

## **SPIRITUALS AS AN EXPRESSION OF DEMOCRATIC VALUES AND COMMUNITY SOLIDARITY**

In the call-and-response structure of the spirituals that evolved during the period of bondage, enslaved Africans affirmed the traditional African emphasis on the importance of family and (tribal) community identity, a value reinforced by the common experience of enslavement. Within this traditional African communal value system, every member of the community was welcomed into the communal circle. In the ring shout<sup>4</sup>, a counterclockwise circle dance ceremony that evolved early in the sojourn of Africans in America, the lyrics and rhythms of the songs sung in the circle often accentuated this communal orientation. For example, in the following song sample, “How Do You Do, Ev’ry Body,” we can feel the communal spirit of welcome evident in the ring shout circle:

How do you do, everybody, how do you do?  
How do you do, everybody, how do you do?  
I don’t come to worry your patience.  
I just come to bring salvation.  
How do you do, everybody, how do you do?

How do you do, my dear brethren, how do you do?  
How do you do, my dear brethren, how do you do?  
I don’t come to worry your patience.  
I just come to bring salvation.  
How do you do, everybody, how do you do?

How do you do, my dear sistren, how do you do?  
...  
How do you do, my dear mother, how do you do?  
...  
How do you do, my dear father, how do you do?  
...  
How do you do, my good member, how do you do?  
...

During the period leading up to the American Revolution of the 1770s, enslaved African singers mirrored in their songs the democratic ideals that were being developed by the British colonists who were themselves fighting for independence from the oppressive rule of England. As the Declaration of Independence asserted that “Every person is endowed with God-given inalienable rights . . . Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” enslaved Africans believed that they too were entitled to these same rights. Many of their songs revealed the strength of their convictions. The following example, “Run, Mary, Run,” which is also a ring shout song, provides a good illustration

Run, Mary, run,  
Run, Martha, run,  
Tell, Mary, run, I say,  
You got a right to the tree of life.

Little Mary you got a right,  
You got a right to the tree of life.  
You got a right, you got a right,  
You got a right to the tree of life.

The Hebrew Children got a right,  
You got a right to the tree of life.  
Paul and Silas you got a right,  
You got a right to the tree of life.

Got a right, you got a right,  
You got a right to the tree of life.  
I come to tell you, you got a right  
You got a right to the tree of life.  
I come to tell you, you got a right,  
You got a right to the tree of life.

The voice is heavy but you got a right,  
You got a right to the tree of life.  
Ups and down but you got a right,  
You got a right to the tree of life.  
True hard born, but you got a right,  
You got a right to the tree of life.

You got a right, you got a right,  
You got a right to the tree of life.

...

Oh Weepin' Mary,  
You got a right to the tree of life.  
Oh Weepin' Mary,  
You got a right to the tree of life.

I come to tell you, you got a right,  
You got a right to the tree of life.  
I come to tell you, you got a right,  
You got a right to the tree of life.

You got a right, you got a right,  
You got a right to the tree of life.  
Ups and down, but you got a right,...

<http://ctl.du.edu/spirituals/Freedom/values.cfm>

## SPIRITUALS OF DEMOCRATIC VALUES AND COMMUNITY SUFFERING/STANDING UP TOGETHER QUESTIONS

1. What shape is important in slave life to create a community of people?
2. What is a ring shout?
3. How does “How do you do, Every’ Body” create community?
4. How did the American Revolution affect slaves view of self?
5. How did they put these views to music?