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**Water as Death and Life: Traces of the Atlantic Slave Trade in New World Funerary and Baptismal Rites**

In November of 1997, National Public Radio’s All Things Considered aired a series entitled “The End of Life: Exploring Death in America.” One of their interviews was with Helen Payne, an elderly African-American woman from Virginia suffering from terminal cancer. The interviewer accompanies Ms. Payne to her Sunday church service at the Second Shiloh Primitive Baptist Church, which interestingly began with an immersion baptism in Bull Run Creek, near the site of the famous Civil War Battle. Dressed in her best clothes, Helen Payne watched as the men and women were brought underneath the surface of the water, and raised up as members of the Baptist faith. The interviewer elaborates that only adult members wholly committed to their faith are baptized and welcomed into this specific church. In the background, the choir sings, “Take me to the water/to be baptized/Oh lead me to the water/to be baptized/I have been to the water/I have been to the water/and been baptized.” In this church, Helen Payne was baptized, accepted into the social community centered on the church itself, and a week after this scene, she was buried there as well, succumbing to complications due to leukemia. Helen was assured, in that moment, of her place in heaven. Why, in a discussion of death in America, would a discussion of a baptism be so prominent? The interviewer states, “The rebirth of baptism, to go into a water a sinner and be raised up
cleansed, was part of Helen Payne’s faith...[she] expected to be taken up by the Lord...and her faith continued to be the lens through which she saw her own death.”

The cultural practices of birth and death are part of the basic fabric of a society. There is no discussion of death and the afterlife without a complementary discussion of life and birth, both physical and spiritual. These ideas are intrinsically linked, and no doubt the system of slavery, in all its violence and suffering, increases the importance of these links. The difficulties in connecting the different legacies of slavery in the Americas because of disparate ethnic groups coming from Africa, disparate physical experiences of slavery, and disparate geographical regions, have plagued historians of the slave trade. But in studying the funerary and baptismal practices of slaves and their descendents, certain patterns of similar practices begin to emerge. This is particularly evident in the use of water as a dual conductor of death and life, particularly in the Christian faith as adopted by enslaved Africans in the Americas and their progeny. Apart from syncretized religions such as Haitian Vodou or Candomblé, which also have a particular sacred relationship with water, many African-Americans have retained a spiritual affinity to water, yet attached them to Christian practices. They have clung to the idea of water as a conduit of death and life, and water plays a distinct role in the baptismal and funerary practices that have created order within disorder for centuries. It has become entrenched in that uplifting and sacred category, the Negro spiritual, in conversations about the death and the afterlife, and in the salient practice of immersion baptism.

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In his examination of death in Jamaican slave society, historian Vincent Brown postulates:

“Especially in the midst of crisis, flux, and chaos, people ‘anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service,’ in order to navigate through a turbulent present. In such periods, the dead are used less as an anchor than as a rudder, offering the weight of precedent not merely to sustain a ‘cult of continuity,’ as some would have it, but to animate a politics of regeneration for a fluid world.”

These “politics of regeneration” constitute the core idea of why African-American funerary and baptismal rites arose in the way they did over the course of the nineteenth century, and then remained throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Even without physical documentation, there was no way for the Middle Passage to completely erase any sense of personhood or connection with the African past. In times of trauma, Brown’s idea of the past (as the dead) as a rudder, rather than an anchor, is more believable than the complete rejection or obliteration of the past in order to grapple with new and traumatizing circumstances. To extend the metaphor, the rudder may be attached to a different boat, but it is still the rudder of the past that guides the actions of the future. When Africans encountered Europeans in Africa, they ascribed these white strangers into their own cosmology. One instance of particular interest was the documentation of the return of four “Kongolese hostages” forcibly taken to Europe. Upon their return, the people of the Kongo, “welcomed the four ‘as though they had seen them resuscitated

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from under the earth.’”

They had been taken across the sea and had somehow returned, a feat which made them reborn. This imagery and ideology, despite the great injustice and human catastrophe of the Middle Passage, and the enslavement of human beings in the Americas, managed to somehow be preserved for generations – though reconceived in different ways.

Upon arrival in the New World, slaves were immediately presented with the challenge of both finding a way to return home, and trying to re-establish themselves in these new, unfamiliar, and threatening surroundings. Gomez calls attention to the sense of loss that plagued a person with no homeland. Without a home, it would be impossible to find a place to rest, to cross over in peace. Gomez writes, “[t]he repose of the soul was also a time of bitter reflection for the descendant of the African-born. At least the latter belonged to some portion of the earth. The country-born could claim no such space…in such moments, the Christian call to heaven would have been of great appeal, an answer to the conundrum, a way out of no way.”

This concept of placelessness would plague African-American communities until they found some way to overcome it, and an acceptance of Christianity, unwilling or willing, was one way in which to do so.

Slaves who had died would not be sent alone to cross over, but instead with the company of friends, family, and slaves from other plantations. Funerals, as well as baptisms, were always held on Sundays – a trend that remains to this day, as Sunday was usually the only day slaves were granted their own personal time. Even if that day was

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the only time a plantation slave had to farm their own crops, rest, and worship at their leisure, to know that they often walked miles to attend the funeral of a complete stranger gives a sense of the immense need for community, and the lengths slaves would go in order to create such a community. In the WPA slave narratives, Elisha Doc Carey reminisces, “I hates to even think ‘bout funerals now, old as I is. ‘Course I’se ready to go, but I’se a thinkin’ ‘bout dem what ain’t. Funerals dem days was pretty much lak dey is now. Evvybody in de country would be dar.”

Both death and life act as a unifying force for a society, especially one afflicted with great trauma or suffering. The duality, rather than the dichotomy, of life and death, and the similar nature of water, is an important way of understanding how African slaves ordered their spiritual world in a Christian context. Those who embraced Christianity did not necessarily forget the threads of their African past, whether this remembrance was deliberate or unconscious. The distinct separations between life and death, good and bad, in the European tradition, is not applicable in the African tradition (and, one can argue even if it has been forgotten, the African-American one).

Water baptism has been a Christian rite since the foundations of Christianity itself. This is not what makes it salient in the context of slavery. That African-born, and then their country born descendents, latched onto the practice of water baptisms, is of particular significance. Gomez argues that water baptism served a dual purpose for the slave community: that it Christianized the African-born community, and strengthened the

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bond between those in bondage. Gomez references Wayne Shirley’s article “The Coming of ‘Deep River;” in his analysis of African-American slaves and their affinity for water baptisms. Both he and Shirley acknowledge, “[i]n particular, the Bakongo association of water with the ancestral realm is not unlike the Christian imagery involving the Jordan River, the crossing of which represented death and the hereafter.” He goes on to reference an argument that the cross was not newly recognized as a Christian symbol but a Bakongo one that “represented ‘a bridge that mystically put the dead and the living in perpetual communication.’”7 If anything, African-born and American-born slaves and their descendents were constantly trying to do exactly that: communicate and connect with the past, because of the fragility of those connections.

Helen Payne brought NPR to her church to observe how she conceptualized death and life, and they witnessed an immersion baptism. There is a parallel to this moment, of an encounter between white and black America , in the historical record: namely, in the WPA slave narratives. Elisha Doc Garey, the aforementioned ex-slave from Georgia, recalled almost the exact same image described in Helen Payne’s interview seventy-five years later. His recollection was collected at almost a similar interval of time after the end of slavery.

“Warn’t no pools in de churches to baptize folks in den, so dey tuk ‘em down to de crick. Fust a deacon went in and measured de water wid a stick to find a safe and sutable place – den dey was ready for de preacher and de canidates. Evvybody else stood on de banks de crick and jined in de singin’.” 8

7 Gomez, pp. 273.
Even the song sung during the baptism, “Lead Me to the Water for to be Baptized,” had not been replaced or forgotten after one hundred and fifty years. Though Helen Payne did not make the specific connection to slavery during her interview, either because she did not know or found it inherent to the story, through this comparison the enduring legacy of slavery is apparent. Slaves chose which songs they wished to be sung during their baptisms and the specific rituals they chose to follow, and generations of their descendents have not tampered with the way their ancestors sought to define their own spiritual spaces.

In the evolution of African-American culture in the United States, there have been processes at work to both remember and forget the legacy of slavery. The African-American spiritual, however, is an enduring form of recognition. Another ex-slave’s interview, also mined from the WPA slave narratives, described a litany of other songs sung during baptisms: “On Jordan’s Stormy Banks I Stand,” “Roll, Jordan, Roll,” and “Where the Livin’ Waters Flow.” Newbell N. Puckett, in his article “Religious Folk-Beliefs of Whites and Negroes,” draws a connection between the frequent references to the River Jordan in many of the spirituals and sermons. One of his ‘informants,’ affirms that “‘[de] ole Ship uv Zion, hit a flat ship wid no smoke-stack. I see’d hit chock full uv shiny anguls an’ de talles’ anguls wuz Eve an’ Adam. Hit floats on de Ribbuh uv Jurden, an’ Christ is de ferryman w’ut carries you ‘cross.’” Many historians, Gomez and Lawrence-McIntyre included, have established the parallel between crossing the river Jordan as returning home to Africa, and the Promised Land as the free North, or Canada.

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One of these African-American spirituals, “Deep River,” is a particularly potent and haunting integration of Christian imagery with the African past. It is not, however, mentioned in the WPA slave narratives, or any other anthology of African-American music until the twentieth century, except for in the 1872 publication of *The Story of the [Fisk] Jubilee Singers: With Their Songs*, by J.B.T. Marsh. The main part of the song goes, “Deep River/My home is over Jordan/Deep River, Lord/I want to cross over into campground/Oh, don’t you want to go,/To the gospel feast/That promised land,/Where all, is peace.”

It is the lyrics of ‘Deep River,’ the haunting melody and sad, slow delivery, that render it so emotive, and a powerful way to reconnect with the past and those who had gone before. Gomez postulates that when slaves mourned, “they surely reflected not only upon their individual plights but also upon the circumstances visited upon them collectively…they mourned the waste and destruction of potential and creativity…[they] do not bemoan death. Rather, [they] grieve that the African experience in America is preemptive of life.”

‘Deep River’ has continued to be sung, not only by Black churches, but also by others in the Christian community, regardless of skin color. In some ways, the understanding of ‘Deep River’ as harkening back to an African past has been forgotten, yet it is simultaneously unforgettable. One can always look to the archives of the past to reconnect the pieces. In singing the spirituals, African-Americans are unconsciously recollecting that pursuit of wholeness, that desire to return home. To sing ‘Deep River’ as an African-American spiritual is a compensatory and cathartic way of remembering the past, yet the recognition of the African connection encompasses the

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11 Gomez, pp. 277.
corrective method of remembrance. Many of the same themes emotively portrayed in ‘Deep River’ are echoed in other African-American spirituals, such as “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child” and “Roll, Jordan, Roll.” There remains a similar longing and acknowledgement of the distance between two worlds, and the need to one day return home.

The method of understanding how African- and country-born slaves integrated their own beliefs into a new Christian identity, and passed this pattern of integration down to their progeny, perhaps does not fit into the models of reconstitution, creolization, or continuity. Instead, it takes the idea of reconstitution, and redirects it in the form of what Gomez refers to as reconceptualization. Enslaved Africans, and particularly their children, faced with the forcible conversion to Christianity, decided instead of forgetting their past in favor of this new church, they would reconceptualize their understanding of Christianity to include the beliefs and ethos of their past lives. To establish, and later recognize, these connections is a way to overcome the idea of natal alienation, of the distance from the motherland. In the daily or weekly practices of African-Americans, to this day, there remains a harkening back to that ancient connection.

A poignant moment from the WPA slave narratives arises in one of the Georgia slave narratives, where an elderly man discusses his recent joining of a Baptist church. He says, “Lak to a got lost didn’t I? If I had stayed out a little longer it would have been too late, and I sho’ don’t want to be lost.” The problem is not necessarily that he’s afraid he will not get into heaven, but that he will be alone: he still desires that sense of community. The preservation of these rites, of funerals and baptism, and their

accompaniment in the form of spirituals, took the times and spaces that slaves had for freedom and established a community in an unfriendly world. This community would ensure that these rites were maintained, and were undoubtedly part of an unconscious strategy of collective resistance. Even when slavery ended, and African-Americans faced the hardships of Reconstruction and Jim Crow, they returned to these moments of community action to remember and to preserve their sense of self. Unlike the Gullah dialect, the legacy of slavery inherent in the African American spiritual, and sustained through its continued usage during funerals and baptisms, cannot die out or be replaced. These songs have been mainstreamed and they are now part of a national Christian identity, a Baptist identity. The traces of slavery present within them will always linger.