“SHABACH HALLELUJAH!": THE CONTINUITY OF THE RING SHOUT TRADITION AS A SITE OF MUSIC AND DANCE IN BLACK AMERICAN WORSHIP

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ABSTRACT

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The expressive forms that were possessed by Africans enslaved in the U.S. – such as music, dance, religion, and language – continue to be developed by many African Americans in secular and sacred contexts. This thesis will explore the ways in which dance and music are still central and are utilized particularly in Christian worship practices in black communities of faith today. The Ring Shout tradition on Southern slave plantations will be investigated for its role from the past to the present to show the continual development of its common practices throughout West Africa and the United States.

Using data obtained through a field study in Toledo, Ohio, my research will test what previous scholars have concluded about the syncretism of African traditions in African American culture as it relates to music and dance within religious contexts. My field study in Toledo, Ohio, will be enhanced with observations and interviews in another field study that took place in Benin, West Africa. The juxtaposition of these two field studies demonstrates a strong connection between African American Christian worship and African religious practices that persists even today. I conclude that some practitioners of black Christianity are not cognizant that the mode of their worship is African in origin. For this reason, my research will examine why and how patterns of African American Christian liturgy have West African origins.
To my Honorable African Ancestors
To Ibeji (Twin Spirits)
To my Destiny
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INTRODUCTION

The expressive forms that were possessed by Africans enslaved in the U.S. – such as music, dance, religion, and language – continue to be developed by many African Americans in secular and sacred contexts. This thesis will explore the ways in which dance and music are still central and are utilized particularly in Christian worship practices in black communities of faith today. The Ring Shout tradition on Southern slave plantations will be investigated for its role as a link from the past to the present, demonstrating its continual development of common expressive practices from West Africa to the United States.

Using data obtained through a field study in Toledo, Ohio, my research will test what previous scholars have concluded about the syncretism of African traditions in African American culture as it relates to music and dance within religious contexts. My field study in Toledo, Ohio will be enhanced with observations and interviews in another field study that I conducted in Benin, West Africa. The juxtaposition of these two field studies demonstrates a strong connection between African American Christian worship and African religious practices that persists even today. I conclude that some practitioners of black Christianity are not cognizant that the mode of their worship is African in origin. For this reason, “Shabach Hallelujah!”: The Continuity of the Ring Shout Tradition as a Site of Music and Dance in Black American Worship explores why and how patterns of African American Christian liturgy have West African origins.

African-derived practices across time and space, with their many expressive idiosyncrasies, have always been a communicative experience. These practices are essential to worship. The singing of songs continues to help shape the service at various points and different levels during worship. Rhythm is present in many forms throughout the entire ritual, while dancing continues to be the physical representation of that rhythm and aids in the embodiment of
a deity. Spirit possession is achieved through all three elements: dance, song, and rhythm.

In black American worship, communication with the sacred through music continues to be an important component of that culture’s religious practices. Components of worship are song, dance, rhythm, and spirit possession through the body. Black American worship has its roots in West Africa, in the enslavement experiences in North America, and in the evolving black church. For example, I found time-honored African-styled Ring Shout traditions in a contemporary church, Friendship Baptist Church in Toledo. During my initial contact with the church, I was amazed at how the flow of the service was not always planned. In this way a freedom emerges, allowing the Holy Spirit to move and be present during worship as a goal of the service. The preacher’s messages are responded to with shouts, praises, dances, running, and clapping.

The praise and worship of God at Friendship Baptist includes many African-derived practices: running in a counterclockwise motion around the sanctuary, shouting, and holy dancing, during which the drum beats change. The holy dancing is accompanied by chants that include words such as “I, I got a praise, I got a praise and I gotta get it out, I got a praise; and when I think about Jesus and what he’s done for me, when I think about Jesus and how he’s set me free, I could dance, dance, dance, dance, dance, dance, dance, all night.” Worship is recognizable by going to the altar, bowing and kneeling, while the choir sings selections that are accompanied by hand clapping and head motions. The message of the preacher is delivered with many bodily gestures with a moderately theatrical religious presentation. I found a similar animated and free-flowing sense of freedom of worship in African rituals in Benin, West Africa.

While interviewing members of the congregation in Toledo (and also briefly with one member of another congregation in Washington, D.C.), I found that there were striking
continuities between their current worship practices and the early plantation Ring Shouts, and even with worship practices, as mentioned before, that I observed in Benin. According to one informant,

Music has healing qualities, chords of peace. It should touch the inner chords of our spirit in order to connect us to God’s spirit. It also allows us to relax, be at peace, expel pain, open to expression of our emotions...healing, reviving, and restoring.¹

Such remarks suggest that the intersection of music and dance and spirit possession continues to exist in black communities of faith. According to another informant,

Dance is a natural part of us...it stems back to our roots, our ancestors...they were expressive and emotional people. It also could be compared to David in the Bible when he danced out of his clothes.²

Clearly, dance continues to be an expressive part of African American Christian worship. These statements connote the synthesis of African and Christian ritual in African American Christian liturgy even today. In the latter informant’s statement, identification with a ritualistic African ancestry is clear.

Therefore, within the actual worship ritual, dance, music, and the spoken and sung word are vital to West African and black American religions. These various components aid the devotees in accomplishing the goal of worship, which is to communicate with God through one’s total being. Whether in the United States or in West Africa, one can observe that among Africans and descendants of Africans there is always a constant connection with the spiritual world through music and dance. To investigate the origins of this expressive form of worship, I turn now to West African religious practices and my Benin field study.

² Elder of Friendship Baptist Church, interview by Erica Washington, tape recording, Toledo, OH, 4 November 2001.
CHAPTER I. OVERVIEW OF SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

Structure of African Religious Practices

The study of sub-Saharan African religious practices is complicated by the fact that each of the more than 1,000 ethnic groups approaches religious practices differently. Indeed, one can be overwhelmed by the complexity and diversity of the many belief systems and also by the problems that often arise due to researchers’ lack of understanding and their subsequent misinterpretation of religious customs. For example, “animism,” “primitive religion,” “ancestor worship,” and “magic” are terms that are used incorrectly to negatively describe African religions. Within explanations by early scholars, ancestor worship was used to represent the core of African religions.

Part of the cross-cultural miscommunication is because, for most native Africans across the sub-Saharan continent, spirituality is lived within all aspects of daily life in which there is no separation between the sacred and secular. Despite the differences in religion, there are also many similarities across the various African belief systems. According to the anthropologist and Akan traditional African priest, Nana Kwabena Brown, “a concept of God-Almighty, reverence for and communication with the ancestors, and propitiation and communication with lesser spirits or deities are the core components of African religious practices.” It is therefore essential to recognize that African religions have the same structure for approaching the religious sphere, but change enters when this structure is personalized by practitioners.

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Scholars have generally arrived at a collective method, a way to characterize the likeness of many African traditions, to describe African religious practices. Because of the parallelisms found in these traditions, the term “African religion” is often used instead of African religions.

Religious historian Albert Raboteau supports this view by suggesting that similar modes of perception, shared basic principles, and common patterns of ritual were wide-spread among different West African religions. Beneath the diversity, enough fundamental similarity did exist to allow a general description of the religious heritage of African slaves, with supplementary information concerning particular peoples, such as the Akan, Ewe, and Ibo, whose influence upon the religions of Afro-Americans have long been noted.

God has many names in Africa such as Olodumare for the Yoruba, Mawu for the Ewe/Fon, and Nyame for the Ashanti. Each ethnic group names the Supreme Deity in its language, and naming the Supreme Deity represents a concept of God that is essential in African belief systems. The name Olodumare in the Yoruba tradition denotes the eminence of God. Theologian E. Bolaji Idowu observes that

the name Olodumare has always carried with it the idea of One with Whom man may enter into covenant or communion in any place and at any time, one who is supreme, superlatively great, incomparable and unsurpassable in majesty, excellent in attributes, stable, unchanging, constant, reliable.

Another common concept is the belief that God reigns in heaven and over heaven and earth, which indicates that God, in traditional African belief, is omnipresent and omnipotent. Since God is recognized as creator and source of everything, Africans believe that they are required to revere Him.

In most African communities it is recognized that there are gods who exist beneath the Supreme God. These gods have a major role in acting as intercessors between God and people.

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They also have many names, depending on the ethnic group. The Ashanti, Ewe-speaking Fon of Dahomey, Ibo, and Yoruba groups distinguish their pantheon of gods with names such as abosom, vodun, alose, and orisha respectively. The lesser gods are recognized as divinities and often explored through myth. The divinities are capable of, but not limited to, being present in human concerns, sowing misfortune, showing benevolence, advising, interfering, informing, confining knowledge, and interacting with each other. As a result, systems of religious worship are established in honor of the divinities. Praises, offerings, and sacrifices are offered up to them during ceremonial practices and celebrations.

Character of African Religious Experiences

Because African religions embrace every aspect of everyday life, belief systems foster ideas and practices that control the totality of life according to the needs of each particular community. These belief systems encompass a spiritual world to include God, other lesser divinities, and ancestors. Hierarchies of divinity range from the Supreme Deity, to lesser deities, to priest, to man. However, Mawu, the Supreme High God of the Ewe/Fon, is perceived differently by his devotees. Although practitioners believe that Mawu is the creator of everything, some Ewe/Fon choose to worship Him formally while others do not. Five decades ago G. Parrinder observed,

at Abomey, former capital of the ancient kingdom of Dahomey, Mawu is worshipped. In varying degrees this worship obtains in the Fon section of the Ewe people, down to the coastal regions at Ouidah and Cotonou. Here Mawu has priests and temples like other gods, but less numerous than the earth-smallpox divinity Sakpata and the thunder-god So. There are ‘convents’ (Mawuxwe,

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10 Ibid, 10-11.
‘Mawu house’) for the training of devotees (Mawusi, ‘wives of Mawu’, male or female) on the same lines as the convents of other gods.\textsuperscript{12}

Even today in Wydah, Benin, I found during my field research that took place during May and June of 2002 that there are still temples, priests, and devotees of Mawu. The Mawu Lisa temple is different from others because “all the Vodun are here”\textsuperscript{13} (the pantheon of gods of the Vodun religion). The High Priestess is 12 years old. She is considered the Chief of Vodun and the Supreme of the temple. The High Priestess is the one who controls all the ceremonies. Her job is to feed the shrine, to pray to the shrine for blessings, and she is the one who conducts ceremonies and solves problems. According to the Chief and the High Priestess of the Mawu Lisa Temple, priests and devotees are chosen as early as

when a baby is born here in the temple or family after three months or four months. They do a ceremony for the baby, an outing ceremony, because when you have your baby, you don’t take the baby outside. The baby will always be indoors for three to four months and the priest will decide to present the baby to a new moon to allow the baby to enter in this life. During this ceremony they do a divination. Can we know the star of this baby? How is he born? Can he worship Vodu? Through divination, they will find out what he is supposed to be. If he is supposed to be a priest, an adept, the divination will find that out and tell parents. If the baby is to worship Vodu, can he be initiated now or wait for how long? Through divination, you will find this out. Everyone can’t be dedicated to this temple. You have to be chosen by Ifa.\textsuperscript{14}

This explanation confirms that some Africans believe in the existence of the Supreme Deity and actively worship Him, like in the example given about the worship of Mawu Lisa (name for the Supreme Deity in the Vodun religion) at the Mawu Lisa Temple.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid, 234.
\textsuperscript{13} High Priestess and Chief of Mawu Lisa Temple, interview by Erica Washington, tape recording, Whydah, Benin, 28 May 2002.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid, interview.
In the Yoruba religion *orisha* is the name that is given to the culture’s pantheon of gods. The *orisha* are envoys of the Supreme High God and work together with Him.\(^{15}\) Theologian Noel King notes that the Orisa [Orisha], then, are the emanations of God’s powers, his functioning, in certain aspects of his activity as understood by humans. Some are the “personifications” of God’s powers in nature, the earth, the rivers, the lagoons, the seas. Some are beings who lived as humans long ago, their divinity recognized later by their descendants.\(^ {16}\)

There are many divinities in the *orisha*. Eshu-Elegba is the personification of opportunity. Art historian Robert Farris Thompson states, “Eshu becomes the imperative companion-messenger of each deity, the imperative messenger-companion of the devotee.”\(^ {17}\) Obatala, also called Orisa-nla, is the epitome of unity and understanding. In addition, he is also considered to be the creator of humanity.\(^ {18}\) The river goddess Oshun is the embodiment of beauty, love, and sexuality.\(^ {19}\) Oya, goddess of the whirlwind, is the representation of female strength. Yemonja, sea goddess, is the characterization of life and prosperity. The thunder god Shango is the image of warrior strength of the Oyo kings.\(^ {20}\)

It is impossible to understand African spirituality without a discussion about the ancestors, because they also inhabit the spiritual world. There are two different categories that make up the ancestors: the living-dead and the spirits. Africans are most concerned with the living-dead because they are those who have died recently and are more connected with humans, especially through memory, because it has not been long ago since they have been human.


\(^{16}\) Ibid, 10.


\(^{19}\) Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 167.

\(^{20}\) Ibid, 84-90.
beings. The spirits are those for whom death is complete, making them fully spirit as opposed to the living-dead who are still connected to their living relatives. Because the living-dead are closer to humans than the spirits, I use the term “ancestor” to describe the living-dead.

The practice of “ancestor reverence” allows the dead to remain active and part of society through remembrance and direct contact with their living relatives. For example, direct contact is achieved through food offerings. Africans understand that this practice is a continuation of the respect and status that elders acquire while living, and the food is symbolic of the continuing nurturing relationship established by the living. The elders and other honorable ancestors continue to offer knowledge, care, and concern for their descendants and clan members.

Interaction between the ancestors and the living is believed to be achieved in the Yoruba religion through dreams, revelations, and messages. The spirits, on the other hand, are conduits of prayers, sacrifices, and offerings to God. Africans have faith in these spirits because they provide a sense of liberation as a result of confessions made by people. The spirits also serve as mediators in human matters and stand in proxy with the gods on behalf of their offsprings.

An element of the Akan religion is the Asamanfo, ancestral spirits. These spirits only influence a specific family or clan. The reverence that is offered up to these spirits maintains the unity between the living and dead. Within the Akan tradition, there are spiritual components, Mogya, Ntoro, ‘Kra, and Sunsum, that are aspects of individuals that potentially remain intact upon passing over to the spirit world. Madeline Manoukian observes,

after death the Mogya retains form, personality and clan status and as a saman or

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23 Idowu, *Olodumare*, 191.
ghost goes to the spirit world to await reincarnation through a woman of the same abusua…at death the ‘Kra goes with the Mogya to the spirit world…it is a divine soul received at birth, which returns to ‘Nyame at death…the deceased’s ‘Kra is usually made to return to earth for reincarnation in a child of his abusua…”

Clearly, these components aid in the maintenance of relationships of the living with the dead.

The blood and soul of an individual, in relation to his/her family, continue to be vital forces through the phenomenon of reincarnation.

The Egun are also ancestral spirits. These spirits revisit earth through members of the male Egungun society. While ceremonies are taking place in honor of the dead person, the Egun will become visible and participate. Dance is interwoven in these celebrations. According to a member of the Egungun society in Benin,

…the Egungun dance is a dance of dead people. It is also called “yaoitcha” the dance of fire. It is a dance of purification which is performed in Yoruba and Nago tribes during dead people ceremonies. It’s danced by women as well as men; women hold an important place because they bless and purify the fire and enable the performers to dance with fire without being harmed or hurt.

The following are examples of some songs that are sung during an Egungun ceremony:

**Example 1**
“Iya lode mon feri bala, abiyaman”

The Mother Priestess has come and I bow to her
(a mark of respect and consideration)

**Example 2**
“Kabiessi ye ye o”

Here are the adorers of Vodun (Kabiessi), here are the powerful sons who master the power of plants and leaves

**Example 3**
“Baba ka lo ile, ile lati wa o (bis)”

Come Big Priest in order to lead the ceremonies

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27 Ibid, 58.
29 Bienvenue, interview by Erica Washington, tape recording, Cotonou, Benin, 23 May 2002.
30 Bienvenue, interview by Erica Washington, email, 1 August 2002.
The following is the musical instrumentation and ceremonial personnel for the Egungun dance:

- **Agbegan** (the bell)
- **Gbon** (talking drum)
- **3 Dugba** (3 small drums)
- **4 dancers**
- **Iyalatche** (the priestess)
- **Zo hoto** (the fire holder)

A primary purpose of each African worship experience is to communicate with the divine. The most universal acts of worship among sub-Saharan Africans are sacrifices and offerings. These expressions are fashioned in order to secure help for the community in regards to daily life. Prayerful offerings are made to God, to the living-dead, and to other spirits in time of need and sometimes accompany acts of worship. Music historian Samuel A. Floyd observes, “the African religious faith was utilitarian, practical, and spiritual.” The gods and men communicate with each other through sacrifice, divination, and spirit possession.

Similar ideas are found in African American worship. Religious Scholar Melva Wilson Costen observes the apparent dynamism and flow that alternates between God’s divine initiative and human responses. [The pattern includes] God’s divine initiative (call); fellowship (gathering); adoration and praise to God (personal testimonies); penitence (prayer); hearing and receiving the Word (illumination); renewal, self-offering, and dedication; and service in the world…

Clearly, there is a connection between African cosmologies and African American Christian worship. Within both religious practices, there is a strong belief in the supernatural and spirits; frequent contact with divinity as well as different methods of communicating with the divine; a

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communal aspect of worship; and a call-and-response nature of worship between human and the divine.

Music and Dance Patterns in African Religions

Africans make contact with spirits through music. According to Raboteau, “dancing, drumming, and singing play a constant and integral part in the worship of gods and the ancestors.” Indeed, they work together. Gods mount – that is, possess – their devotees through dance, the physical expression of the musical elements. The relationship of dance, song, and drum in African-based worship is evidenced in the possession dance Akem performed in the Akan tradition:

The priest whirls round and round after he has first marked spots with powder and delimited both his dancing ring and important positions. As many rounds of this piece are played as the priest desires, while the singers call to God, the creator of the firmament (Oboonyame). One of the important gestures the priest has to make in this opening dance is to point his dancing sword to the sky and then downwards towards the earth.

When enough rounds of the music for the opening dance have been played, the drummers begin the next piece, called adaban. Instead of using swift turns, the priest moves forward along a circular track while the singers sing songs of invocation.

After the adaban the drummers play the music of abofoe, imitative of the hunters’ dance, while the singers praise the prowess of the divinity who, like the hunter, hunts down evil and protects his child from evil men and spirits. A similar piece entitled abefotia is played as a sequel to this, followed by the remaining eight pieces.

When the spirit so moves him, the priest may change the order around by asking for any songs or drum pieces he likes. He never stands still. When he is not dancing, he will walk about, do short runs, dash in and out of the crowd, impersonate various creatures, invite people into the ring by throwing a fly whisk or cowtail switch which he holds in his left hand to them, or shake hands with people along the dancing ring.

Although dance, song, and drum are described separately in the Akem dance, they work together to form a single expressive entity. The priest, drummers, and singers can signal the

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34 Ibid, 15.
ending, beginning, or function of a music/dance section. The rhythms of the drums are heard through singing and seen through dancing.

Melva Wilson Costen's notion of an exchange between divine and human responses in African American Christian worship is seen as a confluence in the Akan Akem example. God’s divine initiative is first seen in the obedience of the devotees to worship God through other deities. It is also seen in the act of the priest clearing the space for worship of the gods through dance and accompanying music (drum). The next activities fall under the category of human responses in which the priest and devotees praise and invoke the presence of gods through dancing and singing. Prayers are also offered up through this dancing-singing phenomenon. Lastly, there is music (drum), dance, and song to aid the devotee to reach spirit possession by the god or gods. This is a plan to allow practitioners to receive a message from a particular god.

Ethnomusicologist Portia Maultsby, in her study of *Africanisms in African Music* suggests that

…black people consciously use their entire bodies in musical expression, and music and movement are conceived as a single unit.\(^{36}\)

This intersection of music and dance supports my concept that dance, drum, and song constitute the whole of the musical elements in African-based worship. It is important to note that all three components – dance, drum, and speech – communicate through language-like features. Many music traditions are associated with each religion.\(^ {37}\) Folklorist Alan Lomax, cited by Floyd, found parallels in the

…extraordinary homogeneity of African song style….When most Africans sing they are non-tense, vocally; quite repetitious, textually; rather slurred in enunciation; lacking in embellishment and free rhythm; low on exclusive leadership; high on antiphony, chorally; especially high on overlapped antiphony; high on one-phrase melodies, on litany form; very cohesive, tonally and rhythmically in chorus; high on


choral integration or part-singing; high on relaxed vocalizing; and highest on polyrhythmic (or hot) accompaniments. This relaxed, cohesive, multileveled, yet leader-oriented style, is distinctly African. It dominates African song from the Cape of Good Hope to the Straits of Gibraltar and west into the American colonies, and is the source and symbol of African cultural homogeneity.\(^{38}\)

Music of African Americans includes several characteristics of African music. For example, the whole body is used in musical experiences; call-and-response form is present, which allows for repetition; there is community participation in a musical event; change of leadership roles; and variation and sameness in rhythms. Ritual is always contextualized with music.\(^{39}\) In West Africa, according to Hounnongan Agbegbe Guendehou of the Thron temple in Cotonou, Benin, “each ceremony has a specific music. Every ceremony has a specific dance. It is not the same dance and music for all ceremony.”\(^{40}\)

Two factors determine the music that is used during worship. On the one hand, the African gods are important as there are specific styles of music and instruments that are associated with the worship of a particular deity. On the other hand, the goals and cultural patterns of worshippers likewise contribute to the organization of music due to society’s perception of the divine, characteristic musical practices, and the summoning of the divine for the welfare of the whole community.\(^{41}\) According to the High Priestess and the Chief of the Mawu Lisa Temple in Whydah, Benin,

All the deities have a lot of songs, drumming, and dancing together. It’s only when you want to do a special ceremony, that you have a special type of music for each of the Vodun. Otherwise they have some for themselves, but a lot they share together because you have so many Voduns and each Vodun has its adepts. Every spirit possesses its adepts. Plenty of the Voduns are here. They have to call each one of them to come. Just

\(^{38}\) Ibid, 27.
\(^{40}\) Hounnongan Agbegbe Guendehou, interview by Erica Washington, tape recording, Cotonou, Benin, 3 June 2002.
by the drumming, the dancing, singing, you know that it is your Vodu, you start to dance for the Vodun.\textsuperscript{42}

These comments verify the strong place that music has during rituals and its marriage with the nature of a ritual.

Vocal music is also important to worship because it fosters community through participation and understanding by all devotees. Because emotion is central to African worship, vocal music becomes a strong vehicle of expression. The musical texts also cover a wide range of spiritual themes. In addition, technical skills are displayed through form, text, melody, and rhythm. According to the African ethnomusicologist Francis Bebey, “it is vocal music alone that can adequately express the meaning of a rite, offer up a prayer to the gods, pronounce sentence and order execution, or preach love and unity within the community.”\textsuperscript{43} The Akan ethnomusicologist Nketia continues Bebey’s perspective when he states that “we find not only songs of praise, invocation, and prayer addressed to individual gods, but also songs that deal with other themes relevant to worship or to spiritual or moral values.”\textsuperscript{44} Religious scholar Melva Wilson Costen applies the same line of thinking to African American Christian worship that “through the texts, singers can respond to God, comment on problems and joys, voice hope in the midst of despair, and assert their humanity.”\textsuperscript{45} It is the text in vocal music that is important in worship. The text helps shape the purpose, melody, rhythm, and form of both African and African American vocal pieces.

Both melody and rhythm in African vocal music are dependent on the text. Because many African languages are tonal, the melodies often concur with the inflection of words,

\textsuperscript{42}High Priestess and Chief of Mawu Lisa Temple, interview by Erica Washington, tape recording, Whydah, Benin, 28 May 2002.
\textsuperscript{43}Francis Bebey. \textit{African Music: A People’s Art} (New York: Lawrence Hill & Company, 1975), 115.
\textsuperscript{44}Nketia, \textit{Music of Africa}, 201.
\textsuperscript{45}Costen, “Music Shapes Worship,” 28.
making the text important in composition.\textsuperscript{46} Classifying African vocal music into two categories, African music theorist Agawu explains that songs are sung in free and strict rhythms.\textsuperscript{47} The music that falls under the free rhythm category corresponds with the text and is sung in a speech-like tempo. The text plays an important role in the phrasing as well as in the duration.\textsuperscript{48} Because all devotees participate in worship experiences in African societies, the call-and-response form (a form in which the “chorus or response is a rhythmic phrase that recurs regularly; the rhythms of a lead singer or musician vary and are cast against the steady repetition of the response”)\textsuperscript{49} becomes familiar and important because of its repetitive structure and communal nature.\textsuperscript{50} The text is most important in vocal music and crucial within a ritual experience. Agawu recognizes the following parts in Northern Ewe prayers: “the (1) invocation of gods and ancestors, (2) the prayer proper, (3) the curse, and (4) the blessing.”\textsuperscript{51} Based on Agawu’s analysis of prayer, I suggest that the song below is an example of a prayer of invocation, containing text that aids in invoking a particular deity, with three distinct parts reflected in the following verses:

\textbf{Verse 1}

All hail. \hspace{0.5cm} 1\textsuperscript{st} Part
Yes, Akyena, come along, \hspace{0.5cm} 2\textsuperscript{nd} Part
Something is happening to me. \hspace{0.5cm} 3\textsuperscript{rd} Part

\textbf{Verse 2}

Hail the water that found a stopping place. \hspace{0.5cm} 1\textsuperscript{st} Part
River god, Tano, come along: \hspace{0.5cm} 2\textsuperscript{nd} Part

\textsuperscript{46} Nketa, \textit{Music of Africa}, 27.
\textsuperscript{47} Kofi Agawu, \textit{African Rhythm: A Northern Ewe Perspective} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 73.
\textsuperscript{48} Nketa, \textit{Music of Africa}, 179-180.
\textsuperscript{50} Nketa, \textit{Music of Africa}, 45.
\textsuperscript{51} Agawu, \textit{African Rhythm}, 53-55.
Something is happening to your children.  

Verse 3

All hail.  
Yes, Akyena, come today,  
For something is happening to us.  

It’s important to understand the exact structure of the song. The first verse begins with a greeting that honors the deity being invoked. Next, it includes a line that calls out the name of a specific god. Afterwards, it ends with a line that states the reason for the prayer or the invocation of a specific divinity. This line is dominant with the personal pronoun “me,” which allows the individual to express his/her individual need for help. The second verse begins with a greeting that honors the force of nature represented by the deity being invoked. Next, it includes a line that states characteristics of the river god and then calls his name out. The verse ends with the reason for the prayer or the invocation of a specific divinity. This line is dominant with the personal modifier “your,” thus showing a personalizing process of the god with the devotee denoted by the plural noun “children.” The word “children” connotes community and unity of worshippers as one, as well as a common focus of worship. The last verse is similar to the first. But, in the second line there are senses of urgency expressed with the words “come today.” With the plural pronoun “us,” the third line returns to the dominance of community. Integral to songs within a ceremonial context are sincere concerns and praises that are expressed through text.

The role of drumming in the ritual experience is to summon the gods. This is done through the performance of specific rhythms believed to represent specific gods. Drums and their rhythms within worship experiences are considered to be sacred. For example, the Yoruba

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52 J.H. Nketia. Drumming in Akan Communities of Ghana (Ghana: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1963) 94.
bembe drum is used when worshipping the wind goddess Oya; bata drums are used when worshipping Sango; the igbin drum ensemble is used while worshipping Obtala.  

The usage of drums becomes more specific by being played at a specific place and by including more percussion instruments. In the Akan tradition, the apentemma, operenten, and atumpan drums are often dedicated to the service of the religious shrines. In some African traditions, musical ensembles include drums, rattles, bells, and voices. For example, the Dzovu musical ensemble, used to accompany religious rituals, of the Ewe consists of two to four drums, one or two bells, along with singing.

Drumming is heightened by accompanying dance movements. Dance becomes the physical and spiritual expression of music. According to the Yoruba scholar P.S.O. Aremu, “drums have a special power; they increase and strengthen a person’s spiritual being, create social cohesion and social solidarity, and promote ritual autonomy through sounds.” When properly used, the sounds of drums affect the soul, body, and mind. These three elements are united through dance.

The goal for any worship service in African religions is to make a bridge to the sacred, and dance is essential in making contact with the divine. Facilitated by people’s perception of the sacred along with inner and outer rewards of dance and approach to the body, dance takes on an integral role in shaping worship services. Progression from the natural to the supernatural worlds during worship is always presumed needed and desired. Dance, then, is recognized as a

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55 Nketia, **Drumming in Akan Communities**, 93.
56 Agawu, **African Rhythm**, 94.
57 Dagan, **Drums**, 111.
58 Ibid, 111.
59 Ibid, 111.
viable form of worship because it is useful in this developmental spiritual cycle. Moreover, dance, coupled with musical and vocal methods of communicating with the sacred, becomes a major resource to satisfy religious needs and expectations within African cultures.\textsuperscript{61}

The role of dance in religious practices can be analyzed on two levels: its role in an actual worship experience and its function in worship experiences. African-derived dance in the religious sphere, according to Reverend Marjani Dele, “is performed to celebrate God’s grace, reaffirm the human connection to the universe, facilitate communal harmony, and exercise spiritual catharsis.”\textsuperscript{62} In some ritual dances there are specialized movements, while in others one is free to dance as the spirit moves.\textsuperscript{63}

According to African dancer/choreographer Omofolabo Soyinka Ajayi, the flow of worship follows a sequence that travels from invocation, to transcendence, and on to celebration.\textsuperscript{64} Every believer that is in a traditional West African religion, with the accompaniment of music and drumming, executes the dance of invocation. Its role is to invoke the presence of the deity. However, additional methods of summoning the Divine Being, such as prayers and singing, precede the dance. Also, the purpose of the dance of invocation is to get the practitioners into a worship mode. The dance of invocation, performed at the beginning of a ritual, has a slow, sedative character without specific movements. Thus, the dance becomes a personal experience for believers. The dance of invocation prepares the devotee to move to the next (transcendental) level.\textsuperscript{65}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid, 187-188.
\textsuperscript{63} Agawu, African Rhythm, 93-94.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid, 188.
\end{flushleft}
The two-part transcendental dance is a powerful way to contact the sacred realm. Ajayi believes that the transcendental dance encompasses both the “progression dance” as well as the “possession dance.” The “progression dance” is when the medium allows his/her whole being to yield to the deity by performing movements that are attributed to the deity being invoked. If successful, this dance then shifts to the possession dance during which the spirit is manifested in the worshipper’s body. The presence and force of the deity overtakes the devotee’s body, allowing the deity to communicate messages through the devotee. Possession by a deity is discernable through the profile and movements that are attributed to that specific god. The transcendental dance is performed by a specialized, chosen individual or group. This new spiritual level is heightened when the deity chooses a person as a medium.

Another type of dance is the dance of celebration. It is a thanksgiving dance that completes the worship experience. The dance of celebration is similar to a benediction in Christian worship because it presents a final blessing from the deity to the devotees. Personal as well as particular praises and blessings through dance movements are offered to deities or a specific deity when possession has been reached. These movements are a result of one’s experience and relationship with the deity as well as a knowledge of archetypal dances that are related to a deity. Furthermore, thanks are given in recognition of the fact and with the understanding that the invoked deity did not have to manifest itself.66

Viewing a particular sacred dance is helpful in understanding the role of dance in African religious practices. Omofolabo Soyinka Ajayi describes the dance for Sango, the Yoruba thunder god:

…the Elegun leans backwards, arms resting loosely on the thighs with the elbows held away from the main body; placing one foot out in front and the other placed behind for balance, the first step is ready to be taken. Responding rhythmically to the

66 Ibid, 191.
background *bata* music, and maintaining the posture established, the sacred performer
starts a slow dance or, as they say, begins to count Sango’s steps. Counting Sango’s steps
begins by slightly raising the heel of the forefoot off the ground and then gripping the
ground with the toes and releasing them almost immediately but slowly. Next, the other
foot is moved forward dragging the rest of the body along and, just before the second leg
draws parallel with the right one, it draws a short arc to the outer side with the same
‘grip-and-release’ toe movements. This completes one circuit of Sango’s step-counting,
but it has to be appropriately terminated to begin the next circuit. The proper termination
is executed with stamp of the left heel and a short jerk of the shoulder; simultaneously the
right leg, which is now back, is brought forward to start the next circuit immediately.67

The dance stance and movements of Lanku (a dance that leads to the possession by Sango)
include themes such as prayer, yielding, invocation, and possession. When a medium dances
Lanku, a dance that is used to communicate with Sango, elements of an invocation dance are
recognized because the dance is slow, executed in the tempo of the *bata* drums and incorporates
characteristics of Sango. The initial stance aids in the yielding process because this position
allows the chosen dancer to give up control.

Initially, the chosen dancer has control over movements because of his backward stance,
toe-release step, and shift of body weight. The Elegun gradually models Sango’s anger by
making his dance posture resemble a bolt of lighting and a thunder clap through movements and
gestures directed: upward, downward, pointed, and, at times, making movements with a tone of
supplication. Desirable and some actual contact with the deity are also detectable at this point.

Within the first part of the progression dance, the expected movements for completing a
circuit are precursors to what follows when contact with Sango is achieved. The completion of a
circuit is evident when the whole foot is lifted and the shoulders jerk. This is also true in the
possession state.

The first indication that Sango has descended on a Lanku dancer is when he begins to
miss his steps and to lose the calculated methodical progress of the step-counting. When
possessed, the medium is unable to complete one stepping circuit before he starts another.

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67 Omofolabo S. Ajayi. *Yoruba Dance: The Semiotics of Movement and Body Attitude in a Nigerian
After missing about four circuits, he lurches forwards and backwards and begins to reel on the same spot. At other times, rather than progress slowly with the grip-and-release toe movement, he sways or staggers and takes a full step forward, lifting the foot off the ground completely.\textsuperscript{68}

During the possession trance state, there is a transformation in profile, behavior, strength, and energy. Now the god, rather than the medium, is in control. There is also a distinctive shift in stance in addition to the whole body dancing, which is an assumption of the embodiment of Sango.

By this time, the medium has become completely transformed, his breathing comes in labored heaves, and his posture is bursting with uncontrollable energy that propels him involuntarily towards the sacrificial animal or the lighted pile. Performed in an almost erect posture, Sango’s Dance of Possesion is virile, energetic, full of restless, continuous movements, and characterized by fast thrusting movements, leg flicks, and jerky shoulder movements.\textsuperscript{69}

Common aspects of African dance in general are included as well.

It is difficult to say which part of the body dominates the dance most, because there is no body part which at any time is not vigorously and actively involved in the dance, although one may be more pronounced at a particular moment.\textsuperscript{70}

In general dancing was embraced in many forms in sub-Saharan Africa. The movements performed by large crowds and team dancing can be performed in a line or circle, or within small groups. The dances done in the circle were regarded as most effective because the ring symbolized a strong sense of community within societies. Tales and legends were central to African music as well as to the corresponding ritual. According to Floyd:

…the activities that took place in the ring were strictly regulated; the dances and music were institutionalized, and the behavior of the participants was policed by dance chiefs, chief and assistant drummers, line leaders, crowd controllers, and other regulators, each of whom played specific and important roles. The choreography, music, tales, and participant, then were focused toward the primary objective of ceremony.\textsuperscript{71}

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid, 88-90.
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid, 88-90.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid, 88-90.
Such a view clearly suggests that ring dance practitioners were focused on a ritual. The use of the body was regulated and constrained.

The ring as a religious formation is important in a variety of African ceremonies. For example, Stuckey cites Talbot’s discussion of a burial ceremony dance in southern Nigeria. Talbot observes that

The Eko also in some of their dances imitate the actions of birds, but the most solemn of them all is perhaps the Ejame, given at the funeral of great chiefs, when seven men dance in the center of an immense circle made by the other performers.\(^{72}\)

Stuckey asserts that the style of delivery in this particular burial ceremony ritual is noted while men

keep their eyes to the ground and the songs that were sung suggested the ancient quality of dance within the circle, the immemorial regard for the ancestral spirits in a country in which dance exists mainly as a form of worship and appears to have developed as a means of achieving union with God.\(^{73}\)

Stuckey also cites Robert Farris Thompson’s description of a Bakongo burial ceremony. According to Thompson,

…bodies were sometimes laid out in state in an open yard, as bare-chested mourners danced to the rhythms of drums in a broken counterclockwise circle, their feet imprinting a circle on earth, cloth attached to and trailing on the ground from their waists deepening the circle. Following the direction of the sun in the Southern Hemisphere, the mourners moved around the body of the deceased in a counterclockwise direction.\(^{74}\) If the deceased lived a good life, death, a mere crossing over the threshold into another world, was a precondition for being carried back into the mainstream of the living, in the name and body of grandchildren of succeeding generations.\(^{75}\)

In another example, a soloist, group, or combination of the two delivers the ring dances of old Dahomey. Stuckey gives a description of these types of ring dances.

As the drums sounded, a woman held a sacrifice under her left arm slowly

\(^{73}\) Ibid, 102.
\(^{74}\)Italicized section of the description is my emphasis.
\(^{75}\) Ibid, 102-103.
dancing in a cleared space three times in a counterclockwise direction, ending with a series of shuffling steps in front of the drums, while the young women who followed her cried out a shrill greeting of the spirits.\textsuperscript{76}

In Sierra Leone, storytelling is another context in which the circle is used. Storytelling is a part of dancing in a counterclockwise direction done in a circle. The focus of the stories is usually on the past and attendees listen or participate in the ritual. Stuckey suggests that clapping and dancing usually occur in stories with a song that takes the form of a refrain. The refrain is repeated by the listeners at a signal from the storyteller. Although it may not involve physical touching of the storyteller, it none the less gives the whole exercise an air of celebration. It also adds an air of vivid drama in the whole process of storytelling.\textsuperscript{77}

Similar concepts are found throughout sub-Saharan African belief systems, however, there are different approaches found in each. This diversity comes from how practitioners recognize and understand African cosmologies relative to their different cultures. Cultural diversity, in turn, allows devotees to contact the sacred through differentiated music and dance expressions within ritual contexts.

In religious ceremonies, Africans consciously use their whole bodies to make contact with the spiritual realm. This total body experience is accomplished through music and dance, which are considered one element. The dance is the physical and expressive representation of the music. These musical elements are important in ceremony because they are strong vehicles of spirit possession. The goal of each ceremonial experience is to make contact with the sacred realm, and that is made evident through the body.

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid, 103.  
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid, 106.
Discussion

People of African descent living on southern slave plantations in North America continued to value music and dance in order to bridge the secular and sacred realms through worship within the Ring Shout. John and Alan Lomax first observe these connections in 1934 through their beliefs that close parallels are striking in many occurrences of the Ring Shout:

We have seen “shouts” in Louisiana, in Texas, in Georgia, and the Bahamas; we have seen vaudou dancing in Haiti; we have read accounts of similar rites in works upon Negro life in other parts of the Western Hemisphere. All share basic similarities: (1) the song is “danced” with the whole body, with hands, feet, belly, and hips; (2) the worship is, basically, a dancing-singing phenomenon; (3) the dancers always move counter-clockwise around a ring; (4) the song has the leader-chorus form, with much repetition, with a focus on rhythm rather than on melody, that is, with a form that invites and ultimately enforces cooperative group activity; (5) the song continues to be repeated from sometimes more than an hour, steadily increasing in intensity and gradually accelerating, until a sort of hypnosis ensues…This shout pattern is demonstrably West African in origin.  

African spirituality has been interpreted in many ways. Although there have been differences identified amongst various ethnic groups, each belief system has similar principles because of its spiritual framework that includes active involvement with God, lesser gods, and the ancestors. Musical components that are made with and by the body are powerful forces used to reach the aims of ritual. In the next chapter I will offer ways in which the use of the body and spirit possession remained constant through the representation of music and dance in African American religious expressions on slave plantations, especially through the evolving Ring Shout ritual.

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78 Raboteau, Slave Religion, 70.
CHAPTER II. RING SHOUT IN U.S. SLAVE COMMUNITIES

OVERVIEW: Religious Life on U.S. Slave Plantations

The religious traditions of enslaved Africans in this country were reflections of the struggle to maintain identity. The principles of West African religious practices in the United States, discussed in chapter one, were coupled with the enslaved Africans’ exposure to their white masters’ religions. The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate an identifiable linkage between religious practices of Africans enslaved in the United States and the spirituality of their African past. This chapter will begin with an overview of religious practices on the U.S. slave plantations with the main focus on Catholicism and Protestantism. Next, claims of the retention of West African religious elements in plantation worship will be provided. In this chapter I will focus on spirituals and their relationship to the Ring Shout and include analyses of the spirituals that offer more insight into the dancing, singing, music, and spirit possession that are tenets of the Ring Shout practice.

Because most whites did not endorse the conversion of enslaved Africans to Christianity for nearly two hundred years, strong retentions of West African religious beliefs and practices were found on U.S. slave plantations. It was not until the Great Awakening of the 1740s, and especially the Great Revivals of the 18th and 19th centuries, that African people who were enslaved in North America were forced to be publicly loyal to the Christian religion of their master.79 Even so, African descendants on the slave plantations during the 18th and 19th centuries maintained a cultural heritage that included many expressions of spirituality, embracing traditions such as West African traditional religions, evangelical Protestantism, Catholicism, and

conjure. The use of the body in praise movements, along with spirit possession (the foundation for worship in traditional West African religion), definitely continued in the New World on plantations.

The spirit of the culture of enslaved Africans in North America would be shaped by legislation that was a result of slave insurrections. Following the Stono Rebellion of 1739 in South Carolina, laws were put in place in 1740 that prohibited the use of drums and dance gatherings because of the fear of more slave rebellions. Before the slave rebellions, West African descendants had the privilege to gather in groups and drums were used for communication to bring the community together. Once the community got together, they participated in activities such as singing and dancing. The law prohibiting the use of drums was passed in order to place restrictions on the way enslaved Africans worshipped. As a result, the use of the body to replace the drum – hand clapping, body percussion, and foot stomping – became the closest medium that allowed enslaved Africans to achieve rhythmic drive.

Both evangelical Protestantism and Catholicism could be adapted to include West African traditions, though in different ways. Evangelical Protestantism allowed free use of the body to express gratitude, to praise, and to achieve spirit possession during worship. The religious revivals associated with the Great Awakening were responsible for the conversion of many slaves to Protestantism because the focus was on personalized transformation that was supported by the principles of Arminianism, the belief that “God would save all who believed in Him and that Salvation was there for all to take hold of if they would.”

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was engaging to enslaved Africans because it was consonant with the physical expressions of
dance, music, and spirit possession in religious ceremonies.  

Catholicism, on the other hand, was accepted by some slaves because they could transfer
their belief in a supreme God along with lesser gods, ancestors and spirits to Catholicism’s use of
sacred objects and devotion to many saints. Catholic customs were already flexible enough to
be syncretized with modes of African religious beliefs. Clearly, both Christian traditions
included practices that were not foreign to slaves. Ethnomusicologist Portia K. Maultsby further
supports this view by saying, “slaves, in general, adopted those concepts and practices of
Christianity which could be identified with West African religious beliefs and customs.”

Evangelical Protestantism, however, was more influential on the slave population than
Catholicism and deserves further examination. Following the Protestant Reformation of 1517,
the British, who became the leading practitioners of Protestantism, also became the dominant
European population of the North American colonies. Religious activities such as camp
meetings, revivals, prayer and praise meetings were important events throughout the slave
quarters because they allowed for a freedom of expression not usually accepted during other
activities by slave owners. Specific components of these ceremonies, such as the preacher’s
rhythmic voice, the music, shouting, and the conversion experience, were common and integral
to both African-based religious practice and Protestant revivalism.

Christianity was divided into two main sects in the United States. The northern states

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82 Olly Wilson, “The Association of Movement and Music as a Manifestation of a Black Conceptual
83 Raboteau, Slave Religion, 272.
Conference, Hymn Society of America), 5.
85 Carolyn Marrow Long. Spiritual Merchants: Religion, Magic, and Commerce (Knoxville: University of
Tennessee Press, 2001), 12, 72-73.
were affiliated with congregationalism, and the southern states were associated with the Anglican Church. The blacks who were in northern states before slavery was abolished there lived and worked in close quarters with their masters. Northern blacks were exposed to much of white culture, making it easy for them to adapt to northern white culture, including religious aspects of the region. Blacks participated in religious ceremonies that resembled those of their West African past on holidays and on Sundays.  

Two examples of holidays that resembled the slaves’ African past were ‘Lection Day and Pinkster Day. For ‘Lection Day, slaves elected a governor or king from their community. People were dressed in fine clothes while taking part in festivities that included a parade, African games, singing, dancing, and playing instruments from both their African past and from their masters’ tradition. Pinkster Day was a holiday with Dutch origins that was transformed into an African-style festival. During the Pinkster Day festivities, thousands of blacks, slave and free, would gather. The festivities included practices such as singing African songs that were accompanied by dancing, and playing the banjo along with African drums.

The blacks who lived in the southern states and on the Sea Islands lived in isolation from their masters and from the mainstream of society. Stronger retention of West African culture, including religious aspects were found in the southern states and on the Sea Islands, especially in the use of body movement that united song and rhythm. These southern blacks and Sea Islanders were able to focus on community, spirit possession, dancing, singing, and music during religious ceremonies.

Revivalism, as a Christian movement in Evangelical Protestantism, eventually inspired

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more blacks to convert to Christianity because the focus was on the individual. Conversion to Christianity was also social and political, however, defining class status and securing basic rights, and became important for black survival in the United States. Masses of blacks used Christianity to support their needs and worldview that retained African practices.  

**Basic Principles of Slave Worship**

When African slaves became Christians during the late 18th century and the Great Revival Period of the early 19th century, West African religious practices were combined with their new religious experiences. Slaves continued to dance and sing while adopting, to some degree, elements of Christianity to conform to West African forms of religious customs. The triad of dance, rhythm, and song created a vitally strong worship practice in black Christianity that became the Ring Shout. Albert Raboteau describes the fusion in terms of the Ring Shout, on which I will soon elaborate:

In the Ring Shout and allied patterns of ecstatic behavior, the African heritage of dance found expression in the evangelical religion of the American slaves. To be sure, there are significant differences between the kind of spirit possession found in West Africa and the shouting experience of American revivalism. Different theological meanings are expressed and experienced in each. But similar patterns of response – rhythmic clapping, ring-dancing, styles of singing, all of which reveal the slaves’ African religious background.

Aspects of West African religious traditions were transformed through Christianity by African slaves and continued to be linked to their worldview.  

The shout is a convincing example of Herskovits’ theory of reinterpretation of African traditions; for the situation of the camp-meeting revival, where enthusiastic and ecstatic religious behavior was encouraged, presented a congenial setting for slaves to merge African patterns of response with Christian interpretations of the experience of spirit.

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92 Ibid, 21-22.
possession, an experience shared by both blacks and whites. The Protestant revivalist tradition accepted by the slaves and their descendants in the United States, proved in this instance to be amenable to African styles of behavior.\textsuperscript{93}

On the surface, it seems as if the use of the body in worship and a re-invented form of spirit possession were widely embraced in the well-established black Christian worship practices of the evangelical Protestant movement.

Recognizable components of the Ring Shout included dancing in a circle with shuffling of feet, the energy of the feet driving into the ground, handclapping, slapping the body to make percussive sounds, singing, shouting, and hollering, bent-knee posture, communicating with the supernatural, the absence of a distinction between sacred and sensual, and maintenance of the community moving together. The dance signified embodied prayer that heightened the religious experience. The Ring Shout was certainly a continuation of a West African tradition because of its marriage between the music and dance. Dance historian, Halifu Osumare, further supports this view by saying, “In the African way of life, dance and music are the essential ingredients to worshipping the gods, and simultaneously, the way a group creates harmony to truly become a community.”\textsuperscript{94}

Indeed, the activities that took place within the Ring Shout reflected what took place in West African religious ceremonies. But, these similar practices during slavery had to be undercover since limitations were placed on the manner in which enslaved Africans danced in religious ceremonies. According to Parrish, “The feet are not supposed to leave the floor or to cross each other, such an act being sinful. The shouting proceeds with a curious shuffling, but controlled step which taps out with the heel a resonant syncopation fascinating in its intricacy.

\textsuperscript{93} Ibid, 21-22.
and precision." Enslaved Africans were not permitted to dance freely as a part of religion in
North America. When they danced, it was thought to be sinful, heathenish, or of the devil by
missionaries, by some blacks, and eventually by slave masters. Therefore, it is important to note
that the dance movements of the Ring Shout were conscious retentions of the religious beliefs of
enslaved Africans that helped to create community for blacks on the southern plantations, in
spite of whites’ disapproval.

Historical Overview of Ring Shout Practices

Sacred dance on slave plantations is best explained through the Ring Shout’s
transformation and syncretization. Many scholars have chronicled the evolution of the Ring
Shout. For instance, Mary Arnold Twining categorized sacred dance on slave plantations in the
New World as the shout, Ring Shout, and shouting. A description of this categorization reveals
that the term

shout expresses a complex of movement and sound that includes singing, dancing, and
clapping; it is best classified as a prayer executed with the whole self…a Ring Shout
contains some of the same elements, such as a uniting of the group’s solidarity and the
release of tensions…the Ring Shout is a pattern whose participants work more
cooperatively toward that aim (altered state of consciousness), whereas the prayers and
shouting constitute a more individual striving toward the desideratum of ‘getting
happy.’

The Ring Shout, which was given many names such as Rock Daniel, the Flower Dance,
or the Rope Dance, had major associations with the past religious experiences of African

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122.
96 Sterling Stuckey, “Christian Conversion and the Challenge of Dance,” *Choreographing History*
(Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 57.
97 Mary Arnold Twining, “I’m Going to Sing and ‘Shout’ While I Have the Chance: Music, Movement, and
slaves. The Ring Shout ritual also provided a way to communicate with the ancestors, an important component in West African religions that was one vehicle for spirit possession. According to Sterling Stuckey, “this dance was known to most slaves, whose people had mainly come from sections of West Africa in which, as the Circle Dance, it was associated with ancestral ceremonies.”

The concept of moving in a circle governs the delivery style of the Ring Shout and is deeply rooted in the African past. Sterling Stuckey notes the transformation of the African circle dance to the North American Ring Shout:

Wherever in Africa the counterclockwise dance ceremony was performed – it is called the Ring Shout in North America – the dancing and singing were directed to the ancestors and gods, the tempo and revolution of the circle quickening during the course of movement. The ring in which Africans danced and sang is the key to understanding the means by which they achieved oneness in America. Knowledge of the ancestral dance in Dahomey contributes to that understanding and helps explain aspects of the shout in North America…

Counterclockwise dance ceremonies were performed in West Africa and continued during slavery by enslaved people of African descent in North America and included both song and dance practices. The remainder of this chapter provides a picture of the activities that took place in the actual Ring Shout ritual in various locals. The analyses will present evidence of specific West African retentions.

Consider this 1862 account of a plantation shout by Higginson:

From a neighboring campfire comes one of those strange concerts half powwow, half prayer meeting…These fires are often enclosed in a sort of little booth made neatly of palm leaves covered in at the top, a native African hut in short; this at times is crammed with men singing at the top of their voices – often the John Brown song was sung, but

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oftener these incomprehensible negro Methodist, meaningless, monotonous, endless chants with obscure syllables recurring constantly & slight variations interwoven, all accompanied with a regular drumming of the feet & clapping of the hands, like castanets; then the excitement spreads, outside the enclosure men begin to quiver & dance, others join, a circle forms, winding monotonously round some one in the centre. Some heel & toe tumultuously, others merely tremble & stagger on, others stoop & rise, others swirl, others caper sidewise all keep steadily circling like dervishes, outsiders applaud especial strokes of skill, my approach only enlivens the scene, the circle enlarges, louder grows the singing about Jesus & heaven, & the ceaseless drumming & clapping go steadily on. At last seems to come a snap and the spell breaks amid general sighs & laughter. And this not rarely but night after night.  

This account highlights that moving around in a circle remained central to religious ceremonies of enslaved Africans. Rhythmic handclapping, shuffling of the feet, and call and response singing are all West African survivals. Furthermore, the main focus of ritual in West African religious practices and subsequently in the Ring Shout is to communicate with the spiritual realm through possession.  

As Maultsby notes, in traditional West African ritual “the accompaniment of a drum, rattle, and singing and hand clapping of the chorus is essential for possession to ensue.” It is the rhythm that is expressed through the body, along with singing, and/or drumming, that carries the powerful influence in the transformational religious experience.

Another Ring Shout account in 1863 by H.G. Spaulding further emphasizes the interrelatedness of dance and music in the Ring Shout in the 19th century:

…there usually follows the very singular and impressive performance of the “Shout,” or religious dance of the negroes. Three or four, standing still, clapping their hands and beating time with their feet, commence singing in unison one of the peculiar shout melodies, while the others walk around in the ring, in single file, joining also in the song. Soon those in the ring leave off their singing, the others keeping it up while with increased vigor, and strike into the shout step, observing most accurate time with the music. This step is something halfway between a shuffle and a dance, as difficult for an uninitiated person to describe as to imitate. At the end of each stanza of the song the dancers stop short with a slight stamp on the last note, and then putting the other foot forward, proceed through the next verse. They will often dance to the same song for

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101 Rosenbaum *Shout Because You’re Free*, 28.
103 Ibid, 11.
twenty or thirty minutes, once or twice, perhaps varying the monotony of their movement by walking for a little while and joining in the singing. The physical exertion, which is really very great, as the dance calls into play nearly every muscle of the body, seems never to weary them in the least, and they frequently keep up a shout for hours, resting only for brief intervals between the different songs.\footnote{Emery, \textit{Black Dance}, 123.}

This account is more graphic in its description by providing information about the type of dancing that took place during the ritual. It suggests that the clapping and the beating of time with the feet continued to be mediums for rhythm and were necessary substitutions for the drum. The “shout step” was synchronized with the music represented by singing and rhythmic hand clapping. The stomping of the foot at the end of each stanza implies that the goal of the ritual was possession, in which there were recognizable progressions. The stomping of the foot at the end of each stanza provides an opportunity for possession because missed steps executed by the foot are the first signs of possession.

Rosenbaum cites Allen’s discussion of a shout in \textit{Slave Songs}. This Ring Shout account by Allen illustrates that slaves maintained active participation throughout the worship that was consistent with their African past:

\ldots[they] all stand up in the middle of the floor, and when the “sperichil” is struck up, begin first walking and by-and-by shuffling around, one after the other, in a ring. The foot is hardly taken from the floor, and the progression is mainly due to jerking, hitching motion, which agitates the entire shouter, and soon brings out streams of perspiration. Sometimes they dance silently, sometimes as they shuffle they sing the chorus of the spiritual, and sometimes the song itself is also sung by the dancers. But more frequently a band, composed of some of the best singers and tired shouters, stand at the side of the room to “base” the others, singing the body of the song and clapping their hands together or on their knees.\footnote{Rosenbaum, \textit{Shout Because You’re Free}, 32.}

This shout account includes a gradual excitement of the song and dance during a ring ritual. It demonstrates that song and dance were inseparable, and that everyone was at the event while many participated in these expressions as a part of the shout. This account also emphasizes the
actual sounding of the feet. Historically, it should be remembered that the shuffling of the feet was important due to the ban placed on the drum in 1740. The importance of community in West African cultures, explored in Chapter 1, is demonstrated further in this account of the Ring Shout. Community continued to be a crucial element for enslaved Africans in the New World experience. On the slave plantation, the Ring Shout not only represented African retentions, but also communal practices that allowed for survival in a brutal system.

The Spirituals and their Relationship to the Ring Shout

The strength of enslaved Africans is remarkable as they were able to maintain a sense of spiritual balance in the new oppressive environment that was most visible in the meaning and the context of spirituals. The spiritual was an important musical genre of enslaved Africans that aided in the preservation of their West African cultural practices. As the Chief and High Priestess of the Mawu Lisa temple in Whydah, Benin suggests,

…when you are singing and chanting and dancing for the Vodun, you are making them happy and that makes you have all the goodness. When you make the Vodun happy, you chant, you sing all his goodness through the songs, through the dances. If the Vodun are happy, then they will respond…Song is a prayer at the same time protection and blessing…

Similar songs were executed both within and without the Ring Shout performances in North America. The song style accompanying the dance that governs West African-based religions continues to be important in the New World Ring Shout ceremony.

Although African retentions were apparent in the Ring Shout, variations occurred in the translation and re-creations in a new land and culture. Because the enslaved West Africans and

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their descendants were in the New World where Christianity dominated, songs became more outwardly connected to the Trinitarian structure of Christianity than with the structure of West African spirituality. As a result, in African American Christianity, personal experiences of Jesus were powerful. Arthur C. Jones notes that enslaved Africans and their descendants established an image of Jesus that connected with their oppression and liberation of spirit: “The symbolism of the Jesus story and its message of better times ahead were explored most fully in songs about Jesus’ death and the opportunity provided to singers to identify with a life in which suffering offered the promise of redemption and salvation.”109

The character of this strong connection with Jesus is obvious in many spirituals. Consider the lyrics of “Guide my Feet,” an example of a prayer. Although the text doesn’t mention the name of Jesus, it does makes references to Him by using the word “Lord” instead. The text is successful in describing the slaves’ experiences of Jesus because of its tone of natural, everyday conversation:

**Verse 1**
Guide my feet, Lord, While I run this race.
Guide my feet, Lord, While I run this race.
Guide my feet, Lord, While I run this race for I don’t want to run this race in vain.

**Verse 2**
Hold my hand, Lord, While I run this race.
Hold my hand, Lord, While I run this race.
Hold my hand, Lord, While I run this race for I don’t want to run this race in vain.

**Verse 3**
Stan’ by me, Lord, While I run this race
Stan’ by me, Lord, while I run this race,
Stan’ by me my Lord; While I run this race, for I don’t want to run this race in vain.110

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The first verse begins with a request to Jesus. Next, it is immediately repeated. This request includes the word “feet” in order to express the possible nearness of Jesus to the individual. Also, the word “guide” suggests the belief that Jesus is always present. However, the combination of the words “guide” and “feet” represents only the beginning level of an experience of Jesus. The verse ends with the reason for the prayer, which represents the individual’s ongoing attempt to experience Jesus. The second verse begins with a petition that is immediately repeated. This appeal includes the word “hand” in order to show how close Jesus could be to a person. The word “hold” implies that Jesus could be reached. When “hold” and “hand” are joined together, another level of Jesus is felt because direct contact is now achieved by both Jesus and the individual. The third verse continues with the pattern established by the first and second verses, but have the highest level of Jesus is touched; “Stan’ by me” proposes the full presence of Jesus by now being with the whole person.

The same thing is true for other spirituals. The words of the spiritual “Give me Jesus” includes the name of Jesus:

**Verse 1**
O, when I come to die,
O, when I come to die,
O, when I come to die,
Give me Jesus,

**Chorus**
Give me Jesus,
You may have all this world;
Give me Jesus.

**Verse 2**
In the morning when I rise,
In the morning when I rise,
In the morning when I rise,
Give me Jesus,

**Chorus**
Verse 3
Dark midnight was my cry,
Dark midnight was my cry,
Dark midnight was my cry,
Give me Jesus,

Chorus\textsuperscript{111}

Each verse is punctuated with a demand for Jesus by using the words “give me Jesus.” All the verses suggest that at all stages of life Jesus is needed. The verses indicate the possibility of transformation in life as a result of having a relationship with Jesus. The chorus represents the value and importance of experiencing Jesus. These text analyses of the spirituals provide us further insight into the place of song in religious contexts of oppressed people of African descent. Focusing on the text of spirituals outside of the Ring Shout gives us one way to study religious and social themes and meanings. These sacred texts continue to be potent and important in effecting transformation while in ceremonial contexts.

The spiritual itself evolved out of the African’s North American experience during the system of slavery.\textsuperscript{112} However, the presence of strong sacred themes proves that the purpose of the spirituals was not merely a longing to be free from bondage.\textsuperscript{113} Arthur C. Jones offers a description of the usage of these songs: “The spirituals, in other words, were not created solely for the purpose of enduring the suffering imposed by slavery. Rather, these songs were a natural extension of long-established West African traditions of music created for worship and spiritual affirmation. Their use as an aid in coping with psychological trauma was a secondary

\textsuperscript{112} Floyd, *Power of Black Music*, 40.
The spirituals, as a part of the worship repertoire of slaves, were meaningful in religious contexts and also in issues relating to daily life.

The texts of spirituals show indications of themes related to West African spirituality. Within these songs, the belief in the omnipresence of God, the Supreme God, is identified. In addition, there are many lyrics that disclose the nature and principles of God. Therefore, the belief in the presence and the power of the Supreme Being is recognized through these songs. Consider the following text:

My God is so high, you can’t get over Him;
He’s so low, you can’t get under Him;
He’s so wide, you can’t get around Him.  

The words of this spiritual reveal that the Creator is in all places and in everything. A personal relationship with the divine is implied in the first line with the use of the word “my.” Also, each line includes a location word that represents cause and a corresponding location word that signifies effect. These cause and effect connections demonstrate an impossibility of evading God. The first line cause and effect relationship is identified with “high” and “over,” in the second line “low” and “under,” and in the third with “wide” and “around.” Within the North American experiences, the worldview of enslaved Africans remained constant because they had the ability to continue their belief in the Supreme God being everywhere and in everything.

Enslaved Africans were considered to be property and inhuman. Therefore, another necessary spiritual theme within these songs was about Self. Composers of spirituals modified the states of consciousness that were imposed on them by their tormenters because of the self-knowledge that enslaved Africans maintained. This self-knowledge included the belief that they were indeed human and progeny of God. These ideas became the source of strength for enslaved
Africans and their descendants because it challenged the dehumanizing system of slavery.\textsuperscript{116}

The text of “Ride Up In De Chariot” portrays a concept of the self-identity of enslaved Africans:

\textbf{Verse 1}
Gonna ride up in the chariot, soon a in the mornin’,
Ride up in the chariot, soon a in the mornin’,
Ride up in the chariot, soon a in the mornin’ and I hope I join the band.

\textbf{Chorus}
Oh, Lord, have mercy on me.
Oh, Lord, have mercy on me.
Oh, Lord, have mercy on me, and I hope I’ll join the band.

\textbf{Verse 2}
Gonna walk and talk with Jesus, soon a in the mornin’
Walk and talk with Jesus, soon a in the mornin’,
Walk and talk with Jesus, soon a in the mornin’ and I hope I join the band.

\textbf{Chorus}

\textbf{Verse 3}
Gonna chatter with the angels, soon a in the mornin’,
Chatter with the angels soon a in the mornin’,
Chatter with the angels, soon a in the mornin’ and I hope I’ll join the band.

\textbf{Chorus}\textsuperscript{117}

This song incorporates poetic imagery. Each verse includes a description of a concept of an after-life experience or heaven. Additionally, each verse helps individuals to psychologically change their present condition while affirming who they are to themselves. The chorus is a forgiveness plea, asking for mercy. The tone now shifts from assurance to doubt that places the focus on the slave masters. Lack of confidence and authority resounds in the third line of each verse and chorus section of the song. Because slave masters created oppressive and hostile environments, enslaved Africans believed slave masters were going to have to pay for their mistreatment and no good could come to them. This shift weakens the position of the slave

\textsuperscript{116} F. Jones and A. Jones, \textit{Triumph of the Soul}, 9.
\textsuperscript{117} Paterson, \textit{Negro Spiritual}, 65-68.
master while making the slaves superior and in control. The change in hierarchy is demonstrated with a disclaimer at the end of each verse and chorus by using the words “and I hope I join the band.”

Africans, becoming African Americans, maintained the principles of family and community that were familiar in West Africa. These family and community relationships were strong because everyone first had a place and connection to the familial structure as well as to the larger community. As a result, the concept of communal relationships allowed African peoples, now enslaved in America, to deal with their new plight with more of a sense of unity, particularly because they were from various ethnic groups and cultures. Within the African context, John Mbiti observes that, “it is kinship which controls social relationships between people in a given community: it governs marital customs and regulations, it determines the behavior of one individual towards another.”

The text of “Old Time Religion” supports the importance of the strong familial ties. In addition, the text gives a description of the horror of breaking up the family and community structure that was common among slave families:

**Verse 1**
Give me that old time religion,
Give me that old time religion,
Give me that old time religion,
It’s good enough for me.

**Verse 2**
It was good for my grandmother,
It was good for my grandmother,
It was good for my grandmother,
It’s good enough for me.

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119 *Give Me Jesus* (cited 9 June 2003); available from [http://www.negrospirituals.com/news-song/give_me_jesus_1.htm](http://www.negrospirituals.com/news-song/give_me_jesus_1.htm); INTERNET
The words of this song reveal the slaves’ continuous appeal for truth and justice. By using “grandmother,” this appeal became personal because slaves were inspired to continue to fight for what their forebears believed in – a particularly West African trait due to their desire to continue to practice something that has been passed down from generations. The ties to the past, elders, and ancestors were sources of strength and courage for enslaved Africans.

The ancestors, who were integral to the West African belief system, continued to be connected to the familial structure in North American slave communities and were consulted to aid family members in many ways. Arthur C. Jones argues that the “personalization of Bible stories illustrates another significant cultural value of the early African American community: the honoring of ancestors…Africans in bondage in North America created, in effect, ancestral equivalents.”

But, there are problems with Jones’ convenient use of the term “ancestral equivalents” because he never raises the question of whether these “ancestral equivalents” were accepted as ancestors or believed to be ancestors. Another problem in Jones’ argument is that he fails to tell us when and where creators of spirituals, African slaves, ceased acknowledging and honoring their own ancestors and as a result found a need to create new ancestors. He fails to tell us how enslaved Africans were connected spiritually to these new “ancestral equivalents.”

Moreover, he fails to acknowledge how it is impossible to create new ancestors because ancestors are your biological antecedents. The belief that the spirits of Old Testament heroes were vital and active because enslaved Africans related to their stories is strong, but is it strong enough to prove that enslaved Africans thought of these heroes as “ancestral equivalents?”

Jones’ analysis of “ancestral equivalents” minimizes the spiritual role, connection, importance, and power of the belief in ancestors in African spirituality as discussed in detail in chapter 1.

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120 F. Jones and A. Jones, Triumph of the Soul, 13.
A more convincing aspect of Jones’ argument is his belief that the stories of these Old Testament heroes gave the slaves encouragement in their fight for freedom. For example, Moses helped to deliver the children of Israel from their oppression. This side of his argument is stronger because one can clearly perceive the degree to which enslaved Africans were encouraged by these stories. Historian Lawrence Levine also recognizes the significance of the parallelism between the stories of the Old Testament heroes and the situations of the plantation slaves:

It is important that Daniel and David and Joshua and Jonah and Moses and Noah, all of whom fill the lines of the spirituals, were delivered in this world and delivered in ways which struck the imagination of the slaves. Over and over their songs dwelt upon the spectacle of the Red Sea opening to allow the Hebrew slaves past before inundating the mighty armies of Pharoh. They lingered delightedly upon the image of little David humbling the great Goliath with a stone…They retold in endless variation the stories of the blind and humbled Samson bringing down the mansions of his conquerors; of the ridiculed Noah patiently building the ark which would deliver him from his confinement through faith.\(^{121}\)

In the same line of association, consider the text of “Wade in the Water”:

**Chorus**
Wade in the water
Wade in the water, children,
Wade in the water
God’s a-going to trouble the water

**Verse 1**
See that host all dressed in white
God’s a-going to trouble the water
The leader looks like the Israelite
God’s a-going to trouble the water

**Verse 2**
See that band all dressed in red
God’s a-going to trouble the water
Looks like the band that Moses led
God’s a-going to trouble the water\(^ {122}\)

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\(^{121}\) Levine, *Black Culture*, 50.

\(^{122}\) *Wade In The Water* (cited 9 June 2003); available from [http://www.negrospirituals.com/news-song/wade_in_the_water.htm](http://www.negrospirituals.com/news-song/wade_in_the_water.htm); INTERNET
As has been noted by many scholars, the chorus is a prayer to prepare the slaves for battle. The act of wading in the water is an imagery of battle. The use of the word “water” is symbolic of death and resurrection. The word “trouble” is symbolic of the short period of time between death and resurrection, signifying that freedom is near. It ends with “God’s a-going to trouble the water” to provide comfort that God is present in the fight for freedom.

Jones further supports the interpretation of “Wade in the Water” as being about battling and revolting;

A leader on the eve of a planned insurrection might well have involved her co-conspirators in singing, “See that band all dressed in red; it looks like the band that Moses led; God’s a-gonna trouble the water!” knowing that all members of the group would understand this as affirmation of their spirited anticipation of imminent freedom and as confirmation of their valued role as leaders of “the band” of freedom fighters. 123

It is also essential to note that the same elements of battle, death and resurrection, and freedom appeared in other interpretations, but were transformed because they accompanied baptism rites and were important to escaping slavery by giving instructions. 124 For example, within baptism rites, when an individual is immersed in water, it is symbolic of putting to death an old life. When the same person comes out of the water, he is a new human being.

With this notion about double meanings and masked purposes found in spirituals, I return back to the analysis of “Wade in the Water.” Verse 1 is in a call-and-response structure. The same response is repeated as a reminder that God is always present in difficult times and served as a source of strength for plantation slaves. Both verses metaphorically portray the slaves’ state of oppression through the children of Israel’s victorious bondage story.

The first call in verse 1 includes the words “host” and “white” to suggest that it appears to be an army that thinks that their system of oppression is justified. The second call in the same

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123 Jones, Wade in the Water, 48.
124 Ibid, 50.
verse describes a division of classes (race) by using the words “leader” and “Israelite” in order to depict a hierarchical system in which one race believes that it is better than the other. The first call in verse 2 includes “band” and “red” to make reference to the importance of unity in this struggle of freedom. The second call in the same verse includes “band” and “Moses led” to suggest that to the slaves everyone is equal and if it continues to be a united push for freedom, they will be successful. Overall the second verse pictures children of Israel crossing the red sea with the help of Moses to escape their bondage. For the slaves, the “crossing” is symbolic of changing from one life to another.

In addition to the power that comes from singing the words of the spirituals, there are clear musical elements that heighten their potency. One of these was rhythm. It is not a surprise that this would be highly influential because the use of the drum was a major part of ceremony or ritual within West African belief systems. When there was no drum, there were always other ways to keep the rhythmic drive: bell, singing, handclapping, and the drive of the feet into the ground. In African traditions, the rhythms that came through the drums as well as the other mediums produced a strong energy that connected practitioners to spiritual realms. Following the cultural traditions of their African ancestors, enslaved Africans continued to value rhythm by incorporating it into their religious activities. The full effect of this rhythmic activity, however, could not come through from just singing. Rhythm was successfully explored through the Ring Shout, often through recurring and familiar rhythmic stanzas that help to sustain rhythmic energies.

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125 F. Jones and A. Jones, *Triumph of the Soul*, 16-17.
126 Ibid, 17.
“Kneebone Bend” is considered to be one of the oldest shout songs sung by enslaved Africans upon their arrival to the New World. This song includes complex rhythms and cross rhythms which also characterize West African music. The song starts out with a refrain that has been identified as the recurring rhythmic verse (seen in mm. 1-4). When the refrain is sung, there is a two-against-three polymeter. The leader starts in two while the basers alternate with a response in three (apparent between mm. 1 and 2 and mm. 3 and 4). When there is a shift to singing the verses, there are alternating passages of three-against-three between the leader and basers (clear between mm. 5 and 6 and mm. 7 and 8). The basers establish and maintain the rhythmic pulse by responding in three and singing in fifths (seen in m. 2) throughout the entire song. Black people in the New World continued to value their African traditional rhythms. The description of this shout song reveals that polyrhythm, which is heard through the singing of the song, continued to be a major characteristic in the New World religions devised by black slaves.

127 Rosenbaum Shout Because You’re Free, 127.
Figure 1. Score of Kneebone Bend
Another element of African origin was body movement, which is suggested in the texts of certain spirituals due to poetic devices that interlocked with the melodies that influenced the creation of their soulful and religious natures.\(^\text{128}\) The shout song “Move Daniel” gives us an imagery of continuous movement through the text and the music.\(^\text{129}\) The body movement that is found in West African-based worship symbolizes the desire for deep connections to the spiritual world. This deep connection is expressed in “Move Daniel” through the singing of words, the structure of music, and the grammar of the text, all of which are interrelated in order to generate movement. Daniel is given many commands that require action such as “Move, Daniel,” “Rock, Daniel,” “Shout Daniel,” and “Do the eagle wing, Daniel.” The commands are repeated several times before the entrance of the chorus. The commands are separated by a comma or a short pause to imply frequent movement instead of limited movement.

Musically, dotted and bouncy rhythms are used extensively in the verse to attain a feeling of motion. The melodic interval between each phrase of the verse has a movement of a third. There is an inverted movement of a third (major sixth) between the first and second phrases (seen in m. 1 on beat three). There is movement of a major third between the second and subsequent phrases (seen in m. 2 on beat three). This third movement is also incorporated when “Daniel” is called during the first part of the phrase (seen in m. 1 on beat four) and in the second part of the phrase between “move” and “Daniel” (seen in m. 2 on beat one). There is also the use of both major and minor modes to enhance the movement in the song. The first phrase is sung in the major mode (G major). The second phrase starts out in the major mode, but progresses to the minor mode (e minor).

\(^{129}\) Rosenbaum, *Shout Because You’re Free*, 123.
This analysis of the verses of “Move Daniel” provides an example of how enslaved Africans consciously continued to pursue their expressive cultural practices through music, dance, and rhythm that were part of their worldview. There is an effective incorporation of singing, rhythm, and movement in this song. The text of “Move Daniel” shapes the purpose, melody, rhythm, and form of the song and preserves the role of vocal music in West African religious practices. “Move Daniel” is in a call-and-response structure. Within the part that is sung by the soloist, words request movement from the individual throughout the entire song. Frequency of melodic movement between words, clauses, phrases, and verses strengthens the locomotive character of the song. The use of dotted rhythms in this song is complex and effective because it aids in achieving the goal of movement.

Musically, the chorus (mm. 3-6) is sung in unison suggesting a decrease in movement because of the absence of action. Each phrase of the chorus starts out with notes that have longer
durations. The first phrase (seen in mm. 3-4) begins with two half notes and briefly returns to a dotted rhythm figure (seen in m. 4 complimenting words of actions such as “pray” and “sinner”), ending with a quarter rest to signify stopping. There is minimal melodic motion in the first line of the first phrase. The first phrase of the chorus is incomplete, ending on a half cadence (I - V), and is in the minor mode. The second phrase (seen in mm. 5-6) starts out with half notes and continues to be dependant on the grammar of the text, but when “sinner gone to hell” is sung (seen in m. 6), the melodic line falls, returning back to the character of the verse. The second phrase starts out in the minor mode, but quickly modulates back to the major mode. The second phrase ends on an authentic cadence (V – I) and alludes to the movement that is found in the verse.

The analysis reveals that the chorus part of “Move Daniel” is typical of West African religious practices because of its communal nature and its usage of harmony. The text continues to be potent and supported by the melody. Based on my analysis of the text and music, there is a change in the melodic structure to aid in the community moving together in order to effectively generate change. The deceleration in rhythm is to ensure involvement by the entire community and is related to the change in melodic structure.

Other musical elements include improvisation; call and response form; successful use of both major and minor modes, which includes the incorporation of “blue” notes; and the freedom of self expression through the music.130 “Blow, Gabriel” is a shout song about the excitement of judgement day that encourages the angel Gabriel to blow his trumpet.131 In West African-based cultures, the element of community in religious ceremonies is as important as the religious ceremony itself. This shout song demonstrates the importance of community by incorporating

130 Ibid, 120.
131 Ibid, 111.
the call and response outline as its overall structure. The call, which varies throughout the song, is always sung by the leader. The alternating response, “Judgement! Judgement bar!,” recurs without any changes and is always sung by a group of basers. This song requires the leader to improvise. Improvisation is best understood through the theme and variation form. The theme (seen in mm. 1-6) is stated by the leader and the basers. The first noticeable variation (seen in mm. 6-12) is controlled by the leader and includes an alteration in the subdivision of the beat. The response of the basers, which begins on the second beat of every measure, is affected and as a result the beat tempo is increased. When Gabriel is encouraged to blow his trumpet again, the leader enters on the “a” of the fourth beat of the measure (seen in the beginning of m. 6). The entrances of the calls now appear to be quicker, reflecting the build-up of excitement. Melodic ornaments, which reflect the rhythm of speech in this case, are also incorporated because of the addition of words (seen in m. 11). In addition to variation found in rhythm, the text also appears in a theme and variation format.
Figure 3. Score of Blow, Gabriel
Consider the text of the theme and variation that is sung by the leader:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Variation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blow Gabriel</td>
<td>Oh blow Gabriel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blow that trumpet</td>
<td>Oh blow that trumpet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calm and easy</td>
<td>Louder and louder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell ev’ry body</td>
<td>Got to wake my people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My God say</td>
<td>Where ever they be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That they got to meet</td>
<td>On land or sea</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The voice of Gabriel is speaking in the theme. The voice of another messenger, a slave, is speaking in the variation because of the use of the words “my people” and “land or sea” that suggest the community moving together. In the variation, Gabriel is instructed to blow his trumpet in a manner that is similar to the theme with the addition of the word “oh.” Afterwards specific directions are given and the text changes.

**Conclusions**

The study of the music and dance that took place in the Ring Shout on U.S. slave communities reveals that there were strong West African retentions. Enslaved Africans continued to be deeply spiritual people. In chapter 1 we find that in West Africa the structure of African spirituality included the belief in a Supreme deity, lesser deities, and the ancestors. However, in chapter 2 we see that enslaved Africans’ approval of Christianity was external. Their understanding of Christian doctrines and rituals were still rooted in West African religious traditions. Religious ceremonies continued to incorporate song, rhythm, and dance. In chapter 1 we observe that in West Africa song, drum, and dance were mediums for prayer, praise, and self-expression. Similarly, in chapter 2, we find the same purposes for these musical elements. But, during slavery, the use of the drum was restricted, so body motions and sounds took over the role

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132 Rosenbaum *Shout Because You’re Free*, 110-112.
of percussion. The goal of ritual continued to be spirit possession. In chapter 1 the gods were summoned through music. There were specific rhythms, songs, and dances for the gods. The expression of dance was a medium in which the deities embodied the practitioners. In chapter 2 the function for dance in worship was the same, though enslaved Africans transformed their spirituality into a Christian mode that encompassed their worldview for survival. Possession was now by the Holy Spirit. In the next chapter, through field work study in Toledo’s Friendship Baptist church, I will identify how elements of the Ring Shout persist in 21st-century Black American worship.
CHAPTER III. ELEMENTS OF THE RING SHOUT AS IT EXISTS IN CONTEMPORARY BLACK AMERICAN WORSHIP

OVERVIEW: Religious Life in Contemporary Black American Worship

Over time and space we find that the 20th-century descendents of West African slaves continued to have the ability to adapt to social conditions while maintaining cultural practices that included expressive forms such as music, dance, and religion. In order to survive the hostile, oppressive conditions of North America during slavery, enslaved peoples of African descent focused on ways to fortify their spirit. They had always been spiritual people and situated spirituality into the fabric of daily life. For the slaves, inward freedom was more reachable and important than outward freedom, which appeared to be impossible to obtain. The purpose of this chapter is to show how the continuum of a West African consciousness in North America evolved in 20th-century black American worship that includes practices that were embedded in the Ring Shout ritual during U.S. slavery.

An important aspect of 20th-century black American worship was the establishment of the black church. The 20th-century black church preserved cultural characteristics of its African past that were initiated during slavery in the 18th and 19th centuries that included practices of dance, music, and spirit possession. The wave of revivalism of the 18th and 19th centuries was the impetus for the conversion of a large number of slaves to Christianity. The massive conversion of slaves to Christianity, however, was paradoxical due to much racism that was found in the churches of their masters. As explained by William Watley,

White Christians would not countenance relating to Blacks as equal members and participants in the household of faith; but powerless slaves would not abide segregated pews, segregated altars and communion tables, or a gospel that taught submission to the
yoke of slavery as consistent with the will of God.\textsuperscript{133}

There were limitations and restrictions on what slaves were permitted to do during worship. During this spiritual racism, slaves were unable to participate fully in worship services. They couldn’t enjoy the same benefits of being Christians as the white Christians. The underlining cause of this spiritual racism was the proclamation that came through preaching, which emphasized when slaves showed obedience to their masters and submission to slavery, it was pleasing to God. As a result, enslaved Africans began to question their participation in their master’s version of Christianity which gave them motivation to create independent black churches. The African American church was important because it was the savior of the community that was oppressed by the system of slavery. It also empowered the people along with allowing constant negotiating with Christianity as a political tactic to meet the needs of people.

The black church was comprised of independent churches that included various denominations that allowed congregations and their leadership to have certain religious rights that they were not otherwise permitted to have. There are seven historical African American churches that were established in the mid 18\textsuperscript{th} century to counter the racism that was so prominent and practiced in the white denominations. The African Methodist church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion church, and the Christian Methodist Episcopal church were denominations that were connected to the Methodist community. The National Baptist Convention, the National Baptist Convention of America, and the Progressive National Baptist

Convention fell under the umbrella of Baptists. The Church of God in Christ was a Pentecostal denomination.\textsuperscript{134}

The creation of these independent black churches opened the way to creations of new church movements that continued to bridge cultural characteristics of the West African past to contemporaneous societal conditions. These new movements have characteristics that allow African Americans to have freedom of expression in religious contexts.\textsuperscript{135}

Just as enslaved Africans faced spiritual racism and because of this formed independent African American churches, likewise, within denominations there was still a sense of bondage that led to the establishment of new movements. For instance, the Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship, with which Friendship Baptist is affiliated, was founded in 1994 by Bishop Paul Morton. The movement continues to follow the Baptist doctrines and places them as their foundation, however, it differs from the traditional Baptist churches in that its focus is on the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, baptism of the Holy Spirit, freedom of intentional formal praise and worship, and freedom to exercise spiritual gifts. The Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship provides us with a bridge between Baptist doctrines and Pentecostal practices. The founders of this movement fused two denominations to fulfill the needs of the people with more focus on spiritual development.

There are different views about the manner in which African American Christians worship. Some believe that the way African American Christians worship is consistent with the way white American Christians worship. Others believe that the way African American Christians worship is consonant with the Bible. These varied notions manifest themselves at Friendship Baptist church, where I did my field study, through the way the members of the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[134] Ibid, 30-35.
\item[135] Ibid, 28-29.
\end{footnotes}
congregation explain why they worship in the way that they do and the pastor’s assertion that
worship practices derive directly from the Bible. For example, when the pastor of Friendship
Baptist church was asked what are some ways the body could be used in a worship experience,
he responded with the following Biblical references.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Barak</td>
<td>to knell</td>
<td>Job 1:21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Yadah</td>
<td>to extend hands with palms out</td>
<td>2Chr. 7:36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Tehillah</td>
<td>to sing</td>
<td>Ex. 15:11</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Todah</td>
<td>to extend hands with palms inward</td>
<td>Lev. 7:11-13, 15</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Pazar</td>
<td>to leap</td>
<td>2Sa. 6:16</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Maha</td>
<td>to clap</td>
<td>Ps. 47:1</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Havah</td>
<td>to lie prostrate</td>
<td>1 Ki. 18:39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Karar</td>
<td>to dance</td>
<td>Ps. 144:3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Raqad</td>
<td>to skip about</td>
<td>Ps. 114:4-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Shabach</td>
<td>to shout loud</td>
<td>Ps. 33:3</td>
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These ways of moving the body during worship are all based on scripture, yet my own
research, both secondary and primary, has revealed that there may be historical reasons for the
worship practices at Friendship Baptist.

**Basic Principles of Contemporary Black American Worship**

During my field study at Friendship Baptist church, I found that the services were
characterized by preaching, musical expressions, and shouting. These modes of worship are
elements connected to West African and slave’s religious practices and are typical of black
churches. In order to fully grasp the method of worship at Friendship Baptist church, one has
to explore the impetus behind the type of spirited worship that is present. According to one
informant, the following drives her to worship:

I have come to the realization of a need to have a relationship with God because of His
love. In the experiences of my past I have been able to benefit from the grace of God.

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Currently, I am able to praise and bless God for being in my life and in the lives of others. Through my praise, I am able to encourage others, to experience inside joy, and appeal to God so that He could bless other individuals.¹³⁷

The reason for worship given by this informant provides a summary of the importance of creating an atmosphere that promotes sincere and energetic worship at Friendship Baptist church. Edward Wimberly in his work, *The Dynamics of Black Worship: A Psychosocial Exploration of the Impulses That Lie at the Roots of Black Worship*, points out the recognizable inspirations behind black worship as “the need for a positive self-image; the need for wholeness; and the need to respond through praise and thanksgiving to God for all that He’s done for them.”¹³⁸

    The focal point of worship at Friendship Baptist church is the preaching. Preaching has the capability of drawing people to church in black American churches and each church is defined by its type of preaching and by the personality of the preacher or the leader of the church. Members of Friendship Baptist indicate that the reason they attend this church and what differentiates it from other churches is the preaching. They point to the anointing of the pastor, the teaching and preaching of the word, and an atmosphere that encourages freedom of expression as important aspects of the church.

    Most of the time, there is a biblical text that is raised for the preacher’s sermon that relates to the title of the sermon or its key points. Generally, there are applications and interpretations suggested by the preacher. At Friendship Baptist church, the pastor structures his sermons in a way that includes dramatic illustrations (accomplished by using members in the congregation) so the key points of the sermon are clearer.

¹³⁷ Elder Pat Sullivan, interview by Erica Washington, Friendship Baptist Church, Toledo, Ohio, 27 February 2002.

The mode of preaching is a communal one at Friendship Baptist church. During preaching time, responses from the congregation are important. Because there are opportunities created to accomplish this call-and-response approach to preaching, it appears that preaching is a choreographed part of worship and develops a quasi-song character.

During the sermon, the preacher has many responsibilities to fulfill. The flow of the sermon is important in keeping the interest of the congregation.\(^{139}\) To this end, stylistic elements of preaching include inflections of the voice (focus being on intonation), cadences throughout the delivery of the sermon, climatic points provided, and bodily movements that one could easily interpret as dancing. Usually the cadences and climatic points occur when important key points are being said. The cadences are imbedded within the sermon while the climatic points are towards the end. The incorporation of these cadences and climatic points provides the preacher and the congregation an opportunity to create a communal atmosphere, for it is during these moments that responses like “amen,” “yes,” “yes lord,” “preach doc,” “preach bishop,” “thank you Jesus,” and “hallelujah” are interjected by the congregation. Often times the preacher will encourage members of the congregation to offer these types of responses because he feels that it helps him to preach better.

When the preacher is about to reach the climax of the sermon, he alerts the congregation through a change in delivery style. Here, there is a tremendous amount of spiritual excitement that is built up and released. This is a vital time for possession to take place. During this time the rhythmic drive that comes from the preacher’s voice changes by getting faster and shorter. There are rapid modulations in the intonations and inflections of his words and there is definitely more bodily movement exhibited by the preacher as well as members of the congregation.

\(^{139}\) It is the belief that the preacher is being led by the Holy Spirit while in the act of preaching and the preparations before the execution of the sermon. So, while possession is most likely at the climatic point in the sermon, it could also take place elsewhere.
Similar characteristics are found in the preaching that took place in the praise houses during slavery. The exhorters and the self-appointed preachers were responsible for creating a black religion which would address the worship needs of African Americans. The style of preaching that came from these praise houses’ sermons fostered communal participation. The sermons were based on acting out biblical stories and on one’s dependence on God. Members of the congregation provided responses to the sermon with words such as “Yes, Lord!,” “Oh, Jesus!,” “and Preach It!” Additional elements were also used: vocal inflections, repetition of text, different ways to express rhythm for pacing of sermon, and the use of the call-and-response structure.  

In addition to preaching, music continues to be central to worship at Friendship Baptist church, enhancing its reputation and drawing people to the congregation. There are a variety of musical genres that are heard during worship such as praise and worship songs, spirituals, hymns, and gospel songs. There are three types of song delivery at Friendship Baptist: congregational singing; choral singing, performed by a choir with selections interwoven in the service; and solo singing. During the choral selections, the members of the congregation often join in on the singing, thus creating a communal atmosphere.

As a vital component to worship, music serves as a requisite for dance and spirit possession. As expected, special attention is given to the planning for music that is used during worship. Within black American worship, there are common events that take place before, during, or after the progression of the service, and songs are intentionally arranged around them. The minister of music is responsible for choosing the music and like the preacher, is led by the Holy Spirit in his selection.

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The gamut of music in black American worship at Friendship Baptist includes vocal and instrumental music, with instruments such as piano, organ, electric keyboard, drum set, congas, tambourine, hand clapping, and foot stomping. Rhythm, central to African-based religions, is achieved in worship at Friendship Baptist through preaching, foot stomping, hand clapping, body movement, drums, electric keyboard, piano, organ, and chanting.

The songs at Friendship Baptist church are performed in a gospel style, characterized by change in timbre, dynamic and tonal contrasts, musical and physical communication, melodic improvisation, and the use of instruments. It is in this gospel style of delivery that we see vestiges of the Ring Shout ritual practiced at Friendship Baptist. In the three songs (Worship Oh My Soul, Victory Chant, and Total Praise) observed and analyzed at Friendship Baptist church, I conclude that the song texts are just as important to worship as the song texts sung during the Ring Shout during slave worship. In Worship Oh My Soul, Victory Chant, and Total Praise, the texts aid in worship because they help the worshippers communicate or express their needs, their problems, their joys, their pain, their need to worship, and their reasons for worship. This practice was found in the shout songs that were part of the Ring Shout ritual. These shout songs (spirituals) helped to transform the slave situation and gave them hope and fortified them in the midst of their oppression from slavery.

Song is meaningful at Friendship Baptist church because it sets the tone for worship. This process is accomplished through the many textual themes that are found in the songs. During worship at Friendship Baptist church, there is a designated praise and worship component. This part of worship occurs at the beginning of the service and is carefully placed there in order to get those that are in attendance into a worshipful mode and to create a worship atmosphere.
Consider, as an illustration, the text of a worship song, which is sung at Friendship Baptist church:

**Part I**

**Line 1** Worship oh my soul  
**Line 2** There’s a higher place of praise and

**Part II**

**Line 3** When my spirit’s overwhelmed  
**Line 4** I lift my voice.

**Part III**

**Line 5** There is power in my praise  
**Line 6** Through every trial I can say  
**Line 7** I choose to worship, worship oh my soul.

Many worship songs encourage an individual to worship by providing them with reasons why they should do so. These reasons turn into a testimony of the rewards of worship for the individual. When one sings this song, one is compelled to release everything that prohibits full and sincere participation in worship by conveying the notion that worship transcends present circumstances. In this particular song, lines 2, 3, 5, and 6 give a person reasons to worship. In addition, lines 1, 4, and 7 provide the act of worship. Thus, the song provides us with a progression in worship: part I supplies us with a call to worship; part II engages us in the actual act of worship; and part III provides us with an encounter of worship.

The intimate nature of the relationship between Jesus and humankind is expressed in the *Victory Chant*, which is a model of a praise song:

**Verse 1**

**Line 1** Hail Jesus! You’re my King!  
**Line 2** Your life frees me to sing  
**Line 3** I will praise You all of my days  
**Line 4** You’re perfect in all Your ways
Verse 2
Line 1 Hail Jesus! You’re my Lord
Line 2 I will obey Your word
Line 3 Because I want to see your kingdom come
Line 4 Not my will but Yours be done

Verse 3
Line 1 Glory, glory to the Lamb!
Line 2 You will take us into the land
Line 3 We will conquer in Your name
Line 4 And proclaim that “Jesus reigns!”

Verse 4
Line 1 Hail, hail Lion of Judah!
Line 2 How wonderful You are!
Line 3 Hail, hail Lion of Judah!
Line 4 How powerful You are!  

The familiar relationship with Jesus is established in each verse of this song in the following ways: salutation, attributes of Jesus, and reasons for praise. The first line of each verse begins with a salutation/greeting to Jesus; the second line of each verse exclaims the attributes of Jesus; and the third and fourth lines provide us with a reason for praise.

Total Praise is an example of a gospel song that is sung at Friendship Baptist church. The text of this song is based on Psalm 121 and incorporates Old Testament biblical vocabulary.

Consider the following text and compare it to the biblical text.

Line 1 Lord, I will lift mine eyes to the hills.
Line 2 Knowing my help is coming from You.
Line 3 Your peace, You give me in time of the storm.
Line 4 You are the source of my strength.
Line 5 You are the strength of my life.
Line 6 I lift up my hands in total praise to you.

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Psalm 121

Verse 1
I will lift mine eyes unto the hills,
from whence cometh my help.

Verse 2
My help cometh from the LORD,
which made heaven and earth

Verse 3
He will not suffer thy foot to be moved:
he that keepeth thee will not slumber.

Verse 4
Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall
neither slumber nor sleep.

Verse 5
The LORD is thy keeper:
the LORD is thy shade upon thy right hand.

Verse 6
The sun shall not smite thee by day,
nor the moon by night.

Verse 7
The LORD shall preserve thee from all evil:
he shall preserve thy soul.

Verse 8
The LORD shall preserve thy going out and
thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore.

Psalm 121 speaks of David being in a wilderness experience. The key to him coming out of his pain is to trust that God is going to take care of him. A similar experience is found in the text of Total Praise. The focus is not on David but on the immediate individual who needs to find safety in God. As a result, this new level of assurance of God in Total Praise will help a worshiper transcend one’s current situation because one chooses to worship God. A comparison of the two texts allows us to see how the practice of taking a biblical text and adopting it to comment on one’s current situation is being continued in black American worship found at Friendship Baptist church.
Musical components of *Total Praise* support the text and its meaning, specifically in the element of time.\(^{143}\) Structurally, the call-and-response element alters time in *Total Praise*. The response (mm.15-22) is not a true response, it is a repetitive chorus. In addition, syncopation is incorporated in the repetitive chorus section (mm. 15-22) that changes the rhythmic complexity of the song.

The element of pitch is altered throughout the whole song. Passing tones are incorporated in mm. 5, 9, 12 and pitch levels are changed throughout. The changing of pitch levels is also seen in the different vocal ranges that are used. A low range is used at the beginning of the song (mm. 3-10); a middle range is used in the middle (mm. 11-14); and a high range is used at the end of the song before the cadenza (mm. 15-22). Dynamic levels are changed throughout with piano (m. 22), mezzo piano (m. 3), mezzo forte (m. 11), crescendo (mm. 13 & 22), and fortissimo (mm. 15 & 30) markings.

The chorus section (mm. 15-22) is a climatic point in the work. At the beginning of this section, the lengths of notes are extended and the texture thickens. Word repetitions are found here (mm. 15-18) and the entire section is also repeated (mm. 15-22). The cadenza, found at the end, allows us to reach another climatic point (mm. 22-30). It is presented in a seven-fold “amen” structure, ending with a very thick texture. The cadenza also includes polyrhythms and ostinati figures.

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Figure 4. Score of Total Praise Page 1
Figure 4. Score of Total Praise Page 2
In the Ring Shout the element of song was important to worship as well. The spiritual was the song style used and these religious songs were based on biblical texts and vocabulary. These songs also had different textual themes that aided in religious expression, such as the purpose of worship and the transcendence in social, class, and emotional states created by slave authority. There was a lot of movement found in these songs textually, melodically, and harmonically. In these songs the rhythm and melody supported the text.

In black American worship, dance is not separated from music. For this reason, it is difficult to discuss dance in isolation from music. Because dance and music are closely related, people do not claim dance as being a typical part of worship. In most cases, dance is discussed separately when an individual is possessed by the Holy Ghost or “gets happy” (another phrase for possession) because their character changes (noticeable when one skips a beat). Music usually assists during the possession state by continuing the rhythmic drive that was initiated by the possessed person.

The dancing that is done outside of the possession state, however, is not dominant over the music. The rhythmic drive is established by the music while the individual who is dancing enhances this drive through movement. The relationship of the rhythmic drive and movement is widespread throughout the worship experience. There appear to be no restrictions on who can engage in this type of worship.

Shouting is also perceived as dancing and is related to spirit possession because when someone shouts they are displaying intense physical praises and worship. Shouting is a necessary experience of worship and comes out in different forms although there seem to be no fixed descriptions of it. There are many variations of using the body while shouting. One way is by running around the sanctuary from time to time with hands extended up in the air. Most of the
time, the running is done counterclockwise. When shouting is taking place, most of the movements are aimed towards the earth. The body is in a bent-knee posture, upper torso is bent, aimed downward. The head is also aimed towards the earth. Even though the knees maintain their bent-knee posture, the feet are lifted so that they could be driven into the ground.

Sometimes the feet look like they are doing a shuffle step while there are different ways the arms move. Occasionally they are slapped up and down or from time to time stationary to the back. At times the arms are held out one at a time in front (when there is spinning added to shouting). Just as soon as the shouting progresses to possession, there is an increase in the rhythmic drive, intensifying the bodily movements, and percussive beats gradually resulting in passing out.

When there is shouting, there is always an issue around space. There are restrictions on how, when, and where shouting takes place due to the structure of the sanctuary, with pews placed in consecutive rows and aisles between. When an individual shouts, he steps in the aisles in order to have plenty of room and also to make sure it is safe. Shouters also make their way to the altar area that is generally in a central location in front of the sanctuary, below the pulpit. When shouting takes place, most of the movements are directed towards the altar. During the time shouting is executed, adjacent to the altar and pulpit areas, it appears that the movements are intensified easily because of the extended space that is available.

Embodying the West African Past through the Ring Shout Ritual

Although traditional Christian influences in regard to theology and belief affect the worship practices of African Americans, black Americans in the 21st century continue to reach back to the past to re-create worship practices that were consonant with their African past. The
following 1867 account of the Ring Shout ritual provides us with a description of the ceremony and helps us to focus on all the elements of the Ring Shout so that one can see its evolution in 21st-century black American worship:

...the true “shout” takes place on Sundays or on “praise”-nights through the week, and either in the praise-house or in some cabin in which a regular religious meeting has been held. Very likely more than half the population of the plantation is gathered together...But the benches are pushed back to the wall when the formal meeting is over, and old and young men and women... boys...young girls barefooted, all stand up in the middle of the floor, when the ‘perichil’ is struck, begin first walking and by-and-by shuffling round, one after the other, in a ring. The foot is hardly taken from the floor, and the progression is mainly due to a jerking, hitching motion, which agitates the entire shouter, and soon brings out streams of perspiration. Sometimes they dance silently, sometimes as they shuffle they sing the chorus of the spiritual, and sometimes the song itself is also sung by the dancers. But most frequently a band, composed of some of the best singers and of tired shouters, stand at the side of the room to ‘base’ the others, singing the body of the song and clapping their hands together or on the knees. Song and dance alike are extremely energetic, and often, when it lasts into the middle of the night, the monotonous thud, thud, thud of the feet prevents sleep within half a mile of the praise house...It is not unlikely that this remarkable religious ceremony is a relic of some African dance...Dancing in the usual way is regarded with great horror by the people of Port Royal, but they enter with infinite zest into the movements of the “Shout.”

This description brings out the various levels of the Ring Shout. It includes information about when and where the Ring Shout takes place, the participants of the Ring Shout, the spacing requirements, how the Ring Shout is performed, a description of the activities that take place, and the progression found in it.

I found that in 21st-century black American worship at Friendship Baptist, what links their worship practices with slave worship in the Ring Shout is the phenomenon of performing ritual and its importance to the community and the mode of worship that characterizes black American worship. In 21st-century black American worship at Friendship Baptist one finds a variety of recreations of past black religious practices, and the style seems to be hereditary. In order to see

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what practices found during worship at Friendship Baptist are components of the Ring Shout, I will compare their worship service to accounts of the traditional Ring Shout for new manifestations of the ritual.

In the Ring Shout, the direction of movement is very important because the ritual’s name is derived from it. When the Ring Shout ritual is performed, participants move counterclockwise in a circle while shuffling their feet. In the revival context, in 1845, Sir Charles Lyell commented on the way slaves danced.

Of dancing and music, the Negroes are passionately fond. On the Hopeton plantation violins have been silenced by the Methodist missionaries…At the Methodist prayer-meetings, they are permitted to move round rapidly in a ring, in which manoeuvre, I am told, they sometimes contrive to take enough exercise to serve as a substitute for the dance, it being, in fact, a kind of spiritual boulanger…

This commentary is supportive of slaves dancing in a circle in the prayer-meeting context.

In worship service at Friendship Baptist church circular movement is noticeable during the worship service when members run as a form of praise. When running takes place, one runs in a counterclockwise way around the sanctuary with hands and arms up in the air while palms are directed out and up. In both worship atmospheres, moving counterclockwise in a circle is present. In the contemporary form, the shuffling of the feet has evolved into running.

In the Ring Shout the quality of movement in the feet is significant because of the percussive sounds it produces. These percussive sounds served as a substitution for the banned drum. In 1878 Bishop Daniel Payne observed the feet being driven into the ground while performing the Ring Shout ritual.

He who could sing loudest and longest led the ‘Band,’ having his loins girded and a handkerchief in hand with which he kept time, while his feet resounded on the floor like

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the drumsticks of a bass drum. In some cases it was the custom to begin these dances after every night service and keep it up till midnight, sometimes singing and dancing alternately – a short prayer and a long dance.\textsuperscript{146}

In this observation the floor represents a drum and the movement of the feet represents drum sticks. When the feet strike the floor, there is an indication that the sound that is produced is loud because of the imagery of a bass drum.

In worship services at Friendship Baptist church, when members dance, a common movement is the energy of the feet driving into the ground. The whole foot is in action while extending flat on the ground. The movement of the feet is synchronized with the rhythm of the music. When this common dance movement is performed, the feet are not lifted very high off the ground. The rhythm is usually played in percussive cycles that include eight beats. These 8-beat cycles are heard on drums (drum set), congas, piano, and/or organ. The intensity of the movements and music builds when one “gets happy” or gets the Holy Ghost.

In the Ring Shout ritual, handclapping is very important because it aids in establishing and maintaining a rhythmic drive. When the Ring Shout is performed, the singers are the individuals who are doing the handclapping. Handclapping can be heard throughout the entire ritual. Consider an 1859 observation made by the Reverend Robert Mallard:

Some were standing, others sitting, others moving from one seat to another, several exhorting along the aisles. The whole congregation kept up one loud monotonous strain, interrupted by various sounds: groans and screams and clapping of hands. One woman especially under the influence of the excitement went across the church in a quick succession of leaps: now down on her knees…then up again; now with her arms about some brother or sister, and again tossing them wildly in the air and clapping her hands together and accompanying the whole by a series of short, sharp shrieks.\textsuperscript{147}

\textsuperscript{146} Ibid, 69.
\textsuperscript{147} Maultsby, \textit{Use and Performance}, 16.
In this observation handclapping is part of the movement and action in the worship experience. Handclapping takes place throughout worship in different ways.

In worship services at Friendship Baptist church, the clapping of hands is performed throughout the service at different points. When the choir sings, handclapping usually accompanies the singing. During the praise and worship part of the service where there is a lot of singing of praise and worship songs, there is handclapping. During preaching time, there is also handclapping. Members clap because they relate to parts of the sermon, due to their appreciation of what God has done for them, while looking forward to what is to come in the future. Clapping fosters communal participation. The movement/gesture of handclapping is something that the whole community can do.

In both worship settings handclapping is present. In the contemporary form one can conclude that there have not been many changes in the way handclapping is included throughout worship when it is compared to the Ring Shout. One small difference is when handclapping accompanies preaching. This change occurs because the focus is on the whole worship service/experience as ritual compared to the Ring Shout ritual in which there is no preaching.

In the Ring Shout ritual the upper torso is engaged in movement. For example, sometimes the elbows are in a bent position and movement resembles wings flapping. The movement of the elbows helps in creating and reinforcing a rhythmic drive. As summarized by Zita Allen, when one participated in the North American Ring Shout:

> Every part of their bodies danced, from their shuffling feet and bent knees to their churning hips and undulating spines, swinging arms, and shimmying shoulders. Even their necks bent like reeds to balance heads rolling from shoulder to shoulder before pulling upright to reveal faces filled with the joy and the ecstasy of dance.\(^{148}\)

In this account we see that every part of the body is engaged in dancing. The multilayered movements that were part of the Ring Shout coincide with the complexity of rhythms that are performed. The swinging arm movement mentioned gives us insight into how the arms are used in the Ring Shout.

During worship service at Friendship Baptist church, when someone is dancing, “getting happy,” and/or getting the Holy Ghost, the arms are in a bent position, while the elbows are moving up and down towards the body and away from the body. Thus the movement of the elbows is synchronized with the rhythms that include 8-beat cycles. The movement of the elbows is in the same time as the movement of the feet being driven into the ground. In both events the elbows are bent. This seems to be one of the staple dance movements found in both worship contexts. This positioning and movement of the elbows appears to be natural.

In the Ring Shout ritual, singing is essential. It is important to note that before any kind of dancing there has to be singing. There is a recognizable progression to complete singing and dancing as a unit. The wide range of themes found in the shout songs sets the tone for the ritual. Consider the description of a shout that focuses in on the singing that takes place during the Ring Shout:

The colored people…have a peculiar music of their own, which is largely a process of rhythm, rather than written music. Their music is largely, or was…a sort of rhythmical chant. It had to do largely with religion and the words adopted to their quaint melodies were largely of a religious nature. The stories of the Bible were placed into words that would fit the music already used by the colored people. While singing these songs, the singers and the entire congregation kept time to the music by the swaying of their bodies or by the patting of the foot or hand. Practically all of their songs were accompanied by a motion of some kind…149

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149 Raboteau, Slave Religion, 65.
This commentary focuses on song. The texts of these songs are based on stories of the Bible and come from other sources and experiences.

During worship service at Friendship Baptist church, there is singing throughout the entire worship service. In addition, there are many “movement words” found in the songs which support dancing during worship. There is also emphasis on poetic imagery, especially in the gospel songs, spirituals, and the gospelized spirituals. There are many musical elements that bring out the technical elements found in the music such as form, rhythm, and the use of different registers in order to support the text. Supporting the text includes form and rhythm as well. In both worship atmospheres singing is present and essential. Throughout both settings singing and dancing are a single unit, setting the tone for ritual/ceremony.

In the Ring Shout ritual most of the movement is done with a bent knee posture. Even when there is no movement the knees are still in a bent position. Consider this 1862 account of a shout that took place on St. Helena Island, South Carolina:

We went to the “shout,” a savage, heathenish dance out in Rina’s house. Three men stood and sang, clapping and gesticulating. The others shuffled along on their heels following one another in a circle and occasionally bending the knees in a kind of curtsey. They began slowly, a few going around and more gradually joining in, the song getting faster til at last only the most marked part of the refrain is sung and the shuffling, stamping, and clapping gets furious.

In this explanation there was a delineation of shout activities that includes singing, clapping, gesticulating, bending the knees, shuffling, and stamping. There was a progression in the tempo of movement and singing. In addition, the level of excitement and participation increased. Mentioning “bending the knees in a kind of curtsey” lets us know that at some point in the Ring Shout the knees were bent.

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During worship services at Friendship Baptist Church, the dancing is referred to as shouting. When one begins to dance or is in the act of shouting, one position or posture of the body is the bending of the legs, thus creating a bent-knee posture. This posture seems to be natural to the shouters/dancers of the worship experience. When one is shouting, you could find that the legs and feet of the dancing remains constant while the upper torso is engaged in different types of movements such as the arms resting to the side with upper torso leaning over towards the earth, or the elbows bent with upper torso pointed towards the earth (motion of the arms resembles a bird flapping its wings), or one arm placed in front of the body while the other is to the side; at the same time the upper torso is directed to the earth (with this movement spinning takes place, when the spinning moves in a different direction, the arms switch, so there is an alternation going on with the arms). In both worship contexts the bent-knee posture allows participants to feel connected to the earth and also allows them to be in a position to direct most of their movements to the earth.

In the Ring Shout ritual spirit possession is one of the goals for worship. The climax of the ritual is spirit possession with all the components of the Ring Shout eventually leading to it. The following early 19th-century account illustrates the presence of spirit possession amongst black American worshippers:

The preacher was drawing his sermon to a close...when a small old woman, perfectly black, among those in the gallery, suddenly rose, and began dancing and clapping her hands; at first with a slow and measured movement, and then with increasing rapidity, at the same time beginning to shout “Ha! Ha!” The women about her arose also, and tried to hold her...The woman was still shouting and dancing, her head thrown back and rolling from one side to the other. Gradually her shout became indistinct, she threw her arms wildly about instead of clapping her hands, fell back into the arms of her companions, then threw herself forward and embraced those before her, then tossed herself from side to side, gasping, and finally sunk to the floor, where she remained...kicking as if acting a death struggle.

\[^{151}\text{Raboteau, } \textit{Slave Religion}, 62.\]
The timing of the spirit possession of the woman in this account is important. The beginning of the spirit possession took place during the climax of the sermon. There was a gradual process of spirit possession which was marked by the woman losing control of her actions and finally falling out on the floor. From this observation, we gather further insight in the behavior of an individual who becomes possessed by spirit.

In worship services at Friendship Baptist church, communicating with the supernatural is important. The term that is used to describe this is “getting the Holy Ghost” or “getting happy.” Spirit possession is noticeable when one is getting the Holy Ghost because the worshipper no longer dances in tempo with the established 8-beat cycle. One begins to actually miss a beat and the dancing seems to become independent of the music. There is a noticeable change in one’s being.

The Ring Shout ritual’s foundation is in the community. There can’t be a Ring Shout without community. The belief is that the entire community is transformed and uplifted. The activities that took place in this observation foster community. According to Reverend Daniels in the late 19th-century:

It took an hour to work up the congregation to a fervor aimed at. When this was reached a remarkable scene presented itself. The whole congregation pressed forward to an open space before the pulpit, and formed a ring. The most excitable of their number entered the Ring, and with clapping of hands and contortions led the devotions. Those forming the ring joined in the clapping of hands with wild and loud singing, frequently springing into the air and shouting loudly. As the devotion proceeded, most of the worshippers took off their coats and vests and hung them on the wall. This continued for hours, until all were completely exhausted, and some had fainted and been stowed away on benches or the pulpit platform.¹⁵²

Community is very important to the Ring Shout. Worship for African Americans is participatory. In this observation the whole congregation participated in the Ring Shout. Some worshippers danced while others sang, clapped their hands, and shouted.

In the worship services at Friendship Baptist church, community is very important. During rituals throughout the worship service, many activities facilitate community such as praise and worship, preaching, when the choir sings, reading scripture, singing of hymns, and even the welcoming of visitors. Everything done in worship (including baptism and communion) involves the whole community. The rituals that take place during worship cannot be successful without full communal participation amongst the members. Everyone who is present for worship is participating by clapping hands, responding to preaching or singing, dancing, praying, singing, etc. In both worship contexts when participants come together for collective worship, the prayers, songs, and dances are for the entire community.

Conclusions

A study of 21st-century black American worship reveals that retentions of the Ring Shout ritual exist at Friendship Baptist church, though its elements have evolved in different ways while keeping an African past as its foundation. The parts of the Ring Shout that are retained are the rhythm, song and dance (shouting) that is a part of the worship experience at Friendship Baptist church. Over time, African Americans have been able to keep their religious customs alive through the act of ritual. In these rituals we discover that the mode of worship (that seems to be hereditary) is the thread that continues to keep these religious backgrounds of African Americans together. Environmental factors and social conditions (such as the doctrines of Christianity and oppressive situations) have caused these religious traditions to develop;
however, at the same time, the string that links them together transcends outer forces caused by the environment and society.

When I surveyed West African-based religious practices, I discovered that African people of West Africa and the United States were spiritual people. In chapter 1, I concluded that West African spirituality included belief in a supreme God, lesser deities, and the ancestors. In chapter 2, enslaved Africans and their descendants adapted to the doctrines of Protestant Christianity with a theology that included belief in God, Jesus, and the Holy Ghost. In chapter 3, there were even more descendants of enslaved Africans practicing Protestant Christianity. In addition, the establishment of independent black churches along with new church movements helped to bridge past worship practices with contemporary worship practices in order to further develop African American Christianity.

When I examined the expressive culture of West African-based worship, I found that worship experiences of African peoples of West Africa and the United States included song, dance, and rhythm. In chapter 1, I concluded that prayer, praise, and self-expression were essential to West African religious practices. These necessary parts of worship were exhibited through dancing, singing, and drumming. In chapter 2, prayer, praise, and self-expression were vital in slave worship because they were used for survival in oppressive environments. Slave worship included singing, dancing, and the use of the body (handclapping, foot stamping, shuffling of feet) in order to create and maintain a rhythmic drive due the ban placed on the use of drums during slave gatherings. In chapter 3, prayer, praise, and self-expression were significant to worship in a contemporary African American church. These components of worship manifested themselves in the singing, dancing, and rhythm. There was a wider range of song types performed during worship service along with a wider range of textual themes. The
rhythmic drive was accomplished by the body with the inclusion of instruments such as organ, piano, drum set, congas, and tambourines.

When I analyzed West African-based religious practices, I determined that worship experiences of African peoples of West Africa and the United States included spirit possession. In chapter 1, possession by a deity was desired and in most instances it came through the medium of dance. In chapter 2, I concluded that possession by the Holy Spirit was important to worship. The height of worship was the possession experience that came in most occurrences when a worshipper danced. In chapter 3, possession was still seen to be one of the most important goals of worship. Possession of the Holy Spirit took place when there was intense dancing, drumming, and singing.
POSTLUDE

I conducted this field study and wrote this paper because I was curious about why African Americans who practiced Protestant Christianity at Friendship Baptist church had energetic, spirited, emotional, spirit-led, expressive, and transformative worship. I wanted to know what drove people to dance, to sing, to shout, and to attend Friendship Baptist church. I wanted to know if the members at Friendship Baptist could identify a linkage to the past in any part of their worship services.

After attending worship services at other black Christian churches and then coming to Friendship Baptist church, I found the style of worship at Friendship Baptist to be innovative and unique because I had never seen that type of worship anywhere else. During services, people seemed to be sincere in their praise and worship and almost all of my informants had a personal story to tell that birthed the reasons for their manner of worship. Overall, while interviewing informants from the congregation, they were generally excited to talk about their religion and why they praised and worshipped in the method that they did. Many of the answers were reflective of the leadership of the church, reflective of personal life experiences, and reflective of identifying with how their ancestors worshipped in the past. Informants were passionate in their discussions about the mode of worship exhibited at Friendship Baptist. They were not used to talking about their religion, but soon felt comfortable because it seemed very natural to do so.

A strikingly different view came from the pastor in regard to why his members exhibited expressive worship through dance, song, and music. Almost all of his responses led to a biblical reference which was different from the responses that came from the personal experiences of the members. While the pastor allowed members to have freedom of expression while they worshipped, permitting music, singing, dancing, and shouting, he didn’t want to acknowledge
the personal essence of worship practices at Friendship Baptist church. The pastor is fulfilling two expectations. One expectation is to support and honor the biblical doctrines of Christianity in order to maintain his integrity as a Christian minister. The other expectation is to make sure he meets the needs of his congregation, which results in the freedom of expression that he permits them to have at Friendship Baptist church during worship.

If we are to understand the essence of African American Christianity and how practices and modes of worship that come from African American Christianity may be connected to an African past, field studies at different African American Christian churches need to take place in order to evaluate the level of interconnectedness between past and present traditions.
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APPENDIX A. INSTRUMENT

A Continuation of the Ring Shout Tradition in Black Communities of Faith: With a Focus on Christianity Field Work Instrument

Stage 1

1. Hi, __________________. How is it going?

2. Fine. What do you think about the worship service today? Wasn’t that a powerful word?

3. We do not spend a lot of time talking to each other. It is always good to talk to other sisters and brothers to see how things are going, to see how God is working in their lives, to learn from their experiences, to rejoice with them for their accomplishments, and to keep each other lifted through prayer and encouraging words.

4. I am interested in your understanding of praise and worship. I would like to write some of this down, would that be OK?

5. Sister or Brother ________________ I notice how you praised and worshipped God during church service. Can you describe in words what happens in your private praise and worship and in your corporate praise and worship? I am sure the way I praise and worship God is different from the way you worship and praise God because we have different relationships with and experiences of God. Because God has done and has been different things for me, my gratitude would be expressed differently.
Stage 2

1. What is the difference between praise and worship?

2. What are some ways you could praise and worship God?

3. What role does music play in praise and worship?

4. I want to ask you a different type of question. How do you feel when you praise and worship God? What are you thinking about. Are you always in a state to think?

5. Are you concerned about what people say about you or if people are looking at you when you praise and worship God?

6. When you worship and praise God, do you see people or are you in your own world (It’s simply between you and God)?

Stage 3

1. Today I’d like to ask you some different kinds of questions. I’ve written some terms
on cards and I’d like to have you tell me one word that can describe each set of words and also tell me which ones are alike or different.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>spirit possession</th>
<th>trance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>filled with the Holy Spirit</td>
<td>transcendental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>having the Holy Ghost</td>
<td>heavenly realm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>slang in the Spirit</td>
<td>spirit mounting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>speaking in tongues</td>
<td>singing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>evoking the Holy Spirit</td>
<td>speaking in tongues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shouting</td>
<td>prayer/prayer language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dancing</td>
<td>baptized in the Holy Spirit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>clapping</td>
<td>running</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>praying</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shout</td>
<td>knowledge of God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shouting</td>
<td>experience of God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>outward expression</td>
<td>don’t know God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inward expression</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. How would you rate the following praise and worship activities? For example, 1 is the highest level of importance.

singing
shouting
dancing
clapping
running
praying
sitting

3. If you were talking to another sister or brother, how would you explain the use of the body for expression as a vehicle for praise and worship? Is it a natural part of us? Where could we have gotten the religious practice of using the body from?

Pastor

1. How do you think Bishop Morton has relied on the past to orchestrate his vision/ministry in the Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship?
2. What is your understanding of praise and worship?

3. Describe what happens in your private praise and worship and corporate praise and worship.

4. As a Pastor, why do you feel it is important to allow the congregation to express themselves during praise and worship?

5. What do you think prevents people from praising and worshipping God?

6. What are some ways the body could be used in a worship experience?

7. How important do you think the use of the body is during praise and worship?

8. Is the use of the body for praise and worship natural for us? Where did we get this religious practice from?

9. What role does music have in praise and worship?

10. What are some characteristics/evidences of spirit possession seen in the Christian Faith?

11. Explain the Ring Shout tradition in your own words.

12. Explain the transformations and syntheses of the Ring Shout tradition at Friendship Baptist Church or Metropolitan Baptist Church.
APPENDIX B. CONSENT FORM

RESEARCH AT FRIENDSHIP BAPTIST CHURCH CONSENT FORM

PURPOSE OF STUDY:

The purpose of this research study at Friendship Baptist Church is to test what earlier scholars have said about the presence of African traditions in African-American culture as it relates to music and dance within religious settings. This research study is going to be used for my thesis, “SHABACH, HALLELUJAH!": THE CONTINUITY OF THE RING SHOUT TRADITION AS A SITE OF MUSIC AND DANCE IN BLACK AMERICAN WORSHIP. You are being asked to participate in this two-month study because you are a member of Friendship Baptist Church.

PROCEDURES:

If you agree to join this study, you will be asked to participate in a total of three interviews that will include questions about your worship experiences. The time for each interview will be about 20 minutes. Before and during interview sessions I will ask you, the participant, if it would be all right for me to take notes and record the sessions.

RISKS:

There are no risks associated with this study.

BENEFITS:

The following are potential benefits that will come from this study for participants:

- Freedom to communicate how, why, and what you do during worship experiences
- Gain knowledge about where particular cultural patterns within your worship experiences originated
- Gain a better understanding about who you are by identifying religious practices that have been retained from the past (Africa) that have been transformed in the present (North America).

PRIVACY INFORMATION:

You are considered an expert in the culture and are the main sources used for this study. The data collected from interviews will be used in my thesis. By signing this form, you agree to participate in this study as well as give me permission to quote you directly in my thesis. I will only share interview notes and recordings with my research advisor, Dr. Steven Cornelius.
JOINING OF YOUR OWN FREE WILL:

You do not have to participate in this study. However, if you agree to join, you will be required to attend three interview sessions. If you can not make all three interview sessions or do not wish to be a part of this study, you will not be penalized in any way. As a participant, you may withdraw from the study at any time.

QUESTIONS YOU MAY HAVE ABOUT THE RESEARCH STUDY:

If you have any questions about the study, you may contact the researcher, Erica Lanice Washington at (419) 353-5279 (eralw@bgnet.bgsu.edu) or the researcher’s advisor, Dr. Steven Cornelius at (419) 372-2519 (sccornel@bgnet.bgsu.edu). If you have questions regarding the conduct of this study or about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Chair of Bowling Green State University’s Human Subjects Review Board at (419) 372-7716 (hsrb@bgnet.bgsu.edu).

WHAT YOUR SIGNATURE MEANS:

Your signature below means that you have been informed about the study. It also means that the information given in this consent form has been explained to you. By signing this consent form, you agree to participate.

________________________________________________________________________

Subject’s signature      Date