



**UNIVERSITY OF
ILLINOIS PRESS**



**American
Folklore Society**
Keeping Folklorists Connected

Easter Rock: A Louisiana Negro Ceremony

Author(s): Marianna Seale and Lea Seale

Source: *The Journal of American Folklore*, Oct. - Dec., 1942, Vol. 55, No. 218 (Oct. - Dec., 1942), pp. 212-218

Published by: American Folklore Society

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/535863>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



University of Illinois Press and American Folklore Society are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of American Folklore*

JSTOR

EASTER ROCK: A LOUISIANA NEGRO CEREMONY*

By LEA AND MARIANNA SEALE

An Easter rock is one of those pagan rites clothed in Christian symbolism which are not altogether uncommon among the Negroes of the South. Its practice, as the writers know it, seems never to have been very widespread, being restricted today to that part of Louisiana lying in the lower Mississippi delta. However, it is quite probable that there are to be found variations of it elsewhere, as the Easter rock is terminated by a "sunrise service;" and the sunrise service is especially common among the Negro Baptists of the South.

Though the Easter rock itself does not begin until midnight, the "general congregation" begin to assemble between nine and ten o'clock Easter Saturday night. At ten, or thereabout, a preliminary service, known as "cul'n" (a corruption from *covenant*), begins. Cul'n consists of a series of testimonials of faith in and random requests of the Lord, and it lasts about an hour. After each set of two or three testimonials and prayers, the head deacon, who presides until the minister arrives for the sunrise service, declares a brief intermission during which "finances" are "tuk up" (in a collection plate). Most of the contributors apparently provide themselves against being embarrassed at the various further considerations of finances by changing what contributions they expect to make into nickels and pennies.

Cul'n exhausted, the congregation is favored with a program of special events, largely impromptu, by groups of singers representing churches other than the host-church. This program, also interrupted periodically by finances, is stopped shortly before midnight to allow opportunity for arranging the properties required for an Easter rock.

The central aisle of the church is cleared of the movable benches, and a plain long table is set lengthwise down the center of the church, before the pulpit. This table is covered with a spotlessly clean, white cloth. The section of the church to the left or the right of the pulpit is curtained off and used as a repository for the various properties to be employed as the rock progresses. All the kerosene lamps, except one at the rear of the church, are extinguished.

Precisely at midnight, by the deacon's watch, the deacon orders the con-

* The description of the Easter rock which follows is based upon the writers' observance of its practice upon three occasions: twice at the St. John the Baptist Church, at Dunbarton Plantation, near Clayton, Concordia Parish, La.; and once at the Baptist Church on Lemarque Plantation, which adjoins Dunbarton Plantation.

gregation to "come quiet." Shortly thereafter, the voices of many women and a single man rise in the song, "When the Sancts Go Marchin' In," and a procession moves into the church through a door at the rear.

At the head of the procession is a Negro man carrying what is called "the banner." The banner is a barrel hoop attached to one end of a six-foot stick. The hoop has, stretched across its area in drumhead fashion, a covering of white crepe paper, and to its circumference is attached tasseled crepe of various bright colors. The name of the church is worked into the white drumhead in red or blue.

Two long white strings are attached to the circumference of the banner, one at each end of the horizontal diameter. The loose ends of these are held by the second member of the procession, a woman who is known as the banner-puller.

The banner, according to Tobias and Elizabeth Scott,¹ is in Christian symbolism Christ the Son; but, by construction and by usage, it represents the sun. The man who "totes" the banner and the woman who fills the office of banner-puller apparently have no particular symbolical significance; however, the banner-carrier is usually the song leader and the practice of "banner-pulling" is considered rather an art. The function of the banner-puller is to cause the banner to "rock" in a peculiar rhythmical manner which matches the double-shuffle dance step with which all the members of the procession move forward.

The banner-puller is followed by twelve other women, all dressed in white and each carrying a lighted kerosene lamp. These twelve are the "sancts." By their number they represent the twelve disciples of Christ; but, by their carrying lamps, they represent the wise virgins of the Biblical parable.

Shuffling along to the right of the table and toward the pulpit, always in time with the singing (in which the congregation has now joined), the procession seriously gets down to its principal business—namely, marching around the table again and again. This marching, with occasional intermissions, continues until the preacher is ready to begin the sunrise service, just before dawn.

After the first complete circuit, the sancts deposit their lamps along the center length of the table, without losing step or position in the procession. At this point in the ritual the song changes, and "rocking" begins in earnest. The sancts, no longer hampered by the lamps, begin to shuffle

¹ "Uncle Tobe" and "Aunt Lizzie" Scott, of Haphazard Plantation, Ferriday, La., are two of the oldest Negroes living in Concordia Parish. They do not "recall" their ages; but both were children during "Reb times," and both have been familiar with the Easter rock ceremony since childhood. This interpretation of the symbolism involved in the Easter rock, as well as all subsequent interpretations, is theirs.

and sway in the manner commonly associated with some phases of the voodoo rites.²

This second stage of the ceremony is known as “dressin’ de table,” and the song with which it is accompanied is, rather appropriately,

Meet me at de station when dat train come along,
(Three times.)

’Cause Ah may be blin’, and Ah ca’ not see.
Meet me at de station when dat train come along,
(Three times.)

’Cause Ah may be lame, and Ah ca’ not walk.
(And so on, through all possible impairments and infirmities.)

As the sancts approach the curtained-off section of the left or the right of the pulpit in their progress around the table, a hand reaches out from behind the curtains and gives to each sanct a large cake, usually angel food or some variation thereof. When all twelve have received cakes and made the circuit of the table with them, the cakes are set down, six upon each side of the table. On the next trip around, each sanct receives from the hand a bottle covered with brightly colored crepe paper; then a glass of “angeliquor” (angelica wine); then a little paper basket containing two or three easter eggs. The cake is a free interpretation of eucharistic bread; the wine is, of course, “the blood of the Savior”; and the bottle contains more of “the blood.” The basket of eggs has no especial significance, but it is included to please the children who share the feast. (This again is the interpretation of Tobias and Elizabeth Scott.)

When the table is properly dressed, there is a brief pause for changing banner-carriers—but not banner-pullers, for the original puller retains her office until dawn.

As marching resumes, the song changes to:—

Choose my seat, set down
At de table of de Lawd.

(This is the basic stanza, but the song leader alters it according to the various levels of his own spiritual elevation.) Now each sanct, continuing to shuffle the while, looks over the congregation with the object of picking a partner “to set down” with her “at de table of de Lawd.” After five or six trips around the table, each sanct has chosen her companion, who shuffles along beside her until she stops at her appointed place at the table. Then the song varies slightly, in words, to:—

Pull up yo’ seat, set down
At de table of de Lawd.

² See Lyle Saxon, *Fabulous New Orleans* (New York, 1928), pp. 309-322.

After two or three repetitions of the stanza in the variation, singing and marching give way to eating and drinking. Though the general congregation are mere spectators, they participate in the supper as actively as they can by means of "hand-outs."

At this stage of an Easter rock it begins to be evident that both the participants and the spectators are having rather free access to the ecclesiastical (and temporal) supply of angeliquor.

With supper ended, rocking is started anew, and with much heightened spirit. Songs which accompany the marching, or shuffling, have no more than a broad general application to the occasion, and their choice or repetition appears to rest solely with the banner-carrier. Three of the more popular of the choices follow:—

They Crucified My Lord

- Banner-carrier: Dey cru-ci-fied my Lawd.
 Sancts: Dey crowned His haid with thawns,
 On de top of de mountain. (Three times.)
 B-c. and sancts: Dey cru-ci-fied my Lawd.
- Banner-carrier: Dey cru-ci-fied my Lawd.
 Sancts: Dey nailed His feets and hands,
 On de top of de mountain. (Three times.)
 B-c. and sancts: Dey cru-ci-fied my Lawd.
- Banner-carrier: Dey cru-ci-fied my Lawd.
 Sancts: Dey staubed Him in de side
 On de top of de mountain. (Three times.)
 B-c. and sancts: Dey cru-ci-fied my Lawd.
- Banner-carrier: Dey cru-ci-fied my Lawd.
 Sancts: De blood come streamin' down,
 From de top of de mountain. (Three times.)
 B-c. and sancts: When dey cru-ci-fied my Lawd.

Little David

- Banner-carrier: Hal-lee-loo, hal-lee-loo!
 Sancts: Li'l David, play on yo' harp.

Chorus (sung by the banner-carrier and the sancts, and repeated after each subsequent stanza):

- Hal-lee-loo, hal-lee-loo!
 O, li'l David, play on yo' harp.
- Sancts: David, Ah loves to hear you play,
 Play on yo' hundred strings.

- Banner-carrier: What you want me to play?
 Sancts: Play dat Ah been redeemed,
 David, play dat Ah been redeemed.
- Sancts: David, whar you gwine, li'l boy?
 David, whar you gwine, li'l boy?
- Banner-carrier: Out on de battlefield.
 Sancts: David, you's too young, li'l boy;
 You's too young to fight dat war.
- Sancts: David killed Goliar too dead to grunt;
 David killed Goliar too dead to grunt.
- Banner-carrier: How you know?
 Sancts: Yon' come de li'l boy wid Goliar head;
 Yon' come de li'l boy wid Goliar head.

Won't You Set Down?

- Banner-carrier: O, won't you set down?
 Sancts: Unh, unh, O, no, O Lawd,
 Ah cain' set down,
 'Cause Ah jus' got to He'b'm,
 Got to try on my crown.
- Banner-carrier: Now, who dat comin' all dressed in white?
 Sancts: Mus' be de chillun of de Israelite.
- Chorus (sung by the banner-carrier and the sancts):
 O, won't you set down?
 Unh, unh, O, no, O Lawd,
 Ah cain' set down,
 'Cause Ah jus' got to He'b'm,
 Got to walk aroun'.
- Banner-carrier: Now, who dat comin' all dressed in red?
 Sancts: Mus' be de chillun dat de Moses led.

Chorus

After each song there is an intermission. During these pauses the sancts bolster themselves against spiritual let-downs with frequent cups of angeliquor, and the spectators do not hesitate to follow the sanctified example.

About an hour before dawn there remains but little semblance of Christianity. Even the symbolism has been forgotten. The whole ceremony has turned into something perhaps most resembling a Bacchanalian

orgy, those who are not interested in participating in some fashion having left long before.

The single bastion of the Lord's host is the preacher who is to conduct the sunrise service and who has survived such a flow of angeliquor that even his constancy of allegiance is questionable.

The text of the sunrise sermon, which begins a few minutes before sunrise, is apparently always some variation of one of the Gospels concerning the Resurrection; for example, Luke 24: 7, ". . . the Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again."

The exegesis may follow any of several forms; but, as the sun begins to come over the horizon, there usually begins a sort of recitative analysis of the meaning of *Easter*, such as the following:

- Preacher: Where do de sun rise? Do it rise in de no'th?
 Congregation: Naw, Suh!
- Preacher: Do it rise in de south?
 Congregation: Naw, Suh!
- Preacher: Do it rise in de wes'?
 Congregation: Naw, Suh!
- Preacher: Den, do it rise in de eas'?
 Congregation: Yas, Suh! De sun rise in de eas'.
- Preacher: Why does y'all say de *eas'*?
 Congregation: 'Cause dat where de sun rise.
- Preacher: Amen. Now why does us put 'eas' in bread?
 Congregation: To make it *rise*.
- Preacher: Why does us call it '*eas'*?
 Congregation: 'Cause it make de bread *rise*.
- Preacher: Now, why does we call dis *Easter*?
 Congregation: 'Cause on Easter mo'nin' de Lawd Jesus done riz up.
- Preacher: Amen. 'Cause de Lawd Jesus done riz up on *Easter* mo'nin', *Easter* mean "to rise." Therefo', let us all *rise* up and go fo'th under de risin' sun on *Easter* mo'nin'.

All rise at the preacher's command, and the procession of sancts re-forms at the table. With one voice the sancts and the congregation break into the "theme song" of the ceremonial:

O, Easter mo'nin'! Shout for joy!
 O, Easter mo'nin'! Shout for joy!
 O, Easter mo'nin'! Shout for joy!
 Rock li'l chillun! Shout for joy!
 O, you ain' rockin'!
 Shout for joy!

To this accompaniment the procession rocks once around the table and through the back door of the church into the dawn. The members of the congregation attach themselves in single or double file to the sanctified train and likewise shuffle out into the light of the rising sun. The singing and rocking continue until the church is empty. Then the Easter rock is ended.

The name, as the first deacon of the St. John the Baptist Church³ explains it, is derived from the fact that "everything rocks." The sancts rock; the church (always a frame building) rocks; the earth rocks; and the sun rocks as it comes over the horizon. That the sancts and the church rock is clearly true, but the distinguishable rocking of the earth and the sun must be attributed to a very fine imagination or to superfluity of angeliquor—or to both.

Southwestern Louisiana Institute, Lafayette, La.

³ Will Stewart, R. F. D. No. 1, Ferriday, La.