

## Double Consciousness in Negro Spirituals.

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### Abstract

Negro spirituals have travelled round the world from their traditional home in America. Some Negro Spirituals express consciousness about the world, problems, inhumanity and the resilience of Negroes as well as the awareness of a better world. Materialism pales in the face of spirituality in the pilgrimage of Negroes from earth to heaven. Indeed, few songs express triple consciousness – references are made to towns in America, Israel and Heaven. This essay investigates the double reference in the songs that give them complexity and their different layers of meaning, establishing that these transform their commonality to classicality.

### Introduction

Spirituals were composed during slavery in America when the Negro lacked education and was compelled to debilitating and inhuman conditions of life. Slaves, especially those from Southern America, used biblical verses for the composition of their songs as exemplified by “Go Down, Moses”, “Swing Low Sweet Chariot”, “Steal Away to Jesus”, “The Angels Are Coming”, “I’m Rolling” and “Roll Jordan”. These songs were composed by “Uncle Wallace” and “Aunt Minerva”. Other slaves also composed impromptu songs showing struggle, faith, redemption and hope. All the songs of the Negro sprang from his experiences- some were composed about his work, others dealt with his deep religious faith.

The songs chosen for this essay are spirituals and few work songs that show deep religious faith. The working definition of spirituals here is that of Locke, a comprehensive one, which is found in an electronic Journal edited by Dolan – “one of the great classic expressions of all time of religious emotions and Christian moods and attitudes” (*ChickenBones*).

Consciousness is a state that is not synonymous with birth; it is a state when the senses are developed to perceive the environment and know things about it and human nature. So no person is born with consciousness; it is acquired over few years of growth in life by the child. So Charlton remarks in an electronic journal that consciousness is an ability that only human beings or complex animals develop (*Psychiatry and Human Condition*).

Consciousness precedes speech. A child that is aware of its world can convey its feeling through crying, which is its chief means of communication. Consciousness is the means of controlling behaviour, knowing reality, the existence of culture and the expression of it. There is a relationship between consciousness and language; one has to be aware of something before articulating one’s awareness about it through language, at the stage when the human being has acquired the human language.

Consciousness is best described in the language of William James as “a stream”, implying a stream that is made up of events, objects and symbols, from which one has to select what is momentarily relevant ( qtd. in *Introduction to Psychology*, 54). This stream can suffer interruptions and time-gaps. This “stream” is a vast world of existence that

forms the pre-conscious state of being from which data are built and selection made, when the child develops consciousness (67).

I have stated else where that consciousness is first an individual business; man selects and uses ideas from the data bank in his mind to express his consciousness about the world – politics, religion, economics, history, literature and other areas of knowledge, especially songs (oral literature) as expressions of man's consciousness about his world; this could be done individually or collectively (*Consciousness, Literature and the Arts*, 4).

Religious consciousness is the awareness and articulation of man about divinity. So what is Christian consciousness? It is that state of consciousness about the Almighty God who created heaven and earth. It is a revolutionary consciousness, not a violent reaction against man but a consistently determined mentality against mundaneness and materialism; it is a preference of futuristic paradise for the present ephemeral world.

Religious consciousness is a paradox; the Christian is not deprived of an average life of material comfort in this life – he has to eat, clothe, build and live in his own house. Yet the comfort of this life is temporary flux that is fleeting; paradise is the utmost place of bliss. The best comfort on earth cannot be compared with Thomas Moore's Utopia- good for all its wonderful beauty, it is unsatisfactory, unlike heaven; it is only transitory for the physical body has a short span of life and the present world is full of inconsistent rhythms of joy and sadness. So the Christian does not deprive himself completely of wealth but he is not deceived of its attractiveness; he transcends and overcomes materialism in exchange for a long lasting style of life. Lancaster asserts that spiritual or mystical consciousness is a state in which man seeks a state of greater intimacy with the divine (77).

Christ's consciousness is much more specific here. Stone says it is concerned with the essential qualities of unconditional love, selflessness, Christ images, avoidance of a judgmental spirit, avoidance of the spirit of fear, and relating with brothers with the purity of heart. (Meaningoflife). The songs implicitly and explicitly express most of these qualities.

The characteristics of Christian consciousness are revolutionary behaviour towards materialism, preparedness to suffer temporarily in exchange for eternal bliss; others are biblical echoes or references to the concrete world as foreshadow of paradise; strong belief in a personality that created the universe; belief in redemption through the death of Jesus Christ and communication through a language peculiar to members using symbols and specialized diction.

Double consciousnesses are words which refer to double awareness of the material and the spiritual worlds in relation to the violation of love that is central to Christianity and the other qualities of Christ consciousness. Symbolism is created out of this state of being. A reference to one thing evokes the thought of another – double reference or consciousness. So Christian symbols are about the concrete world of reality; they are known to members of the group and others who are knowledgeable about Christianity and its cosmology- consciousness is at once a behavioural attitude and theory in this study.

## **Analysis**

There is a revolutionary behaviour towards the material world in the first two songs that shall be considered – the Negro expresses his desire to escape hardship from the land of bondage to a place of plenty. Here is the negro "Go down Moses"

Go down Moses  
Way down in Egypt land  
Tell Ol' Pharaoh  
To let my people go

The negro fell back on the history of the Jews – the timeless stories about Moses the Jewish leader that liberated the Jews from bondage in Egypt, Joseph who was sold into slavery but became the saviour of his family and Daniel who was miraculously saved from a den of lions; these stories anchored his faith in resilience and liberation.

The song is an index of the Negro's inner strength and determination to gain freedom. Gross states that this song is a permanent testament of his resilience and faith in his liberation from bondage (Introduction). The history behind the song is known by most people – the punishments given to Israelites, their determination to be free, their confrontation with Pharaoh and subsequent freedom- these remind the reader of the Negro's faith and hope in liberation, indeed, these lines are true : “Slaves , though we be enroll'd/ Minds are never to be sold” (Redmond,43).

The next two songs are about escape from the material world. The Negro song:

(Refrain)  
wing low, sweet chariot,  
Coming for to carry me home,  
Swing low, sweet chariot,  
Coming for to carry me home.  
I looked over Jordan, and what did I see?  
Coming for to carry me home,  
A band of angels coming after me  
Coming for to carry me home.  
( Refrain)  
If you get there before I do,  
Coming for to carry me home,  
Tell all my friends I'm coming, too.  
Coming for to carry me home.  
(Refrain)  
I'm sometimes up and sometimes down,  
Coming for to carry me home,  
But still my soul feels heavenly bound,  
Coming for to carry me home.  
(Refrain)  
The brightest day that I can say,  
Coming for to carry me home,  
When Jesus washed my sins away,  
Coming for to carry me home.

Reverend Alexander Reid heard two Indians singing “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot”, “Steal Away to Jesus”, “The Angels are coming”. “I’m a Rolling” and “Roll Jordan Roll” in 1850, when he employed them as slaves around the Spencer Academy ( Wikipedia). Historically, the song is classified under “Negro Spirituals and the Underground Railroad” ( Wikipedia). A slave could use several methods of escaping to a free country. First, he could walk at night using “hand lights” and moonlight. Second, he could jump into a chariot, hide and ride away to any safety from slavery. The song was sung to signal a convenient time of escape for the slave.

The song “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” is a metaphor for escape. The image of Jordan is a religious reference to a river in Israel, a destination far from the land of bondage. “Angels” is a word that connotes a means of deliverance as in “a band of angels coming after me”. So Jordan is a simultaneous reference to triple consciousness - a physical destination in America, an allusion to a place in Israel and an allusive town within paradise. Many slaves ran to a “free country” they called their “home”, “sweet Canaan” or “The Promised Land”; this location could be found on the other side of the Ohio River called “Jordan”. Also, the word “heaven” is a destination- a double consciousness that simultaneously refers to a spiritual world of bliss designated heaven and an earthly place of happiness that is far removed from slavery. Jesus is the redemptive figure in the song that has “washed” the “sins” of the Negro, who is “heavenly bound”. The Negro’s consciousness for freedom could have been responsible for the uprisings before the civil war. Since the world is transitory, the Negro is warned to resist the temptation to ungodliness in the song:

O, must I be like de foolish man?  
 O yes, Lord!  
 Will build de house on de sandy hill  
 O yes, Lord!  
 I’II build my house on zion hill,  
 O yes, Lord!  
 No wind nor rain can blow me down  
 O yes, Lord!

The song derives from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:24-27 about a foolish man, who stores his wealth in a house that the foundations are porous – built with inferior materials on “a sandy hill”. So the persona in the song opts for building his house on the hill of Zion, a formidable rock. The next two songs for analysis demand for assistance from God. First is the Negro song.

Oh, bye an’ bye an bye  
 I’m goin to lay down my heavy load...  
 I’m troubled in mind  
 If Jesus don’t help me  
 I surely will die...

Jesus healed people physically and psychologically; he was a man who expressed His love to those who suffered. The Negro was aware of this even though he could not read; he attended church every Sunday where the preacher was a white man, who spoke so well about the good deeds of Christ but did not obey his commandments. So the slave knew his master was a bad Christian, a mere church attendee or hypocrite whose deeds were glaring to him; a man who negated the Christ consciousness he professed. This was why he kept slaves and treated them badly. A few encouraged the slavery practised by their white brothers

The Negro predicts his freedom –“bye an bye”; he is going to lay down his “heavy load”. Load is used in this context as symbol of slavery- discomfort, weight or heavy burden. Some slaves died, some were killed, the persona’s life is endangered, he is looking forward to the assistance of Jesus hence he declares- “I surely will die”. The next song is about liberation.

O wrestlin’ is a Negro song about liberation  
I will not let thee go!  
O wrestlin’ Jacob, Jacob, day’s a breakin’;  
He will not let me go!  
O, I hold my brudder wid a tremblin’ hand;  
I would not let him go!  
I hold my sister wid a tremblin’ hand;  
I would not let her go!  
  
O , Jacob do hang from a tremblin’ limb,  
He would not let him go!  
O, Jacob do hang from a tremblin’ limb;  
De Lord will bless my soul.  
O wrestlin’ Jacob, Jacob” @ C.

The song derives from Gen.28:12-27; the portion is about the dream of Jacob, who saw angels ascending and descending; he was subsequently blessed. Higginson states in an electronic journal that the song is one of the wildest striking song of the whole series: “there is a mystical effect and a passionate striving throughout the whole” (*Atlantic Monthly*). The last four songs conceptualise the Christian faith as warfare. First is the Negro song.

One more valiant soldier here,  
One more valiant soldier here  
One more valiant soldier here  
To help me bear de cross.  
O hail! Mary, hail!  
Hail! Mary, hail!  
Hail! Mary, hail!  
To help me bear the cross.

This is classified by Higginson as a militant, a liberation song. The soldier persona is doubly conscious; he is fighting against a spiritual personality (the devil) and he engages in demanding for his rights despite his deprivation as slave. It alludes to Mary, a mother image implying a subtle demand for mothering and protection. It can be traced to a Roman Catholic origin since Roman Catholics are those who say “Hail! Mary” during worship. “Ride In kind Savior” has a military ring about it.

Ride in, kind savior!  
 No man can hinder me.  
 O, Jesus is a mighty man!  
 No man, @ C.  
 We’re matching through Virginny fields.  
 No man, @ C.  
 We’re matching through Virginny fields.  
 No man, @ C.  
 O, Satan is a busy man,  
 No man, @ C.  
 And he has sword and shield,  
 No man, @ C.  
 O’ old Secesh done come and gone !  
 No man can hinder me.

The song shows the determination of the Negro to be free; he declares this overtly in line two – “no man can hinder me” and the repetition of “no man” six times with a stylistic effect of making the words appear on six lines with obvert impregnability. When the words “no man” appear on a distinct line, the effect is immediate, giving the impression of a sharp difference between the economy of words in the line in contrast to the next line; this is the alternate pattern in the song. The song is a subtle work song with a double reference to mobility at work and escape to freedom. This militant spirit was to continue to influence African Americans until the abolition of slavery and recently in the anti-racist battles for survival as remarked by Maduka and Eyoh about Hughes’ “Dream Deferred” and Mackay’s “If We Must Die” which reject inferior political and economic slavery (30). River Jordan is apostrophized in the next song and regarded as a human being whom the Negro has to say goodbye:

Bound to Go  
 Jodrdan River, I ‘m bound to go,  
 Bound to go, Bound to go –  
 Jordan River, I ‘m Bound to go,  
 And bid’em fare ye well.

My Brudder Robert, I’m bound to go,  
 Bound to go, and c  
 Sister Lucy, I’m bound to go  
 Bound to go, and c

River Jordan is not in America, but for a location on the side of Ohio River is regarded as such. They express the desire to go beyond the river into the land of promise. It is a song that relies on repetition for emphasis and listing of names like “Brudder Robert” and “Sister Lucy” to form its pattern.

The Negro is conscious of three worlds in the song –America, Israel and Heaven. Jordan is a river in Israel, the policy of separateness between whites and blacks has created an artificial white America, where the American Negro is a slave that has experienced the worst treatment unlike the Greco –Roman tradition of slavery. His momentary escape is through the world of song, like Keat’s temporary relief in the world of the Nightingale and, perhaps physical escape to any destination in America, France or any other destination. Militancy is expressed through the words and historical references to army and pharaoh that jump out at every reader or listener to the song.

“My army cross river  
My army cross over,  
O! Pharaoh’s army drowned!  
My army cross over

We’ll cross de might river,  
My army cross over;  
We’ll cross the river Jordan  
My army cross over;  
We’ll cross the danger river  
We’ll de mighty myo  
my army cross over (thrice)  
O! Pharaoh’s army drowned!  
“My army cross over”

Higgenson suggests that Negroes sang the song when matching, rowing or embarking. He remarks further that the word “Myo” could be the Cameroon word “Mawa”, which means, “to die” (ChickenBones). The triple reference in the song derives from Jordan, a river in Israel, a conceptualized destination that could be the North of America and heaven which is the final destination of Christians.

The word Pharaoh in the context of the song connotes danger as well as tyranny or death. This interpretation derives from the encounter of pharaoh and Moses in the Bible. Moreover, the clause “O, Pharaoh’s army drowned” refers to the encounter of Pharaoh and the children of Israel in the Red Sea.

The song “The Coming Day” expresses double reference:

I want to go to Canaan,  
I want to go to Canaan,  
I want to go to Canaan,  
To meet ‘em at de comin’day  
O, remember, let me go to Canaan (thrice)  
To meet ‘em, and c

O brudder, you –oh! Rember (Thrice)  
To meet ‘em, and c  
O brudder, you –oh! Rember (Thrice)  
To meet ‘em at de comin’day

The wine of Canaan is regarded as the best even today. It is a land of milk and honey. The Negroes desire for freedom which is embodied by the word “Canaan” – a place of safety where there is no tyranny and, where there is abundant food. The destinations of Canaan in Israel, Canaan of peace in America or elsewhere and heaven are connotatively implied

In “O yes, Lord”, there is implied surrender and willingness to serve God.

O, must I be like de foolish man?  
O yes, Lord!  
Will build my house on de sandy hill  
O yes, Lord!  
I ‘ll build my house on Zion hill  
O yes, Lord!  
No wind nor rain can blow me down  
O yes, Lord!

Their interest in the material world diminishes. This does not mean the material world and its pleasures are surrendered to whites alone. The Negro should be given the right to participate in the wealth America offers. Two worlds are created in the song – the material and the spiritual. The song derives from the teaching of Jesus on wise sons of the kingdom as juxtaposed with foolish sons. Spirituals are rich in imagery and biblical allusions that give them double consciousness – thoughts about the physical world, the injustices of men and corruption, and the spiritual and enduring world of bliss. These are the contrastive worlds but the ephemeral one pales in the face of the spiritual. Spirituals are choral in nature, this derives from the communal nature of African Americans – one person raises a song and others join. The symbols of the songs evoke double consciousness that make them sophisticated. Spirituals are about slavery, liberation and heaven, yet, they do not express absolute despair; rather, they show Christ consciousness – the lofty height of the Negro’s spiritual attainment and the poor degradable inhumanity of white slave masters.



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