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Singing for Strength: Enslaved Africans and Community Building in the Transatlantic Slave Trade

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Sibell, a young African woman, visited her beloved sister one day. During the visit she was left alone with her sister's husband. He told Sibell that he would take her on a trip to visit his other wife. He then proceeded to carry her for many nights and many days, as Sibell later recounted, "way from my country." When they finally reached their destination Sibell saw white people, big ships, and heard waves for the first time, all of which badly scared her. She also learned of her brother-in-law's true intentions. He planned to sell her for a gun and some gunpowder. Knowing what he was about to do she clung to him and tried to keep him from leaving, to no avail. She was then placed in a "long house full of new Negurs talking and making sing." Sibell was kept in the long house, also known as a barracoon, where slaves were kept for an extended period of time awaiting sale and transfer to ships. Sailors added two or three new captives each day until the house was full. Sibell didn't know anyone in the long house, but when she was taken aboard the ship which would take her to Barbados she recognized individuals she knew from her home country. There was Mimbo, Dublin, Sally, and several others, "but they sell dem all about and me no savvy where now—Here she burst into tears and could say no more."[1]

As an elderly woman in 1790, Sibell still clearly remembered and grieved the events leading to her enslavement. In addition to the painful loss of important social relationships Sibell recalled specific details about her capture, details that had made a lasting impression upon her. One of those powerful images was the singing she heard by other captive Africans. Singing for Sibell and the other captives in the barracoon, who were usually kept in chains,[2] was a significant, and, to an outsider, even startling act. A regular part of the most important events: weddings, funerals, and royal celebrations, singing had long been a significant part of

community life for the people of West Africa, from whom the transatlantic slave trade drew most of its victims. As the captives constructed communities aboard slave ships and in the colonies, singing became a means of survival.

African Participants

Accounts by Africans about their lives prior to their middle passages are extremely rare, but of the handful that do exist, several mention the importance of music and communal singing in particular. The testimony by Sibell has been only recently discovered. Another account, and probably the best known, is that of Olaudah Equiano, born around 1745 in Igbo land (in modern-day Nigeria).[3] After mentioning the use of music in the marriage ceremony of his people he describes the importance of cultural expression: "We are almost a nation of dancers, musicians, and poets. Thus every great event, such as a triumphant return from battle, or other cause of public rejoicing, is celebrated in public dances, which are accompanied with songs and music suited to the occasion."[4] Ottobah Cugoano, a contemporary of Equiano's, was kidnapped as a child from among the Fante people of the Gold Coast and then shipped from Cape Coast to Grenada. He recounts in a biography published in 1787 that after being kidnapped, as he and his fellow captives were being taken to Cape Coast, they came to a place with "a great multitude of people, having different music playing; and all the day after we got there, we were very merry with the music, dancing and singing."[5]

Mahomma Gardo Baquaqua, from a remote Islamic village in modern Upper Volta, describes the way in which he was tricked into capture and enslavement. Holding an important royal position at the time, he was deceived by envious rivals with a song composed in his honor, sung by a local group of singers. He was flattered as a result and took part in many toasts with a

popular alcoholic beverage, unusual for someone of his faith. His enemies then took advantage of his inebriated state and sold him into slavery. Sold several more times before he reached the coast, Baquaqua was eventually shipped from Dahomey to Brazil aboard a Portuguese slave ship.[6] Equiano and Cugoano would later become champions of the abolitionist movement.

Differences in musical styles and expression existed between groups in West Africa, as might be expected. For example, harmony was mostly absent from singing in Dahomey while the neighboring Asante of Gold Coast used two and often three- or four-part harmonies.[7] Distinctions also existed between amateur and professional musicians. In the Akan culture, which included the Asante and Fante people of the Gold Coast, musical training was social in nature and Akan tradition emphasized group rather than individual performance, reinforcing their preference for harmony.[8]

European Observers

The importance of singing to Africans was observed by the very earliest European explorers traveling to West Africa who often described the music, dancing, and singing they encountered. Their interpretations show that, with ears and eyes attuned to their own culture, they often misunderstood what they heard and saw. The Portuguese began their explorations of Africa in the fifteenth century under Prince Henry the Navigator and mentioned singing in their reports. A group of Africans was captured and brought to Portugal in approximately 1445 and the official account described sympathetically what Europeans observed, "But what heart could be so hard as not to be pierced with piteous feeling to see that company? For some kept their heads low and their faces bathed in tears, looking one upon another . . . others made their lamentations in the manner of a dirge, after the custom of their country. And though we could

not understand the words of their language, the sound of it right well accorded with the measure of their sadness."[9]

The earliest English accounts of the use of music in Africa come from Richard Jobson, an employee of the Company of Adventurers of London, who explored the Gambia River region in 1620. In his report he described in detail the funeral of the leader of the people he named "Mary-buckes." The ritual lasted several days and included the naming of the king's son as successor:

> The manner of his buriall, was after this sort, hee was layed in a house, where a grave was digged, and a great pot of water set in the roome, and just after the same manner, as the Irish does, with a wonderful noyse of cries and lamentations, hee was layed into the ground; the people, especially the women, running about the house, and from place to place, with their arms spread, after a lunaticke fashion, seemed with great sorrow to bewaile his departure. They also assembled themselves, in the most convenient place, to receive the multitude, and nearest unto the grave, and sitting down in a round ring, in the middle came foorth a Mary-bucke, who betwixt saying and singing, did rehearse as it were certain verities, in the praise and remembrance of him departed, which it should seeme was done *extempore,* or provided for that assembly, because upon diverse words or sentences he spake, the people would make such sudden exultations, by clapping of their hands, and every one running in, to give and present unto him, some one or other manner of thing might be thought acceptable, that one after another, every Mary-bucke would have his speech, wherein they only went away with the gratifications, who had the pleasingest stile, in setting forth the praises of him departed, in which the people were so delighted.[10]

Jobson also made detailed descriptions of several musical instruments he saw on his journey.

The use of extemporaneous lyrics in communal events is also mentioned a century later by Dutch sea captain Willem Bosman in his description of an annual festival in the city of Axim on the Gold Coast.

> The Devil is annually banished (from) all their Towns with abundance of Ceremony, at an appointed time set apart for that end. I have twice seen it at Axim, where they make the greatest stir about it. This Procession is preceded by a Feast of eight Days, accompanied with all manner of Singing, Skipping, Dancing, Mirth, and Jollity: In which time a perfect lampooning. Liberty is allowed, and Scandal so highly exalted, that they may freely sing

> of all the Faults, Villanies, and Frauds of their Superiours as well as Inferiours, without Punishment, or so much as the least interruption; and the only way to stop their Mouths is to ply them lustily with Drink, which alters their Tone immediately, and turns their Satyrical Ballads into Commendatory Songs on the good Qualities of him who hath so nobly treated them.[11]

A specific example of the communal use of spontaneous lyrics and social comment is cited by Mungo Park, a Scottish explorer, exploring the Gambia and Niger River region in 1795-1797. Park recounts his experience of having a song composed for him on the spot by a group of women who were spinning cotton at the time and gave him shelter, the chorus to which was "Let us pity the white man, no mother has he. . . ."[12] He also describes all-night singing and dancing in conjunction with an ordinary wedding he attended.[13] Park also remarks on several other experiences with West African vocal music, including hearing singing by groups of recently circumcised male and female youth[14] and traveling with groups of men he called "singing men," similar to the familiar west African griot.[15]

An example of men and women singing together is described by Thomas Edward Bowdich while visiting the Asante people in 1816. "The men sit together in a line on one side, with their sankos [an eight-string instrument] and other instruments; and the women in a line opposite them. Individuals rise and advance, singing in turn."[16] Bowdich's time with the Asante coincided with their Yam festival and he writes: "the wild music of these people is scarcely to be brought within the regular rules of harmony, yet their airs have a sweetness and animation beyond any compositions I ever heard."[17] Bowdich also attempted to notate several of the melodies he heard.

Work was an occasion for group singing among West Africans. Hugh Clapperton in his 1829 expedition inland from the Bight of Benin observed singing by men and women as they

worked to repair a city's walls: "Bands of male and female slaves, with drums and flutes before them, and singing in chorus, were passing to and from the river to the wall with water, to mix the clay they were repairing the walls with."[18]

Singing and Community

If singing was an important feature of African culture, apparent to African and European observers alike, so was community. Africans more than Europeans tended to define themselves by their connections to social networks. David Eltis states in *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas,* ". . . generally, status and rights in much of Africa and the pre-Columbian Americas derived not from autonomy and independence but from full membership of a kin-group or some other corporate body." As a result "freedom meant a belonging, not a separateness."[19] This way of identifying themselves would not change noticeably for Africans for the first several hundred years of contact with Europeans and the slave trade: "in Africa as a whole, it could be argued that societies were sufficiently resilient and self-sufficient that fundamental change in relations between the individual and the larger group began only with the colonial period."[20] The importance of community celebrations and communal expressions including dancing and singing support Eltis's assertion. Other evidence for the importance of community can be seen in different types of social relationships. Randy Sparks' *Two Princes of Calabar* describes the "kinship based merchant houses" of the Efik people of Old Calabar.[21] The Efik people originally took slaves from among their own people. Efik slaves called their owners "mother" and "father."[22] The Asante word for slave was also used for any northern foreigner.[23]

When attachments to social networks were destroyed by capture and enslavement, Africans demonstrated the importance of community by recreating it through a variety of

means. The phenomena of singing while imprisoned is a powerful example. In addition to Sibell's account, singing in the barracoons was described by slave trader Captain Theodore Canot, writing in the mid-nineteenth century. Canot built a slave factory for his Spanish patrons on the Grain Coast in what is now Liberia: "The entrance of each slave-pen was commanded by a cannon, while in the centre of the square, I left a vacant space, whereon I have often seen seven hundred slaves, guarded by half a dozen musketeers, singing, drumming, and dancing, after their frugal meals."[24]

Singing Aboard Slave Ships

Singing, forced and free, was also common aboard slave ships. In order to fully appreciate the act, it is necessary to remember the treatment and conditions suffered by enslaved individuals in the barracoons and once aboard slave ships. The fact that Africans continued to sing in captivity might seem naïve or even trivial without this deadly and dehumanizing context. “One out of every four died en route (to the coast) . . . another 15 per cent while waiting to be sold to the Europeans” while ". . . mortality rates among captives during the crossing ranged between 10 and 15 percent.”[25] Disease often spread quickly in the confined and unsanitary conditions that existed in both slave holding-pens and on ships. The words of Ottomah Cugoano speak for the experience of millions:

> The only food we had during the voyage was corn soaked and boiled. I cannot tell how long we were thus confined, but it seemed a very long while. We suffered very much for want of water, but was denied all we needed. A pint a day was all that was allowed, and no more; and a great many slaves died upon the passage. There was one poor fellow became so very desperate for want of water, that he attempted to snatch a knife from the white man who brought in the water, when he was taken up on deck and I never knew what became of him. I supposed he was thrown overboard.[26]

Still the enslaved sang, by force and by choice. William Snelgrave, commander of the ship *Anne,* on a venture underwritten by Virginia merchants, describes a dramatic event taking place at Old Calabar during 1713 in his account of the slave trade in Whyda and Dahomey. After rescuing a child from being sacrificed by the king of Old Calabar, a child whose mother he had purchased for his ship, Snelgrave is spontaneously praised in song by the captive Africans upon his ship: "Having at that time above 300 Negroes on board my Ship, no sooner was the Story known amongst them, but they expressed their Thankfulness to me, by clapping their Hands, and singing a Song in my praise. This affair proved of great service to us, for it gave them a good Notion of white men; so that we had no Mutiny in our Ship, during the whole voyage." Their ultimate destination was to Antigua where the captives, including the mother and child, were sold.[27]

The daily routine on board Captain Canot's ship during the middle passage often included singing: "During the afternoons of serene weather, men, women, girls, and boys are allowed to unite in African melodies, which they always enhance by an extemporaneous tom-tom on the bottom of a tub or tin kettle."[28]

Thomas Clarkson, British abolitionist, collected the testimonies of former slave ship sailors as evidence before Parliament in the 1780's. In doing so he interviewed Mr. Town, who had made slave-trading trips aboard the *Peggy* in 1760-1761 from Liverpool to Iles de Los and then to Fredericksburg, and in 1768-1769 on the *Sally* from Grand Cape Mount to Antigua and then to South Carolina. During these trips he observed both compulsory and voluntary singing: "During their stay upon deck in fine weather, they are made to dance and sing. If they refuse they are flogged, or experience the thumb screw. . . ." However, "There are times when they

sing (for it is called singing) of their own accord. But on these occasions the subject of their songs is mournful, and contains principally their history, and the wretchedness of their situation."[29] Clarkson also interviewed a Mr. Janverin, who made four trips as a mate from Gambia, Angola, and also Cameroon during 1767-1772. Mr. Janverin witnessed slaves being brought on deck daily for most of the day during good weather. "They frequently sing, the men and women answering one another, but what is the subject of their songs I cannot say. They dance also at times, but were not compelled to do it."[30]

Forced dancing and singing aboard a slave ship in Carlisle Bay, Jamaica was described by George Pinckard in 1796: "We saw them dance, and heard them sing. In dancing they scarcely moved their feet, but threw about their arms, and twisted and writhed their bodies into a multitude of disgusting and indecent attitudes. Their song was a wild and savage yell, devoid of all softness and harmony, and loudly chanted in harsh monotony." Pinckard also watched slaves on board engaged in a work song as they knocked hulls off rice with long wooden pestles in mortars placed at their feet, in effect creating a kind of drum: "This appeared to be a labor of cheerfulness. They beat the pestle in tune to the song, and seemed happy."[31]

When African captives "for whom singing and dancing had central cultural roles infused with meaning"[32] were forced to sing and dance their captors were acknowledging the importance of these activities for the psychological as well as physical well being of their prisoners. Though dancing could be used to enforce necessary physical exercise, forced singing brought no such benefit. Europeans had observed the importance of these expressions to Africans while still in Africa. Slave owners would later ban certain types of singing and dancing, showing they, too, recognized the importance of such activities to Africans.

Some slave ship captains could be more humane than others and at least one was celebrated in song by some of his former captives. Captain Hugh Crow paid attention to the diet of his slaves and there was a noticeable lack of overcrowding on his ships. He provided pipes and tobacco for the men and "beads and other articles" for the women. There was voluntary dancing on his decks. Possibly as a result Crow never experienced a mutiny during his thirteen voyages as a slave ship captain.[33] He was celebrated with an original song composed by some of his former slave passengers then living in Jamaica upon the arrival of his ship in Kingston harbor in December, 1806.[34] It is important to remember that Crow was rewarded financially for the good care he took of his captive cargo through the higher prices they brought at market.

One of the most dramatic accounts of shipboard singing among captive Africans occurred aboard the slave ship *Hudibras* as it traveled from Old Calabar to Barbados and Grenada in 1786-1787. One of the crew, Henry Schroeder, writing later under the pseudonym William Butterfield, described how a female slave won great admiration and loyalty from the other enslaved women on the ship through her abilities as a "songstress." She would perform on deck to an enthralled audience of females who gathered around her in circles. Singing "slow airs, of a pathetic nature" she also gave speeches. Butterfield figured them to be stories or even epic poetry. The other women would respond "as a kind of chorus . . . , at the close of particular sentences" describing the traditional African form of call and response. She was able to communicate in spite of the fact that there were many different languages represented by the Africans on board.[35] Harvard professor Vince Brown began a lecture given at Vanderbilt University on February 2, 2009 with a retelling of Butterfield's account. When the woman leader was the first captive to die on the voyage, sailors prepared to throw her body overboard

without ceremony, as was the custom. The other female slaves, herded below deck in advance, protested greatly, thinking that their former leader's body was about to be eaten by the crew, a common myth among Africans. As a result of the women's protests, the captain allowed a few women to witness the disposal of their beloved leader's body, which was treated with more respect than usual. After recounting the story Brown suggested that the woman leader had, through her songs and stories, created a social network and community on the ship.[36]

As ships containing slaves crossed the Atlantic, captured Africans used whatever means available to re-construct a sense of belonging. By singing, dancing, storytelling, and even through plotting revolt and resistance, many Africans were able to regain a sense of community, thereby increasing their chances of survival. Those who survived the middle passage used the term "shipmate," a term of great affection, to describe as kin those who had suffered the middle passage with them. In her testimony Sibell showed how strong such bonds remained after decades. Though many would arrive safely in the colonies, as the result of disease, abuse, suicide, and revolt aboard ship, many would not.

A former slave living in the United States retold the story of his grandfather's middle passage from the Ivory Coast to Virginia in which singing played an important role. On deck, after a meal and still chained: "Den dey sings. One sings, an' de res' hum, lak. What dey sing? Nobody don' know. It's not ou'ah words. Dey sing language what dey learn in Africa when dey was free!"[37]

Singing in the Colonies

Captive Africans arriving in the colonies once again suffered a loss of social connections as shipboard communities were abruptly dissolved. Over time and with fewer physical

restraints, the enslaved quickly began to adapt traditions and activities that were meaningful to them in Africa. Singing was prominent among these and Europeans attempted to descibe what they heard. Richard Ligon, in his 1673 account of life in Jamaica, mentions the singing of slaves, admitting his bias: "For their singing, I cannot much commend that, having heard so good in Europe, but for their voices I have heard many of them very loud and sweet."[38] In 1688 Royal Society fellow and physician Dr. Hans Sloane observed that slaves in Jamaica "though hard wrought, will at nights, or on Feast days Dance and Sing."[39] Sloane also had a French musician set down an approximation of the words and music for two songs he heard performed at a festival "when a great many of the Negro musicians were gathered together."[40] Though the musician identified his notations by area and people of origin, the mixture of African styles and other influences indicate clearly that the process of mixing and adaption, known today as creolization, was already advancing quickly.[41]

Funerals in Africa often included singing and singing became a regular feature of the funeral tradition among the enslaved Africans of Jamaica. Charles Leslie writing in 1740 noted, "When one is carried out to his Grave he is attended with a vast Multitude, who conduct his Corps in something of a ludicrous Manner: They sing all the Way, and they who bear it on their Shoulders, make a Feint of stopping at every Door they pass, and pretend, that if the deceast Person had received any Injury, the Corps moves toward that House, and that they can't avoid letting it fall to the Ground before the Door."[42] Vince Brown, in his study of Jamaican mortuary customs, *The Reaper's Garden*, highlights the communal aspect of funerals: "the enslaved recovered a sense of their common humanity at funerals. Though national groups formed the core of the gatherings, burial ceremonies were generally open to all who chose to attend,

excepting, in most cases, whites and their offspring. Blacks affirmed their common connections to the dead in intensely emotional ritual practices."[43]

Singing during celebrations in the colonies, as well as funerals, was often mentioned by Europeans. Large community celebrations, along with newly creolized traditions, had become a prominent feature in Jamaica by the time Lady Maria Nugent, the wife of Jamaica's governor, described Christmas Day, 1801:

> Christmas Day! All night heard the music of Tom-Toms, &c. Rise early, and the whole town and house bore the appearance of a masquerade. After Church, amuse myself very much with the strange processions, and figures called Johnny Canoes. All dance, leap and play a thousand anticks. Then there are groups of dancing men and women. They had a sort of leader or superior at their head, who sang a sort of recitative, and seemed to regulate all their proceedings; the rest joining at intervals in the air and the chorus. The instrument to accompany the song was a rude sort of drum, made of bark leaves, on this they beat time with two sticks, while the singers do the same with their feet. Then there was a party of actors. -- Then a little child was introduced, supposed to be a king, who stabbed all the rest. They told me that some of the children who appeared were to represent Tippoo Saib's children, and the man was Henry the 4th of France. -- What a *melange!* All were dressed very finely, and many of the blacks had really gold and silver fringe on their robes. After the tragedy, they all began dancing with the greatest glee. -- We dined in the Council Chamber, but went to bed early, but not to rest, for the noise of singing and dancing was incessant during the night. -- I must not omit to say, that Mr. Ward called. I gave him one of my catechisms for the blackies, and one to send to Mr. Wilberforce.[44]

Enslaved Africans would sometimes divide by nationality to sing and dance during these celebrations, re-establishing familiar cultural and social groupings. From an early nineteenth century account of Christmas holiday festivities in Jamaica: "The Mongolas, the Mandingos, the Ebos, the Congoes, &c., &c., formed into exclusive groups, and each strove to be loudest in the music and songs . . . peculiar to their country . . . These African groups took up the sides and corners of the hall, while the Creoles occupied the centre and the piazzas . . . the Creoles danced to the fife and drum."[45]

Singing was also used to form and inspire communities for rebellion. In Jamaica in 1816, at a funeral for a child, an overseer noticed a large number of unfamiliar slaves attending. Eavesdropping, he heard the insurrection conspiracy revealed in the words being sung: "Oh me good friend, Mr. Wilberforce, make we free! . . Buckra in this country no make we free: What Negro for to do? . . . Take by force! Take by force!" The plot was revealed to the authorities. The plot's leader was hung five days later and his head exhibited on a pole as a warning.[46]

In the Spanish colonies of Santo Domingo, Hispaniola, and Havana, Cuba, singing was also important. African slaves could join cabildos, institutionalized religious brotherhoods or fraternities, to which blacks, slave and free, male and female, depending on the type of cabildo, could belong. Cabildos served many social functions and played a major part in community celebrations. One of the most popular festivals was Dia de Reyes in Havana which featured African songs and dancing. The festival became so popular in Havana that the more restrained citizens asked that the celebration be moved outside the city walls in 1792.[47] Zephaniah Kingsley's task system at Laurel Grove Plantation and later at Fort George Island in Spanish, and then U.S., Florida allowed slaves time and extra food to celebrate harvest and spring planting festivals as well as at Christmas.[48] These would have likely included singing and dancing.

Singing in British North America

Mortality rates among enslaved Africans in North America were lower compared to those in the Caribbean and because of this fewer Africans were needed in the colonies of British North America.[49] Accounts of music by enslaved Africans in North America are less common than in the Caribbean as a result, particularly prior to the nineteenth century.[50] A few notable examples exist however.

Slaves in the British colonies of North America created and inspired communities for the purpose of rebellion and resistance incorporating singing just as they had in Jamaica. During the Stono uprising In South Carolina in 1739, slaves took over a small arsenal and armed themselves. Afterward, they stopped outside of Charleston and "set to Dancing, Singing, and beating Drums for the purpose of calling more slaves to join them." The rebellion would fail, but required a month to extinguish.[51]

A different type of resistance involving recently arrived African slaves occurred near Lake Phelps in Washington County, North Carolina around 1800, and illustrates connections between singing, remembrance, and community action. In the process of clearing a large plantation "a number of Negroes just from Africa were put on the work. . . . They were kept at night in cabins on the shore of the lake. At night they would begin to sing their native songs, and in a short while would become so wrought up that, utterly oblivious to the danger involved, they would grasp their bundles of personal effects, swing them on their shoulders, and setting their faces towards Africa, would march down into the water singing as they marched till recalled to their senses only by the drowning of some of the party. The owners lost a number of them in this way, and finally had to stop the evening singing."[52]

Communal music among slaves began to be mentioned more frequently by individuals traveling through the American south as the nineteenth century progressed. Benjamin Latrobe, in addition to his well known description of African dancing and singing by slaves in New Orleans' Congo Square in 1819, described a funeral he observed in May of the same year. The chanting and the "very loud lamentations" made by the "great crowd of women press[ing] close to the grave"[53] are reminiscent of Richard Jobson's description of a Gambian funeral

witnessed 300 years earlier. Celebrations, similar to those reported in Jamaica, took place in a field outside New Orleans in 1831 and featured people, "gathered in a large number of distinct groups; each has its own flag floating atop a very tall mast, used as a rallying point for the group . . . [for the dance] . . . They make their music by beating and rolling their sticks on their drums . . ."[54] Frederick Law Olmsted accidentally encountered a funeral while in Richmond, Virginia some twenty years later. He remarked on the singing which he described as a "wild kind of chant" and the leader of the service's "ludicrous language," but admitted to being stirred.[55]

Travelers commented on hearing "wild hymns of sweet and mournful melody" sung by men and women of the slave coffles as they traveled from Virginia into the lower South. Slaves in coffles were handcuffed, attached to a long center chain, and might contain hundreds of individuals.[56]

Singing was a frequent part of Christmas and harvest festivals in North America and both were popular slave holidays.[57] William M. Adams, a former slave whose recollections were recorded in 1937, recalled dances from his youth on a large Texas plantation that contained many of the same elements as dances from a century earlier: "On Saturday and Sunday nights dey'd dance and sing all night long. Dey didn't dance like today, dey danced de roun' dance and jig and do de pigeon wing, and some of dem would jump up and see how many times he could kick his feet 'foe dey hit de groun'. Dey had an old fiddle and some of 'em would take two bones in each hand and rattle 'em. Dey sang songs like 'Diana Had a Wooden Leg' and 'A Hand Full of Sugar' and 'Cotton Eyed Joe.' I disremember how they went."[58]

Civic celebrations, which often featured music and singing, continued to be of major importance to slaves in North America. In one graphic illustration occurring in 1840, a slave in

Tennessee named Jake was told by his owner that he couldn't have a day to join other slaves enjoying speeches and festivities that were part of the national Whig convention in Nashville. In the argument that ensued, in which Jake was threatened with whipping, he killed his owner.[59]

Respected journalist Whitelaw Reid visited the Sea Islands of South Carolina in May of 1865 and encountered slave singing in the church, where it was an important feature. Churches and religious belief provided powerful traditions and social networks that enslaved Africans and their descendants found familiar. Reid's group arrived unannounced and heard songs sung in a call and response style by several hundred former slaves at an outdoor church service in St. Helena, South Carolina. One song was altered spontaneously to include each of the visitors by name.[60] William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim had been at work in the Sea Islands over the previous two or three years, preserving the songs that would become the pioneering collection, "Slave Songs of the United States."[61]

Singing wasn't only popular with the enslaved, free blacks in the antebellum north enjoyed it, too. In Boston there were many opportunities to join church related choral groups which allowed free blacks, particularly the newly arrived, to establish social contacts.[62] Black women in New England kept traditions of storytelling and songs alive. Much like the "songstress" of the *Hudibras*, Lucy Terry of Deerfield, who called herself Lucy Bijah, opened her home to both free and enslaved blacks of her community where they could listen to African tales and songs.[63]

Though the importation of slaves into the U.S. had been banned in 1808 , slave ships were occasionally captured until shortly before the Civil War. When the slave ship *Wildfire* was

rescued near Cuba and brought into Key West, Florida in 1860, it held over 500 Africans from the Congo River area. *Harper's Weekly* noted at the time that "The well ones . . . were ready at any moment to join a song or dance . . . their singing was monotonous. The words we did not understand."[64]

The last reported slave ship to successfully, though illegally, arrive in the United States was the *Clotilda* in 1860. One-hundred-and-ten men, women, and children who had been purchased in Dahomey were smuggled ashore in Alabama under the cover of darkness. One of them was Kossola, a Yoruban man who would later rename himself Cudjo Lewis. Kossola had been taken from a town in modern day Benin during a raid by the army of Dahomey sometime in early 1860. As Cudjo Lewis he would leave a detailed account of his capture, enslavement, and passage to Alabama. Cudjo mentioned "singing, dancing, and drumming" that accompanied the triumphal return of the Dahomian king before he and other captives were put aboard the *Clotilda*.[65] When the ship arrived in Alabama he and the other slaves were quickly divided up between their new owners. The grief-stricken shipmates, who bonded together by their shared trials, though they represented several different people and language groups, sang ". . . a parting song. Some of its words were 'lon se wu' or 'no danger on the road.' " After recounting the event some sixty-seven years later, Cudjo Lewis stopped talking for the rest of the day.[66]

Strength through Singing

In his influential 1982 book "*Slavery and Social Death*," Orlando Patterson argues that as a result of enslavement, "the slave had no socially recognized existence outside of his master, he became a social nonperson . . ."[67] and also that "If the slave no longer belonged to the community, if he had no social existence outside of his master, then what was he? The initial

response in almost all slaveholding societies was to define the slave as a socially dead person."[68] Patterson's argument underscores the dehumanizing effects of slavery, but also overlooks the ability of enslaved Africans to respond creatively to their circumstances. Earlier in the twentieth century, Melville Herskovits attempted to refute the ideas of E. Franklin Frazier, Patterson's philosophical predecessor, by identifying hundreds of African artifacts which had survived the middle passage.[69] But Herskovits, too, missed what has proven to be of more significance: the ability of enslaved Africans, through creative adaptation, to resist physical and social death by re-creating community. Singing is a clear and compelling example.

When Cudjo Lewis died in 1935, he was the last of the *Clotilda* survivors. He also may have been the last African in the U.S. to have experienced the middle passage and slavery. A few weeks before he died, Cudjo sang a song for a visitor to his home. It was a song with Christian lyrics that he had composed in Yoruba, his native language. Cudjo's song revealed deep connections with communities, past, present, and future. Over the course of his life he had endured the loss of family, friends, and shipmates. His song suggests some of the sources for his strength.[70]

Notes

1. T. J. S. Handler, "Survivors of the Middle Passage: Life Histories of Enslaved Africans in British America," *Slavery & Abolition* 23, no. 1 (April 2002): 32-33. The anglicized names Dublin and Sally suggest that Sibell stayed in contact with her fellow "country people" for a period of time after their arrival in Barbados.
2. Theodore Canot, *Captain Canot; or An African Slaver* (New York: Arno Press and the New

York Times, 1968), 105.

3. Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship* (New York: Viking, 2007), 108.

4. Olaudah Equiano, *The interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or GustavusVass, the African. Written by Himself*, 3rd ed. (Norwich, Conn.: 1794), 7.

5. Ottobah Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Humbly Submitted to theInhabitants of Great-Britain, by Ottobah Cugoano* (London: 1787), 7.

6. Mahomma Baquaqua, *Biography of Mahomma Gardo Baquaqua*, ed. Robin Law and Paul E. Lovejoy (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2001), 136-137.

7. Philip D. Morgan, "Life in the New World," in *Captive Passage: The Transatlantic Slave Trade and the Making of the Americas,* ed. Beverly C. McMillan (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002), 40.

8. J. H. Kwabena Nketia, "The Musician in Akan Society" in *The Traditional Artist in African Societies,* ed. Warren L. d'Azevedo (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), 87, 91.

9. Dena J. Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 3.

10. Richard Jobson, *The Golden Trade: Or, a Discovery of the River Gambra…* (London: Nicholas Okes, 1623), 71-72.

11. Willem Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea…,* 2nd ed. (London: 1721), 133.

12. Mungo Park, *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa Performed in the Years 1795, 1796,*

and 1797 (London: T. Allman, 1839), 131.

13. Ibid., 182.

14. Ibid., 181.

15. Ibid., 190-191.

16. T. Edward Bowdich, *Mission from Cape Coast to Ashantee*, 3rd ed. (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1966), 369.

17. Ibid., 361.

18. Hugh Clapperton, *Hugh Clapperton into the Interior of Africa* (Boston: Brill, 2005), 193.

19. David Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 21.

20. Ibid., 23.

21. Randy Sparks, *The Two Princes of Calabar: An Eighteenth Century Atlantic Odyssey* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 34.

22. Ibid., 38.

23. Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death, a Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1982), 40.

24. Canot, *Captain Canot,* 340.

25. Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), 37.

26. Cuguano, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery*, 43-44.

27. William Snelgrave, *A New Account of Some Parts of Guinea . . .* (London: Knapton, 1734), intro., image 22 and 23, http://galenet.galegroup.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.

Edu/servlet/ECCO.

28. Canot, *Captain Canot, 104.*

29. Thomas Clarkson, "The British Transatlantic Slave Trade," ed. Kenneth Morgan in v. 3: *The Abolitionist Struggle: Opponents of the Slave Trade,* ed. John Oldfield (Brookfied, VT: Pickering & Chatto, 2003), 237.

30. Ibid., 249.

31. George Pinckard, *Notes on the West Indie* (London: printed for Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1806), 231.

32. Emma Christopher, *Slave Ship Sailors and Their Captive Cargoes, 1730*-1807 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 176-177.

33. Hugh Crow, *The Memoirs of Captain Hugh Crow: The Life and Times of a Slave Trade Captain,* Introduction by John Pinfold (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2007), vii.

34. Ibid., 88-90.

35. Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, 280-282.

36. Vincent Brown, "The Reaper's Garden, Social Death, and Political Life in Slavery," (lecture, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, February 2, 2009).

37. Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals,* 16. A longer passage containing this quote can be found in Morgan, *Captive Passage: The Transatlantic Slave Trade...,* p. 52

38. Richard Ligon, *A True & Exact History of the Island of Barbadoes* (London: Parker, 1673), 52.

39. Sir Hans Sloane, *A Voyage to the Islands Madera, Nieves, S. Christophers and Jamaica, vol. 1* (London: printed by B.M. for the author, 1707-1725), Intro, xiviii.

40. Ibid., Intro., L.

41. Richard C. Rath, "Drums and Power," in *Creolization in the Americas*, ed. David Buisseret and Steven Reinhardt (College Station: The University of Texas, 2000), 73.

42. Brown, *The Reaper's Garden*, 62.

43. Ibid., 69.

44. Lady Maria Skinner Nugent*, A Journal of a Voyage to, and Residence in, the Island of Jamaica* (London: T. & W. Boone, 1839), 114-115.

45. Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals,* 87.

46. Brown, *The Reaper's Garden,* 213.

47. Jane Landers, *Black Society in Spanish Florida* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 108-109.

48. Daniel L. Schafer, *Anna Madgigine Jai Kingsley* (Gainesville, Fla.: University of Florida Press, 2003), 47.

49. James Walvin, *Making the Black Atlantic-Britain and the African Diaspora* (New York: Cassell, 2000), 57.

50. Shane White and Graham White, *The Sounds of Slavery* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005), 25.

51. Richard C. Rath, "Drums and Power," in *Creolization in the Americas*, ed. Buisseret and Reinhardt, 111.

52. Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals,* 73.

53. White and White, *The Sounds of Slavery,* 162.

54. Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals,* 87.

55. Ibid., 163.

56. Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1983), 157.

57. Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals,* preface, xvi.

58. William M. Adams, b. 1844. See Rawick, *The American Slave--Texas Narratives: Parts 1 & 2, Vol. 4*., Westport, 1972. Greenwood eBooks. 21 April 2009. http://ebooks.greenwood.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/reader.jsp?x=RSP&p=&bc=ERSP and http://gem.greenwood.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/pdf-files/AS/gwsn_04_ada_wm.pdf.

59. John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *In Search of the Promised Land* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 27-28.

60. White and White, *The Sounds of Slavery,* 26-27.

61. Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals*, 303-320.

62. James Oliver Horton, *Free People of Color* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 35.

63. Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 58.

64. Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals,* 14.

65. Sylviane Diouf, *Dreams of Africa in Alabama—The Slave Ship* Clotilda *and the Story of the Last Africans Brought to America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 40-41, 49.

66. Ibid., 82.

67. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 5.

68. Ibid., 38.

69. Rath, "Drums and Power," in *Creolization in the Americas,* 102.

70. Diouf, *Dreams of Africa in Alabama,* 229.

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