



Black Spirituality and Black Consciousness: Soul Force, Culture and Freedom in the African-American Experience

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Editorial Review

From the Back Cover

Contrary to some misguided perceptions about the religion of black folk, African-American Spirituality plays a vital role in the formation and practice of black freedom in American. While social and political freedom are important quests in the African-American experience of freedom, black Americans have managed to create a unique experience of freedom that embraces black spirituality and black culture as essential elements for building personal identity consolidating community and determining their destiny. This freedom has also created a unique cultural archive of the black culture soul which shapes the consciousness and values of black Americans as a people of God of inherent worth and power who have surmounted the relentless storms of adversity.

Black spirituality affirms, negates and transcends aspects of Anglo-American culture, creates and sustains African-American culture and establishes psychological and spiritual relocation in response to oppression and various systems of devaluation in American society.

A central thesis of this book is that African-American spirituality, by the way it shapes, informs and strengthens black life, creates a unique matrix of freedom that accentuates the power, resiliency and creativity of black people as the means of overcoming their plight. At the heart of this paradigm of freedom is the courage to create and construct a positive reality which has enabled Africans to develop a spiritual gift of resourcefulness that compels to identify, define, confront and transform those forces of evil and oppression that have instigated their demise.

Thus the creation of a culture of spirituality and a spirituality of culture through creative and resistant soul force. And cultural creativity has aided the sanity, survival and well-being that has also contributed to a practice of freedom emulated in the world community.

About the Author

Carlyle Fielding Stewart, III is Senior Pastor of Hope United Methodist Church in Southfield, Michigan. Dr. Stewart is a teacher, scholar and lecturer. He has published over 50 articles in journals and newspapers, and is the author of seven books, including, *Sankofa: Celebrations for the African American Church* and *Soul Survivors: An African American Spirituality*.

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Chapter One: A Definition of African-American Spirituality

Creative Soul Force and Resistant Soul Force

Any exploration of African-American freedom must consider the pivotal role of black spirituality in shaping the consciousness, identity, and values of African-American people. The term "spirituality" has a plethora of definitions and descriptions too numerous to enumerate here in their entirety; but for our purposes the term represents the full matrix of beliefs, power, values, and behaviors that shape people's consciousness, understanding, and capacity of themselves in relation to divine reality.

Spirituality is also a process by which people interpret, disclose, formulate, adapt, and innovate reality and their understandings of God within a specific context or culture. It signifies a style or mode of existence, an ethos and mythos that creates its own praxis and culture, and compels identification and resolution of human problems through divine intervention. These processes involve adaptation and transformation of internal as

well as external conditions.

To be "spiritual" from an African-American perspective, is to live wholly from the divine soul center of human existence. This center is the core of the universe and the quintessential impetus driving the quest for human fulfillment. Thus, African-American spirituality connotes the possession of a soul force spirit that divinely mediates, informs, and transforms a human being's capacity to create, center, adapt, and transcend the realities of human existence. This creative soul force creates its own culture soul, that is to say, the realm of black existence, where black people discover, analyze, celebrate, value, corroborate, and transform the meaning of black life in society. The black culture soul is the oasis of black existence; that orbit of being and behavior where black people freely express and preserve creative soul force while affirming their unique personas as a people.

Two essential elements shape and compel African-American spiritual belief and praxis: creative soul force and resistant soul force. Creative soul force has to do with those elements of spirituality that create cultural mechanisms that enable African Americans to adapt, transform, and transcend reality through the creative construction of black culture. Resistant soul force is the power to create, transform, and transcend those barriers and constraints that enforce complete domestication to those values, processes, behaviors, and beliefs that reinforce human devaluation and oppression.

Creative and resistant soul forces are two important elements in African-American spirituality. Creative soul force is the spirit of creativity that forges and fosters culture as a means of constructing and transforming reality. Resistant soul force is the power that thwarts the complete domestication of the spirit for purposes of subjugation, domination, and annihilation.

At the heart of black existence in general, is a movement of the spirit that creates, values, and sustains its own soul force and culture soul. Creative soul force and resistant soul force contain the dynamic spirits of innovation, adaptation, assimilation, and transformation that shape the African-American experience and consciousness into positive forces for spiritual and social change.

The culture soul is that constellation or archive of values, beliefs, behaviors, practices, and passions that empower and confer value on African-American life. Soul force is the dynamic impetus for positive change. The culture soul is that regime of value and belief giving permanent sanctity and identity to black life as a positively unique cultural and spiritual entity. Both forces emanate from divine reality and are centered in black people's understanding of themselves primarily as spiritual beings, children of the universe, who are umbilically connected to a God of freedom, liberation, and positive change.

African-American spirituality, then, is unique in that this soul force spirit is the ultimate reference point for black existence. This spirit permeates black life and instills in African-American people a will to survive; a desire to confront and surmount all threats to their being and existence while concurrently creating idioms of life and culture which provide them with adaptive mechanisms that reinforce their sanity, affirm their wholeness, and establish their spiritual and ontological location in American society.

Dona Marimba Richards explains this "soul" as follows: The concept "soul" cannot be explained in rationalistic terms. The Western metaphysic is not equipped to discuss it. Soul is the essence of the human in the African view. It is that aspect of the other person that expresses her union with the universal order and through it with all being (Okra, Ka, Se, Emi). It was "soul" that was traumatized by slavery and the sudden imposition of New Europe. It was "soul" that revitalized itself and survived through its connection with the universal African soul.

She employs Leonard Barrett's definition that "soul signifies the moral and emotional fiber of the black

man."

Barrett states: Soul force is that power of the Black man that turns sorrow into joy, crying into laughter, defeat into victory. It is patience while suffering, determination while frustrated and hope while in despair. It derives its impetus from the ancestral heritage of Africa, its refinement from the bondage of slavery, and its continuing vitality from the conflict of the present.

This soul force as the sovereign impetus of African-American spirituality is the ultimate adjudicating, corroborating, and legitimating power of African-American life. Thus, African-Americans have a unique spiritual way of being, a spiritual "personality," which is part of their reality and identity. Black life involves the revelation, cultivation, and perpetuation of creative soul force and resistant soul force as dynamics for liberation and positive change. Black Americans are a spiritual people of soul. Their cultural ethos is replete with manifestations of the divine presence. Whether it is black football players bowing their heads in prayer or doing a triumphal end-zone dance after scoring a touchdown, or jazz musicians giving thanks to God before playing a "set," there is affirmation and acknowledgment of God's all-pervasive presence, power, and grace in every aspect of black life.

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