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PINKSTER

By Robert J. Damm

Many percussionists know about the rich African cultural traditions that were retained and disseminated for more than a century via the Sunday gatherings at Congo Square in New Orleans. A lesser known example of African cultural survival is the Pinkster festival. Despite the harsh oppression imposed on the slaves in the Dutch and English colonies, and the fact that Pinkster took place only once a year, Africans used the occasion to celebrate and pass on rich cultural traditions including singing, dancing, and drumming.

The Dutch West India Company established New Amsterdam (later New York) in 1624. The Dutch settlers brought with them Pinkster, their name for Pentecost, which is a Christian celebration marking the descent of the Holy Spirit on Christ's disciples. Pentecost is celebrated for seven weeks (50 days) after the moveable feast of Easter. The Dutch Pinkster lasted three to six days and included church services, visits with neighbors, building arbors, playing games, and eating special foods such as gingerbread and dyed eggs.

With the arrival of African slaves in New Amsterdam, as early as 1628, Pinkster began transforming into a festival recognized more for its African qualities. Specifically, the traditions were those of

West-Central Africa; "The abundance of names ending in 'Congo' and 'Angola' indicates that the overwhelming majority of slaves composing the charter generation in New Netherland were of [this area]" (Dewulf, p.39). The Pinkster festival became infused with African cultural expressions and provided the opportunity for Africans to retain and pass on many of their traditions. Pinkster Hill in Albany became home to an annual bustling marketplace, African drumming, processions, oratory, and African dancing. Although it is a work of historical fiction, Fenimore Cooper's novel *Satanstoe* includes a description of a Manhattan Pinkster festival. The African tone of the gathering is emphasized:

By this time, nine-tenths of the blacks of the city, and of the whole country within thirty or forty miles, indeed, were collected in thousands in those fields, beating banjoes, [and] singing African songs... The features that distinguished a Pinkster frolic from the usual scenes at fairs, and other merry-makings, however, were of African origin... (Dewulf, p. 7).

MARKETPLACE

In the African village, the marketplace is a location for people to buy and sell goods as well as meet with friends, share news, and transact countless oth-

er cultural activities. "During Pinkster, the hill was transformed into a facsimile of an African village. Preparing the holiday must have involved knowledge passed down through the generations—slaves had to learn how to construct the Guinea drums, dance the toto dance, and erect the African-style huts that housed commercial exchange throughout the fairgrounds" (Verter, p. 419).

The 1803 article published in the *Albany Centinel* described the construction of booths and listed some of the items sold at the Pinkster festival: "These arbors are divided into different apartments, filled up with seats, and stored with fruit, cakes, cheese, beer, and liquors of various kinds. In the centre of this villa, and in front of the royal arbor, a sort of Amphitheatre is laid out, where the Guinea dance is to be performed" (Pinkster, p. 4).

Market festivities during Pinkster were described in Thomas DeVoe's *The Market Book: A History of the Public Markets of the City of New York*, which was published in 1862 but drew on memories of earlier, first-hand experiences. DeVoe's list of items sold by slaves during the Pinkster holidays included "roots, berries, herbs, yellow or other birds, fish, clams, oysters, etc. (344)." Verter proposed that items sold at the Pinkster market included roots and herbs to be used for folk remedies (p. 401). Perhaps the stalls at the Pinkster festival included items related to what in Africa is called a fetish market. The fetish market is a supply store for the ingredients needed for traditional religious practice. The tables of animal parts, plants, and herbs are used for fetishes (sometimes called talismans, charms, or gris-gris) as cures for everyday maladies, animal sacrifice for worship, protection from curses, and various rituals. Everyday objects can be activated to provide protection, channel communication with gods, or ensure supernatural power over others. Figure 1 is of a fetish market in Mali. The author can be seen accepting a chunk of salt from Timbuktu in one hand and holding a monkey head in the other.

AFRICAN DRUMMING

African drums were assembled for use during festivals, but they were generally banned throughout the rest of the year. For example, South Carolina's Negro Act of 1740 specified that it was absolutely necessary to restrain slaves from "using or keeping of drums, horns, or other loud instruments, which may call together or give sign or notice to one another of their wicked designs and purposes." Possibly for this reason, none of the drums actually used for the New York celebrations of Pinkster (1600–1800s) exist today. There are, however, a number of detailed

Figure 1



descriptions of African-style drums played during the colonial period. An anonymous letter published in the *New York Weekly Journal* in 1736 gave an account of an April 10 holiday somewhere outside New York City. This must have been a Pinkster festival due to the drums, rattles, and banjos in the ensemble, which accompanied the singing and dancing:

It was no small amusement to me, to see the plain partly covered with booths, and well crowded with Whites, the Negroes divided into companies, I suppose according to their different nations, some dancing to the hollow sound of a drum, made of the trunk of a hollow tree, others to the grating rattling noise of pebbles or shells in a small basket, others played the banjer [banjo], and some knew how to join the voice [to] it (*The Spy*, p. 1).

In *Satanstoe*, Cooper described drums in the Pinkster festival: “Among other things, some were making music, by beating on skins drawn over the ends of hollow logs, while others were dancing to it, in a manner to show that they felt infinite delight. This in particular, was said to be a usage of their African progenitors (Cooper, p. 70).” Another description indicated the use of a large double-headed drum: “The music was obtained from a huge drum-like instrument, four or five feet long and a foot in diameter, covered at either end by a tightly stretched sheepskin (Paus and Pinkster, p. 4).”

Dr. James Eights, a scientist and artist born in Albany, gave valuable information about drums in his essay regarding Pinkster festivals there: “The music made use of on this occasion, was likewise singular in the extreme. The principal instrument selected to furnish this important portion of the ceremony

Figure 2: Pinkster Drum



was a symmetrically formed wooden article usually denominated an eel-pot [a trap with a funnel-shaped opening for catching eels], with a cleanly dressed sheep skin drawn tightly over its wide and open extremity—no doubt obtained expressly for the occasion from the celebrated Fish Slip, at the foot of the Maiden’s Lane (Eights, p. 326).” Eileen Southern determined that the event described by Dr. Eights took place during the 1770s (p. 41). Based on available historical descriptions, a replica of an African-style Pinkster drum was assembled by the author [see Figure 2]. The shell was a re-purposed wooden fish trap [see Figure 3]. Assistance was provided by master woodworker Dr. John Guyton and Malian master drummer Bassidi Kone [see Figure 4].

From the available sources about African drummers at Pinkster festivals, we learn the names of Jackey Quackenboss and King Charles. Quackenboss is the drummer identified in the most frequently cited account of Pinkster drumming:

Astride this rude utensil [drum] sat Jackey Quackenboss, then in his prime of life and well known energy,

Figure 3: Wooden Fish Trap



Figure 4: Attaching the Goatskin Head



beating lustily with his naked hands upon its loudly sounding head, successively repeating the ever wild, though euphonic cry of Hi-a-bomba, bomba, bomba, in full harmony with the thumping sounds. These vocal sounds were readily taken up and as oft repeated by the female portion of the spectators not otherwise engaged in the exercises of the scene, accompanied by the beating of time with their ungloved hands, in strict accordance with the eel-pot melody (Eights, p. 326).

Although there seems to be no other primary source information about Jackey Quackenboss, Stuckey surmised that “Jackey Quackenboss...was at the height of his powers and possibly the greatest drummer in the slave population, North or South (p. 171).” Stuckey supported his speculation with the following statement:

Regarding drumming, it is essential to remember that drumming was outlawed in much of American slavery, so to have a source that mentions a slave drumming in the U.S., a description of how the drum was made, together with other slaves responding to the beat of the drum is rather rich documentation. It is not the only reference to drumming during slavery but an important one, a key source for evidence of rhythm-consciousness... (personal communication, July 14, 2016).

Quackenboss was loudly calling with his drum and chant for all who understood to collectively participate in a public, yet secret, ritual. The word “bomba” has been identified as Kikongo—a Bantu language spoken by the Kongo and Ndundo people living in what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Republic of the Congo, and Angola—and translated as “secret” (Frere-Jones, p. 6).

PROCESSIONS

Drumming was likely an essential part of the parade that opened the annual Pinkster festival.

“Drums are generally considered the most important musical instruments of Africans...they are symbols of political power...embodiment of black spirituality, galvanizing tools, uniting forces, speech surrogates, and exquisite artifacts (Dor, p. 14). However, there are no known, primary source accounts of Pinkster parade drumming. This is surprising because descriptions of another New England holiday called “Negro Election Day” or “Lecture Day” are ample. That annual custom had much in common with Pinkster. The Papers of the New Haven Colony Historical Society include numerous reports of drumming in the ‘Lecture Day’ ceremonies, in which slaves elected and paraded their own kings and governors:

His parade days were marked by much that was showy, and by some things that were ludicrous. A troop of blacks, sometimes an hundred in number, marching sometimes two and two on foot, sometimes mounted in true military style and dress on horseback, escorted him through the streets, with drums beating, colors flying, and fifes, fiddles, clarionets, and every sonorous metal that could be found, uttering martial sound...united in innocent and amusing fun and frolic—every voice upon its highest key, in all the various languages of Africa, mixed with broken and ludicrous English, filled the air, accompanied with the music of the fiddle, tambourine, the banjo, drum, etc. The whole body moved in the train of the Governor-elect, to his master’s house, where, on their arrival a treat was given by the gentlemen newly elected, which ended the ceremonies of the day (Platt, p.320–324).

Regarding Pinkster, Edwin Olson wrote: “All things being now in readiness, on Monday morning, the blacks and a certain class of whites, together with children of all countries and colours, begin to assemble on Pinkster Hill collected from every part of the city and from the adjacent country for many miles around, forming in the whole a motley group of thousands.... An old Guinea Negro, who is called King Charles, is master of ceremonies, whose authority is absolute, and whose will is law during the Pinkster holiday. On Monday morning between the hours of ten and twelve o’clock, his majesty, after having passed through the principal streets in the city, is conducted in great style to The Hill already swarming with a multifarious crowd of gasping spectators. Before him is borne a standard, on which significant colours are displayed, and a painting containing his Portrait, and specifying what has been the duration of his reign. Two pedestrians, in appropriate badges, lead a superb steed, of a beautiful cream colour, on which their fictitious sovereign rides in all the pomp of an eastern nabob—whilst a large procession of the most distinguished and illustrious characters follow after. At length he reaches the encampment, and after the ceremonies in honor of his arrival are ended, he proceeds to collect his revenue” (Pinkster, p. 4).

The two pedestrians leading the procession are later identified as Peter Hallenbecke and Richard Simpson in an article published in *Harper’s New*

Monthly Magazine: “The procession started from ‘young massa’s house’ (82 State Street; where now stands the large seedstore of Knickerbocker and Price) and went up State Street to Bleeker Hill, on the crown of which was the Bleeker Burying-ground. In front of the king always marched Dick Simpson and Pete Halenbecke, the latter the Beau Brummel [model of fashion and style] of his time. The last parade was in 1822 (A Glimpse of an Old Dutch Town, p. 526).

Peter Hallenbecke was certainly a musician as indicated in the 1881 magazine article recounting how “In the evening there was a grand dance...to the music of Pete Hallenbecke’s fiddle (Harper’s, p. 526).” King Charles must have had a close connection to the two men since records from the period indicate that Hallenbecke, Simpson, and King Charley were all slaves of the Douw family in Albany. Records of slave manumissions [the act of a slave owner freeing his or her slaves] in Albany specify that Peter Hallenbecke, age 27, and Richard Simpson, age 21, were freed from John P. Douw in 1819 and 1823 respectively (Yoshpe, 503). Perhaps Hallenbecke and Simpson played drums in the parade. If so, they may have also drummed in the African musical ensemble for the Pinkster dances.

ORATORY: KING CHARLES

The most famous African associated with the Pinkster festival was a drummer and dancer known as King Charles: “The hour of ten having now arrived, and the assembled multitude being considered most complete, a deputation was then selected to wait upon their venerable sovereign king, ‘Charley of the Pinkster hill,’ with the intelligence that his respectful subjects were congregated, and were anxiously desirous to pay all proper homage to his majesty their king... He was tall, thin and athletic; and although the frost of nearly seventy winters had settled on his brow, its chilling influence had not yet extended to his bosom, and he still retained all the vigor and agility of his younger years. Such were his manly attributes at this present time (Eights, p. 325).”

In 1803, a pamphlet featuring a lengthy poem entitled “The Pinkster Ode,” written under the pseudonym of Absalom Aimwell, appeared in Albany. The Ode is “one of the earliest descriptions of a folk festival in the United States” and “the most detailed account of the whole (Pinkster) jubilee (Fabre, p. 17).” The ode was dedicated to “CAROLUS AFRICANUS, REX: Thus Rendered in English: KING CHARLES, Captain-General and Commander in Chief of the PINKSTER BOYS” (Aimwell, p. 31). It references oratory as an essential part of the festival. King Charles apparently presented an annual speech, including content about liberty. The following lines of the poem refer to his passionate “harangue” and the freedom granted to slaves during the Pinkster holiday:

*And when you know him, then you’ll see
A slave whose soul was always free...
But-hush-now Charles the King harangues,
A hundred fiddles cease their twangs.
Harken, ye sons of Ham, to me;
This day our Bosses make us free;*

*Now all the common on the hill,
Is ours, to do what e’re we will...
Tho’ torn from friends beyond the waves,
Tho’ fate has doom’d us to be slaves,
Yet on this day, let’s taste and see
How sweet a thing is Liberty...
Thus spake King Charles, when all the crowd,
Roused full strong, long and loud,
And thank’d kind Heaven on bended knee,
For this, their short-lived liberty.
(Aimwell, p. 34–35)*

DANCING

Other verses of “The Pinkster Ode” refer to specific Pinkster elements such as the banjo and Guinea dance. The highlight of the Albany Pinkster festival was the Guinea dance, accompanied by the Guinea drums and led by King Charles: “The dances were the original Congo dances, as danced in their native Africa. They had a chief, Old King Charley. The old settlers said Charley was a prince in his own country, and was supposed to have been one hundred and twenty-five years old at the time of his death! On these festivals old Charley was dressed in a strange and fantastical costume—he was nearly bare legged, wore a red military coat, trimmed profusely with variegated ribbons, and a small black hat with a pompoon stuck in the side. These dances and antics...must have afforded great amusement for the ancient burghers. As a general thing the music consisted of a sort of drum, or instrument constructed out of a box with sheep skin heads, upon which old Charley did most of the beating, accompanied by singing some queer African air. Charley generally led off the dance, when the Sambos and Philises, juvenile and antiquated, would put in the double-shuffle-heel-and-toe-breakdown...” (Munsell, p.56).

John J. Williams, a former slave, was quoted in *History of the county of Albany, N.Y. from 1609 to 1886*: “Many of the old colored people, then in Albany, were born in Africa, and would dance their wild dances and sing in their native language (Howell and Tenney, p. 725).” According to primary sources, the Guinea dance used a characteristic circle formation and, at times, a configuration of paired couples: “The dance had its peculiarities, as well as everything else connected with this august celebration. It consisted chiefly of couples joining in the performances at varying times, and continuing it with their utmost energy until extreme fatigue or weariness compelled them to retire and give space to a less exhausted set; and in this successive manner was the excitement kept up with unabated vigor, until the shades of night began to fall slowly over the land, and at length deepen into the silent gloom of midnight (Eights, p. 326).”

The Guinea dance at Pinkster was also referred to as the “Toto”: “From the beginning, African slaves and early generations of African Americans adopted Pinkster and combined it with the worship of their African god, Totau, whom they acknowledged with dance and drum performance during the week-long celebration. (Williams-Myers in Long Hammering, p. 88).”

Williams-Myers gave no source to corroborate his

speculation. Dewulf expressed his concern that “no anthropological study on indigenous African practices ever identified the existence of this mysterious [Toto] god (p. 7).” Stearns gave a completely different translation of the word “toto.” He provided an example of a New Orleans signifying song in which “toto” was translated as “backside” [i.e. buttocks]. He explained that this song exemplified “songs of allusion,” which are characteristic of the music and dance of Africa and the African diaspora (Stearns, p. 11). Perhaps the “toto” dances and accompanying songs at Pinkster festivals fall into this category. If that was the case, the Africans were highly effective in using their double meaning songs of insult and dances of derision to secretly communicate messages that were completely misinterpreted by the white spectators.

SACRED GROUND

The site of Pinkster festivals in Albany and Manhattan might have held a deeper significance for Africans, making use of a space that may have been considered sacred ground because of its connection to the local slave cemetery. “In many African traditions, graveyards are sites of great ritual significance; crossroads between the mundane plane and the realm of the spirits, loci of spiritual power (Verter, p. 419).” A 1793 story involves the sentencing of three teenaged slaves for setting a fire that destroyed several blocks in downtown Albany. The prevailing version of the incident reports that two white men with a grudge against Leonard Gansevoort offered a watch

to Pomp, a male slave owned by another, in exchange for his setting fire to Gansevoort’s house and adjoining shop. Pomp enlisted the help of two girls (Dinah and Bet). All three were convicted and sentenced to death by hanging. The 1790 map of Albany, by the State’s Surveyor General, includes reference to a “Negro burial ground just north of Pinkster Hill.” That Pomp, Dinah, and Bet are buried on Pinkster Hill is also supported by a reference in the Pinkster Ode of 1803:

*Now if you take a further round
You’ll reach the Afric’s burying ground.
There as I rambled years ago
To pass an hour of love-lorn woe;
I found a stone at Dinah’s grave.
(Aimwell, p. 42).*

In Manhattan, “The area known as the Common had originally served as a place that could be used for anyone to let cattle graze or to collect firewood. Part of the Common was later used as a cemetery for deceased slaves. This graveyard was discovered in Manhattan in 1991, which led to the erection of the African Burial Ground National Monument (Dewulf, The Pinkster King, p. 70).

END OF AN ERA

In 1811, the Albany Common Council passed an ordinance that read: “No person shall erect any tent or stall within the limits of this city, for the purpose

of vending any spirituous liquors, beer, mead or cider, or any kind of meat, fish, cakes, or fruit nor to collect in numbers for the purpose of gambling or dancing...or to march or parade, with or without any kind of music during the days commonly called pinxter, under penalty of ten dollars or confinement in jail.” Walsh (1898) noted that the “enforcement of this statute eventually drove the holiday out of existence (p. 813).” Williams-Myers wrote that the reason for the ban was that whites were afraid that the congregation of large groups of African Americans might provide an opportunity to plot and execute a revolt (in Pinkster Festival, p. 16). It may be more than a coincidence that the year 1811 is remembered as a time of fear in America as a result of many random occurrences including the appearance of the Great Comet, a total eclipse of the sun, a mass migration of squirrels, a time of general sickness, and the first of many earthquakes on the New Madrid fault line.


CONTEMPORARY REVIVALS

Several places in New York have revived the annual Pinkster festival. In 1978, the Hudson River Valley Association revived Pinkster at Phillipsburg Manor, an 18th-century living museum located in Sleepy Hollow, New York. Kofi Donkor, a drummer from Ghana now living in New York, has become a cultural contributor to the Pinkster festival in Sleepy Hollow. He and his Sankofa Drum and Dance Ensemble bring African cultural elements to the cele-

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bration and provide a link to the Africans who came to the colonies as slaves.

The 2016 Pinkster included the pouring of libations at the beginning and end of the day's program, a traditional ritual that invokes the spirits of the ancestors. The morning procession began at the administration building and crossed over a wooden bridge to the festival grounds. Kofi explained that crossing the bridge can symbolically represent going from the slavery of the past to the freedom of today; the crossing of a bridge is also found in certain African rituals such as puberty rites. Kofi's percussion ensemble played the *amanko* rhythm to accompany the procession. This is fitting, he said, because in Ghana it represents unity; the name translates to "one people" or "one village." Seemingly in the tradition of King Charley, King Kojo prominently appeared in formal colonial dress and was recognized as a royal dignitary for the day.

For afternoon performances, the drum ensemble played traditional Ghanaian dance rhythms such as *kpanlogo*, *agbadza*, *gahu*, and *adowa*. Kofi related the Pinkster festival to an annual festival celebrated in Ghana called *afahye*, which similarly involves music, dancing, traditional clothing, local cuisine, and games. Visual artists, storytellers, vendors selling ethnic food, basket weavers, and handicraft artists making beaded gourd rattles were set up at stations on the festival grounds in tents or stalls. In the Ghanaian village market, the stalls or huts are called *apata* in the Akan language. Kofi said that today's festival gives a demonstration of what might have happened hundreds of years ago on this historic spot on the Hudson River when slaves were given a brief respite from the injustice of slavery to demonstrate their talents, prepare their favorite dishes from the motherland, communicate freely, and celebrate their traditions (Kofi Donkor, personal communication, September 24, 2016). Dewulf expressed, however, that this "reinvention of Pinkster as innocent multicultural folklore runs the risk of glossing over the deep inequalities that characterized the type of society in which Pinkster tradition developed (p. 186)."

In 2011, Albany lawmakers symbolically struck the 1811 Pinkster prohibition from their law books and have since initiated efforts to revive their Pinkster festival. However, according to online announcements, Albany's Tulip Festival, "rooted in the city's rich Dutch heritage," has become the city's signature cultural celebration. New York City hosts an annual Pinkster commemoration that includes the pouring of libations, lectures, songs, performances, reading of proclamations, and the laying of flowers at the African Burial Ground National Monument Memorial.

CONCLUSION

The annual Pinkster festival in New Amsterdam/New York provided a context in which African drumming, singing, dancing, procession, and oratory reminiscent of life in the African village could be celebrated by slaves in the Dutch/English colonies. This is especially noteworthy since it happened in a setting in which African cultural expressions were highly restricted and drums were essentially banned.

Pinkster thrived from the 1600s into the mid-1800s making it the oldest and longest-running African festival in the United States.

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