

American Plantation Slave Culture

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The image of slavery in colonial America brings up visions of white European settlers commanding over black Africans. Plantation masters legally owned African slaves as property. They purchased them from merchants just as they would livestock or weaponry; therefore, they could control every aspect of the slaves' life and do as they pleased with their "chattel." The slave would have very little control over their lives physically or mentally. They would obey their "master's" every order or else face the severe consequences. However, this image is merely the ideological perception of the slave owners. Even though slaves were continuously treated as sub-human property, they kept the idea that they were still human beings.

Slaves were not indigenous to the North American continent. They had come mostly from different villages in Africa. They were transplanted to North America from their homelands and forced into a de-humanizing system of slavery. However, no matter how much slave owners tried to separate them from the heritage of their homeland, slaves could not be separated from the African culture that had been imbedded in them. This determination allowed their African culture to mix with that of European culture and it came up with something entirely new and entirely their own. They created a culture all of their own while under the strict watchfulness of plantation owners. This act of creating a culture all of their own was an act of rebellion. They found ways to defy their bondage through harvesting personal gardens, creating culturally diverse foods, practicing religion, expressing themselves through music, creating strong family bonds and even through their ideas of freedom. The ability to create a lasting culture under such harsh rule was astounding and no easy feat. This creation of culture began when the slave's daily work ended.

Slaves were given "free time" to do almost what they wished. Slaves earned their free time by completing every task given to them by their masters, as long as it was completed in a

satisfactory manner. One of the main things slaves used this time for was to create gardens of their own. Some plantation owners would allow slaves to cultivate their very own small areas of land. These little pieces of soil were usually right next to the slaves' quarters. Slaveholders usually did not care what condition the area of the slaves' quarters was in. Some also felt that allowing slaves to create something of their own would promote passivity to their sub-human status. They felt this compliance would keep slaves from running away and promote the plantation's overall business. This assumption was somewhat accurate. Slaves did, in fact, take pride in their small gardens and felt happier to be able to call something their own. They would plant and harvest fresh vegetables such as corn, tomatoes and greens. They would plant whatever was available to them through their master's plantation or what they could exchange from other nearby slaves. These harvested goods not only served as extra nourishment, but also as trade goods as long as their master allowed it. Some slaves were allowed to take their fresh produce to sell or barter at the markets or through other means. They could make plans to save up the money they earned from these crops in hopes to one-day buy freedom for them or their loved ones. They could acquire goods that were limited or non-existent to them through their masters. In essence, food had become the slave culture's currency. The act of creating a garden was small way of normalcy and pride for the slaves. Food not only played a currency role in slave culture, but it also played a role of comfort.<sup>1</sup>

While the majority of slaves were working the fields of the plantation, some slaves were always working inside the home of the slave owner. These people were usually referred to as house slaves. House slaves were considered to be the highest ranked of all slaves because they were in charge of keeping the master's home running smoothly with daily chores of cooking and cleaning. Female slaves who were tasked with the duties of cooking were continuously in the

kitchen. They fed not only the head master of the home, but his wife, children and any other relative or visitor that may come by the plantation. They would request certain foods to be made and many times the slave would prepare the food in a manner that they were accustomed to in their homeland. This began a blending of two cultural foods and created African-American cuisine. One example of this was the concoction of ham and brown sugar from sugar cane, creating sugar glazed ham. Ham was not a cultural meal of Africa. Europeans brought over ham and had the slaves cook it. Slaves began adding brown sugar to the ham to make it more flavorful. This not only merged cultures to create a new one, but it created the beginning of slave owners preferring slave created meals.

Occasionally female slaves were allowed to keep what scraps of food that were left over from a full day of work. They would share this food with their families when they could. This small gesture was seen as a treat to the slaves when it was available. It was a small comfort allowed in a horrific life of slavery. All of these elements created what is now commonly known as “comfort food.” These house slave women were also occasionally allowed to use the left overs to create goods that they could sell to other plantation wives or markets. This had the same effect as the slave gardens did. They could earn money in hopes of buying freedom, or in the case of Harriet Jacobs’ grandmother, it could also help them earn respect among the community. The majority of these free time activities, such as selling and trading, were done on Sunday. Every Sunday was a free day; this was due to the slave master’s Christian religion. Sunday was considered a holy day of rest according to the Christian Bible. This religion played a pivotal role in slave culture as well. <sup>2</sup>

Christianity was a European religion brought over to the colonies. Europeans felt that their faith made them superior to the African slaves. They deemed the slaves as heathens and

barbarians that needed to be civilized by being converted to Christianity. One reason for this pressured religion was that the slaveholders wanted to impress on the slaves that God wanted them to be in servitude. The main reason for wanting conversion was fear that slaves would rise against their masters, especially on Sunday, their free day. This fear came true with Nat Turner's Rebellion. A small slave group turned mob when it murdered a Mr. Hutchinson and ransacked his store of guns and ammo. They attempted to march their way to freedom, but were overtaken by slaveholders and officials. This created even more fear for slave owners, so they made it a point to press religion on the slaves in hopes it would keep them from killing white masters again. So many more slave owners began sending their slaves to church on Sundays. Some slaves were allowed to sit in the balcony of white churches in order to hear sermons. Other slaves attended separate sermons reserved just for them held after the white congregation's service. In both services the white preachers would make it a point to read verses that spoke of the slave/master relationship. These verses would tell the slave to obey all of his masters, even the youngest, and that to disobey his master was to disobey God himself. Many slaves did become Christians and believed in God and the Bible. However, it did not create the docile slave attitude that the owners were expecting.<sup>3</sup>

It became obvious to the slaves that their masters only wanted them to hear the parts of the Bible that stated that they were wicked sinners full of desires, which would only be diminished when they lived submissively. Slaves began to focus on the parts of the Bible that they felt were related to them. These scriptures were in the Old Testament, mainly Exodus. They compared themselves to the slaves of Egypt who worshipped God and prayed to be released from bondage. They did not believe that God wanted them to be oppressed slaves, but that since they were children of God that they too were equal human beings. They would look to the story

of Moses and feel that this was proof that God was against slavery. This way of thinking was the exact opposite of what the slave holders had intended, therefore the slaves had to keep their religious opinions hidden from their white masters. They would hold church meetings in secret and risk being punished if caught. In some cases black churches were allowed to hold service, but a white chaperone would have to be there to make sure the slaves were not plotting escape or rebellion. Slaves had to find another way around this block and came up with what is considered the “negro spiritual” and essentially the beginning of blues music.

Slaves merged Protestant hymns with African music styles and created a religious music culture all of their own. These spirituals served more than one purpose. The main and obvious purpose was to feel closer to God. African spirituals were felt through the entire body. They sang loudly, clapped their hands and stomped their feet in reverence to their lord. Slaves felt that this heightened their emotional level to receive the pastor’s sermon and feel closer to God. Slaves would pour their entire body and emotions into these songs. Song became an outlet to express their torment of slavery without suffering the same consequences that they would if they verbalized their unhappiness. They could express feelings undetected by making small changes to words in their hymns. These songs began to take on another task, the task of spreading undetected news throughout the slave community.

Because slaves were creating their own music culture and were already adding words to hymns, slave masters would not notice additional changes to songs. These changed words were the encoded messages that needed to be passed through plantations. They could send messages of warning or could secretly devise a plan to escape. One example of this was the use of Canaan. In the Bible, the land of Canaan was seen as the land of freedom to the slaves in Egypt. In the slave spiritual usage, Canaan was used as code to refer to the North. They wanted to get to the

North where slaves could be free. This code allowed them to make plans for escape while being undetected by slaveholders, or to let family members know that someone had successfully made it to the North. These spirituals were also a way to document the slave's life. It created a musical diary that they could share with other slaves. Families that had been spread apart to different plantations could be comforted by the news of these musical diaries. This small comfort was cherished because slave families endured the cruelest of punishments. <sup>4</sup>

White Europeans looked at African slaves as beasts incapable of love. Just like all of the other assumptions they had made about slaves, this one was wrong too. The strongest bond that helped slaves endure their cruel treatment was their family ties. So many slaves had been brought to the colonies from Africa that it was common for entire families to be on board a ship. When it was time to sell the slaves, many times the families would be broken up and sold to different owners. Mothers and children would openly weep as their families were separated. Not only did the new slaves not know where they were being sent to, but they also did not speak the language or know the land. This made reuniting with family members later nearly impossible. Neither slave owners nor slave traders cared of the trauma this caused the Africans. They only cared for the profit it would bring. Unfortunately, the owners saw this anguish and used it to their advantage to make slaves conform. <sup>5</sup>

Southern plantations were vast and could easily have two hundred or more slaves at any time. This made it easier for slaves to attempt to form new bonds with other slaves in their quarters or at nearby plantations. This also created the want of courtship and marriage. Since slaves had been exposed to Christianity, with many converted, a vast majority of them wanted to be wed and have their marriage legitimized. Having a legitimate marriage was of great importance to many slaves. It was a symbolic way to show that they were still human and had

some amount of control over their lives. However, obtaining marriage was not an easy accomplishment. Slaves were still, in fact, slaves and had to seek permission of their master to conduct any legitimate affairs. Not all slave owners wanted their slaves to be married. They felt it was foolish and wanted to have as much control over their slaves as possible. They did not want their slaves to have any hope because they feared it would give them ideas of being human. Slaves under these conditions would resort to any means necessary to see the person they loved. They would attempt to sneak out in the night to visit their loved ones. If slave men were caught, they were usually beaten and taken back to their quarters. If they had been caught sneaking out multiple times, they would be beaten, mutilated, sold farther away or even killed. Slave women would suffer similar fates for their rebelliousness, but the slave owners of the females would sometimes have additional reasons for their objection to meeting with male slaves. Many plantation slave owners saw their female slaves as property in every sense. They would use the females for their physical pleasure and become possessive over her. They would take a so-called “liking” to their female slaves and did not want any other male to touch her, whether he was a slave or owner.<sup>6</sup>

Not all slave owners objected to the marriages of their slaves. They still saw slave marriage as “silly” and foolish as did their counterparts, but they also saw it as an economic investment. Since the slaves were the owner’s property, it meant that any subsequent children created from the slave’s union would be the property of the owner as well. They could double their property without paying any extra money. Even with the slave master’s consent, slaves wishing to be married still had more obstacles to overcome. If a slave had the consent of his master to marry a female slave, he must also have the permission of the female slave’s master if she was on another plantation. He must then also get the permission of the female slave and her

family if they were on the same plantation or a nearby one. If all permissions were successfully obtained, the slaves must finally get a white minister to perform the marriage ceremony. Even though black ministers did exist, they were not given any legal authority because it would contradict their status as property. This continued outlook of slaves as property even in marriage can be seen in the actual slave marriage vows. White ministers could not say, "What God has joined together, let no man take asunder," because slave owners wanted to keep their legal authority to separate their slaves at any moment, regardless of marital status.<sup>7</sup>

Slave owners with married slaves now had a new form of torture. They could separate married slaves at any time and they held this fact over many slave's heads. They could also sell the offspring of these marital unions. It has been stated many times over that the most severe punishment a slave, especially female slaves, could endure was the separation from her children. A once compliant female slave could turn to screaming fits of rage at her master when her child was taken from her. Mothers would attempt to track down wherever their children were sent. It was common for female slaves to work an entire day of labor and then walk for hours at night just to see their children at another plantation. The fields between plantations began to have worn footpaths that were like "physical maps of kinship." One of the major reasons female slaves were less likely to run away than male slaves, was because of her attachment to her children. She wanted to be near them at all costs and would rather endure punishment than feel as if she abandoned them. A slave mother would do anything in her power to see her children. One of the best examples of this is Frederick Douglass describing his mother walking twelve miles at night after her full day's work just to see him for a short period time. She did this knowing she had to walk back another twelve miles and that if she was not back in her field by sunrise, she would be

whipped. She did not sleep and endured hours of physical labor just for a few moments with her son.<sup>8</sup>

Another torment to the slave family was again due to a master's physical lust for his slave women. It was commonplace on plantations for slave owner's to copulate with their female slaves. No slave, male or female, had any say in this matter because they were deemed as property in every aspect. Females were raped against their will while their husbands or families were powerless to help them. On occasion, a male slave would attempt to intervene in one of the horrific events, but he would either be beaten or sold away. The threat of being taken away from their loved ones held enough power over them that they would try to endure as much hardship as possible. The reasons behind these rapes were simply to show dominance over slaves, finding pleasure in the act and to create more "property" for themselves. The most common outcome of these forceful acts was the creation of a new child. So many slave owner's created "mulatto" children with their slaves, that a law was sanctioned stating that children would follow the free or enslaved condition of their mother. This protected slave owners from having to deal with any possible moral dilemma that they may come across when deciding how to treat children that had half of their DNA and were products of a forced act upon their "property." This allowed the slave owners to protect their reputations and sell any unwanted mixed children they had created. The enacting of this law helps to show the absolute lack of care in the well-being of slaves, but it also shows the high moral character of slaves and their strong bond of family. While the white slave masters were dismissing children that they had a hand in creating, the black male slaves were raising these illegitimate children as if they were their own. This stark contrast shows that slaves were never the inhumane beasts that these plantation owners made them out to be. Even though slaves showed more compassion to the human condition than that of their masters, they

did not hold a submissive mindset. They kept very strong ideas of freedom that they never abandoned.<sup>9</sup>

Plantation slave owners used every tactic they could construct to convince their slaves that they were meant for bondage. They attempted to control every aspect of slaves including their mindset about slavery. With as much adversity as slaves had to endure, they never let go of the idea that they were human beings with rights to freedom just like their masters. This unmoving will is the foundation of the slave's entire culture. Their culture was their rebellion. Their creation of culture allowed them to keep some form of their identity within an oppressive system. They did not have to physically fight or kill their masters in order to have a sense of freedom of their own. The will of the slave created their versions of food, music, religion and family. This culture was passed on from each slave generation to the next and was kept alive by the idea that they were all human beings deserving of their freedom.

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<sup>1</sup> Larry E. Hudson, Jr., *To Have and to Hold: Slave Work and Family Life in Antebellum South Carolina* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1997), 2-31.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross*, DVD. Directed by Phil Bertelsen and others (2013; Public Broadcasting Service)

Linda Brent, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, (Boston, MA: Published for the Author, 1861), 6-10.

<sup>3</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave* (New York, NY: New American Library, a division of Penguin Group, 1997), 123-128.

Brent, 44-50.

Morgan Freeman, *Slavery and the Making of America*, DVD. Directed by Gail Pellett (2004; Educational Broadcasting Corporation)

<sup>4</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *African-American Religion*, (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), 47-56.

Lerone Bennett, Jr., *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America*, (New York, NY: Penguin Books USA Inc., 1993), 102-111.

<sup>5</sup> Freeman, DVD.

<sup>6</sup> Freeman, DVD.

Hudson, 141-150.

<sup>7</sup> Hudson, 141-176.

<sup>8</sup> Douglass, 19-22.

Hudson, 149-155.

<sup>9</sup> Douglass, 21.

Wilma King, *African American Childhoods: Historical Perspectives from Slavery to Civil Rights*, (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 39-53.

Freeman, DVD.