

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE STUDY OF AFRICAN RELIGIOUS
AND CULTURAL HISTORY AND THEIR RELEVANCE FOR THE
HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE DIASPORA

by

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Introduction:

Few books have had so continuously controversial a life as Herskovits' *The Myth of the Negro Past*.¹ It has often been ferociously criticised, and since I wish to make further criticisms of it here I want to begin by making clear my admiration for it. My own criticisms are directed towards the book as an influence *today* rather than towards any inadequacies at the time it was written. In 1941 Herskovits could not have used any other techniques to make his important demonstration of the continued significance of the African heritage in North America. It seems to me that it was very necessary to refute the extraordinary idea that the slaves brought with them nothing viable of their African culture; and it seems to me that the arguments and evidence presented by Herskovits - and of course many others - did in fact refute this idea very effectively. Indeed, I would be inclined to take it for granted that everyone now accepts almost as a truism that the slaves brought with them many usable elements of African belief and practice - even though a book published as recently as 1964, and currently available in paperback, still speaks of slaves 'forced to start a life without a history, a religion or a family.'²

At the time Herskovits was writing he was obliged to lay primary stress on African cultural survivals and retentions, and he was obliged to make use of the comparative ethnographic method and to draw upon studies of twentieth century African cultures. It was hardly his fault that his procedures were so unhistorical. At that time, and until very recently, there *was* no historiography of African religion or cultural ideas so that a scholar had to base his understanding of African religion upon the observations made in recent times by anthropologists and others. Also, and until very recently, there *was* no historiography of the evolution of slave culture in North America. Herskovits therefore could neither show what the character of African religions had been at the beginning of the importation of slaves into

America, nor could he show how African religious beliefs were in practice made use of and modified in the concrete early slave situation. All he could do was to demonstrate from twentieth century ethnographic material on America and Africa that African ideas must have been a factor in the historic situation.

Yet despite the fact that all this was not Herskovits' fault it is important to realise how unhistorical his method is. His major claim to insight was his 'first-hand experience with the African civilizations involved', and this claim naturally led him to place an emphasis upon the continuity of those civilizations over time. To know Dahomey in the twentieth century was to know essential things about West African culture during the previous centuries. There was thus built into his argument a bias towards the idea of the timelessness of African religion and culture. At the same time Herskovits knew much more about some West African religions in the twentieth century than he did about others, and although he was cautious about generalisations this inevitably resulted in a bias towards the idea that all West African religions are and were essentially similar. None of this left very much room for historical change and dynamism in West African religious systems and it perhaps overstated the conceptual shock of the enforced changes caused by the up-rooting of the slaves. And if we turn to the American end of his argument it is at once noticeable that the two chapters on contemporary African retentions are much more substantial and concrete than the chapter on 'The Acculturative Process'. This chapter does not really describe a *process* at all. Nor does it make use of direct evidence about early slave culture. Instead it is obliged to make a series of guesses about how slave culture might have been able to develop given the character of white dominated institutions. To oversimplify, on the African side the book presupposes changelessness; on the American side it presupposes enforced change and pays more attention to the mechanisms of compulsion than to the mechanisms of response.

Of course, we have all come a long way since 1941 and many of us stand on the shoulders of Herskovits and his contemporaries. The study of African history has flowered; so too has the study of Afro-American history. It would seem decent to honor Herskovits as one of the founding fathers of both disciplines rather than to criticise him at this late date for a-historicity. Indeed, it is only worth raising such criticisms be-

cause the work of Herskovits and the controversy aroused by it has continued to exercise so much direct and indirect influence on the study of Africanisms in North America.

I write here with a good deal of trepidation and with a confessed ignorance of unpublished research work now going on, but my impression is that a good deal of more recent work has continued to display the a-historicity of Herskovits' approach, and sometimes in a blunter and more distorting manner. Scholars certainly no longer write in ignorance of West African civilisation, but in their necessarily concise discussions of it, they often take the easy course of assuming its continuity and similarity over time and space. So Meier and Rudwick hopefully tell us that 'elaboration of religious belief was carried to especially great lengths among the Dahomeans, but a brief examination of their ideas and practices illuminates the religious life of West Africa generally.'³ An excellent book like Orlando Patterson's *The Sociology of Slavery* tells us that

*there is a remarkable uniformity in the supernatural beliefs of all West African Negroes This is even more true of witchcraft beliefs and sorcery beliefs There is not only a remarkable uniformity in the witchcraft beliefs of the West African tribes, but in the entire African continent south of the Sahara.*⁴

These excessively generalised and historically inert ideas make it very difficult to come to specific conclusions. Most attempts to establish links between reported slave rituals and beliefs and particular African places of origin are doomed to failure within this framework of thought. Thus the sort of identification which Patterson seeks to make between Jamaican *cumino* and the Dahomean rites described by Herskovits depends upon so general a notion of similarity - both have music provided by drums and rattles, both sacrifice goats, both involve spirit possession - that no specific Dahomean connection can be safely inferred.⁵ Even where it is possible to show that the name of a divinity recorded in an early account of slave rites is also present in Herskovits' account of Dahomean religion in the twentieth century, it is unsafe to assume a Dahomean origin. Historical study of Dahomean religion reveals that there have been many very recent additions to its pantheon of divinities. And on the other side, the abundant evidence of quite distinct and often mutually antagonistic sets of beliefs among

slaves in the New World tends to be subsumed in an assumption of similarity.

Moreover, in so far as there is a continued emphasis upon African 'survivals' or 'retentions', it does seem that there is a danger of mis-emphasis. Such survivals are valuable in the way Herskovits used them to demonstrate that there must have been a powerful African element in slave culture. They are often extremely fascinating in themselves. But it is not a safe assumption that their survival in itself demonstrates their superior vitality and centrality among the whole range of original African beliefs. Surviving Africanisms may sometimes represent crucial aspects of self-identification. But we may hypothesize that more important still to slave survival as people were the Africanisms which were not maintained in isolation but which engaged with the new environment and by so doing were transformed. The essential emphasis of a new historiography of slave society must surely be on the *process* by which the religious and cultural ideas of slaves interacted with each other, and with their social and economic situation, and with the ideas of their masters over decades and centuries. One can take it for granted that African ideas played a very important role in all this change and adaptation: the key question is *how*.

Obviously this question can only be answered by the most rigorous search through the North American evidence, and especially the very earliest North American evidence. But some contribution can be made, I think, by the emerging conclusions of the new historiography of African religion. In lucky cases this new historiography may help in making some positive identifications between reported slave beliefs and contemporary African equivalents. More generally it may suggest an approach to the dynamics of African religious change which may be fruitful when applied to the problems of the diaspora.

The historical study of African religion.

The recent interest shown by historians in African religious change has served to underline certain propositions which contrast with older assumptions about African religion. To begin with, it has become perfectly clear that there were wide differences between the religious ideas and practices of varying African societies. So far from it being true that 'there is a remarkable

uniformity in the supernatural beliefs of all West African Negroes', one of the main problems even for comparative ethnography, let alone for religious historiography, is to account for the major differences in the ways in which African societies explain evil or conceive salvation; the major differences in the role allocated to a creator divinity; the absence or presence of prophetism or spirit possession; and so on.⁶ These differences resulted in sharply contrasting styles of thought and action from one African society to another, and in the context of the history of slavery meant that a slave from one culture - or from one specific historical context - had available to him certain forms of spiritual adaptation and aggression which were not available to slaves from other cultures.

This idea is a very simple one and it has certainly been amply appreciated by many anthropologists before the new interest of historians, but its acceptance would make a difference to studies of slave culture. It is an understanding of the varieties of African religious ideas and practices rather than an assumption of their essential uniformity which makes Esteban Montejo's myth-autobiography so much the most satisfactory account of African religion in a slave society.⁷ In Montejo's remembered Cuba the presumed identity of African religion gives way to sharply defined differences between the concepts and practices of the 'Lucumi', or Yoruba, and the 'Congolese':

I knew of two African religions in the barracoons: the Lucumi and the Congolese. The Congolese was the more important. . . . The Congolese use the dead and snakes for their religious rites. They called the dead nkisi and the snakes embo. . . . The Congolese worked magic with the sun almost every day. When they had trouble with a particular person they would follow him along a path, collect up some of the dust he walked upon and put it in the nganga or in some little secret place. As the sun went down that person's life would begin to ebb away, and at sunset he would be dying. . . . They only killed people who were harming them. No one ever tried to put a spell on me because I have always kept apart and not meddled in other people's affairs.

The Congolese were more involved with witchcraft than the Lucumi, who had more to do with the saints and with God. The Lucumi liked rising early with the strength of the morning and looking up into the sky and saying prayers and sprinkling water on the ground.

The Lucumi were at it when you least expected it. I have seen old Negroes kneel on the ground for more than three hours at a time, speaking in their own tongue and prophesying. The difference between the Congolese and the Lucumi was that the former solved problems while the latter told the future. This they did with dilogunes which are round, white shells from Africa with mystery inside.

The old Lucumis would shut themselves up in rooms in the barracoon and they could rid you even of the wickedness you were doing. If a Negro lusted after a woman, the Lucumis would clam him. I think they did this with coconut shells, obi, which are sacred. . . . The saints spoke through the coconut and the chief of these was Obatala. . . . They said it was Obatala who made you. . . . The old Lucumis liked to have their wooden figures of the gods with them in the barracoon. . . . They made the saint's marks on the walls of their rooms with charcoal and white chalk, long lines and circles, each one standing for a saint, but they said that they were secrets. The Lucumi and Congolese did not get on. . . it went back to the difference between saints and witchcraft. The only ones who had no problems were the old men born in Africa. They were special people and had to be treated differently because they knew all religious matters.⁸

Montejo also drew more general contrasts between the 'Lucumi' and the Congolese, though to his mind they were linked with the basic religious contrast. The 'Lucumi' gods could be appealed to for assistance in direct protest - 'the Lucumis were the most rebellious and courageous slaves.' The Congolese skills

with magic had no such consequence. 'The Congolese were cowardly as a rule, but strong workers who worked hard without complaining.' Nevertheless, their reputation for witchcraft gave them a continuing, individual protection against extreme abuse or affront.

The time when differences such as these were noticeable on a North American slave plantation is not, of course, within the recall of even a man as old as Montejo, and I am aware of the large differences between the slave society of Cuba and of North America. But one should still seek to bring this sense of complexity - of the different essential atmospheres of varying African religious systems; of the growing emphasis within them upon certain kinds of power which were particularly useful in a slave situation; of the way in which such power was used to enforce respect from other slaves and from Europeans - to an interpretation of the early evidence.

This leads me to another, though related point. I have said that African religious systems varied very much from each other. The same was true for African witchcraft beliefs. By witchcraft I refer to the assumed power to injure people by spiritual or medicinal means; witches were normally thought of as totally evil and anti-social, the opposite of socially-approved religious functionaries; but the power to harm might sometimes be approved as when used by a chief against breakers of the peace or when used against an oppressive enemy. Witchcraft has to be very clearly distinguished from religion - although this distinction was rarely made by reporters of slave cultures. Nevertheless, belief in and fear of witchcraft obviously forms part of the total metaphysical system of an African people, since it serves to account for part of all of the problem of evil. It is precisely here that striking differences arose from one African society to another. Most if not all African societies were familiar with the *idea* of the witch. But in some the activity of witches was used to explain almost the whole range of misfortune; in others it was used to explain only domestic and not public disaster; in yet others it was hardly invoked to explain misfortune at all. In many societies the divinities or the ancestral spirits were thought of as much more important causative agents than witches. Such variations in the intensity of witchcraft belief and in its role in the total spiritual economy have given rise to a number

of ingenious attempts by anthropologists to relate differing witch beliefs to differing social structures.⁹

Moreover, it is clear that witchcraft belief has a history as well as a comparative sociology. Within a single society it was often the case that witchcraft belief became much more important and central at certain times than it had been at others. Historians have recently begun to take up this analytical challenge and to seek to define the circumstances under which intense witchcraft fear and witchcraft activity took place.¹⁰

Once again, these realisations are neither very surprising nor very novel but their application to the religious history of the diaspora might yield interesting fruit. For one thing they help to give more specificity to the sort of contrast drawn by Montejo. Clearly he is depicting a difference in ideas of causation between the Yoruba and the Congolese slaves. It would be a fascinating enterprise to examine what happened to these ideas of causation as slave experience lengthened. How did the 'Lucumi' manage to continue to believe, in Montejo's words, that 'the strongest gods are African', while realising that these gods had 'permitted slavery'? Was the Congolese use of witchcraft in Cuba a true reflection of the original emphases of their home metaphysic, or was it a development which took place in response to the enforced co-existence with other African groups and to the demands of slavery?

Whatever the answers to these questions one might suppose that in general there was a shift from 'saints' to 'witchcraft' in the metaphysics of slave communities. If this is so, then recent historical studies in Africa may prove helpful. For example, Bill Rau has recently examined the religious history of the Ngoni of Mpezeni, who eventually settled among the Chewa peoples of eastern Zambia. Rau shows that witchcraft belief came to be dominant in Ngoni metaphysics. The Ngoni aristocracy had no confidence in the capacity of their own or their chief's ancestor spirits to ensure the fertility of this alien land or to cope with locally induced misfortunes and epidemics; they deeply feared the destructive spiritual powers of their subject people, which to some extent made up for the military superiority of the Ngoni. The Ngoni needed to assimilate captives and to exploit their man-power

but they were acutely conscious of the dangers of doing so; some informants say that they made every incoming captive take the poison ordeal to determine whether he was a witch. But despite these precautions Ngoni society remained subject to the spiritual offensives of the subject people. The fear of witchcraft remained constant, and ritual experts from among the subject people were able to rise to prominence because of their claimed ability to counter witchcraft. At the same time many Ngoni fell victim to a possession 'disease', in which they were seized upon by a manifestation of the Chewa High God, whose centralised shrines the Ngoni had themselves destroyed.¹¹

These circumstances are admittedly rather different from most slave situations but the Ngoni case does throw light on the tensions of assimilation and the capacity of 'serfs' to take certain spiritual initiatives. If the attention of historians of African religion were to be drawn to the possible relevance of their work to studies of the diaspora, cases more strictly pertinent could be examined. The case of Dahomey is a good example here. Dahomean religion is very familiar to students of the diaspora, thanks to the work of Herskovits. But Herskovits was studying 'free', twentieth century Dahomean societies. Perhaps more relevant would be the religious beliefs and practices of the nineteenth century slave plantations which became so important in nineteenth century Dahomey. I am not of course suggesting that slaves who were shipped from Dahomey to America were drawn only or mainly from these plantations. But I am suggesting that it would be fascinating to be able to compare the religious modifications which took place within slave plantations in Africa itself with those which took place in the Americas.

I have said, then, that witchcraft belief changed and developed from one period to another within particular African societies. It is time to make the same point about religious systems as a whole. There were great differences between 'Lucumi' religion and Congolese religion. But these differences were not merely a matter of the timeless 'world view' of the Yoruba as opposed to the Congolese; nor were they merely a matter of the contrasting social structures of the two groups. Yoruba religion at the time of the high period of Yoruba slavery was the result of a complex

dynamic process, which was still continuing within Yorubaland.

One of the emphases of the historiography of African religion is that African religions are not to be explained in terms of a general social consensus, or in terms of their perfect 'fit' with social needs. The development of African religious systems often took place through conflict rather than consensus and different pieces of African religious systems served, or could be made to serve, the different interests of competing groups within a society. Yoruba religion is in fact an excellent case in point. It is possible to produce a coherent model of Yoruba metaphysics in which the *ifa* divination, and the *orishas*, and the *ogboni* society, and all the rest, fit together to form an immensely subtle and satisfying whole. But in historical terms these various parts of the system cannot be seen as interdependent upon each other; the Yoruba composite had come together through complex processes of conflict and interaction and balance. As the history of the diaspora shows, the various pieces could come apart again. In some parts of the diaspora *ifa* divination existed without *ogboni*, or the *orishas* without either.

Thus, in understanding the conceptual history of the diaspora one must certainly get beyond the sort of broad contrasts drawn by Montejo, valuable though these are; one must certainly get beyond the idea of 'Yoruba religion' just as much as one must abandon the idea of 'West African religion'. What we need to know is the innovative capacity of the various 'places' of a religious system; to understand why one thrives while another does not. Moreover, we need always to keep in mind that the dynamism of African religious systems continues after the point of rupture between the slaves and their home culture. Yoruba traditional religion as it has been observed and described in the twentieth century is very different in many ways from Yoruba religion in the mid-nineteenth century. Slave religion changed and developed very radically; but religion in Yorubaland also grew away from its old forms. In fact, in some parts of Brazil it is possible to collect Yoruba chants of a clearly archaic character, which contain references to nineteenth century places and events; these particular chants no longer exist in Yorubaland, although archaic chants exist there which have been lost in Brazil. Clearly the situation

is not adequately expressed merely by saying that a study of contemporary Yoruba religion shows that surviving Africanisms in Brazil are 'like it'. We have the opportunity here to do something much more rigorous and exciting; namely to examine the dynamics of differential survival.¹²

On this point I need only make two further remarks. The first is that what I have said of Yoruba religion is equally true for Dahomean. Dahomean religion in the nineteenth century was in a state of rapid change and development; there have been further radical changes since. Herskovits' work on twentieth century Dahomey religion cannot be taken as a safe guide for the nineteenth century; still less can it be used to make comparisons or identifications for slave evidence from the seventeenth or eighteenth century.

The second remark is that I am aware that I have used here a Brazilian example just as I used a Cuban example previously. I know that the North American situation has always been different, and I regret that I remain as ignorant as Herskovits was about the specific historical processes of early North American slave society. But what I am suggesting is precisely that processes and dynamics which can be illustrated with reference to nineteenth century Cuba or twentieth century Brazil may well be relevant to our approach to the earliest periods of slave society in North America too. I am suggesting that in these earliest periods, before Christianity began to 'bite' and before the slaves had developed their response to the 'existential North American situation', we ought to approach the question of what the slaves had to work with from the angles suggested above. That is to say, we can perhaps assume that they brought contrasting and specific religious traditions or pieces of religious traditions; that some emphases within their traditions proved more relevant and viable than others; that they tended to employ these as much in order to define their relationships with other slaves as with whites; and that there was probably a tendency for witchcraft belief to assume a greater place in the overall metaphysic, which it could retain even after Christianisation. What emerged from all this was obviously a composite - a composite first of varying African ideas and rites and then of these with Christianity.

But what kind of composite and how arrived at?

Once again we need to be wary of the idea that it was a highest common factor or lowest common denominator of 'West African religion', and subsequently of this generalised African religion with Christianity. No doubt in the end the factors which operated to generalise the black experience in America also operated to make the initial particularities of each situation of slave adaptation relatively unimportant. But to begin with, and for the slaves themselves, these particularities were crucial.

And here it may be possible to gain insight from another emphasis of the recent historiography of African religion. I have already remarked that the religious history of an African people is to be seen in terms of interaction of ideas, rites and groups. Over and above this, though, is the growing study of the diffusion of ideas and the spread of specialists and ritual forms from one society to another, or across a whole region. Some recent studies have concentrated on precisely this issue of what use is made by people of innovations which come in from outside and which bear no immediate relation to the structures or modes of the society which they enter. In some cases a new mode is attractive even though its myths refer to heroes and divinities from quite outside the society and even though its songs or rites may be conducted in another language.¹³ Sometimes, indeed, the otherness of the mode is its main attraction, either because there has been a loss of confidence in the spiritual forms of the society so that only something manifestly different seems credible, or else because the main problem which is seen to need solution is the problem of how to define and relate to aliens.

The rise of this concrete, relatively small-scale and critical 'diffusionism' seems likely to be of interest to students of the great diffusion of the diaspora. To take one example. Historians of African religion are just becoming interested in the role of the diviner, the man who articulated the metaphysical system and who reflected and shaped ideas about causation. Given that the diviners play this key choreographic role, the abundant evidence for nineteenth century Africa of the influence of diviners from outside the society in which they operated raises all sorts of interesting questions. Sometimes it is plain that the spread of 'alien' diviners in a society can be linked with the spread of new ideas of causation.¹⁴

Sometimes it seems that a diviner from outside a society which is itself very complex and mixed and full of the tensions of assimilation, is better able to operate because he does not represent any internal faction or interest. At any rate the position of these diviners in nineteenth century Africa is not totally dissimilar from the position of the diviner in early slave society, and especially the position of the man whose influence is due not to the fact that he is a member of a large slave grouping but to the fact of his individual ritual skills. It seems reasonable to suppose that diviners played a big role in drawing together and operating the early composite culture of the slaves.

Once again I am of course aware that the slaves in North America were under the immediate pressure of white men and of the white system, so that their situation is immediately differentiated from that of the Chewa under pressure from the Ngoni. African examples show that the mere fact that the masters are white does not necessarily transform the dynamics of religious adaptation and interaction. What happened on the estates of the Portuguese settlers in the Zambesi valley is proof enough of that.¹⁵ But I am aware that American slave owners were very different from Portuguese *prazo* owners, though it is no doubt important to pay careful attention to the differences between white attitudes and structures from one North American slave situation to another. What, then, does the historical study of African religion have to offer when it comes to this question of confrontation with white Protestant capitalism?

It will have something to offer, I believe, even though the contexts in which black men responded to white men in colonial Africa remain clearly distinct from the slave situation. One concern of recent religious historiography has been with the role of African religious leaders in revolts against white rule.¹⁶ Valuable studies have been made of the ideologies which powered large scale uprisings against early colonialism and these will certainly prove relevant to cases of slave revolts where there is clear evidence of the involvement of religious experts. On the other hand we are beginning to complicate the relatively simple initial picture. Instead of merely saying that very often African revolts had prophetic leadership we are beginning to examine more closely the contrasting potentials of different types of prophetism for the mobilisation and sustenance of revolt. And secondly, we

are beginning to realise that the prophetic role could sustain a number of responses to colonialism other than the response of revolt.

In this way Professor Raun has presented us with a fascinating spectrum of prophetism among the Xhosa. There was activist, militant prophetism; but from out of the same nexus of symbols and myths there was also inward-turning revitalising prophetism and even accomodationist prophetism. Most fascinating of all is the case of the Xhosa prophet who sought to 'capture' Christianity for the Xhosa tradition by acting as its local John the Baptist and forerunner.¹⁷ There are many other examples of late nineteenth century African prophets advising selective accommodation to change or use of the white man's ideas. After all, as Robin Horton has pointed out, such men and women were more acutely aware than anyone else of the conceptual limitations of African religious systems when faced with the new scale of experience in the nineteenth century.¹⁸

This suggests to me that we should be careful not to assume a clear dichotomy in the case of the diaspora between resistant African religious leaders and accommodationist Christianised house-slaves. Obviously, Christianity itself could provide an ideology of revolt. Less obviously, indigenous African religious leadership might provide an impulse towards the experimental adoption of some Christian ideas. To say this is not, of course, to brand such prophets as 'stooges'. Professor Genovese has remarked that although the study of slave revolts is an important affirmation of the dignity and courage of slaves, the crucial question for an understanding of the making of slave culture is the question of how they survived and adapted rather than the question of how they managed sometimes to revolt. If African religious ideas and African religious leaders were always ranged on the side of open revolt, the inevitable defeat of such revolts would have meant the inevitable eventual elimination of African religion as an influential factor in the composite slave culture. I would suggest that we need to look for the accommodations made by African religion, to the slave situation - and for the accommodations made by white to African religion.

Finally, there is the whole question of the interaction of African religion and Christianity. Needless

to say, this is a major concern of the new African religious historiography. A fully historical appreciation of the African side of the religious encounter certainly transforms our understanding of what was involved in the missionary thrust into African societies.¹⁹ Once again the circumstances of the slave were very different from those of the African villager. Very few African villagers were faced with the sort of compulsion which Christianised the slaves, and most could still turn to a viable and functioning traditional religious system as an alternative. Despite these differences, though, the studies which have been made in Africa of the interaction of African and Christian ideas remain relevant to the history of the diaspora. I have heard it said that Latin American Catholicism allowed for the continued expression within the generous framework of the official church of lightly Christianised African rites and ideas, while North American Protestantism made it 'impossible' for African ideas to continue. Even when one is dealing with uprooted slaves it would seem very unlikely that any religion could decree the total discontinuance of man's previous ideas. If Protestantism did not make allowance for tolerated parallel expressions of Africanity, the continued Africanism of thought had to find room at the very core of Protestantism.

Here there took place a crucial transition in the development of the slave culture and one which is extraordinarily difficult to document or to detect. One can seek to demonstrate it, as many people have, by remarking on the 'African' character of worship in many Afro-American churches today. But if we are to deal with it in terms of process we need to develop a very sophisticated understanding of continuities through substitution. Perhaps the most relevant thing here are studies of some of the African independent churches, such as Dr. Martinus Daneel's studies of the Shona Zionist and Vapostori churches. What has taken place within these churches is a continuity of Shona concerns and continued expression of many Shona spiritual symbols but at the same time a radical transformation of ideas of causation and redemption. Precisely because in some senses these churches are more African than the mission churches, they see themselves as more radically opposed to traditional Shona religion.²⁰

Conclusion:

This paper offers no solutions. It is concerned to raise possibilities and to suggest questions which may perhaps be asked fruitfully of the North American evidence. It would be exciting for an Africanist to see these questions rigorously pursued. It would be exciting to see the differences between the religious ideas and practices of different slave groups thoroughly explored; to see an analysis made of the ways in which slaves used their distinct religious heritages to achieve status or to protect themselves from the excesses of exploitation; to see an examination of the development of witchcraft as a cultural counter-offensive; to see some exploration of the extent to which African religious initiatives and adaptations affected the consciousness of whites. It would be good to have some inquiry into the role of the diviner as an articulator of the emerging composite religious culture of slave communities; to have a more complex understanding of the potentialities of prophetism; and to have some exhaustive inquiry into continuity through substitution at the heart of slave Protestantism. It would be exciting to see all this partly because it *might* prove fruitful for the study of the development of black culture in North America, and partly because if these questions do prove to have some relevance in America we can then commence a dialogue between the two histories.

I have not meant to suggest in this paper that the flow of ideas between the religious and cultural histories of Africa and North America is all going to be in the same direction. Far from it. I hope and believe that as the study of early slave culture in America develops it will offer a whole variety of insights and confirmations and contradictions which will greatly enrich the historical study of African religion.

Footnotes

1. Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, Harper Brothers, 1941.
2. Joseph R. Washington, *Black Religion: The Negro and Christianity in the United States*, Beacon Press, 1966, p.33.
3. August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *From Plantation to Ghetto*, New York, 1970, p. 16.
4. Orlando Patterson, *The Sociology of Slavery: An analysis of the origins, development and structure of Negro slave society in Jamaica*, MacGibbon and Kee, 1967, pp. 183-184.
5. Patterson, pp. 200-201.
6. One of many statements of these differences may be found in, "Introduction", *The Historical Study of African Religion*, eds., T.O. Ranger and I.N. Kimambo. Heinemann and U.C.P., 1972.
7. Esteban Montejo, *The Autobiography of a Runaway Slave*, Penguin Book, 1970.
8. Montejo, pp. 26-28.
9. Two of the most interesting attempts are Mary Douglas, "Witch Beliefs in Central Africa," *Africa*, vol. XXXVII, No. 1. January 1967; Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*, The Cresset Press, 1970.
10. Gerald W. Hartwig, "Long distance trade and the evolution of sorcery among the Kerebe," *African Historical Studies*, IV, 3, 1971. An elaborate discussion of the subject will be forthcoming in "Introduction", *The Problem of Evil in East Africa*, eds., T.O. Ranger and Sholto Cross.
11. Bill Rau, "A history of Mpezeni's Ngoni of Eastern Zambia, 1870-1920," draft for the doctoral dissertation, UCLA, 1973.
12. I owe this point on Yoruba chants to Wande Abimbola.

13. A pertinent recent study here is Iris Bergeris' 1973 doctoral thesis for the University of Wisconsin, "The Kubandwa Religious Complex of interlacustrine Africa: an historical study, 1500-1900."
14. A case in point is the spread of the idea of illness caused by possession by Ndaus spirits among the Hlengwe of Southern Rhodesia. There is no doubt that this correlates with the increasing influence of Ndaus diviners among the Hlengwe.
15. Alan Isaacman, *Mozambique. The Africanisation of the European Institution: The Zambezi Praios, 1750-1902*, Madison, 1972.
16. A particularly impressive recent example is Gilbert Gwassa, "Kinjikitile and the ideology of Maji Maji," *The Historical Study of African Religion*, eds., Ranger and Kimambo.
17. O.F. Raum, "From Tribal Prophets to Sect Leaders," in *Messianische Kirchengruppen, Sekten und Bewegungen im heutigen Afrika*, ed., E. Benz, Heiden, 1965, pp. 47-70.
18. Robin Horton, "African Conversion," *Africa*, vol. XLI, no. 2, April 1971.
19. An impressive example of this new understanding is Wyatt MacGaffey, *Custom and Government in the Lower Congo*, U.C.P., 1970, pp. 250-257. For a fuller discussion see, 'Introduction,' "Themes in the Christian History of Central Africa," eds., T.O. Ranger and John Weller, Heinemann and U.C.P., forthcoming.
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