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AUTHOR Brown, M. Christopher, II
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ABSTRACT

"Utilizing current trends in reading comprehension used in educational classes," this paper discusses "some forms of communication practiced by early black Americans and their implications for innovation in critical thinking and comprehension strategies." "Utilizing an anthropological approach, this work provides an intense and unified description and investigation of the texts of American Negro spirituals." The paper also discusses the treatment of historical, social and psychological phenomena accompanying Negro life under slavery and presents an objective emphasis of the relationship among the varying interpretations of the spirituals. The paper then analyzes the context of religious imagery and the history out of which the spiritual evolved. The paper concludes that the secret messages and coded words in the spirituals communicate the history of a people's attempted rebellions, modes of accommodation, techniques of survival, as well as explicit and implicit means of freedom. Contains a 57-item bibliography of books, articles, dissertations, reports, and audio-visuals. (RS)

# THE COMPREHENSION OF TRADITIONAL NEGRO SPIRITUALS: THE MEANING AND THE MESSAGE OF THE MUSIC

by

M. Christopher Brown, II
Past President, Honors Program
South Carolina State College, Orangeburg

As education attempts to envelop reading and communication in general, there is an increasing usage of whole language and language experience techniques in addressing the myriad learning styles of individuals. Our ability to critically analyze is contingent upon our understanding of what lies before our eyes. Therefore, reading education must begin to focus on the comprehension of those social phenomena with distinct and "unique" meanings which will facilitate true understanding and higher level thinking skills. I have composed an article utilizing current trends in reading comprehension which I use in my education classes. "THE COMPREHENSION OF TRADITIONAL NEGRO SPIRITUALS: THE MEANING AND THE MESSAGE OF THE MUSIC" provides the reader with an understanding of some forms of communication practiced by early black Americans and their implications for innovation in critical thinking and comprehension strategies.

Utilizing an anthropological approach, this work provides an intense and unified description and investigation of the texts of American Negro spirituals, the treatment of historical, social and psychological phenomena accompanying Negro life under slavery and exceptionally objective emphasis of the relationship between the varying interpretations of the spirituals. The monograph analyzes the context of religious imagery and the history out of which the spiritual evolved.

M. Christopher Brown, II

*This monograph will follow the Arizona Research Style, which is used by the Society for American Anthropologists.

".....[spirituals] portray the hopes of our people who faced the hardships of slavery...They sang to forget the chains and misery. The sorrow will one day turn to joy. All that breaks the heart and oppresses the soul will one day give place to peace and understanding, and every man will be free. That is the interpretation of a true Negro spiritual.

---Paul Robeson

(Robeson: 1981)

This monograph
is lovingly dedicated to
Mother and Grandmother
whose unselfish care and
devotion to me as a
child has been the
light of my
life.

## Preface

The oral tradition that survived the horrors of the Middle Passage and the bestiality of the American slave system persisted and contributed largely to an ever-widening circle of musical expression. A large part of that expression is the focus of this monograph.

The method of oral tradition was greatly responsible for the maintenance of the samples of African heritage which miraculously survived the centuries. Because of the illiteracy of most blacks (at least in the English language) and because of the diversity of African languages, a process of rote teaching was instrumental in sustaining the legends and music of old Africa. Although many Africans had composed their own symbols to represent language sounds, the oral tradition was still by far the most common practice in Africa for decades, and remained the most effective method of reaching the thousands of slaves in America.

In the line of progression from African survivals-- chants, moans, utterances--it is probable that the first music might well have been the work and game songs, antedated by the "sorrow song" or spiritual. The first evidence of music coined by the slave community is the spiritual which was created and refined by the slaves themselves as religious and social statements about the context of their lives.

In summary, the members of the slave community were, for the most part, totally illiterate and thus exhibited complete dependence on oral transmission for news and communication of any kind. Because of the stringent codes which buttressed the slave system, musical expression developed as the chief means of covert communication among the slaves.

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## Framework of the Spiritual

The religious songs of the Negro have commonly been accepted as characteristic music of the race. The name "spirituals" given them long ago is still current, while these songs, composed by the Negroes, and passed from generation to generation with numerous modifications, retain many of their former characteristics (Locke: 1969). In former days the spirituals were judged to be the most beautiful production of race and the truest representation of the Negro's real self. Some of these songs have been published, and for a time their emotional beauty and simplicity of expression won for the Negro a definite place in the hearts of those who had not hitherto known him (Williams: 1990). He was often judged by these songs alone, reported only imperfectly and superficially, and forthwith came many expressions of delight and enthusiasm for the future possibilities of the Negro. These expressions indicate not only the power that the singing of Negro spirituals had upon those who heard them, but also many of the characteristics of the old present-day spirituals (Thurman: 1947).

The impressions of spiritual singing have been expressed as "the melancholy that tinges every Negro's soul.....in dreamy, sad and plaintive airs, and in words that described the most sorrowful pictures of slave life--parting of loved ones, the separation of mother and child or husband and wife, or the death of those whom the heart cherishes" (Odum: 1909). The plantation song in America, although an outgrowth of oppression and bondage, contains surprisingly few references to slavery. The plantation

songs known as the 'spirituals' are the spontaneous outbursts of intense religious fervor, and had their origin chiefly in the camp meetings, the revivals and in other religious exercises. The songs abound in scriptural allusions, and in many instances are unique interpretations of standard hymns.

The spirituals are songs about Black souls "stretching out into the outskirts of God's eternity" and affirming the Gospel which makes you know you are a human being--no matter what White people say (Cone: 1972). Through the song, Black people were able to affirm that the Spirit was continuous with their existence as free beings: and they created a new style of religious worship. They shouted and they prayed; they preached and they sang, because they had found something. They encountered a new reality; a new God not enshrined in White churches and religious gatherings. And all along, White folk thought slaves were contented, waiting for the next world. But in reality they were "stretching out" on God's Word, affirming a new-found experience that could not be destroyed by the masters. This is why they could sing (Cone: 1972).

The spirituals are historical songs which speak about the rapture of Black lives; they tell us about a people in the land of bondage, and what they did to hold themselves together and to fight back (Odum: 1925). We are told that the people of Israel could not sing the Lord's song in a strange land. But for Blacks, their "being" depended upon singing (Harris: 1974). Through the song they built their structures for existence in an

alien land. The spirituals enabled Blacks to retain a measure of African identity while living in the midst of American slavery, providing both the substance and the rhythm to cope with human servitude.

## Elements of the Spiritual

The spiritual, then, is the spirit of the people struggling to be free; it is their religion, their source of strength in a time of trouble (Hamm: 1988). If one does not know what trouble is, then the spiritual cannot be understood.

There is nothing like hearing a Negro spiritual and not knowing the meaning. Many hear "I got shoes, you got shoes," and say 'My mother doesn't sing that anymore. My grandmother does not hardly sing that anymore'. However, this song is filled with radical statements. There are some ghetto rappers and bourgeoisie African-Americans who feel that for all intensive purposes the Negro spiritual is distasteful and no longer culturally necessary. A reason for these views is that the spiritual is no longer closed in the story. It is important to be able to comprehend traditional Negro spirituals; understanding the meaning and the message of the music.

The true spirituals are too often treated sentimentally, and their deepest tragic feeling and their purest folk artistry overlooked (Langstaff: 1987). The spiritual is the people's response to societal contradictions. It is a people facing trouble affirming, "I ain't tired yet" (Grissom: 1930).

However, age alone is not the hallmark of a true spiritual. During 1845-65, the hey-day of the field songs,the genuine spirituals were composed in primitive Negro communities (Ryder: 1970). A genuine spiritual is always a folk composition or a group product, spontaneously composed as choral expression of religious feeling. The word "neo-spirituals" is used to describe the artificial derivatives which are.....entertainment spirituals of the concert-hall and glee club renditions (Locke: 1969).

There is hardly a better way to nail down the Afro-American spiritual than to describe the central passion of it and its creators--a thing called freedom. To get inside the Afro-American spiritual one must search for themes and meanings in accord with the desire and need for expression of the folk community. One must read the songs as comprehensive folk poetry, not primarily as isolated outbursts (Peters: 1989).

While the Negro spiritual represents one in every twelve folk songs, its fundamental theme, though perhaps not the greatest, is the need for a change in the existing order. No one can deny that this theme is equally fundamental in Biblical Christianity. A close reader of the spiritual is compelled to conclude that this fact provides the prime reason for the slave spirituals use of the Bible as its main source, when a harvest of sources (work, slaves, the people slaves worked for, the phenomena of nature, legends handed down from African ancestors, and many others) were available (Walker: 1979).

If a slave, even a religious slave, seeks an outlet for expression, he wants and needs a system capable of direct

language and undercurrent symbolism at the same time (Jackson: 1985).

"In considering the texts of the Negro spirituals as means of communication and expression, we must rely not only upon history, anthropology, and sociology, as tools of understanding, but also, upon psychological analysis" (Taylor: 1971). The first three disciplines enable us to understand how social patterns come into being at a given point in time and how they are related to each other; the fourth, psychoanalysis, offers clues to the mechanisms by which individuals adopt social patterns.

From the time slaves were first brought to the country until their emancipation there were barriers and restrictions which prevented them from satisfying their social needs and attaining those values prized most highly by the dominating culture (Sidran: 1981). Many slaves were dismayed at the situation of their bondage, and confused about their own reactions and possible alternatives, but there was no monolithic Negro attitude. There were militant slaves; and there were apathetic slaves. Some of them were at times aggressive in their hatred toward the White master, and at other times, docile. These mental/emotional paradoxes and conflicts are expressed in the spirituals.

## Objects of the Spiritual

The spiritual employed several hundreds of simple objects as devices. Rarely were the objects obtrusive. The spiritual was

developed so that the quality of things with hidden meanings would be suddenly revealed. The spirituals spoke of hammers, nails, ladders, gates, fountains, nets, rods, keys, brooms, needles, windows, robes, slippers, crowns, harps, bells, ram horns, trumpets, and drums (McIlhenny: 1933) (Lovell: 1972) (Spencer: 1990).

Like certain objects, certain occupations stood out in the spirituals. These are generally related to acts or products that the slaves considered essential to his goals or glorifying. These occupations were the bell ringer, carpenter, builder, farmer, husbandman, fisherman, gambler, horseman, preacher, shepherd, and trumpeter (McIlhenny: 1933) (Lovell: 1972) (Spencer: 1990).

The numerous references objects of nature have certainly impressed the reader with the slave poet's sensitivity to his natural world. This sensitivity is, first of all, a wide-eyed wonder and appreciation. It expands to love. It even becomes kinship, for often the spiritual compares his fate with that of some other natural being. His references to nature are not casual; they are full of wonder, awe, and delight. It might be remembered, also, that some African religions had invested natural objects--sun, moon, sea, rocks--with deistic qualities (McIlhenny: 1933) (Lovell: 1972) (Spencer: 1990) (Warren: 1988).

The spirituals were also abundant with biblical characters, places, and prophetic fulfillments. To say that a slave spiritual borrowed from or utilized the Bible is to say very

little about its literary propensities or values. This special attitude toward the Bible, this selectivity with respect to its contents, and this special way of turning Biblical materials to imaginative purposes make them quite distinctive. In some respects usage of the Bible is a religious manifestation; in others, it is without overt or even apparent religious significance. "The slave spirituals were not evangelical hymns; they were simply a literary revolutionary" (McIlhenny: 1933) (Lovell: 1972) (Spencer: 1990) (Keck: 1988).

**Reasons for the Spiritual**

Most of the spirituals relied upon an enlightened egotism and upon the divine power. The spiritual (and the host of slaves for whom it was spokesperson) did not overlook the strength in community. They also did not depart from the African reverence for family (Hamm: 1988). These spirituals took a comprehensive view of nearly everything. Examining life and the human condition broadly, one saw community power as a vast resource. The community then is defined as a group of individuals, each struggling for fulfillment as hard as he can. Being a member of community did not restrict individual expression; it reinforced it. The community role did not substitute for the individual role, nor did it encroach upon the individual role (Warren: 1988). Yes, slaves had to walk in a lonesome valley by themselves, but from another standpoint, when they combined with their "band' or with their relatives and friends, they could get

more and different things done. They could also have experiences that gave them a different slant and insight from those of the individual alone.

The Afro-American spiritual was not a song of unmitigated joy, despite its recurrent optimism. Even the expectation of victory presupposed a long, hard struggle (Warren: 1988). On the other hand, the title "The Sorrow Songs" given the spirituals by W.E.B. DuBois in his magnificent essay in The Souls of Black Folk, does not fit the whole case either (DuBois: 1903). In fact, there is not a great deal of pure sorrowing. Even the mourning is creative and sometimes joyful.

Slaves believed that they could own every moment in time. Because every moment was special and sacred, they were in awe and in constant thankfulness. They could celebrate the moment because there is this force that empowered them; and made them know that they were children of the universe. They may have been down trodden, but there was a voice resonating about how special they were.

Black people created a world of their own. They had no assets, so they had to use any territory available to take care of the business of making a business. The territory was not land, but culture. All business was done here. And that is why the Afro-American culture is the strongest in the world (Bogan: 1991).

Whether at church, in school, or on the playground the culture was still there. Yes, in the church they were still

slaves; and maybe the missionary that baptized them was white. However, they were brought into a unit that says that the power is in this circle. This "'ligion" gave them something they could fashion in their own interests (Bogan: 1991).

Whenever they ran sound through their body; they no longer felt the way they had decided to feel. The rendering of traditional spiritual songs was a way to get to singing. They could not sing and not change their condition. The singing of spirituals exercised the part of their being that their culture feels should be developed. This acquaintance is humanizing. If they are not acquainted with this part of their body they are somehow less than human (Marsh: 1880).

**The Framework of the Spirituals**

These spirituals are not taught, they come with the territory. "Let your little light, shine, shine, shine", "Nobody knows the trouble I see", and "Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel", these songs capture everyday events in the fields of the south (Fisher: 1926) (McKenzie: 1990) (Work: 1940). They are more than civil worship songs they are statements of existence.

"You must have that true religion" and "Gimme Dat Ole time 'ligion" was a response to the white gospel that was being taught (Osbeck: 1982). The songs "I want Jesus to walk with me" and "Steal Away" were sang during the slave escapes on the Underground Railroad (Rodeheaver: 1931). "I couldn't hear nobody praying" was a song of the Underground railroad (Fisher: 1926).

The song would be sung during service the night before. The meaning in many instances was that the trip on the Underground railroad had been sabotaged (Osbeck: 1982).

These spirituals were resistance songs, for example, "If you don't go, going anyhow" (Warren: 1988). This song was written by Harriet Tubman after she had taken her first trip with her brothers and been captured and dared to make a second attempt by herself. Harriet was called Moses, because she led her people to the promised land. The song "Go down Moses" was used to make slaves aware that Harriet would be leaving for the north. Songs such as these were often sang in the slave quarters (Work: 1940) (Rodeheaver: 1931).

There is a song from elementary school called "Steal Away " (Fisher: 1926). There is no significance until explained by a blind man whose grandmother had been sold "up the river". The song was used to call people to the bush harbors for secret meetings (Bogan: 1991).

The slaves were always singing--in the meetings, in the fields, jails, and churches. Songs like "Ain't gonna let nobody turn me 'round" and "I woke up this morning with my mind stayed on Jesus" are examples of communal singing which announce the presence of reality and community (Warren: 1988). As long as they were singing no individual could change the air of their space. These spirituals maintained their territory. A sheriff who every knew could walk into a mass meeting and begin taking names and the air would change. Then almost immediately someone

would strike up a congregational song and take the air back.

"Run, Mary run. Run, Mary run I say. Run, Mary run. You got a right to the tree of life" (Work: 1940). Watch out for any song that says, "right to the tree of life". It is a statement in the face of a life that questions whether or not that is true. "Lord, I got a right. Lord, I got a right. Lord, I got a right. I got a right to the tree of life" (Work: 1940). Crossing over, tomorrow, in the morning when I rise.....all statements applicable to everyday activities that required change. This change had to be as drastic as death, but as important as life itself (Walker: 1979).

However, it is important to remember that the meaning of the song is placed in it by the singer. Some people say Canaan means Canada; crossing over Jordan means when I die. But in all earnestness, it meant Canada if it meant Canada. It meant crossing over Jordan when I die if it meant that.

## Effects of the Spiritual

Jesus, Satan, death and life, love and hate, heaven and hell, war and peace, violence and nonviolence, transitoriness, outcome of the poetic experience, a sense of well being, fortitude, commitment to freedom and democracy, awareness of a just universe, determination to struggle, resist, and hold fast, and heaven were all elements of the spiritual (Walker: 1988). Although the items we call "basic attitudes" or "prevailing attitudes" have been referred to in their original contexts, to

get a complete picture one should see these items in the total context of the philosophy of these folk poems taken somewhat as a whole (Small: 1987). They are the permeating influences of transformation as the spiritual poet envisages the process. Explicitly, one or more of them appears in almost every poem. "They carry the emphasis, the drive, the magnetic pull of the relationship between the life the slave lives and that which he hopes for and expects" (Peters: 1989).

Never did the slave excuse himself from the transformation process (Taylor: 1971). Again and again he offered himself as a sacrifice on the altar of his ideals. He was realistically aware of his shortcomings and of his crying need for personal rerouting. Remember how he sang, "It's me, it's me, it's me, O Lord, Standin' in the need of prayer" (Fisher: 1926). If on the last day he had to be judged on the wholesomeness of his personality, he was willing to begin at once to make the necessary changes. He did not intend to be found wanting. "He did not intend to use his powerful friends and associates for matters he knew himself to be personally responsible for: such as the purity and rightness of his own heart, such as his own courage and fortitude, such as his personal toughness and faith. When he sang of the demands of Judgement Day, he did so mainly to prepare himself against those demands. He knew that changes of such great magnitude did not come all at once. he Knew it would take time for him to change himself under the hardest discipline" (Thurman: 1975).

If the spiritual, on behalf of his ambitious fellow slaves was to turn them into a new being, it was going to be methodical about it. He did not believe in putting all the work on the Lord or on his son Jesus. The Deity is mentioned numerous times in the spiritual, but one person is mentioned many more times, I (Ryder: 1970).

Also significant was the spiritual, "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine", which is an interesting concept in relation to black people. It is an arrogant stance, because Black's moved as though they were motionless. In the early society, blacks had to go out of their way to be seen. This song makes it clear that in protest someone was sticking out. Some individual or individuals were going against the norm (Bogan: 1991).

Furthermore, most black songs are "I" songs. "We" is the presence of white people. If every slave or black says "I" then you have community. In order for Blacks and Whites to express community one must go to first person plural. But in the Black community the communal word is "I". Many times the word "we" when sung by Blacks is a cover not to say whether you will be there or not; for it may have been sabotaged by the whites. Or conversely, when the time comes "I" will be there (Ryder: 1970).

"The spiritual I is very much like the Whitman I" (Ryder: 1970). The slave is not bragging or complaining as a matter of course. he believes in self-reliance and self responsibility. He is willing to earn his reward, to accept his unique fate, to

develop his special talents. In his estimation the greatest thing that can happen to him on heaven or earth is fulfillment. Fulfillment will change him from a small spirit to a great one, and from a weakly to a strongly considered man. Only rarely does he have small faith in himself, but he wants the whole world to share his sense o growth (Green: 1984).

Because of the constant reference to the Deity and his guidance, the reader of the spiritual may sometimes overlook the explicit principles of character and right living which the poet required of his people. The Deity was all around, yes; the poet called on him for help, yes; but to bring about the hoped for transformation, the individual had much to be and do on his own (Ryder: 1970).

The slave perpetually makes known his passion for creative expression and education (Green: 1984). It is not his passion only; it is one shared by slaves in general. Often what is taken for simple religious participation is a determination to be a whole person, without regard for any religious activity. The slave life and the realization of being a slave inhibited the natural creative yearnings of the slave. He tried to get his creative expression back by making songs and singing them. the obvious inference is that he would have used any channel, religious or secular, to fulfill this essential part of his life.

## CONCLUSION

The religious African heritage of the slaves included a

custom of parable and prophecy that enhanced their abilities to incorporate much of the Bible stories into the spirituals. Constantly striving to give voice to their experiences, slaves found a ready-made text in the story of the children of Israel. "They utilized these stories in songs, developing a communication network of double, triple, and more meanings. This deception was possible because of the master's religious hypocrisy. This indirect mode of expression utilizes metonymic devices to create metaphors and ambiguities, and is well known as one of the characteristics that distinguishes the art of the East from that of the West. Multiple-meaning texts also characterize traditional traits in African and African American music" (Lawrence: 1987). This ambiguous mode not only masks much of the meaning but also much of the fundamental mood. Thus masters would be led to believe, or could choose to make-believe, that slaves actually were happy in the face of such apparent misery.

Placing the texts of "Steal Away" and "Go down Moses" into categories of conscious disguises for political and temporal expressions suggests classifying the whole corpus of spirituals in the same manner. Every reference to crossing the Jordan does not mean escape to the North; every Israelite battle does not mean slaves' struggle for freedom; every reference to Elijah's chariot or the gospel train does not allude to the Underground Railroad; and every trumpet blast from Judgement day does not mean emancipation. The body of spirituals must be seen as a communication system created and utilized by the slaves who used

metonymic devices to present metaphors while disguising many other metaphors.

Black spirituals are a living history book filled with recorded strategies for freedom, escape to better lands, and for seeking justice from a Christian God. Its secret messages and coded words communicate the history of a people's attempted rebellions, modes of accommodation, techniques of survival, as well as explicit and implicit means of freedom.

## Epilogue

"These songs are to the Negro culture what the works of the great poets are to the English culture: they are the soul of the race made manifest....But the sufferings [he] has undergone have left an indelible mark on the Negro's soul, and at the present stage he suffers from an inferiority complex which finds its compensation in a desire to imitate the white man and his ways; but I am convinced that in this direction there is neither fulfillment nor peace for the Negro."

(Robeson: 1981)

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