CHAPTER 18

Rockin’ for a Risen Savior

Bakongo and Christian Iconicity in the Louisiana Easter Rock Ritual

Joyce Marie Jackson

Introduction

I grew up in the sanctuary of a black Baptist church where women were always in the majority in terms of attendance, “feeling the spirit” (shouting) and ritual performativity. By supporting and nurturing one of the most crucial spaces of creativity, resistance and rejuvenation of African American people—the black church—black women are, in large part, responsible for the continuance of cultural and spiritual rituals in the church. Historically, black male leaders have insisted on adopting the patriarchal ministry of their white Christian forbears, even during the times when they strove to purify the white instruction of racist theology and to transform it into liberation theology. It is a peculiar irony of the black church that, while not all but many, men and women of various denominations, are still solidly installing black men in the upper realms of privilege and power, women are still consigned to subordinate positions. Nonetheless, women of the church constantly present challenges to this authority, pulling from a well of Africanist cultural performance practices—dancing, singing, shouting, and exalting—to forge a personal relationship with God. The black “folk church” is already a delineated performance venue in which pastor and congregation engage in a spirited performance which undulates with oratory, poetry, rhythm, music, dance and shouting, in essence a sacred but dramatic theatrical ritual. Pearl Williams-Jones characterizes the folk church as:

at once a mystical, inevitable body of believers unified by a common Christian theology as well as a visible body and community of Black people united by common cultural ties. We may consider the black folk church as being an institution controlled by blacks which exists principally within the Black community and which reflects its attitudes, values and lifestyle. It is a church of everyday people and one of any denomination....

Williams-Jones, 1977, 21
Many of the ritual practices, which we commonly associate with the black folk church, such as freely structured services, dance, improvisational music, the emotional and musical delivery of style of sermons and prayers, and spontaneous verbal and non-verbal responses by preachers and congregations, have essentially merged from African values and aesthetics. Denominational affiliation is secondary to ritual in the black folk church. In essence, the type of ritual determines if a church is a “folk” church or not.

Since the church is the most conservative institution in the African American community, it is logical to assume that ritual services, including the mode of worship and style and function of music, would be preserved there in their truest form. Many cultural ties of the African ancestral lineage have been maintained within the enclave of the black folk church.

In this chapter, it is my intention to respond to a misunderstanding of the black church that was articulated by some early scholars such as Gunnar Myrdal in “The Negro Church: Its Weakness, Trends, and Outlook.” His work in 1944 basically stated that the black church had become an outdated, impractical, dysfunctional institution whose conservative politics supported black poverty. His work set the stage for negative views and was followed by others who concluded that assimilation into mainstream American culture would solidify the demise of the old-time black folk church. Even at the end of 1960s some scholars were still predicting the end of the black church as a development favorable to the black community’s survival (Cone 1971, 349; Washington 1971, 301–309).

Although the impact of the black church within African American communities is richly documented since the early 1960s, this study is a living testament to the unique ritual in a rural community in Louisiana that maintains its identity and strength through the women of the community.

The Easter Rock ritual has two distinct frames and as I will emphasize later, African influences are found in a syncretized form, blended with diverse non-African icons in a unique configuration. In the *Old Ship of Zion: The Afro-Baptist Ritual in the African Diaspora*, Walter F. Pitts, Jr. first delineates this binary structure that persists either in their original or modified form in the Black Atlantic World. Through the earlier labor of Pitts and others, it is affirmed that the African roots of African American religion and culture were never fully nor effectively severed and by their existence challenged the inevitability of day-to-day subordination.

To understand these rituals, and their significance in their respective church communities, I draw heavily on Walter Pitts’ dual ritual frames concept, which combine to create the total ritual structure. In his *Old Ship of Zion*, he refutes the impression, both scholarly and popular, that ritual behavior in the