African American Culture: A Glimpse into the Past with the Goal of a Better Future

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With the recent history-making election outcome of Barack Hussein Obama as the nation’s 44th president but first of African American heritage, it seems only fitting to reflect back on the dawning period of African culture in America. By doing so, it may allow one to achieve a better and more meaningful understanding of how historical events have shaped African American culture into what it is today.

Native Africans were first forced to the Americas as part of the Atlantic Slave Trade that lasted from the 16th to the 19th centuries. During this time period, an estimated number between 10 and 20 million Africans from West, West-Central and South-east Africa were transported to the Western Hemisphere as slaves (Encarta, 2008). The enslaved Africans were then sold or traded as commodities for raw materials, which would be transported back to Europe. This long and grueling trip on slave ships from Africa to the Americas was called the Middle Passage. On average, 16 percent of the men, women, and children who were forced to make this voyage died in transit due to insanitary conditions that were breeding grounds for disease (Encarta).

This forced migration to the Americas was one of the largest diasporas of pre-modern times. The African Diaspora is the story of how Africans, though scattered and dispersed, managed to retain their traditions and reform their identities in a new world. Elements of African culture such as religion, language, and folklore endured and have remained as links to their past lives. In the process of Americanization, Africans formed another culture known as the African-American culture that familiarizes the United States today (Azevado, 1993). This dynamic culture has had and continues to have a profound impact on mainstream American culture, as well as the culture of the broader world.
In 1808, The United States banned the import of slaves, but the practice and sale of slaves in the U.S. was still widely employed and accepted. This time period was marked by upheaval among slaves, such as the Nat Turner Slave Revolt in 1831. Nat Turner led a bloody revolt in Virginia and was later hanged for his actions. This led to even stricter slave laws in some states (Encarta, 2008). Other events, such as the Amistad Slave Revolt and the attempt of thousands to escape slavery through the Underground Railroad, made marks in history and helped pave the path for freedom for African Americans. In 1863, Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, a presidential order declaring the freedom of the slaves. President Lincoln made the end of slavery a major goal of the Civil War.

Unfortunately, the abolishment of slavery did not bring equality for African Americans in the United States. Ever since their forced migration, African Americans were seen as property and were considered inferior to their white counterparts. The late 1800s to the mid-1900s were a time of racial segregation in America. Railroad cars, drinking fountains, restrooms, and many other public mechanisms were designated as “white” or “colored”. There was to be no intermingling of the two. This was shown through several U.S. Supreme Court decisions, with one of those being Plessy v. Ferguson in 1896. Homer Plessy was a 30-year-old “colored” shoemaker who was jailed for sitting in the "white" car of the East Louisiana Railroad (Zimmerman, 1997). Ironically, Plessy was only one-eighths black and seven-eighths white. Under Louisiana law, however, he was considered black and was required to sit in the “colored” railroad car. Plessy went to court and argued, in Homer Adolph Plessy v. The State of Louisiana, that the Separate Car Act violated his Constitutional rights. Plessy was found guilty of refusing to leave the white car and later appealed to the Supreme Court of Louisiana, which upheld Ferguson's decision. In 1896, the Supreme Court of the United States heard Plessy's case and
found him guilty once again (Zimmerman). This historical Supreme Court decision set the precedent that separate facilities for blacks and whites were constitutional as long as they were “equal.” The notion of “separate but equal” expanded into public domains, such as restaurants, theaters, and public schools.

Under the Supreme Court ruling of Plessy v. Ferguson, African American schools and white schools were supposed to be “equal,” but most schools for African Americans were far inferior to their white counterparts. In fact, African American schools only got 60% of funding that white schools received (Lowe, 2004). African American children also had to travel great distances to get to school, even when there was a white school nearby. This became a problem for the father of one African American student, Linda Brown, who had to walk a mile to get to her “black” elementary school even though a white elementary school was just blocks from her home. Brown’s father sought help from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), an organization founded in 1909 that was created to promote the equality of rights of African Americans. This led to the landmark Supreme Court case of Brown v. Board of Education in 1954 that resulted in the mandated desegregation of public schools in America (Cozzens, 1998). While this ruling called for the desegregation of schools, it did not address desegregation in other public domains. This became evident in 1955, when African American Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a public bus in Montgomery, Alabama to make room for a white passenger. Though she wasn’t first to challenge the practice of “separate but equal”, her actions sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott and actually initiated the modern Civil Rights Movement that began in the mid 1950s. The brutal murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till in 1955, just three months prior to the Montgomery Bus Boycott, also helped spark the Civil Rights Movement in America. Till, a native of Chicago, was
visiting family for the summer in Mississippi and broke an unwritten law of the South by whistling at a white female clerk of the town’s local grocery store (PBS, 2003). Till was brutally beaten, shot, and thrown in the river by the woman’s husband and another white man. These two men went on trial for his murder and were acquitted by an all-white jury. Soon after, the two men admitted to the murder of Emmett Till in great detail to a journalist which resulted in the story of Till’s murder having a vast impact on the U.S. and on the Civil Rights Movement (PBS).

For African Americans and the fight for equality, the next decade and a half brought about some of the most significant milestones in America’s history. While the court decision of Brown v. Board of Education did not mandate a specified time by which all U.S. public schools were to be desegregated, three years after the ruling nine African American students who later became known as the Little Rock Nine became the first students to attend what had been a racially segregated school in the U.S. prior to the court ruling (Encarta, 2008). Five years later, in 1963, another milestone was met with the historical March on Washington for jobs and freedom and the infamous “I have a Dream” speech delivered by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In 1964, President Johnson, with Martin Luther King standing behind him, signed the Civil Rights act outlawing racial segregation and discrimination based on race or gender (Encarta). The very next year, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was passed to give African Americans and other minorities the right to vote in America (A&E, 2008).

While these epic events brought African Americans one step closer to the freedoms on which this country was based, this time period also brought great tragedy. Two of the most renowned African American leaders and human and civil rights activists were assassinated within three years of one another. On February 21, 1965 Malcolm X was murdered while speaking at an organizational meeting on African American unity, and in April of 1968 MLK
was assassinated outside of his motel room in Memphis, Tennessee (Encarta, 2008). Despite the
iconic display of the fight for equality by these two African American men, racial tension,
inequality and segregation still continued after their deaths.

In fact, it was 1968 before courts starting demanding desegregation of schools in the
South and 1973 before desegregation was enforced in the North (Lowe, 2004). However,
desegregation came at a price. In the South alone there was a loss of more than 30,000 black
teachers and in some states as many as 90 percent of black principals. There was also a loss of
many African American high schools and their cultural traditions (Lowe). Discriminatory
practices against African Americans continued in the 1960s and 1970s in regards to housing,
financing, and job opportunities (Encarta, 2008). Because of this, more than half of all African
Americans were living below the poverty line at that time. In recent decades, discriminatory
practices have become less transparent. In 1986, the poverty rate among African Americans was
31.1% which is a vast improvement from just a decade and a half before (United States Census
Bureau, 2006).

Today’s statistics depict even more promising outcomes for African Americans than ever
before. In fact, 24.3% is the current poverty rate for single-race African Americans (U.S. Census
Bureau). From an education standpoint, 81% of African Americans have at least a high school
diploma 18% hold a bachelors degree or higher (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). In the fall of 2005,
there were 2.3 million African American college students, an increase of roughly 1 million from
15 years earlier (U.S. Census Bureau). As for the “American Dream” of owning a home and
retaining a job, 46% of African American households are owner-occupied homes. This rate is
higher in certain states, such as Mississippi, where it reaches 58% (U.S. Census Bureau). And,
26% of those16 and older work in management, professional and related occupations. There are
44,900 physicians and surgeons, 80,000 postsecondary teachers, 48,300 lawyers, and 52,400 chief executives (U.S. Census Bureau).

While inequities still exist in America today, these numbers represent a shift towards racial equality. And nothing illustrates that shift like the recent election of our country’s newest leader. The election of Barack Hussein Obama suggests that the previously mentioned events in African American history have not become forgotten moments, but have been building blocks towards something that many African Americans never imagined they would see in an entire lifetime…an African American as President of the United States. While in days, months, years, and decades past it has been difficult for many African Americans to truly believe in the dream of being “anything I want to be”, November 4, 2008 became a day where, in America, that dream is now one that just might actually come true.
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