

Essay on afrodiaspora religion

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The African diaspora represented a giant upheaval and change for the people of Africa; a time when families were separated, and individuals were enslaved and forcibly removed from their homeland in order to provide free labor for the peoples of Europe, and later America, as slaves. Europeans brought slaves to the Europe and North America, and the Spanish provided scores of black slaves to Chile, Brazil, Puerto Rico, and the Caribbean. It is known as one of the biggest forced migrations in the course of human history, and carried an incredible change in the populations of the rest of the world, bringing a once solitary people into the world community, though in a way that stripped them of their freedoms and dignity. In light of that humiliation and feeling of loss, both of their homeland and of their old lives, displaced Africans needed to find something to hold onto for hope and solace. Their old religious traditions were either forgotten about or frowned upon by their masters, but they managed to form their own traditions and transfer what made them essentially African into this new world that they did not fully understand or were not allowed to be a part of. In this essay, we will examine the factors that led to the creation of Afro-diaspora religion, from both a historical and cultural perspective.

The definition of a diaspora is very distinct, as it defines more than just forced relocation or emigration; in order for it to count as a diaspora, the people who experience the dispersal must feel a collective, shared memory and love for their former homeland, feeling that it helps to define them as a person and as part of a community. Being displaced from that region, they feel a strange pull towards it, always hoping to go back, or at least considering it their true ancestral home. (Akyeampong, 184-185) These

criteria certainly qualify during the African diaspora, as millions of native Africans were shipped off to the Americas and Europe to become slaves, a harsh, unforgiving life that demanded that they give up a great deal of what set them apart as a culture. While in these new, strange places, their own attempts at exerting individuality were discouraged, as many attempts were made to simply have them blend up and acclimate themselves to a Western culture that sought to keep them under control.

Africans lost in the whirlwind of the slave trade certainly felt a sense of loyalty to Africa, and their descendants additionally detect a connection to the continent where their ancestors came from, no matter how physically linked they may or may not be to it. It defines who they are as a people, and as such it remains close to their hearts. (Akyeampong, 187)

This reminiscing of their homeland extended to religion, as well. Traditional African religions, such as Taruba, Vodun and Santeria, were focused more on spirituality than specific doctrines; their sense of religion placed them on a closer level of communication and intimacy with their gods, as they focused on ritual and music to perform their communication. The drum was an essential part of the African religious experience, “ a sacred instrument possessing supernatural power which enabled it to summon the gods into communion with people.” (Spencer, 67) The afro tribal was an important drum-based part of their musical and religious history, as it was used to bring together various groups of tribal Africans in unity. However, with the displacement of the African people from their home continent, their drums were left behind, leaving only rhythm to guide them through their trials.

They transferred their rhythm to songs and used them to endure the many indignities that faced them over the prevailing years.

As time went on, displaced Africans and their descendants were taught and picked up Christianity, a faith which proceeded to inform their own sense of spirituality down through the generations, becoming particularly helpful as a source of hope and faith that their conditions would improve. However, Africans who had suffered the diaspora managed to let their own personality shine through by making their own practice of the religion uniquely African, emphasizing dance and song, among other things, in their worship. Ring-shouts were very common in praise houses in the South, using rhythm and dance in lieu of a drum to convey and express the spirituality of the Africans at the time. It was called a “danced religion,” and was complexly choreographed so as to properly illustrate the feelings and spirit that were meant to be shown. (Spencer, 75) This is perfect evidence of how African religion survived in the diaspora, at least in some form – that same spirit of being absorbed in dance and song, shouting at the gods as if they were in the room with you, denoted a closeness with God that was very closely reminiscent of the way spirituality was conveyed in their home continent.

As Christianity became more and more a part of the lives of slaves, the spiritual started to come to the forefront of African-American spirituality as another form of worship that remained true to African traditions, but redefining them to their present struggles. They managed to reappropriate a primarily Western, white religion into a spirituality that allowed them to express the trials and tribulations they were facing. As is obvious, life as a

slave was difficult – moving from owner to owner, town to town, working day and night for no pay or reward, only to come back to a cold stable and the rest of your enslaved brethren. In these darkest of situations, religion became far more important to them. Harding writes, “ the meaning of Black religion across the Americas emerges from this tension and from the process of ‘ wrestling’ with the question of how to stay human in a fundamentally inhumane situation: blackness as an essentially religious task.” (269)

Ritual and tradition remained important parts of the black religious experience, perhaps more so in these harsh conditions which required an even stronger, more ardent faith to get them through the nightmares they were experiencing. The spiritual helped with this, incorporating the traditional African mediums of song and rhythm to Western, Christian stories, permitting them a wholly individual and unique way of worshipping that no one could take away from them. Harding writes that “ the spirituals were a means of engaging the depth and complexity of a people's experience of enslavement and resistance.” (279) Simple words and sermons would not suffice when attempting to release and cope with the hellish life encountered by the vast majority of slaves during this time; as a result, song was their only recourse.

Through the trying times and disconnection from the homeland that Africans experienced as part of the African diaspora, they were able to maintain the most important parts of their own religion and spirituality, and apply it to newfound faiths in Christianity. The spiritual is “ the religious form that has most faithfully nourished the link to ancestors and ancestral traditions

among African Americans and they continue to be a source of great cultural and spiritual sustenance for all people who experience them.” (Harding, 267)

Because of the chaotic, brutal nature of the Africa diaspora, Africans had to turn to new methods of expressing their spirituality, while still holding on to the most basic, fundamental traditions of their people, such as the concepts of rhythm and dance, as well as a closer relationship with their gods. These passionate, freeing forms of expression let them keep something that no man could take away, no matter how much more powerful or forceful they were. This clinging to what made them essentially African permitted them to retain a semblance of dignity and unity among their own people, and is what equipped the African-American people to endure past these trials and become a unique society in and of themselves.

Works Cited

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