AFRICAN CONTRIBUTIONS TO AMERICAN CULTURE

By Joseph E. Holloway Ph.D

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Scholars have long recognized African origins in the linguistic forms and the cultural traits of African Americans, and thus assumed that these Africanisms were derived principally from West Africa. There has been much debate over the origins of African culture in the U.S. The classic debate between Melville J. Herskovits and E. Franklin Frazier is still relevant. To revisit it briefly, Frazier believed that Black Americans lost their African heritage during slavery; thus, the African American culture evolved independently of any African influences. Herskovits argued the opposite that it was not possible to understand and appreciate African American culture without understanding its African linkages and carryover called Africanisms. Current scholars are more concerned with using a transnational framework to examine how African cultural survivals have changed over time and readapted to diasporic conditions while experiencing slavery, forced labor, and racial discrimination.

The new scholarship suggests that the West Africans contributed primarily to Euro-American culture whereas people who came from the vast Bantu speaking areas of Africa, to the east and south of West Africa, are those most likely to have left an African cultural heritage to African Americans. Plantation slavery tended to acculturate West Africans relatively quickly, yet unwittingly encouraged retention of African traditions among others.

Enslaved Africans, not free to openly transport kinship, courts, religion, and material cultures, were forced to disguise or abandon them during the Middle Passage. Instead, they dematerialized their cultural artifacts during the Middle Passage to rematerialize African culture on their arrival in the New World. Africans arrived in the New World capable of using Old World knowledge to create New World realities.

Africans, and their descendants, contributed to the richness and fullness of American culture from its beginnings. Their contributions in early America, for which they have received little or no credit, include the development of the American dairy industry, open grazing of cattle, artificial insemination of cows, the development of vaccines (including vaccination for smallpox), and cures for snake bites.
African stories and folklore, such as the Brer Rabbit, Brer Fox, and Chicken Little tales originated in Africa, and were absorbed into America's culture of childhood and laid a foundation for American nursery culture. Despite the limitations imposed by slavery, Africans and their descendants made substantial contributions to American culture in aesthetics, animal husbandry, agriculture, cuisine, folklore, folk medicine and language. This chapter examines African contribution to American culture.

AFRICAN RICE CULTIVATION

The major contribution of enslaved Africans was in agriculture. In the 1740s, rice from Madagascar was introduced to South Carolina's farming economy. Africans, experts in rice cultivation, were transported from the island of Goree, off the coast of what is now the Senegambia, to train Europeans to cultivate this new crop.

The first successful cultivation of rice in the New World was accomplished in the South Carolina Sea Islands by an African woman who later showed her owner how to cultivate rice. The first rice seeds were imported directly from the island of Madagascar in 1685; Africans supplied the labor and the technical expertise for this new crop industry. Africans off the coast of Senegal helped train Europeans in the methods of cultivation and those who specialized in rice cultivation were imported directly from the island of Goree. Africans were able to successfully transfer their rice culture to the New World. The method of rice cultivation used in West Africa and South Carolina was identical. Enslaved Africans used three basic systems: ground water, springs, and soil moisture retention, or high water table. These three systems are found on both sides of the Atlantic, and formed the basis for South Carolina's antebellum economy.

Early Africans brought with them highly developed skills in metal working, leather work, pottery, and weaving. Senegambians were employed as medicine men (root doctors), Blacksmiths, harness makers, carpenters, and lumberjacks. These trades were passed down to other enslaved Africans by the skilled African craftsmen in an apprentice-type fashion.

Traditional African food culture has been preserved even today in many areas of American cuisine, as in the technique of deep fat frying, southern stews (gumbos), and nut stews. Okra, tania, Blackeyed peas, kidney and lima bean were all brought on slave ships as food gathered in Africa for the Africans during the transatlantic voyage. Fufu, a traditional African meal throughout the continent, was eaten from the Senegambia to Angola and
was assimilated into American culture as “turn meal and flour” in South Carolina. Corn bread prepared by African slaves was similar to the African millet bread. In some of the slave narrative reports, “cornbread” was referred to as one of the foods that accompanied them to the New World.

AFRICAN CONTRIBUTIONS TO AMERICAN “COWBOY” CULTURE

The first major contribution by Africans to North American society was in the arena of cattle raising. When the Fulani (or Fula) people from Senegambia, along with longhorn cattle, were imported to South Carolina in 1731, colonial herds increased from 500 to 6,784 some 30 years later. These Fulas were expert cattlemen and were responsible for introducing African husbandry patterns of open grazing now practiced throughout the American cattle industry. Cattle drives to the centers of distribution were innovations Africans brought with them as contributions to a developing industry. Originally a cowboy was an African who worked with cattle, just as a houseboy worked in “de big House.” Open grazing made practical use of an abundance of land and a limited labor force.

Africans and their descendants were America’s first cowboys. Most people are not aware that many cowboys of the American West were Black, contrary to how the film industry and the media have portrayed them. Only recently have we begun to recognize the extent to which cowboy culture has African roots. Many details of cowboy life, work, and even material culture can be traced to the Fulani, America’s first cowboys, but there has been little investigation of this by historians of the American West.

Contemporary descriptions of local West African animal husbandry bear a striking resemblance to what appeared in Carolina and later in the American dairy and cattle industries. Africans introduced the first artificial insemination and the use of cows’ milk for human consumption. Peter Wood believes that from this early relationship between cattle and Africans the word, “cowboy” originated.

As late as 1865, following the Civil War, Africans whose responsibilities were with cattle were referred to as “cowboys’ in plantation records. After 1865, whites associated with the cattle industry referred to themselves as “cattlemen,” to distinguish themselves from the Black cowboys. The annual North-South migratory patterns the cowboys followed are directly related to the migratory patterns of the Fulani cattle herders who lived scattered throughout Nigeria and Niger. Not only were Africans imported
with the expertise to handle cattle, but the African longhorn was imported as well, a breed that later became known as the Texas longhorn.

Much of the early language associated with cowboy culture had a strong African flavor. The word buckra (buckaroo) is derived from Mbakara, the Efik/Ibibio work for “poor white man.” It was used to describe a class of whites who worked as broncobusters, bucking and breaking horses. Planters used buckras as broncobusters because slaves were too valuable to risk injury. Another African word that found its way into popular cowboy songs is “get along little dogies.” The word “doggies” originated from Kimbundu, along with kidogo, a little something, and dodo, small. After the Civil War when great cattle roundups began, Black cowboys introduced such Africanisms to cowboy language and songs.

**TALES OUT OF AFRICA**

In the area of folklore, Brer Rabbit, Brer Wolf, Brer Bear, and Sis’ Nanny Goat were part of the folklore the Wolof brought by way of the Hausa, Fula (Fulani), and the Mandinka. Other West African tales of a trickster Hare were also introduced. The Spider (Anansi) tales appeared in the United States in the form of Aunt Nancy and Brer Rabbit stories. All the stories of Uncle Remus, as retold in the Sea Islands, are Hausa in origin via the Mande (Mandinka). These African tales laid the foundation for American nursery rhymes.

These stories found their way into American culture as told by slaves. The Chicken Little story is also part of this tradition, and originated unaltered from Africa. The Hare and Hyena, corresponds to Brer Rabbit and Brer Fox tales. African slaves who fled to the Creek Indian Nation introduced these West African Trickster tales, which were also adopted by the Seminoles.

**THE CONGO SQUARE**

Le placé du Congo, Congo Square, is in old New Orleans. An ordinance of the Municipal Council, adopted on October 15, 1817, made the name of this traditional place law. It was considered one of the unique attractions of old New Orleans, ranking second only to the Quadroon Ball. At the square, women wore dotted calico dresses with brightly colored Madras kerchiefs tied about their hair, to form the popular headdress called the tignon.

Children wore garments with bright feathers and bits of ribbon. The favorite dances of the slaves in Congo Square were the bamboula and the calinda, two Congo dances, the latter being a variation of the former that was also danced in voodoo ceremonies.
Another favorite dance at the Congo Square was the Chica, which was very popular during the slave era. The talent of the female dancer resides in the perfection of her ability to move her hips, the bottom parts of her waist, with the rest of the body remaining in a sort of stillness which does not disturb the weak swaying of her hands, waving the ends of a handkerchief or her waist petticoat. A male gets closer to her, leaping up suddenly, and falls back rhythmically, almost touching her. He pulls back, leaps up again and challenges her to the most seductive duel. The dance gets animated and soon becomes lustful.

Another dance particular to New Orleans and the Congo Square was the Ombliguide. This dance was criticized in 1766 by the New Orleans City Council. The dance is performed by four men and four women and involved objectionable movements with navel-to-navel contact, a common trait of Angolan traditional dancing. Enslaved Africans came regularly to Congo Square to perform the Ombliguide and other Congo dances, such as the Calinda, Bamboula and Chica, all transplanted directly from Central Africa. The partial Europeanization of some of these African movements eventually created the native dances of Latin American countries such as the Marcumbi, a dance learned by the Spanish and later brought to Latin America. The Fandango, the national dance of Spain, originated in Cuba, from African dances. Other dances derived from the Ombliguide are the Chacharara, Cadomba, Melongo, Malamba, Gati, Samba, Rhumba, Mamba, Conga and Tango.

The “ring shout” was a dance performed in the Congo Square, also. This is a dance involving people moving around in a circle counterclockwise, rhythmically shuffling their feet and shaking their hands while those outside the ring clap, sing, and gesticulate. Movement in a ring during ceremonies honoring the ancestors was an integral part of life in Central Africa and is believed to have been transported to Congo Square directly from Africa.

Enslaved Africans maintained their music, song, and dance cultures as they adapted to life in the New World. Many African dances survived because they were reshaped and adopted by European Americans, while others remained intact, or changed with the new circumstances. For example, the ring shout started as a sacred Kongoese dance, but later found expression in non sacred forms of dance.

In both Africa and the New World, the circle ritual had different meanings in the distinct cultures. In the Kongo, the ring shout circle is identical to the Gullah counterclockwise dance, which is linked to the most important
African ceremony – the rites of passage. Among the Mande, the circle dance is a part of the marriage and birth ceremonies, and in Wolof culture, the ring circle is central to most dancing.

The Bamboula and the Calinda, variations of voodoo dance, became popular forms of dance expression in early New Orleans. The Cakewalk and the Charleston traveled from Africa to become integral to American dance forms on the American plantation.

The Calinda, also known as La Calinda, is one of the earliest forms of African dance seen in America. This Kongo/Angolan dance first became popular in Santo Domingo, then in Haiti and New Orleans. La Calinda is first reported by Dessalles in 1654 and by a French monk, Jean Baptiste Labat, who went to Martinique as a missionary in 1694. The Calinda is a variation of a dance used in voodoo ceremonies, and is always performed by male and female dancers in couples. The dancers move to the middle of the circle and begin to dance. Each dancer chooses a partner and performs the dance, with few variations, by taking a step in which every leg is straightened and pulled back alternatively with a quick strike, sometimes on point, sometimes with a grounded heel. This dance is performed in a manner slightly similar to that of the Anglaise. The male dancer turns by himself or goes around his partner, who also makes a turn and changes her position while waving the ends of a handkerchief. Her partner raises his hands in almost clenched fists up and down alternately, with his elbows close to his body. This dance is vivid and lively. In 1704, records show that a police ordinance was issued prohibiting night gatherings from performing the Calinda on plantations.

SLAVE MUSIC AND THE BANJO

The dance now known as the Charleston had the greatest influence on American dance culture than any other imported African dance. It is a form of the jitterbug dance, which is a general term applied to unconventional, often formless and violent, social dances performed to syncopated music. Enslaved Africans brought it from the Kongo to Charleston, South Carolina, as the juba dance, which then slowly evolved into what is now the Charleston. This one-leggedsembuka step, over-and-cross, arrived in Charleston between 1735 and 1740. Similar in type to the “one-legged” sembuka-style dancing found in northern Kongo, the dance consists of “patting” (otherwise known as “patting Juba”), stamping, clapping, and slapping of arms, chest, and so forth. The name “Charleston” was given to the Juba dance by European Americans. In Africa, however, the dance is called the Juba, or Djouba.
Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1781: “The instrument proper to them [African American] is the Banjar, brought from Africa, and which is the [form] of the guitar, its chords being precisely the four lower chords of the guitar.” The banjo was known in America as an African instrument until the 1840s, when minstrel shows took it as a part of their Blackface acts. As a result, the banjo became a badge of ridicule and Blacks abandoned it, allowing southern whites to claim it as their own invention.

Benjamin Latrobe, an American architect, while in New Orleans also noticed that the banjo was particular to Africans. In his own words, “a crowd of 5 or 600 persons assembled in an open space or public square. I went to the spot & crowded near enough to see the performance. All those who were engaged in the business seemed to be Blacks. I did not observe a dozen yellow faces. They were formed into circular groups [sic] in the midst of four of which, which I examined (but there were more of them), was a ring, the largest not 10 feet in diameter. In the first were two women dancing. They held each a coarse handkerchief extended by the corners in their hands & set to each other in a miserably dull & slow figure, hardly moving their feet or bodies. The music consisted of two drums and a stringed instrument. An old man sat astride of a cylindrical drum about a foot in diameter, & beat it with incredible quickness with the edge of his hand & fingers. The other drum was an open staved thing held between the knees & beaten in the same manner. They made an incredible noise. The most curious instrument, however, was a stringed instrument which no doubt was imported from Africa. On the top of the finger board was the rude figure of a man in a sitting posture, & two pegs behind him to which the strings were fastened. The body was a calabash. It was played upon by a very little old man, apparently 80 or 90 years old.”

Other African instruments that survived the Middle Passage were the thumb piano also known as the mbira, common in the late 19th century in New Orleans, and the cane fifes found in both West and Central Africa. The making and playing of cane fifes survived the Middle Passage. Africans and African Americans use the same technique to make them.

African drums were common until the Stono Rebellion of 1739. Talking drums were well known on both sides of the Atlantic, especially for their use in slave revolts. The first description of the use of drums in America comes from the official account of the Stono slave rebellion in South Carolina where they were used by Angolans. Afterward the colony of South Carolina in the Slave Act of 1740 passed laws prohibiting “drums, horns, or other loud instruments.”
One of the most popular chordophones is from the Kongo/Angolan area, the mouth-resonated Musical Bow. It only appeared sporadically in African American culture when compared to its diffusion from Africa to South America and the Caribbean, where it is played by Africans, Native Americans and mixed groups. Today the African Mouth Bow’s greatest U.S. distribution is in isolated white communities in the Ozark and Appalachian mountains.

AFRICAN INFLUENCES ON WHITE AMERICAN CULTURE

David Dalby has identified early linguistic retention and traced many Americanisms to Wolof including such words as OK (okay), bogus, boogie-woogie, bug (insect), John, phony, guy, honkie, dig (to understand), jam, jamboree, jitter(bug), jive, juke(box), fuzz (police), hippie, mumbo-jumbo, phoney, root toot(y), and rap, to name a few. Other linguistic Africanisms first used by Americans includes words such as banana, banjo, cola (as in Coca-Cola), elephant, goober (peanut), gorilla, gumbo, okra, sorcery, tater, tote and turnip. [For further reading on African Linguistic retention, see Holloway and Vass, The African Heritage of American English].

The acculturation process was mutual, as well as reciprocal. Africans assimilated white culture, and planters adopted some aspects of African customs and practices, such as the African agricultural methods of rice cultivation, African cuisine (southern cooking), open grazing of cattle, and uses of herbal medicines to cure New World diseases. For example, Africans are credited for bringing folk treatment for small pox, knowledge of birth by Caesarian section (pharaonic in origin), and cures for snake bites and other poisons.

Through the root doctor, Africans brought holistic health practices to the plantations. The African house servants also learned new domestic skills, including the art of quilting from their mistresses. They took a European quilting technique and Africanized it by combining their appliqué style, reflecting a pattern and form which are still found today in the Akan and Fon textile industries of West Africa. While many of the Mandes were enslaved as craftsmen, artisans, and house servants, the field slaves were mainly Central Africans who, unlike the Senegambians, brought a homogeneous, identifiable culture. The Bantus often possessed good metallurgical and woodworking skills. They had particular skill in iron working, making the wrought iron balconies in New Orleans and Charleston.
As field workers the Bantus were kept away from the developing mainstream of white American culture. This isolation worked to the Bantus' advantage in that it allowed their culture to escape acculturation and maintained their homogeneity. Bantu contributions to South Carolina and Louisiana included not only wrought iron balconies, but also wood carvings, basketry, weaving, clay-baked figurines, and pottery.

Cosmograms, grave designs and decorations, funeral practices, and the wake are Bantu in origin. Bantu musical contributions include banjos, drums, diddle bows, mouthbows, Quilts, washtub bass, jugs, gongs, bells, rattles, idiophones, and the lokoimni (a five-stringed harp). The Bantus had the largest constituency in South Carolina and possibly in other areas of the southeastern United States, including Alabama and Louisiana. Herskovits noted that the cultural center of the Bantu in North America is in the South Carolina Sea Islands off the Carolina coast.

Given the homogeneity of the Bantu culture and the strong similarities among Bantu languages, this group no doubt influenced West African groups of larger size. Also, since the Bantus were predominantly field hands or were used in capacities that required little or no contact with European Americans, they were not confronted with the same problems of acculturation as West African domestic servants and artisans were. However, the Mande had a greater influence on white American culture.

Coexisting in relative isolation from other groups, the Bantus were able to maintain a strong sense of unity and to retain a cultural vitality that laid the foundation for the development of African American culture.

AFRICAN CROPS TO THE NEW WORLD

Crops brought directly from Africa during the transatlantic slave trade include rice, okra, tania, Blackeyed peas, and kidney and lima beans. They were consumed by Africans on board the slave ships on the way to the New World. Slavers collected local cultivated crops such as rice and yams, and included dried beans, peas, wheat, shelled barley and biscuits to feed the cargo.

African women prepared much of the food during the transatlantic voyage as suggested by an entry from the journal of the ship Mary from Monday June 20, 1796: “The Women Cleaning Rice and Grinding corn for corn cakes.” These foods were mixed with a sauce of meat or fish, or with palm oil. Once they survived the Middle Passage, the meals they consumed in the plantation fields consisted of boiled yams, eddoes (Tania), okra, callaloo, and plantain heavily seasoned with cayenne pepper and salt.
Other crops brought from Africa included peanuts (ultimately from South America), millet, sorghum, guinea melon, watermelon, yams (Dioscorea cayenensis), and sesame (benne). These crops found their way into American food ways and became part of the ingredients found in the earliest cook books written by Southern Americans.

**Genus, Species | Common Name**
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Abelmoschus esculentus | okra, guimbombo
Aracis hypogaea | groundnut
Blighia spida | ackee, aka, akee
Cajanus cajan | Angola pea, pigeon pea
Cannabis sativa | diamba, marijuana
Cassia italica | Jamaican senna
Cola acuminata | bichy tree
Cucumis anguria | maroon cucumber
Dioscorea alata | yam bacara
Dioscorea cayenensis | yellow yam
Elaeis guineensis | African oil palm
Monodora myristica | nutmeg
Oryza glaberrima | African rice
Phaseolus lunatus | broad bean
Sesamum indicum | benne seed
Sorghum vulgare | guinea corn, wheat


A young physician, Sir Hans Sloane, living in the West Indies, found many of these crops growing on the island of Jamaica as early as 1687. These plants reached the mainland of North America either directly from Africa, or came with enslaved Africans destined for North America and through trade with the West Indies. These crops may have already found a home in North America before Sloane's encounter. Eventually, however, these crops
went from being eaten exclusively by Africans in North America to being in white southern cuisine.

Blackeyed peas were first brought to the New World during the transatlantic slave trade as food for slaves. They first arrived in Jamaica around 1675, spreading throughout the West Indies, and finally reaching Florida by 1700, North Carolina in 1738, and Virginia by 1775. Slave planter William Byrd mentions Blackeyed peas in his writings in 1738. By the time of the American Revolution, Blackeyed peas were firmly established in America and a part of the cuisine.

George Washington wrote in a letter in 1791 that "pease" (Blackeyed peas) were rarely grown in Virginia. In 1792 he brought 40 bushels of seeds for planting on his plantation. Blackeyed peas became one of the most popular food crops in the southern part of the United States. George Washington later referred to them as "callicance" and "cornfield peas," because of the early custom of planting them between the rows of field corn.

Okra arrived in the New World during the transatlantic slave trade in the 1600s. Okra, called gumbo in Africa, found exceptional popularity in New Orleans. In French Louisiana, Creole cuisine and African cooking combined to produce the unique cuisine of New Orleans. Gumbo is a popular stew, or soup, in which okra is the main ingredient, thickened with powder from sassafras leaves (gumbo filé). One observer in 1748 noted that thickened soup was a delicacy liked by Blacks.

Okra was commonly used by the American white population before the American Revolutionary War. Enslaved Africans used the young fruit that contains the vegetable mucilage to eat after boiling. The leaves were also used medicinally to make a softening cataplasm, and seeds were used to make a coffee substitute on the plantations of South Carolina. Okra was popular among women to produce abortion, by lubricating the uterine passage with the slimy pods. In West Africa, women still use okra to produce abortion, using the same method.

The next important crop to arrive to the United States by way of Africa is the American peanut. The peanut is known by several names, including groundnut, earth nut and ground peas. Two other words of African origin for the peanut are Pindar and goober. Among other recorded sources of the use of these African names, both Thomas Jefferson and George Washington called peanuts peendar and Pindars (1794, 1798); the word was used before the Revolutionary War. The word goober was used principally in the 19th century. The period of its greatest popularity was the 1860s when the Civil
War song "Goober Peas" was written. After the war the song’s lyrics were attributed to "A Pindar" and its music to "P. Nutt."

The American peanut has an interesting history. While the peanut is indigenous to South America as a crop, it was first brought to Africa by Portuguese sailors and then back to Virginia from Africa by enslaved Africans. The peanut was used to feed Africans crossing the Middle Passage. One New World observer noted, "The first I ever saw of these [peanuts] growing was the Negro's plantation who affirmed, that they grew in great plenty in their country." In Africa, peanut stews, soups, and gravies serve as an important part of any meal. Nut soups, however, in the American South, although of African origin, and are no longer enjoyed by the descendants of Africans, but rather are associated with Euro-Americans.

The peanut is a crop that George Washington Carver researched. From his experiments he found water, fats, oils, gums, resins, sugar, starches, pectins, pentosans, and proteins. From these compounds he discovered over 300 possible peanut products, including Jersey milk that led to the production of butter and cheese. Among the 300 products arising from his research were instant coffee, flour, face cream, bleach, synthetic rubber and linoleum. Dr. Carver found rubbing peanut oil on the body helpful for rejuvenating muscles. Mahatma Gandhi found that peanut milk, as well as the soy bean formula Dr. Carver created for him, constituted a healthy part of his diet.

Sesame first arrived in South Carolina from Africa by 1730. In 1730, a Carolinian sent sesame along with sesame oil to London. This is an item of considerable importance in Colonial America and England because table oil was one of the products England hoped to obtain by colonizing the New World. In order not to import olive oil for cooking, Britain encouraged production of table oils by offering bounties on edible oils. By 1733, a book on gardening published in London, noting the cultivation of the sesame plant and its usefulness as a source of "sallet-oil." Enslaved Africans grew sesame for uses other than its oil. Thomas Jefferson noted in the 1770s that benne (another name for sesame) was eaten raw, toasted or boiled in soups by African slaves. Jefferson also noted that enslaved Africans baked sesame in breads, boiled in greens, and used it to enrich broth. Today sesame is used primarily as a bread topping.

African cooks in the "Big House" introduced their native African crops and foods to the planters, thus becoming intermediary links in the melding of African and European culinary cultures. The house servants, while learning from the planters, also took African culinary taste into the Big House.
African cooks introduced deep fat frying, a cooking technique that originated from Africa. Long before the day of refrigeration, African understood how deep fat frying of chicken or beef could preserve these foods for some time.

Using their indigenous crops, enslaved Africans recreated traditional African cuisine. One such dish is fufu. In South Carolina this dish is called "turn meal and flour." This meal is prepared by boiling water and adding flour while stirring the ingredients, hence the name "turn meal and flour." Throughout Africa fufu is a highly favored staple. This is a traditional West and Central African meal eaten from the Senegambia to Angola. Africans prepare fufu by mixing palm oil and flour. From this fufu mixture, slaves made hoecake in the fields that later evolved into pancakes and hot water cornbread. Corn bread, prepared by African slaves, was similar to African millet bread. In the journal entry from a slaver on the ship Mary, June 20, 1796, "cornbread" was mentioned as one of the African foods provided for their cargo. The report also mentions a "woman cleaning rice and grinding corn for corn cakes." Corn is still fried into cakes throughout Africa today.

As early as 1739, naturalist Mark Catesby noted that slaves made a mush from the corn meal called pone bread. He also noticed that slaves took hominy (Native American corn) and made grits, a food similar to the African dish called Eba. Catesby observed in 1747 that Guinea corn (sorghum vulgare) and Native American corn were used interchangeably by Blacks. He wrote that "little of this grain is propagated, and that chiefly by negroes, who make bread of it, and boil it in like manner of firmety. "Its [sic] chief use is for feeding fowls...It was first introduced from Africa by the negroes." Lawson noted that Guinea corn is used mostly for hogs and poultry [by whites], adding that enslaved Africans ate nothing but Native American corn.

African food traditions contributed greatly to the culinary taste of America. Southern cooking is a cultural experience to which both Blacks and whites contributed; however, today Black cuisine is strongly influenced by the African style of cooking, a carryover of this antebellum period. "Soul food" itself goes back to days when plantation owners gave slaves discarded animal parts, such as hog maw (stomach), hog jowl, pig's feet, and ham hocks. Blacks took this throwaway and added a touch of African culinary techniques to create tasty dishes. Collard greens and dandelion greens were first recorded in 1887. Poke greens, turnip greens, and Blackeyed peas were first brought to Jamaica from Africa in 1674. They later arrived in North
America in 1738. All of these African foods contributed to the great diversity in American cuisine.

**SLAVE FOODS**

On most plantations the general rule was each family would receive a peck of meal, three pounds of meat and a pint of molasses a week. The most popular foods allowed to enslaved Africans were corn and bacon. The majority of the plantations had mostly salt pork, cornbread, and molasses. In the Sea Islands and coastal regions where there was an abundance of fish, lobsters, crabs, clams and oysters, enslaved African faired better. There was no great difference in the quality or variety of foods given to slaves in the upper South or in the Deep South.

Masters gave their slaves a small plot to grow their own vegetables to supplement their diets. Slaves were given pig feet, pig ears, hog head, and pig intestines. From these parts they created delicacies such as hog head cheese and chitterlings.

Juba was a traditional dish given to slaves that was collected from the master’s leftovers. Such leftovers were also called jibba, or jiba. On Saturday or Sunday the leftovers were thrown together; no one could distinguish the meat from the bread and vegetables. The slaves in the house shared it with those working in the fields.

Cala is a sweetened rice cake, African in origin, served with morning café au lait, formerly sold by Black women in the French Quarter of New Orleans. In Georgia this sweetened rice cake was called saraka. One slave’s account describes how it was made: “Yesium. I membuh how she made it. She wash rice, ann po off all duh watah. She let wet rice sit all night, and put in mawtuhm an beat it tuh paste wid wooden pastle. She add honey, sometime shuguh, add it in floot cake wid uh kams. Saraka, she call um.”

Calalou was a thick soup, or stew, similar to gumbo. Ferdinand Ortiz traced calalu to African coilu, the Mandingo name for a plant resembling spinach. In Pointe Coupee, Louisiana, it is a rich soup, or stew, in which one or more kinds of calalu leaves are the chief ingredients. The name is given to several plants having edible leaves eaten as greens, in soup, or used medicinally. Coffee was originally imported from the Kaffa, a region in Ethiopia, and from which the name “coffee” was derived.

African American cuisine was strongly influenced by African cuisine stemming from the slavery period. Soul food goes back to days when plantation owners gave slaves discarded animal parts. Such as hog maw
(stomach), hog jowl, pig’s feet ham hocks. To this day, Blacks added a
touch of African cooking, which included collard greens, dandelion green
(first recorded 1887), poke greens turnip greens, black-eyed peas (first
brought to North America in 1738).

AFRICAN AMERICAN ARCHITECTURE

Africa is a sizable continent with a multitude of cultural traditions. The sum total
of native African architecture is derived from indigenous African empires and
states, and from imported European, Midwestern and Asian societies. The
architecture is influenced by Moorish invasions, Egyptian pharaohs and all they
engendered, nomadic foragers, hunter-gatherers, stable agricultural societies, desert
dwellers, and ongoing tribal identities and conflicts, diverse religions, witchcraft
and more.

Much of native architecture came from less profound sources. Attempts at
documenting the history of African architecture and understanding its influence on
American architecture have resulted in ethnographic interpretations that have
overlooked an amalgam of cognitive, cultural, and symbolic factors that provide
implicit clues to African American architecture.

An architectural tradition heavily influenced by Africa must not be seen in a
vacuum, but rather should be seen as a kaleidoscopic vision, in which diffusions
manifest in numerous complex forms.

When one views African traits in American architecture before and after slavery, it
becomes clear that the focus must be on special sensitivities. In terms of materials,
techniques, and design, severe limits were placed on African American architects.

Within the range of these limitations there exists an undisturbed African American
architectural tradition, one that has its roots in continental Africa architectural
expressions.

Just as modern architectural marvels are identified with contemporary individual
architects by name, so may indigenous structures be identified with individual
artisans or groups of like-minded individuals.

There are many African artifacts, survivors in architecture. There are less
common ones that represent the essence of African architectural tradition in
a historical and cultural context and therefore warrant the most attention.

The indirect retentions of African building tradition are subtle and
pervasive. For example, plantation owners early in American history
understood the power and symbolism possible in architecture and thus any
attempt by enslaved artisans to draw upon African heritage was stifled.
In the 1930s the residents of St. Simons Island in Georgia recalled the attempts of an African American man named Okra to build a hut to house himself: “Ole man Okra he say he wahn a place like he hab in Africa so he buil im a but... But Massuh make im pull in down. He say he aint wahn no African hut on he place.” [Drums and Shadows: 1940, 188].

Both the plantation owners and non-owners alike saw architecture as a way of controlling one’s life and destiny, through similarity, reinforcing the memory of a homeland and a sense of security in a hostile environment. Thus, as soon as the control of the built environment passed to the African, the Europeans’ position and sense of authority, control, and power were threatened. The slave artisan was therefore denied the power of self-expression through architecture. He had to create an African reality within a European design. In other words, the African artisan Africanized a European structure to fix his African design.

Unless one makes a concerted effort to look, African American contributions to the art of architecture go unnoticed. Historically, the slave artisan was afforded no chance for self-expression. The paradox of Southern slave participation in environmental affairs was that it always reflected the European culture base. Why and how this continual subjugation to European ideals occurred is obvious, as well as the resulting distaste for appreciation of African motifs. The only way to fully understand African content in American architecture is to strip away its superficial covering to discover its true foundation and aesthetic meaning.

According to Dagon philosophy the house serves as womb and a cradle from where culture is learned. It represents an image of a community and expresses a group’s social universe. The power which culture depends upon is derived from the house, and a cultural identity and personality can be understood by the concept of it. The importance of the house as a homeland identity still remains a viable concept in Black community planning today. The all-Black town movement has yet to undergo thorough interpretive investigation by urban historians and urban planners.

As a response to atrocities of a violent hostile racist society, the advocates of self-segregation saw all-Black towns as an important step toward security. The all-Black town ideology sought to combine economic self-help and moral uplift with racial pride. The all-Black town’s movement came from the realization that the American “melting pot” only melted for those of European heritage. In response to American racism numerous Black towns grew. They included: Nicodemus, Kansas (1879); Mound Bayou,
Mississippi (1887); Langston City, Oklahoma (1891); Clear view, Oklahoma (1903); Boley, Oklahoma (1904); Backdom, New Mexico; Hobson City, Alabama; Allensworth, California, and Rentiesville, Oklahoma.

Archeological investigation of Black townships and sizes, materials and relative proximity of houses, the hierarchy of building placement, and a variety of artifacts, found clear evidence of African origin. It shows how an African design has remained paramount in the Black architectural experience in America.

In Plymouth, Massachusetts, archaeology was the primary means of investigating a small Black town called New Guinea. Partings Way, as it is called today, was the home of an ex-slave, Cat Howe, who gained his freedom after serving in the Battle of Bunker Hill. On March 12, 1792, the town of Plymouth granted a strip of 20 rods wide and about a mile and a half long to any person who would clear the land. Howe, joined by Prince Goodwin Plato Turner, and Quamany established a community on this land. Excavations showed that mud walling was reminiscent of African building techniques, and an African design was evident. The size of the house and placement of fenestration allowed scholars to trace the style to the Yoruba’s of West Africa. The house type is known as the “Shotgun” house. There are more of these type houses in Alexandria, Louisiana, than any other parts of the American South.

The "Shotgun" house is a central building type of African American architecture. Beyond its form, it is a perfect example of the subtle and pervasive spatial sensitivities that exist in African American architecture. The Shotgun house is considered architecture of defiance for its assertion of cultural heritage.

The "shotgun" is a derivative of African word origin. The word shotgun itself is derived from the Yoruba word to-gun. In Yoruba this word means place of assembly, or where people gather. People living in shotgun houses have no privacy, but internally prolonged, immediate interaction with one another occurs, or one lingers on the porch. The shotgun exemplifies the West and Central African region’s rectangular house in proxemic dimensions that create intimate spatial living conditions.

Based on a two-room module measuring 10 by 20 feet, the shotgun is rectangular, one room wide, and up to three rooms deep. With the exception of the Camelback, which is the addition of a second story at the back, and the double shotgun, which is two shotguns placed side-to-side, the single shotgun is one story high with the gable front facing the street.
Verandas or front porches are usually attached. Both were also African derived.

This tradition may have originated from Yorubaland via Haiti to the American South. A large number of Yorubas went to Haiti in 1810, and they might have been responsible for the similarity between the shotgun and Yoruba house types. Whatever the connection, the architectural links between Port-au-Prince and New Orleans cannot be denied. All of the nonessential details that are associated with the shotgun in Haiti are also associated with the shotgun in Louisiana.

Africans brought with them to the New World the ability to use wood, metal, earth and stone. Their ability to adapt indigenous materials made them indispensable as workers for Euro-Americans. A prime example of a disguised or unrecognized African architectural influence is the porch. A common feature in many areas of West and Central Africa, the porch is an African contribution to American architecture as a whole.

Pierce Lewis wrote: “It was long before Southerners can bring themselves to attach porches to their Georgina Town houses. Albert Simmons indicates that porches did not become common until after the 1790s, when refugees from Haiti arrived in Charleston.” Caribbean origins have also been cited for verandas found in French buildings in the Mississippi Valley from New Orleans to Kahokia, Illinois. It is not inconceivable that millions of enslaved Africans upon whom Euro-Americans were dependent taught their masters more about tropical architecture than they would be willing to acknowledge.

Enslaved artisans played a major role in the economic and physical development of the American South. Enslaved Africans were responsible for the design and construction of both the Plantation house and the slave quarters. In fact Windsor Hall, the oldest landmark in Greenville, Georgia, was designed and built by Isaiah Wimbush, a slave artisan. The prevalence of certain African architectural characteristics such as steep, sloping hip roofs, central fireplaces and porches suggest that elements of African architecture may have been introduced by slave builders.

On the Sea Island coast of Georgia, enslaved Africans developed a building material called tabby, a burnt lime and seashell aggregate used prolifically as building material for walls, fences, and roadways. On the Island of St. Helena there are some old ruins from the Spanish era still standing. The Brick Street Baptist Church foundation was constructed out of this tabby material as well as the graveyard head stones in the grave of the Penn
Center, to the Slave hospital at the Retreat Plantation on St. Simons Island, Georgia.

The slave quarters at Keswick, near Midlothian, Virginia, were constructed around 1750 and made with the African tradition of hand-made burnt clay bricks by plantation slaves. The slave quarters are reminiscent of the circular structures of Kasai Province in Zaire. The Africa House on the Melrose Plantation, also built with bricks baked on the property is more African in its architectural structure, content, form and design, unlike the Keswick slave quarters.

The Africa House utilizes characteristics such as a steep sloping roof and wide overhangs, formed with hand-cut timber, and reflects the rectangular huts common in the Kongo. The house was built in the spirit of African architectural tradition and stands as symbols of the resilient strength of the African spirit. The fact that it was built by the owner, Maria Theresa Coin-Coin, who was born in the Kongo might help to explain its Kongo design.

Thomas Day, a cabinetmaker and architectural interior woodwork designer from Milton, North Carolina, was the fifth wealthiest man in the county according to the 1850 federal census record. Although servicing an exclusively white clientele, he was able to create African-influenced products. Using carving techniques that required “set-in” elements and an anthropological ordering of scale, he was able to reflect the African carving tradition of the Bakongo of Zaire.

As African American architecture became more professionalized, the African American architects struggled with the paradox of entering the mainstream of American architectural thought, thus producing projects that denied their culture base, and therefore associating themselves with the dominant culture, as opposed to producing projects emblematic of their African and African American heritage.

For the most part, early Black architects executed conservative classical designs deep in the African architectural traditions. In time Black architects tried to make their designs to reflect white American cultural values.

African American architects attempted to incorporate African architectural designs into the plantations and many buildings they built, thus creating an African presence. African American buildings and early structures were transmitters of this culture. They transmitted the culture of the past into the living present, which served as monuments for the future.
African American architecture testifies to the aspirations of a people who tried to maintain a link with their ancestral homeland and African past. Their buildings tell not the official, but the private history of a people, and reveal their cultural traditions and heritage through architecture. The totality symbolizes the unending struggle of a people determined to tell their story and express themselves through the medium of art. Thus, they transmitted the old to the new via their African heritage and culture. As a direct result of this struggle by African Americans to tell their story through architecture, America has been greatly enriched by African influence in American architecture—the hidden heritage.

WHITE AFRICANISMS

Much Africanism simply became Americanisms, such as the banjo, jazz, and rhythm and blues (R&B). Herskovits pointed out that the elaborate etiquette of the South with respect for elders, its use of terms of endearment, kinship in speaking to neighbors, and general emphasis on politeness is African in origin. Whites have adopted African speech patterns and have retained such Africanisms as baton twirling, cheerleading, and expressions and words such as OK (Okay), bodacious, bozo (stupid), cooter (turtle), goobers (peanut), hullabaloo, holly-gully, jazz, moola (money), pamper and “Polly Wolly-Doodle,” wow, uh-huh, and unh-unh, daddy, buddy and tote, to list a few.

Herskovits wrote an essay titled, “What Africa Has Given America?” He first listed music jazz, spirituals, R&B, and gospel. American English and speech has been greatly influenced by Africa. [See Holloway and Vass, The African Heritage of American English]. They argued that the musical quality of southern speech and dialect are all derived from Africa. The emphasis of politeness by southerners is another Africanism they adopted.

Southern cuisine: fried chicken, gumbo, okra and southern seasoning of foods are all African in origin. The elaborate social etiquette of the South and its use of uncle and auntie as terms of endearment and kinship are examples of African traditions adopted by White America. Religious behavior in possession cults such as, the white Pentecostal sects and the use of African instruments, particularly the banjo in Appalachian music and the existence of snake cults are direct carryovers from the African past. Many Africanisms, like the banjo became Americanisms. Today the banjo is an African instrument used exclusively by whites.

Many other aspects of Black American culture that are African in origin have been eagerly adopted by white Americans: hand slapping, hair styles,
clothing fashions, handshakes, and much of contemporary Black music. Other Africanisms found among white Americans, according to Peter Wood, are leaving gourds on poles as bird houses, and techniques of Alligator Wrestling. As late as the 1930s, whites used funerary pottery in a manner identical to Blacks. Both African and European cultures contributed to what was to become considered American culture.

**FOLK MEDICINE AND THE ROOT DOCTOR**

African medical knowledge of diseases in both the Old and the New Worlds crossed the Atlantic Ocean. Although African American practitioners were considered folk and root doctors compared to their European counterparts, their medical practices were often superior in that era. For example, Africans are credited with introducing certain folk treatments for smallpox. Famed anthropologist R. S. Rattray reported that variolation of smallpox was practiced "from time immemorial by the Akan of Ghana." Likewise, the Scottish explorer Mungo Park, during his travels to the windward Coast at the end of the eighteenth century, was informed by a European doctor that the people of the Gambia practiced inoculation for smallpox as their traditional prevention.

Lieutenant Governor William Gooch of Virginia, in 1729, manumitted a slave named Panpan for his secret concoction of roots and herbs because it was a cure for yaws and syphilis. He was freed from slavery at a cost of sixty pounds. Bryan Edwards, listening to one of his Akan women, learned that vaccination was a medical technique used on the Gold Coast to inoculate children with infectious matter from yaws, thus giving them a mild case of the disease and providing resistance later in life. "Mothers inoculate their infants about the period of weaning, that they may be indulged in nursing them until their recovery; and many believe, from an African opinion and custom in that country, that children should undergo the disease at an early period of life."

In another example, a slave by the name of Caesar was known to have cured several persons who had been poisoned. One, an overseer named Henry Middleton, found Caesar's antidote very effective. Caesar cured Middleton from intolerable pain in the "stomack [sic] and bowels" after he had found no cure or relief in the medicines of the "most skilful doctors of the country." Caesar also cured a person bitten by a rattlesnake, and a man afflicted with yaws with his body covered from "top to toe" with scabs. The cure for yaws required the use of flowers of sulphur and burnt nicasars. He also cured those afflicted with the deadly symptoms of pleurisies. For
Caesar's antidote to poison and snake bite, he was given his freedom and financial compensation for life.

Sampson, another slave, gained his freedom as a reward for discovering a cure for rattlesnake bites. His cure was said to have been even more effective than Caesar's. Colonial planters generally had more respect for their enslaved Africans' knowledge of herbs, medicines, and poison, than did the so-called doctors of the era. Enslaved Africans brought indigenous skills and knowledge to North America directly from Africa. They contributed their cultural traditions concerning the uses of plants, as well as the new flora they encountered in South Carolina, in many ways similar to that of West and Central Africa.

Sampson walked into the Commons House of Assembly of South Carolina on May 9, 1754, and offered a cure for rattlesnake bites. To demonstrate the effectiveness of his medicines, he held in his hand poisonous snakes and then pressed them against his flesh and was bitten several times. He was bitten by so many venomous snakes that it was doubtful if he would recover. Sampson declared that he would return in three days alive and well. To everyone's surprise, he returned alive and offered the cure. In proof of the efficacy of his medicines, Sampson on several occasion suffered himself to be bitten by the most venomous snakes, and once let his wounds come so near mortification, that it was doubted whether he could recover, yet he cured himself with them; he disarmed any snake of its venom with some of the herbs. He was immediately given his freedom and a cash annuity for life.

Likewise, Africans knew that smallpox inoculation was done by simply taking some of the pus from the scalp and inoculating those who were not exposed. Smallpox was the most feared epidemic in Colonial America. Charleston, for example, had several smallpox epidemics during that period. However, the outbreak of spring, 1760, was the most widespread. South Carolina had adopted the African practice of using individuals who had previously had smallpox to inoculate the population. In Charleston, townspeople had protested that the government had "negroes [sic] seized with that Distemper in the country [were] immediately brought to town and many others Persons [were] daily inoculated in order to go through the disease in Charles Town..."

Through the root doctor, Africans brought holistic health practices to American plantations. African healers brought knowledge of treatment for many diseases, and health practitioners such as midwives and nurses contributed to New World health care services. During antebellum
plantation slavery, midwives delivered more than ninety percent of children delivered during the early nineteenth century, as had been the custom in Africa. Africans contributed to cures of numerous New World diseases based on their knowledge of similar diseases from the Old World. Their gift of medicine enriched the developing medical field of America, fusing the worlds of Africa and Europe and adopting practical use as well as a holistic approach, to curing and treating diseases.

SUMMARY

The African house servants learned new domestic skills, including the art of quilting, from their mistresses. They took this European quilting technique and Africanized it by combining it with their appliqué style, reflecting a pattern and form still found in the Akan and Fon textile industries of West Africa.

The culture of the Mande had a profound effect on European Americans by way of the “Big House.” It was the planter who witnessed the transmission of European culture to the Africans, and African culture to the Europeans. The acculturation process was mutual, as well as reciprocal. Africans assimilated white culture, and planters adopted some aspects of African customs and practices such as the Africans agricultural method of rice cultivation, African cuisine (southern cooking), open grazing of cattle, and use of herbal medicines to cure and treat New World diseases such as smallpox.

Winifred Vass has documented survival of Bantu vocabulary in American place names, folklore, lexicon, and literature, and Dena Epstein has shown that the banjo is of African origin. Herskovits identified five areas in which African culture influenced the United States: music, speech, social etiquette, cuisine, and religion. African cultural influence has clearly influenced American musical traditions, mainly spirituals, jazz, blues, and bluegrass. These musical forms have influenced popular American music. Many Africanisms, such as the banjo, became Americanisms. Indeed, today the banjo is more characteristic of whites than Blacks. Appalachian banjo music is now considered as American as apple pie, without any distinguishing African characteristics.

A diversity of Africans, including the Bantu of Central Africa, changed North American culture, contrary to the popular belief that only West Africans contributed. Because West Africans had a great influence on white American culture by their presence in the plantation “Big House,” scholars have assumed the same occurred in African American culture.
Nevertheless, recent scholarship suggests a Bantu origin for much of African American culture because, unlike the more numerous Senegambians, the Central Africans brought a common culture and language. Both these African groups contributed to the richness and diversity of American and African American cultures.

References


