Drums Rising: The Drum as Myth and Symbol in African American Culture
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The Drum’s Prohibition Through Time

It is commonly known that the African drum was banned in the Americas during the slave era. It was said that the drum was to be feared by slave masters for its use as an instrument of communication for slave uprisings. The idea of the black male slave inducing a drum to talk calls to mind an image of the slave’s latent capacity for subterfuge and insurrection. The fear of a potential, the unfamiliar and exotic power of the slave, has fueled a great myth.

The use of the drum in the Americas as a communication tool in uprisings is vastly outweighed by the drum’s use in other unrelated functions of communication in social and religious contexts. Slaveholders may not have acknowledged the cultural link between African music, dance and religious practices but they set out to prohibit them all in many areas of the Americas. It is true that the war drum, universal to many cultures, was something to be feared, but both Europeans and Americans, based on their own accounts, show that the African drum was not merely an instrument of war. The documentary evidence presents a contradiction. The drum is at once described as an accessory to revolt and as an integral part of African American culture.

The African drum was often described in dance performances that took place among slaves on holidays and special occasions. The drum was also described in religious ceremonies and “vodou” rituals. That the drum continued in use, and was talked about by observers, suggests that the ban didn’t work. What does it mean that there are so few accounts of the drum being used in revolts? Did the ban in fact work so well that there was a deterrent effect, or was it that there was no African war drum to begin with?

This chapter will interpret the available historical literature on the prohibition of the African drum in the Americas. Accounts and examples will be presented by topic, chronologically within
each, with an eye towards establishing any patterns or trends that can be gleaned from the literature. Because of the nature of the evidence, and this structure, the story will move about in time and place. North America will be considered within the context of the new world African American diaspora. Probably half of the descriptions and accounts of performances come from the Caribbean during the colonial era, with most of the rest originating from north America. Although the focus here is on north America there is a relationship with the Caribbean regarding slavery and black Americans in general that will become evident. The relevant historiography will be discussed after the documentary evidence has been presented. This will allow the reader to view the materials in an order that would have otherwise been organized by author or time period.

Drums in Revolts

Sir Hans Sloane penned the earliest reference to the use of the drum in revolts in the Americas. He was physician to the Duke of Albemarle and visited Jamaica in 1687. After his return to England in 1689 he wrote about his travels.

The Negroes . . . formerly on their Festivals were allowed the use of trumpets after their Fashion, and Drums made of a piece of a hollow Tree, covered on one end with any green Skin, and stretched with Thouls or Pins. But making use of these in their Wars at home in Africa, it was thought to much inciting them to Rebellion, and so they were prohibited by the Customs of the Island.

This is an isolated account for this time and place in terms of the reference to rebellion, but Sloane’s words make three important points. He mentions slave festivals, he describes in specific terms the hand made drums that he witnessed and he refers to the use of the drum in a context of violence.

The best known instance of the use of the drum in a revolt in north America was the Stono rebellion of 1739. The following is an excerpt from an account of the South Carolina incident.

On the 9th day of September last being Sunday which is the day the Planters allow them to work for themselves, Some Angola Negroes assembled, to the number of Twenty; at a place called Stonehow . . . Several Negroes joi ned them, they calling out Liberty, marched on with Colours displayed, the two Drums beating, pursuing all the white people they met with, and killing Man Woman and Child . . . They increased every minute by new Negroes coming to them, so that they were above Sixty, some say a hundred, on which they halted in a field, and set to dancing, Singing and beating Drums, to draw more Negroes to them, thinking they were
now victorious over the whole Province, having marched ten miles & burnt all before them without opposition . . .

In the years following the Stono insurrection laws were passed in South Carolina and Georgia specifically prohibiting the drum. The Slave Act of 1740, in South Carolina, sought to forbid “wooden swords, and other mischievous and dangerous weapons, or using or keeping of drums, horns, or other loud instruments, which may call together, or give sign or notice to one another of their wicked designs or purposes.” The Georgia law used similar language.

And as it is absolutely necessary to the safety of this province, that all due care be taken to restrain the wondering and meeting of negroes, and other slaves, at all times, and more especially on Saturday nights, Sundays, and other holidays, and their using and carrying mischievous and dangerous weapons, or using and keeping drums, horns, or other loud instruments, which may call together or give sign or notice to one another of their wicked designs or intentions . . . and whatsoever master or owner or overseer shall permit or suffer his or their slave or slaves at any time hereafter to beat drums, blow horns, or other loud instruments . . . shall forfeit thirty shillings sterling for every such offense . . .

In these two laws drums and horns are represented as an ancillary to weapons. The Georgia law plainly states that these instruments may be used to “call together or give sign or notice to one another.” It is interesting that both of these laws use the terms “mischievous and dangerous weapons” and “wicked designs.” The fear of the use of the drum as an instrument of communication was clearly articulated.

These laws single out the drum, and remove it from the context or situation where the instrument may have been used, to portray the drum as an instrument of revolt. The original context may as well have been festive or spiritual. Herein lies the apparent reason for such generalizations on the part of observers; since the real intent was not understood, the worst was presumed.

The only other revolt on record, to this writer’s knowledge, where the drum was utilized was the Louisiana revolt of 1811 in St. John the Baptist Parish. This insurrection has been called the largest in the history of north America. “Between 300 and 500 slaves, armed with pikes, hoes, and axes but few firearms, marched on New Orleans with flags flying and drums beating.”

This insurrection is separated from the Stono rebellion by seventy-two years. These two
accounts are similar in their depiction of slaves marching with “colours displayed” and marching with drum accompaniment. The Stono account describes a separate use of the drum for dance and to call together more slaves to participate in the action. In fact one possible difference between the Stono and Louisiana rebellions, based on their descriptions, was that in the later Louisiana revolt drums were used for marching only and not for dance and communication. This could be taken as a sign of assimilation and a retreat from earlier African practices. Repressive laws like those that were passed after the Stono rebellion also occurred in the years following the Louisiana revolt, due to this and a number of other conspiracies that occurred in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century. These revolts, where the drum was not reported on, will be discussed later in this chapter.

During the slave era Africans in the Americas developed new dances that included the religious shout, the secular buck and wing and buzzard lope and original styles of music such as the spirituals, and all without the sanctioned use of the drum. Most of the drum accounts in the literature speak within the context of secular dance. Many of the rest describe religious events. The documentary accounts are strangely mute on the most feared use of the drum in revolt.

Fear of Revolt

Dance and any meeting of blacks for celebrations or religious purposes became the code words for the fear of revolt. Although the instrument was not called by name, often the context made the events clear, and, often the drum was present. An account from 1654 by Adrien Dessales on the island of Martinique describes the prohibition of a dance called Kalenda (also Calenda). The Conseil Souverain de Martinique issued an ordinance on May 4, 1654, against “danses et assemblees de negres.” The ordinance was later restated to include the dance by name. Although the ordinance does not refer to drums, Dessales states that the Calenda was danced to the accompaniment of a drum called banza. Roughly translated from the original French, the drums were “often a cask or barrel, sometimes the first piece of wood they could find; it is a dance most lascivious in timing.” Further incidents led to the creation of Article 16 of the Code Noir of 1685 that prohibited
gatherings of slaves, day or night, on or off the property of their masters. The prohibition was restated again on August 5, 1758 and on May 23, 1772.

An account from 1758 in Louisiana by Le Page du Pratz, a colonial planter, links dance with the potential for revolt.

Nothing is more to be dreaded than to see the Negroes assemble together on Sundays, since, under pretence of Calinda, or the dance, they sometimes get together to the number of three or four hundred, and make a kind of Sabbath, which it is always prudent to avoid; for it is in those tumultuous meetings that they . . . plot their rebellions.

Here du Pratz mentions the Calinda by name, links it to “a kind of Sabbath” and concludes that insurrections are planned under these circumstances.

These two accounts show the associations made by writers regarding the types of activities carried out by slaves. The Calenda, which is well documented as a social dance, was described here in the context of both religion and rebellion. These descriptions, although they do not mention the drum by name, do talk about fundamentally African styled dance, for which the drum was probably present. In this sense the language of these colonial era writers is coded. Some of the following examples will show a similar distance from saying that there was a fear of revolt, or that banned instruments were being used or that restricted practices were taking place, in favor of indirect language or a condescending tone. These accounts will also show the different forms of what amounted to the selective prohibition of African culture in the Americas.

The earliest general prohibition against gatherings of slaves in north America was a Maryland act in 1695. In 1723 the Assembly again enacted laws prohibiting the large meetings of negroes on “Sabbath and other Holy-days.” Barbados adopted prohibitions by 1699 that stated: “Whatsoever Master, &c. shall suffer his Negro or Slave at any time to beat Drums, blow Horns, or use any other loud instruments, or shall not cause his Negro-Houses once a Week to be search’d, and if any such things be there found, to be burnt . . . he shall forfeit 40 s. Sterling.” Like the Georgia law that was instated some time after the Stono Rebellion, this law provides for a cash fine for any offender (the fine for disobeying the Georgia law was thirty shillings sterling). A search provision was also instituted in South Carolina, where the constables of Charlestown would dispense crowds of
Negroes and “enter into any house . . . to search for such slaves.”

On the island of St. Kitts in 1711 and 1722, slave acts prohibited “holding dangerous assemblies or from communication at a distance by beating drums or blowing horns.” In Jamaica in 1717, a slave act also prohibited meetings with drums and horns, but slaves could congregate for “any innocent amusement.” As in the Sloane account, there appears to have been little difference between what looked like “dangerous assemblies” or “innocent amusement” on the part of observers.

There is one account of the use of the drum by blacks for nonviolent purposes, and its presumed use to call an insurrection, that comes from the Mosquito Shore in present day Honduras in 1787. Colonel Edward Marcus Despard, on a mission on behalf of the English crown to oversee the settlement of, and allotment of land parcels in, Mosquito, left an affidavit of his activities there in defense of allegations against him for misconduct. [See Plate 6] One of the incidents described involves the detainment of Joshua Jones a “person of colour” by local magistrates because his land claim, approved by Despard, conflicted with an earlier unauthorized claim made by another settler who was white. In his description of the incident, one informant described under oath how Jones presented no “opposition” and went on to add “nor did I see any appearance of such a disposition among any of the people of colour.” Jones was not only a land owner but possessed eleven slaves of his own. Despard makes the point earlier in his account that as governor he had been made aware of the fact that “people of colour” received “frequent insults” and were put under “hardships” by various other settlers of Mosquito Shore. Despard continues his assessment.

The people found themselves entirely excluded from the privileges of British Subjects; and from the means of making a livelihood and even of having a house to live in; and that they were so grossly abused by persons in the character of Majistrates as even to have common walking sticks forcibly taken out of their hands and thrown into the river, when they were walking peaceably along the street.

Far from being an aggressive presence the “free blacks & mulattoes,” among whom Despard divided “lots in the town” with other white settlers, were subjected to common abuse. Yet the same informant who had earlier escorted Jones under custody relates the following incident.

I was one of the number that took the first guard and remained till near three o’clock of Sunday...
morning; during all my stay I did not see any appearance of a rescue from the people of colour, but all was peace and quietness the whole time, excepting one small mistake that we Gentlemen made. Our Mr. Edward Davis and Mr. Lawless by taking a negro’s gombay for a drum which alarmed the gentlemen so much that Mr. Davis called to arms; Mr. Jackson went upon a reconnoitering party and soon released the gentlemen from their fears, informing the company that it was a few negroes diverting themselves playing the gombay.

It is interesting here how the gombay, which is a drum, is spoken of in the sense that it is not a drum, that is, a war drum. This is certainly as removed an account in time and place as was Sir Hans Sloane’s depiction from the Caribbean, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Though it seems that the African drum had a presumed purpose throughout the slaveholding world.

Language and Intent

A general observation regarding these historical accounts are the superlatives that were often used to characterize witnessed events and performance scenes. Blacks held “tumultuous meetings” (du Pratz) and performed dances “lascivious in timing” (Dessales). Dessales’ quote adds a sexual connotation to the dance, and as one of the following accounts show, some observers found African dance movements offensive. This point begs the question; was there a relation between the use of African music and what was viewed as improper practices carried out between the sexes, and, how were women viewed by the observers, since the Calenda that Dessales describes was danced in couples. The following account from Sir William Young’s journal entry on St. Vincent in 1791 is a further example.

In the evening I opened the ball in the great court, with a minuet with black Phillis . . . our music consisted of two excellent fiddles . . . and . . . tamborin . . . there stood up about eighteen couple . . . This moment a new party of musicians are arrived with an African Balafo, an instrument composed of pieces of hard wood of different diameters, laid on a row over a sort of box; they beat on one or the other so as to strike out a good musical tune. They played two or three African tunes; and about a dozen girls, hearing their sound, came from huts to the great court, and began a curious and most lascivious dance, with much grace as well as action; of the last, plenty in truth.

This observer certainly did not miss much. The drum here has been substituted by the balafon, an African xylophone.

There must have been a reason for this fantastic language. These writers may have been
witnessing something that they had never seen before. The choice of words may as well have portrayed their shock at such exhibitions. They may have also simply been unable to put into words adequately the music and dance they were a party to. Possibly this is evidence of the cultural difference between Europeans and Africans and the standards of behavior, dress and modesty of the two cultures. Also, because these were descriptions of slaves, a modicum of abusive language should probably be expected. Surely Young’s flippant reference to “black Phillis” and the “action” of the African dance can call into question his level of respect for female slaves and bewilderment at things African.

A Culture in Retreat

The 1740s appear to have been a watershed for the perseverance of the African ways of the slave population in north America. The negative impact of the Stono insurrection of 1739 must have been great, as witnessed by the laws that were passed in its aftermath. In 1741 the New York city slave conspiracy, which ended in the execution of thirty-one blacks, was largely the result of white hysteria pointed towards what turned out to be a biracial gang of thieves and arsonists The 1740s were also the first decade where, in the Chesapeake, the black population began to grow mainly by natural increase, suggesting that an acculturated African American population was growing.

The tone and content of the accounts of black American culture change for north America after this time. For example, in 1749 North Carolina slaves and free blacks were prohibited from meeting “for the purpose of drinking and dancing” by the General Assembly. The simplified language, as compared to that of earlier statements, is worthy of note. By this time the drum was taboo in north America, so its absence from accounts can be reconciled in terms of the idea of coded language mentioned earlier. As some of the following descriptions show, it is also possible that the acculturation process was having the effect that European culture, songs and dances, had mixed with African forms to a greater extent. The drum may have fallen into disuse because slaves were dancing more European, than African based, dances. Was the drum there all the time, and not
being talked about, or had African Americans been forced, or chosen, not to use it?

An Opposing Paradigm

Revisionist history says that in north America the drum was banned and that in the Caribbean, because slaveholders were much more free with their chattel, cultural and religious activities in general were permitted. It is my contention that although the drum was not “omnipresent” in north America, it continued to be used for dance, religious events and communication. For the Caribbean, the examples presented thus far suggest that there was considerable restriction on slaves’ non-work activities. In north America, African cultural practices were also under attack, but may have in fact succeeded over time to a greater extent than they have been given credit for.

Thomas Jefferys, an English geographer and mapmaker, reported a dance scene he witnessed in 1760 in the Caribbean. “The Calendoe, a sport brought from the coast of Guinea, and attended with gestures which are not entirely consistent with modesty, whence it is forbidden by the public laws of the islands.” Here a form of the Calenda is mentioned and in this case was supposed to have been opposed because of its immodesty, not because of its danger in revolt? Into the late eighteenth century there continued to be prohibitions against the drum in the Caribbean. In Jamaica in 1788 the New Consolidated Acts XIX, XX and XXI declared it illegal for “slaves to assemble together, and beat their military drums, or blow their horns or shells.”

During this same time period in one place in north America, New Orleans, there were actually concessions being made to the rights of slaves to congregate in public. By 1786 slaves were allowed to meet on Sundays and holy days in public squares after the close of evening service. In 1792, the Spanish governor of Louisiana declared by law that Sundays were for slaves’ recreation. Another 1795 ordinance restricted slave dancing to Sundays. In 1808, five years after the Louisiana Purchase, “Ordinances of Police” addressed slave dancing as well as censored activities at slave funerals.

Art. 9. – As to the custom observed by several Africans and people of colour of assembling during the night, on occasion of the death of some of their acquaintance, those meetings shall be tolerated only when confined to the relations of the deceased, and when everything is conducted at them with decency. But if the tranquility of the neighborhood be disturbed with
cries, singing or dancing, &c. on such occasions, the Commissary of Police and the patrols, are required to take up all persons found at such meetings after the hour of retreat . . . .

Art. 10. – It shall not be lawful for any slaves in town and suburbs to meet together for the purpose of dancing and amusing themselves, (except on Sundays, at such places only as may be therefore appointment by the Mayor, and no where else), under the penalty of ten lashes against every slave delinquent.

Article 10 clearly bans slave assemblies, except on Sundays, with a penalty of whipping. Article 9 allows funeral ceremonies at night, as it was the “custom,” and hindered the extent to which slaves could participate, in the name of “the tranquility of the neighborhood.” So after New Orleans became part of America, custom was allowed, but was subject to restriction. It was Congo Square in New Orleans that provided the late nineteenth century with some of its most detailed descriptions of African based music and dance. Although New Orleans did restrict African cultural practices over time, the city never effectively banned such practices, because they were allowed on Sundays, and have been written about into the late nineteenth century.

Acculturation

The acculturation process continued and by the early nineteenth century accounts plainly discuss this transition. In 1825 H.T. de la Beche made the following comments regarding slaves in Jamaica. “When a negro wishes to give a dance . . . those of the old school preferring the goombay and African dances, and those of the new, fiddles, reels, &c . . . . The various African amusements, in which the negroes formerly took so much delight, are not now kept up with spirit, and Joncanoe himself is getting out of fashion.” In 1828 Alexander Barclay gives an account, also from Jamaica, very similar to that of de la Beche. Here Barclay is discussing festivals held at the end of cane-cutting.

About twenty years ago, it was common on occasions of this kind to see the different African tribes each a distinct party, singing and dancing to the gumbay, after the rude manners of their native Africa; but this custom is now extinct. The fiddle is now the leading instrument with them, as with the white people, whom they imitate; they dance Scotch reels, and some of the better sort (who have been house servants) country-dances . . . . The young people, however still indulge in some amusements on this occasion . . . . They have always with them . . . a fiddle, a drum, and a tambourine, frequently boys playing fifes . . . .
Mrs. A.C. Carmichael talks about both acculturated and African music and dance in Jamaica in about 1833.

Sunday dances in Kingstown are not now common, but in the country they frequently occur . . . The native African . . . dance their own African dances to the drum, while the creole negroes consider the fiddle genteeler, though of an evening among themselves they will sing, dance, and beat the drum, yet they would not produce this instrument at a grand party. Fiddles and tambourines, with triangles, are essential there.

The above examples, all from Jamaica, make a number of points regarding the transition in slave practices. De la Beche declares that there was both the “goombay” drum and African dance, and the fiddle and “reels,” but that the African ways had fallen from fashion. Barclay finds that the “gumbay” drum and “rude” dancing was extinct and that the fiddle was favored as the “leading instrument” to which “Scotch reels” and “country-dances” were performed, in imitation of the whites. Carmichael reports that African dances are only found in the country in Jamaica, and not in the city of “Kingstown,” and that “creole” slaves “consider the fiddle genteeler.” Barclay and Carmichael both admit that the drum is still used either among the young who “indulge” or on the occasion “of an evening among themselves.” These accounts show a marked contrast from earlier accounts. From the more general censor on “assemblees de negres” in 1654, to the explicit language declaring the “wicked designs” inherent in the use of the drum in 1740, this later group of accounts in the 1820s and 30s makes clear the shift in black culture. The later accounts also reveal a perseverance of African practices.

Also, in her travels, Mrs. Carmichael came to question a missionary about prohibitions against the drum and was met with a mute response.

I stated this to Mr. Goy, telling him that some of the negroes said the Methodists forbade their communicants dancing at all; that others said they only forbade the drum, and not the fiddle dance; while others said it was only the African dances that were disapproved of. I asked whether any of these accounts were correct, – but Mr. Goy, and afterwards Mr. Stephenson, heard me in silence, and made no answer of any kind.

Well into the nineteenth century there is evidence of the continued awareness of the affect of the drum in certain situations. In 1840, as the Democratic convention was being held in Charleston, South Carolina a band sent by the New York delegation played for dignitaries at ten o’clock one
It was stopped in the midst of its performance, and forbidden to use its drums . . . . The chief of police, in full uniform, appeared on the scene . . . politely explained the rule, and the reason of it saying, “Play any music you like, if you can dispense with your drums. Their sound at this hour would arouse the whole city.”

It could be inferred from this occurrence that the northern band must not have thought it unusual to play at this hour, or would have done so in New York, but drums evidently had a different meaning in this southern city at night. A periodical called The Commercial Review of the South and West (later De Bow’s Review) carried an article in 1846 titled “Code Noir; or, Black Code of Louisiana,” in which the Sunday dance code was discussed. Another example from Louisiana in 1849 shows that slaves in St. John’s Parish were restricted “from beating the drum or dancing after sundown” These examples plainly show the continuance of the drum into the mid-nineteenth century.

One account from about 1884 attests to drum performance and opposition, late into the century. In a book called The Existing Conflict by Green Raum, the author describes controversial topics of the day such as the rise of the KKK and includes commentary on black fife and drum clubs in Mississippi and white censor of such activities. This form of drum performance was an acculturated practice but in this instance there was still resistance to it.

Context

There is a larger context of circumstances that must be mentioned to better understand the social climate that existed under slavery in the Americas, particularly from the mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century. Beginning in the 1670s imports of African slaves to the southern colonies of north America first increased dramatically. This fact is important to contrast with the 1654 prohibition against dances and assemblies in Martinique; that before the slave trade had even matured in north America, prohibitions had already come about in the Caribbean. By 1710 blacks had become a majority in South Carolina, and it was in 1711 that slave Acts on the island of St. Kitts restricted assemblies and the use of the drum. This juxtaposition of facts suggests the ways in
which the difficulties of dealing with a transported African culture under a system of bondage were felt by Caribbean slaveholders many years earlier than in north America.

African American culture and religion had also been noticed outside of America by the late eighteenth century. In 1782 in Glasgow, Scotland, a songbook was published that included a piece that was probably influenced by black American dance. James Aird’s *Selection of Scotch, English, Irish and Foreign Airs* included a “Negro Jig.” This text also presented the first known printing of “Yankee Doodle.” Because of the fact that this Scottish book was made up in part of “foreign” music, it is at least less of a surprise to find both a black American dance tune and Yankee melody tune together between its covers.

In 1794 in Philadelphia, the first independent black church in the United States was organized. Richard Allen led the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in what was a reaction to the white Methodist church establishment and their limited acceptance of blacks. Reverend Allen also participated in the development of a new hymnal of music suited to the tastes of his congregation. This dramatic and carefully organized effort on the part of blacks in Philadelphia demonstrates the extent to which African Americans in some locales in north America had become acculturated by the late eighteenth century.

Yet during this same span of years Colonel Despard’s account of 1787 described the fear of revolt at the sound of a drum played by an African, and in 1788 Jamaica’s Act banned assemblies and drumming. It could be concluded that the acculturative process quickened in north America to the extent that new ways developed alongside the old for African Americans. Compared to the Caribbean, was this heightened cultural development the outcome of the closer proximity of the two cultures, arguably not found in the islands, or a more strict form of slavery in the north?

The forty-year period from 1791 to 1831 encompassed a group of five of the most well known slave revolts in history that included the Louisiana rebellion of 1811. In 1791 the Haitian revolution began, culminating in the expulsion of the French and independence in 1804. During this period of resistance there are no reports, that this author is aware of, that include the use of the
drum, although African based cultural practices were a part of this armed conflict. For example, Mackandal, a maroon chief, used poison as a weapon. This has been known to be a practice used by Africans in war as well. Mackandal’s plan to poison the water of every house in the capital city was eventually betrayed. There is also the case of Hyacinth, the twenty-one year old leader who’s troops took the capital of Port-au-Prince. Hyacinth used a bull’s tail as a talisman to “chase death away” from his troops. The Haitian revolutionaries by their actions showed a strong existing connection to African ways.

In 1800, Gabriel Prosser was the leader of a conspiracy in Richmond, Virginia. His plot to overrun and destroy the capital city may have failed in part because he did not tap the potential revolutionary force of religion, as had been used in other revolts, but instead focused on politics. The other factor that may have brought failure was the fact that the plan was led by assimilated slaves and may have been an expression of their class at the exclusion of other slaves; it was not an inclusive action. Therefore African practices had little association to such an effort.

In Denmark Vesey’s insurrection in Charleston, S.C. in 1822, Christian religion played a part in the plan. One message to his followers used Jesus’ words “He that is not with me is against me” (Luke, 11:23). Vesey’s conspiracy also included an individual named Gullah Jack who used charms made from crab’s claws, to guarantee safety and victory to recruits. Although the Vesey plot included both European and African religious influences, the possible flaw in this plot may have been that enlisting were restricted to artisans and freemen and therefore lacked numbers and force.

The Nat Turner rebellion, that took place in Southampton county, Virginia in 1831, Turner employed religion and mysticism. On February 12th, Turner interpreted a solar eclipse as a sign from God. Within twenty-four hours, seventy slaves took part killing at least fifty-seven whites over a twenty-mile area. U.S. troops ended the uprising in a massacre of the slaves.

From what is known, the drum was not used in the four revolts discussed above, but African based cultural practices did have an impact on these actions. It can be argued that the more African the conspiracy, that is, the more the action involved African based culture and religion, the greater
the chances were for its success. Gabriel Prosser and Denmark Vesey’s rebellions have the legacy of being the least defined in terms of the conspirators’ message and intentions. The conspiracies were both the efforts of assimilated blacks who included Christianity, and in Prosser’s case, politics, in their message. In contrast, the Haitian revolution and the Nat Turner revolt were based on direct and brutal actions which clearly proposed the destruction of the white oppressor in their purpose. Although the Turner revolt enlisted Christianity, and the Vesey plot included a conjurer, the number of assimilated participants was higher in the Prosser and Vesey plots. This implies a link between culture and action in that the Haitian and Turner revolts focused more on the continuance of African ways as a cause, whereas the Prosser and Vesey conspiracies sought a more complex political redress of the conditions of slavery. As a further example of the possible symbolism involved, Gabriel’s revolt was inspired by the Old Testament emancipation of the ancient Israelites from Egypt, and Denmark Vesey’s plot began on Bastille Day. These are the visions of an assimilated group.

This brief assessment of slave revolts shows that the assimilation of African Americans served to both distance them from African culture, in ways beyond dance and music, and pull them into the ideological and political issues of American culture at that time. For such efforts African culture and the drum was simply no longer needed.

Clandestine Activities

This chapter has so far presented documentary accounts that describe the use of the drum in revolts (Stono), the considerable fear of rebellions where drums or other tools of communication could be used (Georgia, Barbados), and the laws against such use. There are a number of descriptions that show continued prohibitions against the drum’s use in the Caribbean and the United States and evidence of concessions to the cultural practices of slaves in North America (New Orleans), contrary to what might be thought of as being the case. By the early nineteenth century there is evidence of an acculturation process taking place in black American culture (Barclay, de la Beche), yet throughout the nineteenth century there are examples of continued
opposition to the use of the drum (Mason, Police Jury) which in itself speaks to the drum’s continuance.

These accounts have not told the whole story. Most of the descriptions portray public activities, and talk about festivals or celebrations sanctioned by slaveholders. What is missing here are the clandestine activities of slaves and the activities which must have taken place away from the master’s gaze. Was the fact that the drum was loud, and that its sound carried, prohibitive of nighttime events? Although this is a difficult question to answer, and this writer knows of no specific accounts of clandestine drumming, there is evidence of other clandestine slave activities. The following four reports illustrate the nature of secret religious meetings held by slaves in north America and some of the techniques used to avoid discovery.

In the 1843 autobiography of former slave Moses Grandy, he relates how after the Nat Turner rebellion religious meetings were suppressed. He also talks about prayer meetings held in the woods. Black writer Octavia Victoria Rogers Albert describes in her 1891 work The House of Bondage how secret prayer meetings were held in cabins. In order to muffle the singing of hymns, a washtub full of water was put in the middle of the floor. Other testimonies exist in the interviews of John B. Cade, a black professor who’s article “Out of the Mouths of Ex-Slaves” appeared in the Journal of Negro History in 1935. His informants talk about secret prayer meetings in brush arbors. They also describe the use of pots turned upside down to muffle sounds. Others mention the use of quilts hung around worshippers to keep from discovery. One final biography by Miles Mark Fisher titled The Master’s Slave, published in 1922, describes the life of the author’s father Elijah, who was a slave owner. In this work there is also mention of brush arbor services. These testimonies give us a glimpse at the secret world of the slave and the measures taken to keep from discovery. Although these accounts do not talk about the drum directly, they do speak to the clandestine cultural practices under which drumming may too have been carried out.

So far, the accounts referred to in this chapter, from 1654 (Desalles) to 1884 (Raum), have been described by whites about black activities. “Black codes” were instated after rebellions took
place, further restrictions were put in place because of the fear of possible threats, and some accounts, such as Le Page du Pratz’s, appear to have been speculative. Moving away from the specter of what could have been, there is considerable testimony about what blacks in the early Americas did use the drum for that was not directly related to the prejudiced stereotype of communication for rebellion. Festive dance or the appearance of celebration was not always the precursor for war, as the following accounts will attest to. What is more, slaves themselves make this clear.

Communication

Slaves were known for communication techniques aside from the use of the drum. The use of signals and songs to assist runaway slaves was a common practice. It has been popularly known therefore that such songs of movement, transference, and transcendence as “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” were ripe with meaning. This phenomenon was discussed in print not long after the end of slavery. In Zion’s Herald for September 16th, 1875, from Wentworth, North Carolina, there appeared an article called “Slave Telegraphy” that described signals used to alert slaves of oncoming patrollers. In 1896 a New England Magazine article titled “Harriet Tubman” talked about the use of songs as signals to alert slaves. Also in a Colored American Magazine article called “Famous Women of the Negro Race: Harriet Tubman (‘Moses’),” “alerting songs” are described as they were used in the underground railroad.

The role of the drum in the day-to-day lives of slaves is revealed in the narratives of slaves themselves. The Slave Narrative Collection, gathered in the late nineteen thirties from interviews with former slaves, is a source for such insights. In particular the accounts of slaves from the Georgia Sea Islands, an area off the mainland coast of north America, has been a repository of continued African based practices and beliefs. In contrast to the second hand revelations of whites who viewed music and dance performance, these informants provide first hand accounts. The interviews are both revealing and personal. Here the interviewers were white, and some scholars have had reservations regarding the limits this arrangement may have placed on the
interviews. Accepting this point, the narratives remain important due to the corroboration of practices and events that are given in varied ways by these surviving elderly African Americans.

There are a number of examples of the use of the drum in communication. Josephine Stephens of Harris Neck, “a remote little settlement connected to the mainland by a causeway and located about forty-eight miles south of Savannah,” was one of the older residents of the island. She was about 77 years old. The interviewer described Josephine and her daughter.

As we talked with Josephine, the daughter stood in an adjoining room, ironing clothes. She stopped every now and then to take part in the conversation. The two women were utterly different types. Josephine, dressed becomingly in a blue and white checked gingham outfit, was the antebellum type of Negro. The daughter, tall, thin and dashing, and probably in her forties, represented a more modern era. She had on a blue checked sport shirt, a white skirt upon the surface of which was the dim outline of the trade name of a flour mill, and a pair of shiny black satin bedroom slippers. Her two front teeth were gold and shone and sparkled as she talked. Two large gold hoop earrings dangled beneath her close cropped straightened hair . . . .

The mother did not know exactly how old she was but said she had been about fourteen at the close of the War between the States . . . .

When we inquired about the drums being beaten at funerals, she shook her head stubbornly and refused to say anything on the subject.

The daughter, overhearing the conversation, paused in her task of ironing, and said, “Yes'm. Dasso . . . I remembuh heahin bout in the ole days they beat out messages on the drum. Let the folks know wen sumpm wuz bout tuh happen. Wen they give a dance ovuh on St. Catherine, they beat the drum tuh let the folks heah know bout it.”

The observations of the interviewer are interesting here, particularly the detailed descriptions of how the mother and daughter were dressed and how the mother was “antebellum” and the daughter “modern.” The contrast is made more obvious by the fact that the mother refused to discuss drums at funerals while the daughter was forthcoming with that and more thoughts on the subject.

Susan Maxwell, a resident of Possum Point, talked about the death of her mother.

She die right in dis house. Dey measure uh wid a string. Dey beat duh drum tuh tell ebrbody bout duh settin-up. We all set up wid duh body. We hab a big wash pot full uh coffee and hab a big sack uh soda crackuh fuh duh folks. Ebrbody place dey han bery light on uh eahs an on uh nose an den dey say, “Dohn call me. I ain ready fuh tuh go yit.”
Later, Susan mentioned how “In duh ole days dey beat duh drum tuh call duh people tuh duh fewnul.”

In his interview, Jack Tattnall, of Wilmington Island, talks similarly about the drum. “Wen a pusson die, we beat duh drum tuh let ebody know bout duh det. Den dey come tuh duh wake an sit up wid duh body.” Also Sophi Davis of White Bluff stated that “Yes'm dey alluz use tuh beat duh drum wen somebody die tuh let duh udduh folks know bout duh det.”

Issac Basden of Harris Neck was a blind basket maker who was about sixty years old. He described the drum’s use. “I recall wen dey beat duh drum tuh call duh people on Harris Neck tuhgedduh fuh a dance aw fewnul.” Rachel Anderson of Possum Point also mentioned the use of the drum at funerals. “Right attuh duh pusson die, dey beat um tuh tell duh udduhs bout duh fewnul . . . Dey beat duh drum in duh nex settlement tuh let duh folks in duh nex place heah.” Lawrence Baker, of Ridge road near Darien, discussed the drum. “Dey use tuh alluz beat duh drum aw blow duh hawn wen somebody die.”

Rosa Sallins of Harris Neck also spoke of the drum’s use to communicate.

Yes’m, I membuh bout how some time back dey use tuh beat out messages on duh drum. Dat wuz tuh let us know wen deah wuz tuh be a dance aw a frolic. Wen dey hab a dance obuh on St. Catherines, dey beat duh drum tuh tell us bout it. Duh soun would carry obuh duh watuh an we would heah it plain as anyting. Den duh folks heah beat duh drum tuh let em know bout it in udduh settlements.

Rosa’s use of the word message suggests a kind of specificity to what was heard on the drum.

In an area called Baker’s Crossing lived Ophelia Baker, who was a fortune-teller and clairvoyant and was known by the name Madam Truth. She talked about the drum.

The plump, dark-skinned fortune teller said that she had spent her childhood on Skidaway Island. She remembered hearing the drums beaten to tell the people in the nearby settlements of an approaching dance or festival. Her father had been one of those who beat the drum and thumped out a regular message on it, a message that could be heard for miles and was clearly understood by all those who had heard it.

Another woman, who was sitting on the front porch of her house, answered questions and talked about St. Catherine Island. The interviewer asked, “How would you know when they were
“going to hold a dance?”

Dey beat duh drums on St. Catherine. Den dey heah it at Harris Neck an folks deah tell all ub us yuh bout duh dance. We all go obuh tuh St. Catherine in a boat an dance an dance till mos daylight.

This array of accounts shows how the drum was used in a very practical sense for communication. People were called together for dances by the drum. The drum was used as a form of advertisement from one island area to another of a coming event on that day or evening. The drum was also used to inform the community, in a telegraphic sense, of the death of a person. In addition to the use of the drum for the communication of a death, the following accounts talk about the use of the drum at funeral ceremonies. The residents also describe the types of drum rhythms that had specific meanings.

Jack Tattnall talked about funerals. “We beat duh drum agen at duh fewhul . . . We call it duh dead mahch. Jis a long slow beat. Boom-boom-boom. Beat duh drum. Den stop. Den beat it agen . . . At duh fewnul when we beat duh drum we mahch roun duh grabe in a ring.” Sophi Davis, in her interview, also added “An at fuwnuls too, dey beat it.”

Susan Maxwell gave other details of the funeral ceremony. “We bury uh by tawch light attuh dehk. Ebrybody mahch roun duh grabe in a succle. Ebry night attuh fewnul I put food on duh poach fuh duh spirit tuh come get it.” She also described more specifically the way in which the drums beat at a funeral. “Dey beat it slow-boom-boom-boom. Wen dey wannuh stuhrup duh folks fuh a dance aw frolic, dey beats duh drum fas. Den dey knows it ain fuh no fewnul and dat it's fuh a good time.”

Josephine Stephen’s daughter talked about funeral drums. “They beats the drum tuhday at the fewnul. Specially ef yuh blongs tuh a awganization, they goes right along in the fewnul pruhcession and beats the drum as they mahch.” Isaac Basden mentioned the types of beats the drum played for different occasions. “Case, dey hab a diffunt beat wen dey call um tuh a settin-up aw fewnul frum duh one dey use tuh call um tuh a dance.” Rachel Anderson similarly described the type of drumming, “Use tuh alluz beat duh drum at fewnuls . . . Dey beat a long beat. Den dey stop.”

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dey beat anudduh long beat. Ebrybody know dat dis mean somebody die.”

Lawrence Baker also discussed the use of drums at funerals. “Dey beat two licks on duh drum, den dey stop, den dey beat tree licks. Wen yuh beat dat, uh know somebody done die . . . Duh big drum wuz duh one dey beat at duh wake. Rosa Sallins and Anna Johnson of Harris Neck mentioned the use of drums at funerals. They said that drums were played in the procession that accompanied the body to the grave.

For these island residents the drum did talk and conveyed different meanings for different occasions. Here individuals have also articulated the different specific types of beats or rhythms they heard and what those rhythms meant to them. These reflections hint at the level of communication for which the drum was used in African American, and, earlier, African culture. One informant, Priscilla McCullough, who lived near Darien, touched on the relation between the drum and the individual within the community, and, in substitution for the drum in the new world, the banjo, as a voice of reconnoiter or justice for the group against the individual who had gone astray.

Priscilla adjusted her eyeglasses which were tide on with a shoestring and told us something of the early life. She said she had been “bawn tree yeahs fo freedom in Sumtuh, Sout Calina,” As quite a young woman she moved to Georgia but still retained many pleasant recollections of the days of her early youth. She had heard of many African customs and went on to tell us some of these.

“I heard many time bout how in Africa wen a girl dohn cek jis lak dey should, day drum uh out uh town. Dey jis beat duh drum, an call uh name on duh drum and duh drum say bout all duh tings she done. Dey drum an mehuh long a take duh girl right out uh town.”

“Girls hab tuh be keahful den. Dey cahn be so triflin lak some ub em is now. In Africa dey get punished. Sometime wen dey bin bad, dey put um on duh banjo. Dat wus in dis country.”

This being “put on duh banjo” was unintelligible to us and we asked for an explanation.

“Wen dey play dat night, dey sing bout dat girl an dey tell all bout uh. Das putting uh on duh banjo. Den ebrybody know an dat girl sho bettuh chang eu ways.”

Priscilla first speaks to stories she heard about Africa as a girl as if these were abandoned practices. But when she explains being put on the banjo, it becomes clear that the banjo has been substituted
for the drum in America, and that a person’s name is literally called out to the accompaniment of a banjo instead of being called out on a drum.

Finally, a number of the residents talked about dancing to the drum. The woman sitting on her porch talks about dance.

“We use tuh dance all duh time tuh duh drums,” she said. “We would dance roun an roun in a sircle an clap our hans an sing. Dey would hab duh dances obuh on St. Catherine Ilun . . .”

“I use to dance tuh duh drum,” said Isaac Basden in his recollections. Lawrence Baker recalled that, “Dey use drums at dances an meetins, to.”

There are also a number of accounts given of what the drums used to in fact look like. Robert Pickney gives one description. “Duh ole drums nut duh Africans make wuz make out ub a skin uh some kine uh animal stretch obuh a holluh lawg. Dey didn eben take duh haiah off duh skin. Jis put it on datta way.” Jack Tattnall talks about drum making.

Ain so long sence dey step makin drums. Wen I wuz a young man, we use tuh make um. Dey wuz fo-cawhuhed sometimes an wuz cubbuh wid a skin. Dey wuz bout fo feet high.

Susan Maxwell remembered the types of drums used. “I kin membuh the kine uh drum, deah wuz duh lill kittle drum. Hit wuz bout fifteen inches cross an tree an a half foot high. Dat wuz duh drum dey beat fuh a settin-up.” Isaac Basden also talked about drum types.

Deah wuz two kine uh drum. One day call duh kittle drum, an one wuz duh bass drum. It stan bout two an a half foot high. Dey use tuh alluz hab a settin-up wen somebody die. Wen folks would go tuh duh settin-up, day would gib um bread an coffee.

Lawrence Baker described a family of drums, three in number, that sound very much like drums used in Africa in size, and by the fact that goat skin was used to make the drum heads. [See Plate 7]

Lots uh duh drums wuz home-made. Dey wuz made out uh goat skin an coon skin wut stretch out obuh heeps. Deah wuz tree sizes uh drums. Deah wuz duh big barrel drum. It wuz highuhin it wuz cross. Den deah wuz a lill drum frum twelve tuh fifteen inches wide an bout eighteen inches high. Duh udduh drum wuz duh medium size, kin euh in between duh udduh two. Duh big drum wuz duh one dey beat at duh wake. Dey use drums at dances an meetins, to.

What is most significant about the drum descriptions is that these recollections place drum performances in the United States to the mid to late nineteenth century. These accounts come from
a remote coastal island area of Georgia and not the mainland states. These interviews show that the African drum was used in this region of north America. This reality suggests that similar practices may have been possible in other areas of the south.

In the face of such forces native African drum and rhythmic practices might also be expected to adapt or somehow be absorbed in the acculturative process. As the drum came into disuse what took the place, in a culture for which this was an essential instrument? In fact black Americans found a multitude of ways in which to reassign or redistribute the function of the drum in music and dance. The next chapter will examine what surrogates were used in place of the drum.

Historiography

For this writer the story of the African drum’s use in America began with The Slave Community by John Blassingame. It was in this book that I first read about slaves “beating a drum as they marched,” in the Stono Rebellion of 1739, and my interest in this subject was born. Blassingame was also the first author I read who described a complete black culture that existed with little relation to African Americans’ status as slaves.

Among the elements of slave culture were: an emotional religion, folk songs and tales, dances, and superstitions. Much of the slave’s culture – language, customs, beliefs, and ceremonies – set him apart from his master.

I was intrigued by the idea that there was an entire belief system, based on an African past, that the master class was not privy to.

I was later exposed to other works that portray the wholeness and complexity of slave era African American culture. Flash of the Spirit by Robert Farris Thompson and Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom by Lawrence Levine, are among those. Thompson, a scholar in African Art, focused his gaze on African American textiles, sculpture, iron works and constructions for religious purposes, and identified unmistakable African based design intentions. His perceptions and findings have had such focus as to allow him to regionalize certain artistic practices by African cultural group in north America.

The strength of Levine’s work is that he has tapped the oral traditions of storytelling,
particularly heroic and animal tales, to show the rich oral literature that slaves created and passed on to later generations. Blassingame’s earlier work did not marshal such provocative evidence, but he remains for me the historian who best gave meaning to the idea of an independent black culture.

Blassingame makes other important points in the discussion of an original African American culture. He found that African’s “link with their past” was itself a form of resistance to bondage. He delineates, in terms of music, what actual instruments came into use. “Drums, guitars, flutes, piccolos, whistles and horns were the principal instruments and were played on many occasions.” To support the concept that African American practices were foreign to Europeans, Blassingame quotes one Englishman on African dance. “The body movements are extremely difficult and would probably kill a European.” Through such presentations the author shows a clear form to African American culture, and, that slave activities were not necessarily understood or appreciated.

The single most important source of documentary accounts of black music and dance in the New World is Sinful Tunes and Spirituals by Dena Epstein. This documentary colossus, written by a librarian, was over ten years in the making and was supported by grants from the National Endowment and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. The actual focus of this book is the development of the spiritual and how this vocal form was discovered and recorded by interested northern whites, some of whom were active abolitionists, in the mid to late nineteenth century. At least the first half of this 415 page book, that includes notated musical examples, is devoted to the presentation of excerpts from travel journals and diaries of black American performance as witnessed by Europeans and Americans. Epstein treats all of the African American performing arts, music, dance and song, and organizes the material chronologically by region and topic.

Epstein describes a number of impressions about the prohibition of the drum as well as its possible continuance. She in fact asks some of the same questions regarding the documentary evidence that this author has faced in the present work, and I have learned from her observations. For example, in one discussion early in the book the author concludes that such “African dancing in the backwoods would be repressed by the growing settlement of the area.” Epstein also mentions a
discrepancy in the accounts of black performance, different from but not unlike my own queries. “The apparent contradiction between the miseries of slavery and such vigorous dancing and singing created great problems in the thinking of Europeans and their American descendants.” In a similar way she addresses, in an almost frustrated tone, the problems of using disparate historical accounts.

These fragmentary accounts from the early eighteenth century tell little more than that Africans danced in a manner that was considered heathenish in South Carolina, New York, the Leeward Islands, Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina.

Epstein was not able to utilize the Slave Narrative Collection in her work but does state that “it undoubtedly includes much valuable material.”

Epstein’s opinions fall within what I have termed the revisionist view that the “mainland colonies, with the exception of Louisiana, found it possible strictly to enforce the regulations, judging from the relative absence of drums and drumming in accounts from the mainland.” I question this conclusion and have used the known occurrence of clandestine activities as well as the use of communicating signals and songs to set up a larger discussion of accounts that shows the use of the drum as a tool for communication in non-violent ways in the Georgia Sea islands. In spite of her conclusion that the regulation of drumming was “strictly” enforced Epstein contradicts her own assessment elsewhere in the text. “Yet African drumming must have continued surreptitiously in the United States, since interviews collected by the Federal Writers’ Project in the 1930’s describe it vividly.”

The present study accomplishes what historical anthologies such as Epstein’s could not. I have focused on one topic within the broad spectrum of the African-American performance arts and have drawn that idea through the eras of American history. This project has also taken on the point of view that in spite of everything, African drumming never ceased, and has turned to documentary findings to see if a case can be made for that thesis. So where documentary histories tend to be chronologies or collections of materials, I have devised a question that can be tested using this documentary evidence. The nature of my topical study has allowed me to tap a wider array of sources than other works on black culture that I am aware of. I know of no other historical study
that has utilized the resources of documentary anthologies described here. For example, Epstein in *Sinful Tunes* mentions that she did not search newspapers or magazines, while African-American Traditions in Song, Sermon, Tale, and Dance, 1600s-1920 by Eileen Southern does source a variety of these materials from early America, but does not include the types of personal accounts from Europeans and Americans that *Sinful Tunes* and *Black Dance* utilize.

What is interesting about comparing the present thesis of a Sea Island model of drum continuance that might be applied to other areas of America is that *Slave Songs of the United States* published by William Francis Allen in 1867, the foremost collection of black spirituals, has for over a hundred years been the model for all of black song, and it was based on collecting efforts from the same region of the country. If the Gullah people can be a model for song, why not for the drum!

Second to *Sinful Tunes*, the following three works to be discussed probably have been equally important to this project in providing documentary accounts. First among those is *Black Dance in the United States* from 1619 to 1970 by Lynne Emery. This book is primarily an assessment of the history and development of black dance. The amount and types of accounts presented make this book an important source. The early sections of the book are much like *Sinful Tunes* in terms of presentation but the excerpts focus more specifically on dance descriptions. Emery too speaks to the drum’s prohibition and comments on the continuance of African traditions in the face of slavery.

With the blacks, the drums and the calabash left Africa. Still the drumming sounded, but now with the metallic clank of overturned buckets and tubs on the ship decks. The drums, and those who played them, arrived in the New World, and the dances they accompanied reached the West Indies, where they continued much as they had in Africa. It was only as the drums and people reached the United States that the sound of Africa diminished. The drums were prohibited, and yet the rhythms of Africa lived on in new forms among the slaves as base feet stomped on the hard earth, hands clapped, and songs were sung.

Here Emery addresses a type of continuance of African traditions in dance, but again without the drum.
African-American Traditions in Song, Sermon, Tale, and Dance, 1600s-1920 edited by Eileen Southern is another valuable source. This bibliography of research is more far reaching in its design than any other research tool in the subject area. This work includes not only citations in the performing arts but also references in the oral traditions of sermons and tales. There are also many titles of paintings, and illustrations from books, periodicals and newspapers, which is unique among the works I have consulted.

Traditions is best described as a collection or compendium of citations relevant to African American cultural history. Each entry in the work consists of an abstract that describes the pertinent location and dates and provides a brief content summary. This format makes for a book that works in a sense like a catalog of culture. Traditions has been most valuable as a tool to locate sources, that then must be located and examined separately.

In Traditions, Eileen Southern places an emphasis on religion as the most important aspect of black American culture. She also acknowledges the central role of the drum.

At the heart of their culture were their religions, which, encompassing the song, drum, and dance along with prayer, proverbs, and ceremonies, pervaded just about every phase of their lives, from birth to the grave.

In a manner similar to what I have tried to show for the drum, Southern finds a continuance of African ways that is coincident with the slave’s adaptation to and change within their environment. She states that the writings of various observers “attest to the strength of African survivals among the slaves at a time when they were being assimilated into a new religious and social environment.”

The following is a good example of the types of source materials included in Traditions.

These early writers employed a variety of formats for their publications, most frequently the travelogue, but also diaries, journals, letters, regional and national histories, sermons, and political tracts. Additionally, runaway-slave advertisements, broadsides, and other kinds of ephemeral publications provide sources of information about black culture.

Southern also points out the special role, in terms of point of view, that African American voices have in the historical record.
The black narrator, like the white narrator, reported on religious rituals, recreational activities, and other features of plantation daily life, but seen from his perspective, these matters take on a different character.

Afro-American Folk Culture by John F. Szwed is similar in format to Southern’s Traditions. It is an earlier work than Traditions and amazingly reveals a totally different set of sources. This book could also be described as a bibliography of research and is made up of citations with abstracts and locations. The work is organized regionally and chronologically. The unique feature of this volume is the inclusion of foreign language research, most notable from Cuba is Fernando Ortiz’s Los Instrumentos de la Musica Afro-Cubana (1952). The other fact about the collection is that all of the references that I found valuable were books, as opposed to the archival papers of an individual or an obscure periodical article. For example, Shining Trumpets by Rudi Blesh (1946), which includes descriptions of New Orleans culture in the late nineteenth century, is listed in the bibliography as NA248, referring to texts for North America.

I was encouraged by Szwed’s own interest in the continuance of the African based drum in North America, as demonstrated in the following passage. Included in the references he cites are Drums and Shadows, and the early American novel Satanstoe by James Fenimore Cooper.

For those convinced that drums were completely forbidden under slavery in North America with the result that African drums and drumming were irretrievably lost there is the countertestimony of . . . From Congo Square in New Orleans to upstate New York, from backwoods Louisiana to coastal Georgia, drums have been heard and remarked upon from the 1700’s to the present. During Juneteenth celebrations — Emancipation Day — drums and drum dances are still important . . . and local oral history traces the custom to slavery times.

Overall, this bibliography is made up of “published works on Afro-American folk culture, thus excluding dissertations, manuscripts and the like.” Szwed has divided the literature of black American folk culture into four phases. Travel accounts and journal entries from the seventeenth and eighteenth century make up the first phase. A second phase begins with the writings, in the early nineteenth century, of abolitionists who concerned themselves with questions of emancipation and the Christianity of the slave. The third phase includes post slavery writings of former slaveholders, a literature of reflection on the former slave state. The fourth phase, beginning
in the nineteen thirties, analyzes black culture as deviant from the mainstream.

*Slave Testimony* by John Blassingame is a large seven hundred and forty five-page collection of narratives and interviews from published books, newspapers, and magazines, and the Slave Narrative Collection. Blassingame is the most critical historian regarding the usefulness and validity of the Slave Narrative Collection. In his introduction, the author first points out that because of the long life spans of the Collection informants, they cannot be considered typical slaves. There are other reasons for his reservations.

Taken at face value, there seems to have been a bias in many states toward including the most obsequious former slaves. This is especially true when most of the informants had spent all their lives in the same locale as their former master’s plantation. Since the least satisfied and most adventurous of the freed slaves might have migrated to northern states or to cities after the Civil War, the WPA informants may have been atypical of antebellum slaves.

Blassingame goes on to point out that “in spite of the skewed sample” the Collection “reveals much about the nature of slavery” and “contain[s] a large repository of folklore.” He mentions that in the Collection there are “probably more religious and secular songs than any other single collection” and that such works, used with published slave narratives, “will enable historians to write more revealing and accurate portrayals of slavery.”

Blassingame also speaks to the need for researchers to utilize a variety of types of evidence, and talks about interviews versus published individual slave narratives as being complementary to one another.

the interviews include the women (50 percent of the total) and “average” slaves who did not publish their stories; the narratives include the blacks from the border states missing in the interviews

He makes an additional point that in “antebellum newspapers, magazines, and books” there appeared hundreds of accounts of slaves that historians could utilize in addition to narratives and the interviews in the Collection.

In this massive text there is only one interview that mentions the use of the drum, and this was by a slave who was a drummer during the Civil War. I have not been able to account for the fact that this text has so few references to culture. There are only three references to music and
musicians and two accounts that mention communication. This is the same author who in *The Slave Community* set the tone for research into the culture of the African American. I think that it is only a matter of editorial choice and an interest in the portrayal of lifestyle and life history in *Slave Testimony* that can account for this difference.

*Music in New Orleans, The Formative Years 1791-1841* by Henry Kmen provided the insights into African American performance practices in the south that led to my suggestion that the paradigm of severe restrictions on musical performance was not necessarily the case. Kmen offers up six different accounts of the use of the drum in mostly acculturated situations. His book chronicles the interest in dance and march music among the upper classes and the common people of New Orleans during the National period of American history. In a discussion of the white society balls of New Orleans, Kmen states that:

The women might be too fatigued for fireworks, but they were willing to walk barefoot through two miles of mud to get to a dance in the days before New Orleans had sidewalks. After a footbath at the door and a change into the costumes carried by their slaves, they were ready to dance for seven hours and then to brave the mud again on the journey home.

The one account of African styled drumming addresses a different national music.

They have their own national music, consisting for the most part of a long kind of narrow drum of various sizes, from two to eight feet in length, three or four of which make a band. The principal dancers or leaders are dressed in a variety of wild and savage fashions, always ornamented with a number of the tails of the smaller wild beasts.

This account by Christian Schultz, a traveler, from his book of 1810 makes clear that the African ways were still present. An account from another traveler is among a few which describe fife and drum performances. Henry Didimus, during his stay in New Orleans, mentions being awakened by “negroes” early on a Sunday in 1835 “in full regimentals” playing Yankee Doodle on fife and drum.

This consideration of historiography relevant to the prohibition of the drum will now jump in time to our own age to present two final ideas on the drum as symbol in American culture.

*Time* magazine’s June 12th, 1995 issue included a “forum” titled “Tough Talk on Entertainment” where nine writers, artists and politicians wrote brief commentaries on Republican
Congressman Robert Dole’s attack on Hollywood and the need for self censorship. African American author John Edgar Wideman contributed to this piece. Describing the controversy over the harshness of current movies and of rap music the author remarks:

I wasn’t around when black people were barred from playing drums. But I know the objections to African drumming weren’t aesthetic; southern legislators feared the drums’ power to signal a general slave revolt. I was around when finding black music on the radio was a problem. Growing up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the only way to hear the latest rhythm-and-blues sounds after dark was searching the scratchy hyperspace for Randy’s Record Shack beaming up from Nashville, Tennessee.

Banning, ignoring, exploiting, damning black art has a long history. Protecting black freedom of expression and participation at all levels of society began just yesterday.

Wideman’s final point is that America must not fear art that challenges tradition. “The best art interrogates and explodes consensus.”

In 1990, a more than sixty-year-old ban on drums and horns was overturned for establishments defined as a “cabaret.” Paul Chevigny in his book Gigs, Jazz and the Cabaret Laws in New York City states “live music played in bars and restaurants in New York City was restricted by local regulations called collectively ‘the cabaret laws.’” The laws “not only forbade percussion as well as typical jazz front-line instruments such as horns, but it restricted the number of musicians to three . . .” “On January 28th, 1988, Justice Saxe declared the entire ‘incidental musical entertainment’ exception unconstitutional.”

It appears that the ban on drums and horns in Barbados in 1699, St. Kitts in 1711 and 1722, Jamaica in 1717, and South Carolina and Georgia following the Stono Rebellion of 1739, had, until recently, a late twentieth century equivalent. It is well known how the African American music known as jazz has always borne the brunt of a stigma of being lascivious. The cabaret law shows a connection to the morals of our country that is as old as America itself.