

The Healing Element of the Spirituals

by

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Abstract

This study critically analyzes the therapeutic role of spirituals in healing people who have suffered psychological trauma. It focuses on spirituals as a culturally competent therapeutic technique for healing African American clients who have suffered trauma. There are two main goals for this research. First, the research provides a culturally relevant model/framework for examining African American clients who have suffered psychological trauma. Second, it highlights the importance of preserving spirituals as a priceless heritage. It argues, spirituals are not merely an object of music appreciation although important in its own fashion. Instead, they foster hope, survival, and inspiration, all-important in the field of psychology in the task of bettering the mental health of African Americans.

The African Roots of the Spirituals

African cultural and musical traditions, shaped African lives in the African diaspora. Spirituals developed from the African tradition, but fashioned from the specific challenges faced in the traumatic experiences of enslavement in the United States. It is therefore impossible to understand spirituals without understanding their African roots. African American people produced spirituals.

The logic of this argument is, African Americans originated in Africa and brought with them their cultures, and traditions, including their musical traditions. To have a fuller understanding of this argument it is important to provide a discussion on: 1) African American identity, 2) continuities of African cultures and traditions in the United States in general, and 3) the specific elements of African music traditions continued in spirituals.

Concerning the African American identity, John Henrik Clark has argued that the best way to define African American identity is by placing them in the context of African history. Clark believed that slavery and forced exile never wiped away African cultural memory (1997). This also applies to musical traditions. Similarly, Wade Nobles believes African Americans are simply relocated Africans (Nobles, 2003). He states,

We are Africans whose birthplace locates us in America. We are in many respects, especially mentally, still enslaved Africans. It has, in fact, been the African in us that has been the constant, although disrespected, unrecognized, and most often misunderstood aspect of our strength and humanity. (Nobles, 2003, p. 23)

For Nobles, the birthplace does not define the cultural context of the people. The birthplace is merely where they live out their culture that has been inside the people all along. Following Nobles' logic, spirituals are an extension of African culture, which assisted African people in surviving, thriving, and healing. Oluduah Equiano (1789) illustrates this point with his autobiography. Throughout his narrative, Equiano maintains his identity as an African whose location had changed. He remained grounded in his cultural identity and worldview and perspective which illustrated his point. Gomez (1998) and Hall (2005) contend cultural continuities from Africa laid the foundation for African Americans in the United States. Continuing this argument, *Africanisms in American Culture*, edited by Halloway, examines cultural continuities of African knowledge in North America. He argues that it is African people who are in America; therefore, their culture continued to thrive. Utilizing their knowledge of music, the enslaved African Americans captured their experience and desire for freedom in spirituals in their own cultural context. In her work *African American Spirituals*, Caldwell explains the musical foundation of spirituals. She states, "These characteristics have their foundation in the musical practices of Africa: group expression; call and response structure; improvisation; downward flowing melodic lines; rhythmic complexity; use of percussion; incorporation of physical movement; use of oral kineticism use of harmonic, pitch and timbre flexibility. (Caldwell, 2003, p. 22). Caldwell is highlighting different aspects of the African elements situated in spirituals. The following section examines the African roots passed down as they relate to spirituals.

Spirituals capture elements of African culture in its ability to tell the narrative of the enslaved African Americans. In essence, spirituals function in a similar way to the role of the griot. The lyrics of spirituals capture the pain and truth of their experiences. In African culture the role of the griot was to pass down the history of the people. D'Jimo Kouyate states, "The griot was the oral historian and educator in any given society. A griot has special ways of telling these stories so that they are very entertaining, even though the griot's main intention is not to entertain but to teach the people to know themselves" (Kouyate, 1979, p. 179).

The griot's gift to relay the history of the people is an important element as it continues to inform the people. Nketia furthers the discussion illustrating stories were told to the people incorporating song and dance (Nketia, 1974). These scholars explain the cultural tradition of music being involved in the preservation of the history of the people. Spirituals are an extension of that tradition. Using song the collective group poured their history of joy, sadness, and hope into lyrics and music thereby preserving their story.

Another element spirituals draw from African music traditions is the melody. Spirituals use the minor pentatonic scale. The minor pentatonic scale uses the black keys on the piano for a certain sound. Depending on the mood of the group the sound depicted is either, sadness, sorrow, happy, or carefree. With respect to spirituals the emotions expressed are dependent on the pace of the song and the speech patterns of the song. For example, the spiritual *Amen*, uses the pentatonic scale in the key of E sharp (Caldwell, 2003) but evokes a care free and light emotion due to it being sung in an upbeat way. However, the spiritual *Balm in Gilead*, which utilizes the key of B flat (Caldwell, 2003) is sung in a slow elongated fashion depicting sadness.

African music also uses this same melodic structure. Ekwume compares the spiritual *Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen*, and an African song entitled *La Lem Lo*. In the two songs he demonstrates the similarities of the melodic character of the arrangements (Ekwume, 1974). Furthermore, scholar Percival Kirby analyzes eight spirituals in regards to their harmonic structure, positing these structures are also from Africa (Kirby, 1930). Kirby examines the harmonic structure to dispel arguments stating spirituals' foundation is European harmonies. For Kirby, the use of the flats and the enslaved Africans intentional "short circuiting" of the fourth and seventh beat is an effort to stay true to the musical tradition of their ancestors in Africa. "Short circuiting refers to cutting the notes short and changing their tonality in order to create a certain sound" (Kirby, 1930, 412) Engaging in this practice allowed the enslaved African Americans to create a sound similar to that of Africa. Ekwume and Kirby explaining the similarities between spirituals and the African songs illustrate enslaved Africans brought their culture with them into the New World. The culture continued through the singing of spirituals. By intentionally altering notes on the European instruments and melodic structure the enslaved Africans showed they had not forgotten their roots. They were determined to retain as much of their culture and humanity as possible portraying their ability to adapt to new circumstances as well.

Some spirituals use the call and response approach. Call and response refers to a group of singers or soloist singing a phrase and the rest of the group either repeating that phrase or responding to the aforementioned phrase (Caldwell, 2003). For example, the spiritual *Amen* begins with the chorus singing the refrain, "Amen, amen, amen, amen, amen" the lead follows singing "Sweet Baby Jesus". The chorus then responds singing the refrain again. This method allows for the community as a whole to be part of the experience. Having the group participate in call and response formulates the bonds between the individual and the community.

Spirituals contain rhythms that are polyrhythmic in nature. This means in one given song there are many beats. Likewise, the rhythms or beats are a key component of African music as well. Additionally, these multiple beats assisted in the preservation of African dances. The beats and dance continuing during enslavement are an example of the African continuities found in spirituals. According to Nketia, African rhythms were important to African music. The drums were a preferred instrument in the carrying of the beats. Drums and other instruments were different sizes and shapes in order to produce a different sound. The sounds used and the main beat typically carried different messages for the community. For example, one particular beat indicated that the chief had died. The chief's death was communicated in conjunction with a specific dance that was circular in a counter clockwise motion. Some spirituals also included a dance. Enslaved Africans would begin to dance in a counterclockwise motion known as the ring shout. This dance is not the same as the dance in Africa; however the dance itself was truly African in nature. The incorporation of the ring shout while singing spirituals once again engaged the community of enslaved Africans. The ring shout is a dance which incorporates the shuffling of the feet to the music. According to *Sweet Chariot: The Story of the Spirituals*, "To appeal to God, call out to the ancestors, and talk with each other, the slaves continued the sacred African circle dance known as the 'ring shout'" (spiritualsproject.org, 2004). The dance combines singing with rhythmic shuffle dancing performed in a circle and executed in a counterclockwise movement. The songs usually consist of a single stanza (referred to as a "walk") and a single chorus, usually sung at a quicker and more striking tempo, eventually building up to a state of frenzied ecstasy. Observers often saw the practice of the ring shout as "primitive" or "savage" because they did not understand the African tradition of "spirit possession," where the dancer's goal was to feel "taken over" by a divine essence (*Sweet Chariot: The Story of the Spirituals*, 2004). Here it is evident the enslaved Africans are keeping their culture alive. They are choosing to remember who they are and where they come from as a strategy to survive.

African roots of spirituals identify the writers of these songs as African and therefore continuous in their cultural practices. In maintaining their cultural memory they passed down traditions. Some of these traditions were used in spirituals. Although in a different space, enslaved Africans continued in the music tradition of their ancestors. This group of people maintained a cultural foundation of utilizing melodies, rhythms, and dance to tell their story and heal from their experiences in the oral tradition. The enslaved Africans continued their culture through the creation of music during enslavement. Spirituals came from this legacy. Like their ancestors, enslaved Africans sang songs to communicate, keep time, and express feelings, emotions, and events.

Intake: Therapeutic Elements of the Spirituals

The enslaved Africans coped with their trauma in a form grounded in their culture. Birthed from oppression spirituals exposed the cruelties and conditions of slavery, offered an avenue to work through the trauma, and was a source of hope and inspiration. Ani states, “In order to survive as Africans, in order to survive spiritually, we had to create meaning. We had to create order in the midst of chaos” (Ani, 1994, p. 23).

She continues, “In the profanity of slave existence the African ethos discovered its own sacred being through the vehicles of song and ritual, music and dance (The Genius of Africa!). We transformed suffering into an opportunity to express spirit” (Ani, 1994, p. 25). Ani is illustrating the ability of spirituals to create a sense of normalcy for the enslaved via song. Spirituals provided that normalcy, an expression of their culture, while allowing the enslaved Africans to heal.

The conditions of enslavement were harsh, physically and psychologically. The enslaved African Americans endured long hours of labor, whippings, familial separation, rapes and the constant threat of death. This section illustrates the conditions that birthed this music.

At the start of enslavement Africans were involuntarily removed from their home in Africa. This is chronicled in the narrative of Oludah Equiano (Equiano, 2002). As a child, Equiano was captured and sold into slavery. His account captures the fear he and others felt on the boat. He explains the trepidations he faced on board the ship were due to his fear of being eaten by his captors (Equiano, 2002). In this manner Equiano begins his life as an enslaved African. The harshness of enslavement did not cease once off the ship.

Once in North America, the cruelties of enslavement continued. Enslaved African Americans worked in the fields for long hours. Not working to the satisfaction of the owners resulted in whippings and beatings even to the point of death. For example in her account, Vinnie Busby speaks of when she witnessed a death in the field. She states,

Marse Easterlin wuz sho’ a stern master. He belived in whipin’ his slaves. I’s seed him put my ma ‘cross a barrel an’ whip her. She wuz a fiel’ hand an’ ‘wuked powerfully hard. One ob de cruelest things I ever seen done to a slave wuz doen by my Master. He wanted to punish on ob de slaves what had done some ‘em dat he didn’t lak, a kinda suborn one. He tood dat darkie an’ hitched him to a plow an’ plowed him jes’ lak a hors. He beat him an’ jerked him ‘bout til; he got all bloody an’ sore, but o Marse he kept rogh on day after day. Finally de buzzards went to flyin’ over ‘em...dem buzzards kept a flyin an’ old Marse kept on a plowin him ‘till one day he died. (Berlin et. al 1998, p. 15)

This account captures the physical brutality of enslavement. Human beings were whipped and worked as animals in the fields. In addition to this, countless enslaved African American women had unique sexual exploitative encounters during enslavement.

Harriet Jacobs, born enslaved also writes about her experiences. In her account she witnesses her enslavers disregard for human life as they roll over her sister in a wagon killing her and then instructing Jacobs to not cry (Gates, 2002). For Jacobs the conditions of enslavement instill in her a longing to be free so she sleeps with a white man, and births his children hoping that he will then buy their freedom (Gates, 2002). Jacobs' willingness to give herself to a man in efforts to be free is juxtaposed with accounts of enslaved African American women whose bodies were a reminder that they were in bondage.

Repeated rapes on the plantations were not uncommon during enslavement. One enslaved African American who endured repeated rapes was Celia. The biography entitled *Celia, a Slave* (McLaurin, 1991) recalls Celia, whose enslaver raped her for a period of over 5 years. The book recalls Celia pleading with her enslaver to not force himself on her when she was sick and/or pregnant to which he would proclaim he would be in her cabin that night (McLaurin, 1991). Celia's tale is heralded and acclaimed because she fought back and ultimately killed her enslaver. This defensive action would result in her death. Unfortunately, taking her enslaver's life does not undue the injustices of white enslavers who viewed enslaved African American women as objects for their insolent and barbaric pleasure. Narratives of the enslaved speak of both enslaved men and women who felt powerless during these conditions. Resistance meant risking the separation of families as punishment. Celia's account is witness to this as she refused to confess murdering her enslaver for fear her children would be taken away from her (McLaurin, 1991). However, the separation of families was only one form of punishment.

Accounts of the enslaved, spoke of the auction block where enslaved African Americans would face separation from their families. For example in her account, Hannah Chapman speaks to this tragedy:

My father wuz sold 'way from us when I wuz small. Dat wuz a sad time fer us. Mars wouldn't sell de mudders 'way from deir cillun so us lived on wid her wid out de fear ob bein' sold. My pa sho' did hate ter leave us. He missed us and us longed fer hm. He would often slip bak ter us' cottage at night. Us would gather 'round him an' crawl up in his lap, tickles slap to death, but he give us dese pleasures at a painful risk. When his Mars missed him he would beat him all de way home. Us could track him de nex' day by de blood stains. (Berlin et al., 1998, p. 145)

Robert Glenn's account continues,

I belonged to a man named Bob Hall, he was a widower. He had three sons, Thomas, Nelson and Lambert. He died when I was eight years old and I was put on the block and sold in Nelson Hall's yard by the son of Bob Hall. I saw my brother and sister sold on this same plantation. My mother belonged to the Halls, and father belonged to the Glenns. They sold me away from my father and mother and I was carried to the state of Kentucky. I was bought by a Negro speculator by the name of Henry Long who lived not far from Hudles Mill in Person Country. I was not allowed to tell my mother and father goodbye. I was bought and sold three times in one day (Berlin et al., 1998, p. 149).

These two accounts demonstrate the disregard for human life and bond that family members have for one another. At a minimum, separating the families with no warning and no goodbye gives no chance for closure or peace of mind for victims.

The psychical trauma of enslavement leads to psychological trauma for the individual and collective group. Familial separation, beatings, rapes and fear all lead to various forms of emotional trauma now known as anxiety, post-traumatic stress, low self-esteem, and depression. However, during enslavement, men and women were not in a position to be concerned with their mental health. Instead, the group went to their cultural roots and healed themselves through spirituals.

Spirituals were an expression of the hurt experienced in slavery. It was important to identify the source of hurt. For example, Fannie Berry, a former enslaved African provides an example of a spiritual sung to depict the cruelties of enslavement. She states,

An sometimes dey sing it like dis:
Did time tomorrow night,
Where will I be?
I'll be gone, gone, gone,
Down to Tennessee.

De niggers sing dis sorrowful, 'cause some niggers have been beat, or whipped, or sole away. (Berlin et al., 1998, p. 177)

In addition the spiritual "I've Been 'Buked" is a spiritual that expresses the experiences of enslaved Africans. The lyrics state, "I've been 'buked an' I've been scorned" (Caldwell, 2003). The term "buked" refers to the word rebuked. Rebuke is synonymous with being reprimanded, or chastised. Enslaved Africans experienced rebuke from their enslavers for various infractions such as not working up to the approval of the enslavers.

Furthermore, scorned refers to contempt or disapproval towards an individual. Enslavers scorned the enslaved Africans on different occasions. "I've Been Buked" is relatable to the singing in the woods because it is an outward expression of what happened during the day. The conditions of enslavement were so harsh that many perished while working. The spiritual "Die in de Fiel" refers to this treatment. It refers to being on a journey home and that in the process death will come in the field. Here, dying in the field becomes literal as enslaved Africans witnessed family, friends, and loved ones dying at the hands of their enslavers whether it was due to being whipped or overworked. These spirituals allow for an identification of the problem. This identification names the circumstance causing the trauma. Naming the problem then allows for the emotions stemming from the problem to have a voice.

The spiritual "Sometimes I Feel like a Motherless Child" identifies the feelings and emotions of the individual or group. The lyrics state "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child a long way from home." The feeling identified is orphaned and lost. The lost feeling expressed in the lyrics could be sung as an emotional release when a child was sold from her mother to a new enslaver. Singing this song does not suppress the feelings of grief or abandonment, but rather releases it, in order to live and adapt to the new challenges faced. After expressing the emotions, enslaved Africans individually and collectively must find ways to cope.

The spiritual "Steal Away" not only has a spiritual purpose, but also has a psychological and political purpose. According to Christa K. Dixon, "Steal Away" offers a chance to get away mentally from the physical reality of slavery (Dixon, 1976). The rapes endured by African American women mentioned previously were cruel and harsh. There was a need to cope with the effects of those brutal attacks. "Steal Away" offers a mechanism for coping. Moreover, it has a biblical reference. The Bible states, "Come to me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28, King James Version). Here, Jesus offers comfort to those burdened with sadness and worries. A moment of mental rest offers a chance for renewal and strength in order to make it through another day. For the enslaved, a chance to "steal away" is an opportunity for a brief escape from reality, from pain, suffering, and torture. Brief moments of escape illicit a feeling of hope that one-day troubles would be gone as well.

Enslaved Africans used the stories in the Bible as a source of hope and inspiration. Hope that one day their condition would change. For example, the spiritual "Joshua fit the Battle of Jericho" depicts the Biblical account of Joshua and the Hebrews marching around the walls of Jericho and then shouting causing the walls to crumble allowing the Hebrews to defeat the city.(Joshua 6:1-27, King James Version). In the context of slavery the enslaved African Americans become Joshua and the Hebrews with the walls of Jericho being analogous to enslavement. If the walls of Jericho came down, then there is a hope that enslavement will end as well. The spirit of getting hope and inspiration from the Bible is illustrated in the spiritual "Didn't my Lawd Deliver Daniel" (Johnson and Johnson, 1925). Daniel was thrown in the lion's den after refusing to pray to the king but to God instead.

However, the lions did not eat him and Daniel ultimately was freed from the lion's den (Daniel 6:1-28, King James Version). In this account, enslaved Africans identify with Daniel and his predicament. Daniel's deliverance from the hungry lions equated to a belief that certainly the Lord could and would deliver the enslaved as well.

The singing of the songs expresses an acknowledgement of the problem, a strategy to cope with the circumstance while instilling a faith and hope that the existing condition was not eternal, thus creating a space for psychological freedom.

Spirituals continued to provide therapy for the enslaved African Americans by creating an atmosphere for psychological liberation even if only for brief moments in time. Taking the time to sing and dance in their cultural context was the vehicle for this psychological liberation. The singing of spirituals sets the atmosphere for this liberation to take place. The song "I'm Gonna Sing" reflects on the actions of the group when they feel the spirit. The feeling of the spirit causes them to "pray," "sing," or "dance" (Caldwell, 2003). The spirit is in control at that point and not their bodies or the system of enslavement. Young comments on the use of the body as a vehicle for the spirit. He states,

In the moment of ecstasy, the body in trance is not controlled (or even controllable for that matter). Rather, the spirit that moves through the body and by extension, the body itself is communally shared and protected. In this way, the resistant body rejects the ideology of slavery in an attack aimed at the very system of commodity exchange that would have bodies bought and sold. (Young, 2007, p. 107).

Here, freedom is apparent with the notion of resistance. Physically they are still in bondage, but mentally/psychologically they are free from the oppression and bondage of enslavement. This form of resistance is psychologically liberating for the enslaved African Americans and necessary for their mental health. Kambon writes,

Sometimes they would be up all night in night songs and dances as methods of healing and regeneration for the next day's tortuous labor. Hence, the Africans used music as a means of resisting the dehumanizing impact of chattel slavery and as a means of spiritual renewal and fortification. (Kambon, 1998, p.93)

Kambon illustrates the awareness of enslaved African Americans to participate in activities to survive and cope, release psychologically; liberating one's self psychologically is necessary for African Americans presently.

The conditions of enslavement dictated a need for survival strategies for the enslaved African Americans. They took to their culture and provided therapy for themselves. Spirituals became a creative, cultural expression of sadness, anguish, and despair. However, these songs also moved them to cope and endure, liberate and celebrate as well. They include a glimpse of gladness and rejoicing in spite of the circumstances. The source of healing within spirituals lies in the spirit and psychological liberation they carry until the freedom is a physical reality. The end of enslavement brought forth the song *Slavery Chain*.

The lyrics state, "Slavery chain done broke at last broke at last. Slavery chain done broke at last. Goin to stand up proud and free" (Caldwell, 2003, p. 40). Here the wall of enslavement crumbling down is a reality causing a moment of celebration. The process of therapy via spirituals was not in vain, the faith was not futile but worth it. This subsequent section offers suggestions of how the healing elements of spirituals can be applied to contemporary therapy presently.

Closure: The Psychological Implication of Spirituals

This study examined spirituals as therapy for enslaved Africans in North America. It exposed the cultural continuities of spirituals in the African tradition depicting the strength of the enslaved African Americans rooted in their culture. The enslaved African Americans utilized their culture to adapt, survive, and thrive in a new environment therefore recreating, transforming, and revitalizing themselves.

Understanding the therapeutic role of spirituals necessitated an understanding of the conditions of the time and further investigating what specific qualities of spirituals allowed for them to be therapeutic in nature and subsequently moving them into the present.

Understanding spirituals as a cultural continuum recognizes that the strength of the people is located and situated in their culture. It was necessary to grasp their circumstance from a cultural context that affirmed their experiences. Embedded in the continuities is the resistant spirit and fervor of the enslaved Africans allowing room for psychological liberation. Faraji contends, "...the African enslaved for a period of over 150 years on the plantations of North America recreated the cultures and religious worldviews of classical and traditional Africa" (Faraji, 2007, p. 39). An environment of struggle championed the enslaved Africans to dig within their souls for a recreation of African culture reflected in spirituals. It is therefore necessary to not undermine the cultural legacy of spirituals but celebrate the preservation of a people. This spirit became a culture of resistance, which tenaciously fought for acceptance of their dignity and humanity.

Spirituals promoted healing for the enslaved African Americans. The utilization of music became a calculated, deliberate attempt for them to voice, cope and release emotion. Presently, these same songs can promote healing in various therapeutic settings. It is common practice to employ culturally competent therapeutic techniques when treating clients from different backgrounds. It is imperative therapists have culturally competent practices so individuals get the help that will facilitate the healing process.

Spirituals brought the community of enslaved African Americans together as a collective group. Catapulting spirituals in the therapeutic setting, this study then suggests spirituals be used in a group therapy setting. For example, talking about the lyrics or an emotion of a song in such a group would allow all participants to connect and be of one accord. Furthermore, this could provide the group a sense of normalcy by being able to relate to one another.

Although the singing of spirituals took place in a group context, there is room for them to function and be effective in an individualized clinical setting. The current study suggests spirituals as a musical resource in the music therapy setting. The music therapy setting has already had success in the use of music such as hip-hop as an effective tool for African American clients (Lightstone, 2009). Spirituals are gleaned from African American culture; therefore, this research offers spirituals as a resource for this aspect of therapy also. This offers the music of spirituals as a culturally competent technique for both individual and group setting. Here the goal is not to employ spirituals as a direct imitation of their function in the past, but to extract their healing properties and cultivating them presently. Another strategy for spirituals in the individual setting is in the technique of “safe space”. Safe space refers to a body of work on stabilization techniques for trauma therapy called “Psychodynamic Imaginative Trauma Therapy (PITT)” (Reddemann, 2009, p. 5). The technique of safe space is for the client to find a space within himself or herself where there is peace and trust. It acts as an escape from the emotional and psychological trauma felt by the individual. Connecting this technique with the song *Steal Away* is as an example of locating a safe space for the African American client. This provides the client with a tangible model of finding inner peace in times of crisis or anxiety due to a traumatic experience.

Finally, this research offers spirituals as a resource for African psychology as well. Capitalizing on the essence of faith located in spirituals assists African psychology in focusing on the individual as a whole and not only the psychological health of the client but his or her spiritual health as well. This contributes to the holistic health of the client.

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