

Two Black Churches. Made by Bill Ferris. Released by the Center for Southern Folklore and Yale University Media Design Studio. Sound/editor: Robert Slattery. Photographer: Dale Lindquist. Production Assistant: Sara Miller. 1975.

Reviewed by Gilbert Cooley

Two Black Churches is an excellent portrayal of many folkloric and religious beliefs and practices that are still found in today's American Black Church, especially in the rural Southern "Sanctified" and Baptist churches.

The opening scene depicts a traditional and almost rare baptismal service. As the candidates who are dressed in the traditional white march towards the river, they sing a song that is in a type of common meter. It is characterized by its slow pace and moanful sounds. The second scene, set in Reverend Thomas' church in Rose Hill, Mississippi, offers an explicit portrayal of the rhythm that is a traditional "must" for the singing of hymns in Black Churches. This phenomenon has been attributed by many converts to a direct intervention of God's spirit.

The call-response technique was found in two of the songs that were sung in the church: "Done Got Ovah to the Heavenly Land," and a song that was sung by the youth choir of ten- and twelve-year olds. Additionally, an insight into the folkloric process is gained, as "Oh Let Me Go Home," sung by the adult choir, is a possible survival from slavery.

Bishop A. Coward's New Haven, Connecticut, congregation appeared to be more of a 'Holiness' type of church. As the choir marched into the church one had to notice the beautiful golden dresses that every member wore. This color may be a significant element in the study of Black religious beliefs, e.g., golden slippers and golden streets.

One of the formulaic expressions that was used by the Bishop was "after while, by and by." This particular expression is one of the most common phrases in the Black Churches of today. In support of this theme, the song "Everybody Ought to Hold the Line" is sung. His sermon is given in a very emotional and rhythmic style and the congregation is involved actively and orally in the message. This type of audience participation seems to serve as a checking mechanism for the minister: he can always know whether the members are following his presentation or not. In this case, the whole church seems to come under the power of the spirit after the sermon is well under way. There is screaming, dancing, and crying. At the end of the service there is a healing session.

This film sheds light on many of the beliefs and religious practices of Blacks. It also shows surviving folkloric elements existent in the Black Church in America.