

The african identity | history and concepts



According to the Lexicon Webster Dictionary an Identity is referred to as the condition or character that distinguishes a person or a thing (Lexicon Webster, 1981). The main distinguishing conditions or characteristics (the identity) that the slaves had were that they were black and Africans. Africans who were ripped from their homeland and brought into a “ new world” to live under the rule of the white man (Europeans), who believed that they were inferior and whom they viewed as an oppressor. Question, did that Identity survive this oppression? Did that sense of being a proud, black, African get diminished by the slave trade? Agreeably, it would have been hard to maintain that identity, but I strongly believed that the strength of the African people, the strength that made them qualify for the labour required on the plantations, was the same strength they tapped into to hold on to every sense of “ I am an African”. In this paper I would present ways in which they slaves would have been able to embosom the African Identity and reasons why many would think it was lost. Also I would confer the evidence present today to support that this identity survived long enough to have been transferred from generation to generation and is today, very present in the lives of the offspring of slaves.

The slaves had to struggle to hold on to their Identity; a struggle that started as they were being forced from their homelands (Clarke, 1995). This struggle continued in the Americas. It was a brutal but not fatal assault of the black African slaves’ sense of self. They were being forced to accept a new identity; but did they really? Or was it just an idea? Although the slave masters restricted all forms of African culture from being practised and enforced their cultures, the slaves found creative ways of resisting this. A

simple method such as masking it under the practises of the whites at least to keep some semblance of it alive was adopted (Saharan Vibe, 2007).

Yes it would have been hard to maintain identities given that they were punished for doing so. However there are times when they could have interacted without the watchful eye of the slave master catching them (at nights, at church). There was always a defiant few whose bond to the sense of African identity was so strong that even these minimal moments were used to resist against the whites by keeping alive any forms of the identity possible and at least pass it on to other generations when they can (Lashington, 2011).

There are numerous practises that we engage in today in the Caribbean and the Americas that are deeply rooted in African culture that even we don't realize. These support the fact that the Identity survived and lives today. It was so prominent it was called Africanism, the fight of the Africans to keep Africa Alive. This they did in different cultural Expressions: Religion, Music, Dance, Festival, Folk tales, Language, and customs. The extent to which the culture was kept alive was different from island to island because of the time the plantation system was started in the particular island and how many slaves were there (Phillip, 2010).

I can personally attest to having participating in various expressions of traditional African culture. As a dancer I have been privy to learning the Bele dances a native African dance that is usually danced to the music of drums, shack shacks and sticks; a totally African combination. The Religion: having relatives that actively worship as Spiritual Baptist I was exposed to the

Shango and Saraca which was accompanied by the same African instruments. I have witnessed customs such as the placing of black and red or blue Maljo beads on babies when born to ward off the evil spirits and attended many wakes in my short lifetime. I was taught in school of the Anansi stories that originate from Western Africa and other Moral stories. I have been in a su su before and have had many days of eating Ashum around all saints time. If I have experienced and is still experiencing elements of African culture today, how is it that it is said to have not survive the slave trade (Phillip, 2010).

The foods we eat also stems from the African Identity. Examples of this are the ground provisions and salt fish (though the salt fish is more associated with slavery rather than African culture) but it was passed down. Going to the market early on a Saturday is another trait (Phillip, 2010).

To focus on the expression of music to show how strongly some aspects were kept as compared to others. Just as music was used as a form of communication for the slaves during colonialism so it is today in the form of Calypso (especially in Trinidad) as social commentary and Reggae (mainly in Jamaica) is used to protest against forms of oppression. In some islands/colonies because the African music was not freely allowed there was a dilution with that of the Europeans. The same was for the language; hence the amalgamation of English and African to give patois in the British colonies and the French and African to give Creole language in the French colonies. The emergence of these new or modified languages did however play a pivotal role in the success of rebellions and resistances that were held in the Caribbean (Take Five, n. d).

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As a result of the traits of the Africans' view that they will one day be free and return to the motherland that has been passed down, we are now experiencing today in the form of reggae music that reeks of the yearning of black people to return to the homeland. Well known reggae artiste Richie Spice in one of his latest albums ' In the Streets to Africa' has two tracks on the album that pay tribute to the African heritage. One such track, ' Black like tar', where spice sings of being proud to be black and acknowledges Africa as the Motherland. Another of his tracks ' Motherland Calling' sung as a chant to strong drumming music, Spice again acknowledges Africa as the motherland and the belief that even today the motherland is still calling; Africa is still waiting and one day will welcome all her children back home (Rastaman Vibrations, n. d).

Then there is the Legendary Bob Marley who fought for black or African liberation from oppression. His songs spoke of Liberation and Unity. In the track ' Zimbabwe' he urged the black man to get up and fight for be freedom/liberation and to have rights. The same for ' Get up stand up' another call to get up and fight for our rights and to never give up on that fight. In another of his tracks ' Buffalo Soldier' the words ' stolen from Africa, brought to America, fighting on arrival, fighting for survival; recognizes the fact that Africans were forced into slavery and have fought against the oppression of the colonialist systems to keep the African identity alive throughout (Rastaman Vibrations, n. d).

The powerful message brought on by his songs continues with Marley's song ' Chant down Babylon'. Babylon to Africans or black people symbolizes the spirit of those who enslave, commit genocide, slave labour and grind the

poor less advantage peoples of the world. Marley also recognize the need for unity in the world. With this realization there came songs ' One love and Africa Unite' a call to the people of the world to unite for the betterment of all people; especially Africans as they did during slavery. Lastly, there is the famous ' Redemption Song'- the song of freedom. A song whose intent is to reassure the people that freedom is possible but that they must free minds before true liberation is realized. This is clear evidence that the same spirit of the African slave to be free and to return to their home land Africa still manifest in the lives of the Black people of the Caribbean and the Americas today.

The reasons that many believe that this identity did not survive was because the great attempts of the Europeans to suppress any forms of the culture; because of the dehumanization instituted by slavery in the British colonies. These activities distorted the notion of what Africans thought of themselves to be but it did not eradicate it. This was the reason why the slaves rebelled and resisted against the inhumane treatment brought on by the European slave Trade; and the cultural domination it was instituting on the Africans (Bolland, 2002).

I agree that there are elements or practices that would have been lost but to say generally that the Identity itself was lost is wrong. If it did not survive why then do we here chant of Kumbaya's ringing from black churches today? Why kids are still taught with Anansi stories in the schools? The answer to these questions is simple because these things were passed down from our ancestors; slaves (Saharan Vibe, 2007).

Another reason why it is believed that it was 'virtually impossible' for African slaves to have a sense of identity was because it was never really acknowledged and when it was it was misrepresented as the white man was responsible for documentation of it (Clarke, 1995) This wasn't a happening only in the Americas.

"African history was shaped by external influences for centuries. From the Muslim historians from the eighth to fifteenth centuries to the accounts of European travellers during the age of exploration to the dreadful portrayal of Africa as a continent of eternal "blackness" by German philosopher G. W. Hegel in the nineteenth century. Thus it has been very difficult even in light of the decolonization movements of the continent.

Continuing along that line, even native writers urged Africans themselves to come to terms with African Identity in relation to the wanton violence that had been imposed through post colonialism and that continues to plague Africans in post colonial times. In a painstaking recreation of how the western world created Africa as a historical construction, from backward, hostile and uncivilized portrayed by Hegel into the twentieth century Europe's adoption of these older views" (LeFlem, 2008).

As a result of instances as these coupled with institutions such as the caste system that existed in the colonial plantation days that forced upon the slaves that blacks are inferior to the superior Whites, there was the emergence of a mentality that still lives on that have black people thinking that the white man's country, colour, culture etc is much better than ours (Baker, 2011).

It is sometimes very easy when thinking of the African identity to equal it to Caribbean Identity or African American Identity. This is in no way true. If one tries to explain this concept of Caribbean Identity, an apt description of the typical Caribbean person is that he or she is part-African, part-European, part-Asian, part Native American but totally Caribbean; to understand this is to understand creative diversity" (Midrelief. com, 2007). Again, this shows the survival of the African Identity; it was amalgamated with other influences (identities) to form the Caribbean Identity (Midrelief. com, 2007). A similar conceptualization can be concluded for African Americans.

An important factor in this quest to determine the survival of the slave Africans' identity is to understand that it has been exposed to Globalization. I strongly believed the remaining traits of that identity is being further diminished by this phenomenon. The culture that many fought to keep alive for so many years is becoming more and more obsolete by the broken down barriers in communication and travel and the many advances in technology (Take Five, n. d).

Conclusion

Though slavery raped us of the authenticity and pureness off the rich African culture that was once the boast of any African it was the strength of the African that helped him to keep to the struggle to emancipate himself from the shackles of a colonial legacy and not be captives in that evil system (Take Five, n. d). It is with certainty that I say that the African Identity is very much animate in the lives of many individuals, communities, nations, and continents because it has truly survived the attempts of colonialist to

eradicate the sense of Africanism that was kept living in the hearts of the African natives throughout the duration of slavery and is still present in the everyday lives of this generation whether we are aware of it or not.

Agreeably the traces of the culture that is present today shows that it could not have been lost. Diluted? It is possible. Hidden in fusions with practices from colonial countries? Yes. But to say that the African Identity was lost because they were not in their homeland is not right (Midrelief. com, 2007).

The onus is on us this present generation to keep what has survive to today and/or reformulate with what we learnt about the culture of our ancestors.

We need to always remember how truly a proud, courageous, and intelligent people our African ancestors were, and that we must claim their spirit. All that is left is for us to use it to fully emancipate our minds! (Take Five, n. d)