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### Christianity from White to Black

When James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw said that he grew distant from his family because of his belief in a European God as opposed to the lack of any God worshiped by his family, current knowledge of native African religion indicate that he was not telling the truth. Grinniosaw asks his mother, “Pray tell me who me who is the great MAN of POWER that makes the thunder? She said there was no power but the sun, moon, and stars; that made all our country” (Gronniosaw 35). His mother’s answer is odd in that it is counter to the majority of native African religions; one can compare Gronniosaw’s narrative to the writings of Olaudah Equiano, a slave captured from a similar region in eastern Nigeria in 1756 who practiced the traditional Ibo religion. When he became literate and read the bible, Equiano “expressed amazement at seeing ‘laws and rules of my own country written almost exactly’” (Sernett 13). Why would Gronniosaw misrepresent his own culture? The very nature of the European spiritual narrative requires that Gronniosaw, through writing and testimony, atone for his “blackness” in such a way that validates white, Christian preconceptions about the world; one such preconception is that one must officially convert to the Christian faith and renounce their past culture, no matter how similar its values. This idea of incompatibility, coupled with a need for African American slaves to form their own identity that would transcend bondage, were the catalyst behind the infusion of traditional African beliefs within Christian tradition;

that tradition would ultimately create a unique form of “Black Christianity” (this paper emphasizes the role of the Baptist faith up to Reconstruction) that resonated with African American experience in a way that “White Christianity” could not.

In order to understand African American religious trends today, we must first look at traditional African religions<sup>1</sup>. Though it’s true that the first slaves were not communities of people due to their combinations of ancestral and cultural backgrounds, they were gradually able to create social institutions that “were neither imposed by Europeans nor directly taken from African communities, but were a unique combination of elements borrowed from the European enslavers and from various African societies that held common values” (Kulikoff 227). Contrary to Gronniosaw’s claim, one common and *deeply* valued African tradition is the belief in an all-powerful Creator similar to Christianity. As Olaudah Equiano notes in his writings about Ibo culture, “the natives believe that there is one Creator of all things, and that he lives in the sun, and is girded round the belt, that he may never eat or drink...they believe he governs events, especially our deaths or captivity; but, as for the doctrine of eternity, I do not remember to have ever heard of it” (Sernett 13). In fact, the name for God in African languages often means creator or “Molder” (Mbiti Concepts. 45-48). Some African faiths believe that the world

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the information that is to follow is garnered from the works of John S. Mbiti. However, African Scholar Okot p’Bitek argues against Mbiti’s claims of a universal Creator among the societies, saying, “The last and most important pitfall for the Christian student is his belief in one God...to interpret the numerous deities...as *refractions* of God” (p’Bitek 110). In my research, I have uncovered more evidence regarding Mbiti’s views as opposed to p’Bitek’s, but I include p’Bitek’s argument so that the reader may further research his differing view.

was created first, heaven second, while others believe in the opposite order of creation<sup>2</sup>; but all African religions generally place man at the center of the universe and believe in a split reality<sup>3</sup>, one for earth, and one for the heavens (Mbiti Intro. 35-37).

Other parallels with Christianity include God as: holy, all-powerful, all-knowing, omnipresent, and self-existent (Mbiti Intro. 54-60). God also created man<sup>4</sup>, most typically out of earth, and in the case of the Vugusu culture, it is believed that “God completed the whole of creation in six days. On the seventh he rested because it was a bad day” (Mbiti Concepts 48). Contrary to Christianity, however, is the notion of God as good in that he never does wrong to the people or to the world, as opposed to the Old Testament where

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<sup>2</sup> We can assume, based off of Gronniosaw’s mother’s response, that his tribe subscribes to the belief that the heavens were created first and the material world, earth, second. The majority of tribes (meaning at least >50%) believed that man was fashioned out of clay or mud, though one differing belief is that the people came from the sky, either by choice (to populate the earth) or as a punishment (Mbiti Intro. 28-37).

<sup>3</sup> To help explain how God and man are separated, similar to Christianity, Africans generally believe that the two halves of the universe were joined, but were split, either by animals or through the folly of man, into two (Mbiti Intro. 36-37).

<sup>4</sup> African religion is immensely complex, with striking, almost exact parallels between Christianity, and other, very different interpretations. John S. Mbiti’s Concepts of God in Africa (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970) is an extensive coverage of the belief in God across many African cultures. His other book, Introduction to African Religion Second Edition (Portsmouth: Heinemann Educational, 1991), covers the more general concepts of African religion and is geared toward a general, non-academic audience.

God is both creator and destroyer. This difference between the nature of God in African culture versus Christian culture might be shaped by the African sense of time.

African religions are concerned with time as it relates to the past and present; concern for the future is not as great because of a belief that time will never end (Mbiti 40). As Mbiti notes, “People are aware that the laws of nature do not normally change, and so there is no ground for imagining that this entire universe might suddenly come to an end” (Mbiti 40). It is this idea of time as infinity that Gronniosaw manipulated in order to portray his mother as an unbeliever in the Christian God—that the universe was always there—even though it’s already been demonstrated that the African concept of God is almost identical to the Christian counterpart. The biggest difference, it would seem, is in the concept of Armageddon versus a perpetual world, two ideas that greatly determine how a culture reacts to the universe and their position within it. Gibreel Kamara criticizes the Christian notion of Armageddon as it relates to the idea of a postponed Day of Judgment. He argues that, because of the belief in ancestral spirits that watch over people, if an African does wrong, their action is immediately punished, the immediacy of which reinforces the community’s morals in a way that Christianity’s postponed judgment cannot, while helping them to maintain their harmony with the laws of God, nature, and their community (Kamara 509-510). He argues for a return to African traditional values and faiths over Islam or Christianity; not because the latter are somehow inferior, but because the former were *created by the African people* and therefore reciprocally relate to African values and needs.

Despite the similarities, the incorporation of African traditions within the plantation occurred gradually. Between 1650 and 1690, tobacco was the cash crop and

required little labor; as such, slaves were few and forced to assimilate into the dominant white society, but their growing numbers were cause for oppression (Kulikoff 229). 1690-1740 saw a period of heavy migration, and a higher percentage of slaves were imported directly from Africa. These numbers allowed a high concentration of ethnic groups, particularly the Ibo of Nigeria, to enter into the country (Kulikoff 231). As the importing of slaves declined from 1740-1790, the concentrations of slaves began to settle on much larger, community-based plantations, thus allowing a unique African-oriented culture to grow behind the backs of the white slaveholders. Many immigrants spoke similar languages or were able to communicate once they had learned basic English; they also lived in similar climates, harvested similar crops, and grew up in comparable kinship systems in Africa (Kulikoff 232). The slaves were thus able to weave these common threads of culture into a new African American institution. Many slaves were able to practice segments of their religion, or rituals they adopted from their neighbors, in secret.

Attempts to Christianize the first slaves were met with resistance because, should the slaves be able to convert, they could establish a fellowship with the master at the spiritual level, threatening the security of a fragile master-slave dynamic (Raboteau 102). Also, most slaves did not like the idea of sharing heaven with their masters. One minister, Francis Le Jau, an Anglican, attempted to alleviate white concern by requiring slaves to agree to the following disclaimer before being baptized: “You declare in the Presence of God and before his Congregation that you do not ask for the holy baptism out of any design to free yourself from the Duty and Obedience you owe to your Master while you live, but merely for the good of Your Soul and to partake of the Graces and Blessing promised to the Members of the Church of Jesus Christ” (Lambert 188). In this way, the

slaves would understand that the state of their souls was different from the state of their bodies, and that by agreeing to be baptized, they affirming the goodness of the church.

Aside from the rhetoric of obedience in this agreement, which the slaves were well aware of, other cultural problems presented themselves. In West African tradition, the spirits that people sought assistance from (but did not worship) were found at all times in all places, a sharp contrast to the idea of going to Church in one spot at one specific time (Lambert 194). Sunday was also the only time in which slaves could pursue their own endeavors. The somber Anglican faith must have also been hard for the vocal, community-based West African religions to relate to. Le Jau was able to convert some slaves, however, and his letters illustrate how his conversion of the first slaves in the early 1700s began to empower the black populace:

“The best Scholar of all the Negroes in my Parish and a very sober and honest Liver, thro’ his Learning was like to Create some Confusion among all the Negroes in this Country; he had a Book wherein he read some description of the several judgments. that Chastise Men because of their Sins...he told his Master abruptly there wou’d be a dismal tide and the moon wou’d be turned into Blood...some Negroe overheard a part, and it was publickly blazed abroad that an Angel came and spake to the Man” (Sernett 27).

The slaves were now able recite the Scripture passages that caught their attention and inspiration to unconverted slaves who would no-doubt agree with the ideas of salvation and retribution of sin that the egalitarian nature of Christianity inspired. This African reinterpretation of Scripture would pave the way for the further Africanization of Christianity once the Great Awakening converted the slaves en mass.

When George Whitefield arrived from England in 1739, he first preached in the South and then in the North, bringing the Great Awakening with him. By the 1750s, however, the Awakening began to slumber in the North and Samuel Davies, a Baptist, began preaching a form of “religious enthusiasm” in the South. Methodist John Wesley also preached to the slave populace, but the Baptists’ success in converting slaves was so much greater that it was said “if a n— ain’t a Baptist, someone’s been tampering with his religion” (Ignatiev 608). Shubael Stearns and Daniel Marshall were two ministers who would bring Baptism to North Carolina, where it would spread to the rest of the south, but why the Baptist religion to begin with?

The Awakening led to a division within the Faith between the “New Light”, or Separate Baptists, and the “Old Light”, or Regular Baptists; the former were initially concentrated in the New England area while the latter were concentrated around Philadelphia (Lincoln 22-23). The Separate Baptists carried emotional preaching to the point of ecstasy (an immense difference compared to the reserved, Anglican Le Jau) where “people would cry out, fall down, and for a time lose the use of their limbs, which exercise made the bystanders marvel; some thought they were deceitful, others that they were bewitched, and many being convinced of all would report that God was with them of a truth” (Ignatiev 608). This type of display matches many African faiths’ (particularly West Africa) belief in the power of possession and ritual in order to receive power. In this case, it is not God or Christ who possesses the individual, as it is believed that both entities do not possess even though Christ is believed to attend each congregation. Instead, possession can come from an ancestor or other biblical figure made manifest through the Holy Spirit (Raboteau 28). In this sense, the term “got religion” refers not to

allegiance to a denomination, but to the possessive experience of encountering Christ (Sernett 69).

Some scholars argue that, because of the closeness with Separate Baptists in regard to traditional African forms of worship, and because the movement appealed more exclusively to the slave population, the Great Awakening was not a product of Christianity reaching African Americans, but a product of the African Americans exerting their influence over Christianity (Ignatiev 609). This is not a far-fetched conclusion if we take into account the ways in which the white denominations experienced salvation compared to that of the slaves. Never do we hear mention of such lively, vocal congregations in the Anglican or Catholic denominations. The subversive nature of the Baptist faith<sup>5</sup> makes the denomination a logical means of expression for an

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<sup>5</sup> Scholars have long theorized that the appeal of Baptism to poor white Americans was due to a religious system that stressed faith and piety over the wealth and display of the plantation owners. It could be considered a counter-culture to the Anglican culture of wealth that dominated much of America in the 1700s. Unfortunately, the religious autonomy of the Black Baptists would be cut short due to growing fears of a slave insurrection. Independent black churches (and a few managed to exist) were annexed into white Baptist churches; in this way, the poor whites ultimately succumbed to the racist paranoia guiding slaveholders, and the pseudo-liberal spirit of the Awakening was quieted. Non-racist whites soon found themselves embracing the racism of their contemporaries due in part to the patriarchal nature of the Baptist faith, which mirrored the patriarchal nature of the Antebellum South. Information taken from [Afro-American Religious History](#); A documentary Witness, by Milton C. Sernett.



oppressed race. One bit of evidence that favors the idea of African American influence on the Awakening is the fact that we are constantly presented (through letters and testimony) with groups of African Americans who are possessed with the spirit of God as a community, usually to the confusion and awe of their white ministers. Deeply moved by the experience of preaching to the Negros, Whitefield began to end his sermons with a call for the slaves to pray for him (Ignatiev 611), creating the foundation for what would soon become the notion of Black Christianity as a superior form of White Christianity.

Though it's true that spiritual revivalism swept across Europe the same time it reached America, the creation of the Separate Baptists indicate that a burgeoning collective consciousness, driven as a religious movement, was beginning to emerge. The success of the movement illustrates how Baptism "owed to the power of social networks, southerners' growing familiarity with Baptist ways over time, and the ability of this faith to meet the emotional needs of rural people, *rather than as a function of a concerted effort to transform the faith to accommodate to southern ways*" (Spangler 247).

Unfortunately, this new-found freedom to worship alongside the whites was quickly taken away following a series of uprisings across the country (most notably by Nat Turner). Slaves, now that they could read, were preaching what they had read to other slaves, often times altering the story to suit their own emotions toward any subject. The Awakening had done on a macrocosmic scale what Le Jau had done at the microcosmic: given slaves the freedom to preach the Gospel of Christ to each other without the need for white intervention.

Independent black churches were therefore disbanded or annexed into white congregations, with many slave owners forbidding their slaves from attending non-white

ministries. In a way, the evangelicals that condemned slavery unknowingly condoned it in their argument that conversion made slaves “better”, which was easily transposed to mean “better slaves” (Raboteau 145). With black churches under white control, African American “overseers” were tasked with keeping an eye on the congregation and reporting anybody in need of disciplining (Raboteau 145). These members were then subject to the discipline of the whole congregation; in the case of the Gillfield Baptist Church of Petersburg, Virginia, the congregation, on several occasions, expelled their own members for running away from their masters (Raboteau 145). White oppression forced the creation of the “invisible institution” of African American Christianity.

Albert Raboteau illumines some of the cross-cultural connections of the “hidden institution” within the slave community in Slave Religions. The Protestant revivalist tradition of the “shout” is a means of inducing religious ecstasy in the participant. The hand clapping, dancing, and styles of singing are all culturally accepted counterparts to the African ring-shout (Raboteau 72). Because dancing was forbidden as a heathen practice, the slaves were able to justify their dance through a reinterpretation of the “shout”, by which “they danced in ways their fathers in Africa would have recognized” (Raboteau 72). There were several forms of spirituals: the already mentioned shout, anthems, and jubilees, each serving its own occasion. Even though the verses were quoted from Scripture, the style of singing was distinctly African (Raboteau 74). These African elements include: emphasis on call and response, polyrhythm, syncopation, ornamentation, slides, repetition, body movement, hand-clapping, foot-tapping, and heterophony (Raboteau 74). It is no surprise, then, that the active form of worship of

Separate Baptist resonated so strongly with African Americans; it was a Christianized version of their own tribal faith and retained many of its key elements.

The proverb was another tool utilized by both Christian slaves in church and on the plantation. As John Roberts notes, “The universality of proverbial lore and its concern with universal themes furnished the slave community with an ideal means of expression and camouflaging its own peculiar cultural concerns within a larger tradition” (Roberts 130). One proverb that tells the slaves to be obedient and industrious is, “You will reap what you sow, that you sow it singly and reap it doubly” (Roberts 130). By the process of “verbal indirection”, the slaves, upon hearing this proverb, were able to restate it word for word, but took it to mean the eventual fate of the entire slave system (Roberts 131). Not only did the proverbs allow for African Americans to relate their true feelings to each other in a coded way, some proverbs, such as, “Mole don’t see w’at his naber doin’”, impart cultural values upon the listener (Roberts 131). The expression of the proverb through song is consistent with traditional African methods of worship.

Conjuration was a unique aspect of plantation religion, and many slaves put their faith in this alternative form of belief over the pro-slavery preaching endorsed by white society (Sernett 76). Borrowing from ancestral traditions of using sacred objects to harness the powers in the universe, these power objects were often hair, nail clippings, bitter-tasting roots (Sernett 76-78). These remedies can be ingested, sprinkled, smeared, etc, and whose effects range from making a slave immune from his master’s violence to falling in love. As Henry Bibb, a slave, explains, these conjurers were “given to them by tradition, and can never be erased, while the doors of education are bolted and barred against them [the slaves]” (Sernett 80).

Another aspect of this “hidden institution” involved the literal hiding of religious services. The panicked reaction slave holders had in regard to their slaves’ education must have fueled the sense of empowerment among the slaves as they met in secret. One former slave said that, “When the n— go round singin’ ‘Steal Away to Jesus,’ dat mean der gwine be a ‘ligious meetin’ dat night” (Raboteau 213). The limbs of trees would snapped in the direction of the secret meeting (Sernett 67) Aside from meeting in secluded places such as forest or swamp, water-soaked quilts would be erected around the meeting place to help trap sound (Raboteau 215). Slaves would speak over a container of water to drown sound, which is what Robert Johnson, in Iola Leroy, is referring to when he says, “We's got a nice big pot, dat got cracked las' winter, but it will hole a lot o'water, an' we puts it whar we can tell it eberything” (Harper 14). As an ex-slave notes, these secret meetings were unique in that no preachers were present; “Everyone was so anxious to have a word to say that a preacher did not have a chance” (Raboteau 217). Also of interest is the fact that dancing and secular music were sins to the religious slaves; only “movement which occurred in prayer meetings under the influence of the Holy Spirit” were allowed (Raboteau 222). Raboteau points out that yes, some masters allowed their slaves to be baptized and marry, even enjoying the company of a black preacher, but “no matter how religious the master might be, the slave knew that the master’s religion did not countenance prayers for his slaves’ freedom on this world” (Raboteau 219).

This conflict of interest is why the slave congregations were uniquely separate from their white counterparts, and why, after the Civil War, many denominations would create their own “black churches” nestled within the ideology of Christianity, the Baptist and Methodist faith in particular. If we are to trust Mbiti’s knowledge of the African

faith, the conversion of so many slaves during the Great Awakening is logical in that, for many, they were converting to a faith they already had, just under a new name. Outlawed native traditions were reimagined, through the “shout”, ecstatic dancing, and proverb, in ways that were culturally acceptable but still maintained their distinctive African quality.

In “Black Christianity,” the Old Testament aspects of God as “avenging, conquering, liberating paladin” (Lincoln 3) paralleled their ancestral beliefs in a just, powerful God. These congregations believed that they were truer Christians than their white counterparts that used religion to endorse obedience. A key difference, however, is that the postponement of Judgment that Gibreel criticized as not being native to the African ideology becomes a source of optimism and strength. It’s hard to imagine a slave in bondage subscribing to the faith of a static universe over an Armageddon scenario where his life and tribulations will be redeemed. In this light, Christianity reshaped the ideology of the African Americans—their sense of time—in a way that was totally alien to the native African pathos pre-colonization.

In Africa, too, the “destiny of the individual was linked to that of the tribe or the community” (Lincoln 5). For slaves, freedom was therefore a communal security as opposed to white individualism (Lincoln 5). In many ways, the hostility of white society in viewing Blacks not as individuals, but representatives of their whole race, helped to solidify the traditional African values of communal representation and security (Lincoln 5). Much of the strength of the Separate Baptists rested within the Church’s ability to maintain a community where each church, though united by the expressions that fused African and Christian identities, was allowed to maintain their autonomy from one

another<sup>6</sup>. This powerful form of religious expression is as strong and relevant today as it was during the antebellum period, and bridges the African American's sense of Christian identity with their ancestral past that was "lost" due to slavery.

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<sup>6</sup> Methodists also operated on the principle of individual church autonomy, but the churches all subscribed to a unifying doctrine that helped maintain their solidarity as a denomination. This organized structure allowed the Northern Methodists to break from the Southern Methodists during the Great Methodist schism of 1844-46 (Morrow 4). The Northern Methodist Church would then become the dominant religious force post-Reconstruction, whereas the Baptists were still powerful but divided into large subgroups that were more regionally based as opposed to nationally. This may be why Methodism was stronger in the North whereas Baptism, able to meet the needs of individual communities easier while still maintaining the same message, flourished in the South.

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