

How I Got Over: Communication Dynamics in the Black Community

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THIS study is an analysis of the sacred and secular dynamics of the African-American communications system . . . *My soul look back and wonder* . . . which has served to extrapolate, ritualize, and thus preserve the African essence of Afro-American life . . . *how I got over*. We seek to develop a theoretical and conceptual framework for defining Black communication by explicating the cosmology of traditional Africa and demonstrating its continuity in both sacred and secular Black¹ life. Of necessity we have centered our search on the Traditional Black Church² because of its crucial and long-standing historical role in sustaining the culture and communication process of African-Americans.

In seeking to clarify the communication patterns of superficially different Black Americans, we take as our text what many a "street man" has told "young-

bloods": "Beauty is only skin deep but love is to the bone." This text calls attention to the existence of two levels of reality which will be referred to here as "surface" and "deep" structures. In this context, beauty is a surface structure and love is something that resides within the deep structure—"love is to the bone."

Surface and deep structures have unique but complementary natures. Surface structures are objective, empirical, subject to relatively rapid change, constrained by time and space, and non-generative in nature. Deep structures are intangible, subjective, archetypal, not culturally bound, and generative in nature. Consider the nature of surface and deep structures from the structuralist viewpoint: "The reality sought by structural analysis . . . is not empirical reality but reality at the level of abstract pattern, in terms of certain diagnostic features of empirical phenomena. We seek in the observed phenomena evidence of a regularity that inheres at some other level. . . . It is the set of rules—'knit one, purl two,' and so on—that is the structuralist reality, not the ribbing on Susie's new cardigan."³ Here we are concerned with apprehending the "knit ones, purl twos" of Black communication. The Black communications network is actualized in different specific ways, contingent upon the socio-cultural context

¹ Throughout the paper, we will use the terms Black, Afro-American, and African-American interchangeably to refer to Americans of African descent.

² This paper is anchored in the life-long experiences of Jack L. Daniel at Mt. Sinai Baptist Church, Johnstown, Pennsylvania, and Geneva Smitherman at Tennessee Baptist Church, Detroit, Michigan. Both are Traditional Black Churches. For a detailed analysis of the Traditional Black Church, see Melvin D. Williams, *Community in Black Pentecostal Church: An Anthropological Study* (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1974), and Henry Mitchell, *Black Preaching* (New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1970).

³ Eugene A. Hammel, "The Myth of Structural Analysis: Levi-Strauss and the Three Bears," *Addison-Wesley Module in Anthropology* (Module XXV, 1972), p. 3.

(e.g., "street" vs. "church"), but its basic underlying structures, being grounded in the Traditional African World View, are essentially similar. We bear witness to the cultural continuities between such seemingly disparate groups as preachers and poets, bluesmen and Gospel-ettes, testifiers and toast-tellers, reverends and revolutionaries.

Among these variations, the Traditional Black Church is an exemplary form of Black communication. To speak of the "traditional" Black Church is to speak of the holy-rolling, bench-walking, spirit-getting, tongue-speaking, vision-receiving, intuitive-directing, Amen-saying, sing-song preaching, holy-dancing and God-sending Church. Put another way, this Church may be defined as that in which the cognitive content has been borrowed from Western Judaeo-Christian tradition, and the communication of that content—the affective process—has remained essentially African. This specific convergence of Judaeo-Christian content and African process is found in Protestant denominations, such as Baptist, Methodist, Holiness, and Sanctified, where the worship patterns are characterized by spontaneous preacher-congregation calls and responses, hollers and shouts, intensely emotional singing, spirit possession, and extemporaneous testimonials to the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Traditional Black Church is peopled by lower socio-economic, working class Blacks—domestics, factory workers, janitors, unskilled laborers, etc. While today there is an ever increasing number of high school graduates, most "pillars of the Church" have less than a high school education. It is within the Traditional Black Church that traditional Black folk (Blacks who haven't been assimilated into the elusive American mainstream) create much of their reality. The Traditional Black Church is both a sacred and secular community

whose special character, according to Joseph R. Washington, is: "... not its content but its intent, for the cult is a synthesis of Western Christianity beliefs, practices, ceremonies, rituals, and theologies, with the African tradition of religion as permeating all dimensions of life, without final distinction between the sacred and the secular. The intent of the Black cult is that of traditional African religions—the seeking of the power of the spirit of God in all times, places, and things because without that power man is powerless."⁴ Given these kinds of demographics, the Traditional Black Church becomes "more than a church. It is more than a community. It is a human phenomenon responding to social and economic upheavals."⁵

The essential nature of communication in that Church is an interacting, spontaneous process which has been referred to as "call-response." Briefly defined, this African-derived process is the verbal and nonverbal interaction between speaker and listener in which each of the speaker's statements (or "calls") is punctuated by expressions ("responses") from the listener. As a fundamental aspect of the Black communications system, call-response spans the sacred-secular continuum in Black Culture. In the Church, it is often referred to as the congregation's way of "talking back" to the preacher, the most well-known example of which is "A-men." But Traditional Black Church members also call and respond between themselves as well as the preacher, and Church musicians frequently will "get a thang goin'" between themselves and their instruments. More than an observed ritual in Church services, call-response is an organizing principle of Black Cultural Reality which enables

⁴ Joseph R. Washington, *Black Sects and Cults* (New York: Doubleday, 1973), p. 20.

⁵ Williams, p. 183.

traditional Black folk to achieve the unified state of balance or harmony which is essential to the Traditional African World View.

In contrast to those historians, such as E. Franklin Frazier, who have held that American enslavement obliterated for the slaves "the habits and customs as well as the hopes and fears that characterized the life of their forebears in Africa . . .,"⁶ our argument is that the residue of an African heritage persists, undiminished and intact, in the call-response pattern of Black communication. A heritage that may indeed have been amputated in substance yet survives in form.

We have postulated the following two hypotheses to be dealt with in this paper:

(1) There are similarities in the world views of geographically disparate Africans which we refer to as the "Traditional African World View." This View, though possibly not distinctive to Africans, is nevertheless significant for understanding patterns of Black communication in the United States.

(2) The call-response pattern, exhibited most clearly in traditional Black worship service, is reflective of the Traditional African World View. Upon close examination, we find that it is pervasive in secular dimensions of Black Culture and communication and that it reveals not simply a surface difference between white and Black Americans, but a more profound "deep structure" difference rooted in the Traditional African World View.

TRADITIONAL AFRICAN WORLD VIEW

Our hypotheses, of course, rest on the conviction that there is a Traditional African World View. While there are

differences in the many tribes, languages, customs, physiognomies, spirits, and deities that exist throughout the African continent, these seeming "diversities" are surface variations on the basic themes acknowledged by traditional Africans. Focusing on such surface differences as tribal customs or politically defined African boundaries may only serve to obscure the existence of the deep structure that is shared by all traditional African people.

Of importance here is the fact that basic underlying thought patterns do exist amid the unending diversity of African people, and thus it is appropriate to speak of traditional African thought as a single entity—albeit with complex and diverse manifestations. Robert F. Thompson conducted field studies of African art in nine different African cultures, and was able to identify common canons of form pervading them all.⁷ Similarly, Daryll Forde's studies of African social values in various tribal cultures brought him to remark that: "One is impressed, not only by the great diversity of ritual forms and expressions of beliefs, but also by substantial underlying similarities in religious outlook and moral injunction."⁸

To be sure, students of African culture have yet to detail all of the salient features that transcend tribal differences and constitute what we are calling the "Traditional African World View." Yet sufficient patterns of commonality have emerged from research findings and field studies to suggest an interlocking network of cultural and philosophical syn-

⁷ Robert Farris Thompson, *African Art in Motion* (Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1974), pp. 5-43.

⁸ Daryll Forde, ed., *African Worlds: Studies in the Cosmological Ideas and Social Values of African Peoples* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1954), p. x.

⁶ E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 21.

onymity in Africa.⁹ We turn now to consider some of these common patterns.

UNITY BETWEEN SPIRITUAL AND MATERIAL

A fundamental tenet of the Traditional African World View is what Daryll Forde considers as the African formulation about the workings of the universe,¹⁰ and what E. G. Parrinder referred to as the traditional Africans' perception of a "spiritual universe."¹¹ The conception is that of a dynamic, hierarchical unity between the spiritual and material aspects of life. Specifically, there is a unity between God, man, and nature, with God serving as the head of the hierarchy. God is followed by lesser deities, spirits, man, other forms of life, and things. Man resides in the middle of the hierarchy, and as such, he is composed of both a spiritual and material self, with, as K. A. Busia noted,¹² the fundamental sense of causation being spiritual. Fela Sowande also speaks to this basic assumption: "Here there is no room for the clear-cut separation of spirit and matter as opposites; spirit is matter at its most rarefied, while matter is spirit at its most congealed. Thus, it is that man has both a 'lower mind,' his heritage from the visible world of nature, and also a 'higher mind' equally his inheritance, but from the invisible world of spirit."¹³

⁹ For a good summary of the underlying similarity of thought found among diverse African people, see George Balander and Jacques Maquet, *Dictionary of Black African Civilization* (New York: Leon Amiel, 1974), pp. 276-78.

¹⁰ Forde, p. x.

¹¹ E. G. Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion* (London: Hutchinson House, 1954), pp. 20-28.

¹² K. A. Busia, "The African World View," in Jacob Draker, ed., *African Heritage* (New York: Crowell-Collur, 1963), pp. 146-51.

¹³ Fela Sowande, "The Quest of an African World View: The Utilization of African Discourse," in Jack L. Daniel, ed., *Black Communication: Dimensions of Research and Instruction* (New York: Speech Communication Association, 1974), p. 76.

John Mbiti notes the existence of a hierarchy with spiritual and intellectual determinants. He presents the following categories of traditional African religious ontology.

1. "Gods" as the ultimate explanation of the genesis and sustenance of both man and all things.
2. "Spirits" being made up of superhuman beings and the spirits of men who died a long time ago.
3. "Man" including human beings who are alive and those about to be born.
4. "Animals and plants" or the remainder of biological life.
5. "Phenomena and objects without biological life."¹⁴

As this hierarchy is presented by Mbiti, there are divinities ranging from God through lesser deities who number up to the one thousand and seven hundred "orisha" found among the Yoruba. Closer to man, there are the spirits of the ancestors who continue to have influence over their descendants.

The traditional African world is alive with Gods, spirits, the living dead (persons who recently died), people, animals, plants, and objects without biological life. God is omnipresent, and as Balander and Maquet indicate, "from the supreme God to the recent dead, there stretches a hierarchy of divine or semi-divine figures who possess the vital force preeminently and whose cooperation must be sought."¹⁵ Spirits dwell in animate and inanimate objects, and man, upon completing his development, transubstantiates into the spiritual realm. That is, the Traditional African World View assumes that man's ultimate destiny is to move on to the "higher ground" of the spiritual world. Both Sowande, a West African, and Mbiti, an East African, emphasize the common be-

¹⁴ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophies* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), p. 20.

¹⁵ Balander and Maquet, p. 277.

lief in the importance of man's spiritual self in the material-spiritual hierarchy. Sowande goes even further to note that when the connection to man's higher self is disrupted, man slips down to a lower level of the hierarchy—i.e., he becomes an animal. "But the senior partner must be his 'higher mind' for this is his one and only link with the world of reality, the invisible world of spirit. It is the disruption or negation of this link that results in that subtle change of attitude by which a world view degenerates into an opportunistic, hypocritical, callously inhuman view of the world, which turns man from a god-in-the-making into a hairless predatory male animal on two legs, no matter what his human pretensions may be socially, academically, or otherwise."¹⁶

CENTRALITY OF RELIGION

Concomitant with the African emphasis on spirituality is the centrality of religion as a pervasive, dominating force in the life of man. Throughout Africa (and the African diaspora as well), there is no dichotomy between sacred and secular life. Mbiti indicates that there are "no irreligious people" in traditional African society for to be "without religion amounts to a self-excommunication from the entire life of society . . . African people do not know how to exist without religion."¹⁷ Religion permeates all aspects of life since every phase of life in some way relates to man's journey to the spirit world.

Traditional African people are, as Joseph R. Washington wrote, "a people for whom religion was as common as daily bread."¹⁸ "Religion is not a sometime affair. It is a daily, minute involvement of the total person in a community

and its concerns. Indeed, the spirit will not come forth with power apart from the community emptying itself (and thus the priest), so that the power can reign without interference. . . . The heart of traditional African religions is the emotional experience of being filled with the power of the spiritual."¹⁹ Religious beings engaged in the drama of life in a spiritual universe constitute a basic concept of the traditional African "religious configuration."²⁰

And among many Blacks in America, religion plays the same active role in life. C. Eric Lincoln maintained that religion was an inextricable dimension on all levels of Black existence in America: "The black man's pilgrimage in America was made less onerous because of his religion. His religion was the organizing principle around which his life was structured. His church was his school, his forum, his political arena, his social club, his art gallery, his conservatory of music. It was lyceum and gymnasium as well as sanctum sanctorum. His religion was his fellowship with man, his audience with God. It was the peculiar sustaining force which gave him the strength to endure when endurance gave no promise, and the courage to be creative in the face of his own dehumanization."²¹ Thus, religion, as a fundamental construct of the Traditional African World View, became (to borrow a term from Melville J. Herskovits²²) the "cultural focus" of Afro-Americans.

HARMONY IN NATURE AND THE UNIVERSE

In traditional African thought, it is believed that the laws governing one's

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 30.

¹⁷ Adolf E. Jensen, *Myth and Cult Among Primitive People* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 9.

¹⁸ C. Eric Lincoln, "Foreword," in Leonard E. Barrett, *Soul-Force* (New York: Anchor Books, 1974), p. viii.

¹⁹ Melville J. Herskovits, *The New World Negro* (New York: Minerva Press, 1969), p. 13.

²⁰ Sowande, p. 76.

²¹ Mbiti, p. 3.

²² Washington, p. 31.

sell and the laws governing the universe are one and the same. But one cannot simply hold this belief, he must be it and act it. Thus the African World View is manifested in any given individual only when he has become truly a "living witness." One becomes a "living witness" when he aligns himself with the forces of nature, and instead of being a proselytized "true believer," strives to live in harmony with the universe. That is, adherents of the Traditional African World View live as if they are microcosms of a universe that is maintained by the synergic functioning of its spiritual and material essences. Living in harmony with the nature of the universe means, as Sowande indicates, that this World View is not simply a tool for operating in and on the world. Rather, the "world view" emerges "only when the individual has lived himself into what these elements stand for; he must breed into himself the attitudes that they represent; he must turn into the laws of his own being. . . ." ²³ For the traditional African, then, the universe is not an intellectual concept, but a "force field with all things interacting" in balance and harmony. ²⁴

In *Childhood and Cosmos: The Social Psychology of the Black African Child*, Pierre Erny presents an African perspective on childhood that is based, in part, on the propositions being set forth here. Erny indicated that an understanding of who the Black child is must be premised on the deeper understanding of the African Cosmos. "In the traditional African World View, being is identical with life. A vital force similar to that of man animates each object: from god to the least grain of sand the African universe is a seamless cosmos. Each living force is in necessary union with other forces if it wants to increase

rather than dwindle. It is inserted in a dynamic hierarchy in which everything is interdependent. Thus, we are introduced into a universe of correspondences, analogies, harmonies, interactions. Man and cosmos constitute one single network of forces; to grasp one intellectually is to grasp the other." ²⁵

The complementarity of all things in the force field of the universe provides the paradigm for resolving seeming opposites in life. Just as the traditional African finds unity in the sacred and secular aspects of life, he does not dichotomize day and night, good and bad, life and death, or beginning and end. Instead of a perception of opposites, there is a perception of complementary, interdependent, interacting forces, each of which constitutes the beginning and end of the other. The two given forces are synergic in nature, and together they produce a "beat" or rhythm such as the beat of the heart. The universe moves by the many rhythms that are created by the various, complementary, interdependent forces. Thus, traditional African religious ontology constitutes a unity in which "one mode of existence presupposes all others and a balance must be maintained so that these modes neither drift too far apart from one another nor get too close to one another." ²⁶ Put another way, "there is a time and place for everything."

AFRICAN SOCIETY PATTERNED AFTER NATURAL RHYTHMS

In traditional Africa, people pattern their social interactions after the presumed existence of natural rhythms. A traditional African community is itself a rhythm based on the synergic functioning of "I" and "We." Such a com-

munity survives on the rhythm of "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore, I am." ²⁷ What happens to one in some way affects the entire community, and what happens to the entire community necessarily affects all individuals within that community. Neither "I" nor "We" have meaning apart from the other. As an example of the impact of this rhythmic functioning of "I" and "We," consider the traditional attitude toward marriage.

For African people, marriage is the focus of existence. It is the point where all the members of a given community meet: the departed, the living and those yet to be born. All the dimensions of time meet here, and the whole drama of history is repeated, renewed, and revitalized. Marriage is a drama in which everyone becomes an actor or actress and not just a spectator. Therefore, marriage is a duty, a requirement from the corporate society, and rhythm of life in which everyone must participate. Otherwise, he is a rebel and a law-breaker, he is not only abnormal but 'under-human.' Failure to get married under normal circumstances means that the person concerned has rejected society and society rejects him in turn. ²⁸

Throughout the rhythm of life there are many special events that require the participation of every member of the community. Participation is always individual and corporate, i.e., "I" and "We." There are to be no chains broken nor any rhythms stopped.

TIME AS PARTICIPATION IN EVENTS

Community participation is such a crucial element of the Traditional African World View that the African concept of time is defined in terms of participation in experienced events rather than fixed, abstract points. According to Pierre Erny, "African temporality is not lineal, going from a beginning to-

wards an end." ²⁹ On the other hand, as Erny states: ". . . It's not purely circular either. At each return, something remains behind, and something new is added. It is more precise, therefore, to speak of time as a 'spiral.' The peasant and traditional African has a very strong consciousness of being in a world where everything takes place in cycles, where a single life disappears only to better reappear, in a world where there is nothing new under the sun, where a fundamental continuity underlies all changes that can be perceived, where past, present, and future answer one another endlessly." ³⁰

In discussing the World View with regard to the concept of time, we will employ the term "phase" to steer us away from the notion of numerically fixed points so common to Western world ontology. As a conceptual term, "phase" should suggest the traditional African predisposition towards recurring, harmonic cycles, and towards series of events which occur in relation to each other. . . . "What goes around comes around. . . ." African phase is related to natural rhythms such as the seasons of the year; it is rhythmical and cyclical rather than linear, in nature. What matters is not the exact, abstract time of the month or day, but one's participation in a wedding or harvest during a given period of the year or season. Being on time has to do with participating in the fulfillment of an activity that is vital to the sustenance of a basic rhythm, rather than with appearing on the scene at, say "twelve o'clock sharp." The key is not to be "on time" but "in time." ³¹

²⁹ Erny, p. 149.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 149.

³¹ For a detailed discussion of African and Black American temporality, see Dorothy Pennington, *Temporality Among Black Americans: Implications for Intercultural Communication*, Diss. Univ. of Kansas 1974.

²³ Sowande, pp. 67-88.

²⁴ Barrett, p. 17.

²⁵ Pierre Erny, *Childhood and Cosmos: The Social Psychology of the Black African Child* (Rockville, Md.: Media Intellect, 1973), p. 15.

²⁶ Mbiti, p. 20.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 141.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 174.

Traditional African phase focuses on present and past experiences rather than on the future which has not been experienced. Since the World View conceptualizes a universe which is cyclical in nature, the "future" is perceived as the past recurring in a different form. Hence there is considerable importance attached to the present and its relation to the past as opposed to the "future." Phase thus is said to be "backward looking," as the traditional African is firmly rooted in the past experiences of elders and the living dead.

From our foregoing discussion of the Traditional African World View, several salient features emerge:

1. There is a fundamental unity between the spiritual and the material aspects of existence. Though both the material and the spiritual are necessary for existence, the spiritual domain assumes priority.

2. While the universe is hierarchical in nature, all modes of existence are necessary for the sustenance of its balance and rhythm. Harmony in nature and the universe is provided by the complementary, interdependent, synergic interaction between the spiritual and the material. Thus we have a paradigm for the way in which "opposites" function. Specifically, "opposites" constitute interdependent, interacting forces which are necessary for producing a given reality.

3. Communities are modeled after the interdependent rhythms of the universe. Individual participation is necessary for individual survival. Balance in the community, as in the universe, consists of maintaining these interdependent relationships.

4. The universe moves in a rhythmic and cyclical fashion as opposed to a linear progression. "Progression," as such, occurs only into the past world of

the spirit. Thus the "future" is the past. In the community, then, one's sense of "time" is based on participation in and observation of nature's rhythms and community events.

5. Since participatory experiences are key to one's sense of "time," the fundamental pedagogy in the school of life becomes experience, and age serves as a fundamental basis for hierarchical social arrangements.

CALL-RESPONSE

Recall that the Traditional African World View conceptualizes a cosmos which is an interacting, interdependent balanced force field. Further, the society is based on such an assumption, and accordingly, the communications system takes on an interactive, interdependent nature. As Oliver Jackson succinctly states it:

The moral sanctity of . . . life [in African society] derives from the idea that all is spiritual and that the Supreme Power embodies the totality of the cosmos in one spiritual unity . . . the African continuum is essentially harmonious. Men, in building their societies, endeavor to reproduce this 'divine or cosmic harmony.' This is the basis of all ethical and moral behavior in community life. This human microcosm must reaffirm the harmonious modality of the cosmic macrocosm.³²

As a basic communications tactic, call-response seeks to synthesize "speakers" and "listeners" in a unified movement. It permeates all communication, and in the Traditional Black Church it is the basis of all other communicative strategies. Call-response reaffirms the "modality of the cosmic macrocosm."

We are talking, then, about an interactive network in which the fundamental requirement is active participation of all individuals. In this kind of com-

³² Oliver Jackson, "Preface," *Kuntu Drama*, ed. Paul Harrison (New York: Grove, 1974), pp. ix-xiii.

munications system, "there is no sharp line between performers or communicators and the audience, for virtually everyone is performing and everyone is listening."³³ The process requires that one must give if one is to receive, and receiving is actively acknowledging another. Robert Farris Thompson refers to the antiphonal nature of Black communication as "perfected social interaction." He elaborates on this concept as follows:

The arrogant dancer, no matter how gifted or imaginative, may find that he dances to drums and handclaps of decreasing strength and fervor. He may find, and this is damaging to his reputation, that the chorus will crystallize around another person, as in the telling of tales among the Tiv of northern Nigeria. There, we are told by Laura Bohannan, the poor devil who starts a tale without proper preparation or refinement will find the choral answering to his songs becomes progressively weaker until they ultimately reform about a man with stronger themes and better aesthetic organization. He is soon singing to himself. The terror of losing one's grip on the chorus is a real one in some African societies, a poignant dimension of social interaction that for some reason is not mentioned in discourse on singing in African music. . . .

Thus call-and-response and solo-and-circle, far from solely constituting matters of structure, lie in actuality levels of perfected social interaction. The canon is a danced judgment of qualities of social integration and cohesion. . . .³⁴

The power potential and fundamental essence of this interactive system is such that Thompson conceives of it as the "politics of perfection."

"Call-response or 'perfected social interaction' embodies communality rather than individuality. Emphasis is on group cohesiveness and cooperation; the collective common good and spiritual regeneration is reinforced by the visita-

tion of the Spirit, and the efforts of all are needed to bring this about. The preacher says "Y'all ain wid me today, the church is dead," therein acknowledging that he can't make it by himself. But the existence of the "call," which is issued by a single individual in the Group, underscores the importance of individual roles within the Group. The individual is challenged to do what he can within the traditional mold, and he is reaffirmed by the infinite possibilities for unique responses. Centuries-old group norms are balanced by individualized, improvisational emphases. By taking advantage of process, movement, creativity of the moment, and emotional, intuitive, and spiritual guidance, the individual can exercise his sense of Self by virtue of his unique contribution to the Group.

The musical tradition of Black singing groups (sacred and secular) well exemplifies the call-response tradition. Characteristically, a group is comprised of a lead singer ("caller") and his background ("responders"). The leader opens the song and sets the initial mood, but from that point on, the direction and execution of the song depend on the mutual forces of the leader in spiritual combination with his background. For instance, note the opening of the well-known Gospel "How I Got Over":

Leader (Call):	How—
Background (Response):	How I got over.
Leader (call repeated with emphatic feeling):	I said how—
Background (response building with the lead):	How I got over.
Leader:	My soul—
Background:	My soul look back and wonder—
Leader:	How—
Background:	How I got over.

The next verse usually repeats the words of this opening but with greater feeling and emotional intensity, there-

³³ Leonard Doob, *Communication in Africa* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1961), p. 79.

³⁴ Thompson, p. 27.

by taking the song to another spiritual level. The total performance of the group is gauged by their skill in manipulating this musical interplay to move their listeners to get the "spirit in the dark."

We find the same musical tradition in the secular world of Black singing groups (who became the model for contemporary mainstream white groups). For example, note the opening lines to "Don't You Know I Love You So," a popular song from the early 1950s and the beginnings of Black "rock n' roll soul music." The song was recorded by the Clovers, a Black group that has perhaps long since been forgotten.

Leader (call):	Oh, don't you know—
Background (Response):	I love you, love you so.
Leader (call repeated):	Oh, don't you know—
Background (Response):	I love you, love you so.
Background	Oh, don't you know I
(taking over call):	love you, love you so—
Leader (responding):	And I'll never, never let you go—
Leader and	Ooo-dee — ooo-dum —
Background together:	do-wah — I love you so.

CALL-RESPONSE IN THE TRADITIONAL BLACK CHURCH

The Traditional Black Church, it may be recalled, is that church where Blacks use drums, pianos, organs, guitars, tambourines, other musical instruments, their hands, feet, and voices for producing rhythms, guiding holy dancing, and facilitating spirit possession. In such churches, spirit possession is fundamental to the worship of Jesus Christ (who, at times, appears to be a functional substitute for an African deity). Communication in these churches involves an interactive, interdependent, spontaneous process for achieving a sense of unity in which members of the congregation obtain a feeling of satisfaction within themselves, between

themselves and others, and between themselves and spiritual forces. Call-response is a fundamental communications strategy designed to bring about this sense of satisfaction.

Much of what is accomplished by call-response can be witnessed by moving through the hierarchy of the Traditional Black Church. That hierarchy is outlined below:

God (The Father, Spirit, and the Holy Ghost)
Minister, Reverend, Elder (God sent men)
Mother of the Church
Old Folk—Elders
Deacons (Spiritual men who assist the Church Head)
Trustees (Lower in hierarchy because of their fiscal concerns)
Saved Adults
Adult Ushers and Nurses
Saved Young Folk
Unsaved Adults and Children
Backsliders (Former Saved people who have resorted to sin)
Sinners

God must send the man who is to lead, and, subsequently, God tells the man what to say and inspires him to say it. From the outset, Church communication takes on a degree of spontaneity since the leader must "wait on the Lord." Simultaneously, it is the beginnings of process, i.e., the call by God and the man's response by taking up the ministry. Once one acknowledges God's call and one affirmatively responds (many, to their detriment, have tried to ignore God's call), one must still await God's guidance in the daily conduct of one's affairs. Thus, process and spontaneity are maintained by the calls-and-responses between God and the man.

Service in the Traditional Black Church begins with the recognition of the need for God's entrance at the outset. Because it is necessary for God to enter the service, the initial part of the service consists of everyone's making simultaneous calls-and-responses to in-

voke the spirit. The deacons pray, and, as they pray, the minister, the deaconesses, and elders of the church facilitate their efforts.

Deacon:	Come by here today Lord, come by here
Minister:	Yes Lord, come by here
Deaconesses:	Please Lord, Please Lord
Deacon:	Won't you enter our hearts this morning
Adult:	Here I am Lord, help me, please

The order varies in terms of who's calling and who's responding at any given moment. In addition to the above involvements, the elders are usually singing or humming, and musicians are also helping to bring God into the service.

Following this "warming up" period of invoking the spirit, and other intermediate parts of the service, the preacher gets into his sermon by issuing his initial call: "My theme for today is Waiting on the Lord." The congregation responds with "Take your time," "Fix it up, Reb.," "Come on up, now," or simply "Preach, Reb." When the preacher's calls get stronger and more emotional, you can see the Spirit moving over there in the Amen Corner, and hear the congregation urging him on with "Go 'head, now!" "Yessuh!" "Watch yo-self, now!" and such nonverbal responses as nodding of heads, clapping of hands, stomping feet, jumping up and down, jerking the body, holy dancing, "shouting." While the preacher is moving his congregation through the Power of the Word, the congregation's verbal and body responses are also moving him to a higher level of emotional feeling and understanding of the Magic of the Word. Many's the time the Black preacher has been heard to say, "I sho was gon take it easy today, but the folks made me preach."

In the following example of a funeral sermon from Richard Wright's novel, *The Long Dream*, note the congregation's various insistent and emotional responses which the preacher plays off of as he concretely drives home the abstract notion of death.

'Tell it! Tell it!'
'Look down on us, Lawd!'
'Mercy, mercy, have mercy, Jesus!'
'Who dares,' the reverend asked in a wild cry, 'say "No!" when that old Angel of Death calls? You can be in your grocery store ringing up a hundred-dollar sale on the cash register and Death'll call and you'll have to drop the sale and go! You can be a-riding around in your big Buick and Death'll call and you have to get you about to git out of your bed to go to your job and old Death'll call and you'll have to get Mebbe you building a house and done called in the mason and the carpenter and then old Death calls and you have to go! 'Cause Death's asking you to come into your last home! Mebbe you planning on gitting married and your wonderful bride's a-waiting at the altar and you on your way and old Death calls: "Young man, I got another bride for you! Your last bride!"'
'Lawd, it's true!'
'Gawd's Master!'
'Be with us, Lawd!'
[The Reverend demanded:] '... Who understands the Divine Plan of Justice? On the Fourth of July, Gawd reared back and said:
'Death, come here!'
'Wonderful Jesus!'
'"Death, go down to that place called America!"'
'Listen to the Lawd!'
'"Death find that state they call Mississippi!"'
'Gawd's a-talking!'
'"Death, go to a town called Clintonville!"'
'Lawd, Lawd, Lawd!'
'"Death, I want you to tell Tyree Tucker that I want to see 'im!"'
'Have mercy, Jesus!'

A black woman gave a prolonged scream and began leaping about; ushers rushed to her and led her bounding body out of the church.

"Death, tell Tyree that I don't care what he's doing, he's got to come home!"³³

As the process gets more and more involved, spiritual forces "take over." Shouting breaks out all over the church. Older saved people and children with "special gifts" start speaking in tongues. The preacher moves on up to his climax, and the congregation suddenly breaks out in song. Now Reverend can't quit. The Spirit won't let him stop. He runs down out of the pulpit. Nurses are fanning those shouters who have passed out. The musicians and the choir begin to take over as the Spirit has driven the physical bodies to exhaustion. "My, my, my!" . . . "My, my, my!" . . . "Yes! yes!" . . . "oo-koo-Koomaba-sigh!" . . . "ak-baba-hunda!" . . . Thus, community is achieved. God has moved from the minister through the elders, and with the involvement of the saved, the "doors of the church are opened" to the unsaved.

CALL-RESPONSE IN SECULAR LIFE

As we have noted throughout this paper, traditional views distinguish but seek a unity between sacred and secular life. Thus not only is call-response necessary in the Traditional Black Church, it is also a basic communication strategy permeating Black secular life.

In secular style, call-response takes the form of a back-and-forth banter between the rapper (rhetor) and various members of his group, in which, for instance, group members might raise points to see how skillfully the rapper deals with them. Or the group will spur the rhetor on to greater heights of verbal accomplishment by expressions of approval, like "Oh, you mean, nigger" (said with affinity), "get down, man," or "get back, baby," and with nonverbal

behavior like laughter, giving skin, hitting on the wall or backs of chairs, and rich body movements, like rocking back and forth on the heels, circular movements approximating a kind of short dance step. In the secular world, too, there is a kind of hierarchy (though not as rigidly stratified with distinct roles, as in the Church). The secular hierarchy is headed by the heroic man of words in the form of poolroom, barbershop, or street corner rapper; sharp-witted player of the Dozens; or creative narrator of Toasts and other Black folk stories.

In addition to the plain, everyday conversational sets where this pattern comes into play, it is interesting to observe it in operation in more "formal" secular settings, such as at Black political rallies and poetry performances. Just as in Church, the speaker's initial call will be punctuated by expressive responses, (secularized, of course). Instead of "Preach, reverend," we hear "Teach, brother." "Amen" is replaced by "Do it, baby." And we hear many tell the *truth's*, *shonuff's*, and *yeah! yeah's!*, just as in the Church. There are gestures such as the giving of the Black Power sign (raised clenched fist), which replaces the church gesture of waving one's hand in the air ("I couldn't say nothing, I just waved my hand"). When it really gets good, and the speaker is shonuff tellin' it like it T.I.S., folk begin to holler, jump up and down in their seats (i.e., "shouting" as in church), and stomp their feet. Like the preacher and everyday Black people, poets and political rhetor-rappers thrive on audience involvement—they need to know that their audience is moved by their rap and gauge its power by the degree and extent of their responses.

Calling-responding; stating and counter-stating; acting and re-acting; testing your performance as you go—it is such a natural, habitual dynamic in Black com-

munication that Blacks do it quite unconsciously when rapping to other Blacks. But call-response can be disconcerting to both parties in Black-white communication, presenting a real case of cross-cultural communication interference. When the Black person is speaking, the white person, because call-response is not in his cultural heritage, obviously does not engage in the response process, remaining relatively passive, perhaps voicing an occasional, subdued "mmm-hmm." Judging from the white individual's seeming lack of involvement in the communication, the Black communicator gets the feeling that the white isn't listening to him, and may repeatedly punctuate his "calls" with questions, such as "Are you listening to me?" "Did you hear me?" etc. In an extended conversation, such questions become annoying to the white, and he may exclaim, "Yes. I'm listening, of course, I'm listening. I'm standing right here!" Then when the white communicator takes over the "call," the Black person, as is customary, begins to get all into it, responding with verbal expressions, like "Dig it!" "Tell it," "I hear you," "Go head, run it down," and moving and dancing around when he hears something that he thinks is really dynamite. Judging from all this apparent "communication interference," the white person gets the feeling that the Black person isn't listening because he "keeps interrupting and turning his back on me." (There is also the possibility that the Black person will not be his natural self and respond at all; hence also preventing maximum communication.)

In the excerpt below, from Ralph Ellison's short story, "Mister Toussan," Buster and Riley exemplify a secular version of call-response. Buster is narrating the story of the Haitian General, Toussaint L'Ouverture, who, in 1791, led the only successful slave revolt in his-

tory. Note how Riley punctuates and reinforces each line of the story (i.e., Buster's "call") with varied "A-men" type responses, occasionally, as he probably does in Church, repeating the exact words of the "call," other times issuing forth with exclamatory *Jesuses* and *Yeah's!*, and sometimes adding the completer to Buster's "call" statements.

Riley looked hard at Buster and seeing the seriousness of the face felt the excitement of a story rise up within him.

'Buster, I'll bet a fat man you lyin'. What'd that teacher say?'

'Really, man, she said that Toussan and his men got up on one of them African mountains and shot down them peckerwood soldiers fast as they'd try to come up. . . .'

'Why good-God-a-mighty!' yelled Riley. 'Oh boy, they shot 'em down!' chanted Buster. 'Tell me about it, man!' 'And they throwed 'em off the mountain. . . .'

' . . . Gooool-leel! . . . ' ' . . . And Toussan drove 'em cross the sand. . . .'

' . . . Yeah! And what was they wearing. Buster? . . . ' 'Man, they had on red uniforms and blue hats all trimmed with gold, and they had some swords all shining what they called sweet blades of Damascus. . . .'

'Sweet blades of Damascus!' . . . ' . . . They really had 'em,' chanted Buster. 'And what kinda guns?' 'Big, black cannon!' 'And where did ole what-you-call-'im run them guys? . . .'

'His name was Toussan.' 'Toussan! Just like Tarzan. . . . ' 'Not Taar-zan, dummy, Toou-zan!' 'Toussan! And where'd ole Toussan run 'em?' 'Down to the water, man. . . . ' ' . . . To the river water. . . . ' ' . . . Where some great big ole boats was waiting for 'em. . . .'

' . . . Go on, Buster!' 'An' Toussan shot into them boats. . . . ' ' . . . He shot into em. . . . ' ' . . . Shot into them boats. . . . ' 'Jesus!! . . . ' 'With his great big cannons. . . . ' ' . . . Yeah! . . . ' ' . . . Made a-brass. . . . ' ' . . . Brass. . . . ' ' . . . An' his big black cannon balls started

³³ Richard Wright, *The Long Dream* (New York: Ace Books 1958), pp. 295-97.

killin' them peckerwoods. . . .
 ' . . . Lawd, Lawd. . . .'
 ' . . . Boy, till them peckerwoods hollowed
Please, Please Mister Toussan, we'll be good!
 'An' what'd Toussan tell em, Buster?
 'Boy, he said in his big deep voice, *I oughta
 drown all a-you bastards!*
 'An' what'd the peckerwoods say?
 'They said, *Please Please, Please, Mister
 Toussan. . . .*
 ' . . . We'll be good,' broke in Riley.
 'Thass tight, man,' said Buster excitedly. He
 clapped his hands and kicked his heels against
 the earth, his black face glowing in a burst
 of rhythmic joy.
 'Boy!
 'And what'd ole Toussan say then?
 'He said in his big deep voice: *You all peck-
 erwoods better be good, 'cause this is sweet
 Papa Toussan talking and my niggahs is crazy
 'bout white meat!*
 'Ho, ho, ho!' Riley bent double with laugh-
 ter. The rhythm still throbbed within him
 and he wanted the story to go on and on. . . .³⁸

At this point, Riley has become uncontrollably ecstatic about the story and superconfident that he knows how to "put the right stuff" to story-telling. So they switch roles, Riley becoming the "caller," Buster the "responder," and thus the moving rhythm of this story within a story is sustained to its climax.

As a communicative strategy, then, call-response is the manifestation of the cultural dynamic which finds audience and listener or leader and background to be a unified whole. Shot through with action and interaction, Black communicative performance is concentric in quality—the "audience" becoming both observers and participants in the speech event. As Black American Culture stresses communality and group experi-

entiality, the audience's linguistic and paralinguistic responses are necessary to co-sign the power of the speaker's rap or call. They let him know if he's on the right case. A particular individual's linguistic virtuosity is rewarded with a multiplicity of fervent and intense responses. Thus despite the cultural constraints imposed on individuality, skillful sacred and secular rappers can actualize their Selfhood within the community setting. Finally, as with other rhetorical strategies in Black communication, call-response is universally imbedded in the Traditional African World View, the "deep structure" of Black Culture, and we find this structure surfacing in concrete reality by witnessing the various ways individuals manipulate the strategy or deal within the ritual.

CONCLUSION

We contend that the Traditional African World View constitutes the basis, the source, the "deep structure" and indeed, the fountainhead, of Black communication in America. We find that View most carefully preserved and retained in the Traditional Black Church. Recognizing that one cannot duplicate in America *precisely* what would have existed in traditional African society, we have been concerned with demonstrating communicative *patterns*—"knit ones and purl twos"—which clearly reveal the appropriation and transformation of the Traditional African World View for the complex social situations that obtain in America. And these tasks have led us to conclude that call-response is a basic communicative strategy necessary to the social and cultural life-blood of Black America.

³⁸ Ralph Ellison, "Mister Toussan," in *Black American Literature: Fiction*, ed. Darwin Turner (Columbus: Charles E. Merrill, 1969), pp. 98-99.