

AFRICANISM IN AMERICA. AN INTRODUCTORY ANTHROPOLOGICAL OUTLINE*

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Africa is still so evident in America that one could speak of the existence of three Americas, one white, one Indian and, finally Black America
(*L. Hurbon*).

It is obvious that Black Americans were prevented from maintaining in North America the large number of African cultural institutions and traditional customs which have survived in the Caribbean and South America. It has been less obvious to outside observers however, that Black Americans have succeeded in preserving a high degree of their African "character" at the much deeper and more fundamental level of interpersonal relationships and expressive behavior
(*D. Dalby*).

The study of Africanism in America, which interested many anthropologists since Melville Herskovits's *The myth of the Negro past* in 1941 certainly gained a new momentum with the debate stirred by the publication of Franklin Frazier's *The Negro Church in America* in 1963 and the subsequent taking of opposing sides by the scholars.

In fact, while Herskovits emphasized the continuity of West African culture in the Americas, proved by survivals and retentions in many different spheres, Frazier, on the contrary, postulated that, because of the slavery, African-American culture had developed

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independently of any African tradition. Frazier stated that the experience of slavery had destroyed African clan and family institutions and had stripped Africans of their social heritage. African-American culture was, therefore, born in America and emerged from the disruption of the African background and not on its basis.

The best way to look at Africanism probably lies, as it usually happens, in the middle: though undoubtedly Frazier's theory is correct in its overall assumptions, there still are many elements of culture in the New World traceable to an African origin - that is many elements of Africanism.

Recent studies - like Holloway's one (1990) reconsidering African -American culture - seem to confirm this, while at the same time providing material to rectify old mistakes and offering new perspectives on the subject.

One of the first misunderstandings to be clarified was the assumption that African slaves came for the most part from West Africa, particularly from West African kingdoms: new orientations based on the evidence that slavery drew also from other African regions, like Central Africa, corroborated the fact that the Bantu speaking ethnic group being the one who possessed the largest homogeneous culture among the enslaved Africans had possibly had the strongest impact on the emerging of the African-American tradition (see, for instance, on this matter: Blassingame 1979, Curtin 1969; Mannix 1965; Vass 1979).

Studies concerning this theme also revealed that the committents in the New World were definitely very knowledgeable about the the different agricultural practices and about what crops were grown by which ethnic group in Africa and were so able to select slaves' importation by specific prerequisites. Africans in the New World were therefore employed in the households or on the plantations according to their ethnic heritage and to what seems to be the current opinion at the time about different ethnic temperament, strenght and personality.

Anyway, although by diverse degrees in keeping with its different origin, location and kind of employment, every African ethnic group transferred to America what part of its culture's traits was indeed transferrable. The major areas of african influence are so well-known that it should just suffice to mention them: religion, arts, and also kinship, language and folklore.

Religion certainly is one of the most and best-studied fields of African-American culture, as the conspicuous references including renowned names such as Bastide, Brown, McCarthy Brown, Murphy, Washington Creel etc. can bear witness to; it would be useful, though, to remind that religious survivals varied sensibly leading to very different kinds of syncretism and often to variations inside the same African- American religion.

More structured religious systems - like Yoruba's - had a better chance to preserve their pantheon and ceremonies, while others - like Bantu's beliefs and rituals - had to proceed to more significant adjustments. Dahomian voodoo produced - as Bastide skilfully points out - a vital and dynamic american version in Haiti and more rigid ones elsewhere, not as capable to innovate themselves and quite tied to their african antecedents so that they appear to be somehow "fossilized" and to use his own words «not in step with the history's flow» (1970: 156).

Anyway the encounter between African, Amerindian and Christian religions produced a very wide range of syncretic systems like the brazilian ones - *candomblé*, *umbanda*, *macumba* - or the cuban *santería*, all very different, it goes without saying, from one another for *corpus* of beliefs, symbolic register and ritual practice and all, more or less, still undergoing subtle and not so subtle changes and innovations. The core of most of them still lies in the ritual of possession which, though performed in different ways and alternately in a collective form or exclusively by the religious operator, constitutes at the same time the natural link between African and African-American rituals and among the many american born traditions.

In this field also recent studies like Hall's (1990) and especially Brandon's (1990) providing new light on the matter, suggest that a slow but consistent infusion of African traditional traits that certify to the lasting and ongoing relations between Africans and African-Americans is still occurring in the Americas.

As for the art one of the major scholars on this theme, Robert Farris Thompson, has widely shown in his publications the strong impact of the African culture - and of the Kongo culture in particular - on African-American art and on the foundations of Black American aesthetics. In the plastic solutions and symbolic forms in sculpture as in the widespread rise of Black music for instance, Africanism survived.

Maultsby's essays (1983, 1990) on their part point out that African music underwent gradual changes resulting in new aesthetic solutions that ably combine the unsuppressable ties to the African past with the need to fit into the new experiences; Euro-American idioms too had to be reshaped to a certain degree in order to flow in an acceptable way into the developing Black American music.

Maultsby also states that the essential character of the music created by the slaves, which persisted into the 20th century, lies in its everchanging nature and capacity to adjust to the demands of the new social settings, testified by the cases of the Brazilian samba or the sophisticated jazz genres. She concludes that «African retentions in African-American culture exist as conceptual approaches - as unique ways of doing things and making things happen - rather than as specific cultural elements» (1990: 205).

In the Black American linguistic facets too - as Turner (1938) and, more recently, Asante (1990) show - there is strong evidence of permanencies traceable to basic structures of African origin that persist even as the Anglicization occurs.

The Bantu speaking groups, engaged as they were mainly as field slaves, had the best opportunities to retain much of their cultural identity and their original language, a task made easier by the enforced isolation and by the cultural homogeneity and common language itself. Africanisms, like African-American cooking (*soul food*), music (*jazz, blues, spirituals, gospels*), naming practices, folk beliefs and tales and many other customs gradually developed.

West Africans, by contrast, generally employed as domestic servants or having artisans' jobs, who worked in close proximity to European-Americans and under their masters' control, were mainly forced to give up much of their culture, but for the same reasons, also succeeded in supplying the mainstream society with Africanisms and activating a process of mutual acculturation between Africans and European-Americans. In this case we could possibly say that the avenue of cultural transmission worked both ways.

The Senegambians Wolof, for instance, because of their extensive contact with their masters were among the first Africans to succeed in preserving a consistent quantity of their traditional linguistic elements within the emerging American culture. Early linguistic retentions - nowadays currently used terms, like *OK, jam, guy, hippie, phoney, boogie woogie* - have been identified in his

studies about Americanisms by David Dalby (1972) and traced back to the Wolof vocabulary.

In the area of folklore a great many tales, part of the Wolof but also of the Yoruba, Akan and Central African groups' storytelling legacy were introduced remaining almost completely unchanged in the New World.

Anyway, although we can't forget to take into account all these core permanencies, it also goes without saying that no group, no matter how well equipped or how free to choose, is able to transfer its culture intact from one place to another, if culture is thought of as a *corpus* of beliefs and values socially shared and resulting in conventional patterns that can serve as guides of and for ethical, religious, economic and generally social behavior. Besides, in our case, the difficulty was certainly enhanced by the conditions of the Africans who were not free to choose, neither, possessing diverse traditions and often mutually unintelligible idioms, really shared a culture in the way we just defined it.

That is to say that they had to adjust, to move on, undergo changes and create institutions that would prove responsive to the needs of the settlements in the New World.

From an anthropological standpoint one of the more prominent and early modifications stands out in the language's sphere as it has been outlined in both classical and updated studies (see Hall 1966 ; Mintz 1971, 1992).

As Mintz clearly states «often the languages in which slaves and masters communicated were pidgin or trade languages - that is languages with reduced grammars and lexicons, used for specialized activities (such as trade) - involving groups with no language in common. [So that] soon after the slave settlements had begun to grow in the New World, the various African languages spoken by their inhabitants would, in the absence of a continuing speech community, begin to fall into disuse (except in special ritual settings) to be supplanted by a pidgin» (1992: 20-21). It is plausible that in the process the pidgin expanded lexically to serve new expressive linguistic functions and that it overgrew the contours of a narrowly specialized language to become the native idiom of a speaking group, «no longer a pidgin but a "creole"» (*idem*: 21).

The major changes anyway affected, of course, the kinship system, the marriage institution and the relating mutual gender

statuses that also constitute the main *focus* of anthropological interest and debate.

Before any aggregate of slaves could begin to create viable institutions - as Mintz again underlines in his many studies on the African-American culture (1961, 1969, 1970, 1989) - they would have to overcome the shock of capture, enslavement and transport. Relocation in the New World was tantamount to the disruption of the African clanic family and of the rank and status system. But already in the early stages Africans proved to be up to task of reshaping their own traditional legacy thanks to their constitutional dynamism and creativity; their consistent cooperative efforts to create substitutive ways to replace the original lost institutions are now viewed by the scholars as the true beginnings of African-American culture and society.

We find evidence that one of the earliest new social bond was developed on the ships - and for this reason named "shipmate relation" - a kind of same sex dyadic tie destined to become a major principle of social organization and to expand into a wider symbolic kinship. In Jamaica, as Patterson points out referring to J.Kelly's 1838 *Voyage to Jamaica*, the term shipmate «was synonymous with brother and sister and it was customary for children to call their parents' shipmates uncle and aunt and for shipmates to look upon each others' children mutually as their own. The relationship had indeed extended beyond the original shipmates themselves and interpenetrated with biological kin ties» (1967: 150).

It seems, in retrospect, that such initial bonds developed into basic principles which helped to shape new cultural systems in America based upon symbolic relationships replacing the African ascent-descent ties.

Sex roles and relations also were somehow remodeled; in this ambit we find examples that pose puzzling questions in Jamaica and Haiti. Here, in fact, Patterson (1972) found evidence that in the division of labor with regard to marketing, after the Emancipation, women emerged as independent marketers, which is all the more striking since women are and have long been the marketers in most West African societies.

This cannot be explained simply as a result of a return to Africa or to the African past, nor resorting to the male takeover of agriculture as a way to justify the female domination in trade. In fact the mere acquisition of more land could not induce the *exploit* of

female marketing, had this run counter male notions of masculine pride or prestige. Besides we can't ascribe husbands' willingness to allow their wives to engage in economic activities far from home and to develop independent careers to the need to conform to a Western register, as the idea that husbands' masculinity and authority is indeed diminished by wives' economic independence is still part of the sex roles ideology in the U.S. and the separate use of her own capital by a wife is still considered inappropriately unfamiliar in most circles (see Mintz 1955 and 1971 on the subject).

So it seems to be possible that Jamaican and Haitian males gradually got used to expect female autonomy and that, upon Emancipation, in Haiti and Jamaica females were in a position to exercise more fully that autonomy in a way that remarkably reminds that of their West African sisters.

It also could be plausible that the heritage of African notions about the relative separation of male-female roles might have affected this trend in the developing of the African-American culture in general, as it seems to be certified, albeit in very different circumstances, also for the Saramaka Maroons of Suriname (Price 1975) or other ethnic groups in the Caribbeans where, although women are indeed economically dependent on their men in many respects, a man's status is definitely not tied to his wife's submission and dependance.

The shifting from the «slave family» to the so called «emancipated family» (Gonzales 1994: 260) was underlined by the structural changes induced by the long period of Reconstruction, the time of the mass migration of the Black Americans out of the Southern United States, who moved to the North searching for new jobs and encouraged by new opportunities. Between 1880 and 1930, during the northern settlement, the typical matriarchally focused slave family was generally replaced by a simple nuclear family, in most cases formed by husband-wife conjugal units which could more easily adjust to the new settings.

But, while the Plantation family structure was obviously disrupted upon Emancipation, «the mother [as] the only true source of stability and continuity [being the one] who bore the children and cared for them » (*ibidem*) gained once more the status of head of the family structures in post-industrial times and particularly in urban and suburban settlements.

In his recent work about the racial and ethnic families in America, Gonzales (1994) has pointed out as «an analysis of the social structure of the African American family reveals that there are three basic types of families in the African American community today [which] consist of: 1) nuclear families; 2) extended families and 3) augmented families» (264-265); and it is not surprising somehow to find that within the first type the predominate structure is the “attenuated” form (the others being the “simple nuclear” and the “extended” ones) that consists of «one parent living with his/her minor children in one household» (*idem*: 265) and where the overwhelming majority are female and often never married women-headed units.

Gonzales explains the actual escalating trend of matrifocal families as the result of a particular marital market, where the rate of endogamy among African Americans leaves African American women at a disadvantage. This is due to different reasons, namely to the high rate of intermarriage between African American males of higher status and white women on the one hand and to the grave rate of unemployment, drugs and criminality problems which somehow “drain” the eligible males’ reservoir on the other, so much so that this, to the irony of African American women, has resulted in a critical shortage of men able to properly and continuously support families.

Essentially female focused, today’s African American family seems to be furthermore tied to its African antecedents thanks to the still strong importance attached to the value of the family itself and especially to the extended unit as the only source of strenght, security and support: it has its material core in the household and its symbolic one in the surviving authority of the elder of the kin-group. The extended family, in today’s America, as it just did in the old African villages, can provide its people with the necessary assistance and support to cope with everyday’s life, that «take the form of money, labour and product exchange» (Gonzales 1994: 269), so granting the actual character of a mutual assistance community to the unit.

Besides, Black Americans in the U.S. metropolises are now facing, along with all the other ethnic minorities, the questions of ethnic awareness, inter-ethnic relations and of the conflict-based relationship and never solved problems with the Euro-American establishment: in a few words they have to deal with the vital task of

the definition of their identity. And the topics of identity and integration lead us to one of the hottest ground of international anthropological debate (see on the matter Alba 1990; Gleason 1992; Sowell 1981; Whitten 1970 and Yinger 1994).

Black Americans, however, it goes without saying, participate in the process aimed to achieve ethnic recognition not in a submissive way but, on the contrary, bearing a markedly active attitude, an African-American constitutional feature.

One of the generally less cited instances but nevertheless one that better than others proves how cleverly the Black Americans have been able to protect their ethnic image and to succeed in avoiding its misuse - and in so doing to accomplish one of their ultimate ethnic goals - involves the activity specifically relating to dealing with the out-of-date albeit long lasting Black stereotypes in Hollywood movies.

The speech given by the Black intellectual Walter White already in 1942 sounded like a real «statement to the Negro public, particularly in Los Angeles, that [signaled] the end of the monopoly of the Southern racial stereotypes for Negro roles in film» (Cripps 1993: 387) and one destined to open a new season for Black characters in Hollywood. Before the “historical” speech Hollywood movies had always offered a representation of the Blacks convenient to the white racist America’s fight against Black people in the name of a mistaken and obsessive notion of miscegenation. In fact, D.W. Griffith with his *Birth of a Nation* released in 1915 had contributed to create « a fixed image of Blackness...[banishing Black people] into certain spaces, such as kitchens, and into certain supporting roles, such as criminals, on the screen» (Diawara 1993: 3).

Since the ‘40s the «slow fade to black» (Cripps 1993: 387), that is a change for the better, portended by White’s scenario for the Blacks’ future somehow took gradually place, certainly more consistently in the movies than in the real life.

Anyway the American Blacks are still now divided between two opposite pressures: a compulsive need - especially felt by the African-American leadership - to «affect a studied equalitarian assimilationism that discourages to emphasize black values and attitudes, for this might seem to support segregation» (*idem*: 389) and an equally strong need to exploit their ethnic heritage throughout specifically Black expressions and activities: Black art,

aesthetics, literature, in order to emphasize, in other words, their whole African traditional legacy.

To conclude, in every field of African American culture and from whatever anthropological angle we choose to look at it, we can catch its indomitable and dynamic spirit; it expresses itself in a creativity traceable to an undeniable African origin, somehow combined with new traits urged by the pressure of new needs and settlements so that the individual, social and symbolic behaviors and patterns of the African-Americans, while loosely retaining African elements, and in some ways initially conditioned by the code of the masters, finally emerged as truly original in the New World, and are now distinctive of the Black American culture.

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Summary

The article consists of an anthropological introductory *excursus* on the African-American culture beginning from the Slave societies to today's Black American communities.

It synthetically explores the best studied fields: the religion, the arts and linguistics and especially the kinship and marriage and the status relationships characterizing the modern African American family and society. The question of ethnic identity and awareness and of the conflict-based relationship with the Euro-Americans is also pointed out.

The African-American culture, anyway, from whatever anthropological standpoint is investigated, seems to be able today to balance itself between the different attitudes due to the need to retain its African heritage and roots and at the same time to be fully recognized as part of the American society and with the same rights within the Euro-American establishment.

Sommario

L'articolo offre un *outline* introduttivo - e in prospettiva antropologica - allo studio della cultura Afro-Americana a partire dall'epoca della tratta fino alla odierna comunità nera americana. Vi vengono segnalati e sinteticamente esaminati i campi di maggiore interesse e i settori più diffusamente studiati: religioso, artistico e linguistico ma soprattutto gli ambiti sociale, di organizzazione degli statuti personali e matrimoniale. Vi si introduce anche il tema dell'etnicità e dell'identità etnico-culturale dei Neri Americani, trasferendo la trattazione sul più ampio e complesso versante delle relazioni cross-culturali e di maggioranza/minoranza, problemi che essi condividono con altre *enclaves* minoritarie in U.S.A.

La cultura Afro-Americana sembra infine attestarsi come definita da una parte da positive persistenze Africane che affiorano in ogni ambito e dall'altra dal bisogno di certificare la propria specificità e originalità di matrice tipicamente americana.