

# Christmas in slavery

My term of service with Edward Covey expired on Christmas Day, 1834. I gladly-enough left him, although he was by this time as gentle as a lamb. My home for the year 1835 was already secured, my next master selected. There was always more or less excitement about the changing hands, but determined to fight my way, I had become somewhat reckless and cared little into whose hands I fell. The report got abroad that I was hard to whip; that I was guilty of kicking back, and that, though generally a good-natured Negro, I sometimes "got the devil in me." These sayings were rife in Talbot County and distinguished me among my servile brethren. Slaves would sometimes fight with each other, and even die at each other's hands, but there were very few who were not held in awe by a white man. Trained from the cradle up to think and feel that their masters were superiors, and invested with a sort of sacredness, there were few who could rise above the control which that sentiment exercised. I had freed myself from it, and the thing was known. One bad sheep will spoil a whole flock. I was a bad sheep. I hated slavery, slaveholders, and all pertaining to them; and I did not fail to inspire others with the same feeling wherever and whenever opportunity was presented. This made me a marked lad among the slaves, and a suspected one among slaveholders. A knowledge also of my ability to read and write got pretty widely spread, which was very much against me.

The days between Christmas Day and New Year's were allowed the slaves as holidays. During these days all regular work was suspended, and there was nothing to do but keep fires and look after the stock. We regarded this time as our own by the grace of our masters, and we therefore used it or abused it as we pleased. Those who had families at a distance were expected to visit them and spend with them the entire week. The younger slaves or the unmarried ones were expected to

see to the animals and attend to incidental duties at home. The holidays were variously spent. The sober, thinking, industrious ones would employ themselves in manufacturing corn-brooms, mats, horse-collars, and baskets, and some of these were very well made. Another class spent their time in hunting opossums, coons, rabbits, and other game. But the majority spent the holidays in sports, ball-playing, wrestling, boxing, running, foot-races, dancing, and drinking whiskey; and this latter mode was generally most agreeable to their masters. A slave who would work during the holidays was thought by his master undeserving of holidays. There was in this simple act of continued work an accusation against slaves, and a slave could not help thinking that if he made three dollars during the holidays he might make three hundred during the year. Not to be drunk during the holidays was disgraceful.

The fiddling, dancing, and "jubilee beating" was carried on in all directions. This latter performance was strictly southern. It supplied the place of violin or other musical instruments and was played so easily that almost every farm had its "Juba" beater. The performer

improvised as he beat the instrument, marking the words as he sang so as to have them fall pat with the movement of his hands. Once in a while among a mass of nonsense and wild frolic, a sharp hit was given to the meanness of slaveholders.

Take the following for example:

*We raise de wheat,  
Dey gib us de corn;  
We bake de bread,  
Dey gib us de crust;  
We stf de meal,  
Dey gib us de huss;*

*We peel de meat,  
Dey gib us de skin;  
And dat's de way  
Dey take us in.*

This is not a bad summary of the palpable injustice and fraud of slavery, giving, as it does, to the lazy and idle the comforts which God designed should be given solely to the honest laborer. But to the holidays. Judging from my own observation and experience, I believe those holidays were among the most effective means in the hands of slaveholders of keeping down the spirit of insurrection among the slaves.

—Frederick Douglas



## Kwanza

In the beginning before the beginning of all  
Baba and Mama  
Muumba, the Creator . . . lived in Weusi,  
Blackness, darkness with love  
and peace.

One night he created a big, big, light and  
named it sun. (Jua)

And the sun, Jua was hot, hot, hot, hot.  
So Muumba created wet, wet water and  
named it rain. (Mvua)

and in Umoja (Unity)  
the sun shined  
and the rain rained

on a "spinning ball" named Mother Earth.  
Land of trees, fruits and vegetables.  
Happy, happy were the sun and rain as they did  
Ujima (Collective Work and Responsibility)  
for Mother Earth.

But poor, poor, Mother Earth was sad not  
glad. . . .  
She had no one to share with—she was lonesome.  
So Muumba created

Mtu  
(Man)  
and  
Mke  
(Woman)

A Baba and Mama who shared together  
and had 100's of watoto (children)

And good Mother Earth gave them her  
food to eat it all up. . . .

Baba and Mama was so "happy" they made  
a promise,  
"one hand to receive,  
one hand to give"

So Baba and Mama and watoto gave the seeds back to  
Mother Earth.

They planted the seeds in the land and more and more  
fruits and vegetables grew, again. "Come and help." It's Ujima time.  
Come and harvest the food.

And everyone did. With joy and praises they  
are and had a feast. . . . a very special feast  
An Afrikan Feast.

With each one bringing something special, too.  
Sun became a bright, bright, yellow light  
Rain became waterdrops and a beautiful rainbow.

Mother Earth filled the land with fruits.

Baba and Mama and Watoto worked, danced and Sang  
with Imani (Faith),

and gave thanks (Asante) and Praises (Sifa) to  
Muumba, the Creator.

And this was Kwanza, the First Fruits  
in an Afrikan Feast (Karamu).



We wish you a  
Happy Holiday  
Season.



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