African forms of communicating with the divinities and the ancestors. In this sense, the songs

were not only codes for freedom and courage, they were also codes for summoning the spirits of Africa, in the ancestral ways.

Insert excerpt of a shout spiritual performed by McIntosh County Shouters, from Reagon Congregational Singing compilation

It was thus by means of the spirituals and the ring shout that Africans found a way to connect their traditional forms of worship to the exercise of Christian faith. And it was in this conversion that African Americans re-created and re-interpreted Christianity to speak to African imperatives and to their experience of slavery and resistance in the New World. Anthropologist and scholar of Black folk traditions, Zora Neale Hurston, studied African American religion for many years with a close and knowledgeable eye, her observations made stronger through comparative work in Haiti and her own broad experience of varieties of Black religiosity. Hurston found many resonances of African religious values in the contemporary Black church of the mid-twentieth century. "In fact," she said, "the Negro has not been christianized as extensively as is generally believed. The great masses are still standing before their pagan altars and calling old gods by a new name."<sup>21</sup>

## VI. Embodiment, Accompaniment and Reciprocity: "Hard Working Gods"

In many religions of the Afro-Atlantic diaspora, the experience of "possession" or the ritual manifestation of sacred energies in the bodies of devotees, expresses the fundamental nature of the relationship between human beings and the divine. It is a linkage of exchange, of mutuality, of shared responsibility, and above all, of accompaniment. Anthropologist Sheila Walker writes that "a palpable relationship between people and their deities is a unifying feature of the Africa-to-Afro-America religious continuum."<sup>22</sup> Certainly, Santeria, Vodou and Candomblé are strongly marked by this phenomenon which is a central rite in the ritual life of the faith communities. In Black churches in the United States, especially Baptist, Pentecostal and Holiness churches some members regularly "get the Holy Ghost", "get the Spirit", or simply, "get happy." Reagon refers to this intimacy with spirit as a tendency in Black religion "to get common with God," that is, to relate to God almost as one would to a family member, and to experience Jesus as a deeply personal friend who, as much as anything else, offers compassionate and powerful company on the road of life. Walk with me Lord, walk with me./While I'm walking this tedious journey/I want Jesus just to walk with me.

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<sup>21</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *The Sanctified Church*, Berkeley: Turtle Island, 1981; 103

<sup>22</sup> Sheila S. Walker, "African Gods in the Americas: The Black Religious Continuum," in *The Black Scholar*, November-December 1980; 30-31.

Practitioners of other African diasporan religions are also accompanied on their lives' journeys by the divinities they serve. In fact, much of the *raison d'être* for initiation in these traditions is to align a devotee's energy more fully and more closely with that of the spirits who protect her. Practitioners of Candomblé, for example, speak of their orixás as "meu Pai" (my Father) and "minha Mãe" (my Mother) in a sense both holy and immediate. They turn to these mothers and fathers, the orixás, for comfort, assistance, forbearance, healing and innate understanding of their troubles and joys, in much the same way that African American Christians turn to Jesus.

This familiarity with God, rooted in African understandings of relationship between human beings and the divine, appears to have taken on especially marked characteristics in the Americas. It was as if, in the experience of slavery and the consequent struggles of resistance, there was a greater need for the presence and protection of sacred spirits. French photographer and scholar of African religions, Pierre Verger, wrote that in West Africa ceremonies for the embodiment of divine energies are the responsibility of a relative few liturgical leaders especially designated and trained for that work. In the New World, he noted, receiving the Spirit is a more widespread occurrence. African-born individuals interviewed at the end of the nineteenth century in Bahia reported that Candomblé devotees who were born in Brazil were more susceptible to *cair no santo*, become possessed by an orixá. These former slaves noted that in their African homelands comparatively few people personally experienced the direct embodied presence of the deities.<sup>23</sup>

The relatively more common experience of possession and initiation into the service of the orixás and *lwas* on this side of the Atlantic is perhaps a reflection on the effects of the physical and psychic disjunctions caused by the experience of the Middle Passage and slavery. Surviving the traumas, one could surmise, required a stronger grip, a tighter embrace between deity and devotee, than that which had existed previously.<sup>24</sup> The spirituals facilitated this strong embrace, and songs such as *Come Down Angels* reflect the importance of calling on the embodied presence of the Holy Spirit. *Come down angels, trouble the waters/ Come down angels, trouble the waters/ Come down angels, trouble the waters/Let God's saints come in.*

The angels, the saints, the Holy Ghost, Jesus, the Lord. African Americans called on the sacred spirits of the Bible just as their foreparents and their relatives in

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<sup>23</sup> Information on Verger and researcher, Raimundo Nina Rodrigues, from Rachel E. Harding, *A Refuge in Thunder: Candomblé and Alternative Spaces of Blackness*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000, 154-155.

<sup>24</sup> Harding, 155-156

other parts of the hemisphere called on the African spirits. Hurston wrote that all over the diaspora, the divinities cultivated and honored by black people are “hardworking gods who serve their devotees just as laboriously as the suppliant serves them.”<sup>25</sup> In Vodou, Candomblé and Santeria, relationship to lwa, nkisi or orisha is very often understood as an inherited trait, a ritual obligation to which devotees are called. The tradition of generationally-linked pastoral roles in the Black church may perhaps be seen in an analogous light. Certainly the deep, abiding, almost familial devotion to Jesus associated with traditional southern black religion is related to the personal connection people of African descent have nurtured with their spirits all over the New World.

In most traditions of the Afro-Atlantic diaspora the body is an essential conduit for spirit. It is not understood as somehow in opposition to the sacred, but as a housing for it, a place for spirit to enter into the world. The Black body, in the countries of the western hemisphere, has also been overwhelmingly a laboring body, a commodified body, a body undergoing many kinds of distress and signification. This tension – between the suffering body and the sacred body; the despised body and the cherished body – is lived out in the creation and perpetuation of the spirituals.

In her book, The Body in Pain, Elaine Scarry writes about the relationship of human creativity to the challenge of expressing physical trauma. Ultimately, she says, the inexpressibility of great distress in simple verbal exposition leads to a “wider frame of invention.”<sup>26</sup> That “wider frame of invention” for African Americans, included these songs, which emerged from the bodies of slaves as much as from their voices. The spirituals were a means of engaging the depth and complexity of a people’s experience of enslavement and resistance. A way to open up a pathway to another kind of gnosis: “Running the songs through your body,” Reagon implies, is a means toward a different understanding, an-other way of knowing who one is in the world.

A powerful example of the way nineteenth century Blacks used the creation of songs to collectively engage a challenge comes from the report of Henry Goddard Thomas, who in July 1864 spent time in the camp of a black Union regiment near Petersburg, Virginia just before the battle of the Crater. Thomas describes how the soldiers would, in response to momentous news, form songs out of silence; first “studying” on a problem and then raising up sounds in many permutations until the final form is the one that best speaks to the need of the moment.

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<sup>25</sup> Hurston, 56-57

<sup>26</sup> Elaine Scarry, The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World, Oxford, England and New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1985; 22

“Any striking event or piece of news...was followed by a long silence. They sat about in groups “studying,” as they called it.... When the spirit moved, one of their singers would uplift a mighty voice, like a bard of old, in a wild sort of chant. If he did not strike a sympathetic chord in his hearers, if they did not find in his utterance the exponent of their idea, he would sing it again and again, altering sometimes the words or more often the music. If his changes met general acceptance, one voice after another would chime in; a rough harmony of three parts would add itself; other groups would join his, and the song becomes the song of the command.

The night we learned that we were to lead the charge the news filled them too full for ordinary utterance.... They formed circles in their company streets and were sitting on the ground intently and solemnly “studying.” At last, a heavy voice began to sing, We-e looks li-ike me-en a-a marching’ on, we looks li-ike men-er-war. Over and over again he sang it, making slight changes. The rest watched him intently; no sign of approval or disapproval escaped their lips, or appeared in their faces. All at once, when his refrain had struck the right response in their hearts, his group took it up, and shortly half a thousand voices were upraised....The sound was...weird...when all the voices struck the low “E” (last note but one), held it, and then rose to “A” with a portamento as sonorous as it was clumsy. Until we fought the battle of the crater they sang this every night to the exclusion of all other songs. After that defeat they sang it no more.”<sup>27</sup>

The use of spirituals in labor – in battle, in fields, in kitchens, on waterways – and the association of the music with the trials and dangers of slave life reminds us of similar connections elsewhere in the Americas between black religions and the context of struggle out of which they developed. Iyalorixá Valnizia Pereira Oliveira, a Candomblé priestess in Salvador, Bahia Brazil, reflects that her religion, the religion of her ancestors, is hard. “Everything about the slaves’ life was hard. Even their religion was hard.” Mãe Val talks about the tremendous effort Brazilian slaves made to find safe, distant places to hold their ceremonies, the sacrifices of labor and rest made to properly honor and care for their deities; the risk of jail, the beatings and condemnation for holding onto their ancestral faith. But the difficulty of their worship life was compensated by the joy they had in communing with their gods and depending on them for accompaniment and aid, she said. The ialorixá says of the current generation of practitioners, “We know that joy.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Epstein, 293-294

<sup>28</sup> Personal conversation with the author, August 2003.

## VII. The Folhas: Balm in Gilead: Candomblé

Many Candomblé terreiros in Bahia maintain a garden area in which plants are cultivated, as well as an uncultivated space, if available, for wildcrafted herbs. A major emphasis in the religion is ritual and herbal healing. Each of the orixás<sup>29</sup> is considered the owner of specific, proprietary herbs. Each herb is associated with certain songs and prayers, without which, their magical properties do not function. The plants are used in baths, ceremonial cleansings and healing ceremonies as well as in initiatory rites and the preparation of sacred foods. Some of the herbs are aromatics common to many places in the hemisphere, like basil, marjoram and varieties of mint; others are rarer and require special visits to forested areas, or to herb specialists in neighborhood markets. Interdependence of human beings and nature is central to Candomblé cosmology. In fact, the presence and use of herbs (collectively known as folhas, “leaves”) in the religion is extensive and so important that a common saying insists, “without leaves, there is no Candomblé.”

A frequent use of herbs in Candomblé is a *banho de folhas*, an aromatic ritual bath prepared to calm an anxious or chaotic mind. To ease a ravaged psyche. This bath can also be a *descarrego*, (literally, “unburdening”); that is, the washing away of traumatic and negative energies so that the underlying good can emerge. A way of getting to balance, getting to grace. Another familiar usage of herbs in Candomblé is in special preparations to sacralize the body, or bundled branches swept in the corners and along the walls of a room to ritually cleanse the space. There is also a ceremony known as *cantando folhas*, “singing the leaves”, in which liturgical songs in African languages are offered to healing leaves for the physical and spiritual well-being of an individual or a group. This rite, singing the leaves, is generally conducted as part of larger ritual obligations, part of the overall rhythm of ceremonial activities that keep people connected to their sources of support, and that help develop devotees as human beings.

These uses of herbs resonate in the ways spirituals have been songs of deep comfort and sustenance for African Americans. One striking example comes from the writings of a Presbyterian abolitionist, James Miller McKim, who visited the South Carolina Sea Islands in the early 1860s. Hearing the music of the slave community he took note of its distinctive and powerful sounds and asked one of the black men he met where the songs had come from. “Dey make em sah,” the man replied and then explained further. “I’ll tell you, it’s dis way. My master

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<sup>29</sup> This is the Portuguese spelling (plural) of the Yoruba word *orisa*; which is spelled *orisha* in English and *orichá* in Spanish.

call me up and order me a short peck of corn and hundred lash. My friends see it and is sorry for me. When dey come to de praise meeting dat night dey sing about it. Some's very good singers and know how; and dey work it in, work it in, you know, till dey get it right; and dat's de way."<sup>30</sup>

This explanation of the way spirituals were created is richly suggestive of a great many things related to the larger complex of Afro-Atlantic religions, especially the use of song as a form of healing. The man who spoke to McKim essentially described one of the most powerful uses of the spirituals within the enslaved community: that is, as a balm offered to help assuage one another's pain. Reagon affirms this meaning of the music: "Spirituals were songs created as leverage, as salve, as voice, as a bridge over troubles one could not endure without the flight of song and singing."<sup>31</sup>

Whether in response to the physical grief and humiliation of public beatings or the profound heartbreak of having a family member sold away as if cattle, there was song to speak to the unspeakable. The "good singers" mentioned in the passage above were not only women and men with strong voices, but, perhaps even more importantly, they had to have been individuals who knew an alchemy of spirit, sound and compassion that could be brought to bear on the great woundedness of the community, and give it the ingredients of healing. This role of singers as medicine people, musicians and artists as the priest/healers of the community, is one that the creators of the spirituals shared with their relatives in Brazil, Cuba, Suriname, Jamaica and other parts of the diaspora as well.

During the days following Hurricane Katrina when tens of thousands of black people were horrifyingly abandoned in the New Orleans Convention Center, there were reports that one of the evacuees, Mrs. Anita Roach, choir director of a New Orleans church, gathered family, friends and strangers in her vicinity to sing spirituals as a way of diffusing tensions and giving one another encouragement in the face of debilitating psychic assault. A man sitting nearby, Mr. Jesse Jones, who had recently watched a close friend die of dehydration, explained that the songs managed to soothe his spirit a bit. He remarked that the music also helped keep the mass of people calm in a potentially explosive situation. "We had some rioting going on the other night," Jones recalled, "but when she broke out in the spiritual song it just sent a wave of calm through the whole crowd."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Bernard Katz, editor, *The Social Implications of Early Negro Music in the United States*, NY: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1969; 2. Originally published in *Dwight's Journal of Music* Boston: August 1862

<sup>31</sup> Reagon, *If You Don't Go, Don't Hinder Me*; 25

<sup>32</sup> "Amid chaos, a rare voice of strength," in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, September 3, 2005.

## VIII. Retirer d'en bas d'leau: Reclaiming Ancestors

In Haitian Vodou, Guinée is the ancestral home. The place of origin. The eternal dwelling of the lwa. Guinée is Africa. It is where the souls of the dead return to rest, the deep waters of the abyss. And it is the place from which the strength and blessings of the ancestors are repossessed for the benefit of their descendants in a ceremony known as retirer d'en bas d'leau. "A year and a day following the death of a person, the family undertakes to reclaim his soul from the waters of the abyss below the earth and to lodge it in a govi [a specially consecrated container] where it may henceforth be invoked and consulted in the event of illness or other difficulties and so may participate in all the decisions that normally unite the members of the family in counsel."<sup>33</sup> Anthropologist, initiate and scholar of Vodou Maya Deren describes the ritual, directed by a houngan (male high priest) or manbo (female high priest) who shakes a consecrated rattle rhythmically, steadily, for a long time. Sometimes insistently, sometimes with a gentle, ringing murmur, the ritual leader uses the instrument and her voice to call les invisibles, the family dead, to the surface of the water.

This ceremony, in which the spirits of the deceased are coaxed with song back into active participation in the lives of their living family members, is a way of insuring that the blessings and help of ancestors are acknowledged and available to their kin. The spirits of the dead are asked to come and reside in special vessels where they can be kept close and cared for by their descendants. Once all the ceremonial rites have been completed, the reclaimed ancestors "are treated as tutelary spirits, a kind of minor loa, who look after their relations and who, in return for sacrifices offered them, attend to the prayers of kith and kin and respond to their appeals for advice or protection."<sup>34</sup>

Theologian Yolanda Smith talks about the spirituals as an especially apt means by which African Americans recognize and maintain historical/religious connections to ancestors. The songs are, in her words, representative of the "triple heritage" of blacks in North America: African origins; American experience; and Christianity.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, as African Americans sing these songs today, they are, in a sense, performing rites of reclamation that link them to the experiences and gifts of their forbearers. Ruby Sales, a Washington D.C.-based community organizer, Episcopal theologian and former member of SNCC (the

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<sup>33</sup> Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, Kingston, NY: Documentext (reprint); 46. Originally published in 1953 by Thames and Hudson.

<sup>34</sup> Alfred Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, New York: Schocken Books, 1972 (reprint); p. 263. Original translation of *Le Vaudou Haïtien* published in 1959 by Oxford University Press.

<sup>35</sup> Yolanda Y. Smith, *Reclaiming the Spirituals: Possibilities for African American Christian Education*, Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2004; and conversations with the author.

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), explains how spirituals connect her to ancestors and to history. In a 1998 interview, Sales describes growing up in the Black church in Alabama in the 1950s and hearing old songs like *Couldn't Hear Nobody Pray*. In that moment, as she was surrounded by the music, Sales says, "I was no longer an eight-year-old child, I felt really connected to my grandmother; so even today when I sing that song, I don't just sing it in my voice. There is a rattle in my throat as deep and old as my grandmother's voice. It connects me. It allows me to move from one historical period to the next to really get to the souls of where Black people were. It is in that moment, through song, that I am able to feel something other than myself. I become part of a community. I become part of a struggle."<sup>36</sup>

Insert sound sample from the interview here

Later in the interview, Ruby recounts an experience during the southern freedom movement when a dear friend of hers was murdered. The friend had put himself, intentionally, in the line of fire of the gun, taking a bullet that was meant for Ruby. In the face of profound disorientation and grief Ruby became mute for a time and says she was only able to find her voice (and the courage to testify against her friend's killer before an all-white jury) through the enduring support of her loved-ones and, especially, through black religious music. She says, even when she could not speak she would sing songs like *We've Come This Far By Faith* and *Tell Me How Did You Feel When You Come Out the Wilderness?* and she would hear the voices of her grandmothers accompanying her own and those voices would strengthen her. "That's what really got me through...what has always gotten me through, black song," Ruby says, "singing those songs and hearing those voices."<sup>37</sup>

As Sales implies, the songs are repositories of resilience that each generation accesses and renews, adding their own voices and their own battles to the reservoir. The spirituals, like the Vodou ceremony of *retirer d'en bas de l'eau*, become a way to connect with the resources of spirit and struggle created by the ancestors so that the descendants may benefit from what the preceding generations knew and lived. Deren says of the Haitian rite, "[It] is the procedure by which the race reincorporates the fruit of previous life-processes into the contemporary moment, and so retains the past as a ground gained, upon and from which it moves forward into the future."<sup>38</sup> The wisdoms, loves, skills, and disciplines of those who have passed on are reclaimed to be of service to those who remain.

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<sup>36</sup> Ruby Sales: *Standing Against the Wind*, (video/DVD and study guide) Denver: The Veterans of Hope Project, 2000

<sup>37</sup> Ruby Sales: *Standing Against the Wind*.

<sup>38</sup> Maya Deren, 27-28

## IX. Final thoughts

In a recent lecture-concert at the Iliff School of Theology, Art Jones, founder of the Spirituals Project, explained that the primary features of the African American spirituals tradition are: the expression of grief and suffering and the capacity to transcend that suffering. “In order to transcend the suffering,” Jones told the audience, “you have to go into the center of the suffering. And as you go into the center of it, you gain the strength to come out of it.”

Slavery is a difficult subject to manage. For peoples of the Americas, our histories of genocide and slavery are the jagged foundational archetypes of our national psyches. The lacerating roughness from which we seem unwilling or unable to redeem ourselves. And so we bleed. Perhaps some of the problem is fear. Fear of being overwhelmed at the magnitude of injustice, wondering what it will cost us, internally and otherwise, to face this great trauma and live.

One of the major lessons and opportunities of the spirituals and other religious traditions of the diaspora, is that at the heart of any experience of trauma there exist the resources for the transformation of that trauma, the means for its own healing. Out of one of the most horrible chapters in human history, there emerged ritual and artistic traditions that carry, in their bones, the elements of healing from that horror. The medicine is for all who are descendents of the suffering – which is every one of us. We are all troubled by this pain at the center of our national life.

The songs are the stories of the trauma, transformed into strength to last beyond it. The spirituals are history “running through your body,” Reagon and Sales attest. They are sacred vessels that hold the tenacity and sorrow of the slaves themselves and give us a way to reach there. They are the reminder, You got a right, you got a right.

They are the ancestors’ voices giving us their wisdom and their assurance. Urging us into the hard places, into the wilderness, into the truth of where we have come from together. And into the possibilities of where we might yet go. Showing us there is a way through. They walked it. They ran through those swamps. They spelled their griefs in low and eliding tones and put strength in the songs for us to cultivate and shelter.

Oh Weeping Mary...

Rachel Elizabeth Harding  
October 2005  
Denver, Colorado