CHAPTER 4

The Origins of African America and the Continuity of African Culture

Ever since the debate between Melville Herskovits and E. Franklin Frazier, scholars have sought appropriate ways of characterizing the relationship between African and African-American culture. Did the Middle Passage and slavery obliterate the cultural heritage of the African peoples, as Frazier contended? Or did some cultural traits survive in the New World, as Herskovits claimed? Although few contemporary historians would take either side of that stark dichotomy, the debate lingers on in efforts to characterize and account for culturally influenced practices such as the slaves' family life, personality, religion, and resistance.

As with most such dichotomies the opposition may be a false one. As Herskovits himself observed, some cultural traits were better able to survive the harsh slave regime than others. For example, song, dance, and religion did not require the material resources, the careful apprenticeship in skills, or the master's consent to the same extent as would the decorative arts, artisanry or marriage rites. But even the cultural traits most subject to pressure and change might be "reinterpretated" so that African cultural values and practices reemerged in new American forms—among whites as well as blacks. For example, Catholic saints could become associated with African deities and Christian baptism with African river spirits.

More important still, other historians have argued, the concept of culture itself must not be imagined as a fixed trait or characteristic to be passed unchanged from one generation to the next. All living cultures are influenced by social and historical developments; change and adaptation is part of their very nature. The necessity for change and adaptation was especially pertinent for the ethnically diverse African population in America. Coming from sometimes strikingly different cultures, Africans began the process of cultural change and creativity on board the slave ships and continued that process throughout the three centuries of North American slavery. Most pressing of all were the need to fashion a language that made slaves intelligible to each other as well as to their masters, and the need to fashion a religion that made the harsh new world of slavery intelligible to themselves. In these processes, perhaps, change and continuity were but two sides of the same coin.

DOCUMENTS

In the first document Olaudah Equiano, traded from one ethnic group to another along his journey to the West African coast, describes the cultural diversity of West Africa that he witnessed. The second document consists of five advertisements placed in Virginia newspapers to retrieve runaway slaves. Their meticulous descriptions inadvertently reveal the cultural diversity of the eighteenth-century slave population in physical appearance, language skills, and general knowledge and acculturation. The ads also expose, almost casually, the brutality of slavery. In the third document, Dr. Francis Le Jau describes his cautious efforts to convert slaves to Anglicanism. Notably, he requires that they obtain their master's consent, and he is reticent to entrust them with literacy skills, all of which apparently limits the effectiveness of these early conversion attempts. Although not challenging slavery directly, English evangelist George Whitefield is much less circumspect, as the fourth document reveals. Preaching to thousands at a time, he welcomes slaves and free blacks into his fold and makes the education of orphaned black children his special project. The fifth and sixth documents reveal something of Whitefield's influence on American blacks. The celebrated black poet Phyllis Wheatley pays homage to Whitefield's labors on behalf of her people, and John Marrant, a free black, describes his conversion by Whitefield. London Carter's diary entries, the seventh document, show the anxieties as well as the derision of a slaveholder at the conversion of his slaves and fellow slaveowners. Two letters from black converts during the first post-Revolutionary War decade show the steady institutionalization of the Baptist faith among American blacks. The final document is a twentieth-century photograph of a grave in Mt. Olive Cemetery in Washington, D.C. Although Mt. Olive was a white cemetery when this photo was taken, the white shells decorating the mound reflect an African style of burial and, possibly, the continuity of African influences in American culture.

1. Olaudah Equiano, an Ibo, Discovers the Cultural Diversity of West Africa, 1789

... I was again sold, and carried through a number of places, till, after travelling a considerable time, I came to a town called Tinnah, in the most beautiful country I had yet seen in Africa. It was extremely rich, and there were many rivulets which flowed through it; and supplied a large pond in the center of the town, where the people washed. Here I first saw and tasted cocoa nuts, which I thought superior to any nuts I had ever tasted before; and the trees, which were loaded, were also interspersed among the houses, which had commodious shades adjoining, and were in the same manner as ours, the insides being nearly plastered and whitewashed. Here I also saw and tasted for the first time sugar-cane. Their money consisted of little white shells, the size of the finger nail: they are known in this country by the name of core [cowries]. I was sold here for one hundred and seventy-two of them by a merchant who lived and brought me there. I had been about two or three days at his house, when a wealthy widow, a neighbour of his, came there one evening and brought with her an only son, a young gentleman about my own age and size. Here they saw me; and, having taken a fancy to me, I was bought of the merchant, and

The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African (2 vols., London, 1789), 1:52-54.
went home with them. Her house and premises were situated close to one of those rivulets I have mentioned, and were the finest I ever saw in Africa; they were very extensive, and she had a number of slaves to attend her. The next day I was washed and perfumed, and when meal-time came, I was led into the presence of my mistress, and ate and drank before her with her son. This filled me with astonishment: and I could scarce help expressing my surprise that the young gentleman should suffer me, who was bound, to eat with him who was free; and not only so, but that he would not at any time either eat or drink till I had taken first, because I was the eldest, which was agreeable to our custom. Indeed every thing here, and all their treatment of me, made me forget that I was a slave. The language of these people resembled ours so nearly, that we understood each other perfectly. They had also the very same customs as we. There were likewise slaves daily to attend us, while my young master and I, with other boys, sported with our darts and bows and arrows, as I had been used to do at home. In this resemblance to my former happy state I passed about two months, and I now began to think I was to be adopted into the family, and was beginning to be reconciled to my situation, and to forget by degrees my misfortunes, when all at once the delusion vanished; for, without the least previous knowledge, one morning early, while my dear master and companion was still asleep, I was awakened out of my reverie to fresh sorrow, and hurried away even amongst the uncircumcised.

Thus, at the very moment I dreamed of the greatest happiness, I found myself most miserable: and it seemed as if fortune wished to give me this taste of joy only to render the reverse more poignant. The change I now experienced was as painful as it was sudden and unexpected. It was a change indeed from a state of bliss to a scene which is inexplicable by me, as it discovered to me an element I had never before beheld, and till then had no idea of, and wherein such instances of hardship and cruelty continually occurred as I can never reflect on but with horror.

All the nations and people I had hitherto passed through resembled our own in their manners, customs, and language: but I came at length to a country, the inhabitants of which differed from us in all those particulars. I was very much struck with this difference, especially when I came among a people who did not circumcise, and eat without washing their hands. They cooked also in iron pots, and had European cutlasses and cross bows, which were unknown to us, and fought with their fists amongst themselves. Their women were not so modest as ours, for they eat, and drank, and slept with their men. But, above all, I was amazed to see no sacrifices or offerings among them. In some of those places the people ornamented themselves with scars, and likewise filed their teeth very sharp. They wanted sometimes to ornament me in the same manner, but I would not suffer them; hoping that I might some time be among a people who did not thus disfigure themselves, as I thought they did. At last, I came to the banks of a large river, which was covered with canoes, in which the people appeared to live with their household utensils and provisions of all kinds. I was beyond measure astonished at this, as I had never before seen any water larger than a pond or a rivulet; and my surprise was mingled with no small fear when I was put into one of these canoes, and we began to paddle and move along the river. We continued going on thus till night; and when we came to land, and made fires on the banks, each family by themselves, some dragged their canoes on shore, others staid and cooked in theirs, and laid in them all night.

Those on the land had mats, of which they made tents, some in the shape of little houses: In these we slept; and after the morning meal we embarked again, and proceeded as before. I was often very much astonished to see some of the women, as well as the men, jump into the water, dive to the bottom, come up again, and swim about. Thus I continued to travel, sometimes by land, sometimes by water, through different countries, and various nations, till, at the end of six or seven months after I had been kidnapped, I arrived at the sea coast.

2. Six Advertisements for Virginia Slave Runaways, 1736, 1767

Virginia Gazette (Parks), October 29 to November 5, 1736.

RAN away Two Negro Men Slaves; One of them called Poplar, from my House in King William County, some Time in June last; He is a lusty well-set likely Fellow, of a middle Stature, upwards of 30 Years old, and talks pretty good English: The other called Platter, from my Plantation in Roy's Neck, in the County of King and Queen, about the Month of August following. He is a young Angola Negro, very black, and his Lips are remarkably red. He is supposed to be in Company with an old Negro Fellow belonging to Col. Corbin, of a yellowish Hue, his Hair is like a Madagascar's, and to be gone towards Spotsylvania. Whoever brings the said Negroes, or either of them to my House aforesaid, shall be paid a Pistole Reward for each: Or if already apprehended, any Person giving Notice thereof, so as they, or either of them, may be had again, shall be reasonably rewarded by

Benjamin Needler.

N.B. the Negro Poplar is Outlaw'd.

Virginia Gazette (Purdie & Dixon), April 16, 1767.

RUN AWAY from the subscriber in Norfolk, about the 20th of October last, two young Negro fellows, viz. WILL, about 5 feet 8 inches high, middling black, well made, is an outlandish fellow, and when he is surprized the white of his eyes turns red; I bought him of Mr. Moss, about 8 miles below York, and imagine he is gone that way, or some where between York and Williamsburg. PETER, about 5 feet 9 inches high, a very black slim fellow, has a wife at Little Town, and a father at Mr. Philip Burt's quarter, near the half-way house between Williamsburg and York; he formerly belonged to Parson Fontaine, and I bought him of Doctor James Carter. They are both outlawed; and TEN POUNDS a piece offered to any person that will kill the said Negroes, and bring me their heads, or THIRTY SHILLINGS for each if brought home alive.

JOHN BROWN.