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Book Author(s): Katrina Hazzard-Gordon

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# 1



## DANCING UNDER THE LASH

To see an African dance is to witness his cultural past and present. . . . For the African, the fullest expression of art is dance.

—Lee Warren, *The Dance of Africa* (1972)

### **The Middle Passage**

SOCIAL dancing links African-Americans to their African past more strongly than any other aspect of their culture. This is hardly surprising, because dance was (and is today) of central importance in West Africa. It is not only a routine communal activity, but an integral part of ceremonies that bind groups together as a people. It links one's personal identity to that of the group; events throughout the life cycle of the individual and the community are commemorated in dance: fattening house dances, fertility dances, and rite-of-passage dances.<sup>1</sup>

Dance also serves as a mediating force between people and the world of the gods. Specific dances and rhythms were appropriate for particular deities; commonly, a specific rhythm is assigned to every mask and every step that the dancers perform.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, dance is

so much a part of the philosophy, customs, and sense of place that eliminating it would radically alter the African view of the universe.

Although dances unrelated to ritual exist today in West Africa, most traditional dances have been connected to or are performed during religious ceremonies. Since virtually all such ceremonies are public events, officials such as chiefs, elders, and priests must be able dancers. Those deficient in skill undergo several months of instruction before assuming office. We can say without exaggeration that dance competency, if not proficiency, is required of all individuals in traditional West African society.

The pervasive nature of West African dance inevitably drew it into the struggle between slavers and their captives. Capture and brutal treatment brought psychological and cultural transformation, but beyond that, European and American slavers hoped to destroy independent cultural expression among their new acquisitions. They attempted to appropriate dance and reshape it into an instrument of domination. This section is concerned with the slaves' ability to retain or transmute elements of their African cultures in their new environment.

Capture, branding, sale, and especially the dread "middle passage" across the Atlantic were unlike anything the captive Africans had previously experienced. The horror of the experience could only be increased by its unpredictability. Imagine the bewilderment of people herded together for a purpose and a destination they could only speculate about. Surrounded by a variety of African languages (Yoruba, Ibo, Wolof, Bam-

bara, and Bakongo, to name a few) plus that of the slave master, individuals were isolated, wrenched from their communities and ancestors.

Once on board the slaver, the Africans were controlled by terror and intimidation and treated as cargo. Concerned about profits rather than humane treatment, traders were interested in keeping slaves alive and fit for sale. There were two philosophies for loading slave ships: the "tight pack" and the "loose pack." The tight-pack slavers consistently exceeded the legal number of slaves on their ships, subjecting the Africans to a long journey under unbelievably overcrowded conditions. The loose packers obeyed the legal limitations or crowded only slightly. Neither strategy was humane. The actual space allotment per slave under legal conditions was "that every man slave is to be allowed six feet by one foot four inches for room, every woman five feet ten by one foot four, every boy five feet by one foot two and every girl four feet six by one foot."<sup>3</sup> As a consequence of crowding and unsanitary conditions, slave mortality was high.

From the moment of capture, the slaves were under siege. The Europeans attempted to destroy their past and to crush their world view, particularly their religious beliefs, which held the keys to culture and personality. In the middle passage, captives were forbidden to practice their cultural or social rituals. From the beginning of the slave trade, captains and slave dealers debated how much African culture a slave should be allowed to retain. Some practices were condemned as immoral or uncivilized; others were forbidden for political reasons. The Europeans (later, Amer-

icans) recognized that controlling the slaves' culture helped ensure their subordination.

Traditional dance was, of course, forbidden on the slavers, but there is evidence that something called "dancing" occurred in the middle passage. What was it? It seems highly unlikely that a dance area as such existed on the deck of a slaving vessel. The writings of slave-ship captains are not explicit on the matter. Most captains mentioned dancing in a way that implies that slaves happily "danced" on the ships carrying them away from Africa, but some testimony points to purposefully deceptive language in these accounts. Thomas Clarkson, describing the intentions of witnesses called before Parliament to testify against a bill setting a limit on the number of slaves that could be transported per voyage, stated:

It was the object of the witnesses, when examined, to prove two things; first, that regulations were unnecessary because the present mode of transportation was sufficiently convenient for the objects of it, as was well adopted to preserve their comfort and their health. They had sufficient room, sufficient air, and sufficient provisions. When upon deck, *they made merry and amused themselves with dancing.*<sup>4</sup> [emphasis in original]

Further on, Clarkson recounts the observations of less biased witnesses to this "dancing."

Their [the slaves'] allowance consisted of one pint of water a day to each person; they were fed twice a day with yams and horse beans.

After meals they jumped in their irons for exercise. This was so necessary for their health, that they were whipped if they refused to do it, and this

jumping has been termed dancing. On board most slave ships, the shackled slaves were forced to "dance" after meals.

The parts, says Mr. Claxton, . . . on which their shackles are fastened are often excoriated by the violent exercise they are thus forced to take, of which they made many grievous complaints to him. In his ship even those who had the flux, scurvy and such edematous swellings in their legs as made it painful to them to move at all were compelled to dance by the cat.<sup>5</sup>

"Dancing" was believed to have a healing effect on slaves, and was prescribed to prevent both scurvy and suicidal melancholy. According to George Howe, a medical student who sailed to the west coast of Africa in 1880, "In the barracoons it was known that if a negro was not amused and kept in motion he would mope, squat down with his chin on his knees and arms clasped about his legs and in a very short time die." On board this particular ship the remedy for diverting slaves from fatal melancholy was to give them rum and dance them: "The negroes seemed to tire of the monotony of things and some grog was daily distributed to the men and native songs and dances were constantly going on. The ingenuity of everyone was taxed to provide a new source of amusement." Similarly, Dr. Thomas Trotter, surgeon of the *Brookes* in 1783, reported, "After the morning meals came a joyless ceremony called 'dancing the slaves.' Those who were in irons were ordered to stand up and make what motions they could, leaving a passage for such as were out of irons to dance around the deck."<sup>6</sup>

"Dancing the slaves" was a regular activity, as evi-

denced by advertisements for musicians to work on slave ships. Usually several crew members paraded on deck with whips and cat-o-nine-tails, forcing the men slaves to jump in their irons, often until their ankles bled. One sailor explained to Parliament that he was employed to “dance” the men while another person “danced” the women. On ships with no designated musician, music was provided by a slave thumping on a broken drum, an upturned kettle, or an African banjo, or by a sailor with a fiddle, bagpipe, or other instrument. As they danced, some slaves sang, incorporating their experience into their music. One commentator sarcastically noted that the ship captains’ descriptions of this “dancing” ignored the slaves’ evident misery.

We do all we can, insisted the captains, to promote the happiness of the slaves on board. They were brought up on deck for eight hours everyday, while their quarters were being cleaned out, and they were encouraged to dance—in chains. Encouraged, indeed, as other witnesses testified by the application of whips! Those with swollen or diseased limbs were not exempt from partaking of this joyous pastime, though the shackles often peeled the skin off their legs. The songs they sang of sorrow and sadness—simple ditties of their own wretched estate.<sup>7</sup>

Forced to sing as well as dance, slaves predictably chose somber songs. It is not known whether these were traditional or new songs. On some ships slaves were taught short songs to accompany their dances, and sometimes they were permitted to use instruments like tambourines that were brought aboard for

them. Some were forced to improvise drums from materials at hand. Some slaves apparently resisted less than others, willing to adapt traditional music and dances to these new instruments. One ship's officer commented:

Our blacks were a good-natured lot and jumped to the lash so promptly that there was not much occasion for scoring their naked flanks. We had tambourines aboard, which some of the younger darkies fought for regularly, and every evening we enjoyed the novelty of African war songs and ring dances, fore and aft, with the satisfaction of knowing that these pleasant exercises were keeping our stock in good condition and, of course, enhancing our prospects of making a profitable voyage.<sup>8</sup>

The slaves' point of view on such dancing is briefly expressed in a poem printed around 1790. "The Sorrows of Yamba; Or, the Negro Woman's Lamentation" presents the story of an African woman kidnapped from her village home and separated from her children, husband, and parents. The woman, Yamba, is sold to a cruel master and eventually converts to Christianity. The poem conveys the painful longing and sorrow that most slaves must have felt during these occasions.

At the savage Captains beck;  
Now like Brutes they make us prance:  
Smack the Cat about the Deck,  
And in scorn they bid us dance.<sup>9</sup>

Slaves as groups or individuals were also forced to dance to entertain the captain or his guests. The guest of a Dutch slave trader described his host's mulatto

slave girl: "When I dined with the Dutch general at the Mine, I saw her there, being brought in to dance before us, very fine, bearing the title of Madame Vanbukeline." In other instances, slaves inadvertently provided entertainment. In a narrative of a voyage to New Calabar River on the coast of Guinea, James Barbot, owner of the slave ship *Albion-Frigate*, which sailed in 1698 and 1699, describes the good care given to his slaves during the middle passage:

It is true, we allow them much more liberty and use them with more tenderness than most other Europeans would think prudent, as we had them all on deck every day in good weather. . . . We took care they did wash from time to time, to prevent vermin which they are subject to. Towards evening, the blacks would divert themselves on the deck, as they thought fit; some conversing together, others dancing, singing or sporting after their manner, which often made us pastime, especially the females, who being apart from the males and on the quarter deck and many of them young sprightly maidens, full of jollity and good humor, afforded us an abundance of recreation.<sup>10</sup>

Some Europeans were not content with vicarious pleasure and participated in the slaves' dance. The surgeon aboard the Brazilian slave ship *Georgia* leaves us this account from 1827:

On the first voyage out of Calabar we had not been out a week before I found that the captain and crew were desperadoes of the worst kind. Once off the coast the ship became half bedlam and half brothel. Ruiz, our captain, and his two mates set an example of reckless wickedness. They stripped them-

selves and danced with black wenches while our crazy mulatto cook played the fiddle. There was little attempt at discipline and rum and lewdness reigned supreme.<sup>11</sup>

As the surgeon endured six voyages with the *Georgia*, he apparently found a way to remain aloof from these activities.

Slave trading became such an industry that something approaching standard practices developed for feeding, exercise, and containment of slaves. Techniques for “dancing” the slaves emerged as well, but they were shaped by the continual threat of slave mutiny. Some cautious captains allowed only women and children slaves to be unshackled while on deck; others unshackled and danced slaves only after dark, when the chance of mutiny seemed small.

Illegal slavers engaged in smuggling allowed slaves little time on deck, and “dancing” had to be scheduled with a watchful eye for patrol ships. Similarly, when the international slave trade was outlawed in 1807, methods for dancing the slaves were devised to guard against possible capture by either police patrols or pirates. One technique was to bring only a portion of the slaves on deck at a time. Capture by a patrol ship meant heavy penalties: the crew was arrested and the cargo confiscated. The slaves were either returned to Africa or auctioned off in the New World. If capture seemed imminent, captains avoided arrest by jettisoning the contraband. Sometimes the entire cargo, slaves and food, was dumped into the ocean.<sup>12</sup>

So few Africans left written accounts of their experience that little is known about their participation in the dancing. Harsh sanctions certainly discouraged

resistance, the rewards for exceptional dancing (such as an extra cup of water or trip to the slop buckets used as toilet facilities) might have encouraged participation. Liquor was sometimes used as an incentive for some dancers. Liquor and dance diverted the slaves' attention from their condition, and Europeans used them in combination. At the least, the opportunity to be on deck while dancing offered a brief period of relief from the hold.

We can only speculate about the degree to which the middle passage transformed dance for African slaves. Dance existed in a bizarre duality between the dancers and the slave traders. For most of the captive Africans, dance was a cultural vehicle used to mediate between mankind and the deities. African captives on slave vessels probably attempted to evoke deities who could assist them in revolt and escape. Indeed, they might have attributed their failures to their inability to perform ceremonies properly, with appropriate religious objects and the aid of the entire community.<sup>13</sup>

This forced dancing may also have been seen by the slaves as an opportune time to stage a mutiny or suicide. Creating noise and motion, slaves could distract at least a portion of the crew at one end of the ship. The elaborate precautions taken by ship captains indicate that slaves saw dancing as an opportunity to resist their enslavement. Slaves were watched constantly while on deck.<sup>14</sup> Slavers devised strategies to prevent mutiny or suicide, and to regain control in cases of rebellion. Some captains aimed ships' guns at the dancing slaves to intimidate them.

The pattern established on board the slave ship was reinforced in the plantation environment: dancing

was done under the strict governance and supervision of whites who legitimized violence as a means of controlling the slave population. At the same time, resistance and dissembling became associated with dance aboard the slave ship. The African slaves learned to camouflage their hunger for freedom; an apparent accommodation to the circumstances of slavery became a survival mechanism. Once the slaves reached North America, they exploited dance as an opportunity to resist domination.

### **The Plantation Environment**

Once safely through the middle passage and purchased, Africans were expected to adapt fairly quickly to bondage. Life under slavery, repressive though it was, allowed some opportunity for community and cultural development. It seems astonishing that any African customs could persist, but owners did not control all areas of slaves' lives. Unregulated socio-cultural space provided Africans with some latitude in which aspects of African culture could survive.

At least two other factors help explain the survival of African-based traditions: first, some African cultural forms proved functional for the practitioners; second, they did not appear to threaten the slaveocracy. Once the African slaves left the ship and "settled in," they became part of the fabric of life in their new environment, with new acquaintances and group relationships. Shared customs cemented such relationships and unfamiliar ones provided material for new cultural amalgams. African groups were by no means undifferentiated, but they were culturally more similar to each other than any of them were to Europeans.

In the early days of the slave regime, the constant importation of new slaves served to shore up weakening cultural ties to Africa. Even after the international slave trade was outlawed, pirates and smugglers supplied a smaller number of Africans who probably renewed the vitality of African culture. The newly enslaved probably exerted a re-Africanization on plantation dance forms.<sup>15</sup>

The conditions of slavery in North America varied somewhat across time and region. Not all slaves lived on plantations. Some were house servants, urban laborers, or hands on small farms. On some plantations slaves worked in gangs or groups; on others they worked as individuals with task assignments. Work was the dominant feature of slave life, and the work pattern undoubtedly affected the model of culture that emerged. For example, the work song probably achieved a fuller development among slaves on work gangs than among those who worked alone.<sup>16</sup> The dancing among skilled urban artisans appears to have differed from that of field laborers. The type of work determined the slaves' daily routine and consequently their cultural materials. Thus the model of culture—determined by the work routines and the slaves' ethnic composition—varied from one region to the next. Just as one cannot speak of a national American culture early in the colonial period, African-American culture had not yet acquired its national character.

Whether they grew rice, tobacco, cane, or cotton, served in a household, or worked as an urban artisan, slaves had limited opportunity to establish independent culture. Whites, for example, attempted to elimi-

nate slaves' access to drums. Such measures were less than entirely successful, but they created an environment that hindered slaves' attempts to assert their collective identity. Slaves managed to develop models of culture that retained their African character for more than three hundred years, but these models endured because whites did not immediately recognize them as threatening.

As the African was transformed into the African-American, several significant metamorphoses occurred. Most important for an understanding of black dance culture was a distinction between sacred and secular. For most Africans, the social and religious community were the same, and political leaders as well as human ancestors mediated between the living community and world of the deities. Unlike the western God, African ancestral deities embodied a wide range of seemingly contradictory attributes. The clear dichotomy of good and evil that marks Judeo-Christian religious figures was unknown to West Africans.

The major African deities (*orisha*) were capable of performing great feats—and great harm to humans. Like the Greek gods, but unlike the Christian, their nature was inherently erotic. They required appeasement and supplication in the form of ritualized sacrifices and offerings. North American Protestantism came to define African religious beliefs as sinful and strictly forbade their practice, but even among the African-Americans who converted to Christianity, African traditions remained vital. Equally important, much of African religious style, fervor, format, and predisposition in worship persisted in secular vestment.

Over time, a clear demarcation emerged between

sacred, ceremonial dance and the secular dancing associated with festivities and parties. The split began in the middle passage, and by the time the first generation of slaves was born on these shores the process was well underway.

Both sacred and secular dancing originated in an African worship system that included a wide range of praise methods, including a “party for the gods,” or *bembe* as these religious parties came to be known in Cuba.<sup>17</sup> (The Cuban experience can illuminate some aspects of dance in the United States). At least three types of *bembe* were observed among the Lucumi (Cuban Yoruba): *bembe Lucumi*, *bembe Lucumi criollo*, and *suncho*. *Bembe Lucumi* was more generally African than the other two. Its songs were sung in the Yoruba language, its drum rhythms were strictly traditional and were executed on the sacred two-headed bata drum. *Bembe Lucumi criollo* permitted a loosening of tradition; its songs were in a creolized language and its rites were more communal and simpler. The third type, *suncho*, appears to have been the true “ocha party” or party for the gods. Unlike the other types of *bembe*, *suncho* did not always accompany a religious occasion. It appears to have been purely for enjoyment, with religion more pretext than a motive.<sup>18</sup> Although there is no evidence that the *bembe* ever established itself in North America, similar elements were probably retained in “the shouts” held both openly and surreptitiously among North American slaves. African religious elements—musical style, ecstatic behavior, spirit possession, and holy dancing—found expression in these shouts. Writer Frederick Law Olmsted leaves us this account:

On most of the large rice plantations which I have seen in this vicinity, there is a small chapel, which the Negroes use as their prayer house. The owner of one of these told me that, having furnished the prayer-house with seats having a back rail, his Negroes petitioned him to remove it because it did not leave them room enough to pray. It was explained to me that it is their custom, in social worship, to work themselves up to a great pitch of excitement, in which they yell and cry aloud, and finally shriek and leap up, clapping their hands and dancing, as it is done at heathen festivals. The back rail they found to seriously impede this exercise.<sup>19</sup>

Apparently American slaves did not confine their African-based rituals and practices to purely religious occasions. As one commentator noted:

Tonight I have been to a "shout" which seems to me certainly the remains of some old idol worship. The negroes sing a kind of chorus—three standing apart to lead and clap—and then all the others go shuffling round in a circle following one another with not much regularity, turning round occasionally and bending the knees, and stamping so that the whole floor swings. I never saw anything so savage. They call it a religious ceremony, but it seems more like a regular frolic to me.<sup>20</sup>

During numerous African religious ceremonies, particularly those of the Yoruba, music is performed by a liturgical trio of sacred bata drums, namely, okonkolo, itotele and iya. The "three standing apart to lead and clap" mentioned here appear to be an adaptation of this traditional West African pattern to a new socio-cultural environment.

Though the ceremonial context and specific movements varied from group to group, the basic vocabulary of West African dance was strikingly similar across ethnic lines. As a result, interethnic assimilation in the new cultural environment was more easily facilitated in dance than in other aspects of the African culture, such as language.<sup>21</sup> Brought to the Americas in the motor-muscle memory of the various West African ethnic groups, the dance was characterized by segmentation and delineation of various body parts, including hips, torso, head, arms, hands, and legs; the use of multiple meter as polyrhythmic sensitivity; angularity; multiple centers of movement; asymmetry as balance; percussive performance; mimetic performance; improvisation; and derision. These esthetic and technical commonalities continued to be governing principles as dance moved from its sacred context to the numerous secular uses it acquired under slavery.

In North America institutions sometimes minimally supported the retention of African religious culture. Some slave masters established "praise houses" and permitted their slaves to "shout" or engage in secular dancing, even though their peers often disapproved. But the benefits often outweighed the disapproval, as one master testifies:

I would build a house large enough, and use it for a dancehouse for the young, and those who wish to dance, as well as for prayer meetings, and for church on Sunday—making it a rule to be present myself occasionally at both, and my overseer always. I know the rebuke in store about dancing, but I cannot help it. I believe negroes will be better disposed this way than any other.<sup>22</sup>

In general, however, slavery in the context of North American Protestantism proved more hostile to African customs than slavery under Catholic auspices. French and Spanish Catholics introduced their slaves to a pantheon of saints that the Africans came to associate with their own deities and so with their traditional religious practices. Thus, the African theological background to many of these practices (including dance) might disappear while the practice itself or a version of it survived, eventually relegated by the practitioners to the realm of the secular, magic, or folk custom. African-American dance, hoodoo, and folk medicine are clear examples. And as we shall see, a similar process occurred on a broader institutional level.

Slaves performed a wide variety of dances, including a few adopted from their masters, but the majority were distinctly African in character. Among the dances they created were wringin' and twistin' (which would later form the basis of the twist), the buzzard lope, breakdown, pigeon wing, cakewalk, Charleston, "set de flo'," snake hips (the basis for all later African-American dances requiring sharp-popping accents demarcating each line of movement as in the jerk and the breaking style known as "pop locking"), and the shout, which unlike the others retained both a sacred and secular character. Many of the dances consisted of a basic step and a series of improvisational embellishments, which usually initially imitated motions of the work routine. Former slaves frequently mentioned "pitchin' hay," "corn shuckin'," and "cuttin' wheat" as embellishments in the cakewalk.<sup>23</sup> In this regard too the slaves were relying on African traditions in creating new dances; a large number of African dances cele-

brated through imitation significant environmental factors such as herd size, events in the life cycle, or physical labor and work routines.

The amalgamation of traditional African dance principles and the slaves' responses to their New World experience can be seen in the dance known as "set de flo'." Set de flo' took a variety of forms, but in the most interesting a circle was drawn to make an area in which the competing dancers performed. The musician, usually a fiddler, would call out complicated step routines for the dancers to negotiate without stepping on or outside the drawn circle. Dancers often demonstrated their dexterity by placing a glass of water on their heads, performing as many steps as possible without spilling the water.

The challenge posed by the fiddler-caller, familiar to West Africans, calls upon the dancer to perform difficult combinations of steps. The best performers are those who can meet the challenge while maintaining control and coolness. In the African esthetic, balance is achieved through the combination of opposites. Although dancers may be performing a fury of complex steps or figures, they must never lose equilibrium or control. This principle of asymmetry as balance can be observed among many West African groups. Shango, or thundergod devotees, sometimes dance with a container of burning fire balanced on their heads. Among the Egbado Yoruba people, gifted dancers with delicate terra cotta sculptures on their heads demonstrate raw energy in the movements of arms and torso.<sup>24</sup> This principle was later demonstrated in the foot-flashing repetitions of tap dancers like Jimmy Mordacai as well as in break dancing.

Unfortunately, little is known of the secret and well-hidden dances of slaves, but their observed activities indicate that they did not substantially modify the African dance vocabulary or all of the meaning, particularly the qualities of derision and resistance.

The outlawing of the international slave trade in 1807 increased the difficulty of importing Africans to the Americas; after the mid-nineteenth century, most blacks in North America had been born there. This change affected the development of African-American culture in two ways. First, it meant that each new generation would be further removed from contact with indigenous Africans or African cultural practices. Second, blacks in North America, unlike those in the West Indies or parts of Latin America, were not numerous enough to sustain specific ethnic traditions in their cultural complex. Thus, the conditions in North America encouraged the interethnic blending of African customs. Particular traits and habits were subsumed or absorbed, while sustaining something of their original character, and became the initial outline for an emerging African-American cultural complex.

Equally important in the emergence of an African-American culture was the increasing use of the cotton gin. The enormous growth in cotton production early in the nineteenth century gave the South a more homogeneous work culture than it had previously known. "King Cotton" blanketed areas that had primarily grown tobacco, rice, or indigo. Cultural historians have yet to examine the ways in which the new dominance of cotton synchronized work rhythms across regions that had differed significantly. It affected language, daily routines, and yearly schedules.

It changed the environment and modified the tools as well as the materials from which the folk culture was created. From Virginia through Texas, slaves had the new experience of a universal force acting on their cultural lives. While southern culture was never homogeneous, it was overwhelmingly dominated by the cotton plantation. The plantation system generally and the demands of individual masters affected the development of African-American culture.

On the plantation, slaves danced for themselves as celebration, recreation, and mourning as well as for their masters' entertainment. As in the middle passage, dancers were sometimes rewarded with money, extra food, or a pass to another plantation. Yet slaveholders were well aware that dance could function as a form of social intercourse, cultural expression, assimilation mechanism, and political expression. Because it was a means of solidifying the slave community, dance could threaten white dominance. Indeed, slaves used dance to camouflage insurrectionary activity. Masters who permitted slave dancing did so with care, and did so hoping to pacify the slaves' desire to rebel.

Still, most masters recognized the usefulness of allowing at least some dancing among their slaves. Almost all slaves were allowed to celebrate Christmas, and some form of dancing was usually part of the celebration.<sup>25</sup> An article in a southern journal describes the holidays on one plantation:

Holidays—We usually have two, one about the 4th of July and one at Christmas. The one in July is celebrated with a dinner and whiskey. The Christmas holiday is a very different thing. It lasts

from four to six days and during the *jubilee* it is difficult to say who is master. The servants are allowed the largest liberty. They are furnished with whiskey and egg-nog freely, and all the means necessary for good dinners and suppers. They are permitted to invite their friends from neighboring plantations, and to enjoy themselves in any way that suits them. Dancing is their favorite amusement and they go to it, I can assure you with a "perfect rush."<sup>26</sup>

Christmas festivities commonly included dancing, drinking, extra food, and visits to other plantations. One former slave recalled that on Christmas her parents could see each other: "Well, Marse Harriston didn't 'low paw to see may 'cep twice a year—laying-by time and Christmas." Another describes the festivities and the passes that limited slaves' mobility:

Roun' Christmas we git three days holiday as theah's plenty uh dances and shoutin then. We goes tuh the ownuh and gits a ticket an we all gathuhs at the same place an we shouts an kick up with each othuh, but wen yuh ticket out, ef yuh dohn come back, the patrol will git yuh and then yuh gits whipped.<sup>27</sup>

John Pierpont, minister and journalist, recorded his impressions of Christmas on Colonel Alston's Monjetta plantation in South Carolina in 1805, paying special attention to the contrast between the slaves' Christmas privileges and their usual privations.

Throughout the state of South Carolina, Christmas is a holiday together with 2 of the succeeding days, for all literary seminaries, but more especially for the Negroes. On these days the chains of slavery

with which the blacks are loaded and in which they toil unceasingly for their masters, are loosed. A smile is seen on every countenance, and the miseries of the year seem amply recompensed by this season of hilarity and festivity.

No restraint is imposed upon their inclinations, no one calls their attention from the enjoyment of all those delights which the most unconstrained freedom proffers. Children visit their parents; husbands their wives; brothers and sisters each other, who live at a distance and partake the pleasures of social connexions of which they are deprived during the remaining part of the year.

On the morning of Christmas, Col. Alston gave orders that as many beeves might be butchered as to supply all with meat, which as a general thing is not allowed them. No less than 21 bullocks fell sacrifices to the festivity. On my first waking, the sound of the serenading violin and drum saluted my ears even in retirement. During almost the whole of the second and 3 afternoons, the portico was crowded with these dancers, who by their countenance reminded me of the ancient nymphs, satyrs and fauns, and the fiddlers and dancers brought Pan and Timotheus freshly to mind. Some of them who were native Africans did not join the dance with the others but, by themselves gave us a specimen of the sports and amusements with which the benighted and uncivilized children of nature, divest themselves, before they became acquainted with the more refined and civilized amusements of life. Clapping their hands was their music and distorting their frames into the most unnatural figures and emitting the most hideous noises is their dancing.<sup>28</sup>

Whether the celebration was elaborate or small, the Christmas holidays involved some break from the normal routine and some generosity toward slaves. One former slave was treated to Christmas day off and "a big dinner wid all kinds good things to eat spread out in de yard"; Adeline Johnson remembered Christmas as a time of virtual freedom: slaves on her master's plantation were given a week off and some were allowed to travel to neighboring plantations without a pass.<sup>29</sup>

With so much going on, masters were hard pressed to keep track of slave activity for three days, sometimes more. Some masters shared the monitoring responsibilities by staggering the dances and parties so that slaves on one plantation could entertain slaves from neighboring plantations and in turn be entertained.<sup>30</sup> But such cooperation was by no means common; in fact, some masters forbade their slaves to leave the plantation during the period of generalized celebration.

Believing that the strolling about of Negroes for a week at a time, during what are called Christmas Holidays, is productive of much evil, the writer has set his face against the custom. Christmas is observed as a sacred festival. On that day as good a dinner as the plantation will afford is served for the Negroes, and they all sit down to a common table, but the next day we go to work. From considerations both of morality and needful rest and recreation to the negro, I much prefer a week in July, when the crop is laid by, to giving three days at Christmas.<sup>31</sup>

During the Christmas season slave dances were less restricted, generally lasting longer than ordinary

dances, and they were frequently combined with other celebrations, such as weddings. These festivities might go on all day and into the next morning.<sup>32</sup> During the holiday, the slaves shed their work clothes and dressed in their best.

While almost any holiday celebrated by the masters—Easter, Fourth of July, Whitsuntide—might also be celebrated by their slaves, Christmas appears to have been the most elaborate festivity of the year and probably for that reason the most favored by slaves. As an eagerly anticipated event, Christmas became the ultimate reward for good behavior, and masters often threatened to abridge the holiday as they disciplined slaves.<sup>33</sup>

On many plantations, at least part of Saturday and usually all day Sunday were a break from regular work routines. Masters made Saturday afternoons a time for slaves to attend to their personal needs such as washing, gardening, or cleaning up the quarters. In many instances, slaves were assigned tasks for Saturday, so few considered the time their own. One farmer stated: "I give all my females half of every Saturday to wash and clean up, my cook washing for young men and boys through the week." On most plantations all hands stopped work on Saturday at noon. Practices varied, however, and were subject to seasonal changes and regional differences. Robert Collins, a Georgia planter, describes his policy on Saturday labor:

*Hours of Work*—In the winter time and in the sickly season of the year, all hands should have breakfast before leaving the house. This they can do and get to work by sunrise, and stop no more until twelve o'clock; then rest one hour for dinner then work

until night. In the spring and summer they should go at light, and stop at 8 o'clock for breakfast then work until 12 o'clock and two hours for dinner, and work from 2 o'clock and 'till night. All Hands stop on Saturday at 12 o'clock and take the afternoon for cleaning up their houses and clothes, so as to make a neat appearance on Sunday morning.<sup>34</sup>

Generally masters encouraged and provided for regular weekly dances, keenly aware that they helped maintain morale. One small farmer leaves us this account on the management of Negroes:

Negroes are gregarious; they dread solitariness, and to be deprived from the little weekly dances and chit-chat. They will work to death rather than be shut-up. I know the advantage though I have no jail, my house being a similar one, yet used for other purposes.

I have a fiddle in my quarters and though some of my good brethren in the church would think hard of me, yet I allow dancing; ay I buy the fiddle and encourage it, by giving the boys occasionally a big supper.<sup>35</sup>

Some masters even purchased slave musicians to provide music. A Mississippi planter felt some pride in his efforts to arrange a good dance:

I must not omit to mention that I have a good fiddler, and keep him well supplied with catgut, and I make it his duty to play for the negroes every Saturday night until 12 o'clock. They are exceedingly punctual in their attendance at the hall, while Charley's fiddle is always accompanied with Ihurod on the triangle, and Sam to "pat."<sup>36</sup>

Most secular dances occurred primarily in conjunction with a special observance, such as a holiday or weekend. With the ability to curtail or encourage slave dance culture, masters sought to turn occasions to their own use. When slaves made their own dances—and they often did—they accepted a terrible risk of harsh punishment. Slave owners regarded even such frolicsome activities as collective disobedience that seriously threatened their control. They were not wrong.

Slaves accepted dances and other celebrations as a relief from the burdens of their hard lives, relishing every form of enjoyment permitted them, including food, drinking, fellowship with other slaves, and, of course, dancing. And slaves broke the rules. Though drinking except when approved by owners was forbidden, slaves enjoyed homemade alcoholic beverages at these frolics, and they distributed them clandestinely when necessary. Apparently some slaves even built their own stills. John Crawford, born into slavery in Mississippi around 1837, leaves us this account of his grandfather's still:

Grandpappy used to own a still which was run by grandpappy's friend Billy Buck, an old nigger. They made whisky out of corn and made whisky out of peaches. Then they made apple cider and grape wine and dandelion wine and alder (eldeberry) wine. The alder was for the niggers. At the parties and at Christmas the niggers got plenty of whisky.<sup>37</sup>

In William B. Smith's account of a dance he witnessed in the lower end of Prince Edward, Virginia, the slaves of Mr. Samuel Poe had brewed a barrel of persimmon beer and obtained permission from their master to have what they called a "beer dance."

Here the banjor-man, was seated on the beer barrel, in an old chair. *Tumming* his banjor, grinning with ludicrous gesticulations and playing off his wild notes to the company. Before him stood two athletic blacks, clapping *Juber* to the notes of the banjor; the fourth black man held in his right hand a jug gourd of persimmon beer, and in his left, a dipper or water-gourd, to serve the company while two black women were employed in filling the fireplace, six feet square, with larded persimmon dough. The rest of the company, male and female were dancers. The clappers rested the right foot on the heel, and its clap on the floor was in perfect unison with the notes of the banjor and palms of the hands on the corresponding extremities. The dancers having the most ludicrous twists, wry jerks, and flexile contortions of the body and limbs, that human imagination can divine.<sup>38</sup>

The musical instruments at American slave dances were primarily African in nature and strongly resembled instruments found in other New World slave communities. And although slave musicians did adopt certain European instruments such as the violin, the fiddle so frequently mentioned in descriptions of early slave dances was not the European violin but rather an African gourd fiddle that, like the banjo, was constructed by slaves from a technique passed down from older Africans. Isaac D. Williams, a former slave, recalls:

We generally made our own banjos and fiddles, and I had a fiddle that was manufactured out of a gourd, with horse hair strings and a bow made out of the same material. When we made a banjo we would first of all catch what we called a ground hog,

known in the north as a woodchuck. After tanning his hide, it would be stretched over a piece of timber fashioned like a cheese box, and you couldn't tell the difference in sound between that homely affair and a handsome store bought one.<sup>39</sup>

Mack Chaney, a Mississippi ex-slave, tells of his father, a full-blooded African and skilled musician:

He made himself a fiddle outa pine bark and usta play fer us to dance. He taught me to dance when I wuz little like dey did in Africa. Day dance by de-selves or swing each other 'round. Dey didn't know nothing 'bout dese "huggin" dances. I'd be settin on my daddy's lap and he'd tell me all 'bout when he lived in Africa. He usta play de' fiddle and sing 'bout Africa—Dat Good Ole Land.<sup>40</sup>

Throughout West Africa today people play the prototype of the gourd fiddle, or *susa*, as it is known among the Fulani people. According to Mandingo griot Foday Musa Suso the *susa* is an ancient instrument.<sup>41</sup> A gourd forms the body, and horsehair the strings; the bow is bamboo with horsehair. The gourd fiddle is played while held in the bend of the elbow rather than under the chin.

In addition to banjos and fiddles, drums, tambourines, gourds, bones, quills, kettles, hand claps, jawbones, hoes, wooden boxes, and any metal pot or piece accompanied dancing on the plantation. Although some sources state that these instruments were adopted primarily as a substitute for the outlawed drum, all have been widely used in places where drum playing is common, such as Cuba and Brazil, and apparently were taken up for their own sake or retained from Africa.

Wash Wilson, born a slave in Louisiana and taken to Texas before the Civil War, described the types of musical instruments used at slave dances; the variety of objects and techniques testifies to the ingenuity of slave musicians.

Us take pieces of sheep's rib or cow's jaw or a piece iron, with a old kettle, or a hollow gourd and some horsehair to make de drum. Sometimes dey'd get a piece of tree trunk and hollow it out and stretch a goat's or sheep's skin over it for de drum. Dey'd be one to four foot high and a foot up to six foot 'cross. In gen'ral two niggers play with de fingers or sticks on dis drum. Never seed so many in Texas, but dey made some. Dey'd take de buffalo horn and scrape it out to make de flute. Dat sho' be heard a long ways off. Then dey'd take a mule's jaw-bone and rattle de sticks 'cross its teeth. Then dey'd take a barrel, and stretch a ox's hide cross one end and a man sat 'stride de barrel, and beat on dat hide with he hands and he feet and iffen he get to feelin' de music in his bones, he'd beat on dat barrel with his head. 'Nother man beat on wooden sides with sticks.<sup>42</sup>

Frederick Douglass remarked that slave "holidays were among the most effective means in the hands of slaveholders of keeping down the spirit of insurrection among slaves . . . but for those [dances, frolics, holidays] the rigors of bondage would have become too severe for endurance and the slave would have been forced to a dangerous desperation."<sup>43</sup> Many slaveholders certainly saw it that way. Yet no matter how much these occasions were intended to encourage resignation, slaves were able to seize dances as opportunities to resist white domination. A considerable

amount of insurrectionary activity took place during slave holidays and days off, and even in tightly controlled situations themes of resistance were evident in both urban and rural settings. Slaves and masters were continually engaged in a struggle for control. Resistance met with new forms of repression, which in turn bred more resistance.

Fear of slave rebellions, especially as the need for labor intensified, called for extreme measures. In South Carolina, for example, the demand for slaves increased as rice cultivation replaced animal husbandry. After 1698, South Carolina imported Africans in such numbers that the black population outnumbered whites.<sup>44</sup> Numerous slave insurrections resulted in legislation aimed to prevent slaves from visiting other plantations; from using drums, horns, or any other instrument that might signal rebellion; from having gatherings of more than a few people; or having gatherings without a specified proportion of armed white men present. In Charleston, a piece of legislation enacted in 1740, the year following the Stono Rebellion, was specifically aimed at occasions on which slaves might gather for dances. Section 36 is worth quoting in its entirety:

And for that as it is absolutely necessary to the safety of this province that all due care be taken to restrain the wanderings and meetings of negroes and other slaves, at all times, and more especially on Saturday nights, Sundays and other holidays, and their using and carrying wooden swords, and other mischievous and dangerous weapons, or use or keeping of drums, horns, or other loud instruments, which may call together or give sign or no-

tice to one another of their wicked designs and purpose; and that all masters, overseers and others may be enjoined, diligently and carefully to prevent the same, *Be it enacted* by the authority aforesaid, That it shall be lawful for all masters, overseers and other persons whomsoever, to apprehend and take up any negro other slave that shall be found out of the plantation of his or their master or owner, at any time Especially on Saturday nights, Sundays or other holidays, not being on lawful business, and with a letter from their master, or a ticket, or not having a white person with them; and the said negro or other slave or slaves, met or found out of the plantation of his or their master or mistress, though with a letter or ticket, if he or they be armed with such offensive weapons aforesaid, him or them to disarm, take up whip: And whatsoever master, owner, or overseer shall permit or suffer his or their negro or other slave or slaves, at any time hereafter, to beat drums, blow horns, or use any other loud instruments, or whosoever shall suffer and countenance any public meeting or feasting of strange negroes, or slaves in their plantations, shall forfeit ten pounds, current money, for every such offense, upon conviction or proof as aforesaid; *provided*, an information or other suit be commenced within one month after forfeiture thereof for the same.<sup>45</sup>

Laws forbidding the use of drums changed the nature of events where dancing occurred among African slaves and eventually affected the profile of black culture in North America.

Because they brought together large groups of blacks, slave dancing affairs provided opportunities to exchange information and plot insurrections; when

slaves outnumbered whites, spontaneous eruptions of violence were possible. Indeed, ample evidence indicates that slave insurrections were either plotted at dances or scheduled to take place on occasions that involved dancing. One analysis revealed that 35 percent of rebellions in the British Caribbean were either planned for or took place in late December.<sup>46</sup> The high pitch of emotions at these dances could serve as a pretext for touching off a previously planned revolt.<sup>47</sup> The links between dance and rebellion give these occasions a striking resemblance to war dances, or dances in which preparation for battle was the central theme. An armed rebellion in South Carolina in 1730 was planned to begin when slaves "should assemble in the neighborhood of the town, under the pretense of a dancing bout." Similarly, an account of the Stono Rebellion in South Carolina in 1739 reports that slaves seized weapons and killed a number of whites; marching southwestward with "drums beating and colors flying," they were joined by others. After marching about twelve miles, they "halted in an open field, and began to sing and dance, by way of triumph. During these rejoicings, the militia discovered them, and stationed themselves in different places around them to prevent them from making their escape."<sup>48</sup>

Throughout slave territory the drum had long been used to signal public gatherings and dances, and its use continued even after being forbidden. Perhaps some slaves who joined the Stono uprising initially thought that they were being called to a dance: "They increased every minute by new Negroes coming to them, so that they were about Sixty, some say a hundred, on which they halted in a field and set to

dancing, Singing and beating Drums, to draw more Negroes to them."<sup>49</sup>

Religious meetings and field work also gave slaves opportunity to plan and execute rebellions, and virtually every gathering of slaves was viewed with suspicion. Social gatherings of one sort or another, which occurred continually, induced a high level of paranoia among whites, but both whites and blacks came to regard dances as especially dangerous.<sup>50</sup>

Plantation affairs, whether held on a holiday or a weekend, were essential in the development of regional culture. But in the areas immediately on the edges of towns such as Charleston, New Orleans, or Mobile, large public dances held by urban slaves had a different character. Urban slaves were regarded by many plantation owners as lacking regulation and restraint. For the most part they lived away from the watchful eye of their master. Most free blacks and skilled artisans resided in urban areas; and since slaves who could hire out their labor and rent their own shelter were virtually indistinguishable from free blacks, they enjoyed more autonomy than plantation slaves.<sup>51</sup>

Law forbade slaves to be on the street at night without a pass from their masters; however, it was impossible to detect every instance of violation. The relative liberty of movement among urban slaves was a continuing source of complaint from white urban residents.<sup>52</sup> Plantation owners, fearing their slaves would be drawn to a life of greater liberty, discouraged association with urban slaves.

At plantation dances, the overseer or the master could control access to his property. Dances held on public property, however, defeated such strictures.

These large public affairs, like organized worship services for slaves, provided an arena in which black culture could flourish irrespective of status. They brought together plantation laborer, house servant, urban artisan, and free Negro in a celebration of African-based dance. Urban slaves sometimes took the liberty of holding a dance without approval or the required supervision of armed whites; these affairs could attract 200 slaves or more, and crowd control was difficult. The *South Carolina Gazette* described one such unsanctioned affair:

The Stranger had once an opportunity of seeing a Country Dance, Rout or Cabal of Negroes, within 5 miles distance of this town, on a Saturday night; and it may not be improper here to give a description of that assembly. It consisted of about 60 people, 5-6th from Town, every one of whom carried something, in the manner just described; as bottled liquors of all sorts, Rum, Tongues, Hams, Beef, Geese, Turkeys and Fowls both drest and raw, with many luxuries of the table as sweetmeats, pickles & (which some did not scruple to acknowledge they obtained by means of false keys, procured from a Negro in Town, who could make any Key whenever the impression of the true one was brought to him in wax) without doubt, were stolen and brought thither, in order to be used on the present occasion or to be concealed and disposed of by such of the gang as might have the best opportunities for this purpose: *Moreover*, they were provided with Music, Cards, Dice &c. . . .

Then they *danced, betted, gamed, swore, quarreled, fought*, and did everything that the *most modern* accomplished gentlemen are *not ashamed of*.

The atmosphere of frolic and confusion provided opportunities for contacts among insurrectionists, runaways, and other dissenters. The *South Carolina Gazette* continues:

They also had their private committees; whole deliberations were carried on in too low voice, and with much caution, as not to be overheard by the others much less by the Stranger, who was concealed in a deserted adjacent hut, where the humanity of a well disposed grey headed Negro man had placed him, pitying his *seeming* indigence and distress. The members of this secret council had much the appearance of Doctors in deep and solemn consultation upon life or *death* which indeed might have been the scope of their meditations at the time. No less than 12 fugitive slaves joined this respectable company before midnight, 3 of whom were mounted on good horses; these after delivering a good quality of Mutton, Lamb and Veal, which they brought with them, directly associated with one or other of the private consultations; and went off about an hour before day being supplied with liquor &c and perhaps also received some instructions.<sup>53</sup>

Any dance format provided the potential for resistance; however, urban public dances, which occurred outdoors, provided the best opportunities for planned insurrection. Antoine Simon Le Page du Pratz, a Louisiana resident from 1718 to 1734, observed:

Nothing is more to be dreaded than to see the Negroes assemble together on Sundays, since under pretence of Calinda, or the dance, they sometimes get together to the number of three or four

hundred, and make a kind of Sabbath, which it is always prudent to avoid; for it is in those tumultuous meetings that they sell what they have stolen to one another, and commit many crimes. In these likewise they plot their rebellions.<sup>54</sup>

Assemblies of this sort were apparently common in Louisiana, particularly in and around New Orleans. Slaves would gather in several locations around the city on Saturday and Sundays to sing, drum, and dance until dark. By 1786, however, the law forbade slaves to dance on public squares on Sundays and holy days until after evening church service. A visitor to the city in 1799 reports that after dinner on Sunday he saw "vast numbers of negro slaves, men, women, and children, assembled together on the levee, dancing in large rings." In 1804, a Louisiana observer, John Watson reported seeing dancing Negroes "in great masses on the levee on Sundays." Four years later another observer in New Orleans witnessed "twenty different dancing groups of the wretched Africans collected together to perform their *worship* after the manner of their country. They have their own national music, consisting for the most part of a long kind of narrow drum of various sizes from two to eight feet in length, three or four of which make a band." By 1817, dancing in New Orleans proved troublesome enough for the city to restrict it to Sundays before sundown and to one location, Congo Square. In this sense, the establishment of Congo Square, though it led to an inter-African mixing, contained rather than encouraged slave dancing and culture.<sup>55</sup>

New Orleans and Charleston were by no means the only locations for public slave dances and celebra-

tions. In Somerset County, Maryland, complaints were lodged with the judicial authority that slaves were “drunke on the Lords Day beating their Negro drums by which they call considerable Number of Negroes together in some Certaine places.” Similar complaints in early nineteenth-century St. Louis brought out the military to “suppress riots” among free and enslaved blacks gathered at public dances.<sup>56</sup>

Throughout North Carolina, particularly in the areas surrounding Wilmington, Fayetteville, Hilton, Edenton, New Bern, and Hillsboro, slaves danced publicly and celebrated the John Canoe festival. Author Harriet Brent Jacobs describes the tradition:

Every child rises early on Christmas morning to see the Johnkannaus. Without them, Christmas would be shorn of its greatest attraction. They consist of companies of slaves from the plantations, generally of the lower class. Two athletic men, in calico wrappers, have a net thrown over them, covered with all manner of bright-colored stripes. Cows tails are fastened to their backs, and their heads are decorated with horns. A box, covered with sheepskin is called the gumbo box. A dozen beat on this, while others strike triangles and jawbones, to which bands of dancers keep time. For a month previous they are composing songs, which are sung on this occasion. These companies, of a hundred each, turn out early in the morning, and are allowed to go around 'till twelve o'clock, begging for contributions. Not a door is left unvisited where there is the least chance of obtaining a penny or a glass of rum. They do not drink while they are out, but carry the rum home in jugs, to have a carousal. These Christmas donations frequently amount to

twenty or thirty dollars. It is seldom that any white man or child refused to give them a trifle. If he does, they regale his ears with the following song

Poor massa, so dey say;  
 Down in de heel, so dey say;  
 Got no money, so dey say;  
 Not one shillin, so dey say:  
 Got A mighty bless you, so dey say.<sup>57</sup>

The climax of the John Canoe doorstep entreaty came when the company broke into the buzzard lope, a dance well known to African-Americans in the coastal Carolinas. Anthropologist Melville Herskovits is probably correct in speculating that the Yankoro or buzzard of the Ashanti people is the likely origin of this festival name. Certainly these performances in the Carolinas were remarkably similar to John Canoe festivals held throughout the West Indies and even with the Dia de Reyes celebrations in Cuba.<sup>58</sup>

Another annual event was the Pinkster celebration, familiar to the Dutch and Africans in Dutch-settled areas, particularly New York. Usually beginning on the first Monday of Pentecost, this celebration involved weeks of preparation and lasted from three to seven days and coincided with the Dutch observance of Pentecost.

When the long-awaited opening day arrived, slaves from the countryside made their way to the nearest town or city—New York City, Kingston, Albany, Poughkeepsie, to name but a few—to join with the urban colored in the carnival. The Albany festivities topped all others. There the celebration was held at the head of State Street, later the site of the State Capitol. Booths were set up to dispense refresh-

ments of all sorts, including liquor, for the ban on strong drinks was temporarily lifted. A master of ceremonies presided, his principal task being to beat on the kettle-drum which provided the music for the singing, dancing, and parading which enlivened the occasion. In New York City dancing contests between local and Long Island slaves were staged in the streets for the entertainment of all, as well as for whatever shillings might be tossed to the contestants. The "jug" and the more difficult "breakdown" were performed to the rhythm of clapping hands and stamping feet.<sup>59</sup>

Like the John Canoe festivals in North Carolina and Jamaica (and like King Zulu in contemporary Mardi Gras), Pinkster festivities centered on a "king." Two historical accounts refer to an African who served as king for many years. One spoke of "'Charley of the Pinkster Hill' who was brought from Angola, in the Guinea Gulf, in his infant days, and purchased by a rich merchant living on the eastern bank of the Hudson. 'King Charles' was said to have royal blood in his veins." The second Pinkster account describes its "king" as a "colored harlequin":

Dressed in a coat of the military, decked out with colored ribbons, his legs bare and a little black hat with a pompom on one side, he was seated on a hollow log, which had each end covered with skins and served as a drum for dancing. Other negroes had eel pots covered with skin which they beat with their hands while they sang a song that had a refrain "Hi-a bomba bomba" which it was said was brought over from Africa. To this music the negroes danced. There were also gingerbread booths and side shows, and under the charge of the elderly

women all the young gentry were taken out to see the sights.<sup>60</sup>

Throughout New England—in Norwich, Hartford, Derby, and New Haven, Connecticut; in Newport and Kingston, Rhode Island; Salem, Massachusetts, and Portsmouth, New Hampshire—large annual celebrations known as “election day” were celebrated. The festivities included a parade, dining, and dancing as well as an election of a “Negro governor.”

These days of relaxation were made the occasion for a pompous and ceremonious parade by the negroes. They decked themselves out in striking or fantastic costumes, and on horseback or on foot accompanied their “governor” through the streets. The parade included an accompaniment of hideous music, and was followed by a dinner and dance in some commodious hall hired for the purpose. Sometimes, however, the dinner and dance were not preceded by the parade. The central figure in these functions was the “governor,” who was a *person of commanding importance*.<sup>61</sup>

The earliest known “Negro election day” is believed to have occurred in Salem, Massachusetts, on May 27, 1741. Probably the last “Negro governor” was elected in Humphreysville, Connecticut, in 1856.<sup>62</sup> “Election day” and the other festivals in which a “king” or “governor” was chosen parallel black Latin American and West Indian celebrations and seem to derive from African political institutions.

In their own land they had elected kings or chiefs chosen from among descendants of royal blood, and many practices of a judicial and social nature which bear a strong resemblance to those found among

them in America. As time went on these customs were greatly modified, partly by association with different customs, but chiefly through the mere action of time and the failure of fresh arrivals from Africa, until finally the meetings became little more than an opportunity for a good time.<sup>63</sup>

As we have seen, urban slaves and free blacks enjoyed fairly unrestricted access to public spaces. In contrast, plantation slaves occupied a narrower sphere. Social visits and celebrations were limited by the demands of agricultural work and cautious masters. Even masters who encouraged gatherings scheduled them as a reward for particularly arduous work—after a harvest, for example—or perhaps before, as an inducement.

Corn shucking or corn husking was a fairly common group activity on plantations. It required long hours of labor in addition to the normal day's work routine, and drew together all plantation slaves—household and agricultural workers, plus all the children. Competition between shucking teams, which gave the slaves a feeling of control over their work, made it tolerable. An ex-slave from Georgia recalled:

In corn shucking time no padderolers would ever bother you. We would have a big time at corn shuckings. They would call up the crowd and line the men up and give them a drink. I was a corn general—would stand out high above everybody, giving out corn songs and throwing down corn to them. There would be two sides of them, one side trying to outshuck the other.<sup>64</sup>

Meager prizes for the winning side were generally not enough to make the occasion festive, but its social na-

ture enabled some slaves to remember corn shuckings with fondness. A *New York Sun* article describes the lively atmosphere surrounding the corn shucking: "The corn was divided into two piles as big as a house and two captains were appointed. Each chose sides just as the captains in spelling matches do, and then the fun began."<sup>65</sup>

Outside of the routine organization of plantation life, corn shuckings represented an opportunity for slaves to gather as a community. They momentarily masked the divisions of work status, caste, and class, and provided an environment in which slave culture could develop. The need for additional labor sometimes brought slaves from neighboring plantations (I have found no evidence that urban slaves augmented the work force at shuckings). Community relations were established, revised, and re-created at the corn shuckings, giving rise to community standards and crystallizing local culture.

In time corn shuckings developed into a richly textured form that featured dance as well as songs in the call-and-response pattern. David C. Barrow, Jr., observed a dance that accompanied a corn shucking:

With the cotillion a new and very important office, that of "callerout," though of less importance than the fiddler, is second to no other. He not only calls out the figures, but explains them at length to the ignorant, sometimes accompanying them through the performance. He is never at a loss, "genmen to de right" being a sufficient refuge in case of embarrassment, since this always calls forth a full display of the dancers' agility and gives much time.<sup>66</sup>

The dancer and the caller interact in a pattern similar to that of call and response in song; both patterns reflect African practices. The caller, invoking the dancers to ever-greater feats of endurance and virtuosity, recalls the African drummer who challenged and was challenged by ceremonial dancers. In some African cultures this interaction took the form of competition, a test of endurance; in plantation corn shuckings the caller may have required dance steps so rapid and complicated as to tax the dancers' skills, as Barrow implies: "Endurance is a strong point in the list of accomplishments of the dancer, and other things being equal, that dancer who can hold out the longest is considered the best."<sup>67</sup> By coordinating the dance movements, the caller also served an important social function. Since the participants were often from several plantations, each with its own dances, the caller helped create community consensus about the dance and made community participation possible. He either eliminated or integrated plantation particularisms to a general cultural standard.

The call and response typical of corn songs (and other slave songs) were deceptively simple, as the following lyric illustrates. The use of animal characters is typically African-American, and here the rabbit seems to be a metaphor for a slave trickster.

Rabbit in de gyordin (*general's call*)  
Rabbit hi oh (*all hands respond*)  
Dog can't ketch um  
Rabbit hi oh  
Gun can't shoot um  
Rabbit hi oh  
Mon can't skin um

Rabbit hi oh  
 Cook can't cook um  
 Rabbit hi oh  
 Folks can't eat um  
 Rabbit hi oh

The merriment of a corn shucking apparently included a good deal of amusement at the expense of unwitting slaveholders. The dances and the songs were often satirical, pointed instruments of criticism and resistance. A shucking song that tells of the master's good treatment seems on the surface to ridicule only the slaves from a neighboring plantation, but also hints at Jones's stinginess (or downright cruelty):<sup>68</sup>

Massa's niggers am slick and fat  
 Oh, Oh, Oh!  
 Shine jes like a new beaver hat  
 Oh, Oh, Oh!  
 Turn out here and shuck dis corn,  
 Oh, Oh, Oh!  
 Biggest pile o' corn seen since I was born,  
 Oh, Oh, Oh!  
 Jones' niggers am lean an' po'  
 Oh, Oh, Oh!  
 Don't know whether dey get enough ter eat or no,  
 Oh, Oh, Oh!

Slaves' dances served to deconstruct the imposing and powerful presence of whites. In the etiquette of slavery, blacks could not openly criticize whites, so dance was a safer tool for self-assertion, ridicule, and criticism than song. This use of dance was not confined to corn shuckings. Deriding whites through dance probably originated in dances of derision common to many African groups.<sup>69</sup> Whites either mis-

construed these performances as simple foolishness or found some way to discount the comic imitation.

It was generally on Sunday when there was little work . . . that the slaves both young and old would dress up in hand-me-down finery to do a high-kicking, prancing walk-around. They did a takeoff on the high manners of the white folks in the "big house," but their masters, who gathered around to watch the fun missed the point.<sup>70</sup>

Some whites, confident of their power, allowed slaves latitude in comedic performance. In some situations, authority was made to look small and insignificant, and whites were able to laugh off the disrespect. "The entertainment was opened by the men copying (or taking off) the manners of their masters and the women of their mistresses, and relating some highly curious anecdotes to the inexpressible diversion of that company."<sup>71</sup> Slaves used such occasions to assert personal dissatisfactions or communitywide complaints that would have drawn severe reactions in other contexts. African-American song and dance thus became entwined with resistance.

In this section we have seen that slave dances promoted community fellowship and consolidation and helped build cultural institutions. The institution of slavery included forces that worked against consolidation by creating status differences among slave workers. The dancing and other behaviors in these institutions were governed by a set of esthetic and technical principles further removed from their African origins than the dance activities already discussed. Such was the case with "slave balls," our next discussion.

## **Bals du Cordon Bleu**

Communities of blacks were by no means monolithic. Free blacks enjoyed a higher status than slaves, and some categories of work conferred special status. Household service on plantations enjoyed greater prestige than field work, and artisans in urban areas were much more highly regarded than laborers. Similar distinctions operated among free blacks in cities. Some were so valued for their skills that they achieved local fame and whites took pride in having engaged them. Conversely, slaves took pride in the prestige of their owners. Author Samuel Mordecai<sup>72</sup> observed:

The servants belonging to the old families in Virginia and especially those pertaining to domestic households, were as proud of their position as if the establishment was their own. The house servants acquired something of the polite and respectful demeanor which prevailed among the gentility. The coachman in an old family felt as proud of his position on the box as he could have felt had he been inside.

The most prominent member of the black aristocracy of my early years was Sy Gilliat, (probably Simon or Cyrus) the leading violinist (fiddler was then the word), at balls and dancing parties. Sy Gilliat flourished in Richmond in the first decade of this century, and I know not how many of the last. His manners were as courtly as his dress.

Mordecai describes other members of the “slave aristocracy” of Richmond; including Mrs. Nancy Bryd, a pastry chef (“no dinner party nor supper could be complete unless Nancy had a finger in the pie”). He

notes that these African-Americans imitated the social niceties of the white upper class.

Like their betters, the negroes of the present day have their mock-gentility, and like them, they sustain it chiefly in dress and pretension. These gentry leave their visiting cards at each others' kitchens, and on occasions of a wedding, Miss Dinah Drippings and Mr. Cuffie Coleman have their cards connected by a silken tie, emblematic of that which is to connect themselves, and a third card announces, "at home from ten to one," where those who call will find cake, fruits and other refreshments.

Indeed, urban slaves used elaborate dress as a mark of their status. A visitor from New England was astonished

to see slaves with broadcloth suits well fitted and nicely ironed fine shirts, polished boots, gloves, umbrellas for sunshade, the best of hats, their young men with their blue coats and bright buttons, in their latest style, white Marseilles vests, white pantaloons, brooches in their shirtbosoms, gold chains, elegant sticks and some old men leaning on their ivory and silver headed staves, as respectable in their attire as any who that day went to the House of God.<sup>73</sup>

The treatment of people of mixed race varied considerably. Sexual exploitation of slave women was common, resulting in a substantial number of mixed-race slaves. Although some slave owners took pains to conceal their transgressions by selling pregnant concubines, others allowed the mixed-race children to grow up as slaves alongside their legitimate offspring. Still others freed their concubines and children. Com-

pared with the wholly bleak outlook for slave children, some of the master's mixed-race children could hope for freedom or at least a more comfortable life. For those who deeply resisted any connection with whites, a light complexion became a mark of potential outsider status; for those determined to make their lives (or their children's) more tolerable, light skin could be a social advantage. In time, color distinctions augmented work status in creating a complex social hierarchy:

The variety in complexion, status and attainment among town slaves led to a somewhat elaborate gradation of colored society. One stratum comprised the fairly numerous quadroons and mulattoes along with certain exceptional blacks. The men among these had a pride of place as butlers and coachmen, painters and carpenters; the women fitted themselves trimly with the cast-off silks and muslins of their mistresses, walked with mincing tread, and spoke in quiet tones with impressive nicety of grammar. This element was a conscious aristocracy of its kind.<sup>74</sup>

While no caste system as such existed in the South, elite groups of free and enslaved African-Americans formed in southern cities such as New Orleans, Charleston, Louisville, Mobile, Montgomery, and Richmond. The cultural life of these groups bore little resemblance to that on the plantation. Plantation slaves described their dances as "balls," but these affairs had little of the genteel atmosphere and decorum that were a remarkable feature of the balls organized by slaves and quadroons in urban settings.

Author Eyre Crowe, who traveled with the British author Thackeray on his famous visit to the United States, leaves us this account of a ball held in Charleston, South Carolina, March 8, 1853:

This rule of nocturnal retirement was obviously relaxed whenever a negro ball was given. We had the privilege of being invited to see one of these amusements. The saltatory features of the scene here given were quaint yet picturesque. The minstrels were embowered in greenery as they played waltzes and quadrilles, which were danced with great zest, and the hall rang with good-humored laughter.

The refreshments were limited to spruce-beer, of which we drank thankfully, as administering a novel sensation to the jaded palate. The striking features of negro evening dress consisted in astonishing turbans with marabou feathers, into which add accessories of squib shape and other forms were inserted.<sup>75</sup>

The presence of white observers was not unusual; both the urban slave balls and plantation slave dances were attended by whites who served variously as social arbiters, onlookers, and participants.

During the winter, the negroes in Montgomery, have their "assemblies," or dress balls, which are got up "regardless of expense," in a very grand style. Tickets to these balls are advertised, "admitting one gentlemen and two ladies," \$1, and "ladies are assured that they may rely on the strictest order and propriety being observed."

Cards of invitation, finely engraved with handsome vignettes, are sent, not only to the fashionable slaves, but to some of the more esteemed white people, who however, take no part, except as

lookers-on. All the fashionable dances are executed; no one is admitted, except in full dress: there are the regular masters of ceremonies, floor committees, etc.; and a grand supper always forms a part of the entertainment.<sup>76</sup>

Whites exercised their rights of access at both types of affairs, as Elen Campbell, a former slave from Georgia, recalled: "Den sometimes on Saddy night we have a big frolic. De nigger frum Hammond's place and Phinizy place, Eve place, Clayton place, D'Laigle place all git togedder fer big dance and frolic. A lot o de young white sports used to come dere and push de nigger bucks aside and dance wid de wenches."<sup>77</sup>

Campbell's testimony, as well as other evidence, suggests that slave dances and balls were places where white men sought romantic, sexual liaisons with women of African descent. Women of mixed African and European heritage were particularly prized for these liaisons. In Louisiana, the presence of a large mixed-blood population facilitated the development of normalized sexual relationships with white men. Charles Gayarre, Louisiana historian, creator of the Louisiana state library, and magistrate of the New Orleans city courts in the early 1800s, describes the growth of this population:

A census taken in 1788, this free mixt blooded population numbered about 200 free blacks who in that census may have been in the total of 1700 put down as the number of that sort of population for there were few emancipated negroes at that time. From 1788 to 1809, twenty-one years, we calculate that it may have increased 3,500. In that year, 1809, there arrived from the west indies, in conse-

quence of events in St. Domingo, and subsequently in Cuba, 1,977 mixed blooded and pure Africans. Excluding the full blooded blacks. We estimate that mixt blooded at 1,500 which number, added to 3,500 above mentioned, gives what we believe to be about a correct total of 5,000 mixed blooded, or *gens de couleur*. They probably had swelled to over 10,000 souls from 1825 to 1830—the epoch we select to represent their condition.<sup>78</sup>

That women of African ancestry were especially appealing to white men and that dances provided the opportunity for sexual alliances is indicated by a 1785 ordinance (Louisiana was still under Spanish domination) aimed at curbing the activities of quadroon women. They were forbidden to wear jewels and feathers, were ordered to have their hair bound in a kerchief, and were forbidden to have balls that were here referred to as “nightly assemblies.”<sup>79</sup>

Beginning in French Louisiana and continuing until emancipation, particularly in the areas surrounding New Orleans, institutional concubinage known as *la placage*, or the placee system, developed. In a *placage* arrangement the couple, though not legally married, lived together as if they were. Though marriage between Indians, whites, and people of African descent was illegal, *la placage* became a permanent fixture of New Orleans and other regions of the antebellum South. In fact, it existed wherever there was slavery—Haiti, Dutch Guinea, Martinique, Guadeloupe, Jamaica, Peru, and Mexico.<sup>80</sup> An important element in its perpetuation in Louisiana was the quadroon ball.

Unlike other dances in which people of African descent took part, a quadroon ball was held specifically

for wealthy white males to meet colored or mixed-blood women and acquire them as mistresses. These dances entailed elaborate public displays and ritualized exchanges; their elaborate formalization is characteristic of elite dancing. Although concubinage between white men and women of African descent was widespread, these sophisticated public occasions were peculiar to the New Orleans area, except for the "dignity" or "quality" balls of Barbados. Possibly slave balls in other areas served a similar function, but I have found no evidence to support such a conclusion. Numerous accounts indicate that these affairs were attended solely by wealthy white males and mulatto, quadroon, and octoroon women. The historical and more folkloric literature on Louisiana has little to say about them. The contemporary accounts describe them with such idealized romanticism that we know little about their evolution or what actually occurred at them.<sup>81</sup>

Gayerre and other sources imply that by 1788 colored balls and dances had become an important feature of social life in Louisiana. The mixed-blood free community, like slaves who attended balls in other areas, was primarily urban, and existed as a separate entity between the black slave and free white communities. Their ability to make modest economic and social progress distinguished them significantly from black slaves. In New Orleans these *gens de couleur*, particularly the women, "had their boxes at the Orleans theatre, wore diamonds, sported Parisian head-dresses, rivalled white women in the elegance of their toilette."<sup>82</sup>

In the urban South the statutory regulations and

customs that supported strict segregation were selectively enforced, often blatantly violated—principally by white men. Free people of color enjoyed certain social privileges but were well aware that their liberties could be curtailed at any time. For example, on January 19, 1781, during the war between England and Spain, the city of New Orleans was filled with troops and crews of Spanish ships. Fearing for his ability to control the troops as well as large numbers of slaves and free persons of color, the Spanish attorney general prohibited masking and the usual public dancing enjoyed by the nonwhite community, both slave and free. Moreover, quadroons could be relegated to a state of servitude at almost any time. A popular play of the period entitled *The Octoroon: or Life in Louisiana* testifies to their tenuous class stability.<sup>83</sup>

Many whites perceived the *gens de couleur* and free blacks as a threat to the hegemony of the slaveholder class. In 1788 “an excessive attention to dress” by a mulatto or quadroon was considered, according to the ordinance of Governor Miro, “as evidence of misconduct and made her liable to punishment.” Little had changed by 1806 when the legislature of the Territory of Orleans adopted a statute forbidding slaves or free people of African descent to presume themselves “equal to the white.”<sup>84</sup> In theaters, opera halls, and other public accommodations, the areas reserved for quadroons and free persons of color reflected their inferior status, and they were forbidden certain public behavior and attire. Even genteel colored families were forced to practice selective propriety in the homes of the New Orleans *gens de couleur*; “when the females of their families were visited by gentlemen of the domi-

nant class, it was accepted etiquette for them [black men] never to be present."<sup>85</sup>

In short, the free mixing of the races was a one-way privilege; black males did not openly enter into liaisons with white women, nor did they patronize white celebrations. Whites, however, frequented colored taverns, public dance halls, and private dances and balls to such an extent that in February 1800, the Spanish attorney general, Pedro Barran, requested that the city reduce the number of public dance halls in an attempt to lessen disorder and better regulate race mixing.<sup>86</sup>

The nature of urban life, however, made the control of slaves, skilled slaves in particular, hard to accomplish. Bricklayers, engineers, barbers, midwives, blacksmiths, even druggists and trusted house servants received considerable latitude during their hours off and were often indistinguishable from their legally free brethren. In addition, they often had money for admission to public dance halls.<sup>87</sup>

New Orleans under Barran resolved to prohibit public colored dances and limit gatherings to private homes; whites were forbidden to attend these affairs. In response, Bernardo Coquet and his partner José Boniquet proposed to underwrite the city's unprofitable first theater, which had been losing money for the past decade, in exchange for the exclusive right to hold public dances for colored people. This arrangement was to last for one year under the following conditions: the partners could hold one dance every Sunday evening, two per week during carnival season; slaves would not be admitted without a written permit from their masters, and no other colored dances would be

allowed in the city. This arrangement seemed acceptable to all parties since it limited the number of colored dances and saved the theater's operas and dramas for the city. Soon after carnival season, however, the colored dances resumed admitting black and white, slave and free. Complaints again followed that "the dances often displayed luxury equally that of white dances and that free people and slaves of both sexes attended."<sup>88</sup> According to one exasperated citizen,

At the corners of all the cross streets of the city are to be seen nothing but taverns, which are open at all hours. There the canaille white and black, free and slave mingled, go openly and without any embarrassment, as well as without shame to revel and dance indiscriminately and for whole nights with a lot of men and women of saffron color, or quite black, either free or slave. I will only designate the famous house of Coquet, located near the center of the city, where all scum is to be seen publicly and for several years—to that degree that the tricolor balls are not at all secret; I have several times seen the printed announcements posted at the street corners, with the express permission of the civil governor.<sup>89</sup>

The quadron ball as such was born in 1805 when Coquet rented his ballroom on St. Philip Street to Auguste Tessier, an actor and dancer in the local opera company, and moved his own dances to another location. Tessier devised a sure-fire money-making scheme. Beginning on Saturday, November 23, he would give two balls a week, on Wednesday and Saturday, for free women of color; colored men would be

excluded. Tessier's experiment proved an enormous financial success and the quadroon ball soon became a major attraction of New Orleans. White men flocked to the balls for an introduction that might lead to a *placage*.<sup>90</sup>

The men, particularly the planters and those whose business of life, carried on by slaves, left them considerable leisure, tired of the monotonous society of women of their own class and found their amusement in gambling and with the already large and dangerous class of quadroons. Of the attraction of the latter, many a foreign visitor has left glowing descriptions. Already the public balls arranged for them by enterprising managers were a chief institution of the town, and their gaiety and contrast to the monotony of the man-of-leisure's existence gave them a dangerous attraction against which other influences fought in vain.<sup>91</sup>

During the early days of American occupation in the first part of the nineteenth century, quadroon balls were being given in the famous Orleans Ballroom, which for years had been the scene of the most fashionable of white balls. By the 1830s as many as three balls a week were being given. The entrance fee for men was approximately \$2—each gentlemen who attended paid a fee that was around twice that for the white balls and masquerades.<sup>92</sup> Thus, the quadroon ball emerged as the scheme of a dance-hall entrepreneur, not a spontaneous cultural development of the colored community.

The attraction of these peculiar social institutions were several. Frederick Law Olmsted seems to condone *placage* as a means by which frugal young men

could live comfortably while making their way in the business world. Note his implication that white women's extravagance drove white men into the arms of black women, who had to earn their keep.

One reason which leads to this way of living to be frequently adopted by unmarried men, who come to New Orleans to carry on business, is, that it is much cheaper than living at hotels and boarding houses. As no young man ordinarily dare think of marrying, until he had made a fortune to support the extravagant style of house-keeping, and gratify the expensive tastes of young women, as fashion is now educating them, many are obliged to make up their minds never to marry. Such a one undertook to show me that it was cheaper for him to *placer* than to live in any other way that he could be expected to in New Orleans. He hired, at a low rent, two apartments in the older part of the town; his placee did not, except occasionally, require a servant; she did the marketing, and performed all the ordinary duties of house-keeping herself; she took care of his clothes, and in every way was economical and saving in her habits—it being her interest, if her affections for him were not sufficient, to make him as much comfort and as little expense as possible, that he might be more strongly attached to her, and have the less occasion to leave her. He concluded by assuring me that whatever might be said against it, it certainly was better than the way in which most young men lived who depended on salaries in New York.<sup>93</sup>

Why would women of African descent enter such relationships? For many, a more comfortable life; for others, the promise of freedom. White men some-

times protected their children from becoming slaves, and the child's fortune was often the mother's fortune. To white males, the appeal of *placage* was powerful on several levels. Interracial sexual relationships promised exotic, forbidden pleasures and freedom from the bounds of respectable behavior within the relationship. In a society in which all women were subjugated to men, no laws or conventions restricted the treatment of black women. Even free black women could be considered the property of their white male lovers and in many relationships, particularly with urban slaves, the man legally owned his mistress.<sup>94</sup> Though many men honored their responsibilities as fathers and "husbands," others ignored their responsibilities without penalty.

We can only surmise the attitude of the quadroom men toward these arrangements. The balls must have been a blatant reminder of their inferior status and powerlessness. No man of African ancestry was allowed to attend these celebrated affairs in any capacity other than menial or musician.<sup>95</sup>

These functions were essentially glorified slave marts. Mothers brought their thirteen- and fourteen-year-old daughters, dressed in their finery, and paraded them for inspection. Surveying a group of quadroom girls, the "patron" was virtually assured of the young woman's virginity. If he chose to pursue one, he made preliminary arrangements with her mother. After assuring the mother that he could indeed support her daughter in a fitting style, and having reached an understanding as to his obligations and duties, the man concluded the negotiations by presenting a gift or a house to the mother. The arrangements would in-

clude a financial plan for the girl and any children she might have. The patron was then permitted to call on the girl. After the two principals reached an agreement, a party was given and announcements made to friends. The girl then went to live with her "protector," frequently assuming his name.<sup>96</sup>

The frequency of quadroon balls and the testimony of contemporary observers indicate that by 1788 *placage* was widespread among those white males who could afford it. Predictably, critics mourned the decline of morality and regarded miscegenation as a threat to white supremacy. In 1788 Governor Estevan Miro issued (to little effect) his *Bando de buen gobierno*, article 5 of which was specifically directed against concubinage with women of African descent. White women in particular clamored for an end to the balls, and in 1828 successfully pressured the city council to adopt an ordinance that forbade white men with or without masks to attend balls with women of color.<sup>97</sup>

Little changed as a result of the ordinance, but other forces were at work to undermine quadroon balls. One was the growing discontent with slavery. The quadroon balls depended on the meager privilege granted to quadroons and "people of color," as distinct from enslaved Africans; as the slave system drew increasing opposition, lines were more sharply drawn and the fine points of racial distinctions blurred.

After the 1830s, the peak era for these dances, the social status of the free black and colored community diminished. The 1850s were particularly noteworthy for legislative decrees and prejudicial writings that challenged the status of free people of African descent and *gens de couleur*. The growing hostility was re-

flected in local newspapers. A free man of color judged guilty of insulting a policeman was fined \$25, but the *Daily Picayune* thought twenty-five lashes more appropriate so as "to teach him the difference between white and brown." Free Negroes "are not a desired population and they may be a dangerous one." In some communities, according to Sterks, the anti-African sentiment gave rise to vigilante committees determined "to prevent slave insurrections and immoral conduct between White men and free colored women. . . . On one occasion the Lafayette Parish Vigilantes whipped a white man named Auguste Gudbeer and his free mulatress mistress, and they gave the unfortunate couple eight days to leave the parish."<sup>98</sup>

The quadroon balls declined in this hostile atmosphere, and by the Civil War their eradication was nearly complete. During the war so many young men left home to fight for the Confederacy that few girls had "protectors."<sup>99</sup> After the war, all persons of African heritage were equal under the law. In practice this meant that all were subject to the full range of discrimination.

While the quadroon ball disappeared after emancipation, the other slave balls and traditions of gentility flourished. The new social and political relations between blacks and whites provided conditions in which new dance arenas could emerge.