

Hoodoo Religion and American Dance Traditions: Rethinking the Ring Shout

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Abstract: When one considers the history of American dance traditions one rarely thinks about its possible relationship to the local African American “Sanctified” or fundamentalist church described in works such as James Baldwin’s *Go Tell it On the Mountain*. This article examines the historical relationship between early African American slave worship and its contribution to both the social and theatrical dance traditions of the United States.

Keywords: Hoodoo, Ring Shout, Black dance, Plantation dancing.

More than any discipline in the academy, Black Studies explores unseen and overlooked connections between African American life, culture and sociocultural movement in the United States. Uniquely placed as an interdisciplinary enterprise, Black Studies is not restricted by ideological confines which dictate a disciplines approach and focus. Because it challenges many traditional paradigms and their assumptions, Black Studies has the potential to discover both new approaches and new truths while pointing to future research. Such is the case with African American folk religion and dance.

Neither the literature on American dance nor the literature on Hoodoo¹ has considered the possible role of African American folk religion in the development of American dance traditions. Dance scholars such as Lynne Emery, Robert Ferris Thompson, Sally Banes, Kariamuw Welsh, and Jackie Malone have given no consideration to the role of the Hoodoo folk religion on American dance development. Likewise, the scholars who research Hoodoo have narrowly focused their work so that there is little room for other than historical considerations. This type of narrow focus is reflected in the work of Hoodoo scholars like Yvonne Chireau. Therefore, the intent of this article is to give preliminary examination to the idea that a now nonexistent institution, which I call “the old Hoodoo religion,” played a significant role in American dance development.

African American social and vernacular dance has been the wellspring from which nearly all popular American dance, as well as significant theatrical dance, has been drawn. Where it has not been the sole inspirational source, as is the case with theater dance, it has been of significant influence in the dance creation process. From its appearance in North America, African American dance has been intimately responsive to its sociocultural environment; dance gives abstract visual representation to significant moments in African American community cultural history, while articulating esteemed values and nourishing the African soul.

Enslaved Africans brought their traditional dances to North America with them. Primarily sacred, these dances, upon arriving here, quickly underwent modification which broke with specific ethnic African traditional cultural meaning. The original African institutional and ceremonial context, as well as the structure and function of the dance, were disrupted by enslavement.

Independently reconstituted by bondsmen who clung to cultural memory as a means of psychological survival, the dance was reconfigured and adjusted to the new physical and social environment. African traditional dance was modified and forced to adjust to both the new conditions of labor imposed by enslavement and the psychological necessities imposed by its attendant practices.

The African dance vocabularies varied from one African ethnic group to another; but these sacred dances all conformed to an overarching African aesthetic in dance which included the use of angularity, mimicry, multiple meter/polyrhythmic sensitivity, segmentation and delineation of body parts, as well as asymmetry.² These aesthetic organizing principles were common and familiar, as were certain principles of structural organization. The two most visible organizing structures were the circle and the line. All the Africans landed in significant numbers in North America were from cultures which ordered their dances using these aesthetic principles and organizing structures. The most popular European “contra dances” and European “longways” dances organized the dancers in parallel lines according to gender as did many traditional African group dances. Europeans and Africans had the line formation in common and it was therefore, familiar to both peoples finding themselves in North America.

Enslaved Africans, in North America, allotted both temporal and physical spaces for individual expression in both circle dance and line dance formations. Within the circle formation, that space was located within the circle’s center. In the line formation the space was between the two lines. When an individual stepped into the allotted space, they commanded the surrounding community’s attention and support. In the sacred circle, the center was a vortex of spiritual energy and power which represented a separate and sacred realm, one not of the material realities of enslavement. It represented a reality which connected one to the ancestors and reconfirmed a continuity through both time and space. Within the circle, the interaction between the individual and the community was mediated by sacred spiritual forces evidenced in spirit possession. Not so with the line. The allotment of individual space would not disappear either after the African sacred dances began to secularize, or after Africans took up European secular dances, but would over time expand as the sacred circle structure gradually disappeared in most locales and the Shout took up new vestment. As a result of its flexibility and successful adaptation in the secularization process and because of its similarity with the European line dance formation, the African line would remain untransformed and would retain its original African formation.

The few sustainable circle dances which Europeans and white Americans retained eventually disappeared, leaving only circular segments in “square dances.” Their clear preference was for “longways” or line dances. On March 19, 1651, John Playford published the first English dance book, *English Dancing Master*, which contained fourteen circle dances in a collection of forty-two.³ Unlike the circle, the line was familiar to both the enslaved Africans and their European captors.

The African American dance circle formation had an indisputable sacred identity that continued in spite of the line losing all indications of an earlier sacred existence. It was from the African sacred circle, that the first truly African American dance was born: the “Ring Shout.” The Ring Shout was a counter-clockwise, sacred circle dance that appears to have been done universally among African American bondsmen, and later among freedmen. “The Shout,” as it was known, used subdued stepping and hopping footwork performed with a system of gesture, spirit possession, individualized sacred dancing and specific music, particularly vocal shouting.

The music accompanying the Ring Shout was performed by the Shouters themselves. Singing, tapping sticks, hand claps and foot stomps provided the musical backdrop, while subtle jerking motions in the dancers’ bodies provided an additional rhythmic anchor to the Shout. Shouters would later add other instruments as the worship became modernized and adapted to demographic changes in the African American population.

The Ring Shout appeared on antebellum plantations, as well as in urban areas. It frequently puzzled whites who often viewed it with suspicion, disgust, fear and misinterpretation. It was always performed in a sacred context that was separated, by both day, time and location from Sunday church services, usually midweek in an open clearing in the woods, in a “praise house” or in a location other than that used for church services. The practice of “shoutin” would prove to be incompatible with the internal structure of a Christian church; its fixed pews prevented the “shouters” from convening the circle. It was this internal church architecture, with its often fixed, stationary and linearly organized in pews, with front facing alter and pulpit, that contributed to the destruction of the circularity of the Ring Shout. Frederick Law Olmstead leaves us this observation:

On most of the large rice plantations which I have seen in this vicinity, there is a small chapel, which the Negroes use as their prayer house. The owner of one of these told me that, having furnished the prayer-house with seats having a back rail, his Negroes petitioned him to remove it because it did not leave them room enough to pray. It was explained to me that it is their custom in social worship, to work themselves up to a treat pitch of excitement, in which they yell and cry aloud, and finally shriek and leap up, clapping their hands and dancing, as it is done at heathen festivals. The back rail they found to seriously impede this exercise.⁴

Unlike Christian church, the “Shout” had no preacher, and did not adhere to the same order of service as church. The Ring Shout enabled multiethnic Africans, in a particular locale, to combine in an inter-ethnic assimilation ritual that supported the nascent common identity of the African American.⁵ Enslaved Africans were ethnically a diverse group, had different national origins and did not participate in a single culture. The Ring Shout would challenge and dissolve that cultural and ethnic uniqueness.

Like dance in West Africa, the African American Ring Shout was seen as a sacred enactment performed in a sacred context; this was also true for the African American Ring Shout; but, what was the context of the Ring Shout? The earliest accounts of the Ring Shout do not locate the sacred circle in a Christian context. Furthermore some writers have even described it as being a form of “idol worship,” or as “primitive” and even “disgusting.” A white observer leaves us this account of a “shout” where sacred circle was convened:

Tonight I have been to a “shout” which seems to me certainly the remains of some old idol worship. The negroes sing a kind of chorus—three standing apart to lead and clap—and then all the others go shuffling ‘round in a circle following one another with not much regularity, turning round occasionally and bending the knees, and stamping so that the whole floor swings. In never saw anything so savage. They call it a religious ceremony, but it seems more like a regular frolic to me.⁶

Writers, such as Frederick Law Olmstead, observed a “Shout,” and states that there was a clear distinction between Christian church service and the “Shout” service.⁷ Few writers on the subject have done little more than describe it. Attesting to the non-Christian nature of early African American worship, W.E.B. Du Bois had this comment: “The church was not at first by any means Christian but instead was a comingling of plantation rites roughly designated as Voodooism.”⁸

The sacred circle, in the form of the Ring Shout, was of supreme importance to bondsmen, and they performed it in a variety of contexts including bondsmen’s funerals. A formerly enslaved African describes a clandestine funeral rite and the use of the sacred circle:

... I watch ‘em had a fewnul. I gits behine du bush an hide a watch an see wut dey does. Dey do in a long pruhcession tuh duh burryin groun and dey beat duh drums long duh way an deys ubmit duh body tuh duh groun. Den dey dance roun in a ring an dey motion wid duh hans. Dey sing duh body tuh duh brabe and den dey let it down an den dey succele roun in duh dance.⁹

A plantation owner’s daughter recalls witnessing a death bed ritual where the counterclockwise circle was invoked among Africans who were enslaved on her father’s Virginia plantation:

Her room was crowded with negroes who had come to perform their religious rites around the death-bed. Joining hands, they performed a savage dance, shouting wildly around her bed. This was horrible to hear and see, especially as in this family every effort had been made to instruct their negro dependents in the truths of religion...But although an intelligent woman, she seemed to cling to the superstitions of her race.¹⁰

The use of the ring was also observed at Congo Square, New Orleans in 1819 by Benjamine Larobe:

...formed into circular groupes [sic] in the midst of four of which, which I examined (but there were more of them), was a ring, the largest not ten feet in diameter. In the first were two women dancing. They held each a coarse handkerchief extended by the corners in their hands & set to each other in a miserably dull & slow figure, hardly moving their feet or bodies. Most of the circles contained the same sort of dancers. One was larger, in which a ring of a dozen women walked, by way of dancing, round, the music in the center.¹¹

An indicator of both the Shout's importance and its non-Christian nature is evidenced by the insistence that the sacred circle be imported into Christian conversion rituals. It is here that a crisis in scholarly interpretation develops. If enslaved Africans insisted that the Ring Shout be imported into Christian conversion rituals, then where was it being imported from? Certainly not directly from Africa, perhaps from an unknown context; if so, then what was that context? Enslaved Africans would certainly not have imported the Ring Shout from a Christian context into a Christian context. In that case, conversion to Christianity would have been meaningless and unnecessary. If enslaved Africans were Christians already then they would not have been converting and insisting on doing the Ring Shout as validation of their conversion. Scholars have overlooked this significant question which searches for the origins of American performance traditions, and seeks to reveal hidden aspects of life under enslavement.

The Ring Shout was imported from an intermediary religious form, the old Hoodoo religion: an early Americanization of a number of different African traditional religions. This was an intermediary religious form that developed among North American bondsmen prior to their widespread and in depth Christianization. It emerges from an "African Religion Complex," a collection of eight traits held in common by an overwhelming majority of African captives imported to the U.S. and its colonies. These eight traits included:

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| 1. counter-clockwise sacred circle dancing | 5. spirit possession |
| 2. ancestor reverence, | 6. animal sacrifice, |
| 3. belief in spiritual cause of malady | 7. naturopathic medicine |
| 4. water immersion | 8. divination |

Hoodoo religion involved nature reverence intermingled with remnants of African traditional religions. It also substituted forces of nature, such as storms involving lightening and strong wind, rivers and trees, for the divinities fading in their memories. Like the universality of the sacred dance circle, the different African divinities brought here represented universal forces in nature; this situation lent itself to the transference of deity back into natural forces.

Since the forces of nature were everywhere and highly accessible, the transference from lost African divinity back to nature could be accomplished. Evidence of this process is observed in later Hoodoo rituals which responded to and honored these forces. Rituals such as “pouring down the moon” performed as the river’s edge and placing an ax under the bed of a birthing woman in labor to reduce and “cut” the labor pains are but two examples of such rituals.

Though Hoodoo religion was a short lived unsustainable and transitional form; it facilitated spiritual creolization and physical survival. On one end of the transethnic continuum were the newly arriving Africans who embodied African traditions; on the other was a trajectory leading to a range of future possibilities both sacred and secular. The Hoodoo religion was the context which sustained the African sacred circle so that it could become the African American “Ring Shout”: the mother of Afro-North American dance forms. The seeds of all future black dance movement, as well as those fundamental postures and gestures which were both rhythmically ordered and held in esteem, in African American culture, would be contained in the “shout ceremony.” There, they could be preserved until their rebirth in a variety of modified forms. The shout ritual was the arena in which the motor muscle memory of African movement could be learned, sustained, relexified, and reborn eventually as secular dance forms. These forms would go on to become the famous African American dances that have circulated around the world; dances like the “Twist,” the “Black Bottom,” the “Pony” and, of course, the touch response partnering dance known as the “Lindy Hop” and all its various forms.¹²

The Ring Shout would emerge from the sacred circle along with the first saint of the old Hoodoo religion, High John the Conquer.¹³ Not only were a majority of the Africans who were brought here familiar with the sacred circle in their homeland, but also they shared at least seven other essential traits, a total of eight, that facilitated interethnic assimilation and the birth of a new American African.

The dance vocabulary and instrumentation of the Senegambian Bambara were observably different than those of the Ghanaian Akan. The Kongo dance was different than the dances of the Igbo, Temne or Ewe. Under the influence of the sacred circle in America, the various African ethnic dance traditions would solidify into one tradition and emerge from the Hoodoo religion; bringing with it a wealth of non-verbal worship forms expressed as dance. Both sacred and secular dance exhibited both new possibilities and some regional variation. Regional differences were evidenced in the regionally specific names of certain secular dances such as “Virginny Breakdown,” “Texas Tommy,” the “Charleston” or the “Black Bottom,” named for a tough southern neighborhood in the “Jook” section of Nashville, Tennessee, around Fourth Avenue.¹⁴ No such regional variation appears to have existed for the sacred circle. It appears to have varied little regardless of where it was performed.

The Hoodoo religion provided a spiritual context in which the dances could adapt and reconfigure to new meanings and new work rhythms. In the environment of North American slavery, most African American dance rituals were forcibly cut short of their original duration. Whereas, African rituals often required hours of dancing, under North American enslavement, that ritual time was forcefully restricted, truncated and reduced to essentials while the emerging dance movement sustained those characteristics most common to the multiethnic yet homogenizing group. Both Hoodoo shout rituals and secular dances could continue for many hours, much to the puzzlement of slave owners and observing whites.

In the Hoodoo religion, African divinities were transformed back into their natural sources such as storms, wind, lightening, water, fire, and death. Captive Africans could find similarities in these natural forces as they did with the sacred circle. Nearly all the Africans came from cultures in which rivers, storms, fire, birth and death were commemorated. As the protracted process of Christianization began, qualities from the Hoodoo divinities would reappear, embodied in biblical characters, all except High John the Conquer. He was the first and most dominant Hoodoo saint; and, would remain so even as Hoodoo was grafted onto black Christian practice then later commercialized and marketeered by predominantly Eastern European Jewish, middlemen minorities. Both African American dance and music would follow a similar path of secularization and attempts by outsiders to exploit it.

Initially, dance, while being wholly sacred, moved with Hoodoo religion until its divergence into the secular realm. Hoodoo, except that associated with an African American church, would completely lose all relationship with dance. It was largely through Hoodooized African American worship, prior to secularization, that the basis of African American dance was preserved. As Christianization occurred, Hoodoo ritual practitioners grafted their Hoodoo practices such as “head shaving,” and sacred circle dancing onto their newly accepted Christian faith. Bishop Payne leaves us this account:

This young man insisted that “Sinners won’t get converted unless there is a ring...at camp meeting there must be a ring here, a ring there, a ring over yonder, or sinners will not get converted”.¹⁵

The Hoodoo religion, not Christianity, was initially the sacred context for the sacred dance circle. New converts to Christianity required that the sacred circle be imported into their newly accepted religion, Christianity. Insofar as conversion signified a great change, converts would not be repositioning the shout from one Christian context to another Christian context, or conversion would be meaningless and unnecessary here. Further, both bondsmen and freedmen distinguished between going to “church” and “goin fa shout” and they set aside time to participate in both.¹⁶

As bondsmen were emerging from two and a half centuries of enslavement, they cast off not only their shackles, but accepted a new public expression of faith, Christianity. Bishop Payne, who converted over a quarter million freedmen during Reconstruction, was forced into concessions with the old Hoodoo religion in order for the conversion to Christian faith to be fully accepted. What Bishop Payne confronted with the Hoodoo religion, sacred dancing, the making of Hoodoo amulets, head shaving and other practices, would continue to confront African American, Christian pastors until the dawn of the twenty-first century as this passage illustrates:

In a rural Negro church near Columbus, Miss., there was a constant change of ministers because of the reliance of the congregation upon “jacks” (charms wrapped up in red flannel). A new minister was more quick-witted. He wrapped a large hunk of coal in red flannel, planked it on the pulpit one night and said: “Folks, dis yere de daddy-jack I’s got. Bring yo’ baby-jacks on up.” The members of the congregation were afraid not to do this. Thus the minister found out who had “jacks,” destroyed their charms, and was able to hold his position without further trouble.¹⁷

These, and other practices, would continue to be attacked by some as indicators of “lower class,” even “primitive” status.¹⁸

The dance movements in the sacred circle were initially more vigorous and elaborate, retaining much of the African ceremonial character. Spirit possession was true to its name as a particular divinity or spirit spoke through a possessee in the language of dance. In this instance, the possessing spirit gave counsel and advice to both individuals and the community. There was a broadening of the newly emerging African American dance vocabulary. With contributions from different African ethnic groups, the early shouts both absorbed and integrated movements, postures and gestures from the sacred ritual dances of a number of African ethnic dance traditions. Ring Shouts would later integrate movement from aspects of the work routine such as “gathering crops” and “picking up leaves.” Those movements, which remained in the “motor muscle memory” of the newly enslaved Africans, as well as those movements found to be most common, were more easily imitated and integrated into the sacred circle.

For the enslaved Africans, the rhythmically ordered movement expressed in the Shout, was not viewed as “dance.” Bondsmen preferred the Shout ritual over other forms of dance so much so that they refused to label “shoutin” as a type of dancing; even though similar movements were used in both sacred and secular dancing. It is here, against the backdrop of the Shout, that one can see the primary cleavage between sacred and secular, not typical of African traditional culture, drawn first on dance. Unlike secular dancing, the Ring Shout involved no personal competition as that often found in plantation “breakdowns;” dance in the Shout was neither for entertainment of the master, as it was in the contradances, nor for rewards, as in the plantation “cakewalks” or “jig” contests.¹⁹

Several scholars have commented on the possible cosmological significance of the use of circularity in the sacred Ring Shout, Sterling Stuckey among them.²⁰ Seen as a possible tracing of the Kongo cosmogram, the sacred circle was the gateway to a broader spiritual experience, that of spirit possession. Here, dance was an important central repository for African values, including the distribution and allotment of intragroup status. The Shout ritual moved in stages, building. The circle was the gateway to more individualized expression which lead directly into spirit possession. The Shout opened the door to the spiritual realm while individualized movement invited the spirit into one's body. The circle formation, once actively engaged in counter-clockwise motion, became a "spirit-gate" through which humans could connect to a higher spiritual reality.

In the context of the Ring Shout, enslaved Africans could and did assert both a limited independence from enslavement's pain, as well as some agency in forging their community personality and place. As worshippers circled, some of them fell into the spiritual vortex of the circle's center where they were embraced by both the community and the supernatural spiritual forces. As a hallmark of African spiritual values in worship, the Ring Shout emerged early on in the slave community, and included both sacred dancing and spirit possession, while being a vessel for the retention of foundation African spiritual values which were embedded in dance, and which informed both individual and community relations.

In the process of spirit possession, the devotee was embracing the spirit, abandoning earthly control and entrusting all to the spiritual community. The values of caring, secrecy, community obligation in work and spiritual assistance were all conveyed in the sacred shout ritual. It was the central occasion in which community roles, status, values and sanctions were played out and thus became a time to express spiritual individuality. As a result of frequent participation in the sacred circle, a shouter could often be identified with a particularly nuanced style of shouting, or a special dance step.

African American dance, though modified by the conditions of enslaved labor, maintained its vocabulary, and continued to give meaning to daily life. The movement trajectory, which was both dramatic and mimetic, revealed a story of not only the dancers present, but also their past and future. The dance play or play fragment was a cultural monolog which existed not only in the dancers' consciousness, but was inscribed in the bodies of the performers. And, it is here that dance clearly assumed an oppositional stance, as well as a resistance function in the slave community. This resistance function would both continue in African American dance for an interminable number of years after Emancipation, and would be observed in the African American dances of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries

Dance was used to both voice the desires for freedom and to reinforce a continuum of resistance which prepared the community for battle against the harsh conditions of bondage. It reinforced the community's belief in their right to rebellion and all forms of resistance, including subjecting white people, particularly slave owners, to community scrutiny, commentary, and judgment.

The dance play-pantomime provided a platform for interactive critique between dancer and the observing community. Bondsmen danced to both satirize and criticize slave owners, while implicitly asserting a central code of morality. Readers are left with this account of a dance in which bondsmen are ridiculing the master class:

“It was generally on Sunday when there was little work...that the slaves both young and old would dress up in hand-me-down finery to do a high-kicking, prancing walk-around. They did a take off on the high manners of the white folks in the “big house,” but their masters, who gathered around to watch the fun missed the point.”²¹

These “dances of derision” served to deconstruct the imposing and powerful presence of whites; and followed in the great African traditional mode of public criticism through dance, common to many West African ethnic groups.²² This tenacious tradition would imprint itself on future secular dance as a political resistance aspect.²³

As marginalized outsiders to American society, African Americans, both free and enslaved, found dance to be an essential element in sustaining identity through both historical memory and cultural practice. Dance symbolically mediated the relationship between spirituality and material culture, particularly those material objects used during the shout services. Examples include the pot, the walking stick and the hoe. These three items, more than any other, had a close mediating relationship with dance. Iron cauldron-like pots were often placed down turned in the center of the sacred ring. Eventually, any pot would be used and years later, all pots would be absent from the ritual. Some nineteenth century bondsmen asserted that the down turned pot used at Shouts, absorbed the sound of the dancing and singing; thus, keeping slave owners from discovering the clandestine worship rituals which were often held secretly in an isolated grove in the woods or on the edge of the slave quarter. The Ring Shout was multifunctional; but, here it appears to be a conduit vehicle to connect with the spiritual ancestors. The pot focused ancestral and spiritual energies in the center of the sacred circle. It acted not only as a focal point, but also as a universal reminder of a previous existence before enslavement. Eventually, that memory would fade.²⁴

Under Hoodoo religion, the hoe assumed magical properties. This agricultural tool was said to be capable of working by itself.²⁵ Like the pot, the hoe would become associated with food, sustenance and nourishment. The pot was clearly a vehicle capable of delivering food; but it, like the hoe, was nourishing in other ways. Not only was the hoe a tool which raised food from the ground, but it also was the vehicle upon which it was prepared. Synonymous when used, “hoe cake”, “corn pone” and “hot water cornbread,” staples of black southern, food culture, were cooked by bondsmen, while they worked in the fields. Its name, “hoe cake” was descriptive and was acquired because African captives could, and did, prepare this staple of African American southern food culture on a heated hoe blade while they were forced to keep working in the fields.

Today, prepared in a large iron skillet, “hoe cake” is still served in working class, southern based, African American homes, eateries and communities all over the United States. And, the dance step known as “choppin’ cotton,” a step in which the dancer imitates the motions of using the hoe to chop the earth around the roots of the cotton plant, is no longer performed in either its sacred or secular form. This author last saw it performed in 1968 in a rural Jook joint, in the Mississippi Delta town of Glen Allen, Mississippi.

The walking stick would become more important rhythmically after 1739, the year of the Stono Rebellion. The relative success of this particular slave revolt would lead authorities to pass legislation outlawing not only the drum, but all instruments such as horns, bells, and whistles that could be used to signal a gathering crowd.²⁶ With the outlawing of the drum, the rhythmic devises which remained would have to assume double duty and take on functions previously performed by the drum. It is not likely that following the outlawing of the drum, significantly “new” rhythmic devises were invented; rather, the function of those remaining would be expanded. “Body rhythm,” such as “patting juba,” known also as “the hambone,” as well as tapping a walking cane, then, became more significant than they had been prior to the drum being outlawed.

The walking stick, later cane, could be seen taking two divergent paths, both which are related to dance. The walking cane was also a Hoodoo amulet carved and sometimes embedded with High John the Conquer roots and seashells, by African Americans who lived along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts. This sacred cane was, and is today, used to beat out the rhythm which underpinned the Ring Shout. Today, the secular use of the cane as rhythmic synchronizer can be observed in “step shows” of both black Greek letter fraternal organizations, particularly on historically black campuses, as well as non-Greek letter voluntary associations. Carrying double significance, the cane was seen by post-migration, urban blacks as an indicator of sophisticated character and authority as the sacred, ritual Hoodoo significance of the cane faded. The Hoodoo cane sacred amulet is still carved today by certain African American practitioners of the old Hoodoo system.²⁷

As African Americans faced “freedom,” the migration away from the plantation and out of the black-belt South would prefigure a gradual transformation and loss of previously adhered to cultural traditions. By the time of emancipation, African Americans had a well developed secular, social dance tradition with partnered segments, as seen in the dance, the Texas Tommy as well as in the many dances that appeared in mainstream America following Reconstruction and the number of accounts of dancing in the community of bondsmen. Though publicly demeaned, and still outsiders to mainstream American society, African Americans had established a place for themselves in American popular entertainment. Both the sacred and secular dance traditions of the plantation would begin to move north with the Great Migration and American dance traditions would never again be the same.

The influence of the dances and the music of the Hoodoo religion on the urban dance of America would reshape American and eventually, international, urban dance traditions. Simultaneously, the African American influence in American square dance and country dance traditions were assumed to be nonexistent, and were largely ignored by students of American culture. Not only did African American bondsmen develop their own dances from traditional African material, they also adopted and modified dances of European origin.²⁸ The most significant and transforming contribution by black Americans, to the American country dance tradition, was the invention of American square dance calling. In the early colonies, enslaved fiddlers were in great demand as musicians and “callers” at elite, as well as non-elite, dance affairs.

Frequently constructing their own instruments, African American musicians assumed a major role as cultural laborers and were called upon often to provide music for numerous occasions and festivities. These highly skilled dance and music specialists played a role as acknowledged cultural leaders. Concerning the appearance of square dance calling, S. Foster Damon, who stops short of crediting enslaved Africans with the invention, but acknowledges and locates its invention in the United States, had the following comment:

At this point some smart American invented “calling,” which made it unnecessary to memorize the dance beforehand. Like all great inventions it was simple: The fiddler or the leader of the orchestra merely kept telling the dancer what to do next...The fiddler thus ceased to be an accompanist: he became the creator of the dance. He could vary the figures at any moment, just to keep the dancers on their toes; ...he could even call at random anything that happened to pop into his head. These “fancy figures” when nobody knew what was coming next, became popular as the last dance in a “sett”²⁹

Largely speculative, this assertion is undoubtedly true. The African musical calling tradition would predispose the enslaved African American musician to improvisation and “calling” as a matter of course. By eighteenth century, African American bondsmen in the United States had established a two century long rich musical tradition that was highly influential in the making of American dance. Washington Irving, in a satirical statement, inadvertently acknowledged the commonly understood idea, that blacks were entrenched as musicians and cultural laborers:

Another great measure of Peter Stuyvesan for public improvement was the distribution of fiddles throughout the land. These were placed in the hands of veteran negroes, who were dispatched as missionaries to every part of the province...there were joyous gatherings of the two sexes to dance and make merry.³⁰

The European contra dances, which became American square dances, were never called this while in Europe. Instead, they were memorized under the instruction of a “dancing master.” Once the dances came to the colonial United States, they were “called.” The most popular and widely known West and Central West African dances involve “calling” or signaling changes in movement, initiated by either the lead dancer, or the lead drummer. In this case, the enslaved fiddler would have inserted the African tradition of “calling” dances in an environment where few dancers knew the changes in the dance steps known as “the figures.” African American bondsmen also created the last dance in the contra dance sett known as the “fancy figures.” The last dance in the sett was generally the one in which enslaved Africans were allowed to overtly dominate the dancing. By the last sett, social boundaries between blacks and whites often had been lowered, sometimes aided by alcohol. Here, dances like the “Congo Minuet” would have been performed by enslaved Africans who were permitted into the plantation affair as a form of entertainment for the white attendees. This practice continued, and today is seen as the “fancy figures” in American country dancing.

The calling tradition, which directed some of the movement, became integrated with song at the Ring Shout. Words such as “marching to heaven,” “harvesting sheaves,” or other phrases, instructed participants on the ritual pantomime seen in the Shout, as well as earlier secular dance plays such as the “Buzard Lope.”³¹ This gestural tradition would become standard fare in black churches as the preacher moved in referential pantomime, introducing a song that complimented the topic of his sermon. The raised hand, the thrown back head, the hinting at a dance step, and the waiving of the white handkerchief, were all gestures from earlier dances which signaled spiritual contact and sincerity of spiritual purpose.

These standard gestures would later be seen in tap dance, as well as on the modern dance stage, in the work of African American choreographers such as Alvin Ailey, Katherine Dunham, and other choreographers like Bill T. Jones.³² The early modern dance themes focused on by African American choreographers, often raised questions of morality, justice, freedom and suffering while recalling the spirituality of the Hoodoo religion and its offspring, the African American fundamentalist church. Other influences would be observed in the theater dance tradition. The freeing of the pelvis from rigid immobility, typical of European dance movement, allowed for the development of both jazz dance and modern dance traditions and propelled Martha Graham into the position of “high priestess of the pelvic girdle.”³³

In the realm of secular social dancing, the calling tradition would continue in the called line dances, with dances such as the “Madison” which were always called. This practice of calling a dance would generate an entire genre of “dance instruction songs,” or songs which call out the instructions while the participant is dancing.³⁴ Both white and black Americans performed these line dances. Just as the Ring Shout was a site for interethnic assimilation among Africans, the line dances were derivative of the line formation dances shared by both the black and white communities; and were possible sites for inter-racial, sociocultural assimilation between blacks and whites.

The old themes of competitive dancing, social commentary, spirit possession, community solidarity, individual and group identity, and ritualized courtship would continue in both the secular and remaining sacred dances and would remain a significant part of African American core culture. The African American dances, now performed by all Americans of various cultural, racial and class orientations, have spread throughout the world in exported dance arenas such as Euro-American styled cabarets, dance halls, discos, bars, dance clubs, public festivals, jazz and pop music concerts movies, videos and the Internet. These dances, and their accompanying musical forms, provide fuel for hundreds of television and other media commercial advertisements selling products from vitamins to automobiles, and from snacks to medicine. They also provide creative material for the dance theater, including the African influenced postures of George Balanchine and the contemporary ballet theater. From the Graham contractions of modern dance, to the creation of modern jazz dance with the innovations of Lester Horton and his students, the African American Ring Shout has been influential. Its power is also present in the contemporary Hip Hop influenced creations of Rennie Harris as well as dance instruction on the Internet. The Ring Shout, the sacred dance of the Hoodoo religion, has provided a fundamental grounding from which African American sacred and secular dance has developed.

Black Studies can provide both the research approach and ideological framework in which future research on neglected connections, between African ritual contributions and mainstream American life, can be explored, and better understood.

Endnotes

¹ For the purposes of this paper, Hoodoo is defined as the folk spiritual and medicinal system of the African American in North America. this system originated on the plantation of the old South and is a reconstituting of several traditional African religious systems. Congo as well as Bambara influences are particularly observable. This tradition is not to be confused with “marketeted” or commercialized hoodoo which originates around the time of World War 1 and is controlled largely middlemen minorities who misrepresent, commercialize and exploit the old slave religion for monetary gain.

² Zora Neale Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” in Nancy Cunnard,ed. *Negro Anthology* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969) p. 44; John Szwed “Musical Adaptation Among Afro-Americans”, *Journal of American Folklore*, Vol.82, no. 324 (April –June 1969); Robert Farris Thompson, “An Aesthetic of the Cool: West African Dance,” *African Forum* 2, no.2 (fall 1966):13

³ John Playford, *English Dancing Master*, facsimile reprint of first edition, with introduction by Margaret Dean Smith (New York: Association of Music Publishers, 1957). The clear preference of whites for line dances is demonstrated in Elizabeth Burchenal, *American Country-Dances*, vol.1 (Boston: G. Schirmer, 1918) all except six of the twenty-eight contra-dances are in longways formation.

⁴ Frederick Law Olmstead, *Journey in the Seaboard Slave States*, (New York: Dix & Edwards, 1856) p 449.

⁵ This idea that the Ring Shout was a central vehicle for interethnic assimilation among multiethnic enslaved Africans is asserted by Sterling Stuckey in his work *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) pp. 3-83.

⁶ Rupert Sargent Holland, ed., *Letters and Diary of Laura M. Towne. Written from the Sea Islands of South Carolina, 1862 – 1884*. (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1912), p. 20.

⁷ For other accounts of the Ring Shout see Lydia Parrish, *Slave Songs of the Georgia Sea Islands* (New York: Creative Age Press, 1942), pp.54-55;see also Charlotte Forten, *The Journal of Charlotte Forten*,ed. Ray Allen Billinton (New York: W.W. Norton, 1981) pp. 166, 175, 180, 184, 205-06, 209, 212, 224.; see also Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment* (Boston: Fields, Osgood & Co. 1870) pp. 17, 24, 197-98; Edward Channing Gannett, “The Freedmen at Port Royal,” *North American Review* 101 (1865):10

⁸ W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, (Millwood, New York: Kraus-Thomson Organization Limited, 1973) p. 195.

⁹ Georgia Writers Project, *Drums and Shadows*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1940) p. 62, and 67.

¹⁰ Letitia M. Burwell, *A girl's life in Virginia Before the War*, (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1895) p. 163.

¹¹ Benjamin Henry Boneval Latrobe, *Impressions Respecting New Orleans, Diary and Sketches, 1818 – 1820*, ed. by Samuel Wilson Jr. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951) pp. 49 – 51.

¹² The famous Lindy Hop was an evolved form of the Texas Tommy also known as the “Hop,” a called dance with counter clockwise circling, calling of figures and partnered segments. The partnered segments separated from the group formation and has been interpreted by some scholars as a response to European ballroom dancing tradition in the U.S.. This dance was the Grandfather of the Lindy Hop, The Jitterbug, Hand Dancing, North Carolina Shag, Chicago Steppin’, Philly Bop and Fast Dancing. American Cape Verdeans in Providence, Rhode Island, Boston and other New England cities perform a similar partnered touch-response dance known as the “Geechie Hop” This author had the opportunity to attend a Cape Verdean community celebration in Providence in 1980 at which the “Geechie Hop” was danced. These partnered dances appear to have emerged wherever Europeans have dominated, exploited, colonized or enslaved Africans. These dance forms appear through the Caribbean in Cuba, Jamaica and Puerto Rico, in Latin America, as well as on the African continent. The most well known example of European styled partnered dancing in Ghana is Ghanaian “Highlife” dancing.

¹³The spelling used here is correct as pronounced in black vernacular English. See Hurston’s “High John the Conquer” in *Op.cit.* “Characteristics of Negro Expression.”

¹⁴ Zora Neale Hurston, “The Jook” in “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” Nancy Cunard, ed. *Negro Anthology* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969); for the most complete examination of the African American Jook see Katrina Hazzard-Gordon, *Jookin: The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African American Culture*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).

¹⁵Daniel Alexander Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years*, 2nd. ed. (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1968; originally published in Nashville Tenn.: A.M.E.Sunday School Union, 1888) p. 254.

¹⁶ In the Gullah community of Awendaw, South Carolina, participants in the midweek shouts still clearly distinguished between “going fa shout” and attending church. The “shout” survives today in the Awendaw community but is only done in the older churches and only on special occasions. Of course the remnants of the Ring Shout can be observed today as part of “spirit possession” or “catchin’ the holy ghost”, or falling under the spirit in still in many African American churches. Not surprisingly spirit possession in a Christian context, complete with holy dancing, can be observed in Jamaica, and in Christian churches in Africa as well as in African immigrant Christian churches in the United States.

¹⁷ Newbell Niles Puckett, *Folk Belief of the Southern Negro* (Montclair, New Jersey: Patterson Smith, 1968) pp. 168-69. Puckett interview with informant no. 124, Alf Goodman, Columbus, Mississippi.

¹⁸ This author has observed black public reaction to, and condemnation of the worship style of Sanctified, store front churches in which holy dancing, spirit possession, tambourine accompaniment, and fundamentalist style preaching takes place. It is in these churches that one is likely to find a Hoodoo believer, practitioner or “worker” usually in an official position in the church.

¹⁹ Lynne Fauley Emery, *Black Dance in the United States From 1619 to 1960* (Palo Alto, California: National Press Books, 1972).

²⁰ For a discussion of the possibilities of the Kongo cosmogram as a template for the Ring Shout see Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture*; see also Michael Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); see also Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit* (New York: Random House, 1983).

²¹ Rudy Blesh and Harriet Janis, *They All Played Ragtime*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950) p. 96; see also Robert Farris Thompson, “An Aesthetic of the Cool: West African Dance” *African Forum*, vol.2, no.2 (Fall 1966) :96.

²² Concerning dance and music performance themes which focus on morality, reciprocity and right living see Laura Boulton, album notes, *African Music*, Ethnic Folkways 8852; see also Thompson, “Aesthetic of the Cool.”

²³ Katrina Hazzard-Gordon, “Afro-American Core Culture Social Dance: An Examination of Four Aspects of Meaning,” *Dance Research Journal*, 15/2 (Spring 1983):21-26.

²⁴ For an in-depth discussion of the relationship between folk and material culture particularly the spiritual aspect see Laura C. Jarmon, *Wishbone* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003).

²⁵ For an account of a hoe working by itself without a human using it see Georgia Writers' Project, Works Progress Administration, *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes* (Athens: University of Georgia Press) 1986.

²⁶ *Statutes at Large for the State of South Carolina VII*, 410.

²⁷ See Wanda Fontenot, *Secret Doctors (incomplete citation..get this.)* hougan Dafuskie Jones in Lynchburg, Virginia also carves the sacred amulet cane.

²⁸ John F. Szwed and Morton Marks, "The Afro-American Transformation of European Set Dances and Dance Suites", *Dance Research Journal*, 20/1 (Summer 1988); Melville Herskovits, *Myth of the Negro Past*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1941): 270 – 71. See also Katrina Hazzard Donald, "The Circle and the Line: Speculations on the Development of African American Vernacular Dancing," *The Western Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 20, no.1 (Spring 1996): 28 – 38.

²⁹ S. Foster Damon, *The History of Square Dancing*, (Barre, Massachusetts: Barre gazette, 1957): 389.

³⁰ Washington Irving, *Diedrich Knickerbocker's A history of New York*, (New York: George P. Putnam, 1851): 389.

³¹ For photos and descriptions of the Buzzard Lope see Lydia Parrish, *Slave Songs, Op.Cit.*

³² Alvin Ailey's *Revelations*, Dunham's *Shango* are examples here. This author attended a Bill T Jones performance in which Jones performed the "itch" as part of the choreography. After the performance over dinner I interviewed the dancer and asked him if in fact he was performing the "itch". He confirmed for me that indeed he was performing this old Jook house dance believed to have been derived from dances to the African divinity of Smallpox.

³³ This term was used by Katherine Dunham, to describe Martha Graham. Conversation with Katherine Dunham, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio, October, 1972.

³⁴ See John Szwed and Sally Banes? "The Dance Instruction Song" in *Dancing Many Drums*, ed by Thomas F. DeFrantz (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002).

Appendix

