

## Oral Tradition and Spiritual Drama: The Cultural Mosaic for Black Preaching

The unique character of Black preaching may be viewed in the context of two interrelated cultural phenomena: the oral tradition and ritual drama. Among the most insightful commentaries on Black preaching are works by James Weldon Johnson, William H. Pipes, and Henry H. Mitchell. In an effort to contribute to the dialogue on a style of worship which has been submerged in misunderstanding and misrepresentation, this article seeks to examine the meaning and function of these phenomena.<sup>1</sup>

### *BLACK PREACHING AND THE ORAL TRADITION*

Rooted in West Africa and fragmented by slavery, the Black oral tradition encompasses an elaborate system of music, dance, folklore, and oratory. It is the oratorical — both pulpit and podium — domain over which the Black preacher reigns supreme. Once severed from its African origins, the development of Black oratory became generically linked with the Christian pulpit, the anti-slavery podium, and the Black convention platform. The foundation of the anti-slavery podium was laid by the first rebel who exhorted his fellow captives to renounce and resist slavery. A dramatic example was the case of Cinquez who in 1839 led a mutiny on the slave ship, the *Amistad*. Largely through the efforts of John Quincy Adams and the American Colonization Society, the case was tried in New Haven, the mutineers were acquitted and returned to their homes. Trial proceedings reveal that Cinquez' influence over his fellow captives was due to his charismatic bearing and incendiary oratory.<sup>2</sup>

Needless to say, once enslaved, Blacks were forced to restrict their incendiary speeches to the clandestine meetings of the African Cult. As we shall see later, however, Black oratory could be pacific as well as incendiary, entreating as well as demanding.

<sup>1</sup>James Weldon Johnson, *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (New York: The Viking Press, 1927); William H. Pipes, *Say Amen, Brother; Old-Time Negro Preaching, A Study in American Frustration* (New York: The William-Frederick Press, 1951); Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Preaching* (New York: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1970).

<sup>2</sup>Mitchell, *ibid.*, pp. 79, 135; Miles Mark Fisher, *Negro Slave Songs in the United States* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1939), p. 1; Winfield DeWitt Bennett, "A Survey of American Negro Oratory (1619-1900)," unpublished Masters Thesis, Georgia Washington University (February, 1935), pp. 4, 5; Carter G. Woodson, *Negro Orators and Their Orations* (Washington, D.C.: Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, 1936); John Warner Barber, *A History of the Amistad Captives* (New York: Arno Press and *The New York Times*, 1969 (1840)), pp. 5, 6.

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### *A Slave Mother Begs to Keep Her Child*

'The greatest orator I ever heard,' said John Randolph, 'was a woman. She was a slave. She was a mother and her platform was the auction block.' With that Randolph himself imitated the thrilling tones of this slave woman and said, 'There was eloquence, I have heard no man speak like that.'<sup>3</sup>

### *An Ex-Slave Pleads for Racial Peace and Harmony*

The most thoroughly eloquent and effective speeches ever made in the legislature of Texas were pronounced by two Negroes, and both of much the same import, both recounted the story of devotion to 'Old Master and Mistress.' When one of these natural orators, himself an old man, extended his black horny hands and said: 'There can be no great race enmity between us. . . . Look at those wrinkled, rough hands, they tell the tale; they tell how I toiled for them, and the story is not ended; they are old and helpless now, and I live as I once did, in a little cabin, and still I toil for them. I send them half of every dollar I draw from the treasury, . . . Have I not the right to ask you gentlemen of the majority to deal generously with my race?'<sup>4</sup>

Thus Black oratory ranges from a call for Black rebellion to an appeal to white conscience. Historically, the Black preacher has advocated both extremes and all the possibilities in between. While the appeal to conscience is ostensibly less threatening, it has, nonetheless, evoked severe reprisals from the dominant society. The entire career of Martin Luther King, Jr. was marked by violent retaliation to his non-violent crusade. Hence, Donald Smith put it mildly when he observed that a great frustration to the civil rights movement has been the "communications dilemma":

. . . the servant-master, inferior-superior relationship has precluded an honest encoding and decoding of messages.<sup>5</sup>

But while it has been virtually impossible for Blacks to engage in open communication with whites, there is no question that Blacks have been communicating with Blacks. Several facets of the slave communications network were described by Elizabeth Botume, one of the first missionaries to South Carolina's Sea Islands:

Without any knowledge of newspapers, or books, or telegraphy, the slaves had their own way of gathering news from the whole country. They had secret signs, an 'Underground Telephone,' like the 'Underground Railroad' which was of later date; also unknown and unnoticed limited express messengers.<sup>6</sup>

Hence, the most telling feature of the Black oral tradition is that, historically, it originated in and consisted of messages from Blacks to Blacks.

A powerful branch of the oral tradition is the Black convention movement which, ever since the nineteenth century, has provided a forum for Black people to work out their own destiny. Conceived by Hezekiah Grice of Baltimore and hosted by Mother Bethel A.M.E. Church at Philadelphia, the first Negro Convention was held to discuss emigration

<sup>3</sup>Frederick G. Detweiler, *The Negro Press in the United States* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1922), p. 33.

<sup>4</sup>Quoted from the Fort Worth Gazette in *The Christian Recorder* (March 27, 1884), p. 2.

<sup>5</sup>Donald H. Smith, "Martin Luther King, Jr.: Rhetorician of Revolt," unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Department of Speech, University of Wisconsin (August, 1964), pp. 337, 338.

<sup>6</sup>Elizabeth H. Botume, *First Days Amongst the Contrabands* (New York: Arno Press and *The New York Times*, 1968 (1893)), pp. 5, 6.

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and/or other alternatives to the Black dilemma. The oral dissemination of ideas and information via speeches, workshops, debate, and dialogue constituted a valuable source of informal education. Accordingly, the Black convention movement may be seen as an extension of the secret meetings held by slaves.<sup>7</sup>

Continued reliance on the oral tradition was necessitated by illiteracy. Time and again contemporaries expressed amazement at the ability of slaves to repeat long and complicated messages verbatim after one hearing. Teachers in the Port Royal Experiment reported that their students performed much better in their oral lessons than in their written assignments. Observers of the Black Church have marveled at the extent to which Bible texts have been memorized by Black preachers and their parishioners. Though illiterate, Black Harry was said to have committed all of Bishop Asbury's sermons to memory.<sup>8</sup>

One half-literate ex-slave preacher who was greatly acclaimed for his eloquent preaching was the Reverend John Jasper of Richmond, Virginia. Jasper's most famous sermon was based on his thesis that "De Sun do Move." Whites and Blacks came from far and near to ridicule Jasper but many left with profound respect for this passionate and pious messenger of the gospel.<sup>9</sup>

Charismatic Black pulpiter anti-slavery orators were widely praised by both Black and white audiences. Woodson suggests that their impact was greatly due to their intimate knowledge of and experience with oppression and their passion for freedom. One criterion then for judging Black orators must be, as Woodson said, "The effect which they produced on their hearers."<sup>10</sup> There are numerous examples of slave preachers who were so impressive that white congregations purchased their freedom. The slave mother on the auction block, the ex-slave before the Texas legislature, Black Harry, John Jasper — these represent but a tiny sample of legions of unlettered Black orators many of whom never received notice on the printed page. But the impact of literate Black pulpiters and orators reverberated throughout nineteenth century literature. Harriet Beecher Stowe said of Frederick Douglass, "Few orators among us surpass him."<sup>11</sup> Douglass, himself, was an ardent admirer of the Reverend Samuel Ringgold Ward whom the great American orator Daniel Webster called

<sup>7</sup>*The Anglo-African Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 10 (October, 1859), p. 307.

<sup>8</sup>Botume, *op. cit.*; Woodson, *op. cit.*; Detweiler, *op. cit.*, p. 33; Samuel Miller Lawton, "The Religious Life of South Carolina Coastal and Sea Island Negroes," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Religious Education, George Peabody College for Teachers, (1939); Josephine Walker Martin, "The Educational Efforts of the Major Freedman's Aid Societies and the Freedman's Bureau in South Carolina: 1862-1870," unpublished doctoral dissertation, School of Education, University of South Carolina, (1972), pp. 93-107.

<sup>9</sup>William E. Hatcher, *John Jasper: The Unmatched Negro Philosopher and Preacher* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969 (1908)); Richard Ellsworth Day, *Rhapsody in Black: The Life Story of John Jasper* (Valley Forge: The Judson Press, 1953); E. A. Randolph, *The Life of John Jasper* (Richmond: R. T. Hill & Co., 1884).

<sup>10</sup>Woodson, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup>Sterling A. Brown, Arthur P. Davis, Ulysses Lee, eds., *The Negro Caravan* (New York: Arno Press and *The New York Times*, 1969 (1941)), p. 575.

the "ablest thinker on his legs before the American people."<sup>12</sup> In Douglass' opinion, there was only one other Black spokesman comparable to Ward and that was South Carolina's reconstruction congressman Robert Brown Elliott.<sup>13</sup> On the one hand, Elliott, a lawyer, with an admirable academic background and enviable command of the language, could have been characterized as a carbon copy of many of his fellow white congressmen. On the other hand, content notwithstanding, Elliott's style of delivery betrayed his ethnic identity. Consider the press given to his famous Congressional speech on civil rights.

His sentences are constructed with an obvious regard for euphonious sound, and if any fault were to be found in his manner of speaking, it would be that he falls into too much of a cadenced delivery. . . . His speech was well written and it was delivered with the earnestness and eloquence of a natural and experienced orator. The African love of melody was noticeable in the harmony of his delivery. Every sentence closed with a musical cadence.<sup>14</sup>

Nineteenth century reactions to Black pulpiter-orators typically described them as "sonorous," "thrilling," and "forceful."<sup>15</sup> When we examine the cultural context for the traditional relationship between the Black pulpiter-orator and the Black audience, it is understandable that the style of a Black speaker would be characterized in terms of "musical" and "cadenced." These are the very qualities which inspired James Weldon Johnson to call Black folk preachers *God's Trombones*.

He strode the pulpit up and down in what was actually a very rhythmic dance, and he brought into play the full gamut of his wonderful voice, a voice — what shall I say? — not of an organ or a trombone, the instrument possessing above all others the power to express the wide and varied range of emotions encompassed by the human voice — and with greater amplitude. He intoned, he moaned, he pleaded — he blared, he crashed, he thundered. . . . The old-time Negro preacher of parts was above all an orator, and in good measure an orator. He knew the secret of oratory, that at bottom it is a progression of rhythmic words more than it is anything else.<sup>16</sup>

Quoting Julius Lester's observation that rhythm is the indigenous language of Black people, the scholar-musician, Ben Sidran, asserts further that music is crucial to the Black oral culture. Sidran argues that embedded within that culture are:

. . . its own social and value structures and a mode of perceptual orientation capable of supporting such structures. The retention of oral culture means the survival of the necessary perceptual attributes. The examination of these attributes, in, for instance, black music, can yield important information about the nature of the oral continuum.<sup>17</sup>

Support for Sidran's thesis lies, in part, in the etiology of the talking drums:

<sup>12</sup>Samuel Ringgold Ward, *Autobiography of A Fugitive Negro: His Anti-Slavery Labours in the United States, Canada, and England* (New York: Arno Press and *The New York Times*, 1968 (1885)), introduction to Arno edition by Dorothy Porter.

<sup>13</sup>William J. Simmons, *Men of Mark* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Co., Inc., 1970), p. 314.

<sup>14</sup>Quoted in *New National Era* (January 22, 1874); *The New York Times*, Vol. XXIII, No. 6960 (Wednesday, January 7, 1874), p. 1.

<sup>15</sup>Mitchell, *op. cit.*; Woodson, *op. cit.*; Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church* (Washington, D.C.: The Associated Publishers, 1921).

<sup>16</sup>James Weldon Johnson, *op. cit.*, pp. 6, 7.

<sup>17</sup>Ben Sidran, *Black Talk* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), pp. xii, xii, 1.

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It cannot be disputed that the oral culture receives information through intonation contouring from the forms of vocalization as well as the content. The manner in which drums were used to 'talk' is typical of this communication mode. The oral man's sensitive ear for timbral subtleties allowed him to use these drums to beat phonetic reproductions of words themselves rather than a primitive Morse code system. It is clear that these tonal elements have survived in modern black speech.<sup>18</sup>

The many shadings and nuances which are communicated vis-a-vis intonation constitute a great portion of the affective domain permeating the Black oral tradition. "It's not *what* you say but *how* you say it that counts!" is a common saying which James Weldon Johnson simply elaborated when he said:

... the inner secret of sheer oratory is not so much in what is said as in the combination of the how, when, and where, the how is the most important of these factors and its chief virtues lie in the timing; that is, in the ability of the speaker to set up a series of vibrations between himself and his hearers.<sup>19</sup>

So Marshall McLuhan merely carried this nugget of common sense wisdom to its penultimate when he declared that "the medium is the message."<sup>20</sup> Notwithstanding, the polemical impact of McLuhan's claim, the import is clear; often the verbal message is not the primary message. In oral communication, a moan, groan, or shout, frequently convey emotional depths which words could never transmit. It is understandable, then, how the Black oral tradition would become suffused with an affective dimension which, aboriginally, was embodied in African languages, but, under repressive conditions in the New World, was forced to assume a subliminal if not subversive nature.

One of the first lessons that Black children all over the world learn is that rhythmic expression is valuable if not essential:

The teaching of rhythms in Africa starts with infancy. The mother grinds her corn with the child on her back, singing and keeping time with the motion. The children are taught rhythmic games and the little boys make drums of cans and calabashes, covering them with bladders of animals to imitate their elders. The boys generally are started on their musical careers at about the age of six years. They are started on the drum, and once the basic rhythms are learned, they take up other instruments.<sup>21</sup>

The African-American jazz drummer, Max Roach once suggested that most great jazz musicians must have heard jazz in the womb.<sup>22</sup>

In essence, the Black oral tradition has been determined by countless successive generations of Black people teaching Black people through rhythmic patterns in speech, song, and dance. Hence, the Black oral tradition must be considered within the context of the broad mosaic of a rhythmical and musical culture. The selfsame rhythms which are present in the call and response between preacher and parish are also evident in the interaction between the folk musician and the folk. Martin Luther King,

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>19</sup>James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way* (New York: The Viking Press, 1933), quoted in Marcus H. Boulware, *The Oratory of Negro Leaders: 1900-1968* (Westport, Conn.: Negro Universities Press, 1969), p. 3.

<sup>20</sup>Herbert Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (New York: Signet, 1964).

<sup>21</sup>Joseph H. Howard, *Drums in the Americas* (New York: Oak Publications, 1967), p. 227.

<sup>22</sup>"Racial Prejudice in Jazz," (Part 1) *Down Beat*, March 15, 1972, p. 25.

the preacher, and B. B. King, the bluesman, personify this point. Ethnomusicologist, Charles Kiel, perceived a striking parallel in their delivery:

. . . I began to draw comparisons in my mind between the two Kings — the preacher and the bluesman — both leaders in their respective fields, both eloquent spokesmen for their people, both from the Deep South. . . . I was struck by the stylistic common denominator that binds the sacred and secular realms of the two Kings into one cultural unit. . . . This formula may be stated in a number of different ways: 'constant repetition coupled with small but striking deviations; similar wails and cries linked to various tumbling strums and descending figures,' or simply 'statements and counter-statements' — all of which equal 'soul.' It is a pattern that a Negro child in the rural South or the urban ghetto learns by heart, normally in a church context and it is as old as the oral traditions and call-response patterns of West African poetry and music.<sup>23</sup>

Kiel's astute observation must be extended to make the point that in his unique delivery — his special dynamics of cadence, timing, resonance, and rhythm — the Black orator-pulpiteer is not just kin to the folk singer; often, he *is* the singer — the singing preacher.

#### THE BLACK CHURCH AS RITUAL DRAMA<sup>24</sup>

The spectacle of the black church indicated a survival of those traits which dramatize African communal rites.<sup>25</sup>

Through the dramatic modes, i.e., role-playing, humor, imagery, music, dance, and story-telling, etc., the oral tradition supports and sustains ritual drama. However, to the extent that the oral tradition is not necessarily and exclusively religious in content, it frequently does not assume the form of ritual drama. Aboriginal dramatic forms were steeped in religion where mythology and morality were transmitted through ritual. Ritual drama is based on the principle of the divine creation of mankind and man's continuous need for spiritual rebirth. Clearly, the African Cult in the New World has stubbornly and desperately clutched this principle of spiritual invocation and regeneration. Much to his chagrin, A.M.E. Bishop Payne wrote that a group of his parishioners insisted upon performing a strange dance rite called the ring-shout so as to invoke the spirit and to seal the conversion of new members. In connection with possession, Herskovits described how in West African religious ceremonies "the dancers . . . move about the dancing circle in a counter-clockwise direction." So Woofter was correct in his view that the ring-shout was both a form of recreation and re-creation.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup>Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), pp. 96, 97.

<sup>24</sup>This dramatic conceptualization of the Black Church greatly benefited from the unpublished manuscript of Oseloka O. Osadebe, "African Ritual Drama: An Institution for Moral Instruction," School of Speech, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois.

<sup>25</sup>Paul Carter Harrison, *The Drama of Nommo: Black Theatre in the African Continuum* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1972), p. 194.

<sup>26</sup>Joel A. Adedeji, "The Place of Drama in Yoruba Religious Observance," *Odu: Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (July, 1966); Anthony Graham-White, "West African Drama: Folk, Popular, and Literary," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Speech and Drama, Stanford University (June, 1969); Percy Amaury Talbot, *The Peoples of Southern Nigeria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1926), 111; Paul Radin, *Primitive Religion: Its Nature and Origin* (New York: The Viking Press, 1937). See Mircea Eliade, *Birth and Rebirth*; Oseloka O. Osadebe, "African Ritual Drama: An Institution for Moral

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Given the congregation as audience, the choirs, church elders, et al as supporting cast, music and dance as dramatic elements, the sermon-story as plot, and the preacher as principal performer, it seems plausible to employ the analogy of the Black church as theatre. And, as in secular theatre, both cast and audience are costumed:

The African cult had trained Negroes to dress their finest for worship. In Africa they wore cotton, silk, and velvet beautifully ornamented with embroidery and jewelry of gold and silver. In the West Indies a law of 1540 prohibited Negro women from wearing jewelry, pearls, or silks unless they were married to Spaniards; and in South Carolina in 1735 another law had to be renewed to confiscate the 'finer' clothes which slaves wore.<sup>27</sup>

Sociologists and other commentators frequently have attributed the Sunday morning dress parade in Black churches to conspicuous consumption, bourgeois strivings, and compensatory behavior for lack of status in the dominant society. Such experts may not be entirely in error but they need to balance their sociological analysis with an anthropological and historical perspective. (Pageantry may be more appropriate a term than dress parade.) Frances Trollope's description of a camp meeting in 1829 is apropos:

... one tent was occupied exclusively by Negroes. They were all full-dressed, and looked exactly as if they were performing a scene on the stage. One woman wore a dress of pink gauze trimmed with silver lace; another was dressed in pale yellow silk; one or two had splendid turbans; and all wore a profusion of ornaments. The men in snow white pantaloons, with gay colored linen jackets.<sup>28</sup>

Further intensifying the theatrical atmosphere is conflict, which is considered essential to Western drama. By using the perennial themes of good versus evil and oppression versus liberation, the preacher strives to resolve these conflicts through dramatization. As the star performer, the preacher is often extremely versatile — actor, dancer, and musician. One of Jasper's biographers, himself a minister, described Jasper's style of preaching:

He preached with every faculty of his mind, with every passion and sentiment of his soul, with every nerve, every muscle, and every feature of his body. . . . Hardly a word came out clothed and in its right mind. And gestures! He circled around the pulpit with his ankle in his hand; and laughed and sang and shouted and acted about a dozen characters within the space of three minutes. Meanwhile, in spite of these things, he was pouring out a gospel sermon, red hot, full of love, full of invective, full of tenderness, full of tears, full of every passion that ever flamed in the human breast. He was a theatre within himself, with the stage crowded with actors. . . . He was a preacher; likewise the church and the choir and the deacons and the congregation. . . .<sup>29</sup>

Yet, beyond his stage performance, the preacher is the chief script-writer, producer, director, and manager of the theatre. In addition to his on-stage

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Instruction," unpublished manuscript, School of Speech, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois; Daniel Alexander Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years* (Nashville, Tennessee: Publishing House of the A.M.E. Sunday-School Union, 1888), pp. 256, 257; Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958 (1941)), p. 218; Thomas Jackson Woofert, Jr., *Black Yeomanry: Life on St. Helena Island* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1930), p. 219.

<sup>27</sup>Fisher, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

<sup>28</sup>Frances Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1949 (1832)), p. 170.

<sup>29</sup>Hatcher, *op. cit.*, pp. 11, 47.

and backstage administrative responsibilities on Sundays, he is expected to perform off-stage every day of the week. As counselor and consoler to those in distress, community leader, sometime politician, newspaperman, and oftentimes a professional educator, his role-playing never ceases. Moreover, in the tradition of the African priest or medicine man, the Black preacher is not uncommonly reputed to have the gifts of prophecy and healing. Here, again, the theatrical reference is significant as the very word theatre is akin to the Greek *thauma* meaning miracle. In this context, students of drama have long recognized its potential for magic and illusion. When we recall that a primary function of ritual drama was to invoke the almighty and eternal spirit, then it is predictable that, as instruments of God, some preachers are seen as miracle workers. In African ritual drama, the instrumentality of the priest is reaffirmed through the use of a mask intended to supersede his human personality and identity. In African-American churches, a similar effect is achieved with a special kind of preaching voice which is markedly different from the minister's normal speaking voice. Though the Black preacher in America may no longer wear the physical mask of God, he must still lose his carnal identity when he assumes his celestial role.<sup>30</sup>

Lawton describes how the preacher steps into his role during the Sunday morning worship service:

By whatever method the preacher reached the pulpit stand, whether he were already on the platform, stepped up from his place in the audience or was escorted from 'de ante room,' in every case the preacher dramatically assumed his responsibility as leader during the preaching service.<sup>31</sup>

In the fundamentalist churches where members testify before the sermon, it is not uncommon for the minister to base his sermon on the testimonies. This is another manifestation of the dialogical relationship between preacher and parish. He is likely to begin in a conversational tone which some call the calm before the storm. Authorities and observers are in general agreement on the dramatic climax which the Black folk preacher typically achieves near the end of his sermon:<sup>32</sup>

The average sermon can be divided into three parts. The first part usually consists of an apology on the part of the speaker for a cold, hoarseness or some other infirmity. The second part may be styled the 'warming-up' period. During this time the preacher speaks from the scriptures and on the whole presents a sound argument, making practical applications to everyday life. All this time he is calling upon the members, saying 'Pray with me a little while, children,' etc. He is feeling his way until the spirit strikes him. With the coming of the spirit, which is the third part of the sermon, the speaker's entire demeanor changes into a type of discourse that borders on hysteria. His voice, changed in pitch takes on a mournful singing quality, and words flow from his lips in such a manner as to make an understanding of them almost impossible.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup>Interview with Oseloka O. Osadebe, School of Speech, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois (July 20, 1974).

<sup>31</sup>Lawton, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

<sup>32</sup>This insight was provided by a fellow graduate student, John H. Stanfield, Department of Sociology, Northwestern University; Pipes, *op. cit.*, p. 150. Mitchell, *op. cit.*; p. 188; Johnson, *God's Trombones*, p. 7.

<sup>33</sup>Andrew P. Watson, "Negro Primitive Religious Services," in *God Struck Me Dead*, ed. by Clifton H. Johnson (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1969), p. 5.



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During the climax, when the spirit takes over, a congregation may be "moved to ecstasy by the rhythmic intoning of sheer incoherencies."<sup>34</sup> Sophisticated observers, both Black and white, like James Weldon Johnson and Frederick Law Olmsted have admitted that it was with extreme difficulty that they maintained their equilibrium during the dramatic climax. As in the ancient Greek sense of theatre, the Black folk preacher/actor is a producer of miracles, he is able to conjure the spirits, to effect possession.<sup>35</sup>

Herskovits recorded comparable findings in both Christian and traditional religious ceremonies in the Caribbean, Latin America, and West Africa. These data revealed that the verbal incoherence of the Black preacher at the height of his possession may be comparable to the Pentecostal version of "speaking in tongues," but is most likely West African in origin. There, in West Africa, the initiate:

. . . learns the meaning of those strange syllables akin to 'speaking in tongues' . . . which, when interpreted, turn out to be a prophecy, or a new cure, or how to cope with magic, or any of those other matters which concern the gods when they come to earth.<sup>36</sup>

So, while some people may consider the phenomenon of spirit possession a healthy emotional catharsis, it has remedial and didactic functions as well as regenerative value.

Our attention next fastens upon the didactic component of the ceremony. Although the rituals are ancient and the group has a veritable storehouse of myths and maxims, each time the spirit is invoked, new wisdom is imparted. The moment of possession is the "moment of truth." The group receives its most significant teachings in an atmosphere of heightening momentum: "a given rhythm of the drum, the sound of a rattle, singing and handclapping of a chorus are almost invariably essential if possession is to ensue. . . ." <sup>37</sup> Already highly charged, this atmosphere is further intensified by the spellbinding performance of the priest. By chanting, singing, dancing, exhorting, and performing other traditional rites, he galvanizes the collective magnetism required to summon the spirit. By no means is the word collective to be taken lightly. Herskovits emphasized the point that possession is a social phenomenon in West Africa.<sup>38</sup> From a theatrical vantage point, Harrison states the case this way:

If an event is to have dramatic force and verity, it requires the psychic/physical energies of all assembled as in the ritual of a voodoo ceremony — to be fused into a dynamic unity so as to mutually achieve a spontaneous suspension of disbelief. Black people, owing to African continuity, are not spectators by nature; they are participators. The images created in an event gain in spiritual and physical potency through active participation in the mode.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>34</sup>Johnson, *God's Trombones*, p. 5.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 7; Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Back Country*, (New York: Mason Brothers, 1863), p. 189.

<sup>36</sup>Herskovits, *op. cit.*, p. 216.

<sup>37</sup>Herskovits, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>Harrison, *op. cit.*, p. 197.

In the West African tradition, the Black folk preacher creates an atmosphere where group participation is built-in. Observing the call and response pattern, his sense of timing makes room in his discourse of "Amen's" and other "righteous" punctuation from his participating audience. Their relationship is at all times dialogical. While together, the preacher and parish move to familiar rhythms, chants, and songs; there must always be a new stroke, a slightly different twist or subtle variation. Improvisation is a major component in the vehicle which enables the collective to expand its creative powers, ultimately, in order to tap the reservoir of divine creativity. Often the musicians demonstrate impressive improvisational skills, but, to reiterate, the preacher is the master improviser.

Meanwhile, language is used to further enhance and intensify the experience. At one level, allusions to mountains and clouds may help to lift the collective consciousness. At another level, references to joy, peace, freedom and justice may have the same effect. In any case, the effective use of imagery is an extremely important dramatic technique. It is said that Jasper's style "consisted of the stringing together of picture after picture," that he "made frequent use of humor," and that "he deliberately made his sermons spectacular."<sup>40</sup>

Call and response, humor and imagery, song and dance, imagination and improvisation — these are the principal dramatic elements which the Black folk preacher employs to accomplish possession or a reasonable facsimile. As in the West African tradition where spirit-possession was a dominant feature of worship, many of the more sophisticated Black churches retain some aspects of the cult format and spirit-possession is simulated in the dramatic climax. When the collective is elevated to the point of suspension between the *real* and the *ideal*, then the primary message is dispensed. True to form, Martin Luther King climaxed his famous March on Washington address with the refrain, "I have a dream . . .," and it was in this state of mind that his audience was able to receive his reassurance "that one day" freedom and justice and brotherhood would become a reality.

Historically, then, Black preachers have taught great wisdom in a communal atmosphere charged with virtually every conceivable dramatic element. This is a system of education which is far more dependent upon collective participation and dramatic revelation than individual concentration and silent meditation. Needless to say, the entire religious ceremony has didactic ingredients. For instance, improvisation introduces something new while repetition reinforces the old. In the most profound sense of the word, this is a creative process. In the case of possession, the spirit is invoked, pragmatically, to teach and, equally pragmatically, to bring new life.

Perhaps the most essential feature of African ritual drama is its functional character. It is "theatre for life's sake."<sup>41</sup> The dramatic elements work in concert to enhance life. Through its myriad affirmations of life, the

<sup>40</sup>Bennett, *op. cit.*, pp. 22, 24.

<sup>41</sup>Interview with Osadebe, *op. cit.*, see also Basil Davidson, *The African Genius* (Boston: Little Brown & Co., 1969) Chapter 17, "Art for Life's Sake."

## Oral Tradition and Spiritual Drama

ritual drama functions to provide the necessary energies for mankind to engage in the perennial struggle of life. In the face of genocide and dehumanization, the theatre of the Black church has enabled the Black preacher and his parish not only to reenact and to re-channel tension and conflict but also to reaffirm their selfhood and their humanity. African ritual drama thus provided the aboriginal model first, for the validation of life itself; second, the affirmation of Black humanity; third, the perpetuation of Black culture; and, finally, the inspiration for Black liberation.

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