

## ***African American Culture: from Repression to Renaissance***

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### **Abstract**

African American culture is both distinct from American culture and a central part of it. This culture is rooted in the experiences of slavery and captivity in America. It began as a fusion of Western and Central Africa's cultures mingled with Christian and Western cultures. African American oral traditions still influence American culture today. The Harlem Renaissance was an explosion of African American music, arts and literature. In fact, those aspects of African American culture became an integral part of American culture at large. African American cultural contributions have an effect on the way African Americans speak, dance, celebrate and worship.

**Key words:** African American, culture, music, art, literature.

الثقافة الأفرو أمريكية متميزة عن الثقافة الأمريكية و في نفس الوقت جزء أساسي منها. هذه الثقافة متأصلة في تجارب الرق و الأسر في أمريكا. ظهرت نتيجة انصهار ثقافات غرب و وسط أفريقيا، والتي بدورها مزجت بالثقافات الغربية و المسيحية. لا تزال التقاليد الشفوية الأفرو أمريكية تؤثر على الثقافة الأمريكية. عرف عصر النهضة «هارلم» انفجارا موسيقيا، فنيا و أدبيا. هذه الجوانب من الثقافة الأفرو أمريكية أصبحت جزء لا يتجزأ من الثقافة الأمريكية ككل. يظهر تأثير المساهمات الثقافية الأفرو أمريكية من خلال طريقة الأفرو أمريكيين في التحدث، الرقص، الاحتفال و العبادة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** أفرو أمريكية، ثقافة، موسيقى، فن، أدب.

#### Résumé

La culture afro-américaine est à la fois distincte de la culture américaine et un élément central de celle-ci. Cette culture est enracinée dans les expériences de l'esclavage et de la captivité en Amérique. Il a commencé comme une fusion des Cultures de l'Afrique de l'Ouest et du Centre mêlées aux cultures chrétiennes et occidentales. Les traditions orales afro-américaines influencent encore aujourd'hui la culture américaine. La Renaissance de Harlem fut une explosion de musique, d'art et de littérature afro-américaine. En fait, ces

aspects de la culture afro-américaine sont devenus une partie intégrante de la culture américaine en général. Les contributions culturelles afro-américaines ont un effet sur la façon dont tous les Afro-Américains parlent, dansent, célèbrent et vénèrent.

**Mots clés:** Afro-américain, culture, musique, art, littérature.

### **Introduction**

In its broadest meaning, culture is an accumulation of experiences, values, norms, attitudes and traditions which individuals or group of people acquire in the course of generations. Through those cultural components, community members can be distinguished from others. For instance, despite the different restraints, African Americans could preserve their cultural heritage and express their own voice. African American cultural prosperity encompasses various spheres including arts, music and literature. In fact, African Americans' achievements in these cultural areas are the best examples of such richness.

### **The Root of African American Culture**

African-American culture originated from the historical experience of the African-American people. African-American distinct culture is rooted in West and Central Africa. During the period of slavery, African-

Americans could not practice their original cultural traditions. However, many customs, values and beliefs survived producing a dynamic culture that had and still has a great impact on American culture as a whole. Throughout history, African-Americans developed their own culture by creating and preserving their original traditions.

During the 17th century, slave holders sought to exercise power over their slaves by attempting to deprive them of their African culture. Despite physical separation and social discrimination faced in the new world, African slaves clung to their traditional culture. African cultures, slavery, and the civil rights movement have influenced African-American economic, political and social life. Definitively, the imprint of Africa is apparent in politics, economics, language, music, hairstyles, dance and religion. Over time, the culture of African slaves and their successors has witnessed a wide spread not only in America, but in the world as a whole (Geneviève Fabre and Robert G. O'Meally, 1994).

Slaveholders disallowed education of their slaves to keep them in their usual status. That action contributed significantly to the emergence of a strong oral tradition, a common trait of original African culture. African oral traditions were the chief means of preserving history, customs, and other cultural information among black community. Through storytelling, these cultural components

have been passed from generation to generation. In fact, folktales offered African Americans the opportunity to educate and inform one another. African-American oral traditions are rich and expressive cultures that articulate their feelings, aspirations and wishes. In New Orleans and other cities, African American stories, songs and other sorts of folklore continue to develop. Examples of African American folklore include children's sidewalk and jump rope rhymes, handclap songs, rap and tales recited by adults. Despite the fact that these genres differ in terms of their concerns and norms, they carry a common cultural response to the economic, political and social dilemma. Storytelling has always been a central element in African American culture. In Africa, people sang oral narratives about heroes and demons. Since these songs and tales are not written, the words vary among versions. Yet, the content remains the same (Maggie Papa et al, 2007).

### Harlem Renaissance

It was during Harlem Renaissance that African-American culture was first recognized due to the works of Alain Locke. In the 1920s and 1930s, cultural prosperity comprised music, literature and art. African American authors and poets offered great literary works describing the tragedy of African American life, such as Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay and Countee

Cullen. Musical types like jazz, swing and blues became popular (Johnson William. H, 2007). In the political field, prominent African-American movements were formed including the United Negro Improvement Association, National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) and the Nation of Islam (Young Andrew, 1996).

### **Black Power Movement**

'Black Power' slogan gained a considerable echo in the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s. Racial pride and the formation of political and cultural organizations were the main focus of the slogan. Although the term was first used by Richard Wright in a 1954 book '*Black Power*', its original use as a political and racial motto was in 1966 by Stokely Carmichael who viewed the concept 'Black Power' as a representation of African American union and a way to African American self-determination (Ogbar J, 2005). During that period, many of SNCC organizers rejected nonviolence principle. As a response to such behaviour, Martin Luther King (1967) stated:

*"In the final analysis the weakness of Black Power is its failure to see that the black man needs the white man and the white man needs the black man. However, much we may try to romanticize the slogan, there is no separate black path to*



*power and fulfillment that does not intersect white paths, and there is no separate white path to power and fulfillment, short of social disaster, that does not share that power with black aspirations for freedom and human dignity. We are bound together in a single garment of destiny. The language, the cultural patterns, the music, the material prosperity, and even the food of America are an amalgam of black and white."*

After the successes realized by the Civil Rights Movement, many African Americans argued with white supremacy. Besides, they displayed disagreements concerning the principle of integration. Absolutely, Black Power movement had an influence on later political and social movements. By laying more emphasis on democracy and equal opportunities, the movement inspired many social organizations such as black feminism. The main issues of such organizations were political identity and equality. The Black Power had myriad roles: political, psychological and cultural. In this regard, William Deburg (1993) noted that *"movement leaders never were as successful in winning power for the people as they were in convincing people that they had sufficient image enhanced."*

The phrase *"Black is beautiful"* was first coined by John Sweat Rocklin. It emerged as a cultural movement. Its aim was to change misconceptions that African Americans' skin colour, facial traits and hair are ugly. As a response to

such movement, many African Americans stopped straightening their hair and lightening their skin. Moreover, they used African folk idioms to promote their identity (Ogbar J, 2005).

### **African American Music, Arts and Literary Works**

Regarding African-American music, the origin goes back to polyrhythmic music of the African ethnic communities centered in Western, Sahelian and Sub-Saharan districts. During slavery, this kind of music was used to teach lessons, reduce suffering and convey messages. In America, Africans mixed traditional European hymns with African elements to form spirituals (Stewart, Earl L, 1998). At the beginning of the 20th century, different African American musical forms developed due to the technological improvements of radio and phonograph records. Ragtime, jazz, blues and swing achieved great popularity in America and beyond. In effect, the 1920s became known as the *Jazz Age*. One distinct sort of music that gained a remarkable fame in the 1970s was called '*hip hop*'. Such kind of music is a chanted rhythmic and rhyming speech (Southern Eileen, 1997).

Like other features of culture, dance has shaped African American life. Before slavery, Africans danced for particular occasions, such as a birth or a marriage. Blacks who



worked in South America were given more freedom to dance than those in North America. Slave owners, who lived in the North, forbade Africans from dancing. The ring shout or ring dance, the calenda, the chica, and the juba were the dominant dances of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In 1891, The Creole Show was the first popular dance created by blacks (Geneviève Fabre, Robert G. O'Meally, 1994). During the Harlem Renaissance, African-American development in dance was remarkable. During the 1930s and 1940s, African Americans moved into ballet and modern dance. White choreographers incorporated African-American themes and styles into their dances and appointed African Americans to perform them. The Lester Horton Dance Theatre and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre made a great progress in modern dance (Johnson William. H, 2007).

African-American art has significantly contributed to the art of the United States. From the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it had various shapes such as small drums, quilts, wrought-iron figures, and ceramic vessels in the southern United States. These artifacts are similar to that of West and Central Africa (Patton Sharon. F, 1998). On the contrary, African-American artisans like the engraver Scipio Moorhead and the painter Joshua Johnson created art which was made in a completely western European style (Powel Richard, 2005). It was after the American Civil War that museums and

galleries started to exhibit the artistic works of African-Americans. To make their arts more noticeable, a lot of African-American artists traveled to Europe. During the Harlem Renaissance, African American arts stimulated the attention of many European Americans (Southern Eileen, 1997). Black Arts Movement that took place between the 1960s and the 1970s was a significant moment in African-American history. Among African-American artists who achieve national celebrity at that time were Lou Stovall, Ed Love, Charles White and Jeff Donaldson. Donaldson in addition to a number of African-American artists founded the Afro centric collective AfriCobra which still exists these days. Outstanding modern African-American artists are Willie Cole, David Hammons, Eugene J. Martin, Mose Tolliver, Reynold Ruffins and Kare Walker (Smith Roberta, 2007).

African-American literature has deep roots. The slaves used stories and fables in the same way they used music. In the 18th century, many African-American writers as well as poets were impressed by those stories including Phillis Wheatley and Olaudah Equiano. Because African Americans suffered greatly from economic, political and social racism, a number of authors and poets, such as Langston Hughes, W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington focused on the issue of discrimination in America (Gilyard. K and Wardi. A, 2004). For instance, Hughes' essays, short stories, operettas,

children's books and poems portrayed the daily life of African-American community. Through his art, he fought tirelessly against any kind of racism and injustice. In 1951, Langston wrote his famous poem "Harlem", through which he asked an important question about what happens when a dream is ignored or delayed:

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up?

Like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over

like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

like a heavy load.

Or does it explode? (Hughes, Langston. Eds. Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel, 1994)

Hughes viewed that the dreams of many African American who lived in Harlem, New York disintegrated. Lorraine Hansberry, an African American writer and playwright, selected a line from this poem as the title of her

well-known play 'A Raisin in the Sun'. Both the play and the poem explored the fate of African American dreams and the state of African American life during the Civil Rights era (Hansberry Lorraine, 1994). Throughout the same period, many authors dealt with issues such as racial discrimination, coercion, social injustice, prejudice that faced African Americans including Richard Wright, James Baldwin and Gwendolyn Brooks. Some authors who have recently been accepted as a central part of American literature wrote about the same topics such as 'Roots: The Saga of an American family' by Alex Haley, 'The colour Purple' by Alice Walker and 'Beloved' by Toni Morrison, in addition to fiction works written by Octavia Butler and Walter Mosley (Ward Jr. and Jerry. W, 1998).

### **Religious Trends of African Americans**

During slavery, many blacks could not practice their religions freely. They were obliged to follow Christianity. Yet, slaves integrated secretly their dance, songs and African rhythms into Christian worship. In effect, African-American churches offered African Americans the opportunity to become leaders and organizers. Such opportunity was previously denied in American society. African-American preachers became the link between the African-American and European American societies. Consequently, they played a fundamental role in the Civil Rights Movement (Maffly

Kipp Laurie, 2007). Concerning Islam, before the advent of the slave trade, this religion was widespread in West Africa. In this context, the West African intellectual Cheikh Anta Diop (1988) illustrated: "The primary reason for the success of Islam in Black Africa [...] consequently stems from the fact that it was propagated peacefully at first by solitary Arabo-Berber travelers to certain Black kings and notables, who then spread it about them to those under their jurisdiction." After slavery, chiefly during the period of depression, Islamic religion witnessed a real prosperity in the African-American community due to outstanding personalities like Noble Drew Ali, Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X. After his release from prison, Malcolm led the Nation of Islam. In 1952, he met Elijah in Chicago where he started organizing temples for the Nation in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston and in cities in the South. Today, the number of African American Muslims is increasing. According to current researches, African American Muslims make up approximately one-third of the population of Muslims in the U.S. In addition to Christianity and Islam, there are some African American people who worship Judaism, Buddhism and other religions (Maffly Kipp Laurie, 2007).

#### **African American Museums, Languages, Holidays and Names**



Throughout the 1950s and the 1960s, The African-American Museum Movement appeared. Its role was to protect and maintain the African American heritage. Many museums were founded by African Americans to teach and explore African American history including the African American Museum and Library, the Natchez Museum of African American History and Culture, DuSable Museum of African American History and the National Museum of African American History and Culture (Fleming John. E, 1994).

Regarding language, slaveholders intentionally mixed people who spoke different African languages to compel them communicate in English. This resulted in pidgins which are simplified combinations of two or more languages which speakers of diverse languages use to communicate (Coulmas Florian, 2005). Examples of pidgins include Creole and Gullah. African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is academically regarded as a legitimate dialect because of its valid formation. However, some whites and African Americans consider it as slang. Many speakers of AAVE use code switching between AAVE and Standard American English (Wood Daniel. B, 2002).

Holidays are not only related to African American culture, but are generally regarded as American holidays. For example, the birthday of the famous African American civil

rights leader Martin Luther King has been commemorated all over the country since 1983. Another African American celebration which has been adopted nationwide and taught in some states is Black History Month. The aim of such celebration is to focus on the ignored facets of the American history, mainly the culture of African American people. It is observed in February. The date coincides with three significant occasions: the establishment of the NAACP, the birthdays of the well-known African-American abolitionist 'Frederick Douglass' and Abraham Lincoln who signed the Emancipation Proclamation. Each year in June, many African-American musicians, singers and composers organize musical festivals. Such event is called Black Music Month (Gay Kathlyn, 2006).

Prior to the 1950s and 1960s, the majority of African-American names were similar to those used within European American society. However, in the 1960s and the 1970s, a remarkable change in naming started to take shape in the U.S. During that epoch, Islamic names became popular especially among African American community. In general, African-American names have French, Latin, English or Arabic roots. With the emergence of the Nation of Islam, many African Americans used Islamic names, such as 'Aicha'. Also, African names like Ashanti, Tanisha, Aaliyah, Malaika, were widely used (Wattenberg Laura, 2013).

## Conclusion

Culture provided African Americans a sense of union and belonging and enabled them to better understand the world around them. Indeed, heritage was the basis for African American cultural innovation and advancement. African American culture shaped and continues to shape African American life in the U.S. The Harlem Renaissance and the Black Art Movement were major periods in the African American experience. Through music, literature and arts, African American people maintained their identity and opposed the idea of being underestimated by the mainstream culture.

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