From Africa to America

Summary: During the brutality of the slave trade, many enslaved Africans brought their religious traditions to the United States and the Caribbean. These traditions were maintained in subtle ways in the United States, most notably in the Christianity of black Americans. Over the next two centuries, black Americans have explored their connection to African heritage and religions.

Most Africans bound for the plantations, mines, and workshops of the New World embarked on their involuntary journey from the coast of western Africa that runs between present-day Senegal and Angola. Among the approximately ten million who reached the Americas, there were a few Christians and many more Muslims; but the vast majority observed traditional African religions, carrying their complex legacy to the New World. Today that legacy is part of the religious landscape of the United States. Though always subtly visible in the Christianity of black North Americans, it is vibrantly apparent in the religious traditions that were brought to the United States by Caribbean immigrants in the late 20th century, including Cuban Santería, Haitian Vodou, Jamaican Revivalism, and Rastafarianism. The presence of these Afro-Caribbean traditions in the U.S. has contributed to new forms of African-influenced religious life among African Americans.

The African religious traditions that came to the Americas through African captives share a range of qualities. All acknowledge a supreme God, sometimes described as a “high God,” but emphasize the primacy of multiple spirit beings—called “orisha” in Yoruba—in daily life. In reciprocal relationships with these gods, people enjoy successes, celebrate rites of passage, and cope with misfortune, illness, and grief. Like many present-day African traditions, these streams of faith and practice involve sacred dance and percussive music, used to induce immediate contact between worshippers and spirits in the form of what social scientists call “spirit possession.” The devotees are often called the “wives” or “horses” of the gods, and the gods, in turn, are believed to control and care for them. Worshippers in many such traditions make both food offerings and animal blood sacrifices to the spirits during celebratory feasting, cleansing, or healing rites.

Distinctly African traditions made their most obvious contribution to Caribbean and South American religions—Candomble, Shango and Umbanda in Brazil, Santería in Cuba, Shango in Trinidad, Obeah
and Myalism in Jamaica, and Vodou in Haiti—while they were transformed into less recognizable forms in the United States. Scholars of African American history, noting that presumably similar traditions appear to have endured only in cultural fragments until they were re-introduced via the Caribbean, have asked what distinguishes the experience of these traditions in Caribbean and South American countries from that of the United States.

First, experts observe that Haiti, Brazil and 19th century Cuba had a much higher ratio of African to European inhabitants. Further, both Cuba and Brazil received sizable numbers of enslaved Africans until far later than did the United States, allowing the continual reinforcement of African forms of knowledge and ritual life. Second, these were Roman Catholic countries where the rich iconography and mythology of the Catholic saints provided convenient symbols through which to honor Yoruba, Fon and Kongo gods, each with his or her own distinctive emblems and traits. As they continued to develop in the Americas, most of the African-inspired traditions incorporated Christian forms, particularly Catholic statues, lithographs, candles, and stories. For example, the Yoruba or Lucumi tradition is sometimes called Santería, or the “way of the saints,” for the identification made between Yoruba orisha and the saints that are so popular in Cuban Catholicism.

Caribbean immigration to the United States since the late 1950s has established a new range of African-inspired religions that has then reshaped the pan-Africanist impulse among native-born black Americans. Some have joined these Afro-Caribbean traditions, while others borrow practices from them as part of their quest to re-establish a connection with Africa.

However, there was a movement among black Americans to reclaim their American roots decades before this new infusion of Afro-Caribbean culture and religion. Despite its distance from the West African source of the slave trade, the biblical “Ethiopia” became, for some African American Christians, a beacon of hope as a source of black dignity. A political pan-Africanist vision reached its crescendo in the 1920s with the “back to Africa” movement of Marcus Garvey. Led by Garvey, the United Negro Improvement Association—the greatest mass organization in African American history—embraced no single denomination, but declared missionizing and building the African homeland to be the responsibility of all African American Christians. Garvey’s redemptive pan-Africanism finds prominent successors not only in secular African American fashion and politics, but in religious movements like the Nation of Islam.
For many African American Christians and Muslims, identification with Africa did not imply identification with the non-scriptural religious traditions of Africa. Until recently, most African American Christians consciously downplayed their cultural and hereditary connections to Africa. However, the work of scholars such as historian Carter G. Woodson, sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois, and anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits has deepened the understanding of Africa’s contribution to African American culture and progress. Herskovits in particular argued that American culture, while not preserving distinctive Caribbean religious traditions, was nonetheless replete with “Africanisms,” or African survivals. Among these are the many forms of dance, movement, music, and the experience of being “filled with the Holy Spirit,” that the Black church has contributed to American Protestantism in general and Pentecostalism in particular. Another example is the continual presence of certain magical and healing practices in the South, called “Hoodoo,” “Voodoo,” and “Conjure.” Subsequent research presented the “ring shout,” most pronounced among the Gullah of the Georgia Sea Islands, as further evidence of the African connection.

Today, Americans identify with distinctively African culture and religion in many ways. Among African Americans in the United States, there is new consciousness of the contributions their forebears have made to the shaping of American culture, expressed in new forms of African American celebration such as the nine-day Kwanzaa festival held in December. Americans from the Caribbean bring with them the heritage of Catholicism as well as Afro-Caribbean traditions associated with Haiti, Cuba or Jamaica. In addition, new immigrants from Africa’s many countries—including Ethiopia’s Coptic Christians, Nigeria’s Pentecostals, and Ghana’s Anglicans—have brought Christian traditions shaped by their own African cultures. These very different streams of tradition and culture, all linked to Africa, are now present in America.