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## Spirituals As Symbolic Expression

### INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of civilization people have exhibited immense ability in symbol-making. Regardless of culture or time, symbols have emerged as a result of people's strivings for ultimate truth or meaning. That is to say, symbols exist as reflections of people's attempts to make sense out of their existence and to discover who they are individually and collectively. Thus, the behavior and life experiences of people may be traced by the symbols they used. Because symbol-making emerges out of the shared experiences, values and needs within a particular culture or social group, and because these experiences, values and needs differ from one culture or social group to another, it is possible to corroborate the existence of cultural differences. Conversely, it is possible to discover recurring or universal themes which transcend culture and time by virtue of the common will of all people to meaning.

As a part of the process of symboling, music reflects all the attributes of other symbols. It exists, more precisely, as a symbol itself and, as such, possesses content and modes of expression particular to a given culture or group while, at the same time, possessing universal qualities common to all cultures. This same diadic involvement of differentiating cultural and ancestral symbols and unifying elements or universal symbols is apparent in Afro-American spirituals. It is those universal symbols and the manner in which they interrelate with the other kinds of symbols which are intended as the primary focus in this paper.

The overall importance of a study of symbolism in spirituals to church musicians, educators and others involved with the Black tradition lies in the fact that it is this music of the slaves which more than any other means symbolizes the struggle of Black people for ultimate truth and meaning amidst oppression. That is, spirituals are symbolic representations of the strivings of a transplanted people to come to terms with the loss of a familiar existence and established identities and the reshaping of individual and collective identities amidst unfamiliar surroundings, hardships and degradation.

The fact that words or texts convey much of the symbolic meaning of the content of spirituals brings to the fore one additional matter regarding the symbolic nature of songs which must be addressed in this introductory section. This matter involves the problem of signing or symboling.

Signs possess properties which are different from symbols. While signs serve as indicators having specific designated and direct meanings, symbols are basically referents. The former is univocal in that it is

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what it represents and results largely from common-sense endeavors, while the latter is multivocal in that it is more ambiguous in meaning and more dynamic and powerful owing to the involvement of affect and a particular cultural or social context.

In spirituals, as in all music with texts, it is likely that both sign and symbol exist in a manner which makes them indistinguishable from each other. While the song texts may be considered vehicles for signing in that they make direct statements which have specific and direct meaning, they are comprised, nonetheless, of language which is considered symbolic behavior.<sup>1</sup> Thus, song texts comprised of language appearing in the context of musical sound also may appropriately be considered symbolic behavior. It is also important to add that the symbolic nature of songs and texts results from the fact that music is the cultural reflection of emotion or affective meaning.

The propensity toward signing and symboling in spirituals is especially evidenced in those songs which contain double meanings through secret messages. On the one hand, the text as a secret message serves as a signal for escape and may include the means of escape. In this case the message is what it means—a signal for a specific action. On the other hand, a more dynamic message pervades the text. It is a message imbued with a sense of community and power. More precisely, the symbolic message is that of unifying strength, hope and belief in the liberating power of God.

#### ARCHETYPAL MATERIAL IN TEXTS OF SPIRITUALS

The symbols which are reflected in the spirituals are at once cultural, ancestral and universal. They are cultural in the sense that they arose from the specific condition of slavery. They are ancestral in that they were informed by the slaves' African heritage. And, they are universal because they are reflective of the heritage of all men. It may be said that the three kinds of symbols tend to melt imperceptibly into the spontaneous expression of the spiritual. However, it is the purpose here to extract the universal material for the purpose of examining its specific import in the overall symbolic expression of the spiritual. It is the aspect of universal symbols typified in Jung's concept of archetypes which is of concern. Thus, "archetypes" refer to the contents of the collective unconscious which serve as models for patterning.<sup>2</sup> They begin as unconscious material or as forms without content, but develop into content through conscious experience.<sup>3</sup>

Archetypes may be referred to as universal symbols because they have become a part of the psychic constitution of persons, which result from endless repetition of experiences from one generation to another

<sup>1</sup> A complete discussion of the problem of signing and symboling may be found in Alan P. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music*. (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964).

<sup>2</sup> Calvin S. Hall and Vernon J. Nordby, *A Primer of Jungian Psychology* (New York: Mentor Books, 1973), p. 41.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

thereby predisposing persons to think, feel, perceive and act in specific ways.<sup>4</sup> They transcend differences of time and place and elicit responses because they are fundamentally symbolic.<sup>5</sup> The further importance of archetypes as universal themes may be seen in the light of the ultimate meaning toward which they are projected. That is, it is the essential desire for meaning on the part of the unconscious which emerges in archetypal images. They differ from age to age only in detail but the basic pattern remains unchanged.<sup>6</sup>

There is an abundance of archetypal material in the texts of Afro-American spirituals. In the spirituals, archetypal material appears in the form of a hero, number motifs, wheels, rocks, fire, water and animals. Each will be considered within the following sections.

### *The Hero as an Archetype*

Henderson, one of Jung's colleagues, begins his discussion of heroes and hero makers by stating that "The myth of the hero is the most common and the best known myth in the world."<sup>7</sup> Consequently, the initial emphasis on archetypes in texts of spirituals will be on the hero myth.

In describing the godlike figures of the hero archetype, Henderson states that they

are in fact symbolic representations of the whole psyche, the larger and more comprehensive identity that supplies the strength that the personal ego lacks. Their special role suggests that the essential function of the heroic myth is the development of the individual's ego-consciousness—his awareness of his own strength and weaknesses—in a manner that will equip him for the arduous tasks with which life confronts him.<sup>8</sup>

Jung asserts that ". . . myths of a religious nature can be interpreted as a sort of mental therapy for the suffering and anxieties of mankind in general. . . ." <sup>9</sup> Thus,

The universal hero-myth . . . always refers to a powerful man or god-man who vanishes evil . . . and who liberates his people from destruction and death. The narration of ritual repetition of sacred texts and ceremonies, and the worship of such a figure with dances, music, hymns, prayers and sacrifices, grip the audience with numinous emotions and exalt the individual to an identification with the hero.<sup>10</sup>

The subservient role into which Black people were unwillingly thrust created the need for an heroic myth, not just in an individual sense, but also for the establishment of a collective identity. It was from the Christian Bible that the symbolic representation of the hero emerged in melody. According to Thurman,

<sup>4</sup> A complete discussion of the collective unconscious and archetypes appears in Hall and Nordby's *A Primer of Jungian Psychology*.

<sup>5</sup> Carl Jung, *Man and His Symbols* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1964), p. 99.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

The Jewish concept of life . . . made a profound impression on this group of people, who were themselves in bondage. God was at work in all history; He manifested himself in certain specific acts that seemed to be over and above the historic process itself.<sup>11</sup>

For the slave, God was the heroic archetype. But more than this, His power to release those in bondage was invested in the personages of Old Testament heroes such as Moses, Daniel, and Joshua. And, it was these heroes that appeared in spirituals such as *Go Down, Moses, Didn't My Lawd Delivered Daniel*, and *Joshua Fit the Battle ob Jericho*. It is clear that the slaves brought literalistic form to the hero image because of the religious thinking in their environment coupled with the predicament of slavery and the awesome needs that it provoked.

#### *Archetypes Represented By Number or Emblematic Material*

Number or emblematic material symbolizing Self or wholeness and truths greater than the ordinary may be applied to several texts of spirituals. For example, both fourfold and triadic number motifs occur in the text of *O, What a Beautiful City*; thus, the slaves sang about twelve gates, or a multiple of three sets of four:

Oh! What a beautiful city!  
Oh! What a beautiful city!  
Oh! What a beautiful city!  
Twelve gates a-to de city a-hallelu!

An explanation of the meaning of fourfoldness in Jungian terms reveals that groups of four are universal religious symbols.<sup>12</sup> By way of further explanation, Jung states that

The quaternary (or element of "fourness") itself is a strange idea, but one that plays a great role in many religions and philosophies. In the Christian religion, it has been superseded by the Trinity . . .<sup>13</sup>

Wheelwright concurs that the triadic archetype bespeaks a religious perspective and is prominent in Christian iconography. However, he views the triadic archetype in linear perspective. In its temporal form, the linear triad refers to the "Beginning-Middle-End" or "Past-Present-Future," while the spatial form refers to "Down-here (Earth)", "Up-there (Sky)", and "In-between (Atmosphere)".<sup>14</sup>

Wheelwright's linear perspective may be applied to the following textual content of *Oh! What a Beautiful City*:

My Lawd buit-a dat city,  
He built it just-a four-square,  
And He wanted all a-you sinners  
To meet Him in-a de air  
Cause He built twelve gates a-to de city a-hallelu!

In applying the temporal form of the linear triad to the text, it is possible to view (1) the pre-existence of the city that was "built by

<sup>11</sup> Howard Thurman, *Deep River* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1955), p. 13.

<sup>12</sup> Jung, *Man and His Symbols*, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>14</sup> Philip Wheelwright, *The Burning Fountain: A Study in the Language of Symbolism* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1954), p. 132.

God" as a representation of the "past"; that is, it has already been prepared; (2) the existing beauty of the city in the immediate imagination of the slave as a representation of the "present" as characterized by the title; and (3) the desire for "sinners to meet Him in de air" as a representation of the "future."

A similar application of the spatial form reveals that (1) "you sinners" refers to those persons "Down-here" (or on Earth); (2) the "beautiful city" refers to "Up-there" (or Sky); and (3) "meet Him in-a de air" refers to "In-between" (or Atmosphere).

There is still much that cannot be explained about the aforementioned kinds of symbolism. The fact that the use of the number motifs with other kinds of thought forms, gestures and attitudes is inexplicable does tend to underscore the contention that there are, in Jungian terms:

instinctive trends, represented by corresponding thought forms—that is, by the archetypes . . . (that) something that is of a more or less unknown nature has been intuitively grasped by the unconscious and submitted to an archetypal treatment.<sup>15</sup>

The use of number motifs and wheels are both considered by Wheelwright to be picture-thinking or emblematic archetypal material, which refers to depth and significance of existence or to ultimate meaning.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the following discussion is intended as an inquiry into wheels and related emblematic motifs in spirituals.

#### *The Sun and Wheels as Related Archetypal Material*

In the beginning his discussion on the sun, Wheelwright states that

There is one daily phenomenon in particular that impresses men repeatedly, and in the most diverse ages and countries, as symbolizing certain attributes of godhead. That is the sun. The solar effulgence arouses men's minds to a sense of power and majesty, while the light of it, in making vision possible, becomes a ready symbol for the spiritual vision, which is synonymous with the highest wisdom.<sup>17</sup>

The spiritual, *Brighter dan-a Glitterin' Sun* is one example of the importance of the sun to the slaves:

Watch de Sun, how steady she run  
Don't let her catch you with your work undone,

The sun also appears in the spiritual, *Let us Break Bread Together*:

Let us break bread together on our knees.  
Let us break bread together on our knees.  
When I fall on my knees with my face to the rising sun  
O Lord, have mercy on me.

As a symbol related to the sun, the wheel represents a desire for discovering the pure center, the absolute Self, perfect harmony and serenity.<sup>18</sup> This particular archetype appears in the spiritual, *'Zekiel Saw de Wheel*, which was inspired by the Old Testament visions of the prophet, Ezekiel. The Israelites and Ezekiel were dispossessed people.

<sup>15</sup> Jung, *Man and His Symbols*, p. 67.

<sup>16</sup> Wheelwright, *The Burning Fountain*, p. 123.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 123-124.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

In their exile, they searched for a purpose for their existence—to discover who they were, where they were going, as well as to affirm that they indeed counted for something. It was Ezekiel's vision of the wheel that brought their answer and their hope.

It is not known whether the slaves were fully cognizant of the intricacy of the vision as told in the Bible. However, the slaves, like the Israelites, were dispossessed people. Certainly, it is clear that the slaves identified with Ezekiel's vision, thereby incorporating it as their own symbolic expression of hope for discovering their identities anew and their purpose for being.

### *The Rock as an Archetype*

The spiritual, *Elijah Rock*, exemplifies the attempt by Black people to invest meaning in stones:

Elijah rock, shout, shout!  
Elijah rock comin' up Lord,  
Elijah rock, shout, shout!  
Elijah rock comin' up Lord!

Satan's a liar and a conjure too;  
If you don't watch out he'll conjure you.  
If I could I surely would  
Just stand on the rock where Moses stood.

The Jungian explanation for the appearance of this archetype is that

Rough, natural stones were often believed to be the dwelling places of spirits or gods, and were used in primitive cultures as tombstones, boundary stones, or objects of religious veneration.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, stones may be regarded as “. . . frequent images of the Self (because they are complete—i.e., unchanging and lasting).”<sup>20</sup>

It is not known from which Testament the spiritual, *Elijah Rock*, came. In the Old Testament story, Elisha relied on the strength of Elijah. Before Elijah's death, Elisha's last request was that he would be allowed to inherit a double share of Elijah's spirit. In this sense, Elijah as a “rock” was a lasting spirit influencing and girding the life of Elisha.

Both Elijah and Moses appear on a mountain in the New Testament story of Jesus and His two disciples, Peter and James. In this story, the disciples become aware that Elijah was to come and make all things new and that he had, in fact, already come in the person of John the Baptist. One may conjecture that the mountain on which Elijah and Moses stood was considered the “rock.” On the other hand, Elijah, as an eternal symbol may have been combined with the knowledge of Moses and the stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments. Both explanations would at least, in part, explain the words in the spiritual, “Just stand on the rock where Moses stood.”

There is equal difficulty in clarifying the context in which Satan appears in the spiritual. In the Old Testament, Elijah warns that God

<sup>19</sup> Jung, *Man and His Symbols*, p. 258.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 223.

should be relied on rather than Beelzebub, an Old Testament personification of Satan or the devil. However, in the conversation between Jesus and Peter in the New Testament story prior to the hilltop experience in which Moses and Elijah appeared, Jesus chided Peter by saying, "Get thee behind me, Satan." An understanding of this difficulty in clarification is set forth by Johnson and Johnson in the following statement:

When it came to the use of words, the maker of the song was struggling as best he could under his limitations in language and, perhaps under a misapprehension of the facts in his source of material, generally the Bible. And, often, like his more literary poetic brothers, he had to do a good many things to get his rhyme in. But almost always he was in dead earnest.<sup>21</sup>

It is also important to add that African mythology may have informed the slaves' inclusion of "Satan" in the spiritual. The devil or Satan to the New World Black man represented a combination of cultural images and, as such, was completely different than ". . . the fallen angel of European dogma, the avenger who presides over the terrors of hell and holds the souls of the damned to their penalties. . . ." <sup>22</sup> The devil of the slaves had its origin in "Legba," the divine trickster and the god of accident in Dahomean-Yoruban mythology.<sup>23</sup> In this myth, Legba was both beneficent and malevolent.<sup>24</sup> Thus, this spiritual is particularly indicative of the manner in which the slaves fused ancestral and universal elements into the total symbolic content of the text.

#### *Fire as an Archetype*

A clear link is evidenced in the use of fire as an ancient symbol and its reoccurrence as symbolic material in African cultures and in the spirituals of Black slaves in America. According to Thass-Thienemann, the "fire" has held particular meaning and fascination from the beginning of human history.<sup>25</sup> As an archetypal symbol, it has wide-ranging significance. It has been viewed as a principle of life, giving warmth to the body; as a cause of germination and growth derived from the sun; and as the cause and ground of natural existence.<sup>26</sup>

For some African tribes, fire was both utilitarian and symbolic. In its symbolic form, a perpetual fire in the chieftan's hut signified life or the continuation of tribal life both in time and space.<sup>27</sup>

In the spirituals, qualities of both the ancestral and universal symbols are present; however, these qualities are fused with the slaves' understanding of fire in the context of Christian religion. Thus, the

<sup>21</sup> James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson. *The Books of American Negro Spirituals* (New York: The Viking Press, 1953), p. 13.

<sup>22</sup> Melville Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1970), p. 252.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 253.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Theodore Thass-Thienemann, *Symbolic Behavior* (New York: Washington Square Press, Inc., 1968), p. 315.

<sup>26</sup> Wheelwright, *The Burning Fountain*, p. 303.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 304.

symbolic meaning of fire in spirituals became that of burning away sins. Misdeeds of a personal nature as well as the over-arching misdeed of the institution of slavery were punishable by fire. But, more than this, fire was seen as a redeeming element, for with the burning away of sins came the possibility of regeneration or restoration of life to its rightful existence. Two specific examples of the slaves' use of fire as symbolic material in spirituals are the spirituals, *God's Gonna Set Dis Worl' On Fire* and *Everytime I Feel De Spirit*.

#### *Water as an Archetype*

As with some of the previous archetypal symbols, the presence of "water" or "river" in the texts of spirituals results from the migration of symbols from ancient times through African cultures and finally to the slave culture in the New World. Water was considered to be of fundamental importance in early agriculture as a source of energy, a life-giver, or as a life sustainer.<sup>28</sup> This meaning was retained in agrarian African cultures. Moreover, the importance of the symbol of water may be seen in its usage in African ritual. In fact, Herskovits states that:

In ceremony after ceremony witnessed among the Yoruba, the Ashanti, and in Dahomey, one invariable element was a visit to the river or some other body of "living" water, such as the ocean, for the purpose of obtaining the liquid indispensable for the rites.<sup>29</sup>

For the West African, the deity also resided in the water. Thus, Africans leaped or ran into the body of water which was considered sacred. In the New World, water took the form of baptism and was represented in spirituals such as *Chilly Water* and *Wade in De Water*. Herskovits also felt that:

The importance of the Biblical concept of "crossing the river Jordan" in the religious imagery of the Negroes, and as a symbol of what comes after death, is a further part of this complex. For, like baptism, the river Jordan embodies a concept in Christianity that any African would find readily understandable. In the transmutation of belief and behavior under acculturation, it furnished one of the least difficult transitions to a new form of belief.<sup>30</sup>

An example of the religious imagery expounded by Herskovits is evidenced in the spiritual, *Deep River*.

#### *Animals as Archetypes*

Jungian thought contends that "The animal motif is usually symbolic of man's primitive and instinctual nature."<sup>31</sup> As a symbol, it appears in a number of myths. For Jung, this profusion of animal symbolism not only highlights its importance, but also demonstrates an acute need on the part of the people to integrate the psychic or instinctive content of the symbol into their lives.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Donald A. MacKenzie, *The Migration of Symbols* (Detroit, Mich.: Gale Research Company, 1968), p. 69.

<sup>29</sup> Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, p. 233.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234.

<sup>31</sup> Jung, *Man and His Symbols*, p. 264.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 265.



The importance of animals as symbols is particularly evidenced in the religions of practically every race. In this context, however, animals are often interchanged with supreme gods. This is seen, for example, in the Christian religion where Christ appears symbolically as the Lamb of God. In Jungian terms,

The animal attributes of Christ indicate that even the Son of God (the supreme personification of man) can no more dispense with his animal nature than with his higher, spiritual nature. The subhuman as well as the superhuman is felt to belong to the realm of the divine . . .<sup>33</sup>

The importance of the instinctual level in African culture is particularly evidenced in artifacts such as headwear depicting human animal heads which Africans wore during ceremonial dances; door carvings and houseposts which exhibit human animal forms superimposed one on the other.<sup>34</sup> While it is important to understand that in religious rites the human and animal forms merge, it is equally important to recognize that, for the African, this manifestation of man's animal nature was not of single importance. In the African ritual, the identities of the participants also become merged in that of a god, for "Ritual is based on worship that expresses itself in song and dance, with possession by the god as the supreme religious experience."<sup>35</sup>

The form in which the animal archetype appeared in spirituals was usually that of a duality between Jesus as suffering lamb and God's children (meaning the slaves) as suffering lambs. Spirituals such as *Listen to De Lambs*, *De Ol' Sheep Done Know de Road*, *Little Lamb*, *Little Lamb*, *Little Innocent Lamb*, and *Done foun' My Los Sheep* exemplify this use of the animal motif. It may be concluded that it was the Jungian concept at work in both African and New World Christian influences on the use of the animal archetype in spirituals.

#### SUMMARY

There has been exhibited a crucial link between ancient myths and unconscious symbol-making in successive generations. Throughout the history of civilization people have demonstrated the same patterns of symboling. Defined as universal themes, these repetitive patterns are seen in the light of their deterministic qualities in that they are the unconscious strivings of persons for ultimate meaning. It is this essential desire for meaning on the part of the unconscious which emerges in archetypal images. The images transcend time and place, differing only in the specific form in which they emerge.

There is an abundance of archetypal material in the texts of Afro-American spirituals. In some spirituals the motif appears to be based on ancient myths, while others are directly connected with African myths

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 265.

<sup>34</sup> Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, p. 77.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 215.

and rituals.<sup>36</sup> However, the specific symbolic form of the spiritual is distinctly Afro-American, thereby exhibiting a fusion of universal, ancestral and cultural symbols into a powerful message from an enslaved people. Clearly, the symbolic message of the spirituals provides evidence of the struggles of Black people for survival in spite of enslavement; their strivings for sustenance in times of trial and tribulation; their continuous search for ultimate truth and meaning in a hostile and oppressive environment; and their belief that goodness and justice would triumph.

<sup>36</sup> John Lovell, Jr., in discussing textual material of spirituals in his book, *Black Song: The Forge and the Flame* (New York: The Macmillian Company, 1972), pp. 255-272, makes an examination of biblical characters such as Moses, Daniel, Joshua and others as symbolizations of deliverers, as inspirations and as models of the faith and power. Moreover, he cites the numerous examples of such motifs as the sun, rocks, water and other objects of nature in terms of the deistic qualities they held in African religions and the sense of awe they connote in spirituals. However, these references by Lovell are not in terms of any archetypal meaning; rather, he views the material as agencies and models of transformation or the means through which the primary aims of the spiritual as literature were attained.