

AFRICANISMS IN THE NEW WORLDà propos of Les Ameriques noires by Roger Bastide

by Abiola Irele*

One of the most important consequences of the slave trade, which involved the massive transfer of Africans across the Atlantic, has been the implantation in America of whole areas of African cultural expression. The distinctive though varied character of African cultural survivals, and their social significance in the peculiar modes of existence of black peoples within the various societies and cultures of the American continent, have struck several previous writers who have studied Africanisms in the New World, to such a degree that their personal reactions to the social position of the Negro has tended to determine their approach to the question, thus introducing an ideological element into the scientific analysis.

On the one hand there are the "apologists" who emphasize the marked character of Africanisms as a determinant of the cultural position of the Negro in America. This position has been pushed to its extreme frontiers by Negro 'nationalists', whose insistence on the role of the African heritage in the collective personality of the New World Negro is often explicitly tied to a political cause.¹ The 'integrationists' on the other hand reject the anthropological viewpoint, preferring to explain the cultural distinction of the Negro in America by purely sociological factors. For they are aware of the implications of an absolute explanation which, by stressing the persistence of an African nature in the Negro, his original specificity, seems to offer arguments against his integration into Western culture, and into American society.²

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1. Cf. J. Price-Mars: *Ainsi parla l'oncle*, Compiegne, 1923, and W.E.B. Du Bois *Souls of Black Folk*, New York, 1903.
2. The 'integrationist' point of view is best represented by the late Franklin Frazier, especially in his *The Negro Family in the United States*, Chicago, 1939.

Professor Bastide draws attention to this ideological fog that has tended to obscure a scientific analysis and evaluation of African cultural survivals in the New World in his introduction to *Les Ameriques noires*,³ devoted to the subject, pointing out how this can be rendered difficult by the emotional involvement of the writer with his subject. However, his book is at once an attempt to give clarity and focus to the multiple aspects of the question as well as a synthesis of the data.

As the title suggests, *Les Ameriques noires* is concerned with the whole range of distribution of African cultural elements in the New World, highlighting their extreme diversity both in their degree and in their nature, according to the specific historical, geographical and sociological factors that have determined this distribution. The author makes a primary distinction between what he calls "African societies" with a high content of African survivals and in which an African quality predominates, and "Negro societies", which exist in America as sub-cultures within a socio-cultural "mainstream".

Bastide however stresses the point that this distinction exists in fact in a continuum, embracing in a kind of chromatic scale extremes at both ends and gradations within. Moreover, even where the African element predominates, this represents in the first place a composite of several traits from different African cultures, though specific cultures often furnish the basic framework.

For example, the Akan family system has been perpetuated in an almost pure form, with a double lineage corresponding in America to the matrilineal kinship (*abusua*) and the patrilineal spiritual descent (*ntoro*) existing here in Ghana. The day names have been faithfully preserved, both for male and female (the table of the corresponding names in Surinam shows almost no change in this regard). With respect to religious beliefs, the Saramaca have continued to worship the Supreme Being under his Akan name (*Nyame*) and attributes. Their art remains essentially Akan, as comparisons of the styles obtaining in Surinam and in Ghana have indicated, and their oral literature continues to be centred upon Ananse.

Bastide insists further however that none of what he has termed "African" societies exist as a pure form, compared with their original models in Africa,

3. Payot, Paris, 1967.

for apart from the fact that they derive from African cultures not of the present day but of several centuries ago, they also show a certain degree of syncretism, due to contact with either native Indian or Western culture. They are indeed resurrections of Africa in the heart of America, but only in a relative sense, for they are also the results of their bearers' efforts to adapt their ancestral cultures to new environments, a compromise between African social and cultural forms and the various determinisms encountered on the American soil.

More widespread is the second category of Negro societies and cultures that the author distinguishes - those slowly fashioned by the African slaves and their descendants out of a fusion of remnants of African cultural forms, with those into which they came in contact in America. Here it might be mentioned that this fusion was carried out as well with the indigenous Indian cultures, a phenomenon to which Bastide devotes one of the most revealing and interesting chapters of his book. Of greater interest however are the 'Creole' cultures, created out of contact with Western models, and existing within the global context of American social, political and economic organisation.

The most important factor which emerges from Bastide's consideration of these Negro societies and cultures in America is the sociological restrictions imposed upon their formation and development by the very fact of the insertion of the black communities within a social framework over which they have no control. The socio-cultural channels of Negro existence in America have had to be fitted into loop-holes within a total order laid down by the white majority. Thus the specific character and forms taken by Negro sub-cultures, and the variations in their aspect all over the continent have been determined and are still dependent upon the degree of freedom for manoeuvre offered by the dominant group.

Bastide describes at length the kinds of modifications that have been forced upon African survivals due to social pressures from the outside. The need, for example, to adapt to the European seven-day week and to abandon the four-day week of the Yorubas has caused a re-organisation of the ritual calendar of the religions derived from this ethnic group, with consequences for their liturgies. Structural modifications result therefore from the exigencies of the prevailing social order.

Secondary to this over-riding sociological factor governing the different

shapes and quality of Negro sub-cultures is the original ethnic composition of the various Negro populations, which has determined to a considerable extent the content and degree of differentiation of Negro sub-cultures. For although there was a general levelling of African nations during slavery, and though similarities existed between African cultures, this did not preclude the dominance of specific cultures. As has been noted, Akan system of social organisation and religious beliefs have prevailed among the Saramaca in Surinam as well as in Jamaica, due to the concentration in early times of slaves from this country in those areas. The same kind of concentration has made Yoruba culture - especially its religious manifestation - the basic constituent of Negro sub-cultures in Brazil, Cuba and parts of Trinidad, whereas in Haiti, both before and since independence, a certain awareness of Dahomean origin has dominated national feeling.

Professor Bastide's examination of the presence of African survivals which give an original stamp to Negro sub-cultures in America, throws into relief the interplay of the social and the cultural, in the formation and maintenance of these cultures, the dynamic relationship between the infra-structure of Afro-American existence and the super-structure constituted by the values informing their distinctive way of life.

It is primarily through his discussion of African religious survivals that he shows up the capital role played by sociological factors in determining the lines of development of Negro sub-cultures in America. He demonstrates that the mere transfer of Africans to the New World was not sufficient to ensure the survival of their religions, but that the process needed institutional "props" adapted to the new social conditions met with by the slaves. This point is emphasized by the fact that whereas the ancestral cults of the Bantu nations disappeared with the break-up of the lineage systems to which they were tied in Africa, the religions of the Yorubas and the Fons, for example, which though organised through lineage groups, had developed an ideological super-structure independent of these groups, have been preserved. Thus, the cosmologies of the Yorubas and Fons, uniting in one stream of ideas, attitudes and expressive gestures, were transferred intact to the New World and required only a new social organisation to survive.

Even here, the normal working of collective memory did not operate in a mystic fashion, but had not only to find a basis in the social order but also to meet its exigencies, to ensure the continuation in any form of the African

religious beliefs and rituals.⁴

The social mould into which African religions could be fitted was furnished, ironically enough, by the slave masters, who gave official sanction to the spontaneous divisions into ethnic groups developed by the slaves themselves. These 'nations', as they were called, often had religious leaders who also wielded secular authority which came to be recognized by the whites, for they found them convenient intermediaries through whom they could exercise an overall control over the slaves.

This system of 'indirect rule', as it were, was to lay the socio-religious organisation of the separate existence and consciousness of the black man in many areas of America, especially in Brazil. The religious fraternities each acquired with time the character of a distinctive social system having relevance to the lives of the slaves, and later, their descendants. For not only did the ancestral religions serve as a spiritual bond between them, it provided them refuge from the hard realities of their lot and in the secular field even developed veritable social security systems. Thus the functional role of African religions has given them and continues to give them an institutional basis, with an object significance for the black populations in its wedding of the mystic and secular into a meaningful and coherent cultural union. The continuity of African religious survivals in America, as exemplified by the candombles of Brazil and the santerias of Cuba, stands therefore in a close operative relationship with the specific social structures they engendered.

But although emphasis is placed on the social function and on the distinctive character of African cultural survivals in the collective life of the Negro in America, it is only in exceptional cases that they acquire the kind of social force observed, for instance, in the case of the candombles. On the contrary, in most areas of America, Africanisms are diffuse in their manner of insertion into Negro life, which they condition only in the measure in which the black man exists as a socio-economic category differentiated to some extent from the white majority. For in the multi-racial societies of America, the significant social pressures to which the black man is subject remain those of the dominant group - and his cultural orientation, in the global context of American life, derived not from Africa but from Europe. Western forms of social organisation

4. In a previous study of African religions in Brazil, Roger Bastide has developed this point at length, by reference to Maurice Halbwach's theories of collective memory. See Les Religions Africaines au Bresil, (Paris, 1960) pp. 334-361.

and cultural expression serve indeed not so much as foils but as models, due to the fact that the white majority constitutes the reference group in every American society, with the exception of the Bush Negro republics. In short, the dominant process in the evolution of the Negro's American experience is assimilation or acculturation. Again, religious survivals serve as an illustration of the permeating influence on the Negro of his social and cultural environment. For the inevitable impact of Christianity on the Negroes' religious behaviour has resulted in varying patterns of syncretism.

At one extreme in the range lie the Afro-American religious system represented once again by the candombles and the santerias, which have operated an integration into a recognisable African mould of elements borrowed from Christianity. Catholic rituals have been incorporated into the ceremonials of the cults; Catholic saints introduced as intercessors with the Supreme Being, alongside the ancestral deities, especially where there is a convergence of their parallel functions and attributes, and of their symbolic values. This parallel is in fact extremely developed and relatively stable, as the table of correspondences which the author gives in the book clearly shows (p. 163). Afro-American religions demonstrate the additive tendencies of religious systems due to the universal character of religious experience which is merely translated into varied forms in place and time. But the syncretism of the Afro-Americans was due historically to the necessity for the early slaves to dissimulate behind an outward show of Christianity their own religious practices, and has gone far enough today to shape the religious expression of their descendants.

The same process occurred in Haiti with the difference that it has been pushed even further, to a point where a loose reciprocity exists in Vodun between Catholic saints and African deities. Indeed, such a general confusion of the two systems now prevails that Bastide suggests that the Haitians can be said to have evolved a new system, to have fused the Christian and the African into a national religion. This is why he makes a distinction between what he calls 'preserved religions' as in Brazil, Cuba and Trinidad, where the African core has remained intact, and 'living religions', like the Vodun of the Haitian countryside which has cut itself free of its African as well as European roots.

This development is accounted for by the different social and political environments of the two religions and of their practitioners, which determine their attitudes to their religions. The black populations in Brazil and Cuba constitute minorities within multi-racial societies, so that their attachment to their religions

is strengthened by the function which they fulfil in their social lives. This in turn deepens their sense of cultural specificity as reflected in these religions. The African character of Afro-American religions is therefore emphasized in these countries as a cultural reaction to the social forces felt by the black population. With the help of rituals in African languages, carefully transmitted from one generation to another, and even in recent times, of an occasional voyage to Africa (especially to Western Nigeria in the case of some Yoruba candombles in Brazil) to renew contact with the ancestral religion so as to purify the cults in America, these religions are protected against the forces of dissolution which threaten them.

No such pressure is felt, as Bastide points out, by the Haitians who live in a predominantly Negro society and the absence of any reaction on their part comparable to that of the Brazilians, is therefore easy to understand. Moreover, the Catholic clergy having been expelled at independence and only allowed to return much later, the purity of the Catholic faith and liturgy among the Haitian peasants could not be protected against the influence of African religions among them; on the other hand, the inflow of slaves from Africa having at the same time been stopped, the authenticity of the African religions could not be maintained either, for contact with the ancestral religion through new arrivals was also stopped thereby. Hence the free, almost anarchic development of Vodun into a distinctly new form, through the unhampered fusion of the European and African forms of religious expression.

At the other extreme in the range of syncretisms, we have the kind in which the African content has disappeared, and only an African manner remains, a 're-interpretation', to use Herskovits' term, of a totally Western model. The prime example here is furnished by the Negro churches in the United States in which the black man has adopted the revivalist forms of Protestantism, emphasizing its emotional and affective elements. But instead of the hysterical character which these take among the whites, there is in the case of the Negro a control and organization - a rhythmic patterning of the individual experience along lines that are socially given, as is the case with African religions both in Africa and in the New World. The African derived quality of religious behaviour among the Negroes in the United States is so well recognized by the 'black bourgeoisie' that, in order to mark their social distance and demonstrate their integration into the cultural mainstream, they tend to follow the more austere and puritannical forms of religion, along with stricter social norms.⁵

5. Cf. F. Frazier: *Black Bourgeoisie*, Chicago, 1957, especially Chapters III and V.

Bastide explains the differences between North and South American Negroes' degree of religious syncretism as being a result of the different kinds of impact made by Protestant and Catholic forms of Christianity. In the Protestant regions, he says, the teaching of the Bible and the actual inculcation of Christian tenets was pushed further than in Latin America, where Catholicism gave to Christianity a social, more than an individual character, where collective participation in ritual and ceremony counted more than the individual experience of religion. Whilst therefore African beliefs disappeared in North America, and the Negro could only bring to his religious experience an African manner, in Latin America, these beliefs have remained under cover of external Catholic symbols. Thus, in the Protestant regions, Africanisms contribute a formal feature, in the Catholic regions, they furnish the substance, of Afro-American religious comportment.

On a more general scale than that provided by religious syncretism is the continued and ongoing process of culture contact in America of which the Negro populations have been both subject and object: the association of peoples and the mingling of races in America which has led to the creation of new cultural products.

In this particular respect, what is perhaps more marked is the influence of the Negro on the folklore of America. If in the field of religion, which occupies an important position in the ideological superstructures of American mainstream cultures, and is very closely related to the social institutions which the white majority controls, the impact of the black man is negligible, the cultural inter-action of black and white has allowed a free introduction in other spheres, especially of artistic expression, of elements derived from Africa, permitting the Negro to make a distinctive contribution to American culture. The introduction of household slaves into the intimate lives of white families has played an important role in introducing specific cultural traits. Bastide even cites the example of African tales, told by Negro nannies to white children, as having contributed to the socialization of generations of white people all over the American continent - although he does not mention if this has had any effect on their personalities.

Bastide maintains that the Bantu people have of all the African slaves, made the greatest impact on American folklore. For although they lost their religion, they were left with their folklore and even encouraged in their secular

activities to express themselves freely. Thus, while the music of the Yorubas, for example, has taken on a ritual association, acquiring thereby an almost esoteric connotation, the music of the Bantu came to be integrated into the folklore of the entire society. This free development and the fusion with Western elements, had led to the creation of entirely new and original artistic forms.

However, despite this cultural interaction, the predominant fact remains the social distance between the black and white populations. Bastide's study is not concerned with the racial problem. But the social importance of African survivals within Negro sub-cultures in America raises a certain number of problems related to the racial situation in America, which he discusses.

The position of the white majority as reference group for the Negro in every American country gives a social significance to the cultural factor because the whole question of racial integration is based on the cultural assimilation of the Negro. Social modes and criteria for this integration are in fact set forth in cultural terms - in terms of behaviour and values. But the Negro often lives within a cultural setting of his own, with its own system of behaviour and values, having a noticeable effect upon his personality. There are differences in comportment between whites and blacks which can be ascribed to the cleavage between their different socio-cultural backgrounds, and to the separate patterns of socialization that obtain within their respective communities.

This cleavage is emphasized by the notable fact that in all American societies, the Negro occupies as a rule the lower rungs of the social ladder. Despite the existence of 'poor whites', social stratification in America follows a racial pattern; caste and class tend to coincide. Negro sub-cultures tend therefore to be class cultures, and social mobility for the Negro often implies cultural adjustments, as he enters, with the imprint upon him of the primary institutions of the Negro sub-culture, into a world dominated by the secondary institutions of the whites.⁶ This situation places upon individuals, in their shift

6. This observation is valid for the French speaking islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe, where the black populations seem only in appearance to have undergone a total assimilation into French culture.

Cf. F. Fanon: Peau noire, masques blancs (Paris, 1952)

and M. Leiris: Contact de civilisations en Martinique et en Guadeloupe, Paris, 1955.

back and forth between their two worlds, a heavy strain under which their personalities sometimes crumble.⁷

We can talk of the 'collective marginality' of the Negro in America, whose pathological manifestations give us a negative reflection of his social and cultural situation. It can thus be understood why Negro sub-cultures have been implicated in the development of the racially centred ideologies of black people in America. For not only have their social organization converted them into convenient rallying points for Negroes of the lower classes - the religious fraternities developing into messianic movements, such as the Father Divine phenomenon in the United States - the frustration of the intellectual elites often throwing them back upon their own communities, has spurred them into a rationalisation of their own social and psychological dilemmas. For many Negro leaders, one can detect a sublimation, through what Stonequist has called the "nationalist role", of individual drives and conflicts;⁸ social reaction becomes involved with cultural reaction - and it is not surprising that a strong populist element pervades most of these Negro intellectual movements, emphasizing the association of culture and class.

Bastide's study ends with an examination of these relationships between Negro ideologies, and Negro sub-cultures, which combines in one movement political and social protest with counter-acculturation. He pursues this examination further in his discussion of the genesis and development of Negritude, showing the cultural foundation which lends a vestige of truth to the myth, but insisting that the ideological content of Negritude does not in fact correspond to the reality of the African heritage in America.

7. Cf. A. Kardiner: The Mark of Oppression (New York, ed. 1962), composed largely of case histories.

8. E. Stonequist: The Marginal Man New York, 1937
W.E.B. Du Bois comes readily to mind, but this observation must not be taken however to mean in any way that I wish to downgrade Du Bois' notable contribution to the Afro-American and African cause.

Professor Bastide's book, as already mentioned, aims at a synthesis of a subject whose multiple aspects lead off in many directions. What gives unity to his approach is the sociological perspective, its recognition that Africanisms in the New World are the result of interaction not simply between ideas or systems, but between individuals subject to specific social pressures. Their varied structures and aspects spring from the network of inter-personal relations within definite socio-economic and political contexts; their role in the lives of Afro-Americans continues to be linked in an intimate way with the dynamic factors that govern their social existence.

He illustrates then in this study once again the way in which the culturalist view has to give way, or at least modify its concepts, in an approach to the whole question of culture contact. This was a position which Balandier had already taken in his study of culture contact and social change in Africa, in which he insisted upon the direct relevance of the colonial situation to the problems he envisaged, as against the approach of other scholars, like Malinowski who tended to play down this factor.⁹

Besides, the idea that culture transmission flows, like a river from the hilltops to the lowlands, from 'higher' cultures to 'lower' cultures, no longer holds water, so to speak. One has to take into consideration the sociological factors that determine the process - the systems of political power and of economic controls, of social constraints, and their impact both on the external order constituted by the collective lives of the receiving people, as well as their inner responses to these objective factors.

For African scholars however the question of African cultural survivals holds an interest that goes beyond this general theoretical consideration. Indeed, a whole multitude of scientific interests is offered by Africanisms in the New World.

The direct influence of Afro-American ideologies on African political awakening and culture revival - for example, in the genesis of Negritude, which has its roots mainly in the New World¹⁰ - gives to the subject an obvious interest

9. G. Balandier: *Sociologie actuelle de l'Afrique noire*, Paris, 1963, Ch.1 (reproduced in Wallerstein ed. *Social Change: The Colonial Situation*).

10. For the direct growth of Negritude from the socio-cultural ideologies of Afro-Americans, see my article "Negritude or Black Cultural Nationalism", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol.3, No.3.

for us here. Indeed, one of the most striking things about the development of ideologies in Africa is this feed back of ideas and attitudes on the part of the Afro-American, derived from his awareness of his African origin, to its source the return to Africa of the New World Negro has thus provided a powerful impetus to African nationalism whose success in turn is now giving inspiration to Afro-American nationalism. We have here a very interesting cycle of responses which can profitably be studied.

Other areas of study well outside the field of political science open up. For instance, a comparison of elements of African culture preserved in America with their present African models has an intrinsic scientific value. How much of Akan social organisation and values remain among the Saramaca Bush Negroes, and in Jamaica, for instance? To what extent have the variations in infrastructure had an effect on specific details, accounting for modifications in the structure of social relationships and the ideas that sanction them? These and many other questions can only be answered if one works back to African survivals from their source in Africa.

Attention could also be centred on points of detail. A case in point, suggested by Professor Bastide's study, is that of the divination cults of the Yoruba which are still perpetuated in America. The elaborate logical and mathematical system of Ifa may or may not have lost its complexity in America, but what remains of it, how its preservation is maintained and the exact areas of both its ritual and secular applications can only be made clear by referring the survival in the New World back to its present African model.

More important in this respect is the fact that African cultural survivals in the New World are derived from the Africa of three centuries ago, making possible a sort of historical anthropology which should be most revealing of the kind of evolution that our own cultures have gone through, both here and in America. Professor Herskovits had also drawn attention to the usefulness to this kind of comparative work which could throw a light on significant details of African culture today which may be missed by researchers in Africa but recognized with the help of survivals in America. Conversely, the origins of certain patterns and their significance here in Africa would help to clarify obscurities that still persist in certain areas of Africanisms in America.

The study of syncretisms can gain immensely from this kind of comparative work, bearing in mind that African religions as maintained here provide a useful

starting point for examining the lines of development of the syncretistic religions both here and in America. One might examine closely, for example, the role of possession and its shifting values both in traditional African liturgy and in the various syncretistic religions that have sprung up in Africa and in America which still make use of it. No doubt such a study would help towards getting a greater insight into the psychological and spiritual significance of a phenomenon that has not yet been satisfactorily explained.

Africanisms in the New World offer a vast area of research for African linguists who have, in the ritual languages used by officiating priests in Afro-American cults and in the ritual songs of their congregations, a means of checking on old forms of African languages like Fon or Yoruba. The development of Afro-American dialects and of Creole which is based on the superimposition of European vocabularies on an African linguistic base offers another interesting field for tackling problems of phonetic and structural change, as well as those of socio-linguistics.

African oral traditions, art and music also form an important ingredient of American folklore - the exact extent and degree of this contribution is only just beginning to be scientifically studied. Although the Nancy tales are derived from the Akan Anansesem, the fact remains largely a postulation, for no comparison has yet been made on a large scale between the two. Similarly, much has been asserted about Afro-American music's debt to traditional patterns in Africa, yet a strict musicological research aimed at pinning this down to details, and thus verifying - or if need be, disproving - the assertion, has still to be done.

It can readily be seen that Africanisms in the New World offer a very wide range of study for different categories of African scholars. But perhaps the greatest relevance it has to African studies is in its providing an extra reference against which one can view the whole process of social and cultural change in Africa. For although the Afro-American is not an African, the point of departure for the black man's creation of new cultural forms in Africa and in America is the African background, and the same European culture serves as reference culture for both. What Professor Bastide's study makes clear is that there exists a continuity of African culture in America, notwithstanding the fragmentations and the variations that Western influence has caused within it. It is certainly not unreasonable to suppose that certain correspondences, which could provide a framework for some general observations, can be detected between the patterns of acculturation in Africa and in America.

It is true that a considerable number of variables have to be recognized before any kind of meaningful global view embracing both can be evolved, but the fact remains that, even if such an all-embracing perspective cannot be arrived at, the exercise can still be of scientific value inasmuch as the American patterns can serve as a check for the African, and vice-versa.

Bastide himself in his conclusion to this book puts forward a theoretical viewpoint which can serve as an approach to the question. He makes a distinction between what he calls "material" acculturation and "formal" acculturation. In the former case, although elements are borrowed from another culture, this is limited to the substance, which is re-interpreted along existing lines within the receiving culture, integrated as it were into the mental universe of the subject. In the latter case, on the other hand, it is this very mental universe which is transformed, to an extent which makes the subject re-interpret his native culture in terms originally foreign to him, outside the ideological frame of reference of this culture. This distinction is no doubt an abstraction, but it can be held to translate reality, to which it gives refinement in the form of concepts.