

AFRO-AMERICAN SPIRITUAL SLAVE SONGS: A PSYCHOLOGICAL DIMENSION

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Abstract

This paper examined the spirituals, the African American slave songs. Although interest were majorly centred on the psychological dimensions of the songs, the origin, source of nomenclature as well as the features were also looked into. These led to the discovery that the spirituals as Blacks' sacred-church songs with a hybrid of African-European features were composed in variety of forms within African oral song tradition. As songs born out of emotional feelings of a race, nurtured in the context of ritualized Christian worship for purposes of commenting widely on the circumstance of the Blacks who against self-will found themselves in the American environs, they are means of psychic escape, resistance, struggle and reassurance of hope of freedom for the African Americans.

Introduction

Any serious and scholarly attempt to appreciate the African American spirituals with bias in the psychological dimensions will undoubtedly recapitulate the historical contacts that existed between the aborigines of pre-historic Africa and the rest of the West. It was a history of unhealthy and illicit interactions, the attendant benefits notwithstanding, which culminated into slavery that spanned from the 16th through the 19th centuries (Stampp 1956). The aura of the slave system empowered the forceful uprooting, transporting, selling and incarcerating of captured Africans across the Atlantic Ocean to the New World -- Southern America -- as slave (Jones 2). This made the history of the Africans in the American soil for nearly two-hundred and fifty years (1619-1865) to be one of servitude, resistance and struggle for survival. This assault and rudely transplant of the Africans in the New World made bare the situation of life in chains, the trauma of victims engulfed in the web of slavery, especially, in the America's institution of slavery. Further, it was that forceful removal based on the evil of slavery that led to the development of the nomenclature "African Americans" to refer to the Black in America and to suggest that the ancestors of the slaves in the American New World are Africans.

This stolen race of African descent was subjected to different forms of hardship in the hands of their masters in particular and the society at large. While their masters made them work for hours on plantations, which according to Champion ". . . was a large tract farm land for growing cotton, sugar, tobacco and other farm products" (156), the society on the other hand saw and treated them as debased mankind who are only good in replacing indentured servants as economic labour force (Sirinides 2). They were socially placed in bondage, denied their language, families and cultures. The ill treatment was made possible due to the pattern of America's institution of slavery with its racial attitude and badge of degradation placed on its African victims. With such slavery system in America, the African victims were considered less human and their worth paralleled that of ordinary "property" (Friedman 2010: Stampp 1956). Still based on the system, the slaves were not allowed to discuss in their mother tongues or practice the culture and religion of their African descent openly (Costen 31). They were prevented from the use of drums and dancing or engagement of excessive physical movement that were seriously considered by the enslaved African community as core elements of their traditional African culture (Costen 32). These prohibitions against the slaves by their masters were geared towards ensuring a total break on any slaves of his or her "Africaness" and also to "force them into a state of dependency" (Shiru 6). In fact, this was the point Halsell made to convey when he says:

Slaves were brought into America and stripped of their religion and anything related to Africa by Whites with the idea that if slaves were forbidden to hold onto any reminders of their homeland they would be more obedient, less likely to rebel and easier to indoctrinate into the American ways of life. (3)

To permanently erase from the minds of the slaves any nostalgic feeling of their African descent, their owners made concise efforts to restrain them from any forms of interaction even among themselves.

Considering the tribes or clans of Africa slaves were pulled from, they were kept separate so that they could not plan revolt (Pershey 25). Or if ever allowed to stay together, they were forced to do so under the strict conditions of the slave trade and slavery” (Graham 236). Yet, that the Africans have cultural retention of “echoes of Africanism” and that “the body of the enslaved was a storehouse of knowledge, a library of performative information” (Okwori 147) were the serious traits the slaveholders failed to acknowledge. Given the cruelty and inhumanity of the slave system, the slaveholders according to Graham, believed that “the destructiveness of slavery (was) the complete destruction of any African retentions” (235). Surprisingly, this did not happen as hoped. Shiru affirmed this fact when he says: “it is amazing that the dehumanizing institution of American slavery did not “destroy” the slaves” (2). Granting that many of the slaves actually survived, although many others died, the question then is how and which weapon did the poor and helpless African slaves clanged on to which led them achieve their purposes of survival in the slave camps. This shall form the next area of focus.

The Slave and the African Song Tradition

Africa is an oral content (Finnegan x) wherein the citizens have songs as one of the core means of expressing their joys and sorrows. Osadebey had remarked this when he says in Africa “We sing when we fight, we sing when we work, we sing when we love, we sing when we hate, we sing when a child is born and we sing when death takes a toll” (qtd in Tsenongu 64). Confirming this same idea, Ehusani asserts that:

Music is part of the everyday life of the Africans. Music is not just a decoration in the African culture. It is central to nearly all the rituals celebrating birth, circumcision, marriage and funeral. It is an integral part of the African conversation, work, business, festival, ritual and ceremony. It is used to spur farming people to action; it is used in folktales that are told to children under the night’s moonlight; it is used during wrestling with compositions that spur or disarm wrestlers . . . women sing while weaving cloths at home, they sing on their way to the river; tradesmen entertain themselves with songs while engaged in their various trades. People sing every time and everywhere to express joy or sorrow, to celebrate or to mourn. Songs are a medium for expressing the emotions of love and hate. They are used in worship for praise and for petition, for thanks giving and for lamentation. (160)

Although kept under lock and key, this singular trait of engaging in songs for various purposes was exhibited by the captured and incarcerated Africans in the slave ship during voyage from Africa to the New World. Aboard the slave ship, the slaves willingly sang in their languages uniting themselves in sorrow and fear, although this fact had been misconstrued by scholars that the slaves sang on command of “the ships captains to enable them keep fit and strong” (Pershey 25). This could not have been since the enslaved Africans were chained up. Granting that songs “is an integral part of the African conversation, a medium for expressing the emotions of love and hate . . . for worship, for praise and for petition, for thanks giving and for lamentation” (Ehusani 160), the slave engaged in songs while on board to communicate among themselves, reassuring themselves and encouraging themselves to be courageous and fearless even on the face of death. This was the point Karlton seemed to make when he says with songs, “slaves could orchestrate revolts on land and on slave ships as well” (2-3). Perhaps, the series of verbal revolts engaged by slaves against their masters, covertly or overtly, on board during slave triangular trade route seem to mark the beginning of slave revolt in history of slave trade (www.honresoucesshop.com/history).

Furthermore, while in the New World, the acts of songs were still instituted by the slaves as their masters encouraged that as it raised the morale and kept the slaves working in rhythm. Although these songs on cursory consideration were called work-songs but they were laments and chants of protests. Example could be taken from one of the early slave songs titled “juba” born out of the humiliating acts meted against the slaves in the New World which they had to endure. The slaves were forced into eating *juba* (or *jibba*, *jiba*), a stew that contained a week’s leftovers from the plantation-owners’ house. This food most of the time were poured into an animal feeding trough for consumption. It was

in protest and for psychological fortification that the African Americans composed the juba song to harden themselves against the degradation of eating juba food that read thus:

Juba this and Juba that
 Juba killed a yell'a cat
 Get over double trouble, Juba . . .

Juba up, Juba down,
 Juba all around the town.
 Juba for Ma, Juba for Pa.
 Juba for your brother-in-law. (Ellison 50)

These verses are quintessence of the disguised meaning hidden in the songs of the early African American lyrics. The words of the first stanza, for example, pointed at the eclectic nature of the slop made from “. . . the and . . . that”, and also told of the hope for better meals once slavery that was likened as trouble was over. The second stanza made reference to the widespread practice of forcing everybody, with no exception, to eat *Juba*. While mentioning the pervasiveness of the situation, the song made bare the condition as what obtained among the slaves. This also showcased the conditions of the slaves as same. It also evoked the minds of the slave masters to be hardened while a sense of unity among the oppressed African Americans as the only means to fight and resist the abhorrent treatment against them.

Nonetheless, it was the likes of above described conditions of the slaves as well as their experiences in Christian gatherings that later evolved into a new musical form called spiritual. In these first songs, the African commonest feature of song performance format of call-and-response, where a leader would sing a verse or verses and the others would respond with a chorus was used. This came from African traditions of agricultural work songs and found its way into the slaves' work-songs. Again, in the maiden songs of the slaves as they arrived in the New World newly, drums were used to provide rhythm but when sensed by the masters that the use has gone beyond the provision of rhythms to communication of rebellion, it was banned (Lee 3). Nonetheless, the slaves managed to generate percussion and percussive sounds using other instruments of their own bodies. Perhaps, it was the idea that the use of songs was a veritable instrument of the slave that made Plant say this:

Singing was a vital dimension of the moment and situation of African American life. Whether in joy, in agony or sorrow, at work and rest, in worship, in defiance, in flight or danger, in death, in remembrance and the ethereal, songs illuminate the singing soul at centre of the incomprehensibly stressful lives African Americans struggled to carve out for themselves under the yoke of slavery. (2)

The Christianization of the Slaves

The depth of inhuman treatment meted against slaves in the American South environment, especially, on the plantations that housed slave quarters and the ‘big houses’ for the slave masters and their families” (Champion 156), forced the less considered human and depressed slaves to take on the hard ways of either run away from the slave camp, revolt physically against their masters or take any other acts of slaves’ ‘misbehaviour’ (Okwori 151). Such unexpected lifestyles from the slaves quite disturbed the heartless slave masters into thinking of the best ways to keep slaves under control.

One of the thought out means was conversion of the slaves to Christianity. Although the slave masters had earlier on opposed the idea on the pretentious false belief that the slaves are ‘heathen’ and unfit for the Christians’ rite of baptism, lest it gave them a claim to freedom (Stampp 156; Costen 32). However, on the attempt to achieve their goal, the masters reconsidered the Christian gathering as the best place for enhancing the ‘servanthood’ of their slaves (Shiru 7) and as a means of making the slaves subservient and obedient (Owori 151) as subjugating them physically, mentally and spiritually through brutality and demeaning acts seemed not to be yielding the desired result (Sullivan 22). They saw Christianity, when properly taught, as a means of social control. They anchored their hope on the content of religious instruction to be what is more on submissive theology. As Stampp attests the slaves received

. . . biblical command that servants should obey their masters, and they heard of punishments awaiting the disobedient slave in the hereafter. They heard too, that eternal salvation would be their reward for faithful service, and that on the Day of Judgement, God would deal impartially with the poor and rich, the black man and the white. (158)

Such idea made the slave masters shield their sawed and let go of their slaves for conversion. However, the idea of slaves conversion as the last resort of slave holders coincides with the period of the first “Great Awakening” (and aided by the second Awakening that followed in the 19th century), which was “A religious revival moment of around 1740 that swept across the American States and gave slaves and their descendants the opportunity to be rigorously converted to Christianity, the religion of the slave holders” (Lee 3). Most of them embraced the new faith, according to Lee “as a way to deal with their oppression of enslavement” (3). Others took to the new religion, possibly, because their masters put them on the wrong path of belief that it was God’s will that they serve in this life and that their salvation would come in heaven. According to Pershey: “Most of them who embraced the new faith [did so because it] enabled them incorporate their mystical ideas about afterlife with their love of song” (25).

Above all these, the slaves as people who had hitherto been prohibited from any form of interactions and self-expressions, found the Christian religion closing such gap. This is because the places of worship provided for them a place of legitimate congregation, socialization, and safe expression of their feelings. As people who needed to meet with one another on regular bases and share their joys, pains and hopes, the place of church services provided them the needed platform. This is such that often times after regular worship, the slaves converts stay back for singing Christian hymns and psalms and dancing, an act that reminded them not only their cherished African culture but the means of communing with their mother Africa.

This new leaf of life also presented them with a new ray of hope for survival and freedom. Of obvious fact is that although the church’s gathering places served as “secret” meetings places for the slaves, it was most importantly a place they listened to itinerant preachers’ Biblical stories. Such stories include that of Moses leading the Israelites out of bondage from Egypt, that of the Jews and their captivity in Babylon. Others include the stories of the oppressed Jews in the Old Testament like Moses, Elija and Daniel who survived and triumphed over their persecutors among others. Besides these stories and Biblical teachings, they were introduced to hymns that talked about salvation, peace in the kingdom of heaven and the glory of the Lord and His good works. Most of the praise and worship songs were sung to express deep pain and suffering and the yearning for freedom to the Promised Land or kingdom of Heaven. The Biblical stories and the message of Jesus Christ and his Good News (Gospel) in the Bible expressed in the hymns and psalms sang during church services, the slaves were inspired. The inspiration arose in the slaves because most of the stories like that of the Israelites in Egypt, etc, paralleled and resonated with their own captivity. The subjects of the Christian hymns and psalms that tightly linked with the lives of the slaves formed the bases of hope of optimism that one day they shall be free. In fact, the encouragement and the burning zeal of regaining their freedom led the slaves into composing songs of their own.

Origin of the African American Spirituals

The purpose of sending and Christianizing the slaves was to improve their servant hoo; that the slaves after receiving the sermons would demonstrate the Christian virtues of total obedience and submissiveness. On the contrary, in such a religious environment, “the liberating Word of God freed the slaves to respond in new and creative ways in the midst of their human bondage” (Costen 28). Their contact with Christianity rather than weaken them, imbued them with substances needful for the creative creation of new songs. No doubt, the Christian sermons listened to and the ministrations from the hymnals and Psalms put together schooled the slaves about lots of issues they were unaware such as “. . . that all Christians were equal in the sight of God . . .” (Moor and Perkins 2005) and that it was never God’s will that they serve in this life and have their salvation later in heaven. These and more raised the slaves’ hope of freedom. Happy that someday freedom will come to them led the slaves express these hopes in song described as Spirituals, a dynamic means of expressions that solely

centred on the medium of language in mirroring and evaluating black experience within the American society. This is in line with Ellison's idea who says "vernacular art accounts, to a large degree, for the black American's legacy of self-awareness and endurance (qtd in Gates and McKay 2).

The spiritual, though composed in Euro-American style of Psalms and hymns, were not really targeted at eulogizing the subjects of the new found Christian religion rather meant to reflect the emotional burden of the African American slaves. They are not simply different versions of the European hymns and Psalm or Bible stories, but creative altering of materials; new melodies of songs, refashioned texts with stylistic differences that set apart the songs as distinctly African American. The authorities of Wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia captured this idea explicitly when they says : "The term "spiritual" is derived from "spiritual songs", from the *King James Bible's* translation of *Ephesians* 5:19, which says, "speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord" (1-2).

Nevertheless, distinctive differences existed between the Christian hymns and African American spirituals may be identified. While the former reference symbolic aspects of Biblical images, praise the handiworks of God and other miraculous deeds of Him and his son Jesus, the later subtly communicated the hardships, the drudgery, the auction-block, the slave-mart, the shackles and the lash of the slave experience. Hence, the spirituals are directly tied to the various conditions of the slaves. So, they are means of sharing emotional, physical psychological experiences of the slaves in the hands of their masters. On face values, the spiritual communicated Christian ideals, yet, the major aims geared towards reflecting the inward traumas and psych of the slaves in general. For this reason, each of the spirituals passes a piece of information on the psychological conditions of the slaves.

A firmer consensus from a number of critics on spirituals seems to affirm that the recurring theme of "freedom" in the Biblical references was a reference to the slaves' own desire for escape from bondage. Frederick Douglass, himself a former slave, emphasizing the nature of spirituals recalled in Chapter VI of his *My Bondage and My Freedom* why spirituals contained explicit experience of slaves as he says:

I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meanings of those rude, and apparently incoherent songs. I was myself within the circle, so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear. They told a tale which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension; they were tones, loud, long and deep, breathing the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains. The hearing of those wild notes always depressed my spirits, and filled my heart with ineffable sadness. The mere recurrence, even now, afflicts my spirit, and while I am writing these lines, my tears are falling. To those songs I trace my first glimmering conceptions of the dehumanizing character of slavery. I can never get rid of that conception. Those songs still follow me, to deepen my hatred of slavery, and quicken my sympathies for my brethren in bonds. (Wikipedia 4)

Those wild notes that constantly depressed the spirit of the likes of Douglass could still be felt each time any of the spiritual songs is read or is listened to. This is because they are reflections of the slaves' psyche, reflections of their physical sufferings, reflections of their firm hope of regaining freedom and reflections of their encouragements to fight for their rights. These hopes and aspirations are obvious in the spiritual songs of the slaves as they used the spirituals to boost morale and tough themselves psychologically. For instance, in the spiritual titled *Deep river, my home is over Jordan*, in which the excerpt read:

Deep river, my home is over Jordan
Deep river, Lwad, I wan' to cross
over into camp ground. (Ellison 50)

We can deduce that it is one example of the spirituals within which the psychological trauma of the slaves' yearnings to be free is expressed. Like most other spirituals, it superficially praised a Christian God, yet had meaningful undertones that served to communicate, without detection by the Whites, revolutionary messages of support, unity, and revolt and even direction to the Underground Railroad. As the song said: *Deep river, my home is over Jordan*, the slave bard was subtly conveyed and allude to his/her fellow slaves the idea of the crossover of the people of the Israelites to the Promised Land.

The song therefore reminds the slaves that their ‘homes’, that is anywhere they will be a free person, is their home and not on the slave camps. However, realising that God helped the Israelites crossover, they then called on God to in the same way aid the crossover saying *Deep river, Lwad, I wan’ to cross*. However, in her analysis of the same spiritual, Ellison told us that Lemuel Berry had offered interpretation, suggesting that the song insolently express escape to the North where the song referred to as “home” and “camp ground” by crossing over the Ohio River called the “Jordan”.

The truth remained that even as they sang these songs baring their emotions, the slave drivers were convinced that their tunes are all Psalm tunes, and the words are from hymn books. This singular trait of the spirituals made the slave masters hear nothing but the Christian longing of the slaves to be closer to the Lord. So, the slaves being aware of this, hid meanings based on analogies between the Biblical themes and the conditions of slavery. This includes using the Promised Land to represent the Northern non-slave states or emancipation, and by paralleling the Jews’ bondage in Egypt to their own condition. The foregoing submission could be verified in the spiritual “Go Down Moses” that reads thus:

Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egyptland
Tell old Pharaoh
To let my people go.

When Israel was in Egyptland
Let my people go
Oppressed so hard they could not stand
Let my let people go. (Ellison 50)

that the slaves used the sufferings of the Israelites and the courageous move made by Moses into the land of Egypt to liberate his people from the shackles of bondage as a point of contact. As the first stanza indicated, any courageous one among the slaves is the Biblical Moses who like Moses should go to the Biblical Pharaoh, “the slave masters” and ask them to grant the African American slaves their freedom. The second stanza stressed the suffering had by the Israelites in Egypt which made them not to be able to endure any more and in a similar terrain hoped for a saviour like Moses was to his people. On a different interpretation, the spiritual is seen as inducement to all slaves to seek freedom. For example, the line of the stanza that read

Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egyptland
Tell old Pharaoh
To let my people go.

is surely asking every slave man and woman to to be the Moses of their time and strive for freedom and scape from slavery hence the question: *Go down, Moses/ Way down in Egyptland*. These yearnings for freedom and scape seemed to be the most celebrated theme of Africa American spiritual. This basic ideology is evidenced in the content and titles of the spirituals: “O Freedom,” “We’ll Never Turn Back,” “Steal Away,” and “Climbing Jacob’s Ladder,” among others.

The African Americans focused upon the concept of freedom as they distilled and weaved it into songs to protest the injustice of their lots. Realizing the power of songs as means of binding themselves together and the power from their numbers, they directed the united energy towards a common goal such as emancipation. Therefore, using their spirituals as weapon, the slaves encouraged resistance to slavery, spread discontentment, bolster morale, elicit the endurance to persevere, and otherwise engage in clandestine warfare against their oppressors under the strictest surveillance.

Obviously, it was on the attempt to fight the psychological effect the structure of slavery placed on them as merchandise with economic value, as those who must be kept uneducated, illiterate, and submissive (sonofthesouth 57-58), which did not go down with the slaves that they composed their

spirituals to reflection their emotions. So, with the spirituals, they passed their message of resistance against the idea. This could be deduced from such spirituals as shown below:

No more auction block for me,
No more, no more.
No more auction block for me,
Many thousand gone.

No more peck of corn for me,
No more, no more.
No more peck of corn for me,
Many thousand gone.
No more pint of salt for me,
No more, no more.
No more pint of salt for me,
Many thousand gone.

No more driver's lash for me,
No more, no more.
No more driver's lash for me,
Many thousand gone. (Gates and Mckey 12)

In the above, the slaves expressed their discontent of their masters who saw them as objects of trade, therefore, the statement of protest and disagreement suggesting that this should not continue, hence the comment *No more auction block for me*. Furthermore, the slaves are of the opinion that although many slaves had by so doing given out, this callous acts against the slaves should be put to a stop. It was also within the content of the song that other messages on the degradation of the slaves' psychological emotions were showcased. These are evidenced the words of the above spiritual such as *No more peck of corn for me,* *No more pint of salt for me,* *No more driver's lash for me*. The slaves were always given mere peck of corn, mere pint of salt and, most demeaning, they were lashed while doing some laborious jobs in the plantation. These physical and traumatic feelings under remembrance are what they are saying must stop.

In the words of Calhoun, "Southern politicians and slave owners often used the argument that slavery was a force for slaves' benefit, justifying both the institution and the value of slavery, as well as the conditions of slaves" (157). Yet, with spirituals, we are exposed to the indepth knowledge of the realities of their experience which bore evidence in the spiritual as shown below:

O Lord I'm hungry I want to be fed,
O Lord I'm hungry I want to be fed,
O feed me Jesus feed me,
Feed me all my days.

O bye and bye, bye and bye
I'm goin' to lay down my heavy load.
Hell is deep and dark despair.
I'm goin' to lay down my heavy load.
Stop po' sinner and don't go there
I'm goin' to lay down my heavy load. (Ellison 50)

The comments such as enshrined in the first stanza of the song above spiritual depicts the misery of the slaves' condition, a dissenting voice that resisted slave masters to tamp it dawn. Yet, in the course of enduring this suffering, the slaves emlore the Lord Jesus to feed them. And they have the optimism that the Good Lord will feed them with a meal which after eating will not let them be hungry again. Not only that, they believed that soonest, they are going to to lay down their heavy load and load here actually means that were going to be fee people who can fend for themselves.

As a result of the maltreatment slaves received from their masters, they could not openly state all references to resistance. They were sure of brutal retribution if any form of discontent is expressed explicitly. As Africans therefore, the slaves draw from the African tradition of utilizing irony and metaphor in fables, songs, and stories to mask their real meanings. Jones noted this when he said,

Spirituals, by their very nature as folksongs, emerged in such a way that their primary meanings would be understood only those in the folk community of origin, Africans in slavery . . . [this] produced a body of music that could readily be utilized when needed as a basis for secret communication. (49)

The spiritual “Follow the Drinking Gourd” is a perfect instance of the above expressed idea. This is because in the words of Wright, “it was seemingly innocuous to white listeners, but offered navigation by starlight to head North, follow the direction of Big Dipper. In a similar vein, spiritual “God’s A-Gonna Trouble the Water” that reads as follows:

Wade in the water, children,
Wade in the water, children,
Wade in the water, children,
God’s a-gonna trouble the water. (Gate and McKay 8)

Was attributed to Harriet Tubman and explicitly used as a baptism song. Furthermore, it was also instruction for fugitive slave attempt on escape North to freedom. It was a spiritual that encouraged the fellow slaves to always embark on mission of escape instructing that though it was a herculean task yet God will see them through. Here water symbolizes the slave master which the singer assured his kins that would trouble.

This is the same message that are contained in the spiritual “Walk Together Children” that reads this way:

Walk together children,
Don’t you get weary,
Walk together children,
Don’t you get weary,
Oh, talk together children
Don’t you get weary,
There’s a great camp meeting in the Promised Land. (Gates and McKay 9)

This song also is a product of the psychological trauma of the slaves. It advised the slaves to always work hand in hand with one another in all that they do. They are advised to always walk together as people from a common ancestor and never get tired or fed up stressing that there is assured redemption at the end. The spiritual linked the idea of how the slaves gather in a camp to sing and make merriment to what it is going to be like when they are free, which was metaphorically referred to as meeting in the Promised Land. In every of the spirituals, we can always draw a parallel between the verbal joust, the ritual of insult, and black humour, which represent another way in which black people learned to deflect sadness or tragedy or other serious situations connected to their psychologically subordinate status.

Conclusion

One would be tempted to conclude a discussion of this nature by stressing that it was with those spirituals that slaves discussed the best way of escape. From every indication, the slaves used their composed spiritual songs to put across their psychological situations. For most of them, running North was not quite an acceptable solution to their situations. Rather they wanted to end slavery for all, and they used songs as a call to arms. The idea of heaven in spirituals went beyond a desire for a better world; the image of land free of enslavement and suffering were a call to action. Therefore, rather than thinks of the spirituals as art that talked about Christian religion for its sake, they are evidence and legacy of African American slaves with the will to subvert the demands of their masters, escape, fight, plot, triumph, and regain their freedom.

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