

**THE BIRTH OF
AFRICAN-
AMERICAN
CULTURE**

AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE



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THE BEGINNINGS OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN SOCIETIES AND CULTURES



Before any aggregate of plantation slaves could begin to create viable institutions, they would have had to deal with the traumata of capture, enslavement, and transport. Hence the beginnings of what would later develop into "African-American cultures" must date from the very earliest interactions of the newly enslaved men and women on the African continent itself. They were shackled together in the coffles, packed into dank "factory" dungeons, squeezed together between the decks of stinking ships, separated often from their kinsmen, tribesmen, or even speakers of the same language, left bewildered about their present and their future, stripped of all prerogatives of status or rank (at least, so far as the masters were concerned), and homogenized by a dehumanizing system that viewed them as faceless and largely interchangeable. Yet we know that even in such utterly abject circumstances, these people were not simply passive victims. In the present context, we are thinking

less of the many individual acts of heroism and resistance which occurred during this period than of certain simple but significant *cooperative* efforts which, in retrospect, may be viewed as the true beginnings of African-American culture and society.

Various shreds of evidence suggest that some of the earliest social bonds to develop in the coffles, in the factories and, especially, during the long Middle Passage were of a dyadic (two-person) nature. Partly, perhaps, because of the general policy of keeping men and women separate, they were usually between members of the same sex. The bond between shipmates, those who shared passage on the same slaver, is the most striking example. In widely scattered parts of Afro-America, the "shipmate" relationship became a major principle of social organization and continued for decades or even centuries to shape ongoing social relations.

In Jamaica, for example, we know that the term "shipmate" was "synonymous in their [the slaves'] view with 'brother' or 'sister.'"¹ It was "the dearest word and bond of affectionate sympathy amongst the Africans," and "so strong were the bonds between shipmates that sexual intercourse between them, in the view of one observer, was considered incestuous."² We know also that the bond could extend beyond the original shipmates themselves and interpenetrate with biological kin ties; shipmates were said to "look upon each other's children mutually as their own," and "it was customary for children to call their parents' shipmates 'uncle' and 'aunt.'"³

In Suriname, to cite a different case, the equivalent term "sippi" was at first used between people who had actually shared the experience of transport in a single vessel; later, it began to be used between slaves who belonged to a single plantation, preserving the essential notion of fellow sufferers

who have a special bond.⁴ Today in the interior of Suriname, among the Saramaka people, "sippi" (now "sibi") continues to designate a special, nonbiological dyadic relationship with very similar symbolic content; when two people find themselves victims of a parallel misfortune (e.g., two women whose husbands desert them at about the same time), they thenceforth may address each other as "sibi" and adopt a special prescribed mutual relationship.

Other examples of the "shipmate" relationship in Afro-America can be cited—from the Brazilian "malungo"⁵ and Trinidadian "malongue"⁶ to Suriname "máti"⁷ to Haitian "batiment."⁸ But we have said enough already to support the following assertions. It is not surprising that same-sex dyadic ties should have loomed large in the earliest context of African-American enslavement and transport (given that such ties seem often to develop when random individuals are thrust into an institutional, depersonalized setting—such as boot camp or prison). What may make this case unusual is the extent to which such initial bonds could develop into basic principles which probably helped to shape the institutions of such societies and which, even today, in many areas appear to retain their original symbolic content. We believe that the development of these social bonds, even before the Africans had set foot in the New World, already announced the birth of new societies based on new kinds of principles.

Our argument proceeds here in the light of our earlier discussions concerning the concept of a generalized African "heritage" and the distinction between cultural and social-relational perspectives in Afro-Americanist research. Just as the development of new social ties marked the initial enslavement experience, so also new *cultural systems* were beginning to take shape. We shall speculate on some of the processes

that must have been involved in the earliest growth of African-American religions, drawing upon our understanding that, in religion as in many other West and Central African cultural subsystems, an apparent diversity of form fits with certain widely shared basic principles. As in our previous discussion, we seek to conceptualize these principles without reference to specific, overt manifestations. Thus, for instance, most West and Central African religions seem to have shared certain fundamental assumptions about the nature of causality and the ability of divination to reveal specific causes, about the active role of the dead in the lives of the living, about the responsiveness of (most) deities to human actions, about the close relationship between social conflict and illness or misfortune, and many others.⁹ Moreover, ritual knowledge in these societies tended to be specialized and "owned" by individuals or cult groups, and such knowledge was transmitted either along genealogical lines or via initiation into a cult group. Since so much of West and Central African religion was instrumental in orientation (or at least focused on specific, special events, from illnesses to coronations), the proportion of substantive ritual knowledge that was in the hands of specialists was considerable. We would suggest also that this instrumental orientation of ritual encouraged experimentation with, and adoption of, new techniques and practices from neighboring peoples; we suspect that most West and Central African religions were relatively permeable to foreign influences and tended to be "additive" rather than "exclusive" in their orientation toward other cultures.

These generalities may help us to imagine something of the initial cultural situation for an aggregate of recently enslaved Africans. We can probably date the beginnings of any new African-American religion from the moment that one person

in need received ritual assistance from another who belonged to a different cultural group. Once such people had "exchanged" ritual assistance in this fashion, there would already exist a micro-community with a nascent religion that was, in a real sense, its own. We may speculate, for example, that one of the earliest slaves on a particular plantation in a new colony gives birth to twins (or becomes insane, commits suicide, or has any one of a number of experiences which would have required *some* kind of highly specialized ritual attention in almost any society in West or Central Africa). It is clear to all that *something* must be done, but our hypothetical mother of twins has no special expertise herself, nor does anyone of her own ethnic background on that plantation. However, another woman, one of whose relatives may have been a priestess of a twin cult in another group, takes charge of the situation, performing the rites as best she can remember them. By dint of this experience, then, this woman becomes *the* local specialist in twin births. In caring ritually for their parents, in performing the special rites necessary should they sicken or die, and so on, she may eventually transmit her specialized knowledge (which may well be a fairly radical selection and elaboration of what her relative's cult had been) to other slaves, who thereupon carry this knowledge, and the attached statuses and roles, forward in time.

This speculative exercise requires that we notice the probable openness of such situations to the introduction of new cultural materials, as well as the way new ritual formulations become attached to an institutional structure, in the form of specialized personnel. During even a short period of time, exchanges of ritual information among those who shared certain underlying assumptions would have contributed importantly to the formation of integrated cultural subsystems. The

initial cultural heterogeneity of the enslaved doubtless had the effect of forcing them at the outset to shift their primary cultural and social commitment from the Old World to the New, a process which often took their European masters centuries to accomplish.¹⁰ The quite radical cultural reorientation that must have typified the adaptation of enslaved Africans to the New World was surely more extreme than what the European colonists—with their more intact institutions, continuing contacts with the homeland, and more coherent family groupings—experienced. Even in those special situations in which some members of a particular ethnic or linguistic group could remain in close contact, such orientation must have remained a secondary focus of commitment, with the new African-American culture and its concomitant social ties being primary. All slaves must have found themselves accepting, albeit out of necessity, countless "foreign" cultural practices, and this implied a gradual remodeling of their own traditional ways of doing many things. For most individuals, a commitment to, and engagement in, a new social and cultural world must have taken precedence rather quickly over what would have become before long largely a nostalgia for their homelands. We remind ourselves and our readers that people ordinarily do not long for a lost "cultural heritage" in the abstract, but for the immediately experienced personal relationships, developed in a specific cultural and institutional setting, that any trauma such as war or enslavement may destroy. A "culture," in these terms, becomes intimately linked to the social contexts within which affective ties are experienced and perceived. With the destruction of those ties, each individual's "cultural set" is transformed phenomenologically, until the creation of new institutional frameworks permits the refabrication of content, both based upon—and much removed from—the past.

We have been suggesting that distinctive, "mature" African-American cultures and societies probably developed more rapidly than has often been assumed. The early forging of "shipmate" ties or ritual complexes, as we have phrased them, are intended as arbitrary (though central) examples of much more general processes. Even in the realm of the arts, to choose a less likely example, it could be shown that new cultural subsystems were worked out through the interaction of slaves who had not yet set foot in the Americas. Not only was drumming, dancing, and singing encouraged for "exercise" on many of the slavers,¹¹ but Stedman tells us how, at the end of the nightmare of the Middle Passage, off the shores of Suriname: "All the Slaves are led upon deck . . . their hair shaved in different figures of Stars, half-moons, &c, /which they generally do the one to the other (having no Razors) by the help of a broken bottle and without Soap/."¹² It is hard to imagine a more impressive example of irrepressible cultural vitality than this image of slaves decorating one another's hair in the midst of one of the most dehumanizing experiences in all of history.

To document our assertions that fully formed African-American cultures developed within the earliest years of settlement in many New World colonies involves genuine difficulties. These stem from the general shortage of descriptive materials on slave life during the initial period, as well as from the lack of research regarding this problem. However, in at least one colony—Suriname—certain fortuitous historical events allow us to pinpoint in time the development of several major cultural subsystems, and we are able to find support for our broader argument.

Language provides one relevant case. Within the first twenty years of settlement, almost all of the English planters who had established the colony of Suriname left for other parts of the

Caribbean, taking their slaves with them. During the several years when the newly imported, Dutch-owned slaves overlapped with the soon to depart English-owned slaves, the language developed by the English-owned slaves must have been passed on to these new arrivals. This, at least, is our conclusion, because ever since that time, three hundred years ago, an English-based creole (called Sranan, Negro-English, Surinaams, or Taki-Taki) has been the national language of Suriname. This language, a new African-American creation, can reliably be said to have been "firmly established" within the colony's first two decades.¹³

The rapidity with which a complex, integrated, and unique African-American religious system developed in Suriname at a very early point is no less striking. Our evidence, again, is indirect but quite suggestive. When the ancestors of the Saramaka Maroons escaped from the plantations of the Para and the Lower Suriname Rivers to establish an independent society in the forested interior (during the seventeenth and very early eighteenth centuries), they must have carried with them a religious system that had already been rather fully shaped on the plantations. There are remarkable similarities today between the religious systems of the Saramaka and of the "Creoles" of the Para region, similarities which range from countless specific belief-rite complexes, such as that surrounding the killing of a tapir, to broad-based principles like those relating corporate groups and their ancestral gods; these similarities cannot be explained adequately on the basis of subsequent contact.¹⁴ Moreover, today—now that there is freedom of movement for Saramakas going to the coast—a specific group of Saramakas will commonly visit, worship, and exchange specialized ritual information with those "Creoles" who are precisely the descendants of slaves who lived on the

same plantation from which the ancestors of that particular group of Saramakas had fled, over two and one-half centuries ago.

We can assert with some confidence, then, that during the earliest decades of the African presence in Suriname, the core of a new language and a new religion had been developed; subsequent centuries of massive new importations from Africa apparently had little more effect than to lead to secondary elaborations. We would suggest tentatively that similar scenarios may have unfolded in many other parts of Afro-America, and for other cultural sub-systems as well. Handler and Frisbie, for example, appear to argue similarly in dealing with music among Barbadian slaves.¹⁵

However, we do not mean to imply that in some special situations, late-arriving Africans were not able to exert considerable influence on local African-American institutions (see below). Rather, the Suriname data simply suggest to us the need for considerably more detailed research on such problems. When we can chart the growth of African-American social and cultural-systems in a fairly precise time perspective, we will be able to consider, for example, the relationship between the provenience of the mass of Africans and the cultural forms developing in a given colony at a particular time, and we will have taken a large step toward understanding how African-American cultures were actually forged.

We have stressed some of the ways in which the early stages of African-American history fostered the rapid development of local slave cultures. But we believe that this distinctive setting also stamped these cultures with certain general features that strongly influenced their subsequent development and continue to lend to them much of their characteristic shape today. Our speculation runs as follows. While the greatest shock of enslavement was probably the fear of physical violence and of

death itself, the psychological accompaniment of this trauma was the relentless assault on personal identity, being stripped of status and rank and treated as nameless ciphers. Yet, by a peculiar irony, this most degrading of all aspects of slavery seems to have had the effect of encouraging the slaves to cultivate an enhanced appreciation for exactly those most personal, most human characteristics which differentiate one individual from another, perhaps the principal qualities which the masters could not take away from them. Early on, then, the slaves were elaborating upon the ways in which they could be individuals—a particular sense of humor, a certain skill or type of knowledge, even a distinctive way of walking or talking, or some sartorial detail, like the cock of a hat or the use of a cane.

At the same time, as we have seen, the initial cultural heterogeneity of the enslaved produced among them a general openness to ideas and usages from other cultural traditions, a special tolerance (within the West African context) of cultural differences. We would suggest that this acceptance of cultural differences combined with the stress on personal style to produce in early African-American cultures a fundamental dynamism, an expectation of cultural change as an integral feature of these systems. Within the strict limits set by the conditions of slavery, African-Americans learned to put a premium on innovation and individual creativity; there was always a place for fads and fashions; "something new" (within certain aesthetic limits, of course) became something to be celebrated, copied, and elaborated; and a stylistic innovation brought by a newly imported African could be quickly assimilated. From the first, then, the commitment to a new culture by African-Americans in a given place included an expectation of continued dynamism, change, elaboration, and creativity.¹⁶

5 RETENTIONS AND SURVIVALS



If African-American cultures do in fact share such an integral dynamism, and if, as we shall argue, their social systems have been highly responsive to changing social conditions, one must maintain a skeptical attitude toward claims that many contemporary social or cultural forms represent direct continuities from the African homelands. Over the past several decades, historical research has reduced the number of convincing cases of formal continuities, but has hinted at new levels of continuity—levels which may eventually tell us a great deal more about the actual development of African-American cultures. Students of the African-American heritage have witnessed a gradual shift from the analysis of isolated cultural elements viewed largely from the outside, to the analysis of systems or patterns in their social context. Students of creole languages, for example, increasingly have located the unique aspects of these languages on the syntactic (or discourse) level, rather than simply on the lexical level; and analogous arguments have

been proposed for such diverse things as art forms and onomastics.¹

These shifting perspectives are well illustrated by the history of studies of Suriname Maroon woodcarving. Traditionally, scholars considered this to be the prototypical “African art in the Americas”;² an art historian discussing this art among the Saramaka has noted that the “arabesques in openwork . . . even-sided flat bands, and . . . brass studs to enhance curvilinearity” strikingly recall eighteenth-century Akan work.³ Yet recent ethnohistorical field research strongly suggests that this distinctive art form was forged in the Guianas and is largely a nineteenth-century development. It has also demonstrated that many of the most striking formal similarities with West African art are quite recent innovations.⁴ More generally, such research urges upon us a reorientation of our focus, from trying to explain similarities of form considered in isolation to comparing broad aesthetic ideas, the implicit “grammatical” principles which generate these forms. The very real formal similarities between the art of the Maroons and that of some West African peoples are not, then, mere evidence of static “retentions” or “survivals,” but rather products of independent development and innovation, within historically related and overlapping sets of broad aesthetic ideas. The woodcarving of the Maroons, like their naming, cicatrization, and other aesthetic systems, then appears to be highly creative and to be “African” more in terms of deep-level cultural rules or principles than in terms of formal continuities: in short, a highly adaptive subsystem, responsive to the changing social environments of the artists and critics who continue to carry it forward.

We keep in mind that, in art as in much else, the relation-

ships between individual artist and group are likely to be complex and subtle. To what extent art is produced and modified in a context of freedom of expression, and to what extent group and individual creator are bound by conservative values, must be specified separately for each society and, often, for each art medium or genre. We can assume that West African artistic expression varied to some degree from one society to another, while the opportunity for individual creativeness or innovativeness probably varied with the social function of the particular art form. Presumably much the same has been the case with African-American art. Given the social circumstances of its beginnings, however, we choose to suppose that a high degree of freedom for variation may have been institutionalized in many art forms at the outset. In order to make the most possible sense of how these forms evolved in African-American societies, it will be necessary both to learn all we can of those initial situations, and to pursue our study of art and other African-American cultural manifestations in their social contexts,⁵ and not purely as delineations of changing or conservative forms.

Recent historical research on Afro-America also has taught us some of the dangers of extrapolating backward to Africa in the realm of *social* forms. We may mention but one obvious example drawn from our own work. Saramaka men, who now commonly have two wives each, turn out upon careful investigation to be far more "polygynous" (one might say "African-looking," in Herskovits's terms) today than were their ancestors two centuries ago, due to changing institutions in the wider society, with newly evolved patterns of wage labor and the skewed local sex ratios such patterns have created.⁶ It seems likely that systems of social relations are generally even more highly responsive to changing environmental conditions

than are cultural systems. As in the cultural realm, however, we would suggest that delving below the surface of social forms to get at the value systems and cognitive orientations that underlie and accompany them may reveal long-term continuities of another kind.

In calling for more subtle, in-depth research, we do not mean to deny the existence of direct "survivals" or "retentions" in Afro-America, or that careful investigation of the specific reasons for their continued persistence will help us better to understand the formative years of African-American history. We might cite two brief examples. The ultimate "ordeal," the equivalent of the highest court in Saramaka today, is in the hands of a small cult group in a single village; its techniques, which include thrusting a medicated feather through the tongue of the accused to determine guilt or innocence, seem traceable directly to the eighteenth-century Kingdom of Benin.⁷ In this case, it seems likely that a specific cluster of ritual knowledge was carried to Suriname during the earliest years of slavery by a single specialist, and that the tradition (which is attested to in eighteenth-century Saramaka⁸) was perpetuated in much the same way as we describe for our hypothetical "twin birth" ritual. In contrast, divination with a coffin—the interrogation of the spirit of the deceased (in which the movements of the bearers of the corpse are "controlled" by the spirit, anxious to reveal the cause of death)—provides a different sort of example. It was a widespread practice in West and Central Africa as part of funeral rites, and we find it again in widely separated parts of colonial Afro-America—from Jamaica to Dominica to Suriname.⁹ Unlike the Saramaka ordeal, which involves a highly specialized body of knowledge from a particular society that nevertheless served a function recognized as crucial in many West and Central

African societies, divination with the corpse was probably familiar to most of the first transported slaves. These two particular continuities, even viewed thus summarily, can be seen to illustrate somewhat different processes in the development of African-American cultures. Careful consideration of other such real historical continuities almost certainly will help us to understand some of the choices open to early African-Americans, as well as the later course their cultures took.

We wish to consider, in equally sketchy fashion, two other cases of continuity, partly in order to emphasize the relationship between continuity of culture and continuity of personnel, partly to enlarge the range of cases of such continuities, and to expose the complexity involved in their study. Following Emancipation in the British West Indies (1834–1838), free Africans were imported to a number of British colonies, including Trinidad, in the hope of expanding agricultural settlement and of supplying additional labor to the planters. In a twenty-year period (1841–1861), Trinidad received 6,581 *free* Africans;¹⁰ between 1834 and 1867, that island received a total of 8,854 *liberated* Africans, taken off slavers headed for Cuba or Brazil by British cruisers.¹¹ A large number of different African cultural groups were represented by these migrations, including Ibo, Temne, Wolof, Yoruba, Ashanti, Fulani, and Mandingo peoples.¹²

In a tantalizingly brief but intriguing account, Carr described a “*rada*” (Dahomean) community outside Port-of-Spain, founded by one Robert Antoine (Aboyeve Zāhwenu) about fifteen years after his arrival in Trinidad. Antoine acquired a small property by purchase in 1868, where he settled with his common-law wife and son. By the time of his death in 1899, his house and compound had become a center for migrant Dahomeans, many of whom had previously settled

nearby: “during the ceremonial occasions of those early days it is said that so large were the gatherings at the compound that there was hardly room in which to accommodate the people.”¹³

Antoine initiated and maintained a substantial portion of the Dahomean ceremonial calendar at his compound. It is significant that those who emigrated at the same time to Trinidad had included a trained *hubonō* or high priest, and two male *vodūnsi* (cult initiates), and all three of these men actively perpetuated traditional ceremonies. It may be of equal interest that the gods who are celebrated by this group often carry saints’ names, typical of African-American religious groupings in Catholic countries elsewhere, as in Brazil, Cuba, and Haiti. Carr asked his informants how the African deities acquired Christian names and was told that they had “always” had them. The idea that such names had been attached to the African godheads after contact with missionaries in Africa was rejected by the elderly compound member with whom Carr spoke. Thus we have no information as to how or when such names were in fact acquired.

It is not our intent here to examine in detail the correspondences and divergences between the religious expressions of this group and those typical of nineteenth-century Dahomey. But we must note that this case reveals both substantial continuity—as in calendrical allocation of ceremonies, gods’ names, priestly roles, sacrifice, possession, etc.—and substantial modification, both by syncretism (for instance, the attachment of saints’ names, which we believe to have occurred in Trinidad itself) and in terms of the sociology of the new setting. No male *vodūnsis* have appeared since the deaths of Alokasu and Kunu, who accompanied Antoine from Africa. The *Kututō* ceremony for the dead, which is held in November,

is now linked to a Catholic mass for the souls in Purgatory. Five deities, who formerly possessed native African migrants, have not reappeared since the deaths of these men. Some shrines have vanished. Even in small ways, change reveals itself. The *Sakpata* shrine, still maintained in the compound, once had at its head a euphorbia plant, supposedly in accord with African tradition. But a child's eyesight was damaged by the milky fluid of the plant some years ago, whereupon it was replaced with a dragonblood plant (*Dracaena* spp.).

Even without a thorough comparative examination, it should be clear that the sociocultural religious system of the homeland did not survive intact and unchanged in the new context—and, of course, it would be quite extraordinary if it had. Doubtless more significant is the fact that Antoine was able to count on the services of three trained religious specialists when he initiated the ceremonial calendar a century ago. While we cannot weigh the importance of the disappearance of male *vodūnsis*, we think it defensible to assume that it would have affected the forms and functions of the ceremonial calendar today.

A final example may be drawn from the literature on Afro-Cuban religion. While it differs in many ways from that provided above, it shares with the Trinidadian case a relative recency of implantation of African custom in the New World setting. The slave trade to Cuba ended about 1865, though it seems certain that additional slaves were imported during several years immediately following. Curtin has estimated that twelve thousand slaves were imported in 1865, but calls this "guesswork," and suggests that he has picked a relatively high figure because he supposes that the trade continued briefly thereafter.¹⁴ Materials on the ethnic origins of Cuban slaves during the last stages of the trade are unsatisfactory; the trade

was illegal, and manifests of slave ships, or other information of the sort available for, say, Saint-Domingue at an earlier period, are lacking. Nonetheless, it is certain that substantial numbers of Yoruba were imported, and the Afro-Cuban religious and linguistic materials suggest as much. Having carried out field investigations both among the Yoruba of Ife, Nigeria, and the Lucumí of Matanzas, Cuba, Bascom and Montero de Bascom were able to document continuities of certain kinds in divinatory practices, including the 256 permutations resulting from the casting of a sixteen-unit, two-part divinatory necklace. Though important changes in the materials employed, in the terminology of explanation, and in the pronunciation of terms have occurred, "Both the names and the order of the double figures . . . check exactly with those recorded for the Yoruba by Epega, Aderoju, Frobenius, Monteil, and Dennett, for Dahomey by Bertho and Maupoil, and for the Ewe by Spieth."¹⁵ The Afro-Cuban data are particularly convincing because the various elements in divinatory practices are clearly separable, but occur in both Nigeria and Cuba in such intimate interrelationship that diffusion from Africa to the New World cannot be questioned seriously.

These two cases reveal both continuity and change. The Afro-Cuban case makes clear that a relatively complex portion of culture can be carried substantially intact from one locus to another. Though certain substitutions of material (e.g. coconut disks for kola nuts) occur and are obvious enough, migrant diviners needed only to have around them persons from the same or a related society where such divination was practiced to have been able to ply their skills. The Afro-Cuban divinatory practices, however, both show continuities with more than one West African culture and suggest that other groups besides the Yoruba contributed to the forms assumed

by older materials in the Cuban context. The Trinidadian case does not demonstrate any obvious intermixture of original African forms, even though there was considerable change in the new setting over time. The Cuban case suggests that the African materials diffused from overseas originated with persons who were members of different groups, even though very solid continuities with past practice are demonstrable.

Two obvious features of these cases require mention. First, both of the emigrations in question, relative to certain others, occurred fairly recently. Second, in one case the migrants were free or freedmen, and, in the other, slavery had ended only about twenty-five years after the last migration. In both of these regards, the Trinidadian and Cuban examples differ substantially from most other examples of African continuities. In a general way, it can be claimed that both the strength of the continuities and their relative lack of modification probably are related to recency of migration and to the presence (in Trinidad) or nearness (in Cuba) of freedom. Such assertions do not explain away the many other cases of such continuities, often maintained in the face of great oppression and imposed disorder, nor can we deal adequately here with the whole issue of illegal slave trading, as it must have influenced the whole panorama of continuities in the New World. But overall, direct formal continuities from Africa are more the exception than the rule in any African-American culture, even in those such as Saramaka, which have been most isolated.¹⁶

6 KINSHIP AND SEX ROLES



We have been suggesting that a firm grounding in what is known of the past of African-American peoples can enhance our understanding of their present, much as the study of the present provides clues that can be carried fruitfully into archival research. Some additional emphasis on the uses of the past is called for, certainly not to the exclusion of ethnography, but as an essential corollary, particularly in the case of African-American cultures. Given the tension-ridden initial situations in which enslaved Africans found themselves, we believe that one promising strategy—though by no means the only one—for plotting the rise of African-American cultures would be to focus on the beginnings, from which we can work forward, rather than simply to extrapolate backward on the basis of perceived similarities with Old World cultures.

If we force ourselves to consider in all its complexity the initial situation of Africans in any New World colony, few of the “historical” explanations offered by scholars for current African-American cultural or social forms are likely to turn