

# The major socio-cultural experiences of african americans

[Parts of the World](#), [Africa](#)



Running Head: Socio-Cultural Experience The Major Socio-Cultural Experiences of African Americans African Americans make up 13% of the population in the United States, but most of these people did not migrate here on their own accord. This is where a lot of their African culture was destroyed. Most was lost through the enslavement of African people and the systems of social policy's in place, historically and today, that continue suppress African tradition and culture from the African Americans. Much of African American's African culture was lucky to survive as well as it did with all of the hardships forced on them from the European Americans. Much of this comes from centuries of African enslavement masters trying to destroy all African culture in order to create a more efficient workforce. Despite these hardships African Americans have preserved some of their African culture and throughout the years have created their own unique African based culture that they share today. Very little is clearly known about the history and culture of the West African region prior to the Ghana Empire in about the 800s (Mokhtar 380.) The Ghana Empire came to power by dominating the local tribes around them, and soon was able to establish cities and trade routes throughout sub-Saharan Africa. Their economy was based on trading gold and salt (Mokhtar 396); trade from Ghana was one of the main sources of gold for the Middle East (Mckissak 38). Ghana also produced the earliest examples of a unique West African culture; their economic wealth and stability allowed for the creation of an artisan class, as well as an educated class. The Ghana built a center of learning at Timbuktu, which eventually rivaled the major universities of Europe at the time, both in size and scope of study (Miner, 64). The Ghana also produced a style of visual art and

sculpture that has become identified with the West African region to this day. Their forms of visual art included wood carvings, but the Ghana focused mainly on gold sculptures, gold being so common in the area (Mokhtar 422). The Ghana also studied music; instruments such as the Djimbe drum and banjo have their origins here. Their studies of music, using a basic three chord structure on a minor pentatonic scale and an offbeat rhythm pattern form the basis for West African music, as well as providing the basis for the African American musical style known as the Blues (Charters, 19). The Ghana Empire faded between the 1100s and 1400s, replaced briefly by inter-tribal warfare until a new group rose to dominance. Placing their capital at Timbuktu, the Mali Empire based their economy not just on plentiful gold, but also on the selling of enslaved people (McKissak 59). The Mali began an eastern slave trade with Muslim merchants; in the process, much of the area was converted from tribal religions to Islam. The art and architecture of the Mali reflects this change, showing a blending of Islamic and Ghana traditions (Niane 80). The Mali also expanded their trade routes to include Europeans; before the discovery of the New World much of the gold in Europe was supplied by the Mali (McKissak 60). The Mali Empire flourished until discovery of the Gold Coast by European explorers in the 1400s. Europeans traded guns to the Songhai, a minor coastal tribe, in exchange for gold and slaves. The Songhai initially traded their own societal misfits to the Europeans; criminals, debtors, religious heretics and the mentally ill were forced into slavery. After being armed with guns, however, the Songhai invaded the Mali to the north, slowly conquering them and in the process gaining more slaves to trade (McKissak 83, Niane 237). Between 1500 and

1800, it is believed that around 15 and 30 million slaves were traded to Europeans by the Songhai (Craig 270). As you can see the African people were not enslaved without a fight. It took some 300 years to slowly break down these African Empires. Many battles were won by the African's and battles lost were usually long (Karenga 103). John Conny, leader of Ghana, fought for seven years before negotiating with the Dutch (Karenga 103). While it is true that Africans were enslaving other Africans before the Europeans got involved it was the Europeans who dehumanized the African people as where the enslavement in most African nations was more a class system (Karenga 117). For the Europeans, this became an extremely lucrative system; enslaved Africans would be captured or bought in Africa with finished goods like alcohol, guns and cloth, which were then traded for raw sugar and other cash crops American colonial plantations produced. The sugar would be fermented into more alcohol, usually rum, some to be sold and the rest used to trade for more enslaved people (Schwartz 121). The merchant ships were designed with profit in mind; the large cargo holds were prisons where as many people as possible were chained, often in a space just large enough for a person to lay (Karenga 137, Schwartz 128). Disease spread rapidly in the filthy, cramped areas, and many people died from infection as well as malnutrition. Upon arrival in the New World, the newly enslaved Africans were caged and dehumanized in the public view. They were paraded around like cattle, to allow potential buyers to size them up before auction (Schwartz 130). The European holdings in the New World grew rapidly, and became completely dependant on a steady flow of free enslaved labor. Greed and profit fueled the growth of plantations, farming tobacco in

the southern American colonies and sugar in the French, Dutch, and British East Indies. In many cases, especially on the sugar plantations, these enslaved Africans were worked to death, due to the hot climate and tropical diseases (Schwartz 156 - 170). Enslaved Africans struggled to keep their culture intact, attempting to reunite with others of their tribes and reestablish family and religious ties. The enslaved often socialized with others of their native tribes; keeping their individual tribal music, religion, and folklore alive despite the captivity (Yurochko, 16). On the colonial plantations of the 17th and early 18th centuries, there were fewer restrictions on the slave's ability to socialize; masters feared little from what they thought of as inferior people, and Africans were therefore left much to their own when not working (Halasz 27). Slaves often gathered together for weekly festivals and drum circles, rooted deeply in the tribal religions they had been abducted from (Yurochko 18). It was not until slave rebellions (like the Stono Rebellion of the 1730s, and the revolution that made Haiti an independent Black Nation in the 1790s) that large attempts were made to control slave culture, mobility, and communication (Halasz 40). It quickly became common practice to separate newly captured Africans at auctions who came from the same families, or even the same tribe, in an attempt to destroy any ties to their African culture. Much effort was spent destroying the African's ability to communicate, and in this way their tribal languages were slowly stamped out (Karenga 115 - 116). Their religious celebrations became a target as well, and soon there was a White controlling interest in every aspect of enslaved life. Masters even began to choose their slave's wives and husbands, after the trade of foreign slaves were outlawed,

selectively breeding them for the strongest of offspring (Karenga 117, Halasz 43). African musical traditions were also methodically destroyed. Drums had been used for centuries in Africa as a way of communication. These drums could be heard for miles and provided ties to their tribal religion and communication that could be used for unified revolts between plantations (Halasz 43, 114; Yurochko 20). The most common method for destroying the cultural identity of the slaves was through the White Christian religion. In the southern United States, religious conversion became mandatory and was closely controlled by the plantation owners, who looked at the African culture and religion as savage and evil (Cornelius 51). The masters believed it their spiritual duty to make good Christians of their slaves, both for the master's salvation and to create a humble work force without threat of revolt (Cornelius 16, Karenga 122). Churches were started for the slaves, whose message focused on the parables of the "good slave" and damnation, with little of the message of peace (Cornelius 23). Slave owners attempted to control not only the slave's religion through the churches, but also their music. Through introduction of White hymns, the masters hoped to slowly replace the tribal chants and songs of Africa with a more acceptable alternative (Cornelius 69, Yurochko 28). Even through the oppression of their music the Africans had changed the White hymns introduced to them and turned them into "spirituals," which combined the rhythm of the slave chants with the Christian melodies. The Black church service itself slowly evolved into a distinctly different form as well; often these services were energetic jubilant, more closely related in form to the tribal celebrations they were to replace than the somber, reserved White church services (Cornelius

117). Slavery was not always for life, and White masters did grant some slaves their " Freedom Papers." Plantation owners, especially in the tobacco plantations of Virginia and North Carolina before the American Revolution, made a habit granting freedom to older slaves (Franklin 7). Africans who participated in the American Revolution were granted freedom as well, as incentive to join colonial militias (Ayers 152). While a Free Black could own a business or land, in most cases they were not truly equal citizens. Many Free Blacks bought the freedom of their wives and families; children of these families remained free (Franklin 28, 60). As the anti-slavery movement began in the North in the early 1800s, one of its first steps was to push for an end to the foreign slave trade, as well as an end to legalized slavery. This movement had much success and the trade of foreign slaves was made illegal in 1808 (Ayers 235). As a result, many Free Blacks, assisted by Abolitionist groups, organized a chain of sympathy from the Southern states northward. The " Underground Railroad," as it became known, was a way for sneaking runaway slaves north, to states where slavery was illegal and the slave would be safe from persecution (Ayers 326). This system faltered in 1857 however, when the US Supreme Court issued its decision in the Dred Scott case. The decision mandated that a slave was property of its master, and crossing state borders did not change that status. Further, the decision required Northern states to aid in the recapture of runaway slaves. This did nothing to alleviate the stress between Northern and Southern economic ideologies, and the Civil War broke out in 1860 (Ayers 381 - 382). While there were many factors that led to this war, the issue of slavery and abolitionism was certainly on of them. This came to a head in 1863, with

President Lincoln's delivery of the Emancipation Proclamation. The proclamation, while considered by many today to be the beginning of Black Freedom, was actually an extension of war time policy and in a sense a public relations move. The war had been very costly to both sides, and there was little progress to show for the losses. Many citizens of Northern states had begun to lose faith in the war, and Lincoln hoped to turn the war into a crusade while regaining the support of abolitionists (Ayers 422). The proclamation had little actual effect on the Africans themselves, as it left them free but penniless, without rights or citizenship (Karenga 143). Many of these recently freed Africans did not leave the plantations they had once forcefully been tied to. With no money, and no property aside from their clothes, they had nowhere to go. Their former masters soon figured out a way to basically re-enslave them through sharecropping, which in some ways was even worse than enslavement. A sharecropper would be granted a plot of land, somewhere to live, farm equipment, food and seed for crops. The former master, now a landlord, would keep note of the value he had loaned these tenants, on the condition that this loan would be repaid out of the end of year harvest. While this system seemed fair on the surface, but since the books were kept by the landlords and were only legible to them the system was quickly abused by greedy Whites. When the time came to pay the landlord in crops, many of the sharecroppers found year after year, no matter how much was produced it was always barely enough to pay the interest of their loan. Black families grew steadily into greater debt, and ended up just as enslaved as before (Raper 21 - 44). Just after the war, during the Union occupation of the South known as Reconstruction, Congress



passed 3 amendments to the Constitution in order to clarify the status of the recently freed Africans. In the 13th amendment, slavery as an institution was abolished (Ayers 448). In the 14th amendment, former enslaved Africans were guaranteed the rights to due process under the law, and declared that Blacks were citizens to be granted the same legal protection as White citizens (Ayers 455, 456). The 15th amendment extended the right to vote to Black men, and declared that race could not be used to prevent voting (Ayers 465). Southern states responded in force to these amendments after the African Americans, exercising their new right to vote, elected several Black congressmen just after the Civil War (Karenga 146 - 148). Southern states responded with a series of laws that later known as the " Jim Crow Laws." These laws were racism in the purest sense, and though they varied from state to state all contained restrictions on the ability of Blacks to vote. There would be high taxes or difficult educational for voting competency that were made near impossible for uneducated African Americans to pass. The laws also prevented African Americans from entering White stores or restaurants, and often prevented Black families from living too near to Whites (Kennedy, 21 - 68). Blacks protested these laws, but in 1896 the Supreme Court sided with the " Jim Crow Laws" in the landmark case Plessy versus Ferguson. The decision stated that it was legal to maintain separation of the races, so long as there was equal public services on both sides (Ayers 534, 535; Karenga 148). Black Americans quickly began to look for ways to improve their situation, and in 1909 the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) began. Its primary focus was to lobby Congress and the Courts for fair treatment, and an end to the lynching's that

had become common in the South. At this time Black families in the South were living in near constant fear; having few of the rights they were guaranteed. White groups, such as the Ku Klux Klan, began a system of terrorism and public humiliation designed to keep African Americans suppressed and fearful of rising to equality (Karenga 149 - 150, Fairclough 13 - 21). With the onset of US involvement in World War One, however, opportunities for Black workers were created in the major urban centers of the North. Black men by the millions began to leave the South beginning in 1916, bound for places like Chicago, New York, and San Francisco, where factory jobs promised greater economic freedom. Black soldiers, who had recently fought in France, refused to return to the South and live under oppression after fighting for freedom and also migrated (Karenga 148, Harrison 34). Throughout the 1920s, African Americans began to forge a national cultural identity based on their own experiences and triumphs. Many Blacks began to search for a political voice. Those with a moderate view joined the NAACP, while the more radical elements joined the UNIA (United Negro Improvement Association). The UNIA supported a segregated society, unlike the NAACP, and believed that a "separate but equal" society was a challenge to the Black man: to create a separate Black Nation within the United States, one that would be in competition with White economic society and would eventually beat them at the game they had created. The UNIA also inspired a movement of Black Empowerment to create an independent and modern Black Nation (Karenga 158 - 160). The UNIA fell apart in the late 1920s, however, when its founder, Marcus Garvey, was shown to be using the organization for personal profit (Ayers 681). This renewed sense of Black

Cultural pride resulted in one of the greatest artistic movements of any race in US history. Known as the Harlem Renaissance, the sudden growth of Black art was not confined just to the boroughs of New York, but spread across the whole nation (Wintz 7). Jazz, a combination of Black musical styles going back to West Africa combined with White Classical music, became a huge craze among the White youth of the 1920s. Through jazz and swing, Black musicians and performers like Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong came to be accepted in otherwise "white only" nightclubs and bars. Black artists became noticed and recognized; and many found greater fame in Europe than in the United States (Yurochko 35 - 60). Black roles in movies became less stereotyped; no longer just "beg and fetch" roles; actors like Hattie McDaniel (who was the first African American actor to receive an Academy Award, for her part in *Gone with the Wind*) and Bill "Bo jangles" Robinson had spoken lines, and feelings, where their predecessors had not (Jackson, vii). This sudden artistic growth even caused the Library of Congress to send people to travel in the backwoods south, to record African American music and folklore at its source (Yurochko 40). While this was a good time for African American's to rise up from the lowest class citizen they had been before. In some ways they were still only seen as entertainment for the whites and that was the true reason they were aloud to mingle in the same societies as whites. After the Second World War, Blacks began to push for even greater equality. President Truman ended segregation in the military in 1948 (Ayers 811), and the NAACP began to push even harder to gain ground in the Supreme Court. By 1954, the NAACP and its chief lawyer, Thurgood Marshall, had won a major victory in the case of *Brown versus the Board of*

Education of Topeka. In this decision, the court overturned the ruling in Plessy versus Ferguson, stating that the doctrine of "separate but equal" was impossible to guarantee, and that separate school systems were inherently unequal. The courts called for an end to segregation, beginning in the public schools. This caused an outrage in the segregated south, and the President was repeatedly forced to call out the National Guard to ensure the safety of Black and young White protesters (Karenga 167 - 169; Swift 121, 130 - 136). In the midst of this chaos, there were several ideas on how the Black man should fight for his rights. Malcolm X, the most controversial of the new generation of Black leader, spent time with the Nation of Islam and spoke on a platform of violence and Black Empowerment. He preached that African Americans had waited too long for their rights, and allowed the White man do damage their cultural sense of self too long. He adapted the X as a name, to cast off the last name given by whites to their slaves, recommending other African Americans do the same. Malcolm X was killed in 1965. (Fairclough 72 - 81, Swift 152) . The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., began leading a non-violent protest movement, marching large numbers of Blacks and young Whites in favor of equal voting rights, and an end to the "Jim Crow Laws". Many segregated public services, such as busses, were boycotted. This often brought violence on the protesters, but Dr. King insisted that this violence not be returned (Fairclough 68 - 72, Swift 121 - 130). He won the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts in 1964, after the Civil Rights Act of the same year was passed, which would have been impossible if not for his efforts. He was shot and killed in 1968, by a racist White man named James Earl Ray (Ayers 833, 878, 886). The Civil Rights act of 1964

and many smaller measures passed in the decade surrounding, ended segregation by law. The Fair Housing Act and the Equal Opportunity Employment Act were issued to help end institutional racism, and Title VII of the Civil Rights act of 1964 provided the basis for Affirmative Action. This policy, required a certain percentage of employees, students, and tenants to be of minority descent (Karenga 182).. This policy created social tensions among Whites, who feared racial discrimination was now being used against them (Ayers 968, 969). While on the surface these were intended to undo a centuries of oppression it just put a new face onto the discrimination by not giving African American's equality, but just improvements from the harsh situations of the past. Throughout the 60's and 70's, African Americans also found more of a public cultural voice than they had had before. Black musical styles, including Soul (based on the Blues and Spirituals) and Funk (combining electric Jazz and Blues) became common on the radio, Blues styles became adapted to the new Rock and Roll; all were listened to by the youth on both sides. James Brown encouraged his listeners to " Be Black and Proud" (Ayers 837 - 840). Congress declared February " Black History Month" in 1976, to make sure that achievements of Black Americans were specifically mentioned in schools (Ayers 919). Kwanzaa, a celebration highlighting the ideals of African culture, began in the 1970 as well, to provide a uniquely African American holiday (Karenga 163 - 164). By the 1980s, there were new problems facing African Americans and their culture. The inner city, home to many Blacks since their migration at the turn of the century, began to fall prey to a more organized form of crime; drug use and gang membership. Gangs gain hold of much of the inner cities, and their

influence begins to spread far from the large urban centers where they began. Crime rates soar among the minorities, specifically the African Americans. Prisons begin to fill with minority inmates, and the police begin a system of " racial profiling," citing the prison rates as evidence that Black Americans should be treated differently, and are more dangerous (Gibbs 16 - 20). This policy sparked riots in Los Angeles in 1992, after the police charged with brutally beating Rodney King without cause are acquitted. The officers in question were videotaped beating King, whom they painted as a wild and violent man that required such treatment (Gibbs, 28, 56). Rev. Louis Farrakhand, the leader of the Nation of Islam, used the African American outcry after the trial to call for a Million Man March on Washington, DC. The purpose of this march was first to encourage more Blacks to register to vote, and also to address the problems of the inner city. He preached that no white politician would invest heavily in reforming the inner city until it meant votes, hence the need to register more African Americans. Rev. Farrakhand also encouraged Black men to take more responsibility for their families, to become fathers to their children in order to provide good examples and to fight the drug epidemic he claimed the Whites had lain upon them. This has led to the " Millions More" movement, a social group that provides lasting encouragement to Black families (Newton 263 - 290). African Americans, while socially much better off than a century ago, are still fighting to end the oppression and discrimination of their people. They still lobby to end discrimination, especially by police profiling and in their portrayal in the media. Many educated African Americans believe the plight of the inner city -- the gangs, drugs, and the rap music which supports these ideas -- to be

the source of their remaining problems with equality. African Americans have the highest percentages of single-parent households in the United States today, and the highest crime rates. Until these problems are properly addressed, the push for civil rights will continue (Karenga 486; Newton 292)

African Americans have had a long and hard history of oppression, one which has threatened to destroy the cultural identity and uniqueness. Despite the early White attempts to destroy their cultural link to West Africa, they managed to save some parts of their past. Blues music, with its roots in the traditions of the Ghana Empire, has become the single greatest musical influence in America, white or black. Jazz, the creation of musically educated African Americans, is considered the only truly unique American art form in the world. This is all in spite of two centuries of White attempts to eradicate African American culture.

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