

Work dancing as examples of african retentions

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Work on cultural “ survivals” or “ retentions” primarily addresses the question of whether people who are forcefully taken away from their countries leave elements of their culture behind as well, or whether they hold strongly to their native cultural practices. Herskovitz’s (1958) seminal work on African cultural survivals in the United States includes call-response and ritual-like dancing as examples of African retentions in Black American churches.

Similarly, Lincoln 1974 argues that Blacks brought their religion with them from Africa, and that later they “ accepted the white man’s religion, but they haven’t always practiced it in the white man’s way. It became the black man’s purpose . . . to shape, to fashion, to recreate the religion offered to him by the Christian slave master, to remold it nearer to his own heart’s desire, nearer to his own peculiar needs” (quoted in Mitchell 1970: 6).

Suggesting that slave and their descendants were not stripped entirely of their African religious heritage, many researchers have illuminated similarities between African American religious practices and West African rituals (Robert 1972, Barrett 1974, Mitchell 1975, Daniel & Smitherman 1976, Smitherman 1986, 2000, Simpson 1978, Raboteau 1978, Blassingame 1979, Jules-Rosette 1980, Sernett 1985, Twining 1985, Pitts 1986, 1989). If West African cultural retentions do exist among African Americans, it would be difficult and erroneous to discuss any aspect of the Black church without mentioning orality.

Traditional West Africans and African Americans have been described as having a strong oral culture (Edwards & Seinkewicz 1991). In his work on

American sermons from the time of the Pilgrims to Martin Luther King, Jr.,
Warner 1999 claims that American sermons have a written foundation.

What makes this claim problematic is the generalization that “ American
sermons”