

**DYNAMICS OF THE MUSIC CULTURE AMONG THE  
AMERICAN BLACK SLAVES: A LESSON FOR  
INCULTURATION TODAY**

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**Abstract**

Paradoxically enough and in spite of all its negative consequences, the Trans-Atlantic slave trade seems to have gifted humanity with a particular positive legacy. This came in the form of the serendipitous cross-pollination of elements of African and Western musical cultures. The enduring results of these culture-contacts are with us today in the forms of the extant Negro Spirituals and Jazz Music; thanks to the ingenuity of those Black Slaves, then genuinely responding to their human natural urge and need for musical expression of their souls. In all these, there are certainly many lessons in acculturation as well as for practical inculturation in the Church today. Inculturation, for instance, is a natural response to a natural but religio-cultural stimuli, of the wish to contextualize, appropriate and adapt the Gospel of Christ to a given society, situation, age or culture.

**Keywords:** Acculturation, American history, black slaves, culture contact, dialectics, didactics, inculturation, Jazz, music, negro spiritual.

**Introduction**

The Trans-Atlantic slave trade remains a very dark page in the history of mankind. Its effects of deep-seated cultural dislodgement, racial discrimination, inferiority complex and abuse of fundamental human rights, etc, are clearly still with us today. However, just like war is an ill wind that blows no one no good yet challenges human ingenuity, and at

least at its end, affords people chances to start anew;<sup>1</sup> that trade ill-fated though it was, still gave the world nonetheless a few things to eternally appreciate.

Make no mistake about it; we are hereby neither talking about the unfortunate financial gains of those greedy stakeholders in this trade on both sides of the Atlantic. Nor are we referring to the structural developments and advancements in the West that resulted from the toils and labours of those exploited slaves. We are rather concentrating on a few seemingly good *legacies*; especially certain phenomena that sometimes notwithstanding the variation in times and climes, and while stubbornly building upon the steadfastness of human nature as well as simultaneously on the dynamism of culture, turned the ill-fate of the cultural dislodgement experienced by those suffering African slaves into some fruitful and enduring experiences and even discoveries, by virtue of acculturation.

In this vein, and very similar to the thematic plot of Dennis Vincent Brutus' poem, *The Sun on this Rubble*, this essay dares to *celebrate* the musical serendipities that metamorphosed into the twin historical developments known today as Negro Spirituals and Jazz music. In this poem, the poet comes across the uncomely heap of the remains of a destroyed African hut, made with walls of red mud. The sun had just risen and it was just after a heavy rainfall. Lo and behold, there in the midst of this muddy heap of wrecks was a tiny corn of sand which, having been washed by the rain, defiantly and brightly reflected the light from the sun. For Brutus, it was a symbol of pure optimism and not a utopia to see in that *Sun on this Rubble*, portent hope for the future. In fact, it could be said to be akin to the symbolism of those Ezekielian proverbial dry bones in the scriptures that shall definitely rise again.

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<sup>1</sup> Ukeh, C. O., "Lessons in Resilience! Challenges to Ingenuity!! – Reminiscences of a Biafran Toddler Half a Century After" in *Oche-Amamihe – Wisdom Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, Vol. 15, 2020, *Biafra-Nigeria War. 50 Years After*, (156-161) 156.

It is partially in similar lines of thought that we hereby try to carry out some possible lessons from the cultural dynamics and dialectics involved in the historical development of both music genres – Negro Spirituals and Jazz; lessons that may be technically useful and encouraging for certain processes of the inculturation of the Gospel of Christ in a society. The point is that just as acculturation is a natural result of an encounter between the elements of two different cultures, inculturation is also the religious equivalent to acculturation. As a matter of fact, it is a natural consequence of any genuine encounter between Christianity and a given culture. On this background, therefore, we want to see jazz music but more especially the Negro spirituals as human cultural but natural responses that defied even the inhumanity of slavery, in order to defiantly manifest or come into existence. Call it euphemism or even utopia; the enduring truth is that we cannot deny that both musical genres have enriched human music culture and history, just like (or even more than most) any other genre of music may claim to have also done. Their emergence in the history of mankind's music culture is consequent on the dynamic dialectical nature of firsthand encounters between cultures or related elements of different cultures.

## **1. The Dialectic Dynamics within Culture-Contact**

On one hand, never in human history have culture and cultural identity mattered a lot than as they do in the present world. As Huntington puts it, "In the post-Cold War world flags count and so do other symbols of cultural identity, including crosses, crescents, and even head coverings, because culture counts, and cultural identity is what is most meaningful to most people."<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, advancements in science and technology today have also made communications between individuals

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<sup>2</sup> Huntington, S.P., *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon & Schuster, UK, 1997, p. 20

and societies faster, easier and more possible. However, surprisingly enough, this increase in communication has not necessarily unified the world nor has it created a one-world culture. It has rather made people as much aware of their peculiar identities, even as they are mutually becoming more aware of each other's distinct identities too. Thus, one reads, "For it's our paradoxical situation that, at a moment when the world is becoming so obviously interdependent, every nation in it is seeking to assert its own independence. And religion and culture are the means by which independence is asserted."<sup>3</sup> The result *inter alia* is that people have also increasingly become even more aware of the things that differentiate them from others: as races, nations, societies and cultures. Yet people – both as individuals as well as on the societal level – are constantly and largely in contact today more than heretofore. In all this, however, that dynamism that founds, animates and characterizes the socio-anthropological process called culture-contact stubbornly remains and still generally influences people. This dynamism – which is actually innate to culture and all its elements – is a major hub around which this essay really revolves.

Furthermore, it is also pertinent to underscore the fact that from nature, human beings are generally related as well as relate to one another. Here, it is not only a question of blood relationships. Human life itself is lived out in, as well as through a concatenation of interactivity and relationships. This could be in the forms of friendships, business partnerships, marital relationships, to mention but a few. Summarily put, the human being is *ens socialis* – a social being. In other words, he or she is by nature never a loner or lone-ranger. He or she instinctively socializes and is always naturally trying to contact and stay in contact with the other. It is, therefore, almost unimaginable for a human being to willfully live and remain completely or permanently in isolation or

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<sup>3</sup> Warren, M. A. C., "Foreword" in John V. Taylor, *Christian Presence amid African Religion*, Acton Publishers, Nairobi, 2001, p. vii.

*incomunicado*. This fact holds true not only between individuals but also between societies and cultures. In other words, human societies and cultures also interact and socialize with one another. This could be in terms of exchanges in areas like commerce, marriage, politics etc – whereby they usually influence and learn from each other. Such influences could be positive and beneficial or even negative and impoverishing, either mutually or unilaterally. Such an encounter between two or more cultures is technically described in social anthropology as culture-contact.

At this point, it is also necessary to clarify that *Dialectics* is a system of reasoning about reality, which although natural to the human being, is said to have been systematically identified and articulated by G.W.F Hegel. It is a thought-system that seems to partially build on, while simultaneously transcending, dualism.<sup>4</sup> It does this by positing that in reality, there is always a *thesis*, which in-turn necessarily implies or demands the existence of its counterpart, or even opposite called an *antithesis*. But the actual novelty in dialectical thinking – at which point it transcends dualism – is that both thesis and antithesis always necessarily go into a dialogue-encounter, thereby fusing – either partially or entirely – into a new reality or category technically called the *synthesis*. Furthermore, this new category (synthesis) automatically becomes a new thesis, which then necessarily implies and demands another antithesis, with which it again engages itself in order to produce yet another synthesis. This process tends to repeatedly continue out of compulsion *ad infinitum* – thesis-antithesis-synthesis, again and again and again.... An attempt to define Hegelian dialectics in everyday language sees it as "an interpretative method in which the contradiction

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<sup>4</sup> Dualism, simply put, means that reality is necessarily in doublets: good and evil, up and down, black and white, strong and weak, etc. There are actually no grey zones. It is either this or that. Period.

between a proposition (thesis) and its antithesis is resolved at a higher level of truth (synthesis)."<sup>5</sup>

When thus applied to the socio-anthropological phenomenon of culturecontact, dialectics would also simply appeal to that dynamism characteristically native to culture itself. In a transferred sense, therefore, a culture or an element of a culture would then be a thesis, which necessarily encounters another culture or its element as an antithesis. The neo-culture or neo-cultural element consequent upon this meeting or culture-contact then becomes the synthesis. The corroborative point here is that this new culture or cultural element already necessarily assumes the identity and abilities of a new thesis. Out of compulsion of that natural dynamism in culture and its elements, the dialectics of culture-contact is quite unstoppable, as long as human beings, cultures and societies exist and interact with one another. It is within this dynamic dialectic of culture-contact that acculturation is actually born.

In a transferred sense, therefore, this essay understandably tries *inter alia* to look at the socio-anthropological phenomenon of acculturation and in the same vein the theological phenomenon of inculturation, through these same dynamic and dialectic optics of culture-contact. In other words, the theses and antitheses hereby would be respectively African music culture of the slaves and the Western musical instrumentculture of their masters; the syntheses would then be the neo-cultural elements that we now respectively know as Jazz music and Negro Spirituals. A major part of the mainstay of this whole contention then is that, although it is better that such cultural encounters be consciously initiated and directed, more often than not all these do normally happen in response to a sort of humanly natural stimuli.

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<sup>5</sup> [www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com) Collins English Dictionary – Complete and Unabridged, 2012 Digital Edition, William Collins Sons and Co. Ltd. Accessed 3.00pm Monday, 25.04.2022

## 2. Inculturation: A Natural Phenomenon and Process

Before we move on, there is the need to re-emphasize that this essay is also partially examining the fine intricacies of the afore-mentioned dialectical thought-ways in order to *inter alia* appreciate the Christian phenomenon theologically known as the inculturation of the Gospel. In doing this, it intends to thereby emphasize that although inculturation as a concept may be a neologism; it is however, a necessarily human and natural reality, which has always been there and operative – noticed or unnoticed. Inculturation is a natural phenomenon. It is not just a religious phenomenon but primarily and ineluctably a natural process. In other words, it occurs and stands – with or without human conscious intervention. However, considering its importance for a genuine appreciation of the Christian Gospel in any human society or culture, such an intervention should better be conscious and planned. To further explain this, let us now formally provide at least a working definition of it.

We would like to approach this, here, by firstly introducing the content of inculturation. In the words of Magesa, it consists of the answers to the questions, "How has the Christian faith been received and concretely lived by a given cultural entity? How have cultural groups appropriated and perceived it in relation to their own spirituality and practical expectations?"<sup>6</sup> In other words, it never pretends that the said cultural entity was religiously a *tabula rasa* or totally empty of religiosity beforehand. Furthermore, it is clearly a practical and therefore understandably contextual endeavour, which is as contextual as its major object – culture is. Our author had interviewed some African Catholic Church officials, who mostly agreed, "that, for Catholic

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<sup>6</sup> Magesa, L., *Anatomy of Inculturation (Transforming the Church in Africa)*, Nairobi, Paulines Publications Africa, 2004, p. 20

Christianity in Africa, inculturation implies integrating Christian doctrines with 'useful' African traditional cultural values and a modern way of life."<sup>7</sup> It is thus very interesting to note that inculturation is not concerned just with the question of the static cultural values of a society only but also with the dynamic issue of considering the fluid exigencies necessitated modernity, for instance, in that same society too; all with particular reference to how it socially, doctrinally appropriates as well as practically appreciates Christianity. Bevans clearly thinks as much:

If theology is really to be in context, therefore, it cannot simply deal with a culture that no longer really exists.... Sean Dwan cites a report by a Korean nun who was trying to make a Christmas crib relevant to the Korean context.... She designed a crib with Mary, Joseph, and the child in a traditional thatched Korean hut. But this seemed too comfortable, too romantic, too irrelevant to contemporary Korean life. The final design was a small cardboard shack against the background of tall hotels, apartment complexes and office buildings, complete with signs advertising cabarets, health clubs and bars. This scene was much more faithful to the contemporary Korean context, while being faithful as well to the original scene described in the gospels. Romanticism was avoided, and the real Korean culture was depicted.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, we would also underscore that it is not only a theoretical question of doctrines but also very importantly of the practical issue of faith-praxes. As a theological discipline, Inculturation is simply a scientific study of a Christian lived reality. In other words, the term

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<sup>7</sup> Magesa, L., *Anatomy of Inculturation (Transforming the Church in Africa)*, p. 23

<sup>8</sup> Bevans S. B., *Models of Contextual Theology (Revised and Expanded Edition)*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll New York, 2002, p. 25



inculturation simultaneously refers to a lived reality as well as a theology – that is, the study of this said lived reality. However, this essay concentrates more on it as a lived socio-religious experience of cultural elements of a given society's first-hand encounters with Christianity, its doctrines and faith-praxes. Put in a nut-shell, therefore, inculturation is herein understood as a natural response to a natural but religio-cultural stimuli, of the wish to contextualize, appropriate, adopt and adapt the Gospel of Christ to a given society, situation, age or culture. In this particular case, however, the socio-religious cultural experience in discourse is the musical one.

### **3. Music – Element and Purveyor of Culture**

Music is also a natural phenomenon. It is so much part of nature that not only human beings but also some animals appreciate or even make music. It is not just that a bear can learn to dance for instance, but that most birds also have the natural ability and urge to make music, at least by singing. Moreover, once a baby learns to sit properly and steadily, one of the next natural acts that it almost involuntarily carries out is to make music by beating anything it can lay its hands on; most often in a cacophony and yet sometimes with some observable level of rhythm. It even learns to sway its tiny supple body to the nursery rhymes and rhythm of the mother. In other words, it dances too. This last point becomes clearer, immediately it learns to stand up with some measurable balance and stability. Even the incoherent babblings of a child before ever it learns to speak properly, do sometimes have observable musical properties – timing, rhythm, key etc. Furthermore, not only does even a mentally deranged human being naturally respond to music; it is also axiomatic that music and music-making have very seriously therapeutic effects on such people in particular, and human beings in general. Music, the ability and propensity to make or appreciate it, are therefore natural human acts. These acts may thus also be used *inter alia* to confirm the humanity of a being.

Music is not only natural to the human being; it is a major phenomenon of human culture. Thus, in the history of human development, we are told that the attainment of *homo erectus* – erect standing man, simultaneously resulted in the attainment of *homo faber* – working man. By implication therefore, most – if not all – human activities experienced the effects of this very same developmental quantum leap. Thus, this leap was also evident in the development of the various branches of human culture: farming and feeding, singing and speaking, hunting and fighting, building and dressing, etc. Consequently, the human being as *homo faber* also developed technologies. The fabrication and use of tools, implements and instruments – including musical instruments, became part of human life. Understandably, therefore, most musical instruments are also culturally relative and often differ at least in their forms, origins and use, from society to society and from one cultural area to another. In other words, though most musical instruments are today globally known and in use, they variously originated from different cultures or continents. Thus, while the piano, trombone and guitar are Western, for instance, drums and gongs are African and Asian in origin, etc. Musical instruments also define and differentiate one type of music from the other. However, it is not just musical instruments that are culturally conditioned and determined, but music itself is both a sociological institution and cultural phenomenon. Thus, its various forms, genres or types are culturally determined, conditioned and definable.

Evidently, then, just like language and modes of dressing; music is a very prominent category in the cultural identity of any society. Little wonder then that David Crystal would then speak of "the value of languages as expressions of identity; as repositories of history; as part of human knowledge...."<sup>9</sup> Thus, whether at the continental level or the national, at the ethno-tribal level or even the clan level, at the city/town

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<sup>9</sup> D. Crystal, *Language Death*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000

level or even the village level, music has always remained an effective societal identity-marker. Of course, one may also talk about ancient or traditional music; and that also clarifies the fact that music also culturally defines or distinguishes civilizations, ages or generations from one another. Therefore, one may also be able to differentiate between ages and stages of human civilization, with music as a basic barometer. To this effect, one would even differentiate between classical or conventional, mediaeval and modern, primitive and civilized music, etc.

As an element of culture, music can, thus, not only be used to identify and differentiate cultures, it is also a very strong human *language* with an immeasurably universal appeal. As such, it is a very efficient purveyor of culture. With its lyrics and wordings, music is a good repository of not only knowledge but also history. It is not only a strong, secure and very reliable medium of preserving certain cultural elements; it is also a veritable vehicle of transmitting these same elements from one generation to the next. In fact, it is a very easy and effective medium of introducing such elements to new members of the society by virtue of enculturation or socialization. It also facilitates the transmission of such elements from one society or culture to another by virtue of acculturation. Like sports, music is another strong universal language that the world, almost without exception, generally and easily understands, speaks and appreciates. It is thus a unifier that easily bonds human beings; differences of race, colour and levels of civility notwithstanding. Thus, music is almost always a very powerful player within most experiences of culture-contact. In summary, therefore, as a human cultural element, music is a universal language, a natural element of culture. Most importantly, it is ineluctably an effective purveyor of culture and consequently often a very essential instrument and player in most culture-contacts.

It is on such given backgrounds as these that we now consider the historical emergences of Negro Spirituals and Jazz music as cultural

elements, within the culture-contacts that the unfortunate trans-Atlantic slave trade occasioned.

#### **4. Jazz Music: An Acculturative Discovery**

Acculturation has been defined as, "any direct or indirect transmission of an element of culture from one ... to another. (It) should not be looked upon as a specific process; it is rather a special contact situation involving a whole gamut of dynamic processes."<sup>10</sup> We would only add that it actually results from first-hand continuous contacts between persons or groups of persons of at least two different cultures that often subsequently lead to changes in the original cultural patterns of either one or both groups.<sup>11</sup> Thus, it is a matter of changes and exchanges within and between cultures respectively, as a result of first-hand contact between them. As a matter of fact, such changes and exchanges do not always necessarily occur to an entire culture. More often than not, it selectively affects only those elements within the culture that are directly involved in the particular encounter or culture-contact. Once more, it is therefore on such given backgrounds that we now consider the emergence of jazz music as a cultural element in human history.

Of course, jazz music is of different brands. Though there are forms of jazz music with words or lyrics, originally jazz music must have been mostly instrumental and wordless. Thus, in most jazz music, the sound of the saxophone and trumpet especially, or even any other jazz instruments may take up and replace the singing human voice or lyrics. Perhaps, the reason for this is not farfetched. Chinua Achebe partially gives a clue to the unravelling of this puzzle. He rhetorically queries,

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<sup>10</sup> P. Mariatma, "Inculturation and Socio-cultural Change: The Case of Indonesia" in: Joachim G. Piepke (ed.) *Anthropology & Mission*, Nettetal, 1988, (82-98) 82

<sup>11</sup> E. E. Uzukwu, "Preface" in: E. E. Uzukwu (ed.), *Religion & African Culture, 1. Inculturation – A Nigerian Perspective*, 1988, p. 5

"...did not the black people in America, deprived of their own musical instruments, take the trumpet and the trombone and blow them as they were not designed to be blown? And the result; was it not jazz?"<sup>12</sup> The somewhat hidden but noteworthy point, here, is that these Africans were deprived of not only their own African musical instruments but also of their African native languages, which their masters did not allow them to speak. Moreso, the slaves were often drawn from different tribes and with different languages too. Though they might not have been able to communicate in a single common native African language, they must have soon discovered an affinity in their common African music heritage and culture. Thus, though they had lost their ancestral languages, they could still – even if unconsciously but naturally – pour out their African musical souls and spirits on and into those non-African (but however still, human) musical instruments. The naturally first results were wordless, instrumental jazz music. Thus, I dare to opine that worded jazz music was a later development. Of course, this remains a hypothesis and thus, still debatable.

All the same, the point to note here is that those African slaves might have been forcefully torn away and thus actually separated against their wills from their African homelands by those slave-drivers. But then their Africanness and native culture naturally innate in them, were still slumbering deep within their souls; waiting to be awakened as at and when due, by the requisite social or natural stimuli. The musical instinct was such a natural and cultural stimulus that needed only their encountering of those discarded musical instruments of their masters, most probably on moonlit nights after the year's harvest, to be awakened in the African slaves. As those discarded Western cultural musical instruments encountered the inborn African cultural musicality of those slaves, the natural result was what later became known as jazz music. It was a simple and natural appropriation of western musical

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<sup>12</sup> C. Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day (Essays)*, Ibadan, 1977, p.17

instruments by natural African musical ingenuity. It was pure acculturation! Even if one were to object that it was all serendipitous, the fact remains all the more so true, that it was all an issue of a natural consequence of a natural sequence.

## 5. Negro Spirituals: An Exercise in Inculturation

As a genre, Negro Spirituals are actually the precursor of most other American musical genres of today: Blues, Jazz, Rock n Roll, Rap, Gospel etc. Treating it at this point in this essay is therefore not a matter of historical sequence. It is rather in respect of our presumed thematic logic of that hypothetical progression from acculturation to inculturation, with respect to the *differential* relationships between these two cultural anthropological realities. Blues music for instance, developed from the slave work-songs in the fields.

Elsewhere, while once more identifying inculturation as the Christian equivalent to the socio-anthropological phenomenon called acculturation, we have dared to summarily define it *inter alia* as "...that factual adaptative appreciation of a foreign element to a culture or a people, which results freely and naturally at a culture-contact."<sup>13</sup> Expressed in an everyday language, inculturation is always circumstantial. In other words, it is outrightly and naturally contextual. It appeals to the naturally human categories or aspects in a particular culture. As it does so, it contemporaneously and invitingly beckons on them to engage themselves in usefully encountering Christianity, within some dialogues that are hopefully, mutually beneficial or at least benefits the culture or its society. Just as already fleetingly indicated, being contextual also implies that inculturation theology approaches culture not as a fossilized romanticism of values in the past but as a

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<sup>13</sup> C. O. Ukeh, *Spirit – Between Man & God (An Igbo-African Christian Appreciation)*, IKOVerlag, Frankfurt, 2007, p.87

present and living institution; modern for instance, yet without forgetting its firm roots or identity and links within the past.

The natural human category here in question is music as a cultural element that hereby encounters the Gospel of Christ in the particular given circumstances of exploitation of the African slaves. The result was the then neo-religio-cultural musical element that has now become known as Negro Spirituals. The spirit and mien of these songs were definitely African. The lyrics and language of their expression were definitely English but not necessarily the normal English language. It was generally rather 'corrupt' English, as could only result from the slaves' non-formal learning of the Masters' language by speaking it the best way they only could. It was generally phonetic English. Funny though this may sound, one could imagine that the slaves must have had to teach their masters this 'new' brand of English, if these were ever to really appreciate the Negro Spirituals.

Without fear of equivocation, one can easily say that the popular hearty and often soulful Negro Spirituals enjoy a similar history of development with jazz music. Both of them indubitably manifest and witness to typically African spiritual responses in the peculiarly given circumstances of enslavement and exploitation of those slaves, as they toiled under the heavy yokes of the sugar-cane plantations of the West Indies for instance. But these songs are not just religious manifestations and factual expressions of hope and faith in Divine Providence and salvation. Most importantly for this essay, they eventually turned out to be expressions of faith in the liberating Judeo-Christian God in particular, which had forcefully replaced and obliterated their native African images of Divinity. Understandably, therefore, it has been noted that,

...the lyrics of Negro spirituals were tightly linked with the lives of their authors: slaves. While work songs dealt only

with their daily life, spirituals were inspired by the message of Jesus Christ and his Good News (Gospel) of the Bible, 'You can be saved'. They are different from hymns and psalms, because they were a way of sharing the hard condition of being a slave.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, the Negro Spirituals are an embodiment of inculturation of the Christian Gospel message; an expression of human natural religiosity in the given peculiar circumstances of those oppressed slaves.

Africans generally have music that celebrate almost every type of human phenomenon or activity: birth, joy, sickness, death, sorrow, nature, war, peace, hope, trade, festivals, hunting, labour, games, protests, etc. Thus, while helplessly toiling and flailing under the heavy yokes of exploitation and enslavement, those heavily oppressed African souls found refuge in crying up to their Creator. Typically African, with time and practice, these cries for deliverance became musicalized with the rhythm of harmoniously swung matchets, spades, pickaxes, etc. The results were the so-called work songs. This was nothing short of acculturation. But these same feelings were also transferred into the plane of worship – the so-called Camp Meetings in tents. These were the only social gatherings that the slaves were allowed by their masters. They normally took place after normal Sunday services, as the slaves were allowed to stay back and worship God in their own African art and cultural hues. Sometimes, such gatherings of worship were done in the bushes in secret, with wandering preachers. These religious musical escapades resulted in what we today call the Negro Spirituals. It bears repeating, however, to underscore that these worship songs are African in tone, typology and nature, African in spirit but somewhat Western in language and expression – an unusual mixture and cross-pollination.

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<sup>14</sup> Culled from [www.negrospirituals.com/history.htm](http://www.negrospirituals.com/history.htm) Accessed on 14.08.2023 by 12.50pm



While the language was understandably phonetic English, rhythmic clapping of hands and beating of thighs improvised the instrumentation.

The Christian liberative undertone of these songs becomes more evident in the fact that the Negro Spirituals later proved to be the precursors of what are known today as Gospel Songs. It is also evident in most of their lyrics. For,

Many slaves in town and in plantations tried to run to a 'free country', that they called 'my home' or 'Sweet Canaan, the Promised Land'. This country was on the Northern side of Ohio River, that they called 'Jordan'. Some negro spirituals refer to the Underground Railroad, an organization for helping slaves to run away.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, one easily notices how vocabularies and expressions of hope and liberation were smartly borrowed from the Christian Message, *codedly* woven into and then celebrated in these Negro Spirituals. These same feelings are also to be found in most other Negro Spirituals like *Great Day*, *Mary had a Baby*, etc.

The historical importance of Negro Spirituals is further underscored by the fact that the first scholarly work ever to document the music culture of America was the collection of 136 Negro Spirituals with music and lyrics. This book first appeared in the year 1867 with the title *Slave Songs of the United States*. Published by A. Simpson & Co., it was compiled by three Slave Abolitionists: William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware and Lucy Mckim Garrison. While the two men were Howard graduates, the lady was the only musician among them. She was a multi-instrumentalist.

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<sup>15</sup> Culled from [www.negrospirituals.com/history.htm](http://www.negrospirituals.com/history.htm) Accessed on 14.08.2023 by 12.50pm

## Conclusion

To begin this conclusion, we can ask ourselves, wherein lie the didactics for practical inculturation of the dynamic dialectics in any process of culture-contact as evidenced in the events leading up to the emergence of the musical genres of Negro Spirituals and Jazz in human history? To begin to answer this question, we can as well comfortably query with Chinua Achebe with particular reference with the historical emergence of Jazz, "Is any one going to say that this was a loss to the world or that those first Negro slaves who began to play around with the discarded instruments of their masters should have played waltzes and foxtrots and more Salvation Army hymn tunes?"<sup>16</sup>

Of course, the slaves' natural but African sense of music, when unleashed on those Western instruments discarded by their masters, produced jazz music. This is nothing short of acculturation. We can as well very comfortably attempt to answer and conclude with Achebe thus, "Let every people bring their gifts to the great festival of the world's cultural harvest and mankind will be all the richer for the variety and distinctiveness of the offerings."<sup>17</sup> The toiling African American slaves simply responded to that innate dynamism of cultural adaptive ingenuity native to all humans. In the process, they compulsively gave vent to those deep ruminations of their souls' longings for freedom, in lyrics and rhythms. This was how the Negro Spirituals were born. This, then, was also nothing short of inculturation; whereby it becomes an instance of African music culture encountering the Christian doctrine of Divine Providence, for instance. Even here, Achebe's questioning stance still stands relevant. That act of inculturation known today as Negro Spirituals surely enriched

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<sup>16</sup> Achebe, C. *Morning Yet On Creation Day (Essays)*, Ibadan, 1977, p.17

<sup>17</sup> Achebe, C. *Morning Yet On Creation Day (Essays)*, Ibadan, 1977, p.17

Christianity as well as serviced the religious longing and refuge unto Divine Providence, for their composers and users then.

Of course, we cannot deny the fact that the discoveries of jazz music or the Negro Spirituals seem to have occurred out of sheer serendipity. But then, while most inculturation may occur likewise, we still maintain that inculturation is too serious a value to be simply left to the vagaries of chance. It should rather result from conscious efforts and studies or, at least, be subjected to these. It should result as well from conscious attempts to appreciate Christianity from the various given circumstances or cultural backgrounds of each given society that encounters it, its faith-praxes and doctrines. Yet these facts do not detract anything from the validity of the fact that inculturation remains also a natural process and fact; that would still occur even when it is not intentionally undertaken.

Finally, it really bears repetition to still underscore the fact that culture remains, of course, the object-matter of inculturation. But it is a living culture as it is in the present, while though not neglecting the kinship with its past. It is not a fossilized culture, but a culture that is alive. Therein lie the implications both of its contextuality and the consequent characteristic dynamism. Thus, we note that today there may not be any more newly composed Negro Spirituals understandably because the Trans-Atlantic slave trade has stopped. Yet these soulful renditions are still in use. However, various elements of Negro Spirituals have been incorporated into and survive today in Blues, Jazz, Rap and even Rockn-Roll music. However, jazz music is still current and developing daily.

