African Americans Role in Early American History

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**Introduction**

There is little or very less known about the African American contribution to American history and there is no significant literature that tells us about the diversity and cultural richness that they brought into American. America as we know today is rich in culture and have strong values in terms of society and norms, a lot of which comes from the black people who enter this country as slaves but brought with them new ways of living. They worked in every field and contributed in every field whether they were skilled, semi- skilled or unskilled to take part in the making of this great country.

The slaves that came from central Africa and West came with the knowledge of growing crops like rice and the slaves literally taught their owners how to cultivate crops and improved the economy of the country. Watermelon, black eyed peas, sorghum, okra, and millet were all brought from Africa by the African American. Slavery was a key component in making America into the great nation it is today, without the slaves it was impossible to keep up with the needed labour for building the country. When given the opportunity they fought wars for their country and for their freedom which was often denied once the war was won. They were also involved in doing the iron work on various buildings in New Orleans Louisiana. They provide a variety of labour from household domestic to skilled and labour.

African Americans were of great influence in regard to the American history. There is a significant impact on matters concerning culture, religion, economy, and politics. In some of these fields, they were active while in others they were passive. The influence of African Americans can be recognized through the exploration and the study of some of the major events that shape the American history. Throughout the history, we can see that there is a transition from slave labour economy to a free labour economy and how black people penetrated into every field to set their mark. They build their own institutions and communities.

They also participated in politics and influenced the political development of the country especially in the era of Abraham Lincoln who was against the slavery of black people. In his era, black people were involved in the war and influenced the politics in a way that he freed 3 million slaves in the rebel state. Black people are mostly ignored initially and there are also very fewer details about their history which make it difficult to see the exact story of the black side. Basically, black people are very good at being invisible and not showing their customs and ways of living because of their history as slaves as they have to live according to the white people most of the time and majority of their ideas and cultural inheritance are stolen by white people and portrayed as their own. Following are the aspects through which we will see how black people have shaped American history:

**Political**

The African Americans were active in the political scene and impacted it greatly. One of the major political revolution periods in American history was marked by the occurrence of the civil war. The war was triggered by slavery, which majority of African Americans suffered. They, therefore, joined the war which aimed at the abolition of slavery in the United States. The abolition of slavery had a great political impact in the history of America, and the African Americans were among the revolts that led to its end (Reis, 2009).

The African Americans formed part of the liberal minded Americans after the war, which influenced the American political view that advocated for equal rights in matters such as voting. This, in turn, created a more progressive democracy unlike the other conservatives in America. Politically in the American history, the 13th amendment abolished the slavery, the 14th amendment gave equal protection to every citizen and the 15th amendment ensured the citizen’s right to vote. These amendments in the law were the result of the struggle of African American people and were focused on making them equal to the white people.

Reconstruction was one of the most controversial eras of American history because of the first experiment as the interracial democracy. The role of government in playing part for the protection of civil rights and the possibility of racial and economic justice are still unresolved. The key thing after reconstruction was the efforts of slaves to give an idea to their newly acquired freedom and to have their rights as equal citizen, also after the victory of north in the civil war there were problems which need to be addressed like how the nation can be reunited and questions arose like what system should replace slavery and what status should be given to the former slaves.

Most of the time in the Reconstruction century, corruption and mismanagement were at its peak because of allowing black people to take part in politics and it facilitated those who were against equal rights for black and denying the vote to black people. A lot of slaves participated in the American Revolution; they were promised if they survived the war they would be freed. Approximately 15 percent of the continental arm was black, they fought in the battle of Rhode Island and stopped British from invading the American line. In addition to that many slaves served as spies and give valuable information to the union officials in the area.

**Economic**

America was a major producer of agricultural products such as tobacco and cotton. Cotton was one of the leading American exports from the years 1803 to 1937. African Americans played an active role in the production of these crops as slaves. They devised efficient ways like cotton gin to process cotton which increased its productivity. The great produce was as a result of the forced labour they were subjected to under slavery. They were forced to work in the fields to produce cotton which was used in textile industry and was the first mass production to be distributed worldwide. The white people made so much profit from cotton and it helped them to develop the country as strong economic power. England was also interested in the production of cotton that they stand for the freedom of black people. With the help of African American people and geographic expansion,

America was the largest producer and exporter of cotton in the 19th century. It was so profitable that 250,000 more slaves arrive in the United States from 1787 to 1808 just to increase the labour so they can produce cotton. Exports were increased significantly due to the role that the African Americans played in the production and processing of crops. Millions of black people were recognized as a commodity because of the production of cotton on such a huge scale. Agriculture was a major economic activity in the United States and brought about immense growth and development in the nation, all which was made possible by the slavery of the African Americans (Leslie M Alexander, 2010).

African American were also involved in inventions which include a dry cleaning process called ‘’dry scouring’’, a bed where the wooden rail screwed into both the headboard and the footboard, a steam engine for warships, cotton scraper, an angled blade propeller that allowed the boat to move in shallow water and mechanical grain reaper. These all contributed well in the economy by increasing efficiency in processes and provide convenience to American people. Without the slaves, it would have been very difficult to load, unload and transport goods both with in America and to other countries. This helped a lot in strengthening the US economy and helping them to find new ways of making profits.

**Cultural**

There existed an identity of African American culture throughout the history of the United States. However, it did not largely influence the American culture. The African American culture is deeply rooted in Africa. The cultural impact, therefore, deemed to be passive since only parts of the ceremony and rituals practiced in Africa can be traced throughout the American history (Boyd, 2008). However, some of the rituals practiced by slaves were passed on to generations and was later adopted in the American culture. In 1920, the migration of blacks from the rural south to the urban north of the country results in a cultural renaissance. When it comes to art we can see jazz, blues and rock ‘n’ roll are stamped with the influence of African so does the bluegrass music and banjo instrument. It is considered as the first recognition of African American music, culture, and art. In addition to that the authors, poets, and musicians also became an inspiration and continue to shape it even today. Some of the cultural influences by African American are listed below:

* Music: When we talk about music the famous hip hop is the product of black people, the rock ’n’ roll is also inspired by African American and they all owe their roots to African American R&B and soul icons. African influence can also be found in African American music which uses repetition as a part of their songs, they sang these songs while cultivating crops.
* Dance: Most of the dance in today’s America is inspired by African American, the dance done by Beyoncé, Michael Jackson and Rihanna is the style of the black people.
* Fashion: The boots, cornrows, and do-rags are African American fashion which has recently made its way into high fashion. Also, the slang words like chill or cool are all African American slangs developed by them
* Body shapes: today’s body shapes that are considered ideal and portrayed by Kim Kardashian and Jennifer Lopez are all originated from African American people and are now considered ideal in the American context.

**Religion**

The influence of religion was passive. Americans practiced Christianity during the pre-colonial period. African Americans came to the United States as slaves from different parts of Africa, where they mostly practiced traditional religious practices but later started practicing Christianity during slavery. However, some of the traditional rituals were adopted into Christianity and practiced during the religious ceremonies. They went on to form religious institutions which provided venues for the discussion of important issues that they faced. The leaders of these religious institutions become the voice for the African Americans on matters regarding their oppression and campaigning for their rights. The churches became a place for fostering black leadership throughout the African American history (Amanda Porterfield, 2010).

From the perspective of religious differences, the slavery institution played a significant role in shaping America’s religion. They brought African religious traditions which include Islam and West African tribal traditions to America. It created new forms of African-American worship and expressing. The slavery of black people forced white people to re consider their identity of religion; they struggle with their conscience and common practices of the churches. Black people introduced traditions like spiritual powers of ancestors and gods overseeing all aspect of daily life, the concepts of seasons and fertility of the natural world. They were also involved in naming rituals, folk tales, healing practices and ecstatic dance and song. They played a role in transforming Christian faith and worship into their own unique style and during that they made a profound and long lasting impact to shape the American Christianity and music.

# **References**

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