

# Essay sample

[Parts of the World, Africa](#)



## Statement of the Problem

Is it true to suggest that there was a strong presence of African cultural forms within the British Caribbean plantation society up to 1838? Rationale The system of chattel slavery forcibly removed the West African natives from their homeland. As a result of this the Africans were forced to leave a place where they knew as home to a place where they would become the property of another. Their freedom would be subject to the discretion of another person as they would be burdened with restrictions and severe punishment of petty actions. One may ask the question; what really did the West Africans have to hold on to? This research will discuss the various ways in which the West Africans managed to keep the link between their culture and their new home on the British Caribbean plantation during the period of chattel slavery. The research will answer the following questions:

a) What were the various forms of African cultural practices present on the British Caribbean plantation? b) What factors accounted for the retention of these cultural practices during the period of chattel slavery. c) To what extent were the enslaved West Africans able to retain aspects of their culture up to 1838 on the British Caribbean Plantation?

## Data Collection

The research will require extensive use of primary and secondary sources. The inclusion of primary sources such as a journal extract of Lady Nugent will give the research the first hand details it needs to prove the statement in question correct. Secondary sources such as information from textbooks, photograph illustrations will be useful in the analysis of the data.

## Presentation of Data

The data will be presented in the form of a research project utilizing journal extracts, newspaper clipping and photograph illustrations.

## Introduction

During the period of chattel slavery, enslaved Africans were used as labours on the British Caribbean plantations. These Africans were captured and brought to the ' New World' and forced into a system of servitude. A key feature of chattel slavery is ' depersonification' and as a result it was difficult for the enslaved West Africa to practice their culture. However, this research will prove that the enslaved African were able to retain aspects of their culture on the British Caribbean plantation in this period of chattel slavery Aspects of African Culture evident on estates.

The Africans arrived from traditional societies to the British Caribbean with their own forms of values and culture . In their new environment the enslaved Africans wanted to create a life of their own that would keep the African cultural forms relevant and alive. They wanted to revive or recreate much of what they had has their cultural forms while as property on the British Caribbean plantations. Debbion Hyman (2012) defined African cultural forms as the various everyday activities of our ancestors that they brought with them from their homeland and practised on the plantations during slavery so as to keep their heritage alive, as well as to survive the harsh realities of slavery. On an 18th century British plantation there was constant battle between slaves and planters, for the slaves needed to keep their cultural forms alive.

Harsh treatment of slaves by the planter, often forced slaves to resort to various forms of resistance in order to keep their cultural forms alive. While the slaves of the plantation were able to outsmart the planter at times, the planter also devised schemes that made life for slaves extremely difficult. However, the enslaved tried to retain as much of their culture as possible despite the odds. Cultural forms practiced by African slaves on the plantations included music and dance, religion, medicine, language, food, skill, customs and dress. Music and Dance

In the text 'Lest You Forget the Caribbean Economy and Slavery' series, Doris Hamilton-Willie (2001) asserts that the enslaved Africans danced and sang at nights, and on weekends to entertain themselves. They danced 'John Canoe' for entertainment at Christmas time and Kumina for ancestral worship. Hamilton-Willie continued by stating that the slaves also sang at work to make the burden of work lighter. They also sang lullabies to their young ones as they drifted off to sleep. They sang and danced at celebrations which were permitted by the planters such as at Christmas time and crop over festivals (see appendix C). The enslaved African not only danced and sang when contented but also when they were in bereavement. Hamilton-Willie asserted that they sang and danced at wakes and at funerals, and at their worship services (43). The music of the enslaved included the use of instruments such as drums, rattles made from gourds filled with small stones or seeds, flutes, banjos, mouth violin, tambourines and xylophones to produce their music (Hamilton-Willie, pg 43). According to Dr. Torello (see appendix B 2006), they recreated African musical instruments from materials found in Jamaica (calabash, conch, bamboo, etc.) and

featured improvisation in song and dance. All of these customs and many more such as the Christmas street parades of Jonkonnu, were misunderstood and undervalued by Europeans with the exception of the political use of drumming to send coded messages from plantation to plantation.

### Religion

The Africans believed in a creator but also practised spirit worship and spirit possession. When they came to the British Caribbean they kept this practise alive through the Shango, Kumina, and Pocomania religion which remained vibrant on the plantation and brightly decorated their music. Myalism was practised on the estates and most estates had a myalman. There was an obeah man on most estates provided charms for slaves and promises of protection. Indigenous African religions such as kumina were secretly practised on the estate. There was a fusion of African and European religions which resulted in local Caribbean religions such as voodoo (Haiti), shangoism (Trinidad), Santeria (Cuba), pocomania (revivalism- Jamaica).

### Medicine

On the plantation the practise of medicine took the format of using herbs to cure illnesses. The enslaved African practised herbal medicine through the talents of the Myal-men and women on the estates.

### Language

The large number of West African languages and dialects spoken, prevented easy communication among themselves, and so the slaves evolved a common Creole or patois made up of English and African elements. The

enslaved passed their language down through successive generations through oral tradition. This mainly took the format of telling of tales that the older Africans brought from Africa with them. The tales of duppies and other spirits were widespread and so were the fables and stories that were handed down by word of mouth from one generation to the next. Words such as pickney, nana and nyam were utilized by the enslaved on the plantation.

### Food

The enslaved Africans were mainly interested in the consumption of ground provisions. This was mainly due to the fact that these ground provisions such as: yams, potatoes and cassava were what they grew on their provision grounds on the plantations. These foods were also some the foods enjoyed by the enslaved Africans while free in Africa.

### Skill

William Claypole and John Robottom(2001) suggest that the African crafts survived in the forms of basket work and straw-plaiting used to make bed mats, wicker chairs, baskets and occasionally plaited shoes (110). Claypole and Robottom also asserted that traditional pottery skills continue in the making of earthen pots and jars (110). Customs

Claypole and Robottom suggested that slave funerals were carried out with much of the ceremony of Africa, and slavery did not destroy the belief that the dead person remained a part of the community. According to Claypole and Robottom some enslaved African kept a strong belief in the power of Obeahism and Myalism, which was kept alive by the obeahmen and myal-

men and women who came on the slave ships. Another aspect of the African culture which survived in the Caribbean was related to birth and death practices. Hamilton-Willie suggested that the burying of the baby's navel string at the root of a tree, usually a fruit tree was one such custom that survived (pg. 44). Slaves also staged elaborate and mournful funeral rites at burials, accompanied by ' wakes' and before and after the burial, as they would have done in Africa.

According to Dr. Torello (see appendix B) Jamaican slaves came mainly from West Africa. Their customs survived based on memory and myths. They encompassed the life cycle, i. e. a newborn was not regarded as being of this world until nine days had passed and burial often involved libations at the graveside, and the belief that the dead body's spirit would not be at rest for some 40 days. They included forms of religion in which healing was considered an act of faith completed by obeahmen and communication with the spirits involved possession often induced by dancing and drumming. African-based religions include Kumina, Myal and Revival. Many involved recreational, ceremonial and functional use of music and dance (Brathwaite, 1971). " Slaves," Brathwaite explains, " danced and sang at work, at play, at worship, from fear, from sorrow from joy" (p. 220). Dress According to Hamilton-Willie, the slaved had not forgotten the styles they adorned themselves with in Africa, and so, when it was possible, they would wear some of these in the ' New World'. These included the braiding and plaiting of the hair in delicate cane rows, and the practice of wearing head ties. On the plantation however, William Claypole and John Robottom stated that the enslaved were given osnaburgh cloth and ' negro hats'.

Women are noticed to be adorned with head ties and the men in their negro hat as well as their osnaburge cothes (see appendixD) Factors responsible for cultural retention on plantation According to Hamilton-Willie it was the stubbornness, rebelliousness and, often disregard for the prohibitions against their culture, which helped the West African born slaves to retain some aspects of their customs, practises and beliefs (21). They were able to do so mainly because they had a strong determination to continue to practise their culture Music, to slaves was a form of expression of a people who had hope. Music was expressed in the form of singing and drumming. Although the drum seemed like a simple piece of African art to the planter, it was actually a powerful tool used by the slaves for purposes of communication. Music was extremely crucial for slaves in keeping their culture alive, as a lot of the folk tales were handed down through song from previous generations. Songs spoke of life back in Africa and the many hardships faced by these people. Besides music, cultural forms were kept alive on the plantation during the period of the slave trade, when imported slaves from Africa shared information about their homeland with the creoles already on the plantation. This was very common because when a newly arrived African was put on the plantation, he or she could educate and refresh the minds of the older slaves of their homeland and rekindle traditions which may have died away due to many years of absence.

An instance where this occurred was when newly imported African slaves went through the 'seasoning' period. As Claypole states, " they learned to use some of the European language and to live and work in the way enforced by European planters" pg( 110). But at the same time links with the



traditions of Africa were strengthened. In some cases they could even make slaves better informed about their homeland. The chattel system was one that was dehumanising and the enslaved Africans wanted to feel that still had their identity as a people. As suggested by Bryan Edwards “ proudly they displayed their tribal marks with a mixture of ostentation and pleasure...” This statement by Edward which depicts how the enslaved women adorned themselves with their colourful head dress . In his seminal work ‘ The Language of Dress,’ Steeve Bukridge (1998) described the dressing of the enslaved women showed the symbolic appeal for the legitimacy of the plight to reunite African slave women as one.

The large number of slaves helped to keep the culture alive as they were able to strengthen the will and the memory of one another so that what some were afraid to do, others would dare to do, and what some forgot, others would remind them of. This was able to happen because there were always slaves coming each year from the same ethnic groups already represented on the estate. This helped to keep some aspects of the culture alive, as the newly arrived African would ‘ refresh’ the memory of the older ones, and so encourage practises sometimes forgotten. According to Hamilton- Willie many of the slaves who came to the British Caribbean were young and they had a strong recollection of their cultural practises and so, although they were robbed of material aspects when they were taken from Africa, they could use what was available locally to recreate what they had lost. Hamilton-Willie also suggested that another factor responsible for the retention of the enslaved Africans cultural forms was through oral tradition. Customs and rituals were able to pass on aspects of their culture to

succeeding generations through their strong oral tradition, which was encouraged by the quasi-communal lifestyle, which they maintained.

Also, the obeahmen were responsible the survival of the culture as they provided bold leadership and defied the odds in order to maintain their practises. In addition, Hamilton-Willie stated that the planters' ignorance of the significance of some aspects of the culture caused them to encourage some of aspects of the culture caused them to encourage or ignore and outlaw others and even so, though the ' John Canoe', for example, was fraught with rebellious overtones, the planters did not understand that, and so they allowed the enslaved Africans to practise it freely. Extent to which African culture was retained.

Undoubtedly, the enslaved Africans were able to retain a significant aspect of their African culture. For example in their seminal work *Liberties Lost*, Hilary McD. Beckles and Verene A. Shepherd (2004) stated that in the Christmas season Africans in British Caribbean performed the ' Joncanoe' or ' John Canoe' dance, one of the more well-established cultural rituals. The enslaved performed this ritual using elaborate headdress and masks, to show the relationship between the spirit world and social living. Beckles and Shepherd asserted that by the late 18th century the ' John Canoe' was part and parcel of African culture and was associated with Christmas when ' Negroes have been seen beating their tambourines and dancing the whole day.' Lady Nugent in her diary (1801-1805) also alludes to the Africans participation in Jonh Canoe celebration as she saw firsthand the procession of the slaves ' John Canoe' parade on Christmas day(48). She highlighted the

various participants in the parade and made mention to the musical instrument used in the ' John Canoe' parade (see appendix A).

As result, one can safely say that the extent to which African dance, music and craft in relation to musical instruments were practised widely in the British Caribbean. Although the area of the ' John Canoe' dance was allowed some leniency from the planters at Christmas time. There were other areas that were severely forbidden and this allowed the slaves to either practise these areas of their culture in secret or limited practise of these customs. The planter used measures to suppress the use of drums as suggested by Dr. Rebecca Tortello in ( appendix B). The whites also discouraged the slaves from practising their tribal religion and practises of obeah but, instead, were sometimes baptized into the Euro-Christian churches so as to try to destroy their link with their native religion. There were laws against congregating at nights and the planter forbade them from using their tribal language. The planter tried to ensure that their slaves were of different ethnic groups so that they would not unite around common customs.

According to Hamilton-Willie in spite of the restrictions and regulations, which were designed to weaken the African culture, however, slaves resisted the planters vigorously and continued to practise what they knew and loved. Hamilton-Willie suggested that the planters had attempted to use the ' seasoning' period to ' deculturize' the slaves however, it helped many of them bond instead. The enslaved broke the law regarding congregating at nights and they congregated at funerals at which they were able to perform their burial customs. They would in some instance place a bottle of rum at

the foot of the grave and a bowl of soup the head of dead person to sustain them as they move on to the afterlife as suggested by Micheal Craton in his work *Testing The Chairs* 1982.(pg99). The slaves use their African languages when not in the presence of the master and they continued to use the drums and they kept their dances and songs. At the Sunday market they used the opportunity to socialize in terms of dancing and listen to music, as well as a place to meet their obeah men and women.

Conclusion In conclusion, it is established that the enslaved African did retain aspects of their culture on the planter. Though the evidence provided by the various sources the aspects of music, dance medicine, dress, language, customs, skill and religion were some of the African traditions that survived on the British Caribbean plantation during the 1800s. The need to have an identity and the strong determination to continue to practise their culture were contributing factors as to why the enslaved Africans wanted to retain their culture. Though they were opposed the enslave Africans resisted the attempts of the planters to weaken the practise of their culture on the plantation through secret worship and use of the Sunday market to socialize and express themselves through dance and songs. The enslaved African proved to the whites that they would never have been able to fully deculturalize them and in some aspects they evolved or reconstructed their culture in order to still be in tune or connected to their unique identity as an African.

Appendix A

## Extract - Lady Nugent's Journal

25th Christmas Day! All night heard the music of Toms Toms and C. Rise early and the whole town and house bore the appearance of a masquerade. After church, amuse myself very much with the strange processions and figures called Johnny Canoes. All dance, leap and play a thousands antics. Then there are groups of dancing men and women. They had of leader or superior at their head, who sang a sort recitative and seemed to regulate all their proceedings; the rest joining at intervals in the air and the chorus . The instrument to accompany was a rude sort of drum, made of bark leaves, on this day they beat time with two sticks, while the singers do the same with their feet. Then there was a party of actors. -Then a little child was introduced, supposed to be a king, who stabbed all the rest. They told me that some if the children who appeared were to represent Tippoo Saib's children, and the man was Henry the IV of France. - What a m\*lange! All were dressed very finely, and many of the blacks had really gold and silver fringe on their robes. After the tragedy, they all began dancing with the greatest glee. We dined in the Counsel Chamber, but went to bed early but not to rest for the noise of singing and dancing was incessant during the night. 26th. The same wild scenes acting over and over again. Title: Lady Nugent's journal of her residence in Jamaica from 1801 to 1805 Philip Wright (Ed.) pp, 48

## Appendix B

Out Of Many Cultures The People Who Came

The Arrival Of The Africans. Rebecca Tortello

Jamaican life in all aspects cultural, artistic, political, economic, scientific

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was borne out of a brutal system forged through an integration of people and place and emerged as a triumph of the human spirit. FOLK CULTURE

Jamaican slaves came mainly from West Africa. Their customs survived based on memory and myths. They encompassed the life cycle, i. e. a newborn was not regarded as being of this world until nine days had passed and burial often involved libations at the graveside, and the belief that the dead body's spirit would not be at rest for some 40 days. They included forms of religion in which healing was considered an act of faith completed by obeahmen and communication with the spirits involved possession often induced by dancing and drumming. African-based religions include Kumina, Myal and Revival. Many involved recreational, ceremonial and functional use of music and dance (Brathwaite, 1971). " Slaves," Brathwaite explains, " danced and sang at work, at play, at worship, from fear, from sorrow from joy" (p. 220). They recreated African musical instruments from materials found in Jamaica (calabash, conch, bamboo, etc.) and featured improvisation in song and dance. All of these customs and many more such as the Christmas street parades of Jonkonnu, were misunderstood and undervalued by Europeans with the exception of the political use of drumming to send coded messages from plantation to plantation.

Drumming of any kind was therefore often banned. Jamaican music today has emerged from the traditional musical forms of work songs sung by slaves, the ceremonial music used in religious services and the social and recreational music played on holidays and during leisure time (Senior, 2003, p. 339).

The cramped housing space provided to the slaves, which limited (Tortello) their dwellings (often made of wattle and daub) to one window and one door, meant that very little other than sleeping took place indoors. Life, as in Africa, was lived communally, outside. (Brathwaite, 1971, p. 233-4).

Similarly language, as in Africa, is considered powerful particularly naming. Brathwaite (1971) gives an example of a woman whose child falls ill and wants her name to be changed, believing that this would allow her to be cured, (p. 237). Language is certainly an area where African retention is strongest. Jamaicans today move between Patois a creolised English and standard English. Jamaican patois was born from the intermixing of African slaves and English, Irish, Welsh, Scottish sailors, slaves, servants, soldiers and merchants. The African slaves spoke many dialects, and given the need for a common tongue, Jamaican patois was born. It has been in use since the end of the 17th century by Jamaicans of all ethnicities and has been added to by the Jews, Chinese, Indians, Lebanese Germans, and French Creoles who also settled on the island. Some words also indicate Spanish and Taino presence in Jamaican history (Senior, 2003, pp. 273-276). Many of these traditions survive to this day, testament to the strength of West African culture despite the process of creolisation (the intermingling of peoples adjusting to a new environment) it encountered (Brathwaite, 1971). Source: [www.jamaicagleaner.gov.jamaica](http://www.jamaicagleaner.gov.jamaica).

## Appendix C

Photograph of Slaves dancing.

Source: [www.informafrika.com/africa-studies](http://www.informafrika.com/africa-studies)

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## Appendix D

Photograph showing slaves in osnaburge.

Source: <http://urgrvquilt.hartcottagequilt.com>

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