

African Cultural Forms in the Caribbean up to 1838

Religion

Though the planters tried to stifle the indigenous religion, much culture retention occurred. The slaves held on to their beliefs and practices as much as and where possible. Here are some of them:

- Life after death
- The spirit world: duppies or ghosts
- The forces of good and evil and the constant struggle between the two
- That the dead is still a part of the community
- Two types of magic. Obeah - used to inflict hurt or harm and Myalism used to promote life, love, health and success. Both involved the use of herbs, oils, potions etc.,
- A lot of music and dance in their expressions of worship
- Ancestral spirits and that one can actually make contact with them and that they are constantly watching over us.
- Chanting of songs.
- Gods of nature- rain, thunder, lightning and fertility
- Highest respect for Mother earth

How did these religious practices and belief manage to survive the restrictions of slavery?

- a. There were done in secret and late at nights.
- b. Some plantation owners used obeahmen as supplements to doctors. This was intended to be a cost effective measure but provided the slaves with the opportunity to pass down herbal secrets and practices of their forefathers.
- c. Others used or allow the obeahmen to continue his practice as a means of driving fear in the slaves.

d. The slaves conducted their own funeral services and so the tradition and practices were preserved with each successive funeral that they performed. Of course, the planter did not attach any significance to these ceremonies so he did not attend them. His absence gave the slaves the opportunity to do their own thing and so preserve their heritage.

e. The slaves used their own language when communicating. This includes the language of the drums and other musical instruments. As more slaves were bought and brought to the estates, the languages revived. Firstly mortality rate was very high on the estates. This meant that the planters had to constantly buy new slaves. Though he tried to buy slaves from different areas, the reality was that most planters liked to buy slaves from a particular area of the West African coast because they were known for their hard work and industrial skills.

f. The slaves were given some amount of leniency at Christmas time in particular.

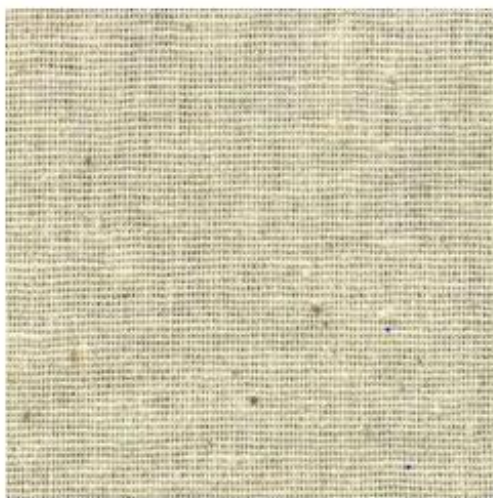
g. They managed to mix and hide their religion within the established faith. For example, Pocomania is a mixture of the Roman Catholic faith and the African religion.

Food

The slaves had to prepare their own meals. They did it the way they were taught back home in Africa. Also the fact that they were allowed to grow their own provisions meant that they were able to choose what to grow- example yam, coco, dasheen etc., They continued their culinary skills. Trinidadian slaves had the luxury of beans and palm oils as they would have had in Africa.

Dress

They were given either two suits of clothing per year or the equivalent yards of *osnaburg*. This is a type of rough khaki also called guinea blue or dutch stripes. The women would wrap their themselves with the cloth the way they would have in Africa to form dress or skirts. And of course they did not forget their 'tie head'



A piece of osnaburg

Language

The slaves came from different areas and ethnic groups in West Africa and so spoke different languages. This forced them to create a new tongue we now know as patois. But several African words survived.

Music and Dance

They had all sorts of songs, work or digging songs as we have learnt, love songs, songs of sorrow, songs of joy and so on. In fact it seems as if they had a song for every occasion just as they had a proverb to fit every situation.

Their music had a lot of rhythm and beat. It involved the use of instruments such as:

Tambourine Banjos Flutes Rattles Xylophones



Tambourine



Banjo



Bamboo flute



Native rattles



"Ilimba" also known as an African

Xylophone when several are placed together

Their dance had a lot of movement and passion, involving gyration of the hip and pelvic areas and the shaking of the rear. This was seen as vulgar by many of the whites, though secretly they were aroused by it, no wonder they understood its sexual importance and described it as debauchery. Types of dance included Dinkie Minnie Kumina and Brukins