

Black Church and Sacred Dance

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The religious beliefs and culture of the Caribbean had an impact on the Black worship experience. Many of the slaves brought into Haiti and other areas of the West Indies eventually ended up in the plantations of the Southern United States. French planters, for example, fleeing the Haitian Revolution, brought slaves to Louisiana with them. Congo Square in New Orleans is believed to be the place where Americans were first introduced to West Indian dance. Here, people came from all over the world to see Blacks perform religious, celebrative, and gymnastic dancing.

The plantation provided the setting for religious and rhythmic dance for slaves. Dancing usually occurred on holidays, occasional celebrations, and on Saturdays, to amuse slave owners. These dances reflected the African heritage of the slave and, also, new expressions which grew out of the experience in the new world. One writer captures the scene accordingly:

“Shout dances survived intact the transatlantic crossing and vividly recalled African dance steps. This consisted of one group’s rhythmicizing a chant or spiritual and groups of worshippers shuffling counter-clockwise round the church house in single file, moving their hips in a rocking fashion, stamping and clapping. If a sister even looked as if her feet were about to “cross” (lift from the floor as if to jig), the watchful deacon would say, “Look out, sister, how you walk on the Cross, your foot might slip and your soul get lost.” Circle or Ring Dances are the oldest extant and stem from the belief in the incorporating the powers of the circle, the transference of psychic powers from person to person, the unity of the community, protection from alien or hostile forces, and strengthening communal life. These prayers with the body integrating, chanting and music developed over centuries in many cultures, notably in Africa, serve to promote ecstatic states of being. No doubt, this was one of the most meaningful forms of expression for the slave, next to the spiritual, and alleviated some of the pain of existence.”

These rhythmic and religious dance expressions have continued to be a part of the Black worship experience. Black preaching, singing or spiritual or gospel music, or “just plain shouting,” all involve a kind of symbolic movement which could be characterized as dance. Note the spirit of this spiritual: “I got shoes – You got shoes; when I get to heaven. I’m going to put on my shoes. Shout all over God’s heaven!”

The mood and tempo of this spiritual implies that the walk might very well have been a glorious dance. Dance fits “shouting all over God’s heaven” much better than walking.

It was the rhythm of almost dance-like movement of the Black preachers that inspired James Weldon Johnson to write *God’s Trombone*, the celebrated book of Black folk sermons.

It is not likely that the word dance will appear in the worship liturgy of many Black churches, but a visit to a “typical” Baptist, Pentecostal, and some expressions of Methodist churches would find choirs swinging and swaying in the processionals and recessionals. Shouting and other religious expressions common to the Black church could easily be characterized as dance.

Black Sacred Dance, as a formal and acknowledged expression, does have a very distinct history. Hampton Institute organized a creative dance group and dance spiritual for the first time in 1925. Since this time, Sacred Dance, using the Black expression, has been limited to theatre and concert halls. Many famous dance artists such as Joe Nash, Pearl Primus, and Talley Beatty performed religious works. Arthur Mitchell and Alvin Ailey have choreographed significant dance works. Alvin Ailey's Revelations have been accorded world fame. "To experience Ailey's dynamic suite of spirituals is like being in church," one enthusiast suggested.

Black churches in a number of mainline, predominantly white denominations, such as the Presbyterian, Episcopalian, United Methodist, and Roman Catholic are now incorporating Sacred Dance into the worship experience.

The future of Sacred Dance is, indeed bright in the Black church. It will be more visible as the Black church understands better the role of religion and the arts and the role, historically, dance has played in the evolution of Black religious expression.