



# AFRICAN AMERICAN RELIGIOUS CULTURES

ANTHONY B. PINN, EDITOR



# African American Religious Cultures

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# African American Religious Cultures

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*Dedicated to the Ancestors who gave birth to these traditions.*



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# Introduction: The Forging of African American Religious Cultures

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## The Americas

The term “America” at times has been used as a reference by citizens of the United States to describe their culture and geography. This rather narrow use of the term was challenged during the first few decades of the twentieth century in light of the history of this area of the world that helped shape the United States and its borders and that also involves a plurality of countries and worldviews (Levander and Levine 2008). The use of “America” to name a particular nation was challenged, and in its place, the “Americas” became a way to describe a particular hemisphere composed of numerous countries with interrelated histories and cultures. There were in fact, as historians have demonstrated, overlapping moments of contact, conquest, and development that bind the various areas of the Western Hemisphere together and that allow for synergy on a variety of levels, including the political, economic, and cultural. For example, the interests of Spain and France in the so-called “New World” involved more than one geographic location—spreading across various islands, North America, and South America. As a result, these areas represent something of a historical and cultural whole in that they share influences and experiences (Thomas 1997; Palmié 1995; Klein and Vinson 2007).

The individual nations that currently comprise this hemisphere are formed and influenced not only from within their particular geography but also by other peoples and nations beyond their borders. They involve similarities of experience but also differences. The histories of various areas of this hemisphere converge and inform each other, but are not identical, resulting in a shared reality that extends beyond the story of any one country. This shared reality that constitutes the overlapping stories of life in the American hemisphere share a fundamental reality that also shapes this encyclopedia—the presence of people of African descent and the history of the Atlantic Slave Trade.

It would be a significant mistake to assume what we refer to as the Americas was an unclaimed area of the world simply awaiting arrival and use by European explorers and economic speculators. No, European exploration did not involve the discovery of new lands, but rather the renaming and use of thriving populations and their homes. The area of the world of concern in this encyclopedia was invented; and this involved the applying of new names, new systems of politics, social life, and so on to existing societies. There were rich and diverse cultures already present. Within this encyclopedia, culture is understood as the beliefs and practices that shape the self-understanding, thinking, and activities of a particular group and the signs, symbols, and other ways in which these beliefs and practices are expressed. Yet, as the entries in this encyclopedia will suggest, these cultures are porous, open to influence and change as they are brought in contact with other cultures.

While communities across the hemisphere do not necessarily refer to themselves as “American” in part because of the earlier and problematic use of the term, there are ways in which the word “American” serves as a marker of related developments and formations that shape the cultural worlds within this hemisphere. It is in this sense, in this way, that the term is used in the context of this encyclopedia: The term “American” is not used here to designate members of a particular nation. It is not political in that way, and it is not concerned foremost with economic and political realities. Rather, the term is used here as a way to think about overlapping religious realities.

It is not uncommon for those of African descent in the Americas to refer to themselves in a way that notes their African heritage and their particular geographic location. Afro-Brazilian and Afro-Caribbean serve as two examples. And while noting and respecting this naming, this encyclopedia seeks to present religious culture in a way that sweeps across the hemisphere, recognizing points of religious overlap and difference. This does not rule out more localized approaches to naming such as the two noted above, but it allows for a more comprehensive (yet not definitive) examination of religious cultures of the hemisphere in a way that recognizes particular nations while putting the religions of these individual nations within a larger framework. In so doing, it uses a reference that considers the full range of this geography and the African cultural influence present in the American hemisphere—“African American.”

### **Africans in the American Hemisphere: African Americans**

Martin Bernal (Bernal 1987, 1991) and Cheikh Anta Diop (Diop 1974), among other scholars, have championed research that points out the impact of Africa on world civilization. But this cultural influence was not limited to contact between Africa and Europe. Scholars such as Ivan Van Sertima have argued with great academic force that Africans made contact with the American hemisphere long before the introduction of the slave trade. In fact, for example, he argues African influence on American culture(s) is still evident in the sculptures, inscriptions, and other artifacts associated with particular areas such as Mexico (Van Sertima 1976). The pre-Columbus presence of Africans in the American hemisphere is important in that it speaks to the rich cultural heritage of Africa and it also notes the manner in which the cultural life and practices in the American hemisphere were influenced by an African worldview. Yet, the number of Africans within the American hemisphere becomes significant numerically only with the slave trade.

One of the most significant markers of the Modern Period, the age of science and exploration, is the development of the so-called “New World” (over against the Old World of Europe)—the Americas—as the major geography for the trade in enslaved Africans and the production of new wealth and new cultures. Numbering in the millions and moved to this location over the course of centuries, the enslavement of Africans from West Africa forged economic growth for Europe through the production of rum, crops, and other items in the Americas and transported elsewhere in the world. Over the course of the slave trade, more than 10 million Africans were brought to the American hemisphere to labor on plantations and to provide other forms of labor necessary to maintain the economic interests of Europe. This trade in Africans was an early example of the global market—a transnational economy—a web-like and interconnected structure that helped fuel the industrial, intellectual, and social advances marking the “Modern World” (Davis 2001).

The forced movement of Africans across the Atlantic involved the entire American hemisphere and many European nations. The system of slavery, once begun in the “New World,” was a system based on the full participation of a good number of European countries. “Ironically,” notes historian David Davis, “the only New World colony that barred the importation of slaves was Georgia, whose founders sought a refuge for England’s deserving poor as well as a secure buffer between South Carolina’s menacing black majority and the hostile Spaniards in Florida, who were accused of inciting slave rebellions and encouraging runaways by offering freedom to those who escaped into Spanish territory. By 1749, however, Georgia’s trustees realized that it was impossible to exclude slaves from the colony and agreed to end their fourteen-year experiment with ‘free soil’ ” (Davis 2001, 179).

### *Justification for Slavery*

One might ask a question at this point: How could humans enslave other humans, and what would encourage this behavior on such a large scale? The answer most often given to this perplexing question suggests the physical difference between Africans and Europeans, along with their cultural differences, was used to justify the slave trade. Even countries initially reluctant to participate in this trade would come around due to the potential for economic gain. Religion offered a firm way of justifying this activity (Haynes 2002). With time, the Hebrew Bible was brought into the service of slavery when the story of Ham (the son of Noah) and his son Canaan—both assumed to be African—was used as justification for the enslavement of Africans:

Noah was the first tiller of the soil. He planted a vineyard; and he drank of the wine, and became drunk, and lay uncovered in his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside. Then Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it upon both their shoulders, and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father; their faces were turned away, and they did not see their father’s nakedness. When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what

his youngest son had done to him, he said, “Cursed be Canaan; a slave of slaves shall he be to his brothers.” (Genesis 9:20–25)

If Canaan is cursed to be a slave, some argued, and Africans are the offspring of Ham (and his son Canaan), then Africans are slaves due to divine action. This was not the only rationale offered for slavery, but its link to a sacred text gave it a certain type of authority and appeal. Regardless of the inconsistencies and flaws of the argument, it and others like it (e.g., physical difference marked inferiority) were held tenaciously. And at times, religious justifications would expand to include the pretext of introducing Africans to the Christian faith; but this evangelizing was spotty at best and was typically a thin veil covering economic motivations.

### *The Practice of Slavery*

There is evidence in written records of “Black” slaves present in Europe as of the 1300s. And many historians who study the Atlantic Slave Trade give special notice to the 1444 transport of Africans to Portugal by Antam Gonçalves and his crew. This did not mark an expanded interest in African servants in that the Portuguese were more interested in gold than in servants. However, limited interest in Africans would change as economic opportunity, particularly through the production of sugar, in the Americas generated need for laborers that could not be met through European indentured servants and the forced labor of indigenous populations. Having developed some familiarity with the capture and use of Africans as servants in Europe, the labor shortage was resolved by systematic introduction of enslaved Africans—a system of forced labor that would last some 350 years, and unmatched by earlier examples of slavery elsewhere in the world (Palmié 1995, 44).

As many scholars note, Spanish authorities allowed the movement of 50 Black slaves to the island of Hispaniola to assist with sugar production at the start of the sixteenth century. Other islands such as Puerto Rico would also receive an influx of enslaved Africans provided to assist with gold mining. Cuba, for example, established late in the fifteenth century, had few slaves who worked the gold mines and a few other economic ventures such as tobacco (Thomas 2002). It was not until the revolution in Saint Domingue (Haiti) damaged its ability to produce large sugar exports that Cuba was able to develop a significant reputation as a prime location for economic growth. Whereas Saint Domingue lost much of its hold on the sugar industry, Cuba expanded its production of sugar. Labor was necessary for this work, and the import of slaves met this need. In fact, Cuba would become one of the largest importers of slaves in the nineteenth century. Islands such as Barbados, Jamaica, Martinique, and others would receive good numbers of Africans. The Portuguese moved into Brazil as of the 1500s, but gave limited attention to its economic potential until later in that century. This is in part because it had some difficulty determining the best way to exercise its claim to that territory over against the growing interests of Spain and France in Brazil. With time, however, Portugal would begin to develop trade in dyewood, cotton, and sugar. The number of Africans imported to provide necessary labor would increase

and eventually accounted for almost 40 percent of the total number of Africans brought to the American hemisphere (Klein and Vinson 2007).

The North American colonies entailed a smaller market than the Caribbean and Latin America, but this did not mean a lack of slave presence in the North American territories. The British, when they finally entered the slave trade in earnest, would surpass European competitors in the number of slaves transported annually to the Americas (Segal 1995, 12–14, 22). Although there were enslaved Africans in New England representing roughly 10 percent of the population by 1775, the bulk of this forced labor was on the tobacco and rice plantations of southern colonies where slaves represented a much larger percentage of the overall population. The first 20 Africans were brought to Virginia in 1619, but with time there would be an increase in the African presence throughout the colonies and this presence would revolve around labor. The presence of enslaved Africans in New England is first noted in Boston and is dated to the 1630s. And although one might speculate that trading in slaves was a practice more likely associated with southern colonies, Puritans in New England began trips to Africa to gain slaves as early as the 1640s. Although a rather dangerous undertaking, Massachusetts merchants took the lead in New England, supplying New Englanders as well as southerners with enslaved Africans. Yet prior to the eighteenth century, the number of slaves in the Puritan colonies was fairly small, much less than 10 percent of the total population. In the northern, middle, and southern colonies, the colonial period was marked by the labor of enslaved Africans. Enslaved Africans never outnumbered Europeans in the northern colonies, and this helped shape the nature of slavery in those colonies. However, and although most farmers did not have slaves, the labor of enslaved Africans in the South on sugar, cotton, and rice plantations, for example, was vital. Over the course of time, roughly 500,000 enslaved Africans were brought to North America. This is a number that pales in comparison to the number of Africans taken to Brazil during the centuries of the slave trade. Although numerous nations participated in the Atlantic Slave Trade, the British and the Portuguese dominated the transportation of Africans (Thomas 1997).

One should not think, however, that enslaved Africans taken to one location necessarily stayed in that location. To the contrary, political challenges such as the North American Revolutionary War resulted in the movement of slaveholders and Africans from one New World location to others. With respect to North America, the Revolutionary War resulted in a movement of colonists loyal to England and their enslaved Africans relocated to Canada. According to David Brion Davis, there were slaves in British Nova Scotia as of the 1750s (Davis 2001, 179). Also, the Revolution in Saint Dominigue—the most productive revolution in the American hemisphere—resulted in slaves’ and slaveholders’ movement to other areas of the Caribbean and North America. In addition, it was the case that some enslaved Africans were “seasoned” or prepared for work as slaves in the Caribbean and then transported, for instance, to North American plantations. While economically rewarding, the dirty business of transporting enslaved Africans was brutal and resulted in the deaths of millions of Africans. The infamous “slaver” was one typically involved in a variety of ventures. “The typical slave trader was interested in all kinds of commerce as well

as slaves: he might be a banker . . . or always also concerned in whaling, in order to make spermaceti candles. . .” (Thomas 1997, 291).

### *Transportation of Enslaved Africans*

Many of the first enslaved Africans in the Americas were transported from Europe, but with time colonists would request shipment directly from Africa. By the mid-1500s, the number of slaves transported to the Americas was roughly 7,000 per year but this number would grow, and with time roughly 5 million Africans would be taken from western-central Africa (Klein and Vinson 2007; Thomas 2002). The trade in slaves was big business. For example, slave traders in France held more wealth than any other group of merchants. Slave trade became a complex enterprise—involving cooperation between various European nations and generating great wealth and advancement. “America became,” note Herbert Klein and Ben Vinson, “the great market for an estimated 10 million African slaves in the course of the next five centuries, and it was in the New World that African slavery most flourished under European rule” (Klein and Vinson 2007, 17).

There was significant money to be made, but the initial costs were high and the risk great; and much of this risk and cost was defrayed through partnerships by which groups carried the expense and split the proceeds. The routes taken and the stops made reflected the desire to maximize profits. However, it was typically the case that the journey involved movement from Europe to Africa, where slaves were secured with payment made in the form of manufactured goods. Then the enslaved Africans were taken to the Americas and the ships loaded with produce from the Americas. The labor to carry out this route included the ship captain and a variety of others, such as officers, crew, doctor, and the person responsible for recording the various business transactions. Armed to prevent theft at sea by pirates, the ships loaded the cargo and began the arduous journey across the Atlantic (Thomas 1997, 301).

Whether purchased or stolen, enslaved Africans were brought to the coast of West Africa for transporting. This movement to the coast in and of itself was a horrific process, involving movement over hundreds of miles with limited supplies and limited rest. It was not uncommon for some Africans to die prior to reaching the coast because of fatigue and lack of proper food and water. Others would not make it to the coast with their initial group because they were sold to other slavers along the route to the coast (Segal 1995, 29). After travel to the coast, survivors were stored in far from comfortable and healthy environments. Little attention was given to arranging them in accordance with cultural groups—the Ibos here and the Madingos over there for instance. The rapid growth in the need for and movement of Africans made such distinctions inefficient economically. They were loaded onto ships once they were available. “‘When our slaves,’ wrote, again Captain Thomas Phillips, ‘were come to the seaside, our canoes were ready to carry them off to the longboat . . . if the sea permitted, and she convey’d them aboard ship, where the men were all put in irons, two and two shackled together, to prevent their mutiny or swimming ashore. The negroes are so willful and loth to leave their own country, that they have often leap’d out of canoes, boat and ship, into the sea, and kept underwater till they were drowned, to avoid being taken up. . .’”

(Thomas 1997, 404). It was often the case that this process of movement to the ships did not take place until enslaved Africans had been branded with a hot iron to indicate to whom they had been sold and who now held them as property. This practice was replaced in time with the use of a piece of metal worn around the neck or wrist that bore the symbol of a particular slaveholder. Bodies were not simply branded or otherwise differentiated as a physical marker of ownership. Many countries, such as Portugal, also required that enslaved Africans be baptized.

Sufficiently marked and in some cases baptized, enslaved Africans began the long and terrifying journey we call the “Middle Passage”—the movement from the West coast of Africa to the American hemisphere. This journey was dreadful regardless of who captained the ship, or which nation sponsored the voyage. “It,” notes Thomas, “was the sea, the vast, mysterious, terrifying ‘green sea of darkness,’ which gave the Atlantic slave trade its special drama” (Thomas 1997, 407). We have no recorded accounts from enslaved Africans concerning the nature of this experience—the feel of the crowded boat, smell, the terror of darkness below deck, and pain caused by the movement of the water as it generated seasickness, as well as the mental and physical trauma of the journey itself. Instead, we must rely on the accounts provided by Europeans involved in the trade who recounted various aspects of the journey. For example, a doctor on one of the ships reported that:

The slaves that are out of irons are locked “spoonways,” according to the technical phrase, and closely locked to one another . . . Those which do not get quickly into their places are compelled by the cat [whip] and, such was the situation when stowed in this manner, and when the ship had much motion at sea, that they were often miserably bruised against the deck or against each other . . . I have seen their [the slaves’] breasts heaving and observed them draw their breath, with all those laborious and anxious efforts for life which we observe in expiring animals subjected by experiment to bad air of various kinds. (Thomas 1997, 413)

Because volume translated into high profits, as many Africans as possible were loaded naked onto the ships. And to avoid revolts, adult males were bound and guarded. Women and children did not pose the same threat, so they were allowed a greater degree of movement. Yet, to avoid suicide due to the terror and uncertainty of the journey, they too had to be monitored and controlled. The conditions under the deck, where the vast majority of slaves were held, were stifling, and seasickness only added to the deplorable conditions. The small and confined space meant adults had restricted mobility and had to lie on their backs, or on some ships they sat up but without the possibility of standing upright. The desire to maximize profits also meant keeping as many of the enslaved Africans alive during the journey as possible. To accomplish this, slave ships required periods of exercise that involved “dancing” or other practices on the deck; and feedings—at times of spoiled food—took place typically a couple of times each day by force if necessary. Some supporters of the slave system argued dancing slaves were a sign of good humor and enjoyment on the part of the enslaved (Pinn 2003). However, it does not take much thought to recognize that