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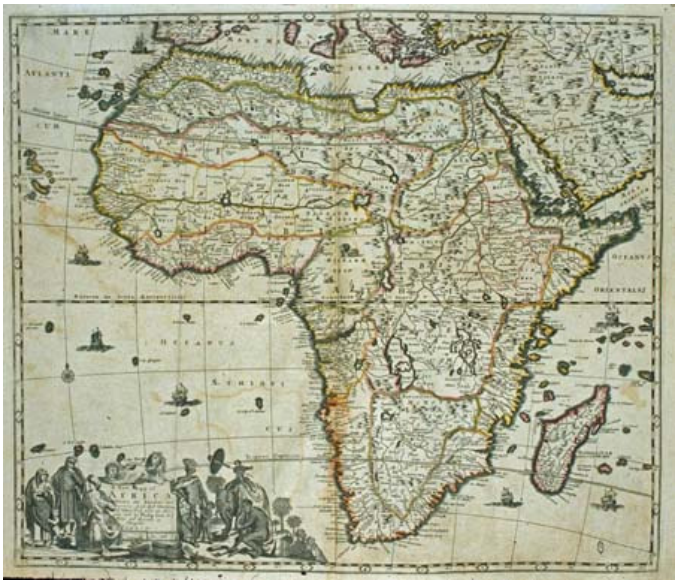
Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority

Rituals Brought Forth from Africa and Employed by Enslaved African-Americans

by Jamie Harding

For many years much was written about the lives of wealthy plantation owners and their families, particularly in the antebellum South. The romanticism and life style of the white plantation owners and their families has been the stuff of many novels and movies. We have always known that enslaved persons were a large part of what kept those plantations in working order. However, little was written about what kind of life those slaves lived. What kind of world did they come from, what rituals did they bring with them to enrich their lives in the New World? Did they keep these rituals; do any of them live on today? It has only been in recent years that many of the mysteries surrounding their lives have been somewhat unraveled. Some of these rituals were carried from their homeland in Africa, some were born out of necessity for their lives in the New World, and many helped soothe the pain and loneliness they must have felt.



A New Map of Africa, 1698

A resource book "Enslaving Virginia" points out that kinship is the key to understanding African society. Africans believed that having children was essential. Without the birth of children, the chain was broken; and we know that birth was an occasion celebrated by rites in all African communities. Pregnant women made preparations in anticipation of the upcoming birth and they observed certain rites and taboos. For instance, a new person had to be initiated into the group at an appropriate time, usually puberty, in a ceremony which made that individual a member of the community. In Sierra Leone, young men and women belonged to separate groups. As a means of initiation men were taken into the bush for weeks of training in traditions and customs. They were taught self-discipline and respect for one's elders. When their training was completed, their status changed and made them full members of their society. Women had a similar initiation.

We know that when Africans were brought to the New World, families were often separated. Lacking nuclear family relationships, there was a bond and kinship between the slaves that lived together. Even in the 20th century, one hundred years after slavery was outlawed, this kinship still exists. John Steinbeck notes in his book *America and Americans* "that always being in the presence of an active and overwhelmingly armed enemy gave the Negroes a community of spirit and a

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Jim Bartlinski, Director
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reliance on one another which whites have only vaguely felt in wartime when they have been under siege."

However, depending on their owner's wishes, marriages were not always allowed between two slaves. A popular African tradition at weddings was "Jumping the Broom." This ritual began in Africa, and although its full meaning and origins have been lost, it most likely represents the joining of two families. Slaves sought legitimacy by jumping over the broom. To them it signified a legal and bonding act. At Mount Vernon, two-thirds of the slaves were married according to a list made months before George Washington's death; although these were not recognized nor protected by the legal system, and would have had to have been approved by Washington.

The book *Slavery at the Home of George Washington* describes the lifestyle of slaves working at Mount Vernon. Virginia had the largest enslaved population in the North American colonies at that time – about 146,000.

Slaves had very little leisure time. Sunday at Mount Vernon was a day off, except possibly for house slaves. Free time was valued as an opportunity to visit, enjoy music, smoke pipes, play games such as prisoner's base, swim in the Potomac, tell stories, and attend horse races in Alexandria. Religion was important to some, and a handful may have been Christian preachers, while others practiced African

Colonial Williamsburg Interpreters practicing Juba

religions. Churches provided more than spiritual guidance; they were also centers for social events.

Story telling was an important cultural form brought over from West Africa and included acting, singing and gestures. In many ways, traditional African folk tales were similar to those found in early European societies. Also, African-born slaves sometimes sang tribal songs and performed tribal dances for their fellow slaves. This resulted in the survival of many African cultural forms in the south throughout the antebellum period. Lawrence Levine, the author of *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* says that black storytellers often altered the rhythm of their voices to act out parts of their stories. The audience would comment, correct, and laugh – thus making the folklore a communal experience.

As slaves toiled in the fields, they often sang field songs. *Slavery and the Making of America* tells about the words in these songs being signals to other slaves about escaping, meetings and other activities. They didn't want the white overseers to know about what they were saying, so it was not just their dialect but embedded in the words they used.

The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South by John Blassingame relates that several aspects of West Africa culture are so distinctive that their presence or absence among southern slaves is easy to discover. Dances, folk stories, music, magic and language show a pattern. Music was central to African culture – drums, guitars, flutes, piccolos, whistles and horns were the principal instruments and were played on many

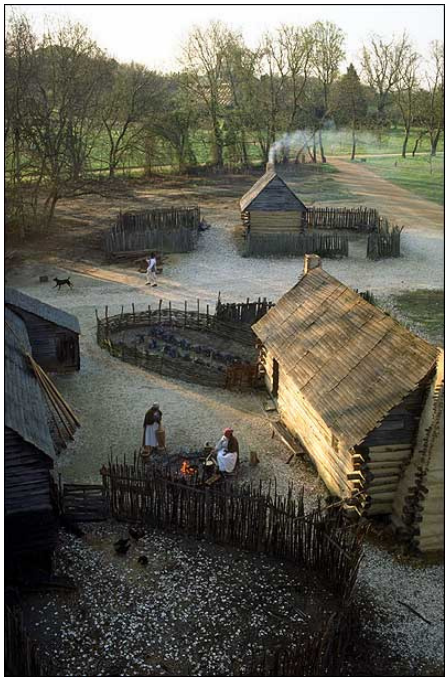
occasions.

In addition to many secular songs was the practice of "juba." When slaves had no musical instruments they achieved a high degree of rhythm by clapping their hands. Solomon Northrup, the author of "Twelve Years a Slave" was an accomplished musician. He observed that in juba the clapping involved "striking the hands on the knees, then striking the hands together, then striking the right shoulder with one hand, the left with the other—all the while keeping time with the feet and singing." Witnesses to juba have told how the patterns were nothing short of amazing. Solomon Northrup, a free man in the North was tricked into slavery in the mid-19th century and brought to the South. He recalls:

> "Alas! Had it not been for my beloved violin, I scarcely can conceive how I could have endured the long years of bondage…It was my companion—the friend of my bosom—triumping loudly when I was joyful, and uttering its soft melodious consolations when I was sad. Often, at midnight, when sleep had fled affrighted from the cabin, and my soul was disturbed and troubled with the contemplation of my fate, it would sing me a song of peace."

What other activities occupied the free time of enslaved African-Americans? Slave children played a game called "hiding the switch" in which one child had a stick on his person and the child that found it ran after the others and tried to hit them. At Mount Vernon, archaeologists discovered clay marbles, popular among children in the 1700s and 1800s. It is possible that skill and gambling continued after childhood. A game called "prisoners base" is thought to date to the middle ages. It entailed a lot of jumping and running similar to today's "Tag" or "Capture the Flag."

Little is known of spiritual practices at Mount Vernon, but there is evidence that religious traditions from Africa had not died out. This is also true of Monticello and plantations in Maryland and South Carolina. This would be especially true in areas of high concentrations of Africans. In the cellar at Mount Vernon, archeologists found a bone from a raccoon that had been incised along one end. It is thought that the bone may have been worn around the neck and suspended from a cord. It is known that a male raccoon is sexually aggressive, so the bone may have been a fertility sign. They also found leg bones of an owl, with the talons cut off. They could also have been worn as ornamentation. This has given some credence to the belief that voodoo could have been practiced there.



Recreated Slave Quarters at Carter's Grove, Colonial Williamsburg

In regards to medical care for the enslaved, many plantation owners employed white doctors to cure sick slaves. In *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, Lawrence Levine reports that there is evidence that on the subject of medicine, many slaves mistrusted the whites and preferred their own remedies. Their medical lore was learned from their African forbearers. One woman told the story of her African-born grandmother who believed that a "misery" in her arm or leg could be cured by splitting a black chicken open and applying it to the painful area.

Death and burial were the final rites observed in the lifecycle of a slave. Although markers no longer remain for slaves at Mount Vernon, there is some evidence that suggests burials were done on an

east-west axis. This may have been so that bodies were laid this way so they faced Africa, symbolizing a desire to return home, or perhaps a sign of the assimilation to Christianity (Christian burials often facing toward the rising of the sun as a symbol of Christ's second coming). There was probably a social gathering at a time of death – a wake or a meal after the funeral. John Blasingame, in *The Slave Community,* also relates that funeral rites were more widespread than voodoo. Because of labor requirements on the plantation a deceased slave was often buried at night with the rites being held weeks later. He says that the similarity to African practices is unmistakable. Mrs. Telfair Hodgson reported that on her father's Georgia plantation in the 1850's:

Carving, c. 1860

"Negro graves were always decorated with the last article used by the departed, and broken pitchers and broken bits of colored glass were considered even more appropriate than the white shells from the beach nearby. Sometimes they carved rude wooden figures like images of idols, and sometimes a patchwork quilt was laid upon the grave."

In essence, rituals which African-Americans carried with them from their homeland helped them to carry on with their lives; and to withstand the pressures they were forced to endure in the New World. Through research we are becoming more aware of what life may have been like for enslaved persons, and the hidden life and rites that many owners were oblivious to.

Thank you Jamie– for your research!