

Slave Culture

Forming a Slave Community

The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South is a book written by American historian John W. Blassingame. Published in 1972, it is one of the first historical studies of slavery in the United States to be presented from the perspective of the enslaved.

In his book, Blassingame corrects common misconceptions about slavery, arguing that slaves had personal agency, actively developed a cultural identity, and performed meaningful activities in their free time and space.

The retention of African culture acted as a form of resistance, and "African survivals" persisted in the form of folk tales, religion and spirituality, music and dance, and language.

While ministers preached obedience in the presence of the slaveowners and other whites, slaves often met in secret "invisible churches" where they could discuss freedom, liberty, and the judgment of God against slaveowners.

The family unit was also an important means of survival and hope for slaves.

John W. Blassingame

John Wesley Blassingame (March 23, 1940 - February 13, 2000) was an American scholar, historian, educator, writer, and pioneer in the study of American slavery.

The Slave Community

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Despite brutal circumstances and limited freedom, African slaves formed strong communities that often served as methods of resistance. *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* is a book written by American historian John W. Blassingame. Published in 1972, it is one of the first historical studies of slavery in the United States to be presented from the perspective of the enslaved. Using psychology, Blassingame analyzes fugitive slave narratives published in the 19th century to conclude that an independent culture developed among the enslaved and that there were

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a variety of personality types exhibited by slaves. In his book, Blassingame corrects common misconceptions about slavery, arguing that slaves had personal agency, actively developed a cultural identity, and performed meaningful activities in their free time and space. The importance of *The Slave Community* as one of the first studies of slavery from the perspective of the slave was recognized by historians. The book nonetheless received heavy criticism by academics who disagreed with Blassingame's conclusions, methodology, and sources.

African Cultural Retention and Community

According to Blassingame, African culture was not entirely removed from slave culture through the process of enslavement. "African survivals" persisted in the form of folk tales, religion and spirituality, music and dance, and language (Figure 0). He asserts that the retention of African culture acted as a form of resistance to enslavement. Culture developed within the slave community independent of the slaveowners' influence. Blassingame notes,

"Antebellum black slaves created several unique cultural forms which lightened their burden of oppression, promoted group solidarity, provided ways for verbalizing aggression, sustaining hope, building self-esteem, and often represented areas of life largely free from the control of whites."

Slaveowners and state governments tried to prevent slaves from making or playing musical instruments because of the use of drums to signal the Stono Rebellion in 1739. In spite of restrictions, slaves were able to build a strong musical tradition drawing on their African heritage. Music, songs, and dances were similar to those performed or played in Africa. Instruments reproduced by slaves include drums, three-stringed banjos, gourd rattles, and mandolins.

Many of the folk tales told by slaves have been traced by African scholars to Ghana, Senegal, and Mauritania, and to peoples such as the Ewe, Wolof, Hausa, Temne, Ashanti, and Igbo. One prominent example discussed by Blassingame is the Ewe story of "Why the Hare Runs Away," which is a trickster and tar-baby tale told by southern slaves and later recorded by writer Joel Chandler Harris in his Uncle Remus stories. Southern slaves often included African animals like elephants, lions, and monkeys as characters in their folk tales.

As Christian missionaries and slaveowners attempted to erase African religious and spiritual beliefs, Christianity and enslaved black ministers slowly replaced African religious survivals and represented another aspect of slave culture which the slaves used to create their own communities. While ministers preached obedience in the presence of the slaveowners and other whites, slaves often met in secret, "invisible"

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services unsupervised by whites. In these "invisible churches," slaves could discuss freedom, liberty, and the judgment of God against slaveowners.

Slave Families

The family unit was also an important means of survival and hope for slaves. Slave marriages were illegal in southern states, and slave couples were frequently separated by slaveowners through sale. Slaveowners often encouraged monogamous relationships to "make it easier to discipline their slaves. ... A black man, they reasoned, who loved his wife and his children was less likely to be rebellious or to run away than would a 'single' slave." Slave parents often attempted to shield infants and young children from the brutality of the plantation. Blassingame notes:

"While the form of family life in the quarters differed radically from that among free Negroes and whites, this does not mean it failed to perform many of the traditional functions of the family—the rearing of children being one of the most important of these functions. Since slave parents were primarily responsible for training their children, they could cushion the shock of bondage for them, help them to understand their situation, teach them values different from those their masters tried to instill in them, and give them a referent for self-esteem other than the master."

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