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I teach courses on African American Religions, Afro-Atlantic or African-based New World Religions like Haitian Vodun or Cuban Santeria, and Indigenous Religions such as Traditional African Religions and Native American. In all of my courses, music plays an important role. Not only do my students read texts about the significance of sacred music in the religious traditions we are studying, but they also watch numerous videos about religious ceremonies and, if possible, make field trips to religious worship sites. Both the videos and field trips include music. At least once per semester, I invite a professional musician to my classes to facilitate a workshop on music for my students. This may sound exotic, but, as far as I know, many of my colleagues in this field would do the same provided an artist and the funding were available. Why is that so? Why is music so crucial for the understanding of indigenous religions such as traditional African Religions and the African-derived religions in the Trans-Atlantic American diaspora? Let me begin with the words of an African American master drummer and writer Sule Greg Wilson. In *The Drummer's Path*, he states that:

Music is sacred. It is an integral part of the Way of Life of many traditional cultures throughout the world; it is the invocation of vital energies that ensure a community's survival. Music helps maintain harmony in and with both the visible and the invisible world. (Wilson, xiii)

It is true that all world religions have their own brands of sacred music. Hence, the integration of music into the curriculum of any form of religious education would be meaningful. Yet, in religions with sacred written documents (revered as 'the word of God'), such as the Bible, the Torah, the Qur'an, and the Veda, the study, contemplation, interpretation, and recitation of sacred texts is at the core of the believers' religious practice. Performing sacred music may appear less significant in comparison. To the contrary, in the religious traditions of oral cultures musical expressions are at the center, not the margins of religious practices and experience.

The ceremonies of these traditions are elaborate communal performances involving musical instruments (mainly drums and percussion instruments), songs, dances, and drama. In these sacred performances the believers communicate with the invisible forces of the divine and experience their deepest forms of religious devotion—a mystical union with the divine, often called 'possession.' (The term 'possession,' though still used in the literature on traditional African and African diaspora religions is very misleading. 'Spirit mediumship' would be more accurate. For further clarification see for instance Felicity Goodman, *How About Demons?*) Therefore, a close examination of sacred music becomes an essential part of the study of such religions. It can no longer be just the icing on the cake so to speak, but rather has to be one of the fundamental ingredients of the cake itself.

All indigenous religious traditions consider the earth sacred; that is why they are sometimes referred to as 'geocentric' religions. In their view, the heartbeat of mother Earth is represented symbolically in the rhythms of their drums, which ubiquitously accompany the sacred ceremonies. It is no surprise, then, that among indigenous cultures throughout the world, drums and the rhythms they invoke are held sacred. The intense, often extraordinarily complex rhythms of the musical ritual performances thus become the venue where the realms of the human and the divine intersect. There, the living rejoin with the dead as they celebrate and honor the traditions of those who have gone before them. Nigerian author Amos Tutuola, for instance, in *The Palm-Wine Drunkard and My life in the Bush of Ghosts*, illustrates this multiple reconnection in the following words:

And when 'Drum started to beat himself all the people who had been dead for hundreds of years, rose up and came to witness 'Drum when beating...

All of the religious traditions I address in my courses stem from primarily oral cultures, with the exception of African American Christians and Muslims who use the same sacred scriptures as their counterparts everywhere else in the world. A combination of music, dance, song, and performance is essential to the religious devotion and ritual practice of these indigenous traditions. Written texts, if at all existent, have no part in their ceremonies. The rhythms of their music, mainly carried out by drums and percussion instruments, together with the poetic lyrics of their sacred songs and the elaborate movements of their dances are the sacred 'texts,' and thus the essence of all 'traditional' religions.

In order to facilitate a well-rounded inquiry into the study of traditional religions, it is important to address such musical sacred 'texts.' There is no way one can comprehend the power and impact of music through reading erudite texts about it, however. Music has to be experienced

on a first-hand basis. If this is true for music in general, it holds particularly true for the powerful impact of African drum music. Hence, I turn at least one or two class sessions into music workshops led by a professional musician. For instance, in a course entitled "Shamans, Rituals, Magic, and Dreamtime: The Indigenous Religions of the Americas, Africa, and Australia," I invited a master drummer who is well versed in West African and Afro-Caribbean rhythms and songs. In addition, he is an initiated priest in the sacred drumming society of the Yoruba Religion, is therefore a spiritual leader in his community, and can speak and perform with authority. He provided a superb introduction to the complex syncopated polyrhythms from West Africa and challenged the whole class to accompany him in some shape or form. The students were delighted. They had a good time, but they also realized how difficult it is to hold even the most basic beats. By the end of the session, they had developed a deep respect and admiration for the skills of our guest speaker and the cultural tradition he represents. They realized through experience that the playful and joyful ease with which his hands mastered the most complicated rhythms is deceiving. They also learned that the depth, complexity, elegance, and spiritual intensity of the language of sacred African music is just as sophisticated as even the greatest written sacred texts born in the Middle East, Europe, and Asia. Later on in the same course, when discussing the religions traditions of Australia's Aboriginal peoples, a didgeridoo artist joined us and introduced us to the language of the eerie vibrations of this sacred instrument, and the spirituality of the people who created it. This workshop carried us like nothing else into the mythology and the elaborate belief system associated with the term, 'dreamtime.'

Many people of African descent in the New World, especially in North America, lost their beloved drums because of the traumatic impact of the Atlantic slave trade and the deprivation and dehumanization endured under slavery. In order to break their spirit and separate them from their cultural roots they had to give up their ancestral beliefs and were more or less forcibly introduced to the Christian faith. Nevertheless, their African spirituality survived the ordeal. The collective memory of their sacred rhythms and music lived on in the clapping of their hands, in the stomping of their feet, in the intensity of their spiritual expression, in the melodies of their songs and in their sense of aesthetics. They created the Spirituals which later developed into Gospel music. Over time, the same resilient African spirituality also brought forth the African American secular cousins of these sacred musical traditions: Blues, Jazz, Rock 'n Roll, and Hip Hop - all of which have become American mainstream music. In his 1903 classic *The Souls of Black Folk* the great African American intellectual, W.E.B. Du Bois, stressed already this impact of African spirituality on the development of American music. Insisting on the significance of what he calls "The Sorrow Songs," better known as Negro Spirituals, he explains:

...by fateful chance the Negro folk-song-the rhythmic cry of the slave-stands today not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas. It has been neglected, it has been, and is, half despised, and above all it has been persistently mistaken and misunderstood; but notwithstanding, it still remains as the

singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people (265).

In the 1960s, the Sorrow Songs became liberation songs. Without them there would have been no Civil Rights Movement. Without the comfort of songs such as the famous "We Shall Not Be Moved" and "We Shall Overcome," the freedom fighters would not have been able to withstand the violence and oppression they endured. They would not have been able to face the threats, the police dogs, the water cannons, and the bullets. Bernice Johnson Reagon, former civil rights leader, Grammy Award winning musician, and Smithsonian Institute scholar, has highlighted the crucial importance of music in the African American Protest movement in numerous publications and video documentaries. When jailed as a protesting college student she discovered the spirit-sustaining power of song. She joined the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) Freedom Singers, and traveled the country teaching the songs of the movement. This subversive 'freedom' music became a powerful nonviolent weapon in the often demoralizing struggle for justice and equality against the heavily armed police force of the white-supremacist system.

Taking DuBois' and Reagon's assessments into account, in my course on African American Religions I set aside at least one whole week to explore the significance of music in these faith traditions. In addition to the workshop on traditional African music, I often invite a musician from one of the major American Black Church traditions to demonstrate how contemporary African American sacred music still reflects ancient African spirituality, though it has evolved and transformed. For instance, I once invited the director of a local gospel choir who is also an ordained minister and a professional entertainer, to visit my class. Members of his gospel choir perform on a regular basis in his church, but they also sing at various public and private functions and have several recorded CDs on the market. The presence of a real person and the active involvement in live music always intensifies the students' attention and participation in the learning process.

In conclusion, I could not teach my religion courses without the mesmerizing beat of sacred Yoruba bata drums or Cuban congas, the spooky echoes of a didgeridoo, or the uplifting sound of a gospel choir. The music is an essential part of the subject matter.

Resources

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