



# The Religious Dancing of American Slaves, 1820-1865: Spiritual Ecstasy at Baptisms, Funerals, and Sunday Meetings

*Kenneth Thomas*

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In contrast to recent historiography, this work reasserts the argument that slaves were not merely the victims of a brutal regime, but lived largely separate lives within a distinct sphere. This work, set mainly in the South Carolina Lowcountry and on the Georgia Sea Islands, examines the significance of the communal, sacred, ecstatic dances of African-American slaves in the antebellum era. Religious beliefs of the slaves, from Christianity through to shamanism, are analyzed, as are the importance of music, ceremony, and the spiritual world. This book suggests that religious dance ceremonies were central to the lives of the slaves, and acted as a sacrament through which they made contact with their ancestors, the spirit world, and God himself. Communal dancing, under a Christian banner, was a key element in the formation of an autonomous slave culture. Where recent historiography has tended to undermine the role of the African-American slave culture, preferring instead to examine the darker features of slaves in the United States, this study reasserts the argument that slaves were not merely the victims of a brutal regime, but lived largely separate lives within a distinct sphere.



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