A STUDY OF THE AFRO-AMERICAN ORAL TRADITION WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE FORMAL ASPECTS OF THE POETRY OF SPIRITUALS

By

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DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I hereby declare that the whole of this dissertation, unless specifically indicated to the contrary in the text, is my own original work and that it has not been submitted for any degree at any other university.

B.E. NOBIN

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a study of the Afro-American oral tradition with special reference to the formal aspects of the poetry of spirituals. In the introduction, an attempt has been made to take a look at the value of oral tradition; the interplay between oral and written traditions; the use made of orality in a society that was denied conventional literacy; the concept and the definition of the term, "spiritual".

The organization of the rest of the essay is as follows: The sections are divided into four chapters. The first chapter concerns the origins of Afro-American spirituals and the anthropological foundations of the Afro-American oral style (anthropology of gesture). In addition, an attempt has been made to place the Afro-American oral tradition vis-á-vis the African oral tradition. The second chapter deals with key characteristics in the expressive phase of the Afro-American slave community with special reference to the dynamics of language usage. In the third chapter, there is consideration in some detail on the Afro-American oral composer and the transmission of the spirituals in an oral style milieu. The fourth chapter investigates stylized expression and is devoted to analyses of mnemotechnical devices within the spirituals. In the concluding chapter, an attempt has been made to take an overall look at Afro-American sacred poetic achievement.

I must point out that it is not my intention to embark on any technical analysis of the music form and configuration of the spirituals - that is beyond the scope of this essay. In including "representative" samples of spirituals (and portions of spirituals), I do not intend them to be seen as "islands unto themselves" but rather, each spiritual must be seen as part of the whole corpus of Afro-American sacred oral composition.

The question may arise: "Why a study of the Afro-American spirituals when there is so much to be studied on the oral

traditions of Southern Africa?" My response would be that the spirituals fascinate me for I see in them their widespread influence on the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements in South Africa. The Gospel song, so beloved of Pentecostal congregations, is an heir to the Spiritual. An enquiry on the sacred music and performance styles (improvisation, extemporization, dance, handclapping, shouts, etc.) of Pentecostalism will reveal that much of the Afro-American oral style still exists within the fellowship of Black and, I venture to say, all Pentecostal churches in South Africa with obvious nuances that vary from denomination to denomination. But, the spirited and lively sacred music is encouraged and preserved.

TERMINOLOGY

The terms "Negro," "Black," and "Afro-American" are, to all intents and purposes, synonymous and interchangeable. These terms do not emanate from personal choice. Rather, it depends upon the use made by those authors from whose books I have drawn my information. In essence, I chose to remain faithful to those sources whence the terms originate. For example, John Lovell uses the term, "Afro-American"; George Jackson uses the term "Negro"; and Dena Epstein prefers the term, "Black".

Moreover, it is not intended that readers discern a male principle in the references to "man," "he," or "him". The terms are inclusive rather than exclusive. Indeed, this very study is about the Afro-American community and, to this end, one must appreciate that the young, the old, the women and the men collectively contributed to the composition and dissemination of the Spirituals. I do make the point in my essay (page 6) that "the spirituals were folk products".

INTRODUCTION

THE VALUE ATTRIBUTED TO ORAL TRADITION

What is the point of culture, what is the point of literature, if it does not transport us beyond our time and place, beyond a narrow and parochial and even narcissistic idea of "relevance", and thus extend our sensibilities to other times and places and modes of feeling? Things do not happen in the arts at random, but as a discoverable sequence of events. To understand a literary tradition, it is necessary to observe it unfolding through time. It is necessary, in this dissertation, to place the black poets in their proper historical context, to trace influences, to establish trends and movements.

Afro-American literary tradition has its own cohesiveness, its own dynamic. The oral tradition of the African American should not be considered as tangential to social anthropology but as the imaginative expression of a culture, and because the culture's literature was oral rather than written is no reason to believe that that culture lacked sensitivity or structure. Any notion that Afro-American oral religious literature was primitive or naïve - an impression conveyed by numerous literary treatments - certainly does not survive careful reading or hearing. With many of its describers and evaluators, the spiritual has lived a cinderella life, full of belittlement and confusion. The spirituals, as a genre, trace the development of the slave's thoughts of himself, others and the world he lived in as he expressed these thoughts in words and song. There was always a social reference but only in relation to social experience.

Several Afro-American scholars have scribbled many lines, in praise, in defence, in explanation, in interpretation, in eulogy of the spiritual. They have mined out its religion, its psychology, its philosophy. But the vast wealth of the spiritual in terms of the social mind of a very powerful cultural unit has just been scratched.

THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN ORAL AND WRITTEN TRADITION

To look to written literature alone for the black American's poetic experience, means excluding a vast quantity of the beautiful and perceptive poetry that can be found within the field of their unwritten literature. It has been common for such poetry to be ignored, even by those interested in exploring the wider range of the poetic imagination, and for readers of poetry to have no chance to experience the delights of, say, the Afro-American poetry of spirituals. To ignore this oral tradition - the basic poetic tradition - is remiss. The study of the Afro-American oral tradition must be an important concern to literary scholars who want to understand the process of literary development of the American of African descent and as an introduction to their written forms. This dissertation strongly stresses that the Afro-Americans were men of the spoken word and that their spirituals were compositions based on oral tradition. Rene Welleck and Austin Warren (1956:47) assert:

> ...the study of oral literature is an integral part of literary scholarship for there ... is a continuous interaction between oral and written literature.

Oral literature has been and continues to be a vital force in ordering and intensifying life for people who rarely read, or in the case of the African Americans, were denied literacy. Writing was always secondary, used for the purpose of preserving the oral message from destruction, whereas oral tradition was primary, sustaining and shaping.

THE USE MADE OF ORAL TRADITION BY THE AFRO-AMERICAN SLAVES

A very strong tradition of orality developed among Afro-American slaves who did not have conventional "literacy" and so used oral modes both to express themselves creatively and to educate. Early in the seventeenth century, Americans of African descent began to find a strangely satisfying expression for their thoughts and feelings in music. The songs which resulted, now known as Afro-American spirituals,

have been a powerful influence on the American nation as a whole. They marked a beginning of poetic expression as influential on subsequent poets as the music has been on later composers. Indeed, long after formal emancipation, a separate black sub-culture formed within the shell of general education and material progress, remaining a largely oral, self-contained society with its own unwritten history and literature.

Afro-American oral verse, dates back to slave days when the plaintive (and symbolically loaded) poetry of spirituals was sung among friends and family. The spiritual was transmitted from person to person orally and there was no way to effectively stop its transmission. Today many of the same devices, repetitions, refrains, idioms, substance, overlapping, melisma, economy of statement, standard images, fixed words and formulaic phrases etc., may be found in the works of the finest of black American writers. Just as spirituals, seculars, and work songs were to develop from sacred music and clandestine clarion calls, through the beautiful transition to blues, so did their forms permeate the products of important American writers such as C.W. Chestnutt, Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison and Gwendolyn Brooks, to name a few.

As slaves could not read and had no use of English hymn-books, the memory was the sole depository of their sacred song. Also, in considering the old plantations, one should not forget that attempts were made to prevent newly arrived slaves from speaking African languages, in the fear that they might be used for secret communication. Legal restrictions on the education of slaves were introduced in the slave colonies. Denied the ABC's, the slaves with their poetry went underground and self-expression was obliged to become total. Thus began a century or more of a significant body of oral literature. The slaves possessed gifts of verbal inventiveness and literary expression of their rich colloquial speech in a high degree, and their spirituals were the genuine expressions of their eminently religious nature. Research has

revealed that the African, for thousands of years, had considered his religious faith and feeling as well as his urge to sing as indispensable as breath itself.

THE CONCEPT OF SPIRITUALS

If a folk song ever grew to epic stature, it was the Afro-American spiritual. The thousands of black composers and the irrepressible groups who picked up the songs and kept them alive and moving were certainly perpetually busy. They (the spirituals) were spread over the slave lands for hundreds of years. The spiritual was a language well understood in all its burning import by the slave initiate, but harmless to an unthinking outsider. Slaves resisted oppression and tyranny, they worked together and never moved without mutual consent. In a sense the spiritual really belonged to the slaves, because they were the ones that listened, and as listeners they strengthened the oral tradition: they were an important element of control. It is likely that although lines, couplets, or even entire songs may have originated with individuals, the community were the court of final resort. They approved or rejected, changed lines that they did not understand, inserted stanzas from many different sources wherever they pleased, sometimes sang a choral response unrelated to the leader's line and kept them in the storehouse of their memory, for oral transmission to the next generation or for circulation in their wanderings to other, sometimes remote sections. The spirituals were folk products.

The spiritual was the foundation stone of black song and black poetry in the United States. Oral poetry, by far, has been one of black America's most popular vehicles of literary communication. The spiritual, orally composed, transmitted and circulated by oral means, is the first identifiable black American poetic expression - it was the slave who used these songs as lyrics of protest:

O freedom! O freedom!
O freedom over me!
An before I'd be a slave,
I'd be buried in my grave

An' go home to my Lord an' be free.

(Traditional)

or a call to a secret meeting:

Steal away, steal away
Steal away to Jesus

(Traditional)

The spiritual began, it is well to remember, as a musical form, sung or chanted to some type of rhythmic accompaniment. It is important to note that when music (and/or dance) is added to poetry, it becomes song, but still remains poetry. In the spiritual, like all oral literature, subject and structure tend to be inextricably interrelated. These pure lyrics of the Afro-American spirituals employed music to carry their rhythm. When people create songs and pass them along orally, on the basis of memory, we have a description of what is meant by the oral tradition. There is also other evidence of the display of the African propensity for dancing, singing, instrumentalizing and poetizing, all four inseparable. The common criteria for orality - those of composition, transmission and performance - will be dealt with later in this essay.

As was mentioned earlier, in their actual performance many of the spirituals were sung, and a full scholarly presentation would have to include a transcription of the music. This has not been attempted here mainly because it would be out of place in an essay of this sort, designed to analyse the formal aspects of the poetry of spirituals rather than musical transcriptions.

Spirituals are much better known than seculars. They tend to be more eloquent statements than those of seculars, for they of necessity cloaked their sentiments, leading to subtle symbolism and imagery as more effective structural patterns and variations. It is on the level of style that spirituals have most contributed to the literary heritage; it is not merely **what** is said in spirituals, but also **how** it is said. Researchers (Lovell, Epstein, Courlander, Conklin and Lourie, Haley) have shown that it is its highly original mode of

presentation, as well as its selective emphasis of given materials that clearly identifies the Afro-American oral tradition. The very structure of the slave's language gave a peculiar shape to his reconstruction of experience, and an additional factor came into play: his own repertory of language. This included the number of words he knew, the combinations of these words he was able to control, and the overall strategies he was able to employ in order to obtain meaning. Add to such contrasts of language, the verve of African rhythms and counter-rhythms, and a new oral poetry was born.

When we speak of the Afro- American spiritual, it really must be mentioned here that Africa, from whose bosom the black American was snatched, should be represented especially by selections from its extensive and authentic oral literature that we call "folk songs". Ties with Africa persisted in the memories of the slaves who had been born there, and the memories they handed down from one generation to another. Documentation (eg. **"Slave Songs of the Georgia Sea Islands by Lydia Parrish**) has been found for the African roots of the Afro-American spiritual, its transplantation to the New World, its acculturation and its emergence into broad public knowledge. When the Africans were taken, their music went with them, merging to a degree with the White man's culture, but never losing its distinctive qualities. The history of the origins of the Afro-American Spiritual (African Source Theory) will be discussed in some detail in the next phase of this essay.

As a prelude to an appreciation of the poetry of the Afro-American spiritual, it is useful to point out things the spiritual has done and things the spiritual is. The following points have been selected from the comprehensive list provided by Lovell (1972:581-2).

THINGS THE SPIRITUAL HAS DONE

1. provided expression for inarticulate masses
2. developed human brotherhood

3. cast a potent spell that revivified the past
4. helped people to the simple faith which higher education left faltering
5. showed black pioneers at work
6. helped to supply a national musical and poetic expression
7. produced remarkable physical effects
8. told of universal striving and weariness

THINGS THE SPIRITUAL IS

1. inspiration and memory of the living heart of history
2. one of the most extensive and varied body of folk songs now alive and growing
3. one of America's greatest artistic achievements
4. an international, universal language
5. unique and inimitable
6. song of the Afro-American soul
7. groping of an uprooted African people, among alien words, alien customs and heartbreaking readjustments
8. the race's richest literary treasure

To summarize, the purposes of the Afro-American spiritual can be simply stated (Lovell 1972:198):

1. To give the community a true, valid, and useful song
2. To keep the community invigorated
3. To inspire the uninspired individual
4. To enable the group to face its problems
5. To comment on the slave situation
6. To stir each member to personal solutions and to a sense of belonging in the midst of a confusing and terrifying world
7. To provide a code language for emergency use.

The Afro-American spiritual had great variety of purpose, beginning with pure expression and communication, and fanning out over a wide field. It cried for a union of the folk against a common enemy and for the common goal of freedom of the body and of the human spirit. Through revelations

produced by anthropology, it becomes clear that the words of the Afro-American spiritual cannot be read with simple literalness. The song creators were aware that the folk had irrepressible drives and deep feelings that words could signify but not fully declare. They did their best to find the phrases and the poetic organization that would go as far as words could go in the chosen direction, and would suggest the remainder of the way. The folk understood and were grateful for the artistic fulfilment of that portion of their souls that needed airing. It naturally follows that if an interpreter wished to know the folk, the words of their songs were an incomparable indicator.

Since the spiritual was transmitted orally by all or most members of a culture, generation after generation, it represented an extremely high consensus about patterns of meaning and behaviour of cultural rather than individual significance. The spiritual depicted the reality and intensity of suffering, the oppression, the struggle, the hope, the joy and determination of the slaves; it inspired courage to remove the causes of that suffering. To the uninitiated, the words of the spiritual were, for the most part, completely unintelligible; but the Afro-Americans knew exactly what the few, apparently quite meaningless and disconnected words meant in association with a particular melody.

In sum, the spiritual can be described as a song of the people - the words and generally the music of which originated among the common people (slaves) and were extensively used by them. "Common people" refers to those whose mental development had been due not to any formal system of training or education, but solely to environment, communal association, and with direct contact with the ups and downs of life. These slaves were not uneducated; the unfolding of their consciousness had been merely the result of realistic process.

CHAPTER ONE

1 ORIGINS OF THE AFRO-AMERICAN SPIRITUAL - AFRICAN GENESIS

Central to an enlightened decision on the origins of the Afro-American spiritual, is an understanding of the influence of the African backgrounds. One needs to point out and characterize the basic African Folk from whom the American slaves derived; to study their attitude toward music and related folk forms, their uses of music, their motives and methods and the impact of music upon them; and to show what of their musical attitudes, techniques, and effects were transferred to the United States of America. There are in Afro-American religious songs certain perfectly preserved hangovers of African folk ways. When the expression "Afro-American Music" is used, it is intended to refer to a complex musical development which took place within the Black communities of the United States. In this chapter, the true nature of African musical accomplishment is comprehended as a far cry from monotonous chanting and tom-tom playing described by early visitors to the "Dark Continent".

The slaves were brought up in a milieu more open to memory and these memories were handed down from generation to generation. They sang sometimes in parts, strange words which were considered meaningless and clumsy in ordinary speech, followed by a much repeated chorus. Such is true in the following Afro-American spiritual:

I free, I free!
I free as a frog!
I free till I fool!
Glory Allelui!

(Traditional)

There is far more to Afro-American folk music than haunting melodies, plaintive themes, colloquial expression, humour and pathos. Explore the essence and development of Afro-American folk music; examine it in terms of its historical

and organic development and it relates to the oral and cultural traditions out of which it took shape. One needs also to take particular note of the imagery and other literary elements that made the Afro-American folk music an exceptional phenomenon. There is a cultural continuity and a relationship with other existing traditions.

Running through Afro-American religious music there is unmistakable evidence of a large and significant oral literature. If one looks at any single spiritual as just a "song" or an example, one misses the larger picture altogether, for it is in fact only a single point of contact with a rich and integrated religious view of life and that view is not naive or quaint - unless all other religious views are naive or quaint.

1.1 SOME PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS ON THE ORAL STYLE OF THE AFRO-AMERICANS

The Afro-American slaves came from many regions of West and West-Central Africa. The Yoruba, the Fon people of Dahomey, the Ashanti and various other tribes of West Africa had highly developed religious systems, complex systems of law and equity, a high order of arts and crafts, music and dance, a vast oral literature ranging from proverbs to epics, moral and ethical codes in large part comparable to those of Asia and Europe, and complex systems of social organization. Although certain musical characteristics varied from one section of Africa to another, the traditional religious music of Africa was reasonably uniform. It is difficult to imagine that huge numbers of African exiles gathered together in a new setting would forget everything they knew and become a vacuum into which the attributes of another culture could be poured at will. In the ordinary course of adjustment, the African and his descendants absorbed and learned from the dominant culture in which they found themselves. Those attributes of the master culture which were congenial

to their past learning, were taken over most quickly, while they clung to those aspects of African life for which they found no satisfactory substitutes.

It should be pointed out that the Afro-American slave who sang in a European language chose to do so out of expediency rather than from any real desire to communicate in a non-African tongue. Two factors influenced his choice. Firstly, the slaves who were brought to America came from all over Africa and were distributed indiscriminately (without regard to point of origin) throughout the plantations in the South. Secondly, because Africa was a continent with so many ethnic groups, with somewhere around a thousand different languages and dialects (in West Africa alone, there were nearly 250 languages and dialects), the Afro-American slave had little option but to choose English as the language of communication. If he had chosen to communicate in his native tongue, he would seriously have limited the size of his listening and participating audience. Wherever the African went, his soul was going to express itself in dance and song, and in spite of continued contact with American Whites, Afro-American religious songs retained their exotic traits.

Olin Downes (Parrish 1942:29) an astute observer of Afro-American performance styles, adds the following points:

> ... clearly and incontrovertibly the spiritual - as other types of Afro-American folk music - is of African origin.

and Downes (Parrish 1942:30) states that we should:

> ...get rid of the ridiculous theory that Negro religious music is an imitation of the hymns of the white.

Alan Lomax (1971:181) observes that:

> Afro-American music, considered as a whole, is a sub-system of a continental Black African style tradition that seems to be one of the most ancient, consistent, and fertile of world musical families.

1.2 RESEARCH ON THE ORIGINS OF AFRO-AMERICAN SPIRITUALS

In the considered judgement of researchers, the matter and method of the Afro-American spirituals were almost exactly the same as those found in specific African song. The capacity of the slave to adapt, while retaining the fundamental qualities of his music, is a theme for a number of close observers of the Afro-American spiritual. Jan Vasina (1963:264) points out in **Memory and Oral Tradition**, that:

> Remembrances once stored are never lost.

In a survey undertaken by Lovell (1972:485), the aspect most stressed by scholars on the origins of the Afro-American spiritual was:

> ... the need of the creative singer. The primary need seemed to be for musical and rhythmic self-expression; but there was need for escape from inhuman treatment; the deeply psychological need of people in search for security after having been torn from their traditional environment; the need to make meaningful responses; the need for overcoming the depth of alienation and for learning new cultural patterns for long-rooted feelings, beliefs, hopes and understandings.

The salient characteristics of oral tradition then emerged as products of the way people in an oral culture thought and talked about their situation in life. Their ways of thinking and talking in turn depended in significant part on the oral mode of communications they employed. Marcel Jousse (1990:29), a precursor in the field of the oral style, expresses this point clearly when he says:

> Memories are nothing but (gestural reviviscences, more or less incomplete repetitions of past receptions) which we re-enact in ourselves.

On the question of the amount of African element contained in the spirituals, some scholars (Lovell 1972:485-6) employed such phrases as:

> "origins essentially African," "structure evidence of West African oral traditions," "the slave's own tradition of folkmusic, folksong, and folkdance," and "significant African retentions."

"A long list of African characteristics was spelled out, including: rhythm, melisma, overlapping, leader-chorus technique, melodies, use of voice, ideas, attitudes, beliefs, cadence, imagery, handclapping, possession idea, speaking in tongues, verse-response, style of delivery, chant, choral polyphony, repetition, spontaneity, distinctive modality, pitch, numerology, euphony, onomatopoeia, and contrast" (Lovell 1972:486). Many of these elements will be discussed fully in the sections on transmission, form and structure of the Afro-American spiritual.

Research, therefore, points conclusively in the direction that the main traditions of the Afro-American song, especially that of the spiritual, were derived from the main African style model. Christian song style did influence the African oral tradition in America in regard to melodic form and, of course, textual content, but, in most other respects the Afro-American spiritual has hewed to the main dynamic line of the principal African tradition. This was not a blindly accepted heritage from the past. There was an ongoing, highly crystallized approach to communication and to interaction which brought new music and new cultural developments to live in all American black communities.

1.3 RETENTION OF RELIGIOUS CONCEPTS AND ATTITUDES

O.R. Dathorne (1974:56) states that:

> The African who practises a traditional religion does not only believe in a creator and an almighty God aided by a certain

> number of spiritual forces who are the intermediaries between Him, nature and man. He does not only believe in the power of God and of dispensation over man and the universe. He lives his belief in the most complete sense of the term.

Dathorne (1974:55) adds that:

> Since there is a "wholeness" to African group life, sacred songs belong to life itself. For they speak of man's relationships with his gods, his environment, and his fellow living creatures.

The widespread acceptance of one God in Africa, long before the white man came, is highly significant. This fact dislodges a pillar of White American mythology that Christian America supplanted dozens of pagan deities with a single God. Without doubt a variety of gods was acceptable to many groups of Africans, but the concept of one God was firmly established throughout Africa and particularly in West Africa.

The transition of Afro-American spirituals from African religious beliefs to America was therefore, a lateral, not a forward pass. In America, the African often intermixed the two, retaining the more practical and inspiring elements of his African faith. "Religious life was marked by retention of persistent concepts and attitudes developed in the African cultures. Among the more conspicuous retentions were the Afro-American's regard for "baptismal" or water rites, their view of the ecstatic seizure of an orthodox expression of faith, and the unusual importance of music and rhythm in worship. All of these elements were essentially a part of the West-African religious ritual, and were found to have persisted strongly in either pure or disguised form in a large part of African America" (Courlander 1963:7).

"The ecstatic seizure - getting of the "spirit" - fundamental in African religious experience was a commonplace characteristic of religious worship, "pagan" or Christian, throughout the black areas of the Western Hemisphere" (Courlander 1963:8). The reliance of the African upon spirit possession is one of the key

background factors in the study of the Afro-American oral religious tradition. The song text of a spiritual reflecting the nature, working, and effect of spirit possession is given below, followed by the titles of a few other spirituals with similar themes (Courlander 1963:240 ff.):

When you feel like moanin',
It ain't nothin' but love!
When you feel like moanin',
That ain't nothin but love.
It must be the Holy Ghost
Comin' down from above.
When you hear me prayin',
That ain't nothin' but love.
When you hear me prayin',
It ain't nothin' but love.
If you hear me prayin',
That ain't nothin' but love.
That must be the Holy Ghost
Comin' down from above.
Do you love everybody,
Taint nothin' but love.
When you love everybody,
Taint nothin' but love.
That must be the Holy Ghost
Comin' down from above.
When you feel like groanin',
It ain't nothin' but love.] (x3)
Children, that must be the Holy Ghost
Comin' down from above.
Do you love your preacher,
Taint nothin' but love.
When you love your preacher,
It ain't nothin' but love.] (x2)
That must be the Holy Ghost
Comin' down from above.

Titles:
"Ain't No Grave Can Hold My Body Down"
"Cry Holy"
"Ev'ry Time I feel de Spirit"
"Gimme dat ole Time Religion"
"O My Little Soul's Gwine Shine"
"Somebody's Knockin' at Yo' Do"
"Lord Has Laid His Hands on Me"

Only by realizing that the sung or chanted art was an expression of the wholeness of life can the significance and meaning of the poetry of spirituals be appreciated. In other words, because it was closely geared to ritual, ceremony, and occupation, it can be

called a complete activity. "In any discussion of folkmusic, the question or inborn musical talents is sure to come up. It has been a cliche, not altogether dispelled, that the Afro-American's sense of music was instinctive or at least biologically inherited from his African ancestors" (Courlander 1963:11). There was an African inheritance, but the inheritance was not biological but cultural. In a setting where everyone sang, where music was found in some aspect in almost every religious and secular situation, and in which participation was a deeply-rooted custom, the individual absorbed and became, to some extent, capable in the musical idiom of his culture.

1.4 SETTING IN LIFE

C.L.R James (Walker 1979:27) says that:

> The slave brought himself; he brought with him the content of his mind, his memory. He thought in the logic and language of his people. He recognized as socially significant that which he had been taught to see and comprehend; he gestured and laughed, cried (emotional gesture), and held his facial muscles in ways that had been taught him from childhood. He valued that which his previous life had taught him to value; he feared that which he had feared in Africa; his very motions were those of his people and he passed all of this down to his children. He faced his contradictory situation in a context in which he was thrown among people of different African backgrounds. All Africans were slaves; slaves were supposed to act in a specific way. There was no model to follow, only one to build.

The slave from Africa was denied the right to act out the contents of his mind and memory-and yet he had to do this! How was this contradiction resolved? What were the new forms created in the context of slavery?

A new community was formed; it took its form in the slave quarters of the plantations. This community developed its own "invisible" church, one designed to meet the needs of slaves. The slave community had its own system of communication based on the reality of the plantation. For the slave community, there was a need

to invent tools to attack and master reality. The slave community had its own value systems, reflective of the attitudes of African peasants, but at the same time borrowing from dominant American modes. It had its own language patterns, because of the isolation of the plantation system from steady European linguistic influences. All the slaves needed was a modest ability to understand English, and most of them, even the new arrivals from Africa, probably acquired that ability during the first decade or so of their life in the United States. The black community was the centre of life for the slaves; it gave them an independent basis for life. The blacks did not suffer from rootlessness - they belonged to the slave community, and even if they were sold down the river they would find themselves on new plantations. Here, people who shared a common destiny would help them find a life in the new environment. As music in Africa was chiefly a community enterprise, the creation of the new community in America was a perfect cradle for the musical transfer. Far from giving up his music, he merely went to business on a new stand. The evidence of African musical transfer in the research of reliable scholars is specific and overwhelming. The universal African conventions from Africa to America such as the theme by leader repeated by chorus or choral phrase balanced as refrain against the longer melodic line of the soloist in the Afro-American spiritual will be dealt with in the latter part of my essay.

1.5 DISTINCTIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF SACRED AFRO-AMERICAN FOLK MUSIC WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF GESTURE AND RHYTHM

In this section of the essay, it will be observed that the Afro-American put his whole body at the disposal of thought. Jousse (1990:8) informs us that "in man all is gesture".

1.5.1 Improvisation

"Books on African music usually comment on the tradition of improvisation in many cultures, while contemporary accounts of Africa demonstrate its longevity. The practice of improvisation among the slaves was not related to African music and dancing, probably because the European auditors did not understand either the words or the musical practice" (Epstein 1977:186).

Epstein (1977:186) states that:

> The earliest known mention of the technique of improvisation (a phenomenon of human spontaneity) in America was one of the first novels of plantation life ...

A perceptive observer (Epstein 1977:187), commented:

> The blacks themselves leave out old stanzas, and introduce new ones. Travelling through the South, you may, in passing from Virginia to Louisiana, hear the same tune a hundred times, but seldom the same words accompanying it. This necessarily results from the fact that the songs are unwritten, and also from the habit of extemporizing, in which the performers indulge on festive occasions.

The Afro-American singer often improvised; from this improvisation the chorus took up a refrain, and sometimes two choruses challenged and answered one another. The chorus may supply refrain or nonsense interjections, may echo the leader, may answer questions, complete a phrase, or repeat a phrase with variations. When the leader improvised, the chorus supplied a steady, identifying refrain. Songs would thus build up a powerful emotional crescendo. All these characteristics, unique to or emphatic in Africa, appeared over and over in the spirituals of Afro-Americans. The notion of oral

improvisation was deep-rooted in Afro-American oral tradition. It was apparent in numerous situations, some of them non-musical in character, ranging from story telling and preaching to simple conversations.

"A man telling a story or yarn, will often stimulate conversational responses such as "oh, Lord," "Yeah," "Ain't it so," and "It's true" at appropriate places" (Courlander 1963:80). The interplay of narration and exclamation sometimes set up a rhythmic, near musical pattern. The element of response in all these situations was paralleled in West Africa. It seems apparent that it was part of a long-standing concept of the relationship between a speaker, narrator, or singer and the group, and stemmed from a sense of community participation.

Wherever group singing took place, there was a natural tendency for two-part singing. The Afro-American rarely played **for** someone as Westerners do; he usually played **with** someone. Song was the bond of fellowship between men. In a typical call-and-response form, the leader made a statement of one or more phrases, with the chorus coming in at some point to add to the statement:

Let me ride. (Leader)
Oh, let me ride. (Chorus)
Let me ride. (Leader)
Oh, Oh, let me ride. (Chorus)

(Traditional)

In some instances the leader sang the entire song, with the chorus joining in towards the end of a line or phrase. In others, the response may consist of a repetition of the line sung by the leader. The value of the call-and-response form as a mnemonic device will be discussed in

the section on form and structure of Afro-American spirituals.

"Many descriptions of improvisatory singing comment on the satiric licence taken by the singers, who felt free to express in song sentiments that could never be spoken" (Epstein 1977:187). D. Epstein (1977:188) quotes from the reminiscences of a woman whose father served as a clergyman in the slaveholding states in 1855:

> The slaves on the plantation usually expressed approval or disapproval of the master's conduct in their wild songs ... No master had a right to make his slave work on a Sunday. However, we know of a minister who called on Negroes to go off home and to planting at once. This the slaves considered such a flagrant violation of morality and such a bad example, that they put him into their song:
>
> Leader : "T'was on a blessed Sabbath.
> Chorus : It rain boys, it rain.
> Leader : The parson say his prayers in church. (Chorus)
> Leader : He cut the matter short, my friends. (Chorus)
> Leader : Now's the time for planting 'bacco. (Chorus)
> Leader : Come my Negroes get you home. (Chorus)
> Leader : T'was on a blessed Sabbath Day. (Chorus)
> Leader : Here's a pretty preacher for you. (Chorus)

1.5.2 **Cries, Calls, Whooping, and Hollering**

Jousse (1990:13) points out in **The Oral Style:**

> One has to speak and "rhythm", like "value" or "volume", immediately gives a certain act of competence to speech.

This is applicable to the African who learned early that the human voice could produce more notes than any existing musical instrument. These melodic calls, unexpected birds of sound, were in the tradition of the Afro-American slaves. According to the testimony of a number

of older people (cited in Courlander 1963:81), calls and cries were used in the old days wherever men and women worked. There were calls to communicate messages of all kinds - to bring people in from the field, to summon them to work, to attract the attention of a girl in the distance, or simply to make one's presence known. There were still others, more aptly described as cries, that were simply a form of self-expression; a vocalisation of some emotion. A man working under the hot sun might give voice to such cry on impulse, directing it to the world, or to the fields around him. It might be filled with exuberance or melancholy. Laryngo-buccal, audible gesticulation prevailed for practical reasons. Courlander (1963:81) describes such a situation:

> It might consist of a long "hoh-hoo," stretched out and embellished with intricate ornamentation of a kind virtually impossible to notate; or it might be a phrase like "I'm hot and hungry," or simply "pickin cotton, yoh-hoo!" Sometimes this elemental music, carried beyond a single line or phrase, would take on the form of an elemental song.

The cry did not have to have a theme, or fit into any kind of formal structure, or to conform to normal concepts of musical propriety. It was often completely free music in which every sound, line and phrase was exploited in itself in any fashion that appealed to the crier. It may have been short and sharp, with an abrupt end, or like the West African cry, it could waver, thin out and gently disappear into the air. It may have consisted of a single musical statement or a series of statements, and may have reflected any one of a number of moods - homesickness, loneliness, etc. The clue often lay in the words as well as the music. One cry

heard in Alabama, went like this (Courlander 1963:83-4):

Ay - oh-hoh!
I'm goin' up the river!
For I'm goin' home!
So bad, I'm so far from home!
And I can't get there for walkin'!
Oh, Lord!

Field calls had some kind of communication. They conveyed simple messages, or merely made one's whereabouts known to friends working elsewhere in the fields. Calls of this kind had great importance to slaves who were confined by their work to particular fields, and who were not free to socialise at times of their own choosing with friends in other fields or neighbouring plantations.

Sometimes, just for the comfort of making one's presence known to others, a field hand would give a wordless call such as (Courlander 1963:83):

oo Who hoo-oo Woh hoo!
Who hoo-oo Woh hoo!

and from a distance, in identical musical phrasing, would come the answer:

Yeh-ee-ee, yeh-hee! Yeh-ee-ee, yeh-hee!

In slavery days, the field calls doubtless had a special importance. They were means by which slaves in an oral/aural environment could keep in touch with one another, and perhaps get around regulations of the overseer that isolated one work party from another. In early slave days, these calls undoubtedly were in African dialects, in so far as actual words were used.

If one considers the tonal aspects of West and Central African languages, the possibility is that many of the calls and cries were less wordless than they seemed. It is now well understood that African signal drumming, for instance, was based largely on simulation, through rising and falling inflection, of speech tones. Voice signalling in Africa was based on this same principle. In some instances, voice signals were not modelled directly on speech tones, but on the sounds of instruments imitating speech. Many of the early day slave calls and cries in the U.S. utilised these communicative devices. In such disguises, seemingly wordless messages could have been quite unintelligible to outsiders. Jousse (1990:229) affirms:

> In his battle against oblivion man strives to press into his service all those mnemotechnical tools that linguistic evolution automatically supplies to his lips.

What the Afro-American brought to calls and cries was something of his own music and imagery. Before the first Afro-American call or cry was uttered in the New World, Afro-Americans possessed a highly developed and sophisticated music. They were conspicuously knowledgeable in this field, and had well defined concepts of the uses to which the voice could be put. The ornamentations and free melodic and rhythmic elements could be heard in prayers and spirituals. Calls and cries were simply extracted out of the common storehouse of musical traditions.

Jousse (1990:19) reminds us that:

> Even in our day, in the countries of the orient, in Africa, and Asia, in order to alleviate the fatigue of

long and tedious tasks, people fall into rhythm.

1.5.3 DANCES

> Motor activity [was] the answer man gave to the excitations that came over him (Jousse 1990:20).

African style dancing was part of the cultural inheritance of Afro-American communities - the memory of it survived. Afro-Americans produced new-style dances. Often, there persisted African elements which gave a special character to motion and motor responses, rhythm, and the symbiotic relationship between sound and movement and between dancing and community purpose or meaning.

Two examples of the Negroes' penchant for dancing cited by Epstein (1977:5) appear below:

In 1721, an Englishman, John Atkins, arrived in Sierra Leone; later he wrote:

> Dancing is the Diversion of their evenings: Men and Women make a ring in an open part of the Town, and one at a time shows his skill in antick motions and gesticulations, yet with great deal of agility ...

Another observer (Epstein 1977:204) described how the Afro-American slaves, in their worship, enjoyed bodily movement and strong rhythm:

> One evening ... I was present at the evening worship of the negroes. It was not until the singing of one of the hymns composed by the Negroes themselves that the congregation became really alive. They sang so that it was a pleasure to hear, with all their souls and with all their bodies in unison; for their bodies wagged, their heads nodded, their feet stamped, their knees shook, their elbows and their hands beat time to the tune and the words which they sang with evident delight. One must see these people singing if one is rightly to understand their life.

While these rhythmists were dancing, the children would form a separate group of dancers, imitating the postures of their fathers and

mothers and mimicking their gestures; they continued dancing and singing until they fell asleep. The detail of children joining in the activities, tells much of how the style of dancing was transmitted from generation to generation. Jousse was well aware of such gestures and he says (1990:35):

> (In the child, reception) leads automatically to realization. Thus he spontaneously copies what he sees being done - mimicry and mechanical reproduction form the basis of most of his imitations.

1.5.4 HANDCLAPPING

Another commonly observed element in traditional Afro-American spiritual music, was the part played by patting and handclapping. Clapping was a normal way of providing percussive effects and maintaining a rhythmic pulse for singing. Thigh-slapping was also a commonplace accompaniment to old-time social dances and to certain kinds of singing. Handclapping was normally present in children's songs, play-party songs, and it is apparent that this musical device was of African derivation.

1.5.5 RHYTHMIC ORAL STYLE

Rhythm is movement pattern. Its nature is determined chiefly by what moves. In song rhythm, the mouth moves in patterns determined largely by language demands. With some kinds of songs, notably the spiritual, we have bodily movement, foot tapping, handclapping, marching and dancing. Such behaviour patterns lend their rhythmic elements to the songs with which they are linked. "This was the "uncontrolled" Afro-American style of singing - regular handclapping, body swaying, stamping, marching

and dancing and abnormally quick body - rhythmic exaggerations" (Jackson 1975:256). "The Negro, however, whose ability in speaking and singing English was rudimentary at best, allowed text-rhythmic misfits to go uncorrected. The foot rhythm or handclapping was the thing". Jackson (1975:257) says that the slave had been "bawn an' bred in de braah patch of foot-and-hand-rhythm". This Afro-American rhythmic skill development could be traced back to Africa.

An observation concerns the assumption that the essence of the spiritual - or any other musical genre - has been adequately explored when melodic or scale or lyrical characteristics have been probed. However, melody is only a single facet of the problem. The point is that early studies dismissed rhythmic elements, and many others, as a style of presentation, not recognizing that a style of presentation is in itself an integral part of a musical concept. Handclapping and heel stamping produced powerful, driving rhythmic effects, with the short vocal responses sometimes tending more towards musical sounds than words. In them (dance motifs), one can see concepts of posture and motion which are related, even if distantly, to those of the African dancer.

1.5.6 **RING SHOUT**

Another way in which the slave reacted to the action upon him was the ring shout. It was a particularly interesting example of hybridized but recognizable African survival. "The shout... was a religious or semi-religious activity combining music, devotion, and movement. It was a cluster of thinly disguised and diluted elements of West African religious

practices" (Courlander 1963:194). It took place in the "church", in some semi- religious setting such as the "praise-house," or in the open.

"In its customary form, the ring shout consisted of a circle of people moving single-file (usually counter-clockwise) around a central point, to the accompaniment of singing, stamping, and heel clicking. In some instances, the participants tapped (in effect, drummed) on the floor rhythmically with sticks to produce percussion effects. The steps were akin to a shuffle, with free foot movement prohibited, and little versatility permitted" (Courlander 1963:194).

"The tempo would build up gradually, singing interspersed with exclamations characteristic of some other Afro-American church services, until it reached a tense peak close to an ecstatic breaking point. At the high point of the excitement, such exclamation as "oh Lord!" and "Yes, Lord!" turned into nonsense sounds and cries; seemingly wild emotional responses, they nevertheless were related to the religious music as a whole" (Courlander 1963:194-195).

"The shout was a fusion of two seemingly irreconcilable attitudes towards religious behaviour. In most of Africa, dance, like singing and drumming, was an integral part of supplication. Not all religious rites in Africa included dancing, but most of them did; certainly at some stage of supplication dancing played an essential role. Among West Africans, dancing in combination with other elements was regarded as a form of appeal to supernatural forces, and this tradition remains alive" (Courlander 1963:195). The circular movement,

shuffling steps and stamping conformed to African traditions of supplication.
It must be stressed that slaves brought to Christian service religious traditions of their own, as well as established methods of treating musical and invocational ideas. They had clear-cut concepts of the role of music in life. Music permeated virtually every important phase of living in Africa, from birth to death. Singing related to religious activity had a specific character and specific requirements. Most West and Central Africans had their own concepts of a supreme (though not necessarily exclusive) deity. In many instances, this deity tended to be somewhat remote and their dealings - supplications, invocational and placative - were with lesser supernatural beings. "Postures and gestures, the manner of standing, the bent knees, the feet flat on the floor or ground, the way the arms were held out for balance or pressed against the sides, the movements of the shoulders, were all African in conception and derivation" (Courlander 1963:195-196). Jousse (1990:23) points out that :

> The more excitable an organism, the more dynamogenous.

The spiritual dancing was believed to increase the religious understanding of the participants: As in the shouts, ecstatic seizures or possessions took place. Epstein (1977:23) describes one such occasion:

> Following the close of the prayer-meeting, "at a given signal of the leader, the men will take off their jackets, hang up their hats, and tie up their heads with handkerchiefs; the women will tighten their turbans, and the company will form a circle around the singer, and jump and bawl to their hearts content."

Songs used in the shout were of various kinds,

> some of them clearly religious in content, others drawing largely upon secular experience and imagery but given religious character by interpolations, responses, and underlying attitudes. As with other Afro-American songs, the statement or idea may have been tangential or metaphoric. As the tempo and the emotions heightened, words would be improvised. Some of these songs were reputed to have lasted more than an hour.

1.6 SUBJECT MATTER OF THE SPIRITUALS

The subject matter of the Afro-American spirituals stemmed from heartfelt community reaction [intussesceptions] to people, events, animals, and things. The African Americans sang extemporaneous songs and recited historical events; they sang and created devout anthems and performed religious services, all orally. They had no books, for they could not read; but the anthems were imprinted on their memory, and they sang them with freedom and feeling. They often made up their own words and tunes, and the anthems and psalms which the Afro-Americans had themselves composed had a peculiar naive character, childlike, full of imagery and life.

In attempting to understand the genesis of the Afro-American spiritual, it is necessary to consider the religious forces that helped to shape it and the impact of the Bible on the slave population. This will be undertaken in chapter 3. Thus, having recognized the presence of specific African traits in the oral compositions and the performance styles of the Afro-American, we are in a better position to recognize that for them human expression was gestural expression - "he went from corporage to mannuelage to langage" (Jousse 1990:96).

CHAPTER TWO

2 KEY CHARACTERISTICS IN THE EXPRESSIVE PHASE OF THE AFRO-AMERICAN FOLK COMMUNITY

As one reviews the body of spirituals, one discovers that the African in America gradually lost his native languages but retained his philosophy, religious practices, poetry, song and dance. The matter of a shift in language is utterly insignificant. For centuries African tribesman have been bilingual and trilingual and surrounded by numerous languages. Lovell (1972:77) notes:

> There is solid evidence that the African slave never stopped singing, but merely changed languages as he has done on innumerable occasions in the past.

Black Americans can look back to a linguistic and cultural history unique in U.S.A. Their West African ancestors began arriving in Virginia just twelve years after the British. West Africans came under compulsion and could only expect slavery. European colonists dictated not only the arrival of the West Africans in the United States but also where and how they lived. The institutions of slavery and racism made it impossible for slaves to assimilate to the dominant culture as European colonists could, or to maintain their culture under circumstances of their own choosing. As a result of all these conditions, black American speech developed differently from any other American language variety. Nancy Conklin and Margaret Lourie (1983:172) maintain:

> Demographic, social and political context, cultural values, and language factors all contribute to create an environment that encourages or inhibits language shift.

The West Africans imported by European slave traders brought with them a wide variety of native tongues. But the conditions of servitude made it impossible for them to maintain homogeneous language communities. At the same time, their social isolation made it equally impossible for

them to assimilate completely to European speech. Less social contact meant that blacks had less opportunity - and probably less desire - to perfect their English. Moreover, within the closed system of plantation societies, blacks greatly outnumbered whites. Their considerable numbers and social isolation guaranteed that many black Americans would speak a language of their own. And circumstances dictated that this language could not replicate that of either their black ancestors or their white masters. As a result, they evolved an African - influenced variety of English, traces of which still survive in the speech and writings of many black Americans. Lovell (1972:130) affirms:

> There must be a capacity within the community for reactions to things; there must be a need for expression; there must be a common language ... and there must be a fully developed craft and art of expression.

2.1 THE DYNAMICS OF LANGUAGE USE

Once it is understood that no living language remains static, the branching of a common ancestor language into divergent varieties can be seen as a natural process. As groups of speakers migrate from a common language centre, they lose touch with other members of their original language community. Peter Trudgill (1974:181) explains this point clearly:

> All languages are subject to change, and they are all the products of influence and admixture from other languages.

In the case of the Afro-American, the transition from multilingualism to monolingualism in the dominant tongue began with borrowing. Borrowing occurred most readily - if most superficially - at the level of vocabulary. Commonly, it began when cultural contacts created vocabulary deficiencies in the native tongue as its speakers encountered new objects, new situations and new ideas. When interaction with the dominant language community became frequent and on-going, borrowing became so extensive that users of the

American variety could not understand speakers of the homeland variety. If I understand Jousse (1990:98), only by replacing the spirituals in the Afro-American environment where they originated can they be fully and correctly understood.

2.2 HISTORICAL, SOCIAL, AND POLITICAL FACTORS INFLUENCING LANGUAGE

Many developments in the field of Afro-American language have to be viewed against the historical background and Trudgill (1974:59) asserts:

> ... the subject (of language) as a whole is fraught with various social and political implications.

In taking the aspects of historical, political and social backgrounds of the language of spirituals, and in studying these, I have tried to formulate a cohesive argument to show that language was an important concomitant of ethnic-group membership. For the Afro-American slaves, these common backgrounds provided a magnetic field in which every member of the group was caught.

Between 1619 and 1809, slaves were imported to the American South from the West African coast - first mainly from Senegal, Guinea, the Slave Coast (parts of present-day Ghana, Togo, Benin, Nigeria) and later farther south in Nigeria, the Congo, and Angola.

FIGURE 1 LANGUAGES OF WEST AFRICA

SOURCE : CONKLIN AND LOURIE 1983:209

These West Africans originally spoke a variety of languages (Mende, Ewe, Ibo, and Wolof, to name a few), primarily from the Niger-Congo language family (see Figure 1). Yet these African native languages seldom survived intact for even a single generation in the New World. Jousse (1990:96) states that "an individual living in a particular society expresses himself in the language which that particular milieu imposes upon him". The Afro-American slaves could not use their native tongues to communicate with each other since, as stated previously, slave traders punished the use of native languages and often separated members of the same language community to prevent conspiracy. On any given plantation, slaves would speak a number of different and often unrelated languages - a situation which made their native tongues useless for communicating with one another, much less with their masters. Consequently, the Afro-Americans had no choice but to abandon their native languages and had to learn quickly how to communicate with the white who controlled their fate. Epstein (1977:74) states that "the Africans were faced with the necessity for some

kind of accommodation with their white masters". And to communicate with those around him, the slaves had to learn a new language as soon as possible. Thus, they developed a creole language which combined elements of West African languages with English.

2.3 CREOLE ENGLISH

Cut off from their own linguistic roots yet denied sufficient access to the language of their masters, slaves developed a **plantation creole** in which English, as the superstrate language, contributed most of the vocabulary while the substrate West African languages provided numerous grammatical features. Trudgill's (1974:61) definition of creole is given below:

> Simply put, however, the term **creole** is applied to a pidgin language which has become the native language of a speech community, and has therefore become expanded again, and acquired all the functions and characteristics of a full natural language.

Plantation creole was preserved longest among the field slaves, who came into least contact with whites. They continued to speak a creole English with a number of African features. Segregated policies precluded cultural assimilation and undoubtedly retarded linguistic assimilation too. Segregation, poverty, and, in a different way, black separatism had all operated to keep black Americans a relatively cohesive speech community.

Creole was complex enough in both vocabulary and grammar to serve the full range of needs for speech and song, whether intimate or formal in style, mundane or philosophical in nature. Creole had some sort of social reality. It was a more congenial partner to truth in spite of its imperfections. It is clearly inaccurate to consider creole debased or unstructured. On the contrary, it testifies to the ingenuity and adaptability which one language community can display

when confronted by a pressing need to communicate with another. Communication succeeded most readily when interlocutors adhered to the same standards for the language, both attitudinally and behaviourally. Folk expression was an intragroup thing. Those with whom the folk shared a consensus about language structure, language use, and norms for interaction constituted the speech community, within which the speakers' intent and listeners' comprehension meshed.

2.4 LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION AMONG THE AFRO-AMERICANS

Language was "taught" as it is taught in the elementary phases among literate peoples. Elders taught single words by constant repetition, making a sort of game of learning; and the listener's own restless activity resulted in the development of language habits. (Jousse (1990:94) states that "miming is the first impression, the first language of humanity and of the human being". Parents and elders regularly talked with the children and, in so doing, they transmitted their values and beliefs. Such activities expanded the child's vocabulary and store of ideas rapidly.

Language instruction among the Afro-Americans was given also in connection with story-telling, singing and "oratory". It is easy to see how such training as this served to stimulate the community's imagination and ambition, discipline their habits of thought and speech, and enlarge their stock of words, images and concepts. Professor J.Z. Young (1951:91) notes:

> In learning a language, therefore, a person not only gains the advantages of communication with his fellows; he also sharpens his own observation.

Among the Afro-Americans, poetry was invariably sung or chanted, not recited. Lullabies were sung to children, and songs were important parts of religious ceremonies and communal entertainment. Children and members of

the community, therefore, learned the spirituals very much as they did other aspects of culture - by imitation, stimulated and guided by the others.

Lacking a written mode, the Afro-Americans were especially dependent upon speech and song in organizing, refining, preserving and communicating ideas. While this imposed a limit upon the development of thought and language, and while African Languages were of various degrees of richness and complexity, it may be said that in general the acquired language of the Afro-American was an adequate medium of communication and expression for works of the imagination.

2.5 SPECIFIC ELEMENTS OF LITERATURE IN THE SPIRITUALS

Many of the unconscious aspects of speech styles and non-verbal behaviour survived in the shift from homeland languages to the African-influenced variety of English. Examples of spirituals included in this study will demonstrate that, far from being "illogical" or "preliterate", the language of the Afro-Americans was subtle and systematic and full of invention and device - though its history made it a different variety of English. Having examined the language of the spirituals, I am convinced that there can be no valid arguments for considering it linguistically inferior to, say, standard English. Perhaps the most usual misinterpretation is to read a folk song such as the spiritual "literally," that is, without regard to the peculiar language of the folk community. Consider, for example, the language of a close family when members are communicating with each other. It is full of oral shorthand, symbol, meaningful but peculiar accent, irony and significant silences. These elements are not embellishments; they are the natural routine of close communication. The same sort of thing was true of the communication of the Afro-American community.

While only a few representative samples of Afro-American spirituals are referred to in this section, they are adequate to show the meanings and flavour radiated by the total group that followed normal pathways of oral tradition. The quality of the spirituals obviously depended upon the depth of involvement of the folk community and the success of the artistic devices employed. It is necessary to mention too, that the creators perpetually used stock phrases and patois in spirituals, all of which were intimately understood by the general community. Jousse (1990:45) points out that "patois is not mere gross and formless jargon but is the brother of our literary language, and it has the advantage of being transmitted solely by oral tradition..."

2.5.1 **HUMOUR**

Afro-American oral poetry was historically livened with its own unique humour steeped in irony. The following spiritual illustrates this:

> Our fader, who are in heaven
> Whiten man owe me 'leven, pay me seven,
> Thy Kingdom Come, Thy will be done
> And ef I hadn't tuck that, I wouldn't get none.
> (Traditional)

Another spiritual that inspired humour reads:

> Ol' Satan is mad an' I'm so glad, ...
> He missed de soul he thought he had,
> Oh, sen' - a dem angles down.
> (Traditional)

From the above spirituals, it is evident that with the Afro-American, certain ways of expressing humour were favoured. Punning too, was considered a very clever form of humour among the Afro-American slaves but scorned as low humour by others. In fact, subtle forms of humour entirely escaped the notice or ethnic

outsiders chiefly because they did not understand why a certain thing was said at all. In the spirituals, as a point of interest, the quality of such traditional American comedians as Bill Cosby and Redd Fox reflects the same attitudes, as well as the devastating art of understatement - still another basic characteristic of Afro-American oral style.

2.5.2 PERSONAL PRONOUNS AND FAMILY AND COMMUNITY TERMS

Personal pronouns were greatly favoured, hence its great efficacy from the mnemotechnical point of view. Most spirituals declared a presupposed "You" or "I". Side by side with the personal pronouns were the family and community terms (beloved of the African mind): "Father," "brother," "sister," "mother," "children," "sinner," etc. Much as they relied upon the divine power, the slave poets (and the host of slaves for whom they were spokesmen) did not overlook the strength in community. The song composers did not depart from the African reverence for family. The poets had a keen sense of being surrounded by an attentive audience which was ready to share and imbibe their sentiments. Sharing sentiments was indeed one of the hallmarks of the family and community spiritual. The song composers were explicit about the fellow members of their community, whom they naturally expected to become involved in their songs. The pronouns, family, and community terms had a concrete reality; they were always significant.

Below are some of the spirituals (cited in Lovell 1972:275-279) which make emphatic use of personal pronouns, family and community terms:

a) **I** want **my sister** to go with **me**
To feast on the heavenly manna.

b) **My** lovin' **brother**,... **My** lovin' **sister**,
When the world's on fi-yah
Don't **you** want Chris' bosom
To be **yo'** pillow?

c) Ain't **you** glad, ain't **you** glad
You got good religion?

d) Walk togeder, **children**, Don't **you** get weary...
Talk togeder, **children**, Don't **you** get weary...
Sing togeder, **children**, Don't **you** get weary...

e) **Brother** (**sister**, **sinner**) **you** shall reap what **you** sow
On the mountain, in the valley;
An' a **brothers** an' **sisters** an all, ...
You'd better be ready when de roll is call
An' Hallelujah to dat lam'.

2.5.3 VOCATIVES

The slave poets and all the singers knew that the breaking down of the group morale of the slaves was considered to be a necessity of the governing classes. The emphatic and persistent use of vocatives in many spirituals had the primary purpose of holding the community together, of encouraging the community to look upward, of carrying a direct or implied warning to the community. In a sense, the vocatives served a didactic function. This device may seem ineffective on paper but was most compelling when spoken, sung or chanted.

a) **Keep praying'**
I do believe
We're a long time waggin' o' de crossin.
Keep prayin'
I do believe
We'll get home bimeby.
(Lovell 1972:277)

b) **Turn** sinner, **turn**,
May the Lord help - a yo' to turn;
O turn, Why will yo' die?
(Jackson 1975:153)

c) **Watch out**, my sister, how you walk on the
cross; ...
Yo' foot might slip an' you soul get lost.
(Lovell 1972:278)

2.5.4 FIGURES OF SPEECH

Figure of speech was a staple of Afro-American oral literature. It was an outstanding quality and accomplishment of the Afro-American spiritual. The similes, the metaphors, the personification and other figures were generally bold and were used to achieve special meaning and effect. Figures were integral to the functioning of language for these spontaneous peoples. While conceding a common source (the Bible) and some similarities in words, it is apparent that figures of speech in Afro-American spirituals were unique.

2.5.4.1 SIMILE

The following spirituals demonstrate the preponderance of evidence:

a) Is there's anybody here **like weeping Mary**
Call upon your Jesus and he'll draw nigh.
O Glory, Glory hallelujah
Glory be to my God who rules on high.
(Jackson 1975:151)

b) Went to the graveyard the other day,
I feel **like my time ain't long,**
I looked at the place where my mother lay,
I feel **like my time ain't long,**
I feel like, I feel like, I feel **like my time ain't long**
I feel like, I feel like, I feel **like my time ain't long.**
(Work 1941:135)

c) Oh praise an' tanks! De Lord he come
To set de people free;
An' massa tink it day ob doom,
An' we ob jubilee
De lord dat heap de Red Sea waves
He jus' **as 'trong as den.**
(Epstein 1977:257)

d) O, in - dat ark de little dove moaned,
An' a hallelujah to dat lam"
Christ Jesus standing **as de corner stone,**
An' a Hallelujah to dat lam'.
(Lovell 1972:247)

e) O the religion that my lord gave me,
Shines **like a mornin'star.**
O Brother [mother, sister] you'd better believe, believe
To shine **like a mornin' star.**
(Lovell 1972:316)

f) If you cannot sing **like Angels,**
If you cannot pray **like Paul,**
You can tell the love of Jesus,
You can say he died for all.
(Lovell 1972:287)

g) Ol Satan's jes' **like a snake in de grass...**
He's watchin' to bite yo' as - a yo' pass.
(Lovell 1972:299)

2.5.4.2 COMPARISON

Susanne Langer (1942), in her chapter on "Life Symbols" discusses:

> ... the need to symbolise experiences is as basic a drive in the human beings as the need for food ... it makes them aware of comparison as a principle of human thought.

This view is relevant to this study when it is understood that the Afro-American, without an impressive writing technology or literary training, was instinctively sensitive to ways in which the spoken word could be employed to manipulate thought and action in a manner aesthetically satisfying to himself and to those to whom he communicated it. Jousse (1990:44) contends that orally-oriented people habitually use examples and comparisons when they want to make someone else understand something. Examples of spirituals, in which comparisons occur, are given below:

a) De foxes have a hole and de birdies have a nes',
De Son of man he dun no where to lay his weary head.
Jehovish, hallelujah, de lord is perwide,
Jehovish, hallelujah, de lord is perwide.
(Jackson 1975:147)

b) We'll see our elders' glory;
But the angels seem to tarry
And the saints of God rejoicing ...
Our lamps are burning,
Our lamps are burning.
(Jackson 1975:157)

c) O my mudder's in de road, Mos' done trabeling,
My mudder's in de road, Mos' done trabeling,
My mudder's in de road, Mos' done trabeling,
I'm boun' to carry my soul to de lord,
I'm bound to carry my soul to my Jesus.
(Jackson 1975:171)

d) Ef my mudder want to go,
Why don't she come along?
Let dis warfare be ended,
Hallelu! Hallelujah! Hallelujah
Let dis warfare be ended, hallelu.
(Jackson 1975:191)

2.5.4.3 **PERSONIFICATION**

Another figure related to metaphor is personification, in which an inanimate object or an abstract concept is spoken of as though it were endowed with life or with human attributes or feelings.

The following spiritual personifies the abstraction, "death", as a robber. The personification of abstractions was standard in Afro-American oral tradition, where it sometimes became stereotyped. The value of this device for mnemonic purposes is quite obvious.

a) **Death** came to my house, he didn't stay long
I looked in the bed an' my mother was gone,

I looked in the bed an' my father was gone,
I looked in the bed an' my brother was gone,
Death ain't nothin' but a robber, don't you see.

(Lovell 1972:217)

b) **Det'** ain't you got no shame, shame?
Det' ain't you got no shame, shame?
Det' ain't you got no shame, shame?
Det' ain't you got no shame.

(Jackson 1975:209)

The figures with rocks are usually quite striking:

a) O **rocks**, don't fall on me,
O **rocks**, don't fall on me,
O **rocks**, don't fall on me,
Rocks and **mountains**, don't fall on me.

(Lovell 1972:217)

b) Went to the **rocks** for to hide my face,
Rocks cried out, "No hiding place,"
There's no hiding place down here.

(Lovell 1972:217)

As literature, the spirituals may lack many of the qualities which modern literary scholars require. But, one has to realize that the spirituals, some 6000 of them, were not written down book fashion. They were not in fashionable or, even, grammatically correct English. Most times they rhyme, often they do not; sometimes their rhyming is clumsy or banal. The rhyme scheme is often abcb, but again looking widely one can find many rhyme schemes. Often there is no rhyme. What is important is that whatever rhyme schemes were used, they were likely to be easy for the multitudes to commit to memory and to sing and to develop into rhythmic and harmonic patterns.

Many times the language is not literary at all. But like most folk songs, theirs is a language of the people; every spiritual, verse and melody was the product of a folk community. The hope of the creators of these spirituals was communication, dissemination and "osmosis", not inclusion in anthology. Even so, the spirituals, as the study has shown, possess a number of literary qualities. They have poetic exaltation and often a care for language in the best poetic senses. They have definite themes and theme development. Borrowing from the Bible and from other sources, they show a creditable, and sometimes a remarkable adaptive skill and result. It would be true to say that the Afro-American spirituals have outlasted, by more than two and quarter centuries, its original creators in the minds of Americans, without signs of losing strength. It has also built large new communities in a great many parts of the world such as Jamaica, Trinidad, Brazil, Canada, England, South Africa, etc.

CHAPTER THREE

3 AFRO-AMERICAN ORAL COMPOSERS AND THE TRANSMISSION OF BLACK SACRED SONGS IN AN ORAL STYLE MILIEU

In the preceding chapters, emphasis was laid upon the African heritage and the key characteristics in the expressive phase (language) of the slave community. My focus now turns to the next important concern: the oral composers and the Afro-American "ethnic laboratory". For my guidance, I draw upon the words of Jousse (1990:152): "the possibility of reconstruction is a function of the very essence of oral style and has a universal, application, **mutatis mutandis**." This chapter attempts to describe issues germane to our understanding of how the members of the slave community who were, for the most part "illiterate", exhibited complete dependence on oral transmission. Firstly, it seeks to demonstrate that the spiritual composer, in trying to make the memorization easier for his audience, drew from a powerful African oral style tradition and, again to use the words of Jousse (1990:151), "incorporated its stereotyped wisdom" and "mental dispositions." Secondly, the chapter will describe a popular agency of oral transmission. And, thirdly, it will attempt to explore some traditional methods through which the spirituals were preserved and transmitted among the slave population.

3.1 ORAL COMPOSERS

Summary evidence that the Afro-American song creator retained inextricable links with his African ancestors is found in many places:

Lovell (1972:104), supports the return-to-Africa connotation:

> The Negro creator never gave up the basic musical approach of his African ancestors.

Henry Krehbiel's evidence in Afro-American Folksongs (1965), cited in Lovell (1972:105), helps to demonstrate that the Black sacred songs and other folk songs belong in entirely different categories:

> ...the Negro spiritual is unique, rooted in Africa, and entirely different from any other folk song...

Bruno Nettl, **Folk and Traditional Music of the Western Continent (1965)**, has written:

> ...As in Africa, the Negroes of the United States have developed song makers who composed or improvised song, or who created material out of songs already in existence, and who became masters recognized by the community. (Quoted in Lovell 1972:199).

Miles Fisher, a Baptist clergyman, concluded in his doctoral thesis of 1945 that "the slave's central desire expressed in song was a return-to-Africa" (cited in Walker 1979:50).

Walker (1979:50) himself suggests that:

> The influence of the African form and function on the spirituals produced a musical literature that was and is a reservoir of the history or social statement that the singers made of the circumstances that impinged upon their lives and that they recorded in African style, in their music.

Before going further, it is desirable to determine the preponderant evidence that the African rootage was shared by all those who inspired, composed and sang the songs. It should be seen at once that the Afro-American spiritual composer concerned himself as definitely as did his African ancestors with making the most of his material environment, with social problems, with religious philosophies, and with creative and recreational interests. One, therefore, cannot understand the Afro-American spiritual composer without understanding the creative oral poet in traditional African society. To this end, one must turn to a

description of the traditional African artist.

3.2 THE TRADITIONAL AFRICAN COMPOSER

The artist in traditional African society was both inheritor and disseminator of the literature, its keeper, defender, protector and its releasor. He was spokesman for the society in which he lived, holding up its prejudices and directing its dislikes against what was discountenanced. He was not recognized as an individual, for he had no personal voice, but he was a highly respected member of his community. He participated in all aspects of group life and joined with his audience in all activities associated with existence. As would be expected, the very nature of the unique African communal experience affected the structure of the poetry. Dathorne (1974:43-44) points out:

> African oral poetry ... is not used merely as a vehicle of emotion, for often a more complicated and significant meaning has to be expressed. The poetry therefore is used for working out ideas, which explains why song has so prominent a place in primitive life ... it is even more useful in dealing with problems which trouble man and call for a solution acceptable to his ways of thought.

Various forms of artistic expression, spoken and sung and chanted art, had their own specialized artists. Walker (1979:28) affirms that troubadours, storytellers, and griots (official village historians) have been the history keepers. And as I have already pointed out, the traditional artist was a mirror of the group. Consequently, the degree to which he could convert his material depended on the material itself and the role he was required to play. Memory was the composer's most important attribute, but no creative display was merely a test of memory. Although the African composer associated his work with a body of material - birth, death, puberty, fertility, harvest, famine, marriage, tragedy - in most cases it was

unformed and only partly helped him to create. The fact that the oral tradition was a reservoir from which the composer drew meant that he was restricted; this was the formal limitation imposed on him.

3.3 THE LINKAGE BETWEEN AUDIENCE AND COMPOSER CAN BE IDENTIFIED IN THE AFRICAN ORAL TRADITION

In, **Listening for the African Past**, Joseph Miller (1979:7) makes a very important observation:

> By taking the perspective of an oral historian, as artist, the literature may be understood as influenced by the way he (the African) thinks, by the way his audience reacts, by his method of preserving and transmitting information, and by the way he and his audience interact in terms of the culture they share.

The audience was also responsible to this unformed ideal of art that was present in everyone's memory. The link between audience and the composer was their direct involvement in, and their responsibility to, the absoluteness of the collective experience. For his part, the composer knew how to capture the interest and stimulate the participation of the audience. H. Butcher's comment cited by Jablow (1961:342) merits attention:

> ...the various actions are uninitiated, and onomatopoeic sounds are freely used. Any misfortunes to the characters ... draws forth roars of laughter, and any magical or mysterious happenings elicit a chorus of grunts and exclamations of surprise

Thus we may conclude that the artist in African oral traditional literature came to mean everyone who participated in this creative ordering; the idea of the alienation of the artist from his audience is therefore incongruous and irrelevant. The artist refashioned the experience topically, he recast it locally, in every instance it was prescribed by social necessity, never by individual option. As W. Abrahams (1962:91) remarks:

> It was open to the raconteur to change the images handed down to him in a composition, and even surrounded salient details in his account with more local and topical allusions. A raconteur revealed his verbal virtuosity in the way in which he adorned the bare substance of his recitative.

The African griots were a case in point. They were the minstrels of Africa, and because they were tribally contained their songs were not about themselves but about the people to whom they were attached. Alex Haley (1977:8), a contemporary Afro-American writer, pays tribute to the African griot in **Roots**:

> ...I acknowledge immense debt to the griots of Africa where today it is rightly said that when a griot dies, it is as if a library has burned to the ground. The griots symbolise how all human ancestry goes back to some place, and some time, where there was no writing. Then, the memories and the mouths of the ancient elders was the only way that early histories of mankind got passed along ... for all of us today to know who we are.

Haley (1977:626) continues:

> ...these Gambian men reminded me that every living person ancestrally goes back ... and then human memories and mouths and ears were the only ways those human beings could store and relay information ... we who live in the Western culture are so conditioned to the "crutch of print" that few among us comprehend what a trained memory is capable of.

By now it should be evident that the traditional African artist was expected to reorganize the group experience because he was ultimately responsible to that absolute ideal of art present in the collective memory of the community. Cyprian Ekwensi (1973:217) stressed the need to consider "our (African) musicians, ballad singers, and dramatists as identical exponents of a common culture".

3.4 AFRO-AMERICAN ORAL COMPOSERS

Thus, against the background of traditional African creative and communal experiences can one truly understand the Afro-American spiritual creators. As

could be expected, the very nature of the unique African collective consciousness affected the structure of the Afro-American spiritual. Dathorne (1974:45) points out: "within it their artistic importance serves to bring audience and creator together and to help the audience to participate". The Afro-American song creators, in their attempts to reach a black communal audience, found particularly conducive to literary creation many of the organizing principles of traditional oral poetry, including the context of performance.

Acceptance of this talented individual did not rule out partial participation by the group in the creative process. Walker (1979:33) states that it was important to the development of the slave community's sense of group solidarity and that they created a music form in which they could all participate. When the composer created the song and gave it to the group, the group generally accepted, but reserved its veto power. It struck off portions that, in the singing, did not fit. It even added a phrase or line. Over the period and range of transmission of the song the group added stanzas, and often did so. But, Lovell (1972:134) points out:

> These developments take nothing away from the original creator. He is spokesmen for the group ... As a true poet he has the art of striking deep into the consciousness of his people ...

The Afro-American religious poet was creator because he was an individual with philosophy and style. Music was the vehicle for the transmission; and the oral tradition was the dynamic that allowed it to live. In a body of songs was a variety of philosophies and styles expressing a single community attitude. As is customary in African folk tradition, the community provided the material for the songs and the dominant themes; some genius in the community created the songs themselves. In Africa, this genius was carefully

designated and trained over a period of years. In America, he was probably well known to his local group, but his name has since become shrouded in mystery.

3.5 THE LAY PREACHER AS COMPOSER

A likely composer of a great number of spirituals was the black preacher. He had the knowledge, the memory, the imagination, the skill with phrases, and the requisite poetic soul. He had the leadership to impress his songs upon the earliest slave congregations and get them well started on their way. Wendel Whalum cited in Walker (1979:34) underscores the biblical basis of the Spiritual: "The Bible, more than any one source, provided the textual experience for the religious music which is at the base of a consideration of Black hymnody". The point must be made within the context of the holistic theological systems of Africa, all life was manifestly religious. Song-makers composed spirituals into which were woven various biblical references from the Old Testament and the New. The following examples taken from Courlander (1963:43-46) support the view that spirituals were compositions attributable to the lay-preacher.

In the Bible (KJV) we read in **Genesis** 3:7-9:

> And the eyes of them both were opened,
> and they knew that they were naked; and
> they sewed fig leaves together, and made
> themselves aprons.
> And they heard the voice of the Lord God
> walking in the garden in the cool of the day;
> and Adam and his wife hid themselves from
> the presence of the Lord God among the trees
> of the garden.
> And the Lord God called unto Adam and said
> unto him, Where art thou?

The spiritual creator refashioned it topically, recast it locally in song thus:

Oh, Eve, where is Adam?
Oh, Eve Adam in the garden.
  Pinnin' leaves.
Adam in the garden,
  Pinnin' leaves.
Adam wouldn't answer,
  Pinnin' leaves.
Adam shamed,
  Pinnin' leaves.
Adam?
  Pinnin' leaves.
Adam!
  Pinnin' leaves.
Where't thou?
  Pinnin' leaves.
Adam naked,
  Pinnin' leaves.
Aint you shamed?
  Pinnin' leaves.
Lord I'm shamed,
  Pinnin' leaves.

Courlander (1963:43) states that "it would be possible to put a large body of black religious songs together in a certain sequence to produce an oral counterpart of the Bible".

In the Book of **Revelation**, Chapter 5:1 we read:

> And I saw in the right hand of him that sat on the throne a book written and on the backside, sealed with seven seals.

The above passage was the inspiration for the following composition:

Well, who's that a-writin'?
  John the Revelator.
Who's that a-writin'?
  John the Revelator.
Who's that a-writin'?
  John the Revelator.
Well, book of the seven seals.

Confronted with new religious patterns, the composers found in the Bible prolific materials adaptable to the traditional dramatic statement. These creators felt impelled to translate and recast Biblical events into a dramatic form that satisfied their sense of what was

fitting. The end product was enriched by their African past and what they remembered from the oral tradition of Africa. It is a safe assumption that all Afro-American religious songs were understood by the slaves in the light of their own immediate condition of servitude. In summary, the spirituals were created and refined by the song creators and by the slaves themselves as religious and social statements about the context of their lives - a practice intimately connected with the African compositional process. Lovell (1972:244) speaks incisively to this issue:

> He (the spiritual creator) used the Bible, the world of nature, things around him, occupations, even other songs. But his poetic approach was different, often unique. He borrowed only the things that fit his poetic philosophy.

3.6 AGENCY OF TRANSMISSION - THE "INVISIBLE CHURCHES"

Having focused on the **agents** of transmission, namely, the black oral composers and their idiosyncratic restructuring of the spirituals according to the dominant interests of the slave community, something must be said of a major **agency** of transmission - the "invisible" churches. And, since my concentration in this essay is on the early slave congregations, nothing elaborate will be said here of the camp meeting tradition or the Episcopal, Presbyterian or Evangelical influences. Suffice it to say that the evangelists and missionaries were almost unanimous in opposing black preachers on both religious and political grounds and were intolerant of African religious practices blending with the formal (Anglicized) order of worship.

The "invisible churches" played a critical role in aiding the preservation and transmission of the spiritual among the slave community. Prior to the building of physical places of worship, the "invisible churches" of the Southern plantation gave cohesion and commonality to an oppressed people who had been snatched from their homeland and raped of their culture

and language. These gatherings were often contrary to the pleasure of the slaveowners and had no fixed site or meeting place. Thus, the term "invisible church" is used. John Lovell (1972:189) attests to this view:

> Most of the religious meetings that were meaningful to him (the slave) were secret meetings, proscribed by the establishment. In these he could let himself go, he could commune with his true friends, those to whom he was bound in danger as well as in faith, and he could sing, clap his hands, and shout. Here, also, he heard about Biblical heroes and events from the preachers and others among the slaves who came by the news in various ways.

In terms of sheer numbers, the greatest concentration of religious life and activity centred in the "invisible churches" of the Southland. It was in this setting, primarily, that the transmission and preservation of spirituals took place and, as a result, "Christianity was Africanized" (Herskovits 1974:213). The Afro-American spirituals fashioned in the slave warrens of the South provided the foundation which authenticated Black religious experience. At these clandestine meetings, the spirituals played a crucial role in worship style and was a key mobilizing force.

The presence of the music of Black religious tradition served as a device to fire and fuel most of the efforts, large and small for the liberation of the oppressed - personally and collectively. Stated another way, it was the "invisible churches" peopled with the masses which retained the music and worship that was identifiably Africa linked and which had been in the forefront of much of the struggle for freedom. Many spirituals, of course, seemed purely religious, and that is to be accepted. What is remarkable is that so many others were clearly calls for freedom or statements of dissatisfaction with the singers' lot, for example:

> Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
> Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
A long ways from home;
A long, long way from my home.
(Traditional)

The word "freedom" occurred with disturbing regularity in the spirituals, as did references to "home", and they evidenced an almost pathological concern for the plight of Old Testament Jews held in Egyptian bondage. The following plantation songs taken from George Jackson's (1943:148-181) **White and Negro Spirituals.** demonstrate freedom as a passion:

a) What ship is this that will take us all home?
O glory hallelujah!
'Tis the old ship of Zion, Hallelujah!
'Tis the old ship of Zion, Hallelujah!

b) I will meet chu een duh primus lan',
I will meet chu een duh primus lan',
I will meet chu,
I will meet chu,
I will meet chu een duh primus lan.

c) When Israel was in Egypt's land.
Let my people go,
Oppressed so hard they could not stand,
Let my people go.
Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt's land,
Tell old Pharaoh, Let my people go.

However important or unimportant the message of the black preacher, the music of the religious tradition, was a tool, a device, to raise the expectancy of the listener to a peak level or in the words of Walker (1979:33) "it was aimed primarily at the ear as the route to the heart as over against being aimed at the eye as the route of the mind".

The spirituals began, grew, developed and expanded in the "invisible churches" of the South. The oral tradition contributed to that development. The slaves formulated new ideas and practices of their own and the "invisible churches" were filled with ecstatic singing and climaxed in a frenzy of emotion. Worshippers had an appetite for music that was rhythmic and emotion inducing. The "invisible church" consisted of services

conducted among slaves and these meetings could not have proceeded without the instrumentality of the oral tradition. I have indicated in Chapter two that the sheer force of circumstance required the slaves to "adopt" the language of the master. This, coupled with Bible narratives provided the slaves with the raw material to fashion their own concept of God's providence and concern in the hellish condition of servitude.

Gradually, a sizeable body of spirituals developed in the slave community through the instrumentality of the oral tradition. Many of the spirituals learned by rote were making the rounds of the plantation. 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" (Roach 1973:9). Musical expression developed as the chief means of covert communication among the slaves of whom John Leland wrote in his **Virginia Chronicle** (1790), "were remarkable for learning a tune soon" (cited in Epstein 1977:111). Mention was made of the fact that the slaves, who were unable to get a formal education, cultivated memory as a substitute. Slaves who could not read knew by heart large portions of the Bible and a number of spiritual songs. In the preliterate era of slavery, the fuel of the "invisible church" was the musical expression constantly fed by the oral tradition. John Watson (Epstein 1977:218) mentions:

> "the coloured people get together, and sing for hours together, short scraps of disjointed affirmations, pledges, or prayers, lengthened out with long repetition choruses".

The religious poetic expression could not have developed or survived without constant reinforcement of this oral tradition, and thus as a device was indispensable to the development and operation of the "invisible church".

Perhaps the primary contribution of the "invisible churches" was the cohesive influence they had upon the general populace of the slave quarters. The spirituals were a major support system of the "invisible church" where everyone could participate, and the spiritual form and performance were non-exclusionary. As Whalum notes (1973:47):

> If a member of the group could not sing, he could pat his foot; if he could not pat, he could sway his head; and if he could not do this, he could listen and witness.

No doubt, then, the "invisible churches" were a major agency for the oral transmission and preservation of the Afro-American spirituals.

3.7 MODELS OF ORAL TRANSMISSION

Here I wish to point out that oral transmission was, for the slave congregations, a specialized act of communication whose principal function was to organize the response of human collectives in ritual or ritualized situations. There were well - integrated and highly cohesive group performances in which the participants conformed to an agreed-upon communication plan in a disciplined and orderly manner. Before doing so, it may be useful to recall that Jousse (1990:148), in describing St Matthew's approach in making memorization easier for Greek speakers, said: "It is not to be supposed that a popular audience could take in so much at one hearing." As for the approach Jesus used among the simple peasants, Jousse (1990:148-149) stated that: "His (Jesus') style must have been adjusted to slow-moving minds". Similarly, as the spirituals were transmitted by word of mouth, the style or mode of transmission to aid memory was an important operating force of the slaves' living oral style.

3.7.1 RESPONSORIAL OR CALL-AND-RESPONSE MODE OF TRANSMISSION

The call-and-response style of singing so familiar to them was ideally suited to the participatory service of the "invisible churches," where vast numbers of slaves required responses they could learn on the spot. In African oral poetry, for instance, the pattern consisted of alternate lines of solo-and-chorus. Dathorne (1974:53) illustrates such an example of an African poem:

Solo : O God of thunder and lightning ...
Chorus: (After each line) That thy seed may commingle with God's whose
dwellings are in the springs,
I will pray night and day.
Solo : O listen to my constant plea.
Chorus: (repeated)

The responsorial mode was found in many spirituals. This quality is another strong evidence of an African survival in the New World. African music was rife with this device that found such effective use in group or communal singing. It should be remembered that the authentic Spiritual form was not given to solo performance; there was frequently a solo or lead line that developed the framework for choral response from the group.

This pronounced responsorial quality is illustrated in the following example, "I Heard de Preachin' of de Word o' God":

Lead : I heard de preachin' of de Elder,
Chorus: Preachin' de word, preachin' de word.
Lead : I heard de preachin', of de Elder,
Chorus: Preachin' de word o' God.
Lead : How long did it rain? Can anyone tell?
Chorus: Preachin' de word o' God.
Lead : For Forty days an' nights it fell.
Chorus: Preachin' de word o' God.

Lead : How long was Jonah in de belly of de whale?
Chorus: Preachin' de word o' God.
Lead : 'Twas three whole days an' nights he sailed.
Chorus: Preachin' de word o' God.
Lead : I heard de preachin of de Elder.
Chorus: Preachin' de word, preachin' de word:
Lead : I heard de preachin' of de Elder.
Chorus: Preachin' de word, preachin' de word,
All : Yes, preachin' de word of God.
(Johnson 1969:90-92)

Though obvious, it must be said that both melodic and lyric repetition enhanced the life expectancy of the Afro-American spiritual with this built-in memory facility.

Lining out was a mode much used by the slaves to teach the spirituals to the congregation. Each line was intoned by some person before it was sung by the congregation. As the slaves had no books, the spirituals were given out by one or two lines, that they may join in the exercise. Other patterns of this kind that possessed the pronounced responsorial mode that facilitated preservation and aided transmission took the following forms (Courlander 1963:92-93):

1. Unison singing - the leader and chorus sang together word for word.

2. The leader sang his first solo line, followed with the response line, then sang his second solo line, after which the congregation picked up the indicated response. Each line of the solo part, except for occasional repetition, was different.

3. The chorus repeated in full the solo lines, each of which was different.

4. The leader sang every line twice, a fixed choral response followed each solo line.

5. The leader sang a line with one or more repetitions with the chorus picking up the last word or several words of each line and then singing the responsive part.

6. The leader sang each line twice, with an alternating choral response between.

William Beckford's descriptive account of the slaves' oral performance is quoted by Epstein (1977:188-189):

> The style or singing among the Negroes, is uniform ... one person begins first, and continues to sing alone: but at particular periods the others join; there is not, indeed, much variety in their songs.

Another description cited in Epstein (1977:225), gave more details:

> Their (Afro-Americans) hymns, or religious chants, might furnish a curious book. The words are generally very few, and repeated over and over again; and the lines, though very unequal, are sung with a natural cadence that impresses the ear quite agreeably.

In the oral style milieu, the Afro-American could not read, but he knew by heart a host of spiritual songs. The call-and-response and the solo-and-chorus methods worked like a flame . Through these modes of transmission which were not reserved for a few privileged individuals, the spirituals were assimilated schema by schema and disseminated by perpetual contact between those spontaneous people.

I have attempted thus far, in the study of the Afro-American oral tradition, to describe the oral-style laws. This involved detecting and analysing the language they spoke, the milieu in which the slave composed and assimilated the spirituals, the form or style in which he

received the tradition, and the oral modes used in the diffusion of the spirituals. My attention, in the next chapter, will fall on the basic structural patterns at the root of the composition of the spirituals with a view to understanding the various mnemotechnical devices used in the spirituals.

CHAPTER FOUR

4 MNEMOTECHNICAL DEVICES WITHIN THE POETRY OF THE SPIRITUALS

One of the most popular ideas held by the literate public and by some literary scholars is that there is no "art" involved in the creation and dissemination of oral poetry. We do well to remember that all literature began as an oral art and is still to some extent oral. Abrahams and Foss (1968:12) state:

> The creator/performer in a folk community works in a much more restricted manner than his sophisticated counterpart ... Even in those groups where he is called on to improvise as he is performing, he does so within a severely restricted form, using traditional verse patterns, tunes, and compositional techniques.

The point was made earlier that there persisted among black folk musicians a predilection for certain performance practices, certain habits and certain ways of shaping music to meet their needs in the new environment that had roots in the African experience.

The Negro oral composer or performer was obliged to use expression which was immediately understandable because of the oral nature of his presentation and the limitations which this placed upon his audience. He was compelled to present spiritual compositions that could be understood by the slave population almost as a reflex action. Furthermore, in such an orally-orientated environment, compositional pieces had to be memorable, for the slaves relied upon oral transmission to embody their knowledge and entertainment. Oral composition gravitated towards conventional expression and repetitive expression because they were more immediately understandable and retainable. Consequently, the poetry of the spirituals was filled with devices which aided memory.

The preceding chapter demonstrated how the slave composer/performer synthesized his group, reaffirmed its

values, giving it a feeling of community. His aim was a normative one, and his musical texture, forms, poetry, rhythm and melody were thus conservative - in favour of **status quo**. For the oral performance to function, the whole group had to understand and react to it. Thus the performers utilized expression which was similar to that used in the past and with a vocabulary common to all.

In this chapter a brief examination will be made of the mnemotechnical devices within the poetry of the spirituals. Jousse (1990:183) noted these critical facts:

> Man is, indeed, by nature "mnemotechnical", because he is intelligent. **Homo faber quia sapiens**. He creates stable, manageable frameworks whereby to preserve, in living form, and to transmit to his descendants, his past experiences.

and, again Jousse (1990:197) noted:

> In the battle against oblivion
> man strives to put at his service
> all those mnemotechnical tools
> most suited to the underlying laws
> of the human compound

I believe that what Jousse is saying is that man, by nature, has at his disposal a whole range of motorial, affective, and intellectual elements built into his organism which gives him an almost instinctive ability to re-enact for himself and others past experiences. Mnemotechnical tools enable man to easily and rapidly memorise a piece of poetry, a song, etc.

Within the body of the spirituals, the mnemotechnical devices give evidence of a conscious exercise of the oral composer's will: in order to make the memorization and re-memorization of his oral compositions easier for himself and his "repeaters".

4.1 THE USE OF REPETITION

Lovell (1972:215) points out that:

> Repetitions are mainly memory aids, and means of enlisting and holding the support of the group.

In addition, repetitions also have meaning: what is repeated is repeated because it should be remembered.

The most important characteristic of formal style of Afro-American religious poetry was a reliance on repetition to achieve coherence. Repetition was the primary organizing principle of the spiritual. It should never be forgotten that repetition performs many functions in regard to composition. According to Abrahams and Foss (1968:65):

> It (repetition) establishes a sense of familiarity within a specific piece that enables the audience to follow and sympathize, it provides points in a composition which aid memory; and in many cases it helps establish the incantatory feeling which encourages vicarious identification and the consequent enjoyment of the pleasure in the simultaneous contemplation of and enjoyment with the work of art.

Let us turn to examples of formulaic repetition observable in Afro-American spiritual poetry.

4.1.1 REPETITION OF A SINGLE WORD

Simple repetition, that is, of a single word was very common in the spirituals and was used for emphasis, memory and to provide continuity.

The following spiritual shows that the words were generally very few, and repeated over and over again; and the lines, though very unequal, were sung with a natural cadence that impressed the ear quite agreeably:

Oh, carry me away, carry me away, my Lord!
Carry me to the berryin' ground,
The green trees a - bowing. Sinner, fare you well!
I thank the Lord I want to go
To leave them all behind.
O carry me away, carry me away, my Lord!
Carry me to berryin' ground

(Epstein 1977:225)

The above poem relates to the moment of death, and in it are simple and poetic images which are touching even to the modern reader or auditor.

The second poem, "**O dem golden slippers,**" illustrates the creative use made of single words:

Oh, dem golden slippers, oh, dem golden slippers,
Golden slippers I'm bound to wear
'Cause dey look so neat,
Oh, dem golden slippers, oh, dem golden slippers,
Golden slippers I'm bound to wear
To walk de golden streets.

(Lovell 1972:284)

The composer's repetition of single words in the above spiritual deserves special comment. The word "slippers", for instance, occurs six times in the spiritual. It is the fourth word in the first and fourth lines and it ends the first and fourth lines. It reappears as the second word in the second and fifth lines. Repetitive use of other words is noticeable : the septuple use of "golden" and the double use of "wear". In addition to functioning as a mnemonic aid, the words helped to provide continuity between lines.

Because of their conventional nature there was a certain amount of predictability to the spirituals in Afro-American oral tradition.

4.1.2 INCREMENTAL ITERATION

The technical phrase to describe the recurring quality of the spiritual song is "incremental iteration." It simply means that a lyrical pattern or patterns exist in a line which repeat with only slight variation. This is frequently reinforced with repetition of the lyric line or verse, providing a double quality of being repetitive. Though obvious, it must be said that both melodic and lyric repetition enhances the life expectancy of this folk music with this built-in memory facility. One example, taken from Walker (1979:57-58) will suffice to demonstrate the characteristic of being repetitive:

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
(Were you there?)
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
(Were you there?)
Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble
tremble, tremble;
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Were you there when they nailed Him to the tree?
(Were you there?)
Were you there when they nailed Him to the tree?
(Were you there?)
Were you there when they nailed Him to the tree?
(Were you there?)
Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble,
tremble, tremble;
Were you there when they nailed Him to the tree?
Were you there when they laid Him
in the tomb?
(Were you there?)
Were you there when they laid Him
in the Tomb?
(Were you there?)
Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble,
tremble, tremble;
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?.

4.1.3 "WANDERING" PHRASES AND WORDS

There are some words, some phrases, some lines that reappear so consistently from song to song

that they can be regarded as "wandering" phrases and words. Freedom was a central passion of the spirituals and its creators. The word "free" appears in all three of the spirituals given below (Lovell 1972:116-331):

a) I free, I free!
I free as a frog
I free till I fool
Glory Alleluia.

b) We'll soon be free ...
When de lord will call us home ...
We'll soon be free ...
When Jesus sets me free.

c) Free at last, free at last, I thank God I'm free at last;
Free at last, free at last, I thank God I'm free at last.
'Way down yonder in the graveyard walk. ...
Me and my Jesus goin' to meet and talk. ...

On - a my knees when the light pass'd by, I thank God I'm free at last
Thought my soul would rise and fly, I thank God I'm free at last.

Eileen Southern (1983:198), author of **The Music of Black Americans**, makes the following important observation regarding "wandering" phrases, words and verses:

> There are, for example, the places to which the slaves refer to their songs - the wilderness, the valley, Jerusalem, Jericho, and the promised land. Any of these may be accompanied by adjectives - for example, "the lonesome valley" or "new Jerusalem."

To Eileen Southern's list, I wish to add Biblical items that abound in the spirituals:

> "Jordan," "Egypt," "Red Sea," "Canaan," "Galilee," "Noah," "Abraham," "Isaac," "Joseph," "Jacob," "Moses," (one of the most popular of the spiritual figures), "Pharaoh," "Joshua," "Gideon," "Daniel," (another extremely popular spiritual figure), "Jonah," "Mary," and "John the Baptist."

4.1.4 REPETITION OF THE FIRST LINE OF A STANZA

A number of spirituals use the technique of repeating the first line two or three times followed by a refrain - a formulaic expression described by Eileen Southern (1988:189) as the "aaab form." An example of such poetic form is given below:

We'll run and never tire. (a)
We'll run and never tire, (a)
We'll run and never tire. (a)
Jesus sets poor sinners free. (b- Refrain)

The lightning and the flashing. (a)
The lightning and the flashing, (a)
The lightning and the flashing. (a)
Jesus sets poor sinners free. (b-Refrain)

Portions of two further spirituals illustrating the "aaab" form are taken from Lovell (1972:217 and 243):

a) O rocks, don't fall on me, (a)
O rocks, don't fall on me, (a)
O rocks, don't fall on me, (a)
Rocks and mountains, don't fall on me. (b)

b) When I get to heav'n I will sing and tell, (a)
When I get to heav'n I will sing and tell, (a)
When I get to heav'n I will sing and tell, (a)
How I did shun both death and hell. (b)

4.1.5 ALTERNATING LINE AND REFRAIN

The alternation of solo verses with refrains was typical of many spirituals, thus reflecting what Southern (1982:188) describes as "traditional African call-and-response performance practices." An example of such a pattern is taken from, **The New Grove Gospel, Blues and Jazz**, (1980:5):

I know moon-rise, I know star-rise,
Lay dis body down.
I walk in de moonlight, I walk in de starlight,

To lay dis body down.
I'll walk in de graveyard, I'll walk through de graveyard.
To lay dis body down.
I'll lie in de grave and stretch out my arms,
Lay dis body down.

Another poem is taken from Lovell (1972:273):

Oh you got tuh walk-a that lonesome valley,
You got tuh go tha by yo'sef,
No one heah to go tha with you,
You got tuh go tha by yo'sef.

Jurdun's stream is cold and chilly,
You got tuh wade it faw yo'sef,
No one heah tuh wade it faw you,
You go tuh wade it faw yo'sef.

When you reach the rivah Jurdun,
You got tuh cross it by yo'sef,
No one heah may cross it with you,
You got tuh cross it by yo'sef.

When you face that Judgmunt mawnin',
You got tuh face it by yo'sef,
No one heah to face it faw you,
You got tuh face it by yo'sef.

You got tuh stan' yo' trial in Judgmunt,
You got tuh stan' it by yo'sef,
No one heah tuh stan' it faw you,
You got tuh stan' it by yo'sef.

4.1.6 COMPLETE REPETITION OF A VERSE AFTER EACH STANZA AS A CHORUS

Another repetition technique of importance as a mnemotechnical device was the use of the refrain - typically the spiritual consisted of four - line stanzas alternating with four-line choruses, and within that structure, an alternation of solo verses with refrains; again reflecting the traditional African performance practice. The following examples are taken from Walker (1979:59-60):

a) **Refrain:**

Joshua fit de battle of Jerico,
Jerico, Jerico,
Joshua fit de battle of Jerico,
An' de Walls come tumblin' down.

b) **Stanzas:**

You may talk about yo' king ob Gideon;
You may talk about yo'man ob Saul:
Dere's none like good ole Joshua
At de battle of Jerico.

Up to de walls ob Jerico
He marched with spear in han'.
"Go blow dem ram horns," Joshua cried,
"Kase de battle am in my han'."

Den de lam ram sheep horns begin to blow;
Trumpets begin to sound.
Joshua commanded de chillen to shout,
An' de walls come tumblin' down.

Because of their conventional nature there was a certain amount of predictability to the pattern in the spirituals, as mentioned previously. This predictability was heightened in proportion to the amount of conventional form or phrasing used in a specific spiritual, and how often the conventional expressions were repeated. By repeating words, phrases, verses, refrains, choruses and stanzas, the slave audience gained a sense of power over them. Jousse (1990:213) sounds out a warning to modern literary scholars when he says: "... we must guard against applying the categories of our rhetoric to this mode (oral teaching/transmission, designed for recitation) of instruction." Jousse demonstrates the importance of repetition in all oral style milieux. The repetitions so flagrant in the spirituals were there to make the songs easy to carry and to harp on words and ideas of key significance to the slave population. Jousse (1990:213) warns against modern preconceptions of interminable repetition within oral compositions as "monotonous." And while it

is true that repetition in the spirituals was extreme and "ritualistic." it would also be true to say that many skilful literate writers frequently employ the same stylistic technique in prose and poetry.

4.2 PROVERBS

One of the most ancient forms of stylized expression was the proverb, and in a few places in the world was it more flourishing than in Africa. Proverbs are an example of what may be termed "fixed phrase" (as opposed to "free phrase") tradition inasmuch as the specific styling of a proverb is closely tied to the language. Notwithstanding the difficulties entailed in transplanting African proverbs in the New World, the fundamental dependence upon proverbs for poetic construction continued, albeit to a lesser degree.

Dundes (1981:248) writes: "As a slave, so far as his life was reflected in song and proverb, the Negro's primary interest seems to have been in God and religion." Dundes (1981:248) quotes an example of a spiritual that was sung by an old woman to enforce the idea of the proverb: "De quickah death, de quickah heaben":

> Oh Freedom, oh freedom
> Before Ah'd be uh slave
> An'd be burried en mah grave
> An' go home tuh mah Jesus an' be saved.

Lawrence A. Boadi in his article, **The language of the Proverb in Akan**, cited by Richard Dorson (1972:183) speaks of the importance African societies "attach to linguistic and literary features associated with the proverb." Some scholars say that, especially in preliterate societies, the main role of the proverb is to provide a storehouse of native wisdom and philosophy. A careful observation of the above poem

will reveal that the function of the proverb is aesthetic or poetic and didactic. The proverb became a traditional formula which enabled the members of the slave ethnic milieu to communicate with one another.

4.3 TEXTUAL SIMPLICITY (ECONOMY OF WORDS) OF THE SPIRITUAL

The spirituals were extremely simple, consisting basically of a single chorus. To use a modern expression they were "short and crisp." The conciseness of certain lines or stanzas in the spirituals caused them to be aurally memorable and further helped in the process of retention. When such memorable expression began to filter into other similar song texts, they became conventions. Such convention as extreme textual simplicity provided a vital mnemotechnical device within the spirituals. And it becomes evident that songs often are remembered in this way when one recalls that songs tend to become more conventional the more they are transmitted.

Although there is ample evidence of the abovementioned conventional form in the general body of the essay, it may be expedient to include a few more spirituals at this point to illustrate the conciseness of spirituals:

a) I sought my Lord in de wilderness,
In de wilderness, in de wilderness;
I sought my Lord in de wilderness;
For I'm a-going home.

(Southern 1983:167)

b) My brother, you promised Jesus,
My brother, you promised Jesus,
My brother, you promised Jesus,
To either fight or die.

Oh, I wish I was there
To hear my Jesus's orders,
Oh, I wish I was there
To wear my starry crown.

(Southern 1983:169)

c) Lord, I want to be a Christian
In my heart, in-a my heart,

Lord, I want to be a Christian
In-a my heart.

(Lovell 1972:191)

Based on the evidence, it can be assumed that at a time when there were no hymnbooks and when most of the slave congregation was "illiterate", the slaves "would get together, and sing for hours together, short scraps of affirmations, pledges, or prayers, lengthened out with long repetition choruses" (Epstein 1977:218). For his part, the Afro-American composer used traditional compositional techniques. The spirituals were filled with devices which aided memory. The texts of the composed songs were not epic poems but a stringing together of isolated lines from prayers, the scriptures, and orthodox hymns, the whole made longer by the addition of choruses or the injecting of refrains between verses.

CONCLUSION

No study covers all the ground. My research dissertation is no exception. It is a socio-historical introduction to the tradition of Afro-American spirituals, the roots of which are identified with the oral tradition of Africa (west Africa in particular). A renowned scholar, Ruth Finnegan, in her book **Oral Poetry** (1976:3) makes the following pertinent point:

> ... some knowledge of the social and cultural background is a great help in appreciating foreign poetry.

The essay is aimed, inter alia, at tracing the origin and route of the religious poetry of the Afro-American experience. The essay is far from being exhaustive, though it firmly establishes that a pronounced oral tradition existed among Afro-Americans. The members of the slave community were non-literate and thus exhibited complete dependence on oral transmission for news and communication of any kind.

The essay seeks to underscore the African influence in the poetry of the black religious experience in the New World. No attempt has been made to deny the Western experiences and influences on the religious poetry of the Afro-Americans. The essay attempts to establish that the linkage between the ancestral home (Africa) of black Americans and their survival on the Western experience (slavery, segregation, political oppression, etc.) can be identified in the oral tradition. The above point is endorsed by Walker (1979:15):

> Despite the calculated and premeditated design (of the slave owners) to sever the historical umbilical cord of African heritage, the oral tradition survived - miraculously. The adaptation of the oral tradition to Western influences produced an Afro-American culture that was essential to cope with the seldom - changing oppressive experience.

Every contemporary source, with the exception of Professor G.P. Jackson, contains references to slaves born in Africa who helped to keep African traditions alive in their communities. The influence of traditional African song can be seen in the

spirituals with their chorus - like repetition, simple language, and strong rhythm, all characteristics of African oral conventions. Thus it has been possible for me to find a number of direct parallels between African compositional pieces and slave ones. As the slaves learned the language of the master, their verbal commonality became pronounced in the spirituals that developed in the context of slavery.

Nearly all the spirituals were derivations of Biblical themes, and heavy emphasis fell upon those themes where, by supernatural means, God delivered the faithful from impossible circumstances. In the selection of spirituals in the general body of my essay, I have attempted to show the importance of the Bible in providing a storehouse of materials for the slave composers. The words of the spirituals are marked by vivid imagery, with emphasis on metaphoric figures of speech. The language of the spirituals is simple but nevertheless, forceful and direct. The composers employed a lively, varied style which included statements, quotation and exclamation. Again and again the same religious themes are represented in the spirituals. Some of these themes can be anticipated, for they are the themes of any oppressed people who are determined "to overcome". Walker (1979:34) expresses the point clearly:

> In the community of suffering, the slaves found life bearable through the religious faith instilled in the folk community by singing the language of faith - the spirituals.

There is hardly any dispute among contemporary scholars that rhythm was a key characteristic of African folk music. Rhythm was a key characteristic of Black American song, sacred as well as secular. It follows, naturally, then that a primary feature of the spiritual was rhythm. The spirituals were composed with strong rhythmic pattern in the form of songs, to be sung during religious and communal activities. it was helpful to reinforce the contention of African influence when I made a general comparison between the characteristics of African songs and the basic characteristics of the faith songs of the slave.

The single most important element of the slave musical style was its performance as, indeed, is true of black folk musical style in the twentieth century. It was the performance that shaped the song into an entity, that finally determined its melody, texture, rhythmical pattern, diction and effect upon the listeners. Natural pauses in the performances were filled with clapping, stomping, walk and shout, patting of thighs, and vocal outbursts, etc. By all accounts, performance was inseparable from some kind of body movement - movement involved in providing accompaniment for singing and dancing. One writer, cited by Southern (1983:202), attempted to define this phenomenon:

> Without any teaching, the Negroes have continued a rude kind of opera, combining the poetry of emotion, of music, and of language ... all the Negro songs were intended to be performed as well as sung and played.

I conclude my essay with yet another quotation by Eileen Southern (1983:553-4) - lengthy, but nonetheless pertinent to this study of Afro-American spirituals:

> It has been 364 years ... since the black man first began to sing his "song in a strange land." Again and again black musical styles have passed over into American music, there to be diluted and altered in other ways to appeal to a wider public or to be used as the bases for development of new styles. Thus spirituals were replaced by gospel, traditional jazz, by bepop, rhythm' n' blues, by soul-to cite a few. The old is never totally discarded, however, but absorbed into the new.

To use the theme of the **Third International Conference** organized by the Oral Documentation and Research Centre (University of Natal) on **Oral Tradition and Innovation**, the musical compositions of contemporary Black artists can be described as "new wine in old bottles".

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