



Smithsonian

National Museum of Natural History

Guide to the Melville Herskovits films, 1928-1934

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Collection Overview

Repository:	Human Studies Film Archives
Title:	Melville Herskovits films
Date:	1928-1934
Identifier:	HSFA.1977.01
Creator:	Herskovits, Melville J. (Melville Jean), 1895-1963
Extent:	5 Film reels (black-and-white silent) 0.25 Linear feet
Language:	Moving image materials are silent; supplementary materials are in English.

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

These films and related papers were transferred to the National Anthropological Film Center by the Melville J. Herskovits Library of African Studies at Northwestern University in 1977.

Processing Information

Titles are supplied by the archivist for untitled films.

Preferred Citation

Melville Herskovits films, Human Studies Film Archives, Smithsonian Institution

Restrictions

The collection is open for research. Please contact the archives for information on availability of access copies of audiovisual recordings. Original audiovisual material in the Human Studies Film Archives may not be played.

Conditions Governing Use

Contact the repository for terms of use.

Scope and Contents

Edited footage shot in West Africa (1931), Haiti (1934) and Georgia (U.S. ca. 1930) for/by Melville Herskovits. Please note that the contents of the collection and the language and terminology used reflect the context and culture of the time of its creation. As an historical document, its contents may be at odds with contemporary views and terminology and considered offensive today. The information within this collection does not reflect the views of the Smithsonian Institution or Anthropology Archives, but is available in its original form to facilitate research.

Selected Bibliography

- Herskovits, Melville Jean, "Book about Negroes," *The Nation*, (July 15, 1931), 68-69.
- Herskovits, Melville Jean. *Life in a Haitian Valley*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1937.
- Herskovits, Melville Jean. *Dahomey: An Ancient West African Kingdom*. New York: J. J. Augustin, 1938.
- Herskovits, Melville J., and Frances S., *Rebel Destiny: Among the Bush Negroes of Dutch Guiana*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1934.
- Kahn, Morton. *Djuka, The Bush Negroes of Dutch Guiana*. New York: Viking Press, 1931.

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

- Agriculture
- Ashanti (African people)
- Dance
- Fon (African people)
- Music
- Saramacca (Surinamese people)

Cultures:

- Ashanti (African people)
- Fon (African people)
- Saramacca (Surinamese people)

Types of Materials:

- silent films

Names:

- Herskovitz, Frances S. (Frances Shapiro), 1897-1972
- Kahn, Morton C. (Morton Charles), 1896-1959
- Steiner, Ralph, 1899-1986

Places:

- Africa, West
- Benin
- Caribbean Area
- Georgia
- Ghana
- Haiti
- Nigeria
- North America
- South America
- Surinam

Container Listing

Herskovits' Film Study of West Africa, 1931

Film reels (71 minutes; black-and-white silent; 1900 feet)

[Video: Herskovits' Film Study of West Africa video clip](#)

Notes: Footage shot during fieldwork in Dahomey (Benin), Nigeria, and the Gold Coast (Ghana). Documentation of Yoruba, Hausa, Ashanti, and Dahomean culture includes: *elegbara* dancers and an Igun (Egungun) ceremony in Abeokuta, Nigeria; Hausa drummers and praise singers of the Emir of Kano, Nigeria; court scenes and Kwasidei ceremony in Asokore (Gold Coast) honoring a chief's ancestors; market scenes in Abomey, Dahomey; a *dokpwe* (communal work group); Dahomean chief with wives and praise singers; *legba* dancers and drummers and Nesuhwe ceremony honoring ancestors; and various subsistence and craft activities including iron-forging, brasswork, woodcarving, weaving, hoeing and planting.

HSFA 1977.1.1

Herskovits' Film Study of West Africa (Outtakes), 1931

Film reels (2 minutes; black-and-white silent; 41 feet)

Notes: HSFA 1977.1.5

Outtakes from [Herskovits Film Study of West Africa, 1931]. Footage is fragments of scenes including carving, metalworking, women on market day, and dances.

Life In a Haitian Valley Film Study, 1934

Film reels (52 minutes; black-and-white silent; 1400 feet)

[Video: Life in a Haitian Valley video clip](#)

Notes: Footage shot during a three-month field study in the valley and village of Mirebalais, central Haiti. Documentation of Haitian culture includes various subsistence and craft activities (hoeing, planting, marketing, and rope making); a combite or communal work group (known elsewhere in Haiti as the Société Congo) clearing a field; the heading, "dressing," and consecration of an ensemble of *rada* drums by a *pret savanne* (bush priest); sequences from a Vodun ceremony including a rada altar with chromolithographs and the *action de grace* (preliminary segment) of the ritual; and short sequences of social dance styles, including a banda, Congo, and Martinique, performed for the camera.

Marketing market women transportation of produce to market (38-107, 127-200 roll 1) ; Marketing mode of produce transportation donkey baskets, loads on head (38-200 roll 1) ; Markets peasants market women selling makeshift enclosures (227-330 roll 1) ; Dwellings field shelters thatch wattle and daub (1-33 roll 2) ; Agriculture tillage men hoeing fields women planting seed(40-121 roll 2) ; Agriculture tillage use of hoe on tropical soils African retention ; Cooking yard context fire hearths utensils woman tending pots (122-144 roll 2) ; Agriculture tillage communal labor

for clearing field "combite" (149-243 roll 2) ; Drumming tillage, rhythmic accompaniment to "combite" (157-243 roll 2) ; Music palliative to work "combite" (157-243 roll 2) ; Cordage braiding fiber cordage lashings for drumheads (301-385 roll 2) ; Musical instruments drummaking three-part vodun drum ensemble(1-72 roll 3) ; Ritual libations drums baptising the vodun drums (64-80, 185-199 roll 3) ; Ritual religious practices drawing "veve" around tree (201-225 roll 3) ; Ritual pictures of saints (233-240 roll 3) religious practices vodun altar candles ; Ritual religious practices vodun altar flagwaving dancing prostration houngan twirling woman (241-301 roll 3) ; Dancing demonstration man illustrating dance steps kinesics (1-80 roll 4) ; Communication gestures two men talking (81-121 roll 4) ; Games gambling men playing "wari" streetside African retentions (122-201 roll 4) ; Music drumming vodun ; Musical instruments snare and drum (211-216 roll 4) ; Musical instruments hoe blade and metal snare accompaniment to drums (249-52 roll 4) ; Communication gestures kinesics two elite males (283-322 roll 4)

HSFA 1977.1.2

Georgia Shouters, circa 1930

Film reels (37 minutes; black-and-white silent; 900 feet)

[Video: Georgia Shouters video clip](#)

Notes: Footage depicting a Shouter service typical of the Georgia coast and Sea Islands. Footage was taken around the house and yard of a Shouter leader with dances staged for documentation. The dances and movements are part of the Ring Shout tradition, also known as the Saturday night frolic. The elevated wood floor on which some dances are performed is used instrumentally to carry the sound of the dancers' feet. Scenes include members of the group engaged in "seeking" or "getting saved," a "prayer band" singing and dancing at the threshold of a house, and a harvest dance with women "picking crops" and putting them into their aprons and men "shoveling" or "hoeing." The absence of children in the footage probably reflects the fact that the dancers were recreating movements from an earlier period.

Footage was shot by Ralph Steiner.

HSFA 1977.1.3

Saramacca Maroons of Surinam, 1928

Film reels (black-and-white silent; 1438 feet; 16mm)

Notes: HSFA 1977.1.4

Footage shot during a field trip in Dutch Guyana (Surinam). Included are: Maroons poling boats up the Saramacca River, negotiating rapids and shallows; shots in Parimaribo of Creole Blacks in yards; aspects of Creole dress; Saramacca woman winnowing grain; man working on a dugout canoe; natives playing *wari* (a West African game widely distributed in the New World); portaging of large canoes over shallow rapids; village with thatched houses; a *gudu wosu* (man's personal

house) with distinctive carving on door and frontice; natives posing with carved paddles; Maroon playing the *apinti* drum used to telegraph messages from village to village; Lombe village; chief posing in traditional dress; Saramacca crafts--man carving paddle; shrines in Lombe; and the medicine man of Gandy Village.