

**LIVING TRADITION
IN AFRICA AND THE AMERICAS**
The Legacy of Melville J. and Frances S. Herskovits
A Sourcebook to the Exhibition

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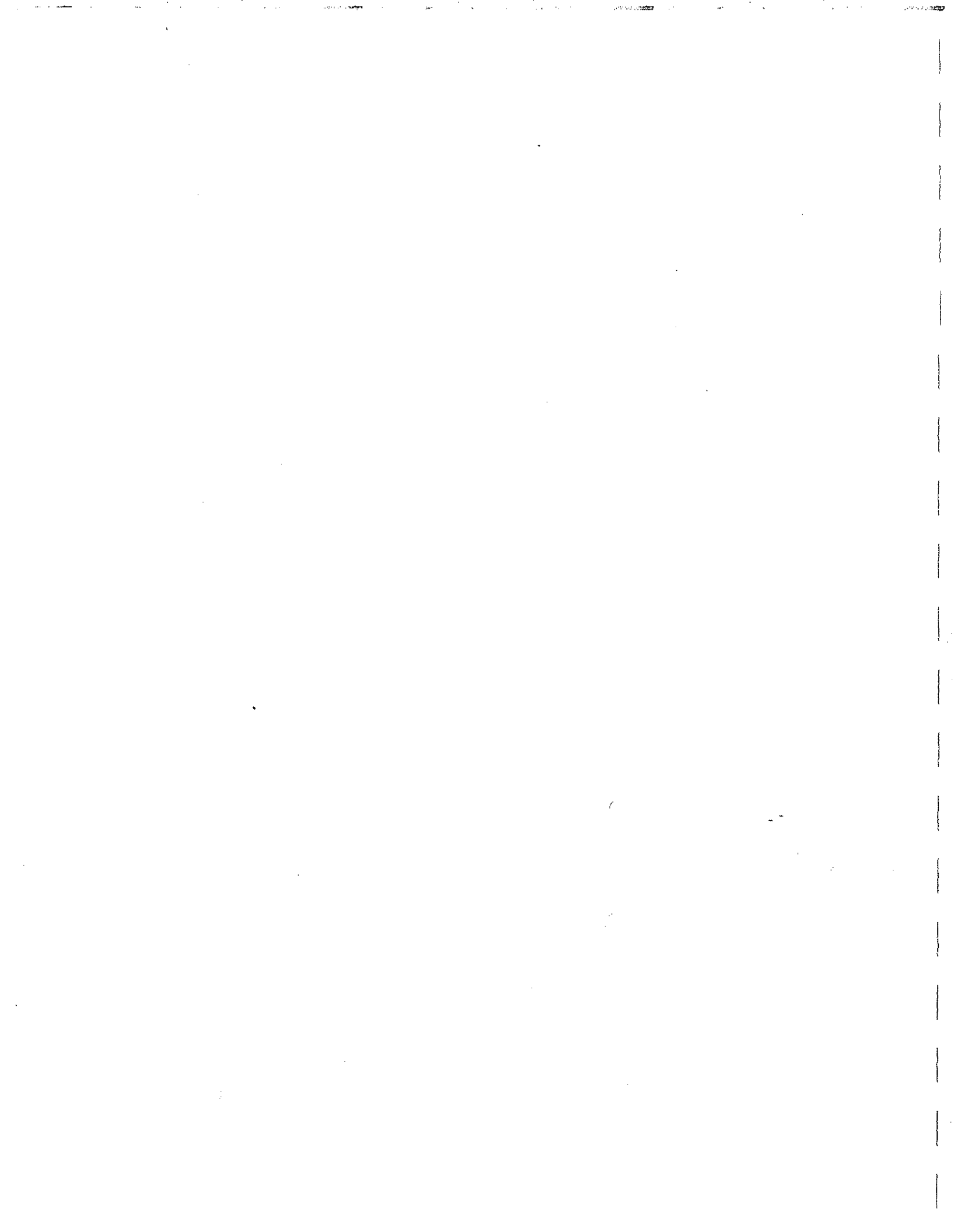
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The Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art
Northwestern University
1967 South Campus Drive
Evanston, Illinois



*“There are . . . questions which remain largely for future study. . . (W)e ask ourselves whether the role **a living tradition** assigns to individual self-expression has significant bearing on the dynamic potential of a group, politically and socially. Can it furnish us with firm leads to the group’s receptivity to new forms, to its areas of resilience, to its tradition-bound resistances? We treat a number of these questions here. But, in the idiom of the Dahomeans, merely to name them means that ‘the road is open.’”*

— Melville J. and Frances S. Herskovits, *Dahomean Narrative*
(1958:5-6)



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LIVING TRADITION IN AFRICA AND THE AMERICAS THE LEGACY OF MELVILLE J. AND FRANCES S. HERSKOVITS

This exhibition celebrates the fiftieth anniversary of Northwestern University's Program of African Studies, founded by Melville J. Herskovits in 1948.

The collections exhibited in the Block Museum have two lives. In their first life, they were the scientific record Melville Herskovits and his wife Frances compiled between 1928 and 1963 to establish continuities between the cultures of Africa and those of descendants of African slaves in the Americas. The second life of any collection begins when others start to use it as a resource for new research and creative inspiration in the present and for the future.

The legacy of Melville and Frances Herskovits — the Program of African Studies, their collections, their publications, and their passion for Africa and its Diaspora — invites later generations of scholars, artists, and an informed public to new frontiers of discovery.

Directors: Jane I. Guyer, Program of African Studies
David Mickenberg, Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art

Curator: Deborah L. Mack

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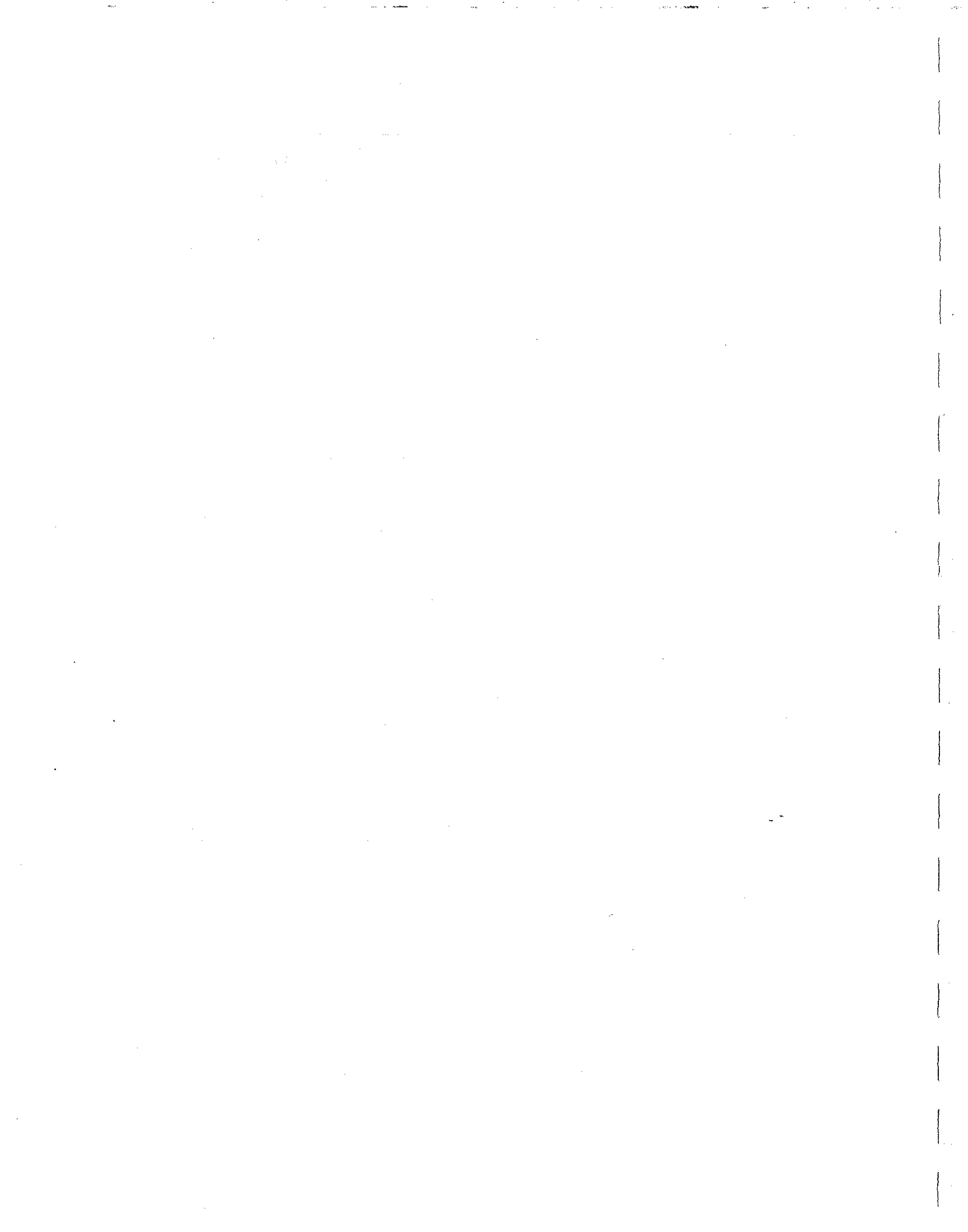
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THE HERSKOVITS RESEARCH PROJECT AND ITS CONTEXT





RECONNECTING THE "BROKEN THREAD"

"It is . . . exceedingly difficult and puzzling to know just where to find the broken thread of African and American social history."

—W. E. B. Du Bois, 1908 (1908:9)

In the early years of this century, few scholars studied the cultural life of the peoples of African descent whom the slave trade had scattered throughout the New World. While Melville Herskovits was not the first to identify continuing evidence of African origins across the great divides created by the slave trade—Franz Boas, Elsie Clews Parsons, and W. E. B. Du Bois had already begun to explore the African cultural legacy in the Americas—Herskovits was the first to apply the discipline of anthropological research to the vast task of documentation and explanation.

■ ■

Scholars had made many and contradictory claims about the cultural legacy of the slaves. It was argued that African-American styles of life and art were racial rather than cultural in origin; that those enslaved were of low status in Africa and therefore culturally impoverished to begin with; and that slavery had destroyed all cultural memory of Africa, leaving its descendants to patch together a new life out of American Christian culture and the experience of poverty and discrimination.

The Herskovitses' identification of African ancestral traits in the Americas supported those who believed in the continuing importance of Africa to the New World. But the variation from place to place, and the complexity of combinations with other cultures were far greater than they expected, surpassing contemporary anthropological concepts for describing and explaining culture change. So the materials they collected—stories, songs, films, photographs, objects—do not simply illustrate a theory; they also speak to us in their own voice and continue to challenge our understandings of cultural creativity in the modern world.

"I built up in my mind a dream of what Negroes would do in the future even though they had no past . . . then Franz Boas addressed the history of the Black Sudan. I was amazed and began to study Africa for myself."

—W. E. B. Du Bois, 1958 (1996:64)

AFRICAN-AMERICAN EXPERIENCE IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

The volatility of American social life at the beginning of this century was particularly marked for the descendants of slaves. The fear of Jim Crow, the rural catastrophe caused by the Depression, and an epidemic of lynching in the South helped to fuel their desire for safety, education, and social mobility in the North. Migrants found hope in cultural movements such as the Harlem Renaissance, but they also encountered racial barriers to employment and housing. This social turbulence was mirrored in the world of ideas.

■ ■

Academic and social allegations of the intrinsic inferiority of Black peoples flourished, justified by a rudimentary science of cranial capacity and intelligence, and a contradictory jumble of received ideas about Africa's history, climate, and cultures; about slavery and its aftermath; and about the effects of chronic poverty and social ferment on cultural life.

In this environment, a new generation of critics of American racism placed great importance on scientific logic and empirical evidence in the study of Africa, the Americas, and their connection. Although the emphases of African-American and European-American scholars differed in some respects, all were animated by an Enlightenment faith in the power of accurate knowledge to change society.

"When such a body of fact, solidly grounded, is established, a ferment must follow which . . . will influence opinion in general concerning Negro abilities and potentialities, and thus contribute to a lessening of interracial tensions."

— Melville Herskovits, 1941 (1990:32)

TEACHERS, MENTORS, AND COLLEAGUES

The scientific study of culture, in universities, was only about thirty years old when Herskovits began his data collection in the Atlantic world. His teacher, Franz Boas, was the leading figure in academic anthropology in the United States. Through Boas, Herskovits benefited from the inspiration and financial support of folklorist Elsie Clews Parsons, who had collected narratives and proverbs in African-American communities in the United States and the Caribbean. And he corresponded with W. E. B. Du Bois, who was writing on history and racial issues from an African-American standpoint.

■ ■

FRANZ BOAS

Boas laid out the founding principles of American anthropology, all of which profoundly shaped Herskovits's work:

- Culture, not race, explains the variations in human behavior from one society to another.
- All cultures are made up of many distinct "traits," such as artistic designs, tools, rituals and kinship terms. Each culture trait has its own history, geographical distribution, and common combination with other traits.
- Cultural traits should be studied by "using sound, inductive methods," and by making meticulous and comprehensive collections.
- Cultures change over time through the acquisition of traits from outside and through individual creative modification and invention from within.

Primarily a scholar of Native American cultures, Boas had wanted to set up an institute to apply his ideas and methods to the study of Africa and African America, but he was unable to raise the funds. Melville Herskovits was his first student to take up this challenge.

"No proof can be given of any material inferiority of the Negro race; . . . without doubt the bulk of the individuals composing the race are equal in mental aptitude to the bulk of our own people."

— Franz Boas, 1915 (1915:vii-viii)

W. E. B. DU BOIS

For African-American scholars, finding African traits in the New World was a matter not only of scientific interest but of identity. Du Bois was the first major figure to trace African Americans' intense religious conviction and expression to Africa. In his book *The Negro*, Du Bois claimed that "the vast power of the priest in the African state" had been "largely unaffected by the plantation system." These ideas expressed in a nutshell the concepts of a valued culture in Africa, its retention under slavery, and the transformation of this culture into new inspirational forms that Herskovits's work would explore in minute detail.

■ ■

ELSIE CLEWS PARSONS

Folklorist, mentor, and patron until her death in 1941, Parsons supported and advised on all of the Herskovitses' early field research. A woman of independent means, she personally financed their first field trip to Surinam in 1928 and several later projects. Both Frances and Melville Herskovits corresponded with her regularly and sought her advice on research techniques and strategies.

"[The African priest in the New World] found his function as interpreter of the supernatural, the comforter of the sorrowing, and as the one who expressed . . . the longing and disappointment and resentment of a stolen people. From such beginnings arose and spread with marvelous rapidity the Negro Church."

— W. E. B. Du Bois, 1915 (1915:188-89)

"There are suggestions everywhere in Negro circles of unwillingness to tell tales during the day time. I think the reason is more underlying than the association with wakes, probably African."

— Elsie Clews Parsons, in a letter to Frances Herskovits, 1928

A WORKING PARTNERSHIP

Four of the books produced from the Herskovitses' field research were jointly authored, and Melville fully acknowledged the importance of Frances's contributions in all of his singly-authored publications. His masterpiece, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, was a commissioned work; to fit with the deadlines, the manuscript had to be finished within a year. All of his field research was carried out under similar time constraints. In each case Frances was there to gather her own data, to translate, and to be a full intellectual participant. Indeed, they both insisted upon her presence in the field, even when friends and mentors counseled against it.

■ ■

Born in 1895, Melville J. Herskovits studied anthropology with Franz Boas at Columbia University from 1920 until 1927. After a brief period on the faculty at Howard University, he moved to Northwestern in 1927, where he was founder and first chair of the Department of Anthropology (1938) and founder and first director of the Program of African Studies (1948). Active in local and national arenas, he served on the Mayor's Committee on Race Relations in Chicago in 1945 and wrote a report for the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations in 1959 advising on America's policy towards the newly emerging nations of Africa. He died in Evanston in 1963.

Frances S. Herskovits (née Shapiro) was born in Russia in 1897 and came to the United States at the age of eight. In the 1920s, although she was already working, she attended graduate seminars in anthropology at Columbia University. She and Melville met there and were married in 1924. Frances shared all her husband's work: travels, study, professional correspondence, translation, and writing. In addition, she singly authored translations of Dahomean songs. After Melville's death, she edited a collection of his papers and taught African literature in the Department of English at Northwestern University. She died in Evanston in 1972.

"I am deeply indebted to Frances S. Herskovits, whose many months devoted to exhaustive reading made available the materials for a control of the literature. Without this reading. . . this study could not have been made. Nor could it have been delegated to another, for, since she has participated with me in all the ethnographic field studies in my research program, she was uniquely equipped to discern correspondences and to evaluate interpretations."

—Melville Herskovits, 1941
(1990:xxviii)

AFRICAN ATLANTIC WORLD

"A SINGLE AREA — AFRICA AND AFROAMERICA"

— Frances Herskovits, 1966 (1966:x)

Melville and Frances Herskovits began their field research at a time when funding was very scarce. The early and sustained financial sponsorship of Elsie Clews Parsons made their first field trips possible. In the field, the Herskovitses began to construct what Melville would refer to as a "chain of evidence" linking widely dispersed cultural elements of the African Atlantic world.

■ ■

Franz Boas's concept of "culture areas" corresponded to the idea that the great language families and art traditions of the world can be roughly defined geographically. According to Boas, culture traits are recognizable across broad areas and through time, even though they are constantly being adapted. The study of culture areas began with the study of peoples who are connected by trade and migration across the land mass of continents.

Melville Herskovits applied the culture area concept to a different world: one that bordered a great ocean and one that had been created by forced displacement. Of the Atlantic world he asked the same classic questions about the distribution of traits, which in this case were retentions from Africa. But as his research expanded, he increasingly tried to understand syncretism (the combination of different beliefs) and the mixing of African culture with other cultures: Native American, French, Portuguese, Scottish, and all their regional and class variants. Although he remained convinced that the Africa-descended world formed a single culture area, Herskovits struggled to describe and explain the enormous variety of retentions and accommodations that different peoples had made, from southern Brazil to the South Side of Chicago.

"What is true of language and art, which do not become a subject of retrospective reasoning, seems to us no less true of those aspects of life that are subject to remodeling by rationalising processes."

— Franz Boas, 1924 (1940:293)

THE JOURNEY GEOGRAPHICAL AND INTELLECTUAL

—LOGISTICS AND METHODS— TRAVEL

“THE THOUSAND AND ONE THINGS I HAD TO DO”

Each research trip involved meticulous planning because so much data had to be collected, in so many places, in such a short period of time and with such modest amounts of funding. The Herskovitses' itineraries were complicated, so that they could visit many places on a single trip. The schedules and fares of different shipping lines had to be synchronized. Friends—such as W. E. B. Du Bois—provided letters of introduction to African leaders to speed their work. Bank accounts had to be set up in the major cities. All the technical equipment had to be studied, priced, purchased, and packed. Medical supplies had to be bought.

Scientific work benefited from some special conditions, such as reduced fares on some carriers and duty-free import of used film. But every transaction under the scientific rubric had to be arranged in advance by written correspondence.

In the places they visited all organizational problems had to be dealt with: a closed bank, a stolen suitcase, a changed shipping schedule.



RECORDING "ON LOCATION"

The technology for recording outside a studio improved over the period of the Herskovitses' work, but it was always cumbersome. The recording machine, electricity generator, acoustic cylinders and acetate discs all had to be technically mastered, moved from place to place in areas with limited transportation facilities, and preserved under tropical conditions. Filming posed similar challenges. Given the difficult logistics, the collections they made are a testimony to the paramount importance they placed on the acquisition and preservation of original evidence.

In Surinam and Haiti they made acoustic cylinder recordings, which yielded crude results. For the research in Trinidad in 1939, they were able to use a new sound recorder of the kind seen in the exhibition. With this more advanced equipment they were able to make many recordings that can now be worked up to a standard adequate for a modern compact disc.

■ ■

In recording and filming, the Herskovitses had to overcome many difficulties, including their own inexperience with the technology, humid conditions, and enthusiastic but noisy audiences. Optimal recording conditions were impossible, and improvements had to be improvised. In South Carolina, for example, they built a wooden platform so that they could record the percussive sound of people's feet as they danced.

"This time everything worked, except that occasionally a particularly loud note would cause the needle to jump and on replaying go back into the same groove . . . The songs, carried by the wind toward town, seem to have created a minor sensation, for people began to drift up the hill and . . . we had to have Margaret shoo them away."

— Melville & Frances Herskovits, 1939

**"MUSICAL MIRACLES" AND
"MAGNIFICENT DANCING"**

When it came to documenting musical performance, Melville Herskovits brought his personal love for music to his work. He and Frances collected more than 1,500 recordings from nine countries, with styles ranging from the "drums and rattles and . . . magnificent dancing that marks the worship of African gods" to "the miracle [of] the American spirituals." In Trinidad they found the ceremonial music of a Shangó temple to be clearly of African derivation. Upon hearing the music of the Spiritual Baptists, they realized that this music, while obviously European, also had more subtle African stylistic elements that had been reinterpreted to fit within the form. These two musical styles, represented in the exhibition in the recordings of *Eshu Bara* and *Jesus, Lover of My Soul*, are what led to the Herskovitses' theory of reinterpretations.

In the Boasian tradition, the Herskovitses acknowledged the individual artist as cultural innovator, usually making note of the names of the performers. The quality of the recordings improved over time; hence the variation heard in recordings featured in the exhibition.



THE ITINERARY

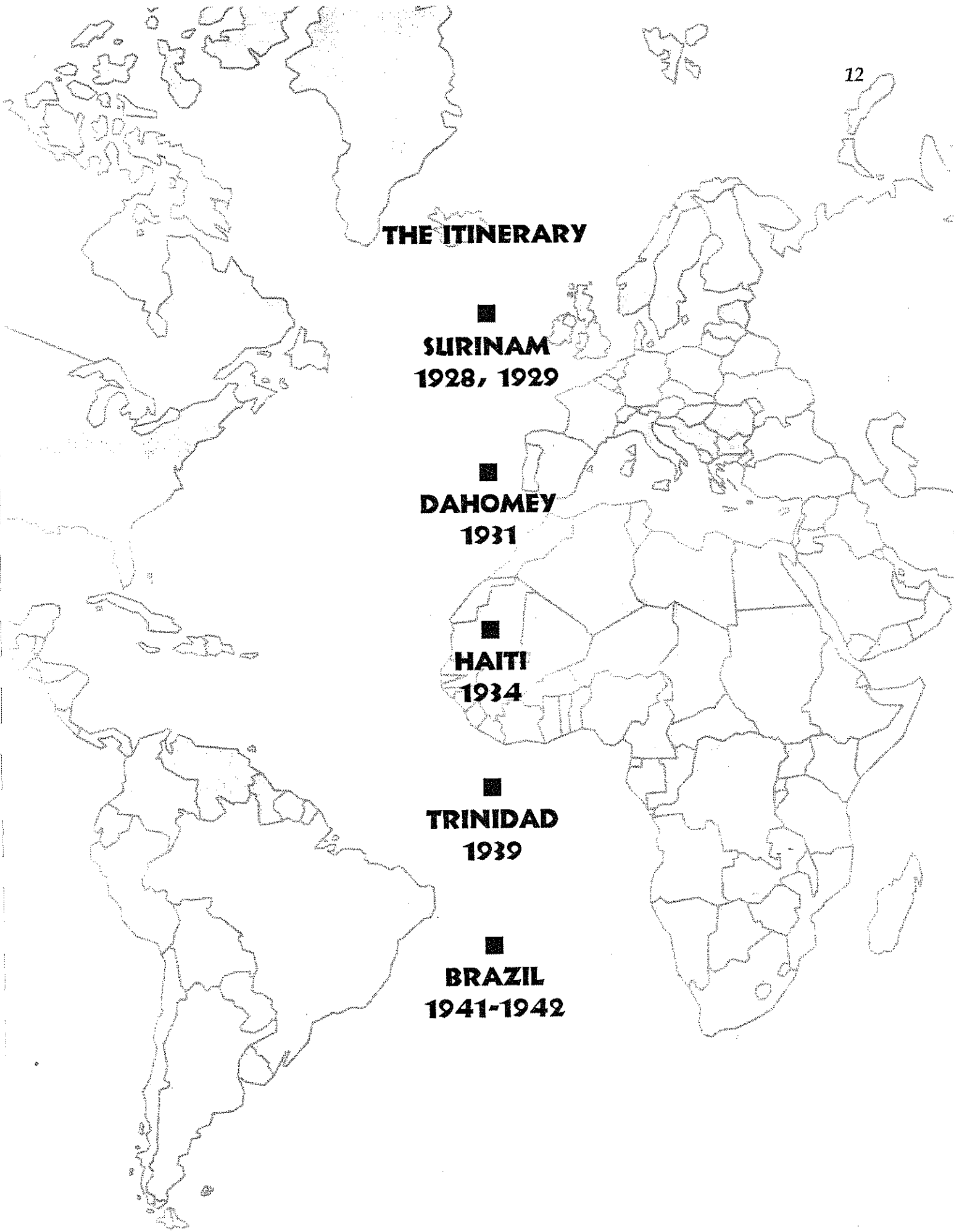
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SURINAM
1928, 1929

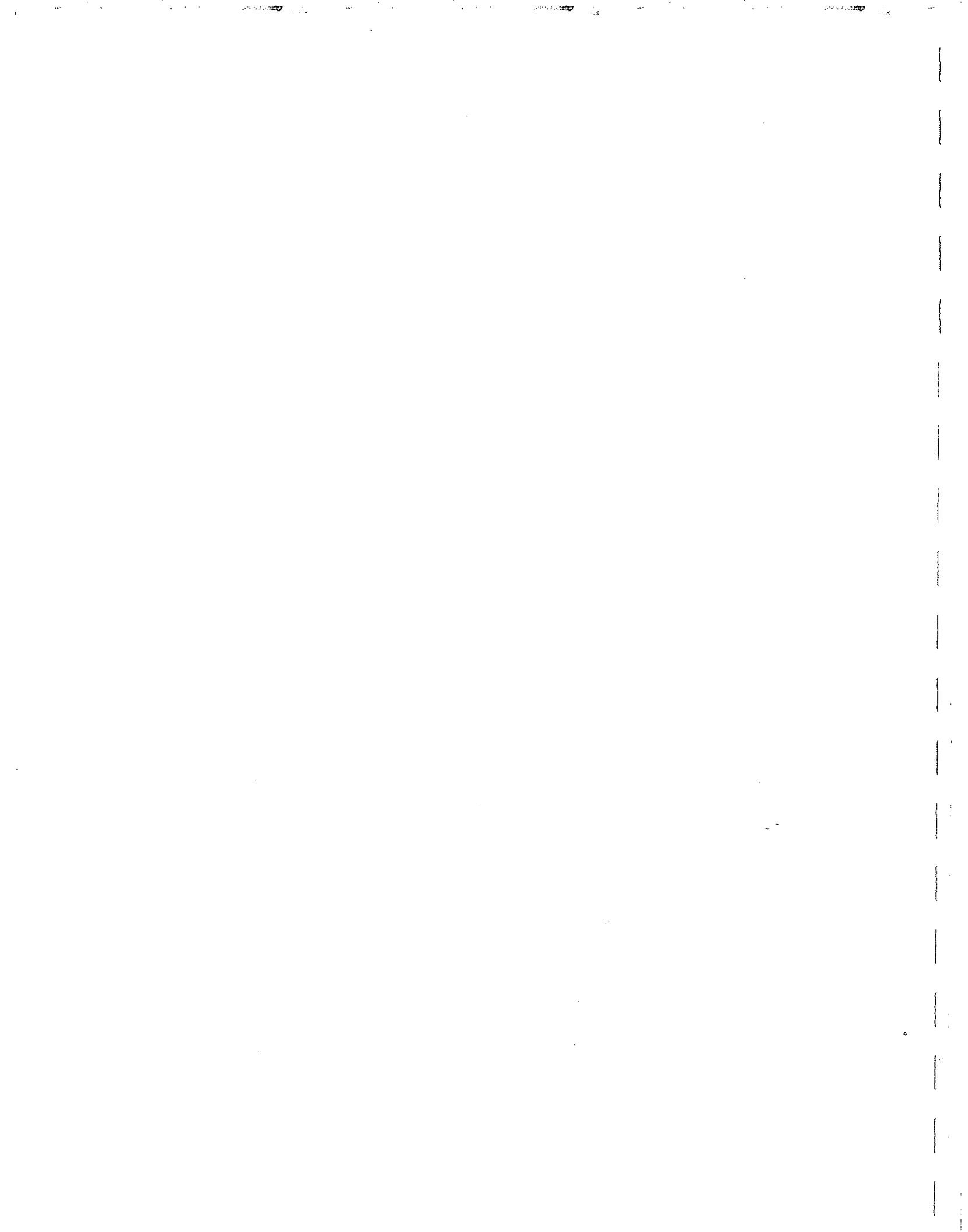
■
DAHOMY
1931

■
HAITI
1934

■
TRINIDAD
1939

■
BRAZIL
1941-1942





SURINAM
1928, 1929
THE SEARCH FOR "AFRICANISMS"
IN PURE FORM

Elsie Clews Parsons and Boas together decided that Herskovits's first field research outside the United States should focus on Surinam, a country in South America. They thought that if African cultures had survived at all in the New World, the "purer forms" would have been preserved in the one place where slaves had escaped from the plantations early on and established their own free communities. The "Africanisms" that the Herskovitses found there among the Saramaka people were so clear that they could identify particular places on the West African coast from which the Saramaka probably originated.

■ ■

Public opinion and a number of colleagues — including mentor Franz Boas — strongly advised against Frances traveling into the "dangerous" interior of the country. In the end, Melville went into the interior alone. He documented Saramaka linguistic structure, collected ethnographic material and art, and charted social organization. Frances stayed in the capital city of Paramaribo and collected folklore: proverbs, riddles, folktales, and beliefs. Their first trip in 1928 was short and intense, conducted at breakneck speed, and mediated by others who acted as guides and interpreters.

Their follow-up trip in 1929 continued this research, but this time with greater depth at a slower pace, and extensively using their own participant observations. This second trip was very successful in large part because of Frances; this time, she was fully involved in every phase of the research and in every location. It established the pattern that they would continue for the rest of their lives.

Melville and Frances discovered strong and definite retentions inland, but they also found, to their surprise, cultural retentions in the cosmopolitan capital as well. They documented their discoveries in the experimental *Rebel Destiny* and in the more scholarly *Suriname Folk-Lore* — both of which they co-authored.

Chicago: A Northern Outpost

Although they never published a detailed work on Chicago, the Herskovitses checked many details of their thoughts and findings at home. For example, in 1929 Frances wrote of a Black church within walking distance of their Evanston home: "... what we found was practically a Paramaribo 'winti' dance. The same dancing, the same trembling of the body, the hand-clapping ... It was astonishing."

DAHOMEY
1931
RETURN TO ORIGINS

For their first field experience in Africa, the Herskovitses chose to focus on Dahomey (now Benin) in West Africa. Although they visited other sites in Ghana and Nigeria, they thought that Dahomey was not as culturally affected by European colonization and would therefore provide baseline data on African forms that they could use for comparison with the New World.

Dahomey is the subject of the Herskovitses' most comprehensive field studies and publications. They documented a very broad spectrum of subjects: political structure, narrative, dance, work, and, above all, religion. Religion kept resurfacing as the most resilient of all cultural complexes in the Americas. Melville and Frances collected detailed information on the terms for the gods, the conduct of ritual life, and the aesthetics of spirituality, which they used later to compare with religious life in Haiti and Brazil. For example, Vodou deities were just one of several kinds of spiritual beings in Dahomean religion; research in Haiti would show how their importance was magnified in the New World.

■ ■

The Herskovitses asked about words and place names they had come across in Surinam. And they showed people photos of Saramaka stools, religious charms, and other objects. While their informants recognized most of the objects they were shown, they considered them older and largely archaic forms of material culture. The Herskovitses found that local cultures had continually changed everywhere over time, including Dahomey. Their African encounters establish the beginning of the Herskovitses' interest in cultural change, and they began to de-emphasize the "purity" of cultural retentions.

"... it is the lot of every Dahomean eventually to become a Vodou himself, to join the company of his ancestors . . . Thus the supernatural world, integrated with life in the world of man, forms a unified whole that, peopled with deities, ancestral spirits, familiar spirits and human beings, make the Universe of the Dahomean."

— Melville & Frances Herskovits, 1933
(1933:74)

HAITI
1934
THE COMPLEXITY
OF CULTURAL COMBINATIONS

Noting the similarities between Haitian culture and that of Dahomey, the Herskovitses went to Haiti in search of African retentions. But the village of Mirebalais in central Haiti, the setting for their book *Life in a Haitian Valley*, represented another fundamental field experience. In Mirebalais they encountered a contemporary peasant society that had been shaped by the syncretism of a dual cultural legacy — part African and part European.

■ ■

The slaves found a French culture in Haiti that was cultured but also decadent. They were skeptical of the morality of Catholic priests, and considered government officials venal.

"Thus if the life of the Haitian Negro peasant of today presents aspects of harshness or instability, it would seem proper to ask how much of this might be ascribed to the examples which these Negroes were set by their masters"

—Melville Herskovits, 1937
 (1937:46-47)

TRINIDAD
1939
SYNCRETISM IN FAMILY LIFE
AND MUSICAL PERFORMANCE

Accompanied by their small daughter Jean, Melville and Frances next visited the small town of Toco in Trinidad, where they studied work and belief in a complex, multicultural, and predominantly Protestant society comprising African, European, and East Asian populations. They found that slavery had destroyed most of the "traditional direction of their own ways of living," except for "the more intimate and detailed phases of the culture that were the affairs of women." In Trinidad they confirmed their controversial claim that family life in the New World owed much to Africa.

In Trinidad's Protestant religious traditions the variety of musical styles was very wide, but still reflected African styles. The Herskovitses' field experience in Haiti confirmed their view that syncretism took different forms in different areas of life and that even profound acculturation did not eliminate all influence from Africa.

■ ■

The Herskovitses recorded 352 songs in Trinidad in an effort to cover an entire range of variety. Music, with its "rhythmic structure and tonal progressions," opened up syncretism to the rigor of formal analysis.

"During the past few days we've had a lot of reel and bele songs, as well as Baptist shouts, and today we took a few more of the sentimental songs, which live up to their name in the worst sense. As Fann [Frances] says, 'It is an amazing culture where the most African music is the Baptist song, and the most African tradition, worship of the ancestors, is carried on to French quadrilles and Irish reels!'"

—Melville Herskovits, 1939

"We know today that the acceptance of new forms does not necessarily preclude the retention of an underlying value system."

—Frances Herskovits, 1966 (1966:23)

BRAZIL
1941-1942
THE CONTINUOUS RENEWAL
OF AFRICAN TRADITIONS

Melville and Frances spent their longest period of sustained field research in Brazil, documenting Afro-Brazilian religious life and culture. Although they had intended to conduct extensive field research around the country, Melville fell ill, and ultimately their field work was confined primarily to the state of Bahia. They continued their usual practice of recording songs and documenting ritual while giving greater attention to a theme that had always been in their work, albeit less prominently: the economic life of the people.

Africa was not a remote, mythical place for Afro-Brazilians. Direct ties of trade and migration had continued without interruption, providing a source of objects and services related to religious life. In Brazil, the Herskovitses saw a fully developed and unambivalent coexistence of "Euroamerican culture . . . and a belief system that is based on the sanctions of a non-mechanistic order."

On the morning of the Herskovits family's scheduled sailing for the U.S., two priestesses of the Afro-Brazilian religion of Candomble warned them not to board the ship. Although all of their field collections had already been crated and stowed on board, the Herskovitses heeded the warning and flew back to the U.S. Upon their return they were notified that the ship had been sunk in the Caribbean "due to enemy action."

"The economic activities of male cult-affiliates run the gamut of the occupational scale . . . they are porters and cleaners . . . stevedores, masons, carpenters, drivers of trucks . . . Here indeed lies one of the most striking aspects of the acculturative syncretisms that give to Afrobahian life its unity and inner coherence . . . No incongruity is felt . . ."

— Frances Herskovits, 1958 (1958:252)

PUBLICATIONS

THE HERSKOVITS SCHOLARSHIP ON AFRICA AND AFRICAN AMERICA

The Herskovitses were prodigious writers. All of their major field projects resulted in book-length works, except the ill-fated Brazil trip during World War II. No less than four volumes were written from the Dahomey research, two on Surinam, one each on Haiti and Trinidad.

In a 1935 article entitled "What Has Africa Given America?" Melville suggested that—in speech, in music, in the "spirit of African politeness," in religious fervor, in cuisine—American culture had borrowed much from African cultures. In the 1950s he edited important collections on economic and political change in Africa. After his death Frances edited a collection of papers entitled *The New World Negro*.

Having started with the study of "Africanisms" scattered throughout the Atlantic world, by the 1950s Melville Herskovits had shifted his entire emphasis to their meanings in the context of ongoing cultural life. And through this focus on meanings, he saw the study of the traditions of Africa and the Americas as offering inspiration on the broader process "of the ever-increasing contacts, over the world, between peoples having different ways of life."

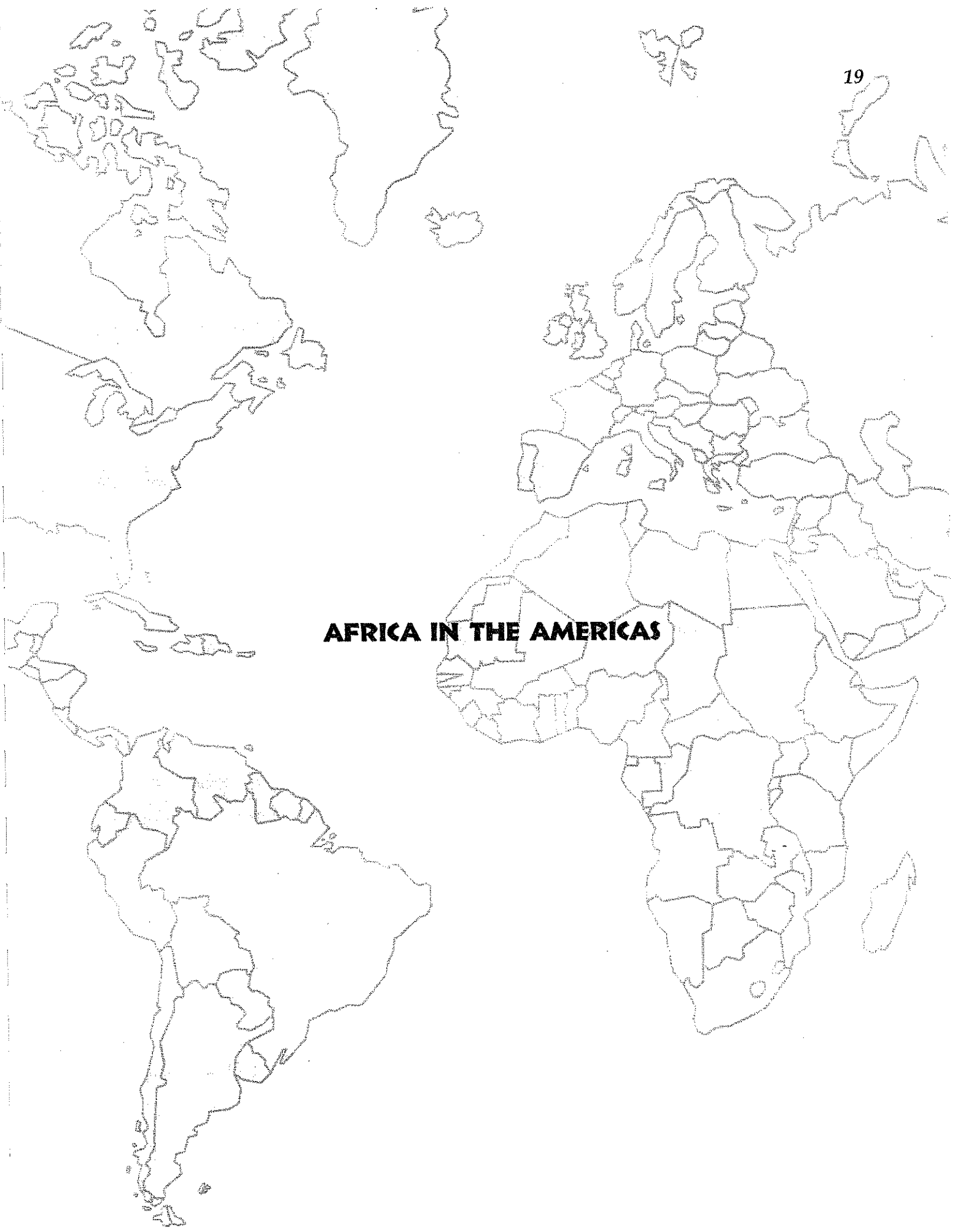
Melville Herskovits's most influential and controversial publication was *The Myth of the Negro Past*. The book was published in 1941 under the auspices of the famous Carnegie Corporation project that produced Gunnar Myrdal's influential *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and American Democracy*.

Written for the general public rather than for an academic audience, Herskovits's book attacks "the myth" that African cultures were simple or backward and that African Americans had lost their traditions under slavery. Referring to his and Frances' field studies throughout West Africa and the Atlantic diaspora, he asserts that African Americans are indeed inheritors of a past; that their cultures of origin in Africa were richly complex; they did not generally acquiesce to slavery; and that their current cultural life is a creative syncretism of many African and non-African elements.

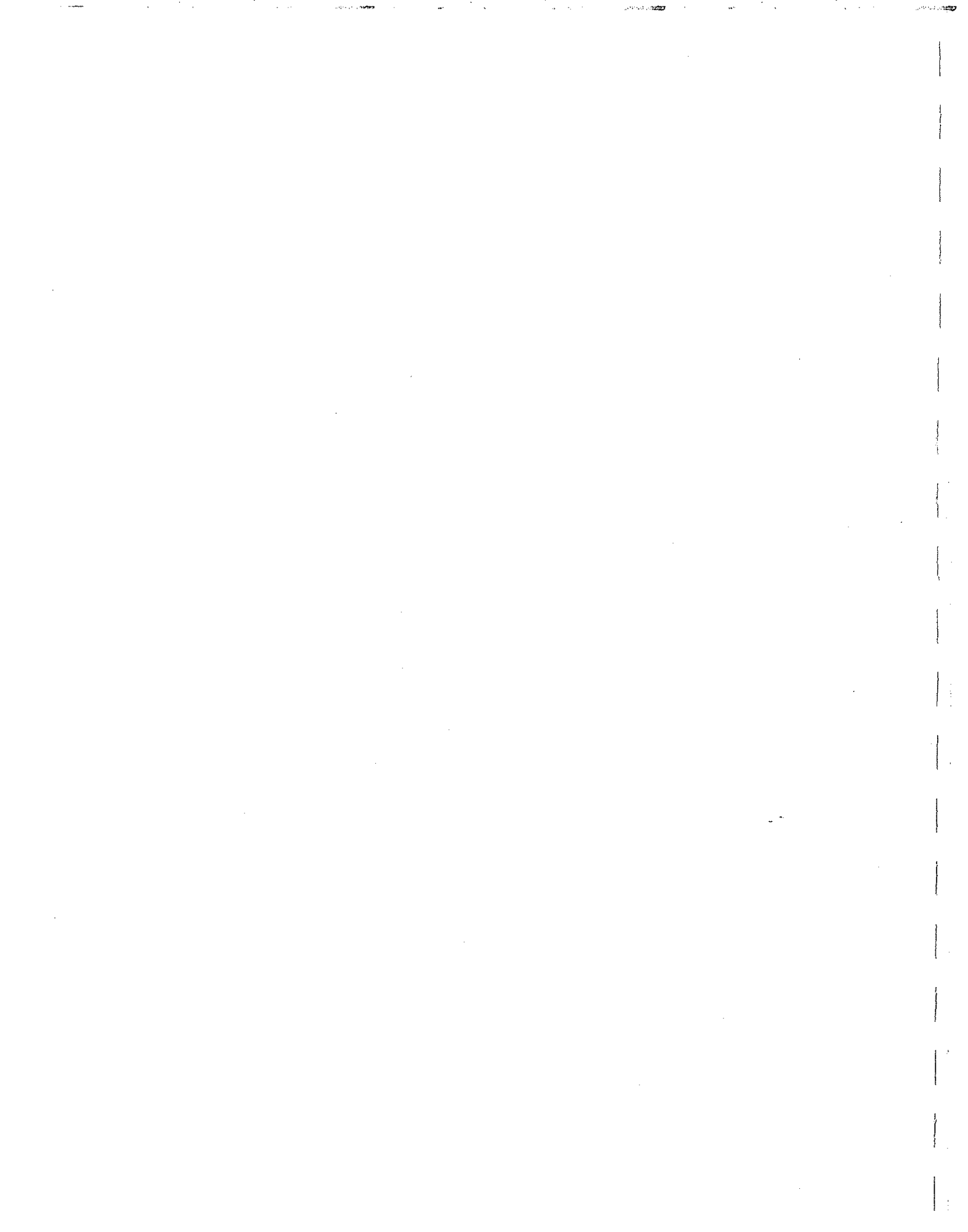
The book caused controversy. Myrdal feared the conservative implications of stressing cultural difference when the goal was to dismantle the bases for racial discrimination in law and society. Sociologist E. Franklin Frazier argued that tracing all traits that seemed specific to African-American populations to their African origins was to negate the devastating effects of slavery. These debates continue and have inspired generations of scholarship.

"The myth of the Negro past is one of the principal supports of race prejudice in this country."

—Melville Herskovits, 1941 (1941:1)



AFRICA IN THE AMERICAS



THE SURVIVALS AND RETENTIONS OF UPROOTED PEOPLES

Data-gathering in Surinam and Dahomey revealed a surprising number and variety of close correspondences between the cultural life of the two peoples, the Saramaka and the Fon. Place names were the same, and there were similarities of architectural style, games (such as wari), drums, religious ideas and practices (such as the association of trees with spirits) and symbolic beings (such as snakes).

Although African languages had been lost and people spoke an English creole, the Herskovitses found striking correspondences in speech and narrative forms between Africa and the Americas. Familiar African linguistic features had been accommodated to a foreign grammar. For example, the English adjective "very" would be expressed in some West African languages as a verb, repeated for emphasis; hence, "too much" as a workable version in English creole.

The New World peoples of African descent were not migrants who could bring whatever they valued. They were uprooted people of different origins, of different ages and experience, bringing varied knowledge of their own ancestral traditions, and surviving the deliberate destruction of their culture under slavery. The discontinuity of their lives between Africa and the Americas made the continuities of their culture all the more impressive and mysterious.

"(T)he peculiarities of Negro speech are primarily due to the fact that the Negroes have been using words from European languages to render literally the underlying morphological patterns of West African tongues.

For example:

English

The tale is very nice

Twi (a Ghanaian language)

asem no ye de dodo

Literal (similar to English creole)

Story it is sweet too much"

—Melville & Frances Herskovits, 1936 (1936:130)

"The millions of Africans who were dragged to the New World were not blank slates on which European civilizations could write at will. They were peoples with complex social, political and religious systems of their own. By forced transportation and incessant violence, slavery was able to interdict the transfer of those systems as systems; none could be carried intact across the sea. But it could not crush the intellects, habits of mind, and spirits of its victims. They survived in spite of everything, their children survived, and in them survived Africa."

—Sidney Mintz, Introduction to
The Myth of the Negro Past, 1990
(1990:viii)

THE COMBINATION OF DIVERSE CULTURES

From their earliest work, the Herskovitses were trying to understand not only particular retentions but also their recombination into new systems of thought and patterns of life. The sheer variety of cultural mixture that they found surpassed the anthropological theory of the time.

Even within a single work (on Haiti), Melville Herskovits's concepts contradicted each other: he wrote of "working the amalgam" of African and French culture, then of "socialized ambivalence," and yet again of a "fundamental clash of custom." In the United States, he noted that African belief and Baptist Christian practice converged — for example, in the religious meaning accorded to immersion in water — so that the slaves found foreign practices understandable in their own terms. And in Brazil he found yet another kind of coexistence of cultural elements where a technical culture from Europe, a religious practice from Africa, and elements of Native American belief were combined in people's lives in "unity and inner coherence . . . No incongruity is felt."

The inescapable conclusion was that traditions are lived and reworked through improvisation, giving rise to an infinite and ever-changing set of variations around common themes. In the situations of New World existence, coherent meaning was not a legacy handed down intact, but an achievement that had to be constantly recreated.

"The conclusion that we reach is that in Africa, as in the New World, the cultural processes that will be operative will be those of addition and synthesis to achieve congruence with older forms, rather than of subtraction and substitution, with resulting fragmentation."

—Melville Herskovits, 1958 (1990:xli)

CORRESPONDENCES BETWEEN AFRICAN DEITIES AND CATHOLIC SAINTS AS FOUND IN BRAZIL, CUBA, AND HAITI

African deities	As found in Brazil	... in Cuba	... in Haiti
Shangó	Santa Barbara in Bahia Saint Michael the Archangel at Rio	Santa Barbara	
Legba			Saint Anthony Saint Peter
Esu	The Devil		
Ogun	Saint George at Rio Saint Jerome Saint Anthony at Bahia	Saint Peter	
Yemanjá	The Virgin Mary	Virgin de Regla	

RECORDING EVERYDAY MOVEMENT AND DANCE ON FILM

Movement is one among many expressive and communicative cultural forms in the Boasian tradition of analysis. But ways of describing and analyzing it had been more elusive than for language and the arts. Technologies were limited for creating the kind of record that allows detailed study. Film created new possibilities.

In Dahomey and Haiti, the Herskovitses filmed the same method of "heel-and-toe" planting and of hoeing. Group work in the fields, in lines, often accompanied by music, was another practice recorded in several parts of the Africa-descended world. Similar movements of the hands in carving, pottery-making, and weaving were all seen as evidence of the retention of technical proficiencies through performative style.

■ ■

The Herskovitses filmed another, very important form of motor behavior: dance. Dance lay at the heart of religious life, which in turn lay at the heart of African culture and of its resilience in the New World. Since "no method has as yet been evolved to permit objective study of the dance," in 1936 Herskovits encouraged anthropology student, dancer, and subsequently famous choreographer Katherine Dunham to study in Haiti.

"It was with letters from Melville Herskovits, head of the Department of Anthropology at Northwestern University, that I invaded the Caribbean . . ."

—Katherine Dunham, 1969

"In the very foundation of Negro religion, the African past plays a full part. [In Africa] the outstanding aspect of religion . . . is its intimate relation to the daily round . . . the very nearness of the spirits means that their requirements must be cared for as continuously and as conscientiously as the other practical needs of life . . . Ritual is based on worship that expresses itself in song and dance."

—Melville Herskovits, 1941 (1990:215)

"The scene in a field where a large combite (cooperative labor group) is at work is an arresting one. The men form a line, with a drummer in front of their hoes. The simidor, who leads the singing as he works with the others, adds the rhythm of his song to the regular beat of the drum, thus setting the time for the strokes of the implements wielded by the workers . . . The cooperative work-system, which is so important in maintaining agricultural production, is directly related to comparable groupings of West Africa, of which a distinctive form is the dokpwe of Dahomey."

—Melville Herskovits, 1937

ARTISTIC IMPROVISATION IN CLOTH

Artists are free to transform what is given into what is imagined: to change one visual pattern into another; to turn a familiar object to a new use; to invert a routine sequence. An improvisational aesthetic is fundamental in the West and Central African cultures from which the slaves came. But it was also extraordinarily suited to survival under adversity. A prohibited practice could be carried out in another way without necessarily losing meaning; ordinary conversation could be made to convey secret information; an entire performance could be evoked in a musical phrase.

■ ■

Cloth examples in the exhibition show an improvisational aesthetic at work, where geometrical designs are juxtaposed in unique asymmetrical patterns. Each motif and color makes allusions, so that each combination can convey its own meaning. For example, a Bunu Yoruba bride wears cloth of deep indigo blue ("black") to symbolize fertility, striped with red to allude to death and the ancestors. Her cloth thereby links the generations.

A gift of cloth can express human bonds. In *Dahomey: An Ancient West African Kingdom*, Herskovits recorded a song of devotion and grief that is sung at the death of one's "best friend":

This day I bring
The cloth I promised you.
This is the day of misfortune
That we spoke of together.
You knew that when war came to you
I would not fail to bring you aid.
That is why I am come . . .
One day I will see him again,
Yes, I will see him,
Because I, too, am going toward death.
(1938, I: 353; and 1934:631-32)

Improvisation rests on such transformation: the possibility that a cloth design can invoke an emotion, that emotions are lived in dance and song, that a particular rhythm of sound evokes particular spirits, and that the spirits can be represented in the visual and plastic arts as masks. Improvisation in jazz and painting follows a similar logic.

"The manipulation of secret symbols . . . contributed to the success of the American Underground Railway . . . (T)he slaves would work out a quilt, piece by piece, field by field, until they had an actual map, and escape route . . . to get off the plantation."

—Maude Wahlman, 1993 (1993:85)

SHANGÓ IN THE OLD AND NEW WORLDS, PAST AND PRESENT

The African deity (orisha) Shangó – the fierce and red-clothed god of thunder – has devotees throughout the Americas. His drums (bata and anyan) were played in Brazil and Cuba, and a Shangó group performed his music for Herskovits to record in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad. Shangó's symbols, such as the double axe from Dahomey and the doll made in Brazil, were deeply meaningful to people on both sides of the Atlantic.

In more recent years, participation in orisha worship has expanded and spread into new areas. Shangó and Ogun have become more important; as the gods associated with action, iron, and masculine strength, they have become attractive in competitive technological economies. Ritual images like the one shown in the exhibition are made in religious communities and sold to the faithful for their altars. Commercial songs already made allusions to the orishas in Herskovits's day. When the exhibition *Face of the Gods: Art and Altars in Africa and the African Americas* toured in the United States in 1993, devotees brought food and gifts to the altars.

"I shall make good use of the descriptions by the Calypso artist who sings of the way in which possession at the Shango dances comes on, sacrifices are given, and what happens under possession."

—Melville Herskovits, 1939

"In both Brazil and New York an extension of the thunder god's power and mystery has been discovered in electricity itself. . . . The Nigerian storm on the edge of a knife has become a play of fire and smoke in a corner of New Jersey."

—Robert Farris Thompson, 1993

(1993:244)

PROTECTIVE WRITING

In numerous African societies, indigenous or imported writing is associated with knowledge, power, and intelligence, and is therefore considered sacred and protective. Writing was encoded in painted, dyed, or woven cloth; it was painted or drawn on the ground or on buildings; it was built into or encased within material culture.

Several West African scripts (Vai, Fon, Nsibidi) as well as the Central African Congo cosmogram were brought to the Americas and combined to create new scripts. In the Americas, various African ideographic writing systems were used in Brazil, Surinam, Haiti, Cuba, and the U.S. They can be seen today in painting, sculpture, and multiple-media religious arts.

■ ■

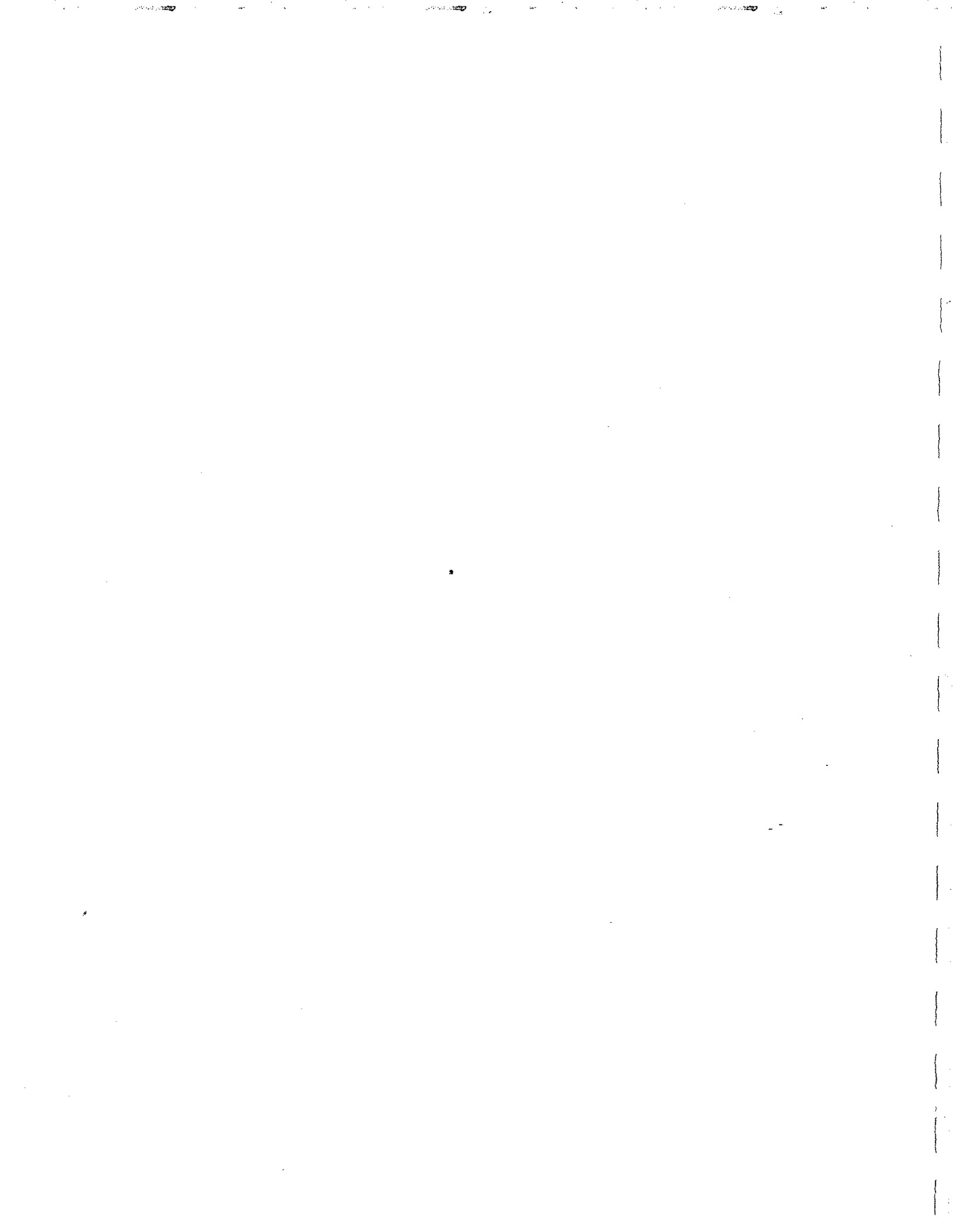
Among the best known are: pontos recados or marked "prints" in Brazil, which can be found in ground paintings, on cloth, and on protective charms; Afaka Atumisi? in Surinam, which the Herskovitses documented and interpreted on men's wood carvings as well as women's calabash and cloth arts; Anaoruana? in Cuba, which can be seen in ground paintings, on pots, and on men's protective society costumes.

"Religious ideas survived because they were essential tools of survival, and thus were encoded in a multiplicity of forms: visual arts, songs, and black speech. Yet the encoding was not simple to decode; improvisation adds an aesthetic feature which both gives African-American arts their unique style but also protects them from easy interpretation, copying, or predictability."

—Maude Wahlman (n.d.:2)

NEW DIRECTIONS





NEW DIRECTIONS: THE ROAD IS OPEN

To their great credit, the Herskovitses posed more questions than they answered and indicated more complexity than they could explain. In their side-comments, suggestions, perplexities, and their collections lie sources for new exploration.

One final example of a problem they noted but did not explore is the importance of the cultures of parts of Africa other than Nigeria and Dahomey in the slave legacy. The omission can be seen in the map Melville used to summarize their work by 1956.

"Do the candombles, that have been assumed to be the only valid expression of African religious retentions in Brazil, rather represent special and restricted forms of organization found in the urban centers of Nigeria and Dahomey, transplanted to the urban centers of Brazil?"

— Melville Herskovits, 1958 (1966:x)

Of Haiti in 1931 he wrote that Yoruba (Nigerian) and Dahomey culture had prevailed over others and that, in any case, there is "a basic unity of language and culture in all of West Africa." But twelve years later in Brazil, a heartland of Yoruba-derived orisha worship, he wrote of other practices with African elements, such as Caboclo, and questioned whether Candomble might not be a religious practice specific to urban life, both in West Africa and Brazil. While traveling in the Congo in the 1950s, he found the same kind of exact parallels with Brazil as he had found twenty years earlier between Surinam and Dahomey.

Accepting the challenges posed by the Herskovitses' work, some of their students took on such problems as:

- a deeper understanding of key practices on both sides of the Atlantic
 - William Bascom on divination
 - Katherine Dunham on dance
 - Allan Merriam and Richard Waterman on music
- study of the arts and expressive lives in other African cultures of the slave-trading regions
 - Warren d'Azevedo in Sierra Leone
 - Justine Cordwell in Western Nigeria
 - Simon Ottenberg in Eastern Nigeria
 - James Fernandez in Gabon
- the fundamental structures of African cultures, such as language
 - Joseph Greenberg on African language families

Other scholars drew on other themes:

- Sidney Mintz on the reshaping of post-slavery societies in the Caribbean
- Robert Farris Thompson on religious art
- Gwendolyn Midlo Hall on the influence of Senegambia culture in Louisiana

The map of scholarship, in both its geographical and intellectual highlights, has become quite different over the 25 years since Frances died, but as Sidney Mintz wrote in 1969 as a memorial to Melville:

"No ethnologist of the Caribbean can claim himself to be uninfluenced by the work of Melville Herskovits. His name, and his works — sometimes, under test or attack — are referred to in nearly every significant ethnological paper and book on the area to be published over three decades."

AFRICAN DIASPORAS AND THE WORLD

"Toco (Trinidad) local economy is an integral, if infinitesimal, part of the world economic order."

—Melville & Frances Herskovits, 1939

African peoples were among the first to be scattered around the world by the expansion of the world economy since the sixteenth century. They have been part of modern change for hundreds of years, creating the creole cultures that many scholars see to be a feature of the new global order for many peoples at the end of the twentieth century.

The Herskovitses studied the diaspora that had been created by the slave trade. The twentieth century has created new African diasporas all over the world, and new markets for the products of African work and art. All the art pieces in the exhibition entrance are contemporary, created from elements of a living tradition for the commercial art markets of the world.

Cedar table

Adiante Fransoon
Baltimore, Maryland 1998
Program of African Studies (PAS) collection

Rhythm Changes - Dexterity

Sam Middleton
1979
7/50 silkscreen 20" x 25"
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture
New York Public Library

Sequined rada tambou (drum)

Frantz
Port-au-Prince, Haiti 1998
Itiah Gallery, Chicago

Awé (Umbrella)

Eugene Fiogbe
Musée Historique d'Abomey, Benin 1998
PAS collection

Un Hijo de Yemaya

(A Child of Yemaya)
Tony Gleaton
Los Angeles, California 1992
b&w photo
PAS collection

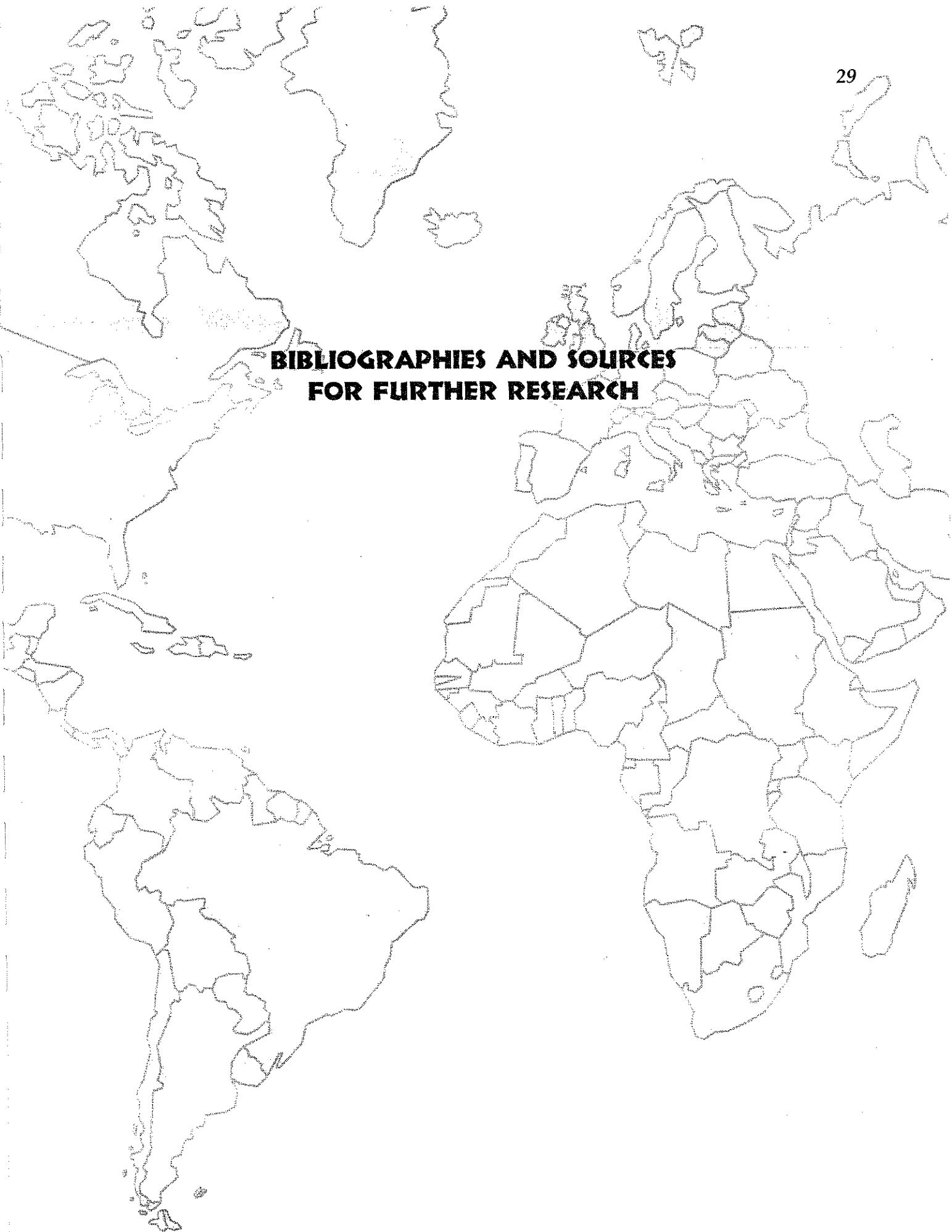
Ejo-Loran (Snake)

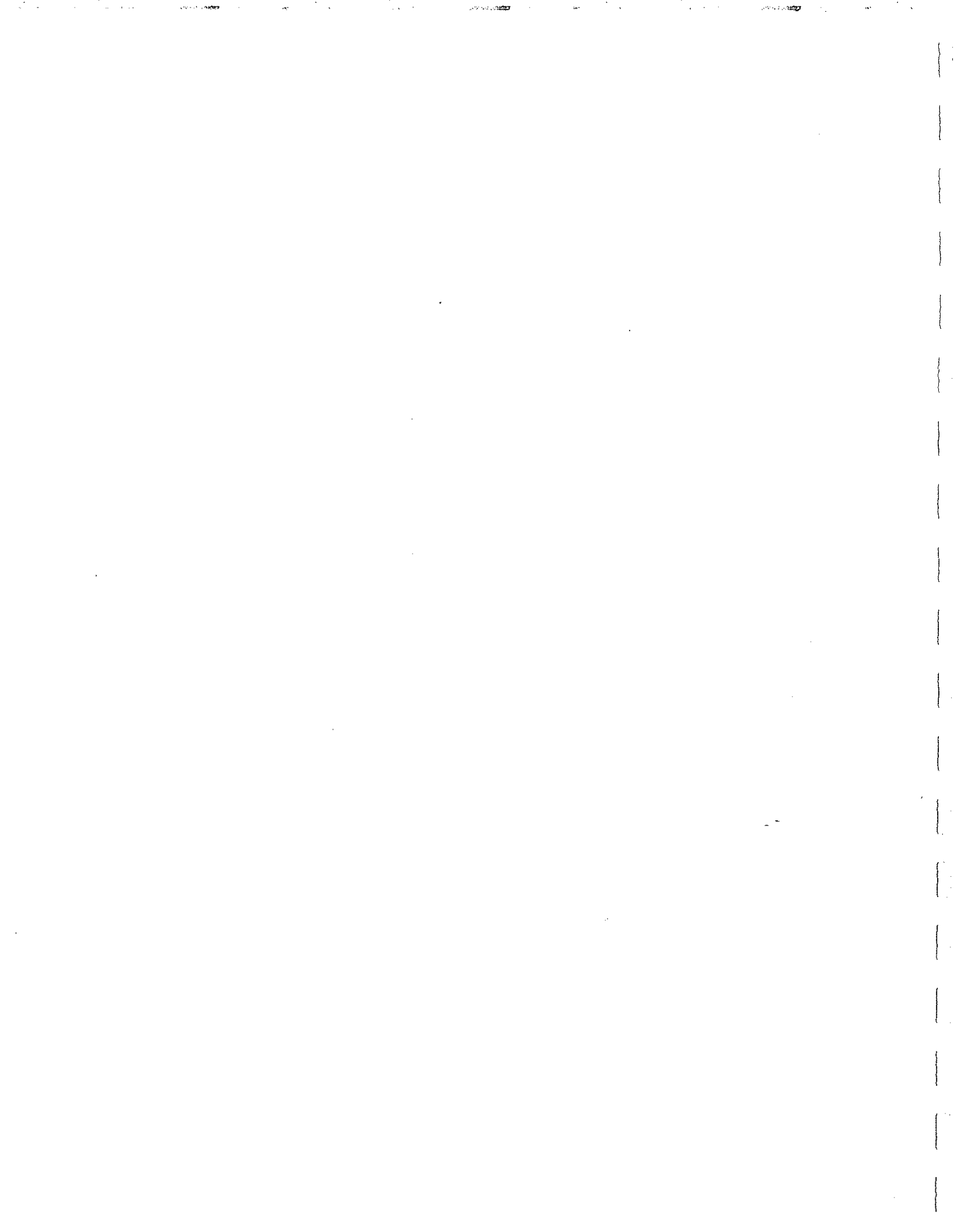
Master Didi
Salvador, Brazil 1994
Collection of the artist

Yvonne Daniel,

Dancing for Yemaya
Photographed by Frank Ward
1991
Color wall photo

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COLLECTIONS

- The bulk of the Herskovitses' field photographs—more than 700 nitrate negatives—are at the **Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution**. Included are approximately 120 images from Brazil, 165 from Haiti, 194 from Surinam, and 258 from several locations in West Africa. <<http://www.si.edu/organiza/museums/africart/resource/archives.html>>
- The Herskovitses' field films from Ghana, Nigeria, Dahomey, Surinam, Haiti, and the Sea Islands in Georgia (including some footage shot by contemporaries on location and purchased by the Herskovitses) are now part of the **Human Films Archive, Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution**.
- **The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library** houses more than 900 objects acquired by the Herskovitses in the mid-1920s through the 1960s. The art and artifacts in this private collection reflect the range of the Herskovitses' geographic and thematic interests. The Herskovits collection from Surinam—some 264 objects—constitutes the single largest body of material. The collection includes more than 100 textiles, such as Fon appliqués, commemorative cloths, and Surinam shoulder capes. Herskovits holdings at the Schomburg Center also include many personal papers, field notes, original manuscripts, and field photographs not available at the Smithsonian, most notably photographs from Brazil and Trinidad. <<http://www.nypl.org/research/sc/sc.html>>
- **Indiana University's Archives of Traditional Music** hold four large field collections recorded by the Herskovitses in Surinam (1928-29); Nigeria, Togo, and Dahomey (1931); Haiti (1934); Trinidad (1939); and Brazil (1941-42). There is also a collection of 33 wire recordings of services from Chicago's Greater Harvest Baptist Church, compiled by the Herskovitses from radio broadcasts in 1948-49. <<http://www.indiana.edu/~libarchm/>>
- Herskovits papers collected at the Schomburg Center and in the **Northwestern University Archives** contain correspondence and other materials that yield insights into shifts in academic and popular understandings of the African diaspora over the course of Herskovits's lifetime.
- **The American Folklife Center** includes the **Archive of Folk Culture**, which was founded at the Library of Congress in 1928 as a repository for American folk music. The Archive of Folk Culture became part of the American Folklife Center in 1978. Today, its multi-format, ethnographic collections are diverse and international, including over one million photographs, manuscripts, audio recordings, and moving images. It is America's first national archive of traditional life, and one of the oldest and largest of such repositories in the world. Included in its holdings (AFS

6777-6892) are 116 12-inch discs of Afro-Bahian songs recorded by Melville and Frances Herskovits in Bahia, 1941-42, for the Library of Congress. (Tape copy on LWO 4872 reels 427B-436B.) Selections from this collection have been published by the Library of Congress on cassette number AFS L13, AFRO-BAHIAN RELIGIOUS SONGS FROM BRAZIL.

<<http://lcweb.loc.gov/folklife/archive.html>>

