African American and West Indian Folklife in South Florida

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Present-day metropolitan Miami, which encompasses most of Dade County, is an evolving environment which illustrates the historical flow of cultural ideas between diverse populations. The black population provides an excellent example of this diversity. Although the 1980 Census Summary of the General Population Characteristics reported that there were 280,484 blacks in the county, it did not mention that they came not only from the United States, but also from the Caribbean, Latin America, and Africa. In this essay, I will examine some aspects of the folk culture of two African diaspora groups in Miami—African Americans and West Indians.

The African American Presence

Since they first came to the Miami area in the early nineteenth century, African Americans have responded to a broad range of experiences—slavery, urban migration, disenfranchisement during the Jim Crow era, the struggle for civil rights and economic freedom, and today, a new political activism. Throughout the episodes of their history, African Americans have found ways to educate, strengthen, comfort, inspire, motivate, and entertain their minds and spirits, thereby making it possible to survive and grow beyond the external circumstances of their lives.

A rich and immense body of tradition has emerged from this struggle for survival. African American folk culture includes the songs, verbal lore, crafts and occupational skills that African Americans brought from both rural agricultural areas and other urban

centers. These traditions are composed of more than skills that can be learned by example, such as improvising the lead in gospel song, piecing a quilt, or break dancing. They also include the concepts, cultural values, aesthetics and world views that make African American folk expression unique. Many of these emerged directly from the values shared by various African societies.

When Africans were transported to the sugar plantations of the Caribbean, then to the cotton plantations and farms in the southern United States, they brought their traditional ways of thinking and living with them. Since many Africans had lived in close and prolonged proximity with European-derived culture, they were able to exercise a cultural selectivity by tenaciously retaining those elements of their African heritage which were most valuable to them. This selective process and subsequent synthesis of African and European elements defines the evolution of a distinct African American culture. In African American folk traditions, however, the African elements are usually more prevalent.

Religion

The culture of urban African Americans reveals much about the boom, bust and subsequent redevelopment of their communities. Throughout the process of community change, African Americans have selectively chosen to hold on to long cherished ways of doing things. The rhythm and flavor of African American urban community life takes one in many directions. The church is a good place to begin, for it serves as the most important community institution for newly arrived families. It is also one of the strongest and most enduring transplants to urban life. For many African Americans, the church family replaces to a substantial degree parts of the extended family that was left behind.

African American migration patterns follow well-travelled corridors. People from rural areas leave some relatives and move to urban areas with other branches of their families; over time, others may follow. In this manner, entire communities can be gradually transplanted. Many of the African American churches in Miami were organized with memberships based on rural congregations. Some of the smaller churches are still shaped by members arriving from rural areas in

Florida or other southern states. In the early 1920s, some residents of Calvin, Georgia, moved into the West Perrine community and founded the church that became Mt. Moriah Baptist Church. Families from Perry, Georgia, moved into the Goulds community in the mid-1920s, and some still have their church membership at Mt. Carmel Unity Baptist Church.

The church is the place where the raw edges of migrational change are softened, where old flavors and sounds from home are not discarded, but blend in comforting ways in a new urban gospel pot. There you can find the elders who perform black sacred songs and prayers holding on to a tradition that surely represents continuity not just from the rural South, but from older African roots as well.

One can go to the Church of Christ in the Goulds community and still find a strong traditional unaccompanied song service led by elders who maintain the old, rich pattern of singing a song phrase followed by the congregation repeating that same phrase, a practice which is known as lining-out. One also hears the old patterns with "amen corners" (i.e., a group within the congregation that responds verbally to the sermons and songs) and general congregational singing in unison and heterophony. The call-and-response structure, which is a common performance practice in West African music, is prevalent not only in this folk church setting, but in most African American traditional music. Call-and-response is an alternation between a leader and a chorus, purposefully done so all can join in. Many West African, and thus African American, musical events are of a participatory nature. Their songs—spirituals, hymns and jubilees—are accompanied by handclapping, foot stamping and interjection of a shout, cry or holler from someone who "feels the spirit."

In many churches, especially the larger ones, old gospel songs led by the elders in the traditional way have been supplanted by the newer sounds of songs accompanied by electric organs and/or instrumental combos. New songs which serve new needs evolved from traditional ones. Many of them combined the musical structure and poetic forms of old secular and religious songs with new musical and textual ideas. These gospel songs can be heard in Mt. Carmel Missionary Baptist Church and New Macedonia Baptist Church in Liberty City or Glendale Missionary Baptist Church in Richmond Heights.

The highly emotional and spirit-filled music called *gospel* evolved from the Holiness and Pentecostal Churches, and first penetrated more established denominations through the "storefront" Baptist and Methodist churches, which permeate areas where African Americans have lived in Miami. Today, denomination is not a determining factor, and one finds gospel music in Baptist, Methodist, Catholic and Episcopal congregations throughout the communities.

Going out to a "singing" is another urban-based Christian sociocultural event which takes place in churches, schools, community centers and auditoriums. "Singings," "gospel extravaganzas," and "gospelfests" are programs of gospel music with between two and ten vocal groups performing a few songs each. A minister usually opens the program, and many times it is closed as the "doors of the church" are opened in an invitation to accept Christ as one's personal savior.

Smaller community-based vocal groups often perform along with choirs at singings. These groups are organized in churches, schools and among occupational, community and family groups. The Calvary Travelers (mixed group) is an example of a family group that continues to perform in the unaccompanied, or a cappella, style. The emphasis is on blended ensemble singing, with group harmonies serving as the only needed arrangements for the solo singing of the lead. Their arrangements include the whole group singing choruses in harmony, with the lead performing words and melody over repeated, harmonized, rhythmic phrases sung by the group. Performances by the Heavenly Jewels and the Disciple Travelers have remained a cappella. However, some quartets and other smaller groups who performed unaccompanied for many years, such as the Stars of Harmony, have added instruments. Although it is not the norm, Miami also has its share of female a cappella quartets, including the Gospel Lyrics, the Goldenaires and the Wimberly Sisters.

Secular Music

Music, sacred and secular, is a powerful force in all communities, but is perhaps even more so in the African American tradition, since it was something that could be held on to under the adverse circumstances. When the blues, which is traditionally African American, rural and southern, came to the urban areas, it immediately took root

and became the main song form used for entertainment. The blues of the country fields and small "juke joints" became urban when musicians employed amplified instruments in the 1940s. During that era many such bands could be heard while strolling down N. W. 2nd Avenue in Overtown—then Miami's "Little Broadway." Today you still hear the familiar sounds of the blues bands in clubs such as Tobacco Road (Miami's oldest extant nightclub), Sensations and Studio 183. Singers like Charles Wright and Alice Daye have also carried on the tradition. Blues and many other African American folk traditions have survived largely by oral transmission from senior members of the community to the younger generation.

The blues performer provided music for dancing in clubs, at barbecues, house parties and other social gatherings. His music also served as a means for passing time and making social statements. The solitary, transient lifestyle of many bluesmen did not deter them from making use of the call-and-response performance tradition. In the twelve-bar blues, a singer makes a statement or asks a question related to some circumstances of life. The comment or response at the end of the phrase comes not from a chorus of other singers, but from his guitar.

Miami bluesman W. C. Baker was born in the rural outskirts of Live Oak, Florida, between Jacksonville and Tallahassee. At age six, he began to sing the blues while plucking chicken wire strung across an old box made from scrap lumber—his first guitar. Like many country bluesmen who made their first instruments, this was his rite of passage into the blues world.

Mr. Baker's first professional engagement as an adult came 46 years ago at the Big House club in Brownsville. His early life was very transient, and he had to deal with many adverse circumstances caused by discrimination, financial strain and lost love. Nevertheless, through discipline and cooperation, Baker gradually moved from the lonely life of a transient bluesman to the leader of a well-known Miami blues band called W. C. Baker and the Cooperatives.

Domestic Arts

Neighborhood community centers are another significant place in Miami's African American communities where many aspects of traditional culture can be seen. For many generations African American

women in the south have made patchwork quilts for utilitarian purposes. Although quilt making is not a specifically African tradition, it is possible that both the tradition and styles of African American quilts are related to the African tradition of decorative textiles. The quilts made by members of other cultures are more formal and unyielding in design and color than African American quilts.

At the Goulds Senior Citizen Center and the Perrine Neighborhood Community Center, elderly women gather to work on quilts. Not only do they make new quilts, but they also frequently repair or restore older quilts for others. For them quilting remains a social event, during which they talk about things that interest them. Because of this social function, it is likely that quilting will survive in African American neighborhoods for a long time.

Pattern names are a part of quilt folklore. The ladies at the West Perrine Neighborhood Center have quilted the "Flower Garden," "Star," "Little and Big Bow Tie," "Square" or "Nine Patches," "Around the World" and "Stove Eye." The ties to West African textile art can be seen in the quilts they refer to as "String" quilts, which strongly resemble the woven fabric and designs of West African cloth.

Virginia Barrel came to the community of West Perrine from Atlanta, Georgia, thirty-nine years ago. She has quilted since the age of twelve, when she learned the craft from her grandmother and mother. Mrs. Barrel comments:

> I held the lamp at night, so they could see how to quilt. ... They used a frame that hung from the ceiling by a cord or string. ... I made my first quilt at age fourteen with strings left over from other quilts.

Some of the women hate to discard anything, and these leftover items provide materials for other crafts. For instance, some use the fabric left from the quilts to fashion rag dolls, as well as dresses for dolls they have made from plastic bleach and detergent bottles. They create yo-yo pillows, pin cushions, fabric flowers and rugs out of old stockings. In addition, they make items from plastic soft drink can holders, aluminum can pop tops and egg cartons. The impetus to make these things comes from the strategy of survival, which arose when people had to "make do" by making use of everything.

Two members of the West Perrine Community Center show one of their quilts. HMSF, 1989-212-93.

Doretha Carter, who moved to Miami in 1924 from White Springs, Florida, utilizes many old things. She continues to make her own lye soap because she does not like to throw away her leftover cooking fat and she prefers doing things the old fashioned way. Mrs. Carter also preserves fruits such as guavas, mangoes and oranges when they are in season.

Several women in the community still employ home remedies to cure various illnesses. They gave several examples of remedies for fever, such as drinking fever grass tea or an alcohol, mustard and turpentine mixture. For the common cold, they recommended a mixture of castor oil, cod liver oil and honey. If children have worms, they might chew a piece of asafetida. Sores or burns may be treated by rubbing them with aloe vera or tobacco juice.

The West Indian Presence

In the 1890s, Coconut Grove became the first major settlement by people of African descent, most of whom were Bahamian. Since that time, thousands of Caribbeans have made Dade County their

home. They continue to add a new and vital dimension to this city by the sea. No official count for each island nation represented has been taken recently, but there are several visible communities.

Even though many Caribbean groups have assimilated to the mainstream Miami culture to a certain extent, they maintain a very strong sense of shared identity through several strategies. First, a large number of Caribbean organizations or voluntary associations and cultural activities and address social, political and cultural issues. One example of this is the Miami Caribbean Carnival Association. In addition, there are newspapers, tabloids, journals and magazines that keep the Caribbean community informed about issues and activities concerning them and their respective island nations. Furthermore, just as African Americans continued selected cultural practices when they moved from the country to the city, Afro-Caribbeans have bridged the gap from the island to the mainland by preserving some forms of their homeland's cultural practices which have become symbolic of their ethnic identity.

The West Indian sense of ethnic identity is also reflected in home interiors, which make important statements about the identity of their residents and the way they want others to perceive them. Home interiors often encompass vital aspects of family and homeland history, and reflect aesthetic patterns and values that are reiterated in other spheres of life. Far from remaining fixed and unchanging, arts and crafts displayed in the home always incorporate both continuity and change by reflecting their owner's travels to the home country. For example, in a Trinidadian home I observed beautiful embroidery done by the mother and the headdress of an old Carnival costume juxtaposed with a commercial wooden replica of the island of Trinidad, obviously made for tourists. The value of these objects, then, is not found in their function and aesthetic form alone. Clearly, the process of creating the items and the act of possessing them carry significance for community members and make important statements about how they perceive their identity.

Another strategy for reinforcing the traditional culture is the frequent journey home to the mother country. Since a large number of people frequently fly to the islands, a number of West Indian-owned travel agencies have been established in North Dade. Many travel to

their home island several times a year, depending on factors such as family, business or vacation.

Music and Song

One of the most noticeable aspects of West Indian culture in Miami is the music. The remarkable richness of West Indian musical life is partly the product of its multi-layered complexity and diversity, which reflects the encounter between European and African musical traditions. European folk music practices, whether of Spanish, French, British or Dutch origin, have for centuries been coming into contact and fusing with the musical traditions carried by slaves from West and Central Africa to the Americas. The various practices and the way they have combined have differed from place to place. However, the fundamental cultural elements in the different colonies paved the way for a creative process of blending and fusion (sometimes referred to as "Creolization") that had similar results throughout the Caribbean.

In Miami, parties and other social events are held in peoples' homes or in rented halls, and generally involve a deejay who spins reggae, calypso and soca (an invigorating musical synthesis of calypso with soul and funk elements) records. Occasionally, live reggae bands such as Zero Crew or Spice Roots, and live steelbands, such as Burt Reyes Steel Orchestra or Rising Star Steelband, perform as the events. Staged dance performances, such as calypso and limbo, may also be featured along with informal social dancing.

In addition to local entertainers, major calypsonians, soca and reggae stars, including David Rudder, Baron, Mighty Sparrow, Calypso Rose, Steel Pulse and others, usually appear in concert several times during the year. These social events are usually sponsored by a West Indian organization to raise funds for a cause of by a promoter for pure entertainment and monetary profit. West Indians flock to these events. The concerts are a medium wherein they can experience their common bonds, as well as express and solidify their West Indian heritage.

In all the previously mentioned West Indian musical styles—calypso, reggae and soca—one can hear the synthesis of European and African elements along with indigenous island characteristics. For example, each style is performed on instruments of European origin

and each uses the European harmonic system based on the diatonic scale, but the African elements are very strong. They include the presence of the call-and-response structure, syncopated rhythms, improvisation, strong percussion, the relationship of music and dance and the music's political as well as collective social nature. While all three styles are dance and party music, reggae and calypso also function as media for social and political commentary.

Musical and extra-musical affinities link the various styles with the individual characteristics of their island nations. Although calypso is performed today on European instruments, it is traditionally performed on steeldrums, or "pans" as they are referred to by Trinidadians. The rhythm of the Trinidadian and Jamaican dialects tends to exert a powerful influence on the music and the manner in which it is performed. It does not matter how urban or international these styles have become, they still retain a strong indigenous character.

Although currently a popular style, reggae has its roots in traditional styles of Jamaican music. Elements from the Kumina tradition (religious ceremonies of drumming and dancing, held for the purpose of communion with the spirits of ancestors) are evident in the rhythmic layering of the guitar and keyboards in many reggae songs. Jamaican mento music is similar to the calypso of Trinidad and Tobago in that it is sometimes comical while still making historical, political and social comments. However, mento consists of a different combination of instruments than calypso. In addition to guitar and banjo, a rumba box is the percussive instrument instead of a drum. Mento phrasing can also be heard in the accents of reggae trap drummers, although their individual styles vary. Even the dance movements of reggae are similar to that used in mento dancing. This similarity is noted by Louise Bennett-Coverly, a Jamaican folklorist, poet, storyteller and newspaper columnist. She refers to the dance movements as an "old African step," the "weak knee" or "dipping motion."

Carol Pratt has resided in Miami since 1980, but she still plays mento and other more traditional songs on her guitar, and sings the lyrics she learned during her childhood in Jamaica. Pratt has returned to some of the rural areas where people still practice the old folk songs of Jamaica in order to collect and learn more. She performs them at her church and other cultural events in the West Indian community.

Lucille Ranger-Brown, who has lived in Miami since 1971, is a

celebrated Jamaican performer. She performs many traditional Jamaican songs and dances, including work songs that portray typical marketplace scenes, women washing their clothes at the riverside, men working on the railroad and other aspects of "the old culture like it used to be." Ranger-Brown also recites stories in Jamaican dialect or patois, and intersperses songs and dances in the midst of them. She explains:

> We tell stories through folksongs. You see everyday living and we'd make a song or dance out of it. We don't go to school for this.

Narrative

Narrative tradition is another vital aspect of the influence of African traditions on West Indian culture. Storytelling—expressing a concept, moral lesson or day-to-day experience in dramatic imagery—is one of the strongest retentions of African narrative forms in the diaspora. As in African communities, it is an important means of record-keeping and transmitting information. Telling stories about animals who exhibit human behavior in familiar situations was a common method of instruction in West African society. A prevalent theme was the confrontation between a small animal, such as a spider or a rabbit, and a large animal, like a lion or fox. The weaker animal prevailed by using its wit or cunning. Within the context of the oppressed lives of the slaves, the tales took on another connotation—that of the slaves outwitting their masters.

Lucille Fuller, also from Jamaica, has a large repertoire of animal folktales, particularly about the Anansi (spider) character. She is a very animated and dramatic storyteller who tells tales in Jamaican dialect and uses voices changes to represent each animal. Fuller learned her stories from her grandmother, mother and father. Now, she recites the stories in schools and on church and community programs.

Foodways

One can see the expression of West Indian identity in Miami through foodways. There are presently many authentic West Indian

restaurants, such as the Pantry Restaurant, the Pepper Pot and Pauline's. Taken as a group, they offer a considerable variety of foods, with the repetition of some dishes, which are universally popular in the Caribbean, such as rice and peas. Other popular dishes include curried goat, oxtail stew, "jerk" chicken or pork, Escovich fish, fried plantains, codfish and oiled bananas, conch fritters or salads, callalou, and ackee with saltfish.

Shirley Sutherland of Tobago is proud of her heritage and traditional cooking. She still prepares the traditional foods of her island home for her family, friends and West Indian community functions. For example, she cooks bigi, which has spinach as its main ingredient, and coo-coo, which is made from cornmeal, okra, and coconut milk. For special occasions, she prepares a main dish like callalou, made from dashing leaves, okra, green peppers, pigtails and crabs.

Sutherland, and other West Indians need certain basic ingredients to maintain the authenticity of traditional dishes. Therefore, Miami has many grocery stores that specialize in the essentials for West Indian dishes. Some businesses serve a triple purpose, such as Jamaica Products, Inc., which is a wholesale warehouse, grocery and retail restaurant. Don Linton and his wife sell cases of canned goods, fresh produce, medicinal herbs, spices, pharmaceuticals and other Jamaican products to clients in Miami and other parts of the United States.

Smaller West Indian grocery stores and bakeries may also provide more than one service. Tai's Bakery, run by a Chinese Jamaican family, also serves hot lunches. The bakery abounds with West Indian breads and sweet treats, like sourdough and coconut breads, fry bake, plantain and coconut pastries, currant rolls and fruit cakes. Two of the more popular items are the spicy lobster patties and meat pies.

Celebrations

Many Trinidadians from Miami make the annual journey home for Carnival. It is recognized that no single event in the English-speaking Caribbean engenders as much ethnic unity and camaraderie among West Indians abroad as the Carnival celebration. Not only do they make the annual pilgrimage back for Carnival, but wherever they happen to be domiciled in large numbers, bands of masqueraders parade in imitation of the event.

Masquerading (mas for short in Trinidad) is an almost universal feature of the widely distributed pre-Lenten festivals, which culminates on Mardi Gras (Fat Tuesday), the day before Ash Wednesday, and the beginning of the Lenten fast. Trinidad is no exception. Early descriptions of the restrained European Carnival celebrations in Trinidad prior to emancipation mention maskers, and the custom was carried and elaborated by freed slaves. In recent years, many of the older traditional Carnival characters have disappeared, and the hundreds of Mas bands that participate in Carnival usually construct costumes on a new and original theme each year.

Llewellyn Roberts, who remembers following old sailor bands around as a child in Trinidad, and who, like most Trinidadians, has participated in Carnival all his life, is committed to continuing similar celebrations through Miami's West Indian Carnival. Roberts, who is a master craftsman, has been designing and building costume headdresses for many years. His specialty is wire bending—the painstaking task of constructing frames of wire that can be shaped with foam rubber, cloth, paper foil, sequins and paint into a finished costume. Jesse Lampkin, also a wire bender from Trinidad, designs and builds full costumes. He lived in New York for many years and always participated in the West Indian Carnival on Labor Day.

On Columbus Day, Miami's West Indian community turns out to "Jump Up" and "Play Mas," dancing through the streets of downtown Miami to calypso and soca music. The Carnival combines African rhythms, colors and sensuous movement, with the West Indians' unique flair for hospitality, entertainment and bacchanal.

Just as Llewellyn Roberts and Jesse Lampkin persistently endeavor to preserve and celebrate their Trinidadian culture, Billy Rolle and Bruce Beneby have played similar roles in the Bahamian community. Billy Rolle is the Executive Director of the annual Miami/Bahamas Goombay Festival Celebration, which takes place in early June. His grandfather was one of the first settlers to come from the Bahamas in the 1890s, and his father emigrated around the turn of the century from the family island of Exuma.

Since it began in 1978, the festival has evolved into a large and celebrated event during which Coconut Grove's Grand Avenue turns into Nassau's Bay Street. The internationally acclaimed Royal Bahamas Police Band performs at Goombay events and marches in

the parade. In 1989 close to 800,000 residents and visitors packed the Grove for the festival, feasting on traditional Bahamian treats, viewing the arts and crafts, and enjoying the music of Miami's Sunshine Junkanoo Band.

Bruce Beneby was the leader of the Sunshine Junkanoo band, which consists primarily of his family and friends. He was born in Nassau, but lived in Miami since 1956. There are various theories on the origin of the term Junkanoo. Beneby believed that the term and the celebration of Junkanoo

> All began in Africa with a gentleman named 'Johnny Enew,' leader of a band that traveled from house to house, from street to street during certain holidays like Christmas and New Years, which is when Junkanoo is celebrated in the Bahamas.

Every year during the holidays, Beneby returned to Nassau, to participate in his country's traditional celebration, marching in parade and beating drums.

The Sunshine Junkanoo Band members play horns, drums, whistles and cowbells. Each year they create a new array of vividly colored costumes with headdresses based on a specific theme. The band has performed at the Goombay Festival in the Grove since its inception, and also performs at other festivals and events throughout the state.

Bruce Beneby was tragically killed this spring in a hit and run accident, but his family and friends are continuing the tradition.

Summary

Traditional culture continues to pervade the lives of African Americans and West Indians in Miami. Many traditions, such as those mentioned here, not only provide an enduring basis for family and community life, but also serve as a source of aesthetic satisfaction for generations of participants.