"Changing Negro Life in the Delta" by Samuel C. Adams

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

The Samuel Adams manuscript was submitted to Fisk's sociology department in 1947, fulfilling Adams's requirements for a master's degree. Several of the years between the fieldwork and the writing were spent in service with the military.

A copy of this manuscript was discovered strewn about the floor and cabinets of Alan Lomax's Hunter College archive; Robert Gordon collated the material and, with Bruce Nemerov and Ms. Beth Howse, Fisk's special collections librarian, determined that the pages were part of the Adams thesis. The original manuscript turned up at Fisk a couple years later, and their complete copy is the source for this chapter.

Adams focuses on cultural change in the Delta, the urbanization of "Negro life." He is examining a dynamic, changing culture. Written at a time when machines were performing the labor that had always been done by hand, Adams states, "As urban influences impinge more and more upon the traditional plantation society, other broader aspects of social life are also changing . . . The effects of the direct and indirect accessibility of plantation Negroes to urban ways of life—resulting from the concrete highways, automobiles, locomotives, electricity, radios, and newspapers—have been to weaken the powerful cohesive force of the folkways and mores of the old South." His paper, he writes, "seeks to measure the effects of urbanism on the customary modes of behavior of rural Negroes in an area where there still exist many evidences of the sway of traditional life." (In this case, Clarksdale, a relatively small town in 1941, "was treated as the seat of urban influence.")

In succeeding chapters, Adams illuminates church life, then secular life, and their changes. He notes that secular society changes "far more readily and radically than the sacred." His anecdotal evidence of the change in society's attitude toward the church is startling; of the youngest generation, he writes (without noting the song in reference): "The youth . . . ridicule ministers; they picture them as 'worldly' men . . . It is reported that the children objected to the use of the word 'nigger' in a song, so the word 'nigger' was changed to 'preacher.' "

Adams examines changes in secular life through the lens of song and story. He traces work songs from their religious roots to their present, decidedly secular, malleable state. He then studies the source of those changes: "Specifically the victrola, the radio, the juke box, the dance halls,

the movies and the changes in technology make it possible for the plantation Negroes to have a greater access to broader worlds of experience than ever before." His evidence of such influence includes a toast entitled "Shine and the Titanic" and a song about Hitler and the devil.

Among Adams's appendixes is a sample of the questionnaire filled out with one hundred plantation families in the Coahoma study. Adams, whose task was to talk to people, also shares several anecdotes of Delta life that were too good not to include, even if they were not directly part of the body of his paper. These are detailed, informative pictures of a cultural life long gone.

FISK UNIVERSITY

Changing Negro Life in the Delta

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
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By
Samuel C. Adams Jr.
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Tribute is offered to the late Dr. Robert E. Park, who aroused and directed my curiosity in the changing Negro life on a Delta plantation.

CHAPTER I

Introduction

Negro life on the plantation is changing. The transition has been going on for nearly a century, but it has become more pronounced since the turn of the present century and, particularly after World War I. With the South becoming increasingly an integral part of the national economy, the old plantation system is rapidly collapsing.[1] As urban influences impinge more and more upon the traditional plantation society, other broader aspects of social life are also changing. Changes are in evidence everywhere in the South today and they are affecting white and Negro alike. The effects of the direct and indirect accessibility of plantation Negroes to urban ways of life—resulting from the concrete highways, automobiles, locomotives, electricity, radios, and newspapers—have been to weaken the powerful cohesive force of the folkways and mores of the old South and to increase general confusion in thought and contradictions in the behavior of the Negroes.[2] In other words, the changing South is an interesting laboratory for the student of the social sciences, especially those interested in culture change and acculturation of Negroes in the Deep South.

General treatises on social change are many[3] but realistic studies, giving a sufficient emphasis to specific and concrete factors and forces underlying alterations in cultural and social life, are relatively limited.[4] Furthermore, we are familiar with the idea of the importance of a market town as a distribution center for an area in bringing about social change and acculturation. This has been recognized, but just how important such a town can be socially as well as commercially—for a relatively isolated traditional community—requires consideration.[5] This is to be expected since the students of the social sciences are primarily interested in more or less durable and abiding changes or general social processes rather than in those changes that are short and transitory in nature.[6] But in order to understand the full import of general and cyclical trends in social change, one must study the nature of the things that are undergoing a transformation as well as forces that are acting to produce and effect changes. From the standpoint of social change, the durable and transitory alterations in social life are two aspects of a single process. So conceived, any cultural and social phenomenon can be said to allocate itself along a continuum.

With reference to change and adaptability J. Masuoka states: "social and cultural phenomena seem to allocate themselves in a kind of continuum, ranging from the most to the least readily transformable. at one end of the continuum are found those organized activities having to do with technology and secular values; while at the other are found those deep seated attitudes, beliefs, sentiments, and ideologies. It is commonplace knowledge and observation that some of these organized activities change more readily than others."[7] This general statement needs to be supplemented with empirical studies.

Regardless of size, location, simplicity, or conservatism, changes constantly take place in a society. One of the factors of greatest importance in cultural change is the dominant concern of a people or the focus of the culture. For in all cultures certain aspects of life are emphasized and the possibilities of alternatives are more readily granted a hearing, as contrasted with elements of culture taken for granted—where suggestions of change, even of relatively slight change, fall on unprepared ground and receive negative reactions. Thus, it would seem that if changes occur in the mode of life of a people, new ways of acting, thinking, and feeling precede or accompany change or acculturation. Learning is the psychological crux of acculturation in that it prepares the individual for participation in a certain way of life. For this process to occur there must be adequate motivation, drives, cues, and rewards. Thus, "one must want something, notice something, do something, and get something."[8] In short, an alteration in the environing conditions of life has its counterpart in the modification of habits, attitudes, and personalities of Negroes on the plantation.

Habits and attitudes of Negroes on the plantation are accepted as more or less different from those of the Negroes in the city. There is a difference in attitudes and conduct between a group of plantation Negroes who have been more strongly influenced by the city way of life than those who have been less affected. What does it really mean when the plantation Negro says that he does not remember old folk tales, but enjoys telling a worldly story? What does it mean when he says that he has no time to sing? What does it mean when a woman says that the burial association is better than the church? What happens to Negro folk songs and the spirituals when the influence of the "juke box" and radio are felt strongly? What happens to the "folk" culture in general when the Negro participates with zest in city life?

THE PROBLEM OF THE STUDY

The chief problem of this study consists in describing and analyzing culture and social changes that have been and are occurring in the Delta, but equally it is the concern of this study to gain insights into the processes of these changes. Thus, the study seeks to discover pertinent factors that create stability in human culture and social life as well as the necessary and sufficient conditions under which modifications in the mode of life of a people take place. This study, by investigating church activities on the one hand and singing and story telling on the other, seeks to determine as far as possible a set of conditions and factors associated with acculturation of the Delta Negroes. Stated somewhat broadly, this study seeks to determine the areas of Negro folk life that are subject to the forces of civilization or the culture of the city.[9]

The hypothesis of this study is: The greater the participation of a people in city life (which means a greater drive to learn city ways of life), the greater is the change in the traditional culture. With the changed conditions of living, there is a greater reward—both economic and social—to be had from accepting new ways than from adhering to

the old ways. In this process of culture change there is a difference; some of the habits are more persistent than others and in some areas of group life social constraints and conservation are more powerful than in other areas. Thus, it would seem that the change is more pronounced in the area of less structuralized human behavior than in the institutionalized, for in this area of human activities fashions and fads have their full sway. In the case of the church, the acculturation is blocked by the vested interest groups and by more enduring group habits and sentiments.

SOURCES AND METHODS OF THE STUDY

Negro sharecroppers on the King and Anderson, a Delta plantation, were studied.[10] Clarksdale, Mississippi was treated as the seat of urban influence. The degree of participation in urban life was measured by the frequency with which the plantation Negroes visit Clarksdale; by the kind and extent of activities in which they participate while in the city; by the number of radios and automobiles that they possess; and, by changes in attitudes toward the city.

Data on folk tales, folk songs and the spirituals were obtained informally through listening in and recording what they told and sang; formally through the interviewing of one hundred individual members of the community.[11] These cooperating individuals gave information on their past and present preferences in the kinds of music, tales and stories. Data on the religious behavior of the Negro were obtained from the ministers and deacons and church members, as well as from others who have lost interest in church going. Additional data on the religious interests were secured by means of participant observation. As to the size of the families; sex, age, and marital composition; educational and economic status; and recreational and other activities of the family members studied were secured by means of family schedules.[12] In addition, by eating and sleeping on the plantation, and by participating in the community activities, the attitudes of the people were observed.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study, though incomplete, seeks to measure the effects of urbanism on the customary modes of behavior of rural Negroes in an area where there still exist many evidences of the sway of traditional life. In a measure this study will reveal what happens to the religious and to the folk expressive behavior of peoples when they come under the influence of city ways.

In order to provide a sufficient proof for the hypothesis of this study, a far more intensive analysis should have been made of the religious and other expressive life of the Negro. Moreover, other areas of changes, particularly the family and the school, should have been studied to show how a change in one area of life affects the other mode of

life. In other words, more comparative studies should have been undertaken. As to the method of study the limitation is obvious. There should have been more quantitative analysis of the change and the case studies should have been more complete to show the dynamic aspect of the folk society in transition.

CHAPTER II
Social Change in the Delta

Lying between the Mississippi and Yazoo Rivers the Delta extends to Memphis, Tennessee in the North and to Vicksburg, Mississippi in the South.[13] It is called "the Delta" because the plain and basin are formed by the alluvial deposits of the Mississippi River. The dwelling units of large plantations, sprawling cotton fields, highways and telephone poles are the most conspicuous features of the scenery. In the Delta counties, over eighty per cent of the agricultural acreage is devoted to the production of cotton.

In 1940 the total population of the Delta was 508,022; of the total, Negroes comprised roughly 362,000 or seventy-two percent.[14] Some of the important characteristics of the present day Negro population in the Delta are: (1) that more than eighty-seven per cent of Negro males are engaged in agriculture; (2) that they are predominantly tenant farmers; and, (3) that they are largely illiterate.

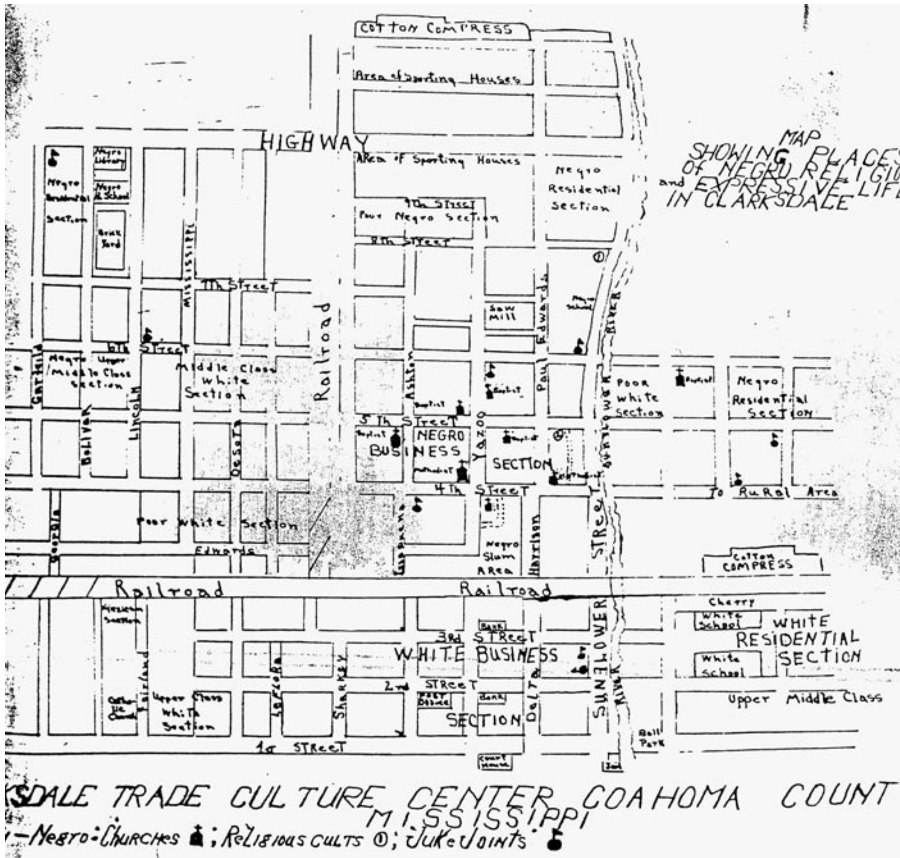
CLARKSDALE

The city of Clarksdale, one of the Delta's trade and culture centers is located in the north-western section of the State of Mississippi. The city is on Federal Highway 61, and is seventy-five miles south-west of Memphis, Tennessee. The population of Clarksdale is roughly 12,000 and of this total 10,000 are Negroes. Since its incorporation in 1882, the population of the city increased steadily. The number of inhabitants in 1890 was around eight hundred, but by the turn of the century the population increased to 1,800. In 1920, there were 7,500 inhabitants; in 1930, 10,000; and in 1940, about 12,000.[15]

The paved highways connect Clarksdale with its hinterland. Here are located the business establishments, schools, and churches. Clarksdale has fifty-one food stores; twenty-two eating places; twenty general merchandise stores; twenty-four clothing stores; eleven automobile dealers and garages; eight household furniture, radio, and electrical appliance stores; five major lumber yards; nine Negro "juke joints"; and nine drug stores.[16] There are eight Negro churches but there are approximately one hundred Negro ministers; many of whom conduct religious services throughout the Delta. In addition there are two cults, namely the Saints and the Jehovah Witnesses.

The main avenues through which the plantation Negroes enter and participate in the city life of Clarksdale are Fourth, Issaquena, and Sunflower streets.

The corner of Fourth and Issaquena Streets on a Saturday Evening

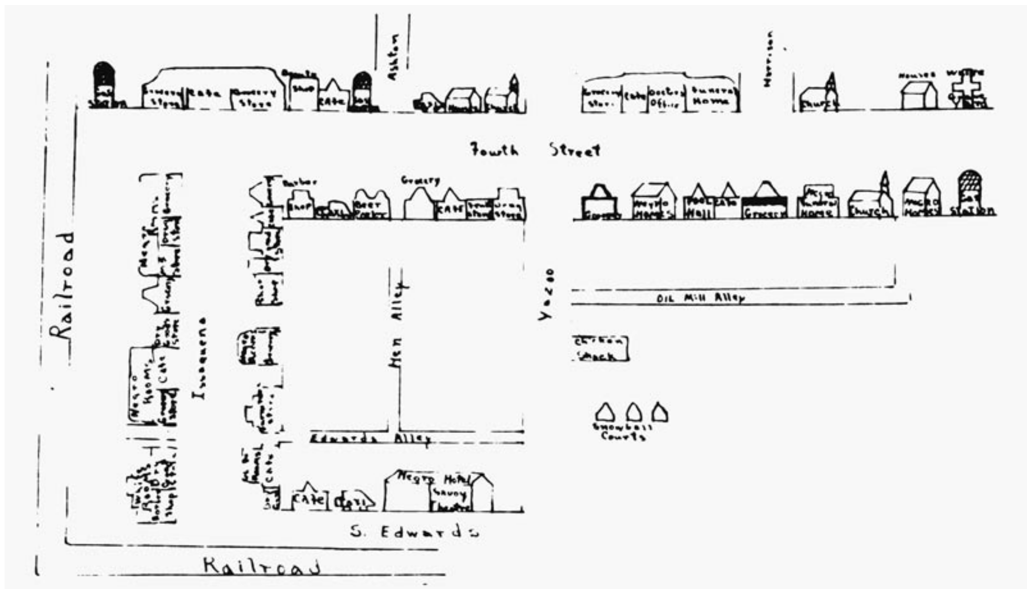


Map of the Physical and Institutional Layout in Clarksdale, Mississippi

Issaquena Street stretches two blocks. Its buildings are mostly one-story brick and frame structures. There are retail drygood and hardware stores, rooming houses, restaurants, and personal service shops. On this street the Negroes move back and forth with little intention of ever buying anything. If they buy anything at all, the purchases will be limited to a few loose cigarettes, bottles of beer, or candies. The music on the street comes chiefly from the "juke boxes" in the restaurants. The Savoy theater is the main attraction on this street.

Where Issaquena ends, Fourth Street begins. In physical appearance the buildings are dull, brick structures. This street has more Negro operated business establishments than any other street, but there are also the Jewish, Italian, and Chinese owned establishments. On this street are located the Dipsie Doodle, the Methodist and Baptist churches, Sanders Drug store, Messenger's pool room and café, the Fourth Street Cab stand, and the G. T. Thomas Block. Messenger's pool room, where Negroes and a few Mexicans play pool or listen to the "juke box" is a favorite stopping place for Negroes. As far as the plantation Negroes are concerned the Dipsie Doodle, a café and beer tavern, is probably the most frequented and popular place. On the opposite side of the Dipsie Doodle are two rather large and impressive Negro churches.

Sunflower Street is the "roughest" of all the streets. The major attraction on this street is "Tommy's Place," since this is the only place in Clarksdale where Negro youth are allowed to dance.



Map of Clarksdale's "Beale Streets"

THE PLANTATION

The King and Anderson plantation occupies a fifteen mile strip of Delta land contiguous to the city of Clarksdale. The U.S. highway runs through its center. Its sharecroppers are Negroes. The plantation is almost treeless, showing the intensive cotton cultivation. The black and fertile soil is beady in texture when dry and is sticky when wet. All this land is under cultivation, save the plots left for the church, the school, the gin, the commissary, and the houses.

In appearance the tenant houses are all alike; they are painted green and trimmed in white. Most of them have two rooms, but there are some with only one room. A typical house is generally bare except for the newspaper on the wall, a stove or fireplace, a table, and an old bed in the corner. Some of the houses have a separate kitchen. In sharp contrast to the tenant houses are those of the overseers. They are painted white and are surrounded by trees, lawn, and shrubbery.

The plantation store is located on the U.S. highway. Both in appearance and in stock it resembles the old "General Store." It is one of the largest buildings on the plantation.

Located about one hundred yards from the highway is the church. Its well built frame structure is painted gray with white trimmed borders. Placed on a wooden frame in the front of the church is a large bell which is used to bring the people together to inform them of deaths in the community as well as other important meetings. The interior of the church is kept neat and clean. There are Sunday School calendars on the wall, several wooden benches and a piano near the pulpit. This building has added functions; it serves as a grade school building and as a community center for the plantation people. Near the church is the agricultural high school for Negroes. It is a frame and brick structure with dormitory space for boys and girls.

There were three hundred and four Negro families on this plantation at the time of this study. One hundred of these families were studied. The mean number of persons living in these families was 3.8 persons per family. Ninety-seven out of the one hundred families stated that the plantation work was their only occupation. For the whole group the average number of years on their present jobs was 9.2 years, but only four families had been on the same plantation all their lives. The average length of residence in the community for all these Negroes studied was 10.7 years. On the average these families cultivated eighteen acres per family while the annual income was about $324.00. The median last school grade completed by heads of the families was 4.4 while for wives it was 5.9.

The King and Anderson plantation, like others in the Delta, is becoming more and more mechanized. Since the day laborers with tractors do all the plowing, the sharecroppers no longer "plow under the land" to lay fallow, or "turn it over in the spring" for planting. Flame weeders, too, are rapidly eliminating the tedious task of hoeing and chopping the crop: within a few hours an airplane sprays the cotton fields. The conse-

A Sharecropper House on the King and Anderson Plantation

quences of the mechanization are many and among them are (1) the losing fight of the sharecroppers who at present merely "watch and tend the crop," (2) the increase in the leisure time, and, (3) the increased accessibility of the Negroes on the plantation to the ways of the city people. For example, fifty families have radios and the urban newspaper is read by thirty families. The most remote section of the plantation is now accessible to the county agricultural and home demonstration agents who bring new ideas and new ways of doing things. There is also the agricultural high school where both the city and rural children come in contact: they come in contact with urban technological artifacts as well as with the teachers who are all city bred.

The plantation Negroes go to the city. Twenty-eight out of the total of one hundred families reported that some members of the families go to Clarksdale at least once in every two weeks while the remaining seventy-two families go to Clarksdale three times a week. Thirty families have automobiles. On Saturday morning the trucks sent by the merchants in Clarksdale bring the plantation Negroes into town. After the cotton picking season is over in January, the plantation Negroes have hardly anything to do till spring.

In addition to general trips to town there are special events or seasons which bring the plantation Negro to Clarksdale. The following are some of the main events:

January	New Year's Celebration
March	Afro Sons and Daughters Convention
April	4H Club Rally, Fireside Exhibits, Ham and Bacon Shows, Easter
May	Field Day (all county schools come and parade), City School Commencement