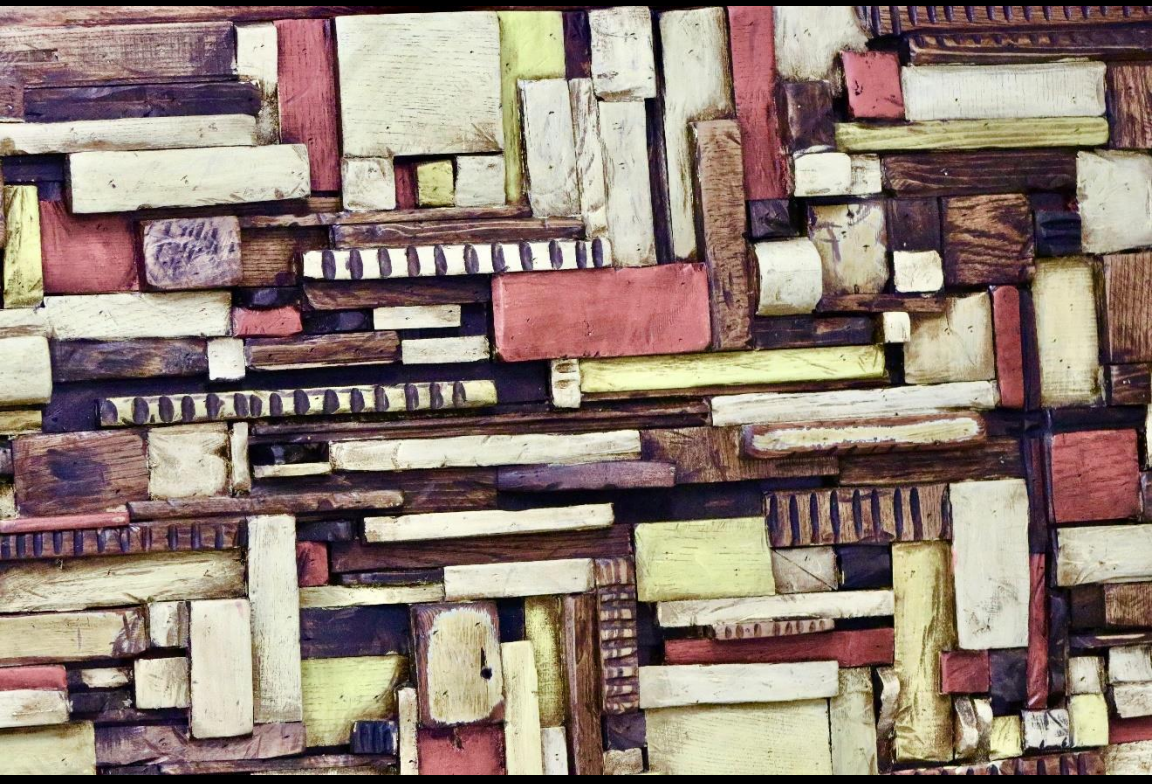
Africana Studies Review



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On the Cover

Detail from a piece of the WOODEN QUILTS™ collection by New Orleans-born artist and Hoodoo Man, Jean-Marcel St. Jacques. The collection is composed entirely of wood salvaged from his Katrina-Damaged home in the Treme section of the city. St. Jacques cites his grandmother—an avid quilter—and his grandfather—a hoodoo man—as his primary influences and tells of how hearing his grandmother's voice whisper, "Quilt it, baby" one night inspired the acclaimed collection. Pieces are now on display at the American Folk Art Museum and other venues.

Read more about St. Jacques' journey beginning on page 75

Cover Photograph by Deanna Gloria Lowman

AFRICANA STUDIES REVIEW

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SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY AT NEW ORLEANS

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ABOUT THE AFRICANA STUDIES REVIEW

The Africana Studies Review (ASR) is an annual publication of the Center for African and African American Studies at Southern University at New Orleans (SUNO), in collaboration with the Office of Title III Program.

The journal solicits research across the entire range of topics encompassing the domain of African and African American Studies (broadly construed). ASR particularly welcomes manuscripts on critical issues in black history, politics, law, education, religion, social organization, economics, creative production, psychology, and sociology, as well as empirical and theoretical papers that advance social scientific research on the global experience of African people.

ASR is a methodologically, multidisciplinary journal that welcomes research on important issues that transcend the boundaries of traditional academic disciplines. It therefore invites interdisciplinary scholarship and commentaries that challenge the paradigms of single traditional disciplines. Work may take the form of an article, essay, or book review. For book reviews, ASR seeks reviews that assess a manuscript's strengths and weaknesses, as well as locating it within the current field of scholarship.

Submission Guidelines

ASR only considers papers not under review or previously published elsewhere. All works are subject to peer review and should conform to the latest American Psychological Association (APA) format.

Full submission guidelines and submission form on our website at www.AfricanaStudiesReview.com

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Introduction to the Spring 2019 Issue

Funlayo E. Wood Menzies

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to this issue of the Africana Studies Review! This is my first issue as managing editor, and I am grateful to our editor-in-chief Dr. Clyde Robertson, the Center for African and African American Studies at Southern University at New Orleans (CAAAS-SUNO), and the editorial board—both seasoned and new members—who have contributed to the issue. I am also thankful to the Center for Black Studies Research at the University of California, Santa Barbara and its director, Dr. Sharon Tettegah, who have supported me as I made the transition into this new editorial position.

This Spring 2019 issue is a conglomeration of diverse pieces of scholarship in Africana Studies, from scholars in ethnomusicology, cultural anthropology, religious studies, legal studies, African studies, and other disciplines focusing on various aspects of Africana spirituality and artistic expression. These two forces—spirituality and art—have been intertwined lifelines for Africana peoples. Our spirituality has sustained us in the best times and through the direst of circumstances, and our ability to express ourselves in unique and instructive ways continues to awe and influence those within and outside of our communities. Where these two intersect we find some of our most enduring and influential forms, from gospel, to drum and dance, to quilting, to spoken and written word, to hip-hop.

We may not think of all of these forms as being "spiritual" per se, as many of us have been taught to subscribe to religion and spirituality as *sui generis* entities that exist only in particular modes and spaces.[1] The Africana ethos, however, is one of "God in everything," so every act is coded spiritual—acts of creation, especially so. To create is to become God, to transcend the immediate and become one with the infinite if only for a moment. Whether through dance, words, thought, images, sculpture, or ritual, the act of creating something that did not exist before—and which

[1] Wood, Funlayo E. "Introduction to the Special Issue, the Color of God: Race, Faith, and Interreligious Dialogue." Journal of Interreligious Studies, no. 23 (2017), 9.

may not ever exist again, in the case of a thought or performance—simultaneously exalts us and grounds us firmly in our humanity.

The contributors to this issue explore various acts of creation and their implications. Fittingly, we open the issue with a case study of the transformative power of the intersections of art and spirituality. In "'Tribute': Negotiating Social Unrest through African Diasporic Music and Dance in a Community African Drum and Dance Ensemble," Lisa M. Beckley-Roberts shares her experience with creating a performance piece in the wake of the extrajudicial killing of Trayvon Martin in 2012. Using Gabelnick's concept of the learning community and her own subjectivity as a professor and mother as lenses, Beckley-Roberts ultimately aims to show how using "global systems of learning along with pre-existing western pedagogical approaches can help create critical thinking students who have a desire to use the skills that they have acquired to address inequality."

Moving from the contemporary into history and back again, Nzinga Metzger posits spirituality as a kind of reserve into which African Americans—and diasporic Africans more broadly—may temporarily escape the harsh realities of racism and marginalization. In her piece, "Still in the Hush Harbor: Black Religiosity as Protected Enclave in the Contemporary US," Metzger traces the history of black religiosity in the US and posits black people in America as still in the Hush Harbor, the sacred space which we created in the face of persecution for our beliefs and our very existence. Drawing on Orlando Patterson's theory of natal alienation, Metzger highlights how religious involvement helped—and continues to help—people of African descent forge identity and avoid social death.

From the hush harbor we zoom in on just one tree as we turn to Ayodeji Ogunnaike's thoughtful analytical piece positing the palm tree as the *axis mundi*—the center point around which the world turns—in Yoruba cosmology. Ogunnaike argues that given the palm tree's central place in Yoruba sacred narrative and ritual, it acts "as a bridge between heaven and earth and that this bridge is used to ensure earth's proper alignment with respect to heaven and the world of the ancestors." In addition to these important spiritual functions, he notes that the palm has real practical value as a source of food and material for living, thus exemplifying the both-and orientation common to many Africana cultures and spiritual systems.

This both-and orientation is further highlighted by this issue's special section entitled Roots, Rocks, and Ring Shouts, the proceedings from the sixth gathering of the African and Diasporic Religious Studies

Association (ADRSA). The ADRSA was founded at Harvard University in 2012 to address the real need for scholars of Africana religions—many of whom are also practitioners—to have a forum in which to dialogue from an emic perspective.

For too long certain aspects of Africana studies have been dominated by scholars who do not represent or hold commitments to the communities about which they are writing. Religion is one area within Black studies which has been subject to domination in two ways: black scholars writing on their own traditions were by and large Christians writing on the black church, and scholars writing on African indigenous religions and their variants were largely white anthropologists—outsiders to both the cultures and traditions on which they were writing. These two realities meant that until recently, most information on "black religion" either centered Christianity or, where it focused on indigenous religions, did so from an exoticized or othered perspective.

The ADRSA has been a proud advocate of and forum for emerging voices—and seasoned ones who, perhaps, have not gotten the respect they deserve within the academy—in the study of Africana religions. Its sixth gathering, its first off Harvard's campus since its founding, aimed to bring African Americans and their contributions to Africana religions and culture to the fore. This is important because although research and dialogue on these rich traditions has increased exponentially in recent years, they are still largely misunderstood and seen in a negative light in American society, and the world, leading to religious discrimination and even surveillance and aggressive policing in communities of practice.

The keynotes and panels included in the symposium addressed these issues and more as they brought together artists, activists, scholars, and practitioners of traditions including Hoodoo, Ifa-Orisa, Akan indigenous religion, and Catholicism. Together, they sought to analyze and honor the "roots" and "rocks"—that is the origins and the most important aspects of—these traditions and think about how to tap into them to spur the continued advancement of Africana peoples.

Opening the symposium on her 70th birthday, New Orleans native, renowned teacher, dancer, storyteller, high priestess, and author of the now classic text *Jambalaya: The Natural Woman's Guide to Personal Charms and Natural Rituals*, Yeye Luisah Teish, offered her reflections on 50 years in African spirituality. From the confirmation slap that only served to

confirm she wanted no parts of Catholicism, to the long-delayed penning of her classic text, Yeye Teish shares moments from her life in her signature candid style and leaves the audience with a charge to fulfill so that she can "die in peace" when the time comes for her to join the ancestors.

The first panel of the day, "(Re)Present: On the Intersections of Art and Spiritual Practice" brought together Baba Marcus Sangodoyin Akinlana, Ikeoma Divine, Sula Spirit, and Jean-Marcel St. Jacques, whose art graces the cover of the issue. They discuss what their respective acts of creativity and creation mean to them and, most directly in the case of St. Jacques, how spirit influenced their creations and helped them to find their way through challenging yet soul-growing situations.

Next, for the panel "Juju Justice: Policing and Black Religions" Aisha Beliso-de Jesús, N. Fadeke Castor, and Alison McCreary share their experiences as scholars and activists of Santeria, Ifa-Orisa in Trinidad, and Candomblé, respectively. They touch on the difficulties that can ensue when law enforcement interacts with communities of practice without proper training as well as the harsh realities of religious discrimination, especially in the case of Brazil. While all agreed that the situation often feels dire, they each expressed hope, and noted their inspiration in the power of community coming together in ritual and in protest—sometimes both at once.

The day's final panel, "Wakanda to Where: Fact, Fiction, and the Way Forward," explored the vision of Wakanda presented in Marvel's record-breaking film *Black Panther*. and how to capitalize on some of that energy to effect real change for Africana people. Scholars of arts and literature and practitioners of Africana spiritualities, Yeyefini Efunbolade, Régine Romain, Anwar Uhuru, and Kokahvah Zauditu-Selassie reflect on this and impart their suggestions for creating a lasting wave. Instructively, Iyalode Yeyefini reminded the audience that a version of Wakanda has existed in the United States, in the famed Oyotunji Village, located in Sheldon, SC.

Although unfortunately not sitting on a deposit of a rare and valuable substance like vibranium, as the only independent African-centered village in the US founded in 1971, Oyotunji stands as a testament to African ingenuity and endurance of spirit as expressed through its founder, Oba Oseijeman Efuntola Adefunmi I and his emissaries. It helped reveal the potential of African Americans coming together to form independent African-centered communities, complete with their own schools and systems of leadership and also revealed the potential pitfalls of the same.

The panel ultimately highlights the importance of expression—true, genuine expression that reveals us to ourselves and to those around us—as it is only through being able to first imagine a thing that we are able to bring it into being.

Closing out the issue is the powerful afternoon keynote delivered by scholar of Yoruba studies and literature, Teresa N. Washington. She tapped into the symposium's theme reminding the audience of the importance of the roots, rocks, and the ring shouts that have sustained and empowered Africana peoples. With the roots, she notes, we made medicine—and poison. The rocks housed our divinities, stood as metaphors for our indestructible spirits, and made handy weapons. And the ring shout, the movement of feet, the clapping of hands, the raising of voice calls the gods down to earth whereby we might become them.

In the act of creation, as in the act of possession, one becomes divine—again, if only for a moment—stepping into that role of Creator normally reserved for the Most High. The longest common thread running through all these pieces is the reminder that we have this potential, that we are divine and powerful. Although many attempts have been made to separate Africana peoples from their divinity and power, it endures, and these pieces and the knowledge and sentiments they engender are the truest testaments.

"Tribute": Negotiating Social Unrest through African Diasporic Music and Dance in a Community African Drum and Dance Ensemble

Lisa M. Beckley-Roberts

On the evening of Sunday, February 26, 2012, Trayvon Martin was murdered. As the details unfolded, it was revealed that he had been wearing a hoodie and therefore looked "suspicious" according to a neighborhood watch coordinator, George Zimmerman; as a result, Zimmerman followed, fought, and then shot Martin. Within a short time, the public developed strong opinions about who was at fault, how police should have responded, and what actions should be taken in regard to George Zimmerman. Florida's "Stand Your Ground" laws came to the forefront of the controversy and American opinions were polarized on the law and how it was being interpreted in this particular case. [2]

On Saturday, July 13, 2013, communities across America anxiously awaited the decision of jurors in the case of the state of Florida versus George Zimmerman in the shooting of Trayvon Martin. Among them were members of the Tallahassee Community College African Drum and Dance Ensemble which was comprised of students, faculty, and community members in Tallahassee, Florida. When the "not guilty" verdict was delivered, mass protests broke out around the country as Florida became the battleground over "Stand Your Ground" laws and Trayvon Martin became the face of civil rights movements such as Dream Defenders and Black Lives Matter. Many people reacted with anger, sadness, and a feeling that their lives (and the lives of their children) held little value in the eyes of those jurors. At the same time, there were others who believed Zimmerman's account of the circumstances, and that the jury had made the correct decision. There were still others who felt ambivalent about the shooting and subsequent trial but were disturbed by the mass protests that began in response to the verdict.

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[2] According to Florida Law 776.013 b Home protection; use or threatened use of deadly force; presumption of fear of death or great bodily harm.— "Deadly force if he or she reasonably believes that using or threatening to use such force is necessary to prevent imminent death or great bodily harm to himself or herself or another or to prevent the imminent commission of a forcible felony."

As a professor and as a mother of a black boy, I was among those who felt angry and sad. I was, however, determined that the work of both of those jobs must include providing tools to critically analyze what had happened, why, and how to move beyond it. It was only through working with members of the African drum and dance ensemble and the leadership team of that group that I was able to articulate my feelings, and connect with the ways that black people had, throughout history, resisted attempts to dehumanize and disenfranchise them. It was from the emotional turmoil that members experienced, the study of resistance movements in the African diaspora, and our collaborative artistic reaction to both of these that we were able to move beyond feeling helpless to being empowered.

Just two days after Martin's shooting, I arrived on the campus of Tallahassee Community College where I was then a professor. I was shaken after having heard the reports but prepared to facilitate a rehearsal of the college's African drum and dance ensemble along with the ensemble's choreographer and artistic director, Mr. Kwame A. Ross. The ensemble at the time was comprised of 20 members that included four community volunteers and ranged in ages from 18 to 70. When I arrived at our normal rehearsal space 15 minutes early, students were waiting for me, which was a highly unusual occurrence. "Ms. B-Rob," one of my students said, "we've been talking, and we think we need to do something about this Trayvon Martin thing! We want to do something in the show for him."

Ross and I conferred and decided to begin our rehearsal with an open discussion about how everyone felt and how they wanted to process the world events within the context of our scheduled end of the semester showcase (the show that they had mentioned). This discussion revealed an array of reactions to the recent events and was an example of the creation of communal healing space where the members of the ensemble could express their ideas, concerns, anger, and confusion; we, as directors of the ensemble and facilitators of the "safe space," listened and remarked only when necessary. From an African-centered perspective, this might be considered the creation of sacred space for individual and communal healing. From a western pedagogical perspective, this was an opportunity

to create a learning community which acknowledged mature learners as taking responsibility for sharing in the task of teaching (Gabelnick, 1990).[3]

The ensemble had a standing goal to produce a show for the end of the semester in which they would use African and African diaspora musical and dance traditions to tell a story. Mr. Ross and I had encouraged students to see what they were doing as a form of artist activism that emphasized the value of these art forms as being equally important to study, from a scholarly and critical perspective, as those from the Western tradition. We had established a practice of seriously discussing the history, efficacy, and performance practice of the music and dance we performed in the ensemble in a way that was reflective of both my own classical music training and Ross' ballet training. Under Ross' artistic direction, our shows had matured significantly and were more polished. But it was not until this event that it became evident that students had clearly come to believe that they were both capable of, and responsible to the community for, making a sociopolitical statement through their artistry.

That day, we began work on a new piece that was born out of our collective fear, anger, and need to do something. While we were uncertain of what it would become or if it would actually make some type of impact, we were certain that it needed to be done. With mine and Ross' African and diaspora dance and choreography, staging and coordination, Akinlana Lowman's contributions of skills in the Afro-Brazilian martial art capoeira,[4] Giltrecia Head's audiovisual and mixed media contributions,[5] and all members' participation and assertions of ideas, we created a work which combined rhythms and movements from capoeira, Afro-Cuban and Congolese Palo, Afro-Haitian Vodoun, Guinean social dance, and

[3] Learning community here refers to a curricular structure in which participants work together to solve a specific problem and/or provide opportunities for students to participate in academic growth. See "Learning Communities: Creating Connections Among Students, Faculty, and Disciplines" in *New Directions in Teaching and Learning* Vol 41.

[4] While Akinlana Lowman, a capoeirista, facilitated the instruction of capoeira other members of the ensemble who helped to develop this choreography were Edward Dorman and Shawn Lawrence.

[5] Giltrecia L. Head, a dancer with the ensemble, is also a graphic designer who created a visual slide show which was projected at the back of the stage and served as a backdrop initially, and later as a focal-point of the presentation.

combined them with imagery and costuming inspired by African American urban life.[6]

About a week into our work, it struck me that what was happening was a distinctly African phenomenological case study into the ways that cultural, collective, and communicative memory works and manifests itself within the context of a community-centered world music performance ensemble. In his book on memory, Maurice Halbwachs (1992) discusses it as a phenomenon that occurs primarily through social interaction. According to Halbwachs, "…it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize and localize their memories" (p. 38). As a group, our collective memory of using artistic expression to negotiate the mutual trauma that we experience as people of color and youth was activated. We found that in an America that has systematically disenfranchised, abused, and later rationalized those behaviors, we could reinvent, or remember, our use of art, as people of the African diaspora.

In the ensemble, we studied and performed music from multiple ethnic groups in Africa and the diaspora and our performances were always based upon the repertoire of movements that were appropriate to be done with particular rhythms (played by drums) or songs. In so doing, we had the opportunity to honor the historical and/or original efficacy of the piece, while making it appropriate for Western audiences through staging and performance practice.[7] Additionally, we reinterpreted the original efficacy of each dance and used it for our contemporary needs. In so doing, we preserved a moment in our collective experience. Carol Muller refers to this as a *living archive*. When discussing the work of Isaiah Shembe, a South

[6] Members of the ensemble continued having open discussions during rehearsals to discuss ways that the piece that we later titled "Tribute" should evolve. As executive director of the ensemble my main contribution was facilitating these discussions, and providing all members a space to hold them, while acquiring the props and necessary supplies to bring their vision to life. My other contributions were, like other members of the ensemble, mainly ideas about how to stage things and voting on whether I agreed with specific ideas. Additionally, I actively participated in multiple heated discussions about how the world events and our artistic reaction to them, were making me feel.

[7] Performance practice refers to the way that a particular piece of music or dance is performed in a particular context. It includes considerations of the original style, efficacy, instrumentation, choreography, and/or costuming.

African who was instrumental in establishing a new form of hymn performance practice in South Africa, she states that, "what Isaiah Shembe did in that moment [of creating the new performance practice] was to create a living archive for holding Africanness as a cultural practice in trust for future generations until such time as it would be reconstituted as a force of power and visible social identity." (Muller, 2002, p. 413) Through the performance of its piece dedicated to Martin, the ensemble, similarly, created an archive of a set of identity specific reactions recorded through African diasporic music, and movement for future generations.

Moreover, this was a basis upon which an examination of the ways that an African approach to education—accessed through collective memory—could successfully become integrated with the liberal arts as a means of creating a more global approach to western education and, in so doing, exhibit the relevance of humanities study in the 21st century. This concept is not completely foreign to the academy: there are numerous studies, and resulting curricula, based upon the creation of learning environments which encourage individual and/or collective democratic learning communities (Jenlink and Jenlink, 2008, p. 311) and collaborative learning initiatives that motivate bi-cultural experiences/models (Duncan and Barber-Freeman, 2008, p. 241). Few, however, focus on the reclamation of cultural identity—specifically an African identity—through the performing arts, as a means of processing traumatic events. Existing curricula and those in development could benefit from incorporating African ideals about the ways that music and the arts can be used to accomplish goals such as: facilitating communal or individual healing, teaching or critiquing a societal norm such as gender performance or expression, or inciting a specific reaction in members of the community.

From a strictly Eurocentric perspective, art exists primarily for art's sake, to be consumed and enjoyed by the *superculture*. In African, Indiginous American and most other global cultures, however, art serves a purpose and there is an efficacy to artistic expression. Furthermore, while communal and individual mental health are not commonly related to processes of cultural and communicative memory in our institutions of higher learning, such consideration may prove productive. The African drum and dance ensemble used the construction and performance of the "Tribute" piece to process feelings about Trayvon Martin's death and the acquittal of his murderer and made a conscious attempt to depart from the Eurocentric model in response to a desire to align with a perceived African approach to art. Operating with the understanding that art can serve a

specific purpose and be efficacious in healing trauma, is invaluable for institutions which serve young people, men and women of color, members of the African diaspora, and other underrepresented populations. These populations, who are disproportionately suffering from trauma-induced depression, and other forms of mental health distress, can benefit from the adoption of identity affirming models of education that are not traditionally a part of the education system of the society in which they live, as did the members of the ensemble.

The performance, which consisted of music, dance, theatrics, and audiovisual projections displayed before a live audience was akin to art in ritual context in Africa. Art historian Rowland Abiodun is worth quoting at length to shed light on this context:

> An important aspect of verbal and visual arts in ritual contexts in Africa is the way they affect their audience, initiate and non-initiate alike. Often achieved through a careful choice and arrangement of a range of sculptures, objects, colors, sounds, phrases, and incantations, these artistic devices, whether they exist as assemblages or simply by themselves in sacred settings, confront the researcher in the field with an enormously complex religio-aesthetic experience. This scenario does not lend itself easily to straightforward ethnographic description, translation and analysis, especially if we rely solely on terminologies and/or theoretical constructs derived from the traditionally relevant academic disciplines of art history, psychology, philosophy and anthropology as defined and practiced in the West. The methodological challenges arising from this situation create, however, an opportunity to explore afresh African conceptual systems and oratory for new and contextually relevant theoretical alternatives. This exercise is most likely to advance the study of art in general, as it promises to add the badly-needed dimension of "soul" to a still essentially formalist, self-referential and Western-modernist approach to African art and aesthetics (Abiodun, 1994, p. 309).

Like Abiodun, I am interested in the revising and advancing the framing of African attitudes and approaches to performance in Western ethnographic descriptions and analysis, and believe it efficacious to study these phenomena and, importantly, to understand them in their intended context. Further, in an effort to affirm diasporic identity and collective memory, as well as to assist participants—both the performers and the audience—in communal processing of Martin's murder, I also aimed to apply many of these attitudes and approaches to my Western liberal and performing arts pedagogy. Although the goal was not to turn the classroom or stage into "religious" spaces, I acted with the clear intent of creating a *ritual* space[8] in which emotions surrounding the event (grief, anger, and a call to action principal among them) would be honored. Adding to the communal nature of the exercise, we intended to pull the audience into the performance and offer them an opportunity to reflect upon their feelings about the event. In this way, our goals were similar to those Abiodun observed in Nigeria among the Yoruba, whereby art is meant to impact audience members—both those who sympathized with Martin and those who felt more sympathetic towards Zimmerman.

In a separate article on African aesthetics, Abiodun discusses oral traditions and their role in preserving and disseminating culture noting, "Oral traditions will become a highly efficient means of studying culture, retrieving history and reconstructing artistic values. Used properly, oral traditions will reveal forgotten meanings that would be difficult or even impossible to obtain even from the cooperative informant" (Abiodun 2001, 16). Oral transmission was our primary method of transferring the material to students, contextualizing each of the components of the performance (rhythms, accompanying choreography, songs, and visuals)[9], and the final performance itself. There was no use of notation to teach musicians, dancers, or other participants, instead they learned by watching, listening, and doing, and we aimed not to entertain and to communicate meaning through our performance. In this way, we consciously placed ourselves

[8] In this context, ritual space refers to a place which through music and dance was set aside from the surrounding area and used to achieve common goals that included spiritual uplift.

[9] It is important to note that we used African, Afro-Haitian, Afro-Brazilian and Afro-Cuban rhythms which each contain a specific repertoire of dance steps. This performance was not an Afro-modern one which blends forms to achieve a specific effect. Rather, each piece was choreographed with traditional dance steps.

along a continuum of preservers of oral tradition from West Africa throughout the diaspora, embodying and archiving our interpretations in movement and song. Like many African-inspired diasporic art forms, most notably hip-hop, we created a piece of art that preserved a moment in American history. A piece of art that presented our localized experience in Tallahassee, Florida, the capital of the state Trayvon Martin was from and in which, George Zimmerman killed him.

The African drum and dance ensemble featured an accompanying academic component, the format and structure of which was based on my own experiences with fieldwork. I had spent years studying and producing an ethnography on the transfer of knowledge in the African American Lucumí religious system and the ways that music, dance, and chant serve as conduits for knowledge acquisition in the religion. Lucumí or *La Regla de Ocha* is a diasporic manifestation of the *Orisha* religious system that originates among the Yoruba in southwest Nigeria.[10] My work has afforded me the opportunity to study with elders in the tradition from the United States, Cuba, and Nigeria, and I have spent extensive times in Lucumí, Ifa and Orisha communities in Florida, New York, South Carolina, Belize, as well as a short period studying the religion in various parts of Nigeria. It was during that study that an elder once told me, "Elders can see sitting down what children cannot see standing." The elder shared this Yoruba proverb to explain why I was not able to understand a concept until I had spent a significant amount of time studying with an elder and learning by actively participating in my own education as a part of a larger community.

In these settings, I observed learning as an active communal process that takes place under the tutelage of a respected elder. Participatory practice of skills and constant critical reinforcement of details—rather than exams or simple recitation of steps—is the method by which elder instructors ensure students' mastery. This mode of information transmission produced students who confidently demonstrated higher order critical thinking skills as well as the ability to apply familiar and non-familiar methodology and theories to new situations. I saw an example of this when students of Lucumí elders I was observing were able to critically analyze

[10] Orisha are deities which are viewed as manifestations of the Creator that can be observed in nature and have influence over human matters.

the details of herbs which with they were unfamiliar, to identify the family of herbs they came from, and to then make correct assumptions about their use within the context of rituals after having been taught about the herbs using this participatory model.

After observing the teaching and learning styles of various Lucumí practitioners over the years and seeing their positive results, I began to apply some of their methods to teaching students in my ensembles and classes. Initially, I simply incorporated more student-led discussions and workshops into my courses and ensembles. But events in the world and in my own state at the time—Martin's death being the most notable but far from the only traumatic public event during my tenure— I determined that it was also my responsibility to create more opportunities for critical application of music and cultural analysis to current events. Thus, I first actively worked to instill analytical skills as I taught them about the events of the past, and then encouraged them to apply those skills to current events; I refer to this approach as "contemporary informed historiography." However, it is only the case in Western educational environments, and those systems influenced by the west, that active learning, which considers the impact of a learner's experience and their environment, as not impacting their understanding of history. Moreover, I have come to believe that active learning from this perspective is the most effective means by which to produce students who are critical thinkers.

For my students in African drum and dance class and ensemble, most with little or no dance experience, we studied the Haitian revolution, the use of music and dance as a tool for resistance throughout the diaspora, and we discussed how rhythms, songs, and movements from the Palo tradition in Congo were often used by people in first in Haiti (and later in Cuba) to inspire bravery and awaken ancestral spirits to help people fight against the injustices of enslavement and eventually to begin a revolution in Haiti that would become a beacon of hope to African descendants throughout the Americas.

Upon the realization that young Trayvon Martin had been slain for being suspicious looking, for defending himself against an adult man who was following him, and that this man would not be held accountable by the law, students began to discuss ways that pieces that could be used in a suite to be our own protest and political statement. They began to apply familiar repertoire to a new and unfamiliar circumstance. Furthermore, rehearsals became highly charged sessions often including tears and disagreements.

Mr. Ross and I often felt the need to stop and discuss what was happening and triggering these emotions and he developed methods of fueling emotions and/or diffusing them through movement and music. Students explored varying opinions and feelings of the work of the then infantile Black Lives Matter Movement and compared and contrasted that with the work that had been done by figures from the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

Finally, each of the components of what we had learned, as a community, were linked together in the "Tribute" suite performed on April 24, 2012. The suite consisted of four pieces. The first piece used an excerpt from a bell pattern used in music in the Cuban Palo tradition that we called "Preparation." We intended it to work as a summoning of courage in the same way that Haitians had used music as a part of their preparation for the revolution. Several dancers began by entering the stage dressed in all white, as were all of the performers, and they began tapping out a Palo rhythm with drum sticks on the floor while moving counter-clockwise in a circle. Drummers played the rhythm on the edges of their drums rather than on the drum head which created a more brittle timbre. The dancers were joined at center stage by three men who had been drumming before but left their instruments and began performing the Afro-Brazilian/Angolan martial art *capoeira*. Capoeira, when first performed in Brazil in the 16th century, combined elements of dance and fighting skills in order to disguise its use as a form of fighting and training for combat. As such, its performance is often referred to as "playing." Three men engaged in the performance, which was marked by one man stepping forward to begin a series of very complex moves including kicks and spins. After this solo, each of the three stood completely still as three women danced onto stage and placed red hoodies on the men. These were put onto them forcefully and with the intent of encouraging them to stop "performing" capoeira as play, but rather to function as men in defense of the community's women and children. Once the men had the hoodies on, another dancer entered stage wielding two machete. As she danced around the men, she raised the machete over the men's heads and proceeded to "purify" them with the weapons through her movements which traced their body's outline. This, again, was a symbolic pre-war act.

It was at that point that those three drummers returned to their drum, and along with the entire instrumental section (four other percussionists), they began playing the selection "Nago." "Nago," an Afro-Haitian rhythm

and dance, is performed in honor of the deity Ogou associated with battle in the Haitian vodou tradition. Dancers performed steps that mimicked marching into battle and intimidating opponents. They moved aggressively but slowly with machetes in hand. As the "Nago" dancers exited the stage the rhythm that the drummers played changed abruptly to "Mayi." This Afro-Haitian rhythm was much faster, and the movements emphasized speed, agility, and precision. Finally, the work ended with the piece Petwo which also has its roots in Haiti. Historically, this piece reflects the nature of spirits who have undergone cruelty and who work to not only bring justice but do so in a "by any means necessary" fashion. As the rhythm of Petwo began, dancers walked onto stage now donning red hoodies over their all-white attire. Together, they solemnly pulled the hoods over their head on a drum cue. They then proceeded to begin dancing in synchronization the "Petwo" dance which includes movements that mimicked punching, digging in the earth, and fighting. As the dance ended a slide show was projected at the rear of the stage featuring images of Emmit Till, African American lynch victims, and finally morphing to Trayvon Martin.

"Tribute" was a powerful work whose construction and performance impacted each performer and audience member differently. It became the most discussed, complimented, and well-received piece of that show and, since then, it has remained one of the most important pieces the ensemble ever performed because it represented a point in the ensemble's history whereby its mission developed into art activism with student-directed, socially relevant show themes. "Tribute" illuminated to the students, community members, and the directors of the ensemble that the study of African diasporic music and dance can directly contribute to the creation of critical thinkers and socio-politically aware students and can also act as a conduit for the expression of important ideas and sentiments.

African and African diasporic performance traditions have the potential to inspire more opportunities for critical thinking in college students and communities. Moreover, the application of principles from knowledge transfer in African society and the diaspora may serve as valuable model in the creation of learning communities and student-led active learning. The inclusion of education approaches from Africa also imbue students of African descent with a means of developing a strong sense of identity situated within a lineage and pattern of self-awareness. In addition, the inclusion of these models for education promote cultural and collective memory. Finally, it cannot be emphasized enough the degree to

which all liberal arts, but especially the performing arts, have the potential to assist students in negotiating individual and communal trauma.

Reframing the definition of the liberal arts to include models of global systems of learning along with pre-existing western pedagogical approaches may create critical thinking students who have a desire to use the skills that they have acquired to address inequality. At the same time, it has the potential to facilitate higher quality student and community experiences that are meaningful and force students to interact differently with the world and society in which they exist.

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Still in the Hush Harbor: Black Religiosity as Protected Enclave in the Contemporary US

Nzinga Metzger

Loss. Loss of land, loss of connection, loss of language, loss of family, loss of name, loss of personhood-these and more compose the long list of precious intangibles of which countless Africans were dispossessed during the centuries-long atrocity that was the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade.

More than a crime perpetrated against nameless, faceless masses, the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade was one violence at a time, visited on one person at a time millions of times over. Mothers, fathers, grandparents, sisters, brothers, playmates, best friends, doctors, masons, carpenters, favorite aunts, cooks, priests, farmers, blacksmiths, fabric dye—all suffered, one by one, the unimaginable terror of being ripped from their homelands, traveling thousands of miles in putrid ships, and being forced to work for strangers for free. Meanwhile the families, friends, and loved ones they left behind also individually suffered and struggled with the absence of those ripped away from them and their families. The sorrow wrought by this era of the history of the Americas is unquantifiable, the psychological trauma-abysmal, the effects, rippling seemingly unendingly down the vagaries of time, space, and history to the present.

This monstrous abuse, along with the almost complete genocide of the indigenes of the Americas are the skeletons in the closet in the story of the founding of the "modern" Americas. So intense and lasting was the ongoing physical and psychological violence endured by enslaved Africans that survival and resistance became permanent and prevalent themes in the black cultures that would emerge in the Americas. These cultures and the sociocultural forms that compose them not only aided people of African descent in surviving the slavery era, but those eras of oppression which succeeded it. One of those forms, the black church continues to serve people of African descent in ways that manifest as a continuity of the original purpose it served during this difficult time. Herein we will discuss the roots of this institution and how it continues to serve African Americans in the contemporary U.S.

Though much is known about the physical violence done to the bodies of people of African descent during the American slave-owning era, less is known and discussed about the immaterial enslavement on the minds and

spirits of the enslaved because they were largely disallowed from reading and writing to record their own thoughts and feelings. In his work on natal alienation, Orlando Patterson provides insight into the existentially annihilating forces enslaved African people faced as they daily struggled to survive as people who did not own themselves living under the constant threat of state sanctioned violence. Patterson notes that the enslaved existed in a state of permanent non-personhood that he called "natal alienation." For him, natal alienation

> goes directly to the heart of what is critical in the slave's forced alienation, the loss of ties of birth, in both ascending and descending generations. It also has the important nuance of a loss of native status, of deracination. It was this alienation of the slave from all formal, legally enforceable ties of 'blood', and from any attachment to groups or localities other than those chosen for him by the master, that gave… slavery its peculiar value to the master (Patterson 1982).

Patterson further describes New World slaver as "the permanent, violent domination of natally alienated and generally dishonored persons" (1982).

As I have discussed elsewhere, this domination stripped individuals of power in general but the loss of the specific power to define themselves in relation to their immediate surroundings was keenly acute. By being natally alienated—outside the land of birth with no hope of return—the captive individual forfeited all rights and responsibilities to kin, living and dead. He or she was socially dead. It is extremely important, then, to fully understand the degree to which one's freedom and personhood were linked to one's kinship ties within the context of African philosophies (Metzger 1999).This logic becomes extremely important with reference to the peoples victimized by the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade victimized because, in many of the cultures from which the enslaved were removed, nationlessness essentially meant loss of identity:

> These then are the features of an African tribe, people, society or nation. A person has to be born a member of it, and he or she cannot change tribal membership. On rare occasions he can be adopted ritually into another tribal group, but this is seldom done and applies to both Africans and non-Africans...The deep sense of kinship, with all it

> implies, has been one of the strongest forces in traditional African life. Kinship is reckoned through blood and betrothal. It is kinship which governs social relationships between people in a given community. It governs marital customs and regulations, it determines the behavior of one individual towards another...The kinship system is like a vast network stretching laterally (horizontally) in every direction to embrace everybody in any given local group. This means that each individual is a brother or sister, father or mother, grandmother or grandfather...The kinship system also extends vertically to include the departed and those yet to be born (Mbiti: 1970 101-102).

Thus, beyond the struggle to simply remain alive in a society wherein one was wholly expendable outside one's ability to produce labor, the enslaved person had to struggle against existential erasure—to fight simply to *be.* African peoples in the Americas invented several social technologies to mitigate this ongoing and relentless attack on their bodies, their humanity and their personhood. They developed modes of behavior that fooled slaveowners into believing they were stupid or incapable of understanding in order to avoid physical violence or overwork. They created new family ties that would anchor their existence and affirm their personhood. Finally, to respond to the metaphysical and spiritual assault against their minds, they crafted a metaphysical and spiritual response: They created religious institutions which affirmed their experiences, their outlooks on the cosmos, and their place in it. Those religious institutions and their role in sheltering, affirming, renewing, edifying and strengthening black people are the concern of this paper. Slave religious institutions had to do the profound work of psychologically and spiritually rebuilding people who had suffered mental trauma and whom were under ongoing psychological attack. The religio-spiritual practices of the enslaved had to provide avenues for renewal, healing, self-defense, support, empowerment, resistance, and escape, even if only temporary.

It is important to note here that these early practices of African and creole North American blacks would not have been Christian. Rather than being forced to convert as soon as they arrived in North America, Africans and their descendants in North America were intentionally kept from Christianity well into the 1700s. Raboteau notes that masters "…objected to slave conversion because they believed that Africans were too 'brutish' to be instructed (1978:100). Because of this, little progress was made in

converting the slave population to Christianity for the first 120 years of black slavery in British North America, (Raboteau 1999:24). Raboteau explains further:

> British Americans resisted religious instruction of their slaves because they suspected that it was illegal under British law to hold a fellow Christian in bondage. If this were true, baptizing a slave would in effect free him, contrary to the slaveowner's economic interest. Colonial legislators solved the problem by passing decrees that baptism had no effect upon the status of the baptized in regard to slavery or freedom. Despite the legislation, British American slave owners remained suspicious of teaching Christianity to slaves because they believed that becoming Christian would raise the slaves' self-esteem, persuade them that they were equal to whites, and encourage them to become rebellious (1999:21).

Raboteau also notes that British-American Protestants were also apprehensive about including Africans in the fellowship of Christian community as they felt it would "blur the cultural and social distinctions that an effective system of slavery required" (1999:22). Importantly and complementarily, the majority of enslaved Africans were themselves loathe to convert. Ira Berlin and Albert Raboteau agree that well into the 18th century a great number of enslaved persons were not Christianized by virtue of their own preference. Berlin explains: "Few plantation slaves accepted Jesus or even knew his name. In the countryside, they remained 'as great strangers to Christianity, and as much under the influence of Pagan darkness, idolatry and superstition, as they were at their first arrival from Africa.' What plantation slaves knew about European-American life did not encourage them to learn more." (Berlin 1998:172)

Thus, effectively, for approximately the first 120-150 years of their presence in North America as enslaved and semi-free people, people of African descent were largely left to their own devices with regard to religion. Ira Berlin gives insight to the phenomenon of neo African cultural genesis which was taking place during the time period when slaves were

largely discouraged and restricted from converting to Christianity and were also rejecting the few efforts that were initiated to convert them:

> The rejection of Christianity was just one manifestation of the reorientation of black culture stimulated by the importation of African slaves. Newly arrived Africans, although a minority of black society, had a powerful effect on the native black population, infusing it with knowledge of Africa and African ways. Sometimes it was just the presence of African men and women walking the streets of northern cities and the byways of the northern countryside, bearing ritual scars and speaking the language of a land most black northerners knew only from second and third-hand accounts. At other times, newly arrived Africans reawakened black Americans to their African past by providing direct knowledge of West African society...African Americans soon began to combine their African inheritance with their own evolving culture. In some measure, the easy confidence of white northerners in their own dominance speeded the synchronization of African and creole cultures by allowing black men and women to act far more openly than slaves in the plantation colonies. Black northerners incorporated African ways in the silent and unconscious ways that generally characterizes the transit of culture... (Berlin 1998:190)

Not only were creole African-based beliefs and practices on a developmental trajectory where they were being molded by at least a hundred years of presence in North America; they were also continuously being affected by African arrivals and being maintained by people who were mostly not interested in conversion to Christianity.

It is difficult to know exactly what these heterogeneous religo-spiritual practices would have looked like. There were likely multiple strains of belief and ritual converging and diverging with each other, being exchanged among the enslaved with their movement from one place to another—via sale or escape—and being reinfused with the aforementioned "fresh" Old World beliefs with the introduction of newly captive continental Africans to African American populations. Because of the subversive and intentionally clandestine nature of these practices, what took place was frequently outside the purview of slaveowners and thus not very well documented. Detailed descriptions of slave religious practices do not appear

until the late 18th century and early 19th century when conversion efforts were launched more vigorously, and missionaries made a point of observing and recounting what they saw in the course of their efforts to Christianize the enslaved. There are, however, other sources which point to the nature of the repertoire of slave religio-spiritual beliefs and practices. For example, exhaustive work on conjure, and hoodoo, or traditional African American folk beliefs, and magic has been done by authors such as Harry Middleton Hyatt, Newbell Niles Pucket, Zora Neale Hurston and others.

Other work that has contributed to both an acknowledgement and an understanding of the religio-spiritual lives of the enslaved before the Great Awakening can be found in the field of archaeology where sites like the African Burial Ground in Manhattan, New York and the Carroll House in Carrollton, Maryland provide an ever growing archaeological record of evidence that African Americans exhibited a religio-spiritual outlook on the world authored by themselves and heavily influenced by African belief systems. These beliefs were in the process of being reshaped into new forms over the duration of their existence in the North American colonies and later the United States.

Laurie A. Wilkie asserts that "The abundance and breadth of material leaves no doubt that enslaved African, then African-American, families and communities created secret and sacred landscapes, separated and internally constructed, but still sometimes influenced by the spiritual lives of European and Native Americans." (Wilkie 1997:81) Importantly, Wilkie acknowledges the fact that these traditions are not evolving in a vacuum but in a context within which they influence and are influenced by the cultures with which they come into contact. Most notably for our purposes, she stresses that artifacts found in pre-Great Awakening African America are imbued with African symbology and, as such, the archaeological evidence for these spiritual systems is preponderant. Further, she advises that the artifacts be studied diachronically and in relation to their cognates in Africa to lend context to the purposes for which they were created and used.

Based on the work of archaeologists like Wilkie, Michael Blakey and the aforementioned anthropologists, folklorists and other social scientists, it is indisputable that a North American African American religio-spiritual reality—indelibly shaped by African ideas—exists. These first worship spaces and practices were neo African creations based on Old World values applied to New World circumstances of displacement, slavery and oppression. This is an important point which will be revisited with regards

to the development of the black church and its role in contemporary African American life.

Here, it is important to spend some time discussing the basis for the structure of these early religious practices which would later coalesce into what social scientists refer to as the "invisible institution" of slave religious practice and later, the "Black Church." From the time that Africans were taken from Africa and arrived on the shores of the Americas, witnesses and perpetrators of their fate have argued about the nature of Africans and their culture(s). Many who sought to justify the atrocities in which they participated insisted that Africans had no real cultures and histories to speak of, that Africans were little better than animal-like brutes for whom slavery was an advance. Others argued that even if there was such a thing as African culture, it was base and uncivilized. Others, still, argued that it was impossible that the people they held in captivity could not have had anything in common with each other upon which to build anything culturally meaningful together outside Africa (Herskovits 1941:1).

The goal of the popular narrative of which the preceding ideas were a part was to negate the agency of African people and their ability to create anything of cultural coherence or value. In their work, *The Birth of African American Culture*, Sidney Mintz and Richard Price build on the work of Melville Herskovits to provide a cogent foundation for debunking this myth by providing a framework for understanding how any type of cohesive world view or set of beliefs could emerge from such a diverse group of peoples as those from whom African captives were taken and brought to the Americas. They acknowledge that West African cultures are similar as a result common origins or perhaps even millennia of contact (Mintz and Price 1976:9). But rather than asserting that these similarities exist as a result of static or fixed sameness, they assert that observable similarities among many African cultures exist not because people are replicating each other's sociocultural forms, but because of deeper pre-existing structural commonalities.

They assert:

> An African cultural heritage, widely shared by the people imported into any new colony, will have to be defined in less concrete terms, by focusing more on values, and less on sociocultural forms, and even by attempting to identify unconscious "grammatical" principles, which may underlie and shape behavioral response…we would call for an

> examination of basic assumptions about social relations (what values motivate individuals, how one deals with others in social situations, and matters of interpersonal style), and on the other, basic assumptions and expectations about the way the world functions phenomenologically (for instance, beliefs about causality, and how particular causes are revealed) (1976:9).

They continue:

> Similarly, the comparative study of people's attitudes and expectations about sociocultural change (e.g., orientations to ward "additivity" in relation to foreign elements, or expectations about the degree of internal dynamism in their own culture) might reveal interesting underlying consistencies (1976:10).

Finally, they explain:

> …the notion of a shared African heritage takes on meaning only in a comparative context, when one asks, what, if any, features the various cultural systems of West and Central Africa may have had in common. From a transatlantic perspective, those deep-level cultural principles, assumptions, and understandings which were shared by Africans in any New World colony—usually an ethnically heterogeneous aggregate of individuals—would have been a limited though crucial resource. For they could have served as a catalyst in the processes by which individuals from diverse societies forged new institutions, and could have certain frameworks within which new forms could have developed (1976:14).

For Mintz and Price, it is not the actual socio-cultural practices and forms from Africa that enslaved peoples replicated, it is the values that formed those forms that Africans brought with them that allowed for the creation of neo-African sociocultural forms in the Americas. It is also important to illuminate that one of the very values or subconscious perspectives many enslaved Africans may have shared would have been their inclusionary and flexible nature. Upon contact with others, African spiritual systems were

and able to incorporate and adapt to new deities, concepts and practices. This characteristic malleability would have been an important contributing factor in the development of new African-based traditions and beliefs in the Americas.

Closer to the mid-1700s more and more slave owners finally saw the utility in allowing, encouraging or even forcing their slaves into Christianity. They actively proselytized their slaves into a brand of Christianity which espoused slave docility and acquiescence to their lot. As a result of their efforts, more and more enslaved people were exposed to Christian doctrine. Large waves of enslaved people would have been converted through the fervor of the First Great Awakening which saw revivals sweeping the colonies:

> The conversion of slaves in large numbers was a product of a period of religious revivals that swept parts of the colonies beginning in 1739. These extended meetings of prayer and preaching stirred intense religious emotion among crowds of people and led many to experience conversion. Leaders of revivals made special mention of the fact that blacks attended their gatherings in larger numbers than seen before. Not only did free blacks and slaves attend revivals, they also took active part in services, praying, exhorting, and preaching. Revivals succeeded where earlier effort failed… (Raboteau 1999:24).

This new type of Christianity, with its expressiveness and emotionalism made it more accessible to slaves than the earlier efforts at catechizing them which relied heavily on memorization. Having been more widely exposed to Christianity and embracing it, blacks sought to congregate in group worship. However, living in constant fear of rebellion, whites forbade people of African descent from meeting, even for religious purposes. Their fears would not prove unfounded as religious meetings often served as the pretense under which slaves gathered to plan rebellions. The attempts of Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner and the Haitian Revolution were proof of this. Thus, in some cases, slaves would have attended the worship services with whites, where the efforts to indoctrinate them to accept their servitude would have been primary. It was under these circumstances that enslaved people created their own clandestine religious

spaces. Under potential pain of severe punishment, many enslaved and semi free people developed an "invisible institution" of worship where they could interpret Christian gospel in terms of their own experiences, spiritual needs, and beliefs and be free of white scrutiny. These worship secret spaces were called "hush harbors."

Though there were probably countless subconscious values or categories of significance of which Mintz and Price spoke that shaped the sociocultural forms, practices, and traditions of the enslaved, here we are mainly concerned with those that would have directly impacted their religio-spiritual customs and rites. One such a value would have been the persistence of the value of the "sacred grove." Sacred places in nature figure prominently in many West African religio-spiritual systems. In many traditional African spiritual systems, which may be independently polytheistic, pantheistic, animistic, animatistic, monotheistic or combinations of all or some of these at once, places in nature have the potential to be imbued with the energy of a specific spirit or deity or with the energy of an impersonal force which makes the place special or sacred. Rivers and other bodies of water, mountains, specific trees, caves and many other places in nature could potentially be held as sacred but here, the focus is on the "sacred grove."

The sacred grove figures prominently in religio-spiritual traditions throughout the Africa. Superficially, the sacred grove is a physical place distinguished by the fact that it provides a forested enclave for the enactment of sacred ritual activities. More esoterically, the grove is metaphorical also a spiritual "place" where humans and deities interact and for some, it may also a place where spiritual dimensions overlap or where one leaves the mundane and enters spiritual realms, often to return to the mundane transformed.

In this context it is not difficult to hypothesize that, for a people for whom nature was often viewed as sacred and as an appropriate locale for the enactment of ritual, a "hush harbor" would have been a logical and even ideal place for the conduct of Christian and syncretic religio-spiritual practice: The "hush harbor" was the African American sacred grove.

At times, these hush harbors would have been literal places in nature. At other times necessity called for caution and ingenuity: Raboteau explains, "Slaves devised several techniques to avoid detection of their meetings. One practice was to meet in secluded places—woods, gullies,

ravines, and thickets (aptly called "hush harbors"). Kalvin Woods remembered preaching to other slaves and singing and praying while huddled behind quilts and rags, which had been thoroughly wetted "to keep the sound of their voices from penetrating the air" and then hung up "in the form of a little room," or tabernacle (Raboteau 1978). At these times, it would have been the actions of the enslaved, the rituals, the physical closeness, dancing bodies, singing voices, quietly clapping hands and the invocation of the divine that would have transformed a cramped cabin into a sacred grove.

Thus, the "hush harbor" or "brush arbor" could be either a physical place in nature or a metaphorical space created in cramped quarters by people of African descent, both enslaved or free, in North America during and after the U.S. slavery era to address their particular psychological and spiritual needs. In situations where people were not free to go to an actual grove in nature, the creation of sacred grove space would have occurred through the closeness of bodies joined in focus and purpose and through the performance of ritual and/or worship. The shielding, encompassing, transformative and sacred nature of this kind of space cannot be overlooked. Much like their correlates in Africa, the very performance of ritual and worship in these places would have sanctified them, making them special-deepening the symbolism and efficacy of their ability to transform and aid participants.

These hush harbors would have been no less transformative in the Americas than sacred groves would have been in Africa: Enslaved Africans would have needed these spaces in order to help them neutralize the psychologically and spiritually annihilating effects of slavery. These spaces, even when temporary, would have been "safe spaces," places where slaves and freemen could undergo catharsis, release, express and release grief or anger and gird themselves mentally and spiritually to return to the outside world where they were basically non-persons. The religious practices of the enslaved that took place in these African and creole created sacred spaces helped Africans and their descendants to resist and neutralize the onslaught of material and immaterial forces that sought to existentially negate them. In these enclosed, intimate, spaces, "the Spirit" moved and enslaved Africans likely danced the "ring shout," prayed, received visions, caught the "holy ghost," had conversion experiences, and prayed for freedom. This space allowed them to reconnect with each other, with what they believed to be, and with that they believed themselves to be.

Claiming, creating and sanctifying this space would have allowed black people to exercise agency in their lives that they likely did not have access to at any other time. It would have been a balm to their demoralized souls; it would have helped them assert their personhood, if even only to each other; it would have edified them; it would have given them hope, given them succor, given them shelter. It would have empowered them. They would have entered these sacred spaces in one state of mind and left in another-transformed. The hush harbor/sacred grove, physical and metaphorical, would remain a crucial theme in the black sacred cosmos and in the development of the role of the black church and its applicability and necessity present themselves repeatedly in African American religious life.

Having experienced the fervor of the first Great Awakening in the enslaved and free blacks in the mid to late 18th century began to try to assert their religious independence with little success, particularly in the South. African Americans gained some headway in establishing their autonomy as Christians, and: "As African Americans embraced Christianity beginning in the 18th century, especially after 1770, they gathered in independent church communities… (Weisenfield 2015:1)," but their efforts were almost always met with white resistance and repression. Later, the Antebellum period would prove to be period of characterized by ongoing power struggle between whites and people of African descent over the latter's right to religio-spiritual agency. In the South, efforts to gain this agency were consistently met with resistance and restrictions. Meanwhile, in the North, gradual emancipation made room for blacks to exercise more control over their religious lives and institutions (Raboteau 1999:23). Northern black churches took up the abolitionist cause when white congregations became disaffected and they played an important role in the Underground Railroad and in assisting fugitive slaves who had made it north to establish lives as free persons.

Thereafter, the late Antebellum and post and Reconstruction eras saw a growth in the development of formalized, independent black dominations that would later make up the 7 denominations that are collectively referred to contemporarily as "the black church." Moving forward, we rely on a definition of "the black church" that is limited to "those independent, historic, and totally black controlled denominations, which were founded after the Free African Society of 1787 and which constituted the core of black Christians. Today the seven major denominations with a scattering of smaller communions make up the body of the Black Church and it is

estimated that more than 80 percent of all black Christian are in these seven denominations, with the smaller communions accounting for an additional 6 percent (Lincoln and Mamiya 2005:1). Those seven historic denominations are: African Methodist Episcopal Church; the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church; the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church; the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Incorporated; The National Baptist Convention of America, Unincorporated, The Progressive National Baptist Convention; and the Church of God in Christ (2005:1).

Lincoln and Mamiya note that what distinguished these churches from their white counterparts was the fact that "the religious worldview of African Americans is related both to their African heritage, which envisaged the whole universe as sacred, and to their conversion to Christianity during slavery and its aftermath…black people created their own unique and distinctive forms of culture and world views as parallels rather than replications of the culture in which they were involuntary guests (2005:2). African American churches also centered the idea of freedom; they elaborate: "During slavery it meant release from bondage, after emancipation it meant the right to be educated, to be employed, and to move about freely from place to place. IN the twentieth century, freedom means social, political and economic justice (2005:4)." The black church remained on this independent trajectory from the time Christianity took institutional root in the African American community before the Civil War and its role continued to evolve after the war.

One of the first causes the black church took up after the Civil War was education. Considerable numbers of black missionaries left the North and went south in order to help educate newly freed African Americans. For them, this was more than literacy for literacy's sake: it was education for the general uplifting of black people, and for the building of black communities with productive members who could contribute positively to the progress of the race. Additionally, church laity and clergy who chose to take on the task of working with freedmen and women saw the task at hand as multidimensional. Slavery "left a legacy of behaviors, attitudes, and knowledge deficiencies that needed to be addressed and reshaped it blacks were to be equal to the duties and promises of free citizenship. It was the black church that accepted the challenge thus posed. It sought to give caring oversight to each component of the lives of black people" (Murphy 2005:134). Socially, politically, educationally and religiously, the black church attempted to pick up where freedmen and their ancestors had left off in their efforts to survive slavery and help African Americans to participate

in U.S. civil society. Two points, however, stand out about the role of the black church in this era: First, that it served as a locale for the affirmation of personhood and second, that it served as a "refuge from the frustration, denigration, and barbarity that interposed itself recurrently into black life…it counteracted the personality destroying forces of white oppression by an affirmation of the value and worth of the black man and woman, boy and girl" (Murphy 2005:137). Here, once again, the black church plays the part of transformative space. Where mainstream society still negates black personhood, the black church affirms it and edifies it members, building them up and strengthening them to be able to withstand the onslaught of racism and oppression once they leave its hallowed walls.

The next era of importance in which the black church would have created a sacred enclave for black people would have been the Jim Crow era in the South and its fallout, the Great Migration era in the North. In the South, the black church would have continued to serve the purposes it had post-Civil War and Reconstruction. In the North however, the black church played the part of inviting, welcoming, and sustaining new migrants from the South to the north's urban centers. Prior to 1910, the vast majority of blacks lived in the rural South in small communities, by the early 20th century, millions of blacks made their way north (and some, west) looking for an escape from the heavy yoke of Jim Crow and opportunities for better lives.

As the migration north gained volume and momentum, black churches had to accommodate larger and larger numbers of new members in their buildings. When they could not, people found new spaces in which to hold church services and the "storefront church"—or church held in a building formerly used as a store or for other commercial purposes—was born. The churches also had to assist new migrants from the South become acclimated to life in the North: culturally the shift from rural South to urban North was an adjustment that required conscious navigation. In the North, denominations like the Episcopalian and Presbyterians had made a concerted effort to become less like the emotionalist, "hand clapping, foot-stomping" churches with which blacks had been associated and had become more reserved in their worship style.

There was a definite cultural gap between groups of North blacks who were often trying their best to model sacred behaviors of which they thought white America would approve and rural black southerners who had maintained not only physical distance from whites in church but also in

terms of their worship style. For example, in Chicago, there were people "nervous about the arrival of the migrants, fearful that this less educated, less sophisticated group [would] hinder their own efforts at advancement and render them less fit in the eyes of white America (Fowlkes 2005:156). But for these new residents, their style of worship had been so central to their reality; their identity and their physical and psychological survival in the South that they refused to give it up. This fact again points to the centrality of the idea of a sacred space that had a transformative, edifying and renewing purposes specifically for black people and their needs that they were neither willing to surrender nor negotiate. Fowlkes further explains:

> Through the stories, letters, and writings of followers from this period, and through the words of scholars, we see the growth and appeal of the Holiness and Pentecostal traditions in the cities, particularly in "storefront churches"—places of worship established in parlors, basements and storefronts. These churches form an oasis in a large, unfamiliar city, allowing migrants to recapture some of the intimacy of rural life (2005:159).

Here, new to the North African American migrants largely reject large, staid congregations which lack the dynamism in worship they are used to and opt for spaces that reflect their experience and heritage in the South.

Later, during the Civil Rights Era, the black church maintained its central position in African American life, and in addition to serving all the purposes it served before this crucial moment in history, it also served as a locale for organizing pointed resistance to Jim Crow. The connection between the Civil Rights Movement and the black church is undeniable and the sacred element of this struggle is directly related to the concept of "freedom" in black theology as previously discussed. The interrelatedness of the movement and the church are poignantly highlighted in the use of sacred music in movement meetings where people sang themselves into a courageous and resolute state of mind that allowed them to withstand the insults and bodily harm they had to endure in the struggle for civil rights. These gatherings were essentially as rituals of transformation in created sacred spaces that transmuted everyday people into warriors.

Throughout the 60s, 70s, 80s and 90s, rates of high black religiosity persist such that contemporarily, black religiosity outpaces that of other races in the U.S.:

> African-Americans are markedly more religious on a variety of measures than the U.S. population as a whole, including level of affiliation with a religion, attendance at religious services, frequency of prayer and religion's importance in life. Compared with other racial and ethnic groups, African-Americans are among the most likely to report a formal religious affiliation, with fully 87% of African-Americans describing themselves as belonging to one religious group or another, according to the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, conducted in 2007 by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life… Additionally, several measures illustrate the distinctiveness of the black community when it comes to religious practices and beliefs. More than half of African-Americans (53%) report attending religious services at least once a week, more than three-in-four (76%) say they pray on at least a daily basis and nearly nine-in-ten (88%) indicate they are absolutely certain that God exists. On each of these measures, African-Americans stand out as the most religiously committed racial or ethnic group in the nation.[11]

Furthermore:

> Large numbers of both African Americans and Blacks of Caribbean descent indicate that they look to God for strength, support and guidance (Table 2). Race differences are evident with higher percentages of African Americans and Black Caribbeans as compared to non-Hispanic Whites indicating that they "strongly agree" that they look to God for strength and support. Almost 9 out of 10 African Americans (89.7%) and Black Caribbeans (86.16%) report that they "strongly agree" with the statement. In contrast, only sixty percent (60.16%) of non-Hispanic Whites "strongly agree," while 11.32% "strongly disagree" with this statement (compared to less than 2.5% of African Americans or Black Caribbeans). Regression analysis indicates that

[11] Statistics drawn from http://www.pewforum.org/2009/01/30/a-religious-portrait-of-african-americans/

> both African Americans and Black Caribbeans are significantly more likely than non-Hispanic Whites to agree that they look to God for strength, support and guidance (Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004).[12]

These findings beg the question, "Why are African Americans religiously inclined in such strong contrast to the rest of people in the U.S.?" Taylor, Chatters, & Levin indicate that:

> A growing body of research indicates that the use of religious resources, strategies, and
>
> orientations for managing problematic life events and situations is widespread within the U.S. population (Koenig et al., 2001; Pargament, 1997). Religious coping refers to cognitions, behaviors and practices that are used to manage the perception, occurrence and/or consequences (e.g., emotional, psychological) of an undesirable or threatening event or situation (Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004)

African Americans still fall behind their white and counterparts in important measures of quality of life like life expectancy, maternal death in child birth, infant mortality, education, wealth and health disparities among others too numerous to list here. It is reasonable to conclude that there are cultural and sociological factors at play here. Culturally, African American religio-cultural heritage in the form of the black sacred cosmos, imposes no separation between sacred and secular realities and exhibits an established precedent for placing religion at the center of life. Secondly, their ongoing experience of economic, social, political and physical suffering precipitate their reliance on religion to sustain them through difficulty. This is supported by the fact that, in the United States, the vast majority of religious people—eighty percent of Americans—still worship in racially segregated congregations, or those where a single racial or ethnic group comprises at least 80% of the congregation.[13]

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[12] Statistics drawn from https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2967036/

[13] Statistics drawn from http://www.pewforum.org/2009/01/30/a-religious-portrait-of-african-americans/

Much like their ancestors, contemporary African Americans still require customized sacred space where they can focus on their particular collective needs. Just as it would have been practically impossible to address the challenges of overt and covert racism in church beginning on the plantations and moving through the Antebellum period, the Reconstruction, the Jim Crow Era, and the Civil Rights era, the contemporary atmosphere around race in the United States still poses a considerable challenge to resolution or even frank conversation on institutional and other forms of racism.

What becomes clear in the above examination is that over the duration of African American history in the US, the role and the purpose of the black church becomes layered and compounded. In each successive era in which it exists, it serves new purposes while the earlier purposes it served never completely disappear. At its inception, the black church would have served psychological, spiritual and existential purposes. It would have provided a temporary escape from the mental and physical brutality of enslavement as well as a place for communion with others of like lot. It would have reinforced identity and helped people of African descent assert their agency in defining a world according to their beliefs, customs and experiences. It would have empowered the enslaved to envision themselves as enslaved only in body. It would have given them an outlet for their creativity and gifts outside of their utility to their owners. It would have given them a place to be fully human.

Though whites no longer legally owned black bodies during the Reconstruction, the direct and pervasive threat of physical violence against black people was very real and ominous. The Reconstruction saw gratuitous violence visited on black people and the need for healing from these situations would have remained for the duration. During this era, in addition to responding to needs inherited from the slavery era, the church would have had to serve new roles as centers for education and community organization and self-help societies. Later, it would help black people cope with the economic limitations and social restrictions they had to endure during the Jim Crow era, overt bigotry in the form of formal segregation being the norm rather than the exception. The black church would now have to help people find jobs, provide for their physical needs when necessary and help them psychologically cope with the pressure of surviving in a society where one wrong move could mean harm to life, limb or livelihood. During the Civil Rights Era, the church served as a center where people met, organized and bolstered themselves as they prepared to go to battle with Jim Crow.

Again, none of the earlier needs ceased to be. Rather, the purposes of the church had to serve the new needs in addition to continuing to serve the old ones.

After the Civil Rights Era, the black church would have had to maintain its position as a provider of all the aforementioned in addition to helping people deal with waves of different drug crises that rocked so many black communities, most notably the crack epidemic. The "war on drugs," and "broken windows policing" eras saw the black church continue to serve all of its prior roles in addition to helping people cope with the ravages to their communities that drugs were. Contemporarily, though physical violence to black bodies may not be as much of a threat as it was on plantations or in the Reconstruction South, many would argue that both violent crime inside black communities and extrajudicial violence perpetrated disproportionately against members of the black community constitute a psychological stressor for which many black people still need a solution. Once again, the churches' role as mitigator for the effects of physical violence persists.

In the U.S. African American religious ethos, the "hush harbor" is a type of sacred grove which has remained an important part of African American religio-spiritual memory and heritage. Protected by the isolation of this New World sacred grove, African American religiosity flourished and became a created space of free expression for African Americans to enact their own spiritual ideals where and when they could not worship openly or in white churches. Over time, factors that called for a sacred African American space perhaps became more nuanced and numerous, but the original purpose of shielding, protecting, edifying and renewing remained central and indispensable.

African America has a rich cultural heritage on which it has drawn in order to allow people to survive two and a half centuries of ongoing racial struggle. In a context within which viability, functionality, and efficacy of African American culture are interrogated, and often denigrated; where all too frequently it is cast as rootless and dysfunctional, wherein too many African American youth and even adults are largely unaware of the layered intricacies of their story here in the United States, where "lostness" and disenfranchisement are all too often the angle from which African American culture and social technologies are cast, the point of this work has been to highlight thematic intentional continuity and black agency in the creation of African American viable and functional cultural artifacts and technologies.

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The Tree That Centers the World: The Palm Tree as Yoruba Axis Mundi

Ayodeji Ogunnaike

The Tree That Centers the World

Although heaven may appear to be quite far away, for the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria, the distance between heaven and earth is only the width of 16 palm kernels. This is because the palm tree plays a central role in many aspects of traditional Yoruba religious life, particularly through the tradition of *Ifa* divination that allows all people to know the will of heaven. However, the palm tree does not function as the "cosmic tree" that sustains and rejuvenates all life or a "world tree" that contains the entire cosmos as is often found in other religious traditions. I will analyze the central role played by the palm tree in traditional Yoruba religion primarily, but not exclusively, through the tradition of the *orisa* (Yorba deity) *Orunmila* and the even more important place the oil palm tree (*Elaeis Guineensis*) in the practice of *Ifa* divination. Through mythological narratives and ritual procedures, I argue that the palm tree functions as a bridge between heaven and earth and that this bridge is used to ensure earth's proper alignment with respect to heaven and the world of the ancestors. As such, the palm tree functions as an axis mundi, and also demonstrates that in some settings, this category of sacred tree should be separated from others such as the cosmic tree, world tree, or tree of life although they have often been assumed to be one and the same. Through the 16 palm nuts employed in *Ifa* divination, *Orunmila* ensures that heaven is never out of reach for those on earth and that the earth maintains proper alignment with heaven.

Separating the Cosmic Tree and Axis Mundi

Many religious traditions contain archetypal trees that either contain the entire cosmos (such as *Yggdrasil* in Norse religion or the *asvatta* tree in the Upanishads) or sustain and rejuvenate the world (as with the May Tree in Europe), and Mircea Eliade claimed that "all of them express the same idea: that vegetation is the manifestation of *living reality*, of the life that

renews itself periodically" (1958, p. 324).[14] Part of this living reality is the function as axis mundi, which Eliade, as the creator and champion of the widely used concept, characterized in the following fashion:

1) a sacred place constitutes a break in the homogeneity of space;
2) this break is symbolized by an opening by which passage from one cosmic region to another is made possible;
3) communication with heaven is expressed by one or another of certain images, all of which refer to the *axis mundi*: pillar, ladder, mountain, tree, vine;
4) around this cosmic axis lies the world, hence the axis is located "in the middle" at the "navel of the earth"; it is the Center of the World (1961, p. 37).

As stated in the quote above, Eliade recognized that objects besides trees could function as an axis mundi, but when trees served this function it was because they "[repeated] *ad libitum* the same archaic image – the Cosmic Mountain, the World Tree or the central Pillar which sustains the planes of the cosmos" (1961: 42). Particularly with the examples, such as Yggdrasil, listed in his *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, this seems quite logical as such trees span and encompass every realm of life in addition to possessing the properties of death and rebirth that are so central to the arboreal rituals he analyzes.

Since Eliade's publications, these different models have been commonly assumed to be different functions performed within or by the same tree, whether it is the asvatta tree in Hinduism or the oak tree in pre-Christian Europe. For example, under "World Tree" *The Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion* simply redirects the reader to the entry under "Axis Mundi", where it provides a very succinct and enlightening definition and analysis that also emphasizes it all-encompassing nature in representing "the unified Self" (Leeming, 2014). However, Eliade and his theories have, for some time, been subjected to a great deal of scrutiny for his sweeping generalizations and theories of the origins and diffusion of ideas that can

[14] See chapter VII of Eliade's *Patterns in Comparative Religion*.

form a type of proto or *ur*-religion. More specifically, Frank Korom has identified serious methodological issues with the development and original sources for Eliade's axis mundi, although he does not wish to dismiss the archetype entirely (1992). Here I agree with Korom that "the concept of a mythic *axis mundi* can be a useful analytic tool or phenomenological category only if it is grounded in specifics, not in vague examples applied within an atemporal and aspatial theoretical framework" (1992, p. 115-6).

By placing the useful tool of the axis mundi within the particular ecological situation of the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria, it sheds a great deal of light on the ritual and mythological importance of the palm tree. At the same time, this context also demonstrates how the archetype of the axis mundi can be, and at times is, separated from those of the world tree and cosmic tree.

As stated earlier, Eliade understood trees to play such an important role in religious thought and practice because of their regenerative nature. He argued that "as this inexhaustible life was, in primitive ontology, an expression of the notion of *absolute reality*, the tree becomes for it a symbol of that reality (the centre of the world)" (1958, p. 267). This may be because in many areas, "the cosmos was pictured as a tree because, like one, it is periodically regenerated", implying the cycles of death and rebirth manifested in the transition from winter to spring (Eliade 1958, p. 309). While most of the rituals surrounding the world tree, cosmic tree, and/or axis mundi cited by Eliade take place during spring or summer when plants have come back to life, such seasons do not exist in the ecology of tropical Nigeria.

As the Yoruba area of Nigeria is roughly seven or eight degrees north of the equator, only two seasons – wet and dry – are experienced, and as a result, trees do not go through this annual cycle of death and rebirth. Their leaves stay green throughout the year and thus are not associated with what Eliade believed to be the most central aspect of their nature in religious thought. Consequently there are no myths about trees that contain the entire cosmos or other plants that sustain all of life as is found in many Indo-European cultures that developed in different climates.[15] Despite lacking the significance Eliade emphasized so heavily, the palm tree has played a

[15] Although it must be mentioned that plants are inextricably linked with healing and medicine and some are linked with fertility as well.

curiously important role in Yoruba religious thought, enjoys a privileged place in Yoruba mythology, and its products tend to be either favored foods or strict taboos for practically every *orișa* or traditional Yoruba deity.

The Importance of the Palm Tree

While not a world tree or cosmic tree, the palm tree has a special significance to practically all of the *orișa* (traditional Yoruba deities) and thus a general, and perhaps not well-understood, importance in the religious system at large. The importance of palm trees and particularly the oil palm is likely linked to the near universal use of the red oil (*epo*) produced by its fruit in cooking, the use of the oil produced from the inside kernels (*adi*) for soap and several other purposes, and of course the production of palm wine (*emu*), the favored alcoholic drink in the area.

In terms of religious significance, palm fronds (*mariwo*) are almost always found marking the presence of a sacred grove or the site of sacred rituals, warning those who are not meant to enter therein. Palm fronds are also believed to be the clothing of some of the orișa and ancestors, and on their festival days, such as the all-important *Ọlọjọ* festival of Ogun (deity of iron and war) in the ancestral ritual city of Ile-Ifẹ, palm fronds can be found practically everywhere (Olupona, 2011, p.111-43). Also, as mentioned above, almost all of the orișa have a strong affinity for one type of palm oil (*epo* or *adi*) and are repulsed by the other. In fact, these substances are some of the most commonly used to appease them or to goad them into furious action. Palm wine (*emu*) is also another important substance as it is often a taboo for certain practitioners, particularly those of *Ọbatala* (the ancient god of whiteness and creation), and while all of these products of the palm tree appear in numerous Yoruba myths, it is palm wine that arguably features most prominently.

Although there are other myths that feature the two types of palm oil, and in rather distressing fashion, explain why they are loved or detested by certain orișa,[16] the palm tree and palm wine always appear rather early in the most well-known and central Yoruba myth and its variations. In every

[16] See the mythic explanation in Ifa mythology here: *Ogunda-Di* < http://ask-dl.fas.harvard.edu/content/94-ogunda-di-odi. >

version of the Yoruba creation myth *Ọbatala* (ancient deity of creation and whiteness who is sometimes also called *Orișanla*) was charged by *Olodumare* (Almighty God) with the task of creating the earth and was given several items including some sand/dirt in a bag, a chameleon, a rooster, and a few others depending on the variant of the story. Ọbatala then descended on a chain to earth, which was only water at that time, and at some point he became thirsty, drank a great deal of palm wine, and fell asleep. As a result, another deity, *Oduduwa*, who was Ọbatala's junior, took all of the materials in Ọbatala's possession, dropped the sand on top of the waters and then placed the rooster on top of the pile of sand. The rooster kicked the sand out in all directions, causing the land to spread, giving the city Ile-Ifẹ its current name (*ile n fẹ* in Yoruba means "the earth is spreading"), and the chameleon carefully walked on the surface of the new land to make sure it is stable. When Ọbatala awoke, he swore that he and his children would never drink palm wine again.

Despite the fact that there are countless variants of this general account, in practically all of them, the palm tree or its products feature prominently. In one variation recorded by Ayo Salami, Ọbatala met the first palm tree and tapped it before even making it to earth (2008, p. 41). In another, Ọbatala did in fact create the world, and only got drunk afterward when he was creating human beings. Still, the first action he took after building his own house was to plant a palm tree that quickly reproduced (Courlander, 1973, p. 19).[17] Curiously enough, the growth of the human population was likened to that of the palm trees in this myth, which is quite interesting given that there are some others in which human beings were created out of wood (Ogumefu 1984, p. 12). In yet another myth, likely from the Yoruba city of Ọyọ and not Ile-Ifẹ, *before* land was created, Olodumare planted a giant palm tree on the surface of the waters, and he sent seven crown princes to live on top of it. One of them ultimately created the world in an almost identical fashion to that of Ọbatala or Oduduwa, and it is only after this that the princes ceased living on top of the palm tree and came down to what we call earth today (Beier 1980, p. 10-12). Clearly the presence of the palm tree in all of these foundational myths can be no mere

[17] This myth appears to be a combination of two, as the story of creation and Ọbatala creating human beings are usually told separately, but it is significant that Ọbatala could not be depicted as having faithfully carried out the first mission without being depicted in the second (creating humans) as having gotten drunk again.

coincidence, and perhaps the best clue as to why it occupies this role lies in the importance of Ifa divination in traditional Yoruba culture.

The Palm Tree as Source of Ifa, Knowledge, and Divination

While there are numerous forms of divination available to the Yoruba, "Ifa is regarded as the most important and the most reliable", and the most central feature of Ifa divination is undoubtedly the *ikin*, the 16 palm nuts that are both the fundamental tools of divination and understood to be the orișa Ọrunmila himself (Bascom 1969, p. 11).[18] Whenever practitioners of traditional Yoruba religion face a major problem, decision, action, crucial event in life, or simply would like some form of advice, Ifa divination is understood as the most authoritative and precise method of determining the best course of action. As such, it is consulted at every major event in the life of a person and the community at large. Traditionally, this form of divination has been carried out through an elaborate ritual process involving the *ikin* or 16 palm nuts that have been ritually prepared to become Ọrunmila. Through this ritual, they deliver Ọrunmila's message to the diviner, called a *babalawo*. These palm nuts must come only from the oil palm tree (*Elaesis Guineensis*) and must have four or more "eyes" (*oju*) or indentations at their base. Most babalawo now use a divining chain called *ọpẹlẹ* as it greatly reduces the amount of time required to carry out a session of divination, but even this chain is crafted out of pods taken from the palm tree. Thus, the palm tree provides the central medium through which the Yoruba can conduct divination and communicate with heaven.

The connection between the orișa Ọrunmila (also often called Ifa just like his system of divination) and the palm tree extends far beyond the tools of divination. The Fon people of present-day Benin Republic who imported the tradition of Ifa, call it *Fa* and believe her (not *him* as in Yoruba belief) to possess 16 eyes, to live on top of the palm tree from which she can see everything that takes place on earth, and to speak through palm nuts (Isichei 2004, p. 273). This depiction of *Fa* uses the imagery of the palm tree, which can grow to up to 20 meters tall in the case of the oil palm (Encyclopedia of Life), to explain how Ifa is an omniscient deity who knows all that has occurred in the past, that is presently occurring, and is yet to

[18] Many if not all of these forms of divination are believed to have been taught to other orișa by Ọrunmila as easier replacements or simplifications of Ifa.

occur. As the majority of the vegetation in Yorubaland takes the form of undergrowth not much taller than three to four meters and many of the other trees do not reach the impressive stature of the oil palm in particular, a deity who resides at the top of such a tree would have a perfect vantage point from which to view the entire landscape. In addition, a tree that stretches so far above the plane of human activity could also be understood to exist almost outside of or above time, allowing Fa/Ifa to observe the entire world as it unfolds (particularly if it were understood to have been planted at the beginning of the world). Finally, the enhanced powers of perception represented by the 16 eyes of Fa, must surely be linked to the 16 *ikin* as they even have a similar shape to human eyes and are described in the Yoruba language as having eyes (*oju*) themselves.

Ọrunmila himself stresses the centrality of the palm tree to his very existence in one part of the vast oral corpus he is believed to have passed down to his children the *babalawo*. In one verse, he explains why he is not able to refrain from drinking palm wine although he would like to maintain solidarity with his great friend Ọbatala/Orịṣanla by stating:

> *Ninu ọpẹ ni mo jẹ, ninu ọpẹ ni mo mu*
>
> *Mariwo ọpẹ ni mo ti rin gbọran-gbọran wanu aiye;*
>
> *Anu banla ti orịṣa, ni mo ṣe,*
>
> *Ti mi o mu ẹmu.* (Idowu 1962, p. 79)

> I eat from the palm tree, I drink from the palm tree,
>
> Palm fronds formed the path through which I came into the world
>
> It is out of compassion for Orịṣanla
>
> That I do not drink palm wine.

Here the palm tree was described as literally sustaining Ọrunmila by providing his food and drink, and Idowu even described palm wine (which is white in color) as the milk from his mother's breast, likely because it is the palm tree that brought him into the world (1962, p. 79). Along these lines, the aforementioned palm fronds (*mariwo*) that demarcate a sacred

area form the path Ọrunmila either took or takes to come down to earth as the tense used could indicate that the action takes place in our outside of time. If these palm fronds are taken to mean not only those that have been removed from the palm tree to signify a sacred area, but possibly those that are still attached to the tree itself, then Ọrunmila would continuously follow them to or through the palm tree to come to the world. This interpretation seems quite likely given the way the leaves of the oil palm in particular sometimes open up to the heavens and form a type of funnel leading down to the ground.

This representation and significance of the palm tree also extends to the way Ọrunmila is believed to have left the world in addition to the way he entered it. In one fascinating myth, a powerful diviner in Mecca named Alapansiki or Setiu was called to help the Meccans find the Prophet Muhammad (saw) after he managed to sneak out of the city. Alapansiki performed divination for them and directed them to a cave up in a mountain just outside the city. The Meccans rushed to examine the cave, but when they arrived there, they found the mouth of the cave to be covered by a spider's nest and an undisturbed bird's nest, which they took to mean that no person could have entered it recently. They then returned to Alapansiki, furious that he had lied to them, and the slew him on the spot by hacking him into little pieces that were subsequently carried up into heaven by a strong wind.

The Prophet Muhammad (saw) escaped to another city after the Meccans had left, and then sent them a message informing them that Alapansiki had told the truth. This caused the Meccans great concern, which was only made worse when they returned to the place where they had killed Alapansiki and found a large palm tree had already grown there. They then asked another diviner what should be done about their transgression, and through Ifa divination it was revealed that they would have to fast for 30 days every year beginning with the day on which they had killed Alapansiki (Ifatoogun Babalọla, personal communication, June 26, 2009; Ifaṣọla Onifade, personal communication, June 14, 2009).

This story is fascinating for numerous reasons such as the fact that it is practically a carbon copy of a section from the *Sira* or life of the Prophet Muhammad (saw), it was recited to me as an explanation for the origins of the Muslim fast during the month of *Ramadan*, and it incorporates the tradition of Ifa into Islamic history. However, it is most significant here because Alapansiki is understood by the babalawo to be Ọrunmila. This

identification is not without precedent as the orișa are often called by many names (some of Ọrunmila's other names include Ifa, Edu, Ẹlẹripin, Ẹla, and Agbọnniregun), and Ifa has a particularly close relationship with Islam in Yorubaland. Most importantly, this puts the presence of the palm tree where Alapansiki was killed into context as it is his sacred tree and is also cited elsewhere in the oral Ifa corpus as the marker of the place from which Ọrunmila ascended to heaven.

In a more widely known myth from one of the major chapters of the Ifa corpus, Ọrunmila had eight sons who became kings of their own towns when they grew up. One year, Ọrunmila was celebrating his annual Ifa festival and called his children to come celebrate with him. When the first seven came, they arrived singing and dancing and gave him the traditional greeting which includes a full prostration (*idobale*). However, the youngest son refused to bow down before their father and came wearing all of the same status markers that Ọrunmila wore: a royal crown, royal shoes, and a royal staff. This lack of respect infuriated Ọrunmila, and when he asked his son what the cause of his irreverence was, his son responded that one king must not bow down to another, which has become a custom in Yorubaland to the present day. At this Ọrunmila became even more upset, and he left his house in Ile-Ifẹ, climbed up a symmetrical palm tree that had one base but 16 heads, and refused to come down.

Without the help of the god of divination, people no longer knew what the causes of their problems were and consequently did not know how to fix them. People were no longer able to have children, the crops would not grow, disease spread quickly, and when they fell ill no one knew how to cure them. Eventually they decided that enough was enough, and on the advice of a babalawo, they took a sacrifice to the tree where Ọrunmila was living and begged him to come back down. He refused, but took pity on them and gave them the first 16 *ikin*, informing them that if they ever sought answers or needed his help, they should simply ask the *ikin*, and he would speak through them. He also gave special brown and green *ilẹkẹ* (beads used to mark the devotees of the various orișa) to his children and told the others that they should call anyone they saw wearing these beads *baba* (father or

potentially implying the term *babalawo*).[19] After this, Ọrunmila ascended into heaven never to return again.[20]

Apart from the recurrence of the palm tree, this myth is significant because of the role it implies for the palm tree in subsequent ritual practice. Here it is a more specific platform from which Ọrunmila could reach heaven as opposed to a simple marker in the previous myth, and it also provides the only explanation I have ever heard for the use of *ikin* in divination as their essential role in Ifa is usually simply assumed. The movement of Ọrunmila up to heaven, and his giving the *ikin* to the people below him as a parting gift provides a model of a type of cosmic bridge which allows him to return to heaven, but also to descend to earth through the *ikin* and Ifa divination to provide order for the world. It is this role as cosmic bridge that may account in large part for the centrality of the palm tree in Yoruba religious thought despite the fact that it is not associated with regeneration as sacred trees are in other areas and religions.

The Palm Tree as Cosmic Bridge

The presence of certain markers of where the orișa returned to heaven are not uncommon, and are often trees,[21] acting as a form of bridge for them to leave the world. One myth even cites the first orișa on earth tying a chain that leads to heaven onto a tree, but none of these currently allow the two-directional travel that the palm tree does. This function of the palm tree as Ọrunmila's bridge is mirrored in the structure of the tree. To begin, it reaches up to the sky/heaven more so than many of the other plants around it, and Eliade noted how the structure of cosmic trees reaching up into the sky has allowed them to serve Tartar shaman as ladders that they could climb to reach heaven, just as Ọrunmila appears to have done in the myth above (1958, p. 299). The act of climbing is particularly fitting when

[19] Babalawo still wear these beads today, and it is likely not a coincidence that brown and green are the colors found on the palm tree.

[20] See a recitation and interpretation of this myth here: *Iwori-Meji* <http://ask-dl.fas.harvard.edu/content/30-iwori-meji-ii>.

[21] Ṣango (royal orișa of thunder and lightning) is believed to have hanged himself on a tree, but not died, and entered the ground beneath it (Courlander 1973, p. 99). Ogun (orișa of war and iron) is believed by some to have also entered the earth in the city of Oșogbo where a tree marks the exact location. Both trees receive sacrifices on behalf of these orișa.

applied to the palm tree as its scaly bark almost provides natural rungs, which are used on a regular basis by palm wine tappers who would otherwise never be able to reach the top of these tall, slender trees. In addition, the outstretched palm fronds often assume the form of a funnel-shaped channel leading from heaven to earth, which is again reminiscent of Ọrunmila's statement of following the path of palm fronds to reach earth.

In this sense the palm tree may not serve the function of *world tree* in Yoruba religious thought, but with regard to Ifa divination, it appears to be a prime candidate for the category of *axis mundi*. Eliade described the arboreal *axis mundi* as standing, "at the centre of the universe, binding together earth, heaven, and hell," and "consequently, communication with heaven can only be effected near it, or by means of it" (1958, p. 299, 300). This is certainly true of the palm tree in traditional Yoruba religious thought as the palm tree is the primary and fundamental means of communication with heaven, and while there is no real concept of "hell" in this religious tradition, the world of the ancestors (whose whishes are often also conveyed through Ifa divination as well) does exist beneath the earth, where the roots of the palm tree reach. In the mythology analyzed above there is also no description of the palm tree existing at the center of the universe,[22] but there is no denying how central it is to each individual's life and to communal life as it informs all major decisions.

When I asked the Araba (high priest of Ifa) of the city of Modakẹkẹ about the relationship between the palm tree and heaven, he explained that it is what links all people with heaven. According to him, it is because the babalawo guard this link that they are so important to society, can be found everywhere in Yorubaland and beyond, and devotees of all the other oriṣa, Muslims, Christians, and non-Yoruba people seek them out as well. He described the palm tree as the "bridge" between heaven and earth because Ọrunmila and his divine message can only come to the world through this tree, and it is only by speaking to or through this tree that people are able to ask direct questions of him in heaven (Ifarinwale Ogundiran, personal communication, October 14, 2013). This insight places the palm tree firmly in the center of traditional Yoruba religious life if not the middle of the

[22] Although in some variants of the creation myths palm trees are planted in or just around the spot where land was first created, they are never specifically references as existing in the center of the universe, and no one palm tree is ever singled out in such a fashion.

world, and highlights how it allows for the two-way communications between heaven and earth. As a result of this communication, the palm tree can be understood to center the world as well as link it with heaven.

The Centering of the World

The ritual practice surrounding Ifa divination places a great deal of importance on the issue of orientation in the positioning of the babalawo himself, the divining board (*ọpọn Ifa*), and the incantation recited before the divination process can begin. In the past, diviners used to always face East when they performed Ifa divination, but now the issues of orientation have become more relative as opposed to absolute (Bascom 1969, p. 34). For example, the divining board (*ọpọn Ifa*), which almost always takes a circular or rounded-square shape, must contain the face of *Ẹṣu* (the messenger deity of chaos and crossroads) on one side looking inward, and this side must be positioned so that Ẹṣu is facing the diviner. Then, before Ifa is consulted, a ritual incantation must be recited. Although the specific words of this recitation may vary by region,[23] the diviner must call on God to descend to the earth, call on the four cardinal directions around the divining board (front, back, right, and left in that order) which are sometimes already marked out by drawing a cross in powder in the center of the board, and then he links the center of the board with heaven. If the diviner employs the divining chain (*ọpẹlẹ*), then he must raise it toward heaven when calling on *Olodumare* (Supreme God), touch its ends to the ground when referencing the earth, and then touch each side or center of the divining board when they are mentioned as well. If after the chain is thrown, the two sides become crossed, the diviner must uncross them, paying close attention so that the right hand side is on the right, the left hand side is on the left, and that these are the only aspects of the chain to be disturbed as it is the specific configuration of the chain that will reveal Ifa's message.

Both the words and physical movements of the diviner in this ritual invoke the two-way movement across the palm bridge that is Ifa. If simply the movement of the diviner's hand and the chain are followed, they first move from heaven to earth, then they anchor all four cardinal positions of

[23] See Olupona 2011 for a portion of one such variation, although the translation of "center of heaven" may be a bit loose in this account, which is very different from the incantation taught to me (31).

the divining board. It is only after this that they move from the center of the board back to heaven. This ritual process is fascinating because it provides an archetype for the actions that should be taken in conjunction with the divination process. The memorized messages a diviner recites for a client after the appropriate divinatory sign has been revealed always contain (often among other aspects such as proverbs, lengthy stories, poems, and others) a brief account of a mythic figure or figures for whom the same sign was cast. This account must include the advice given to the mythical client and how that particular issue was either resolved or not based on how closely the client followed Ifa's guidance. This facet of Ifa perfectly manifests Eliade's theory on ritual actions only having meaning or legitimacy when they "imitate or repeat an archetype" provided by ancestors or figures in the mythic time, *in illo tempore* or *igba iwaṣẹ* in Yoruba (1958, p. 34).

Thus, Ifa can be understood to bring the mythical archetype from heaven to earth, just like the first movement of the diviner's hand. Next, it provides a blueprint for the appropriate action in accordance with this myth which can take the form of prayers, specific actions, medicines, taboos, and—in practically every case—sacrifices, just as the movement of the diviner's hand establishes the boundaries and appropriate edges of the divining board. Most if not all of these actions - particularly the sacrifices - are oriented toward or offered to heaven, just as the diviner's hand finally moves from the center of the board back toward heaven.[24] This analysis is particularly telling when, if as Olupona argues, the divining board is taken to represent the cosmos (2011, p. 180). If the board represents the cosmos on a smaller scale, the diviner must orient it appropriately with heaven, establish the link between the two, anchor the earth to heaven's orientation, and then cement the ritual by the final movement from earth back to heaven both verbally, physically, and ritually.[25] Hence, Ifa through or as the palm tree, serves the role of a bridge that allows this connection between heaven

[24] However, in some cases they are directed toward the ancestors, who are believed to live underneath the ground, which allows the palm tree to orient humans with respect to the underworld as well.

[25] Although outside the scope of this paper, and completely unexplored by scholars, this dynamic is strikingly similar to the Buddhist concept of *Dukkha* as being "off-center" and the source of all conflict and suffering. Ifa is believed to possess the answers to all worldly problems and conflict and to have the ability to ensure appropriate if not harmonious action in all cases through the re-centering or reorganization of action and attitudes.

and earth and also reorients the world in conformity with heaven, a powerful image if this firmly rooted tree is understood as a pivot that can be used to turn the earth in the appropriate direction.

Conclusion

Unlike some trees that occupy a privileged position in other religious traditions, the palm tree is not understood to contain the entire cosmos or represent eternal life in traditional Yoruba religion, but it does function as an *axis mundi* and a bridge for communication with heaven. Because trees never lose their leaves and grow them back in the tropical climate of southwestern Nigeria, the palm tree lacks the critical quality of regeneration that characterizes cosmic trees, world trees, and variations on the tree of life. Still, it possesses very specific importance to most orișa and figures quite prominently in Yoruba mythology. The palm tree is always the first tree to appear in Yoruba myths of creation, sometimes even before the creation of the world, which seems appropriate if it is understood as the bridge that links the heaven and earth together. Furthermore, with this role in mind, it seems reasonable that the orișa who had close relations with heaven while on earth and now reside there would have their own relationship with the bridge that allows them to move and communicate back and forth between the heavenly and earthly realms.

However, it is the orișa Ọrunmila who enjoys the closest association with the palm tree, and particularly his sacred oil palm. He is described as coming to the world and leaving the world by means of the palm tree, being sustained by it, and most importantly speaking through the palm nuts it produces by means of Ifa divination. He is also understood to *be* the 16 (or sometimes 17 or more) palm nuts that have been ritually prepared, making him if not the palm tree itself, at least the potential for a palm tree in the form of its nuts. Because of the centrality of Ifa divination in traditional Yoruba society as the primary means of communication with heaven and because it is employed through divinatory ritual and sacrifices to reorient earth in accordance with heavenly archetypes, the palm tree can be understood as both a bridge and a pivot that centers the world on heaven and ensures that the former is always aligned with the latter. Through this function, the palm tree serves as the Yoruba axis mundi, and demonstrates how this function can in fact be separated from the archetypes of world tree and cosmic tree. Hence, without regenerating or containing the cosmos, the palm tree firmly centers and anchors the world and ensures that heaven is never any further away than the width of 16 palm nuts.

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CHALLENGES AND TRIUMPHS OF ORISHA TRADITION IN AMERICA: A FIFTY-YEAR RETROSPECTIVE

YEYE LUISAH TEISH

Orisha priestess, folklorist, ritual expert, and educator Luisah Teish shares some of her background and personal experience with coming into the practice of the Orisha Tradition in America over fifty years ago.

I learned the art of eavesdropping at a young age. I learned how to be right in the next room listening to everything the adults said, pretending I didn't know. This has served me very well in life, that ability. But it left me with lots of questions.

When I did get to question—because back in those days, children didn't question—I said, "Mama, Daddy: how come y'all do *that*?" Their answer was always, "That's what the old folks say do." So, in my quest I went and asked Mama Ludy (who was in her 80s) why my mother (who was in her 30s) did what she did. And Mama Ludy's answer was, "Cause that's what the old folks say." And it occurred to me that if somebody is older than Mama Ludy, then they talkin' 'bout somebody that ain't *here* no more.

This was the opening to knowing that ancestor reverence is important. And if you grow up in New Orleans and you start asking the question "why?", it leads you to Haiti. If you get to Haiti, the question "why?" leads you to Africa. If you get to Africa, the "why?" leads you to the entire planet. And you know, my eyes were open to a peek-a-boo where I had to pretend I wasn't seeing nothing but I'm steadily gathering information.

Here's a very, very important thing to know about your *ori*, or your consciousness.[26] Whatever you put in it, your *ori* takes as a command and it begins to guide you along that path. So, I'm asking the question, "What are the old folks talking about? What is it that they know that I need to know?"

And this led me to, I mean really led me to finding a National Geographic magazine. And they had a spread on Africa. And they had people with their faces painted and they're blowing horns. And I'm looking at it and saying, "What's that? What they doing?" And you keep asking the question. The stronger the desire is the more the ancestors hear you and they put you on a path— a path of discovery so that you can find the answer. So, for me, I left New Orleans and went to Southern California. I was in high school in Los Angeles trying my best to be a Del Vyke queen: a street gang, bullets, you know doing that thing young people do. And time after time I would have this quote unquote hallucination of an old man dressed in white peeking around. He would give me instruction, and I would never forget it.

I don't know how many of you have ever seen the movie *Colors*, but I know them people. That's a true story, they done just changed a few names. But I was a Del Vyke queen in Los Angeles in 1965. And I remember being at a party and I looked over and I saw the image of the man dressed in white around a tree. And as I approached, trying to see if he was real, he said, "Go get a Taco Burger."

And I'm saying, "I'm at a party and there's lots of food."

Again, he said, "Go over to Taco Burger."

I said, "Okay," and I left.

And I'm walking up to the Taco Burger like this and here come the police.

"Where you going?"

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[26] *Ori* is the Yoruba word for "head." It references both the physical head (ori ode) and the inner head, or seat of consciousness and personality (ori inu). Ori is considered a personal divinity that walks with every person.

"Oh, I'm going to get a Taco Burger, which is right down here."

They said, "Where you coming from?"

I lied and said my uncle's house down there because I knew my uncle would back me up; he lived over here, but the party was over there. So, I went up to get the Taco Burger and by doing so, I had just missed a drive by shooting that happened near the party right after I left. And that happened more than once.

So, when I got my first reading[27] and they said to me, "Your mother's father wants you to know that he has been protecting you all this time." I had to say, "Yeah, thanks. Thank you." Because I had walked away from a lot of danger.

So, let me go back a while and say that my mother's philosophy was "God by any means necessary." And we lived in the segregated south where it's not safe to go to school, it's not safe to go to church, and where I stood along the highway waiting to be taken to school and would have people come by and shoot at me on the highway. It was serious. But I went to any kind of church. My father's people were AME, my mother was Catholic, and at one point she decided to put me in Catholic school which put me in jeopardy because I had to stand on the highway getting shot at going from Harvey to Algiers.

But being in Catholic school was very, very interesting because it was my first opening to rebelling against the symbolism. It was the first time that I learned in the Catechism that you must not ask the question "why." That you were given concepts that you must not test. This wine and this bread are not wine and bread. There's a ritual whereby the transubstantiation of matter turns into the actual body and blood of Christ

[27]Divination is the process of seeking knowledge of the past, present, and/or future using intuition and tools such as cards, seeds, bones, water, mirrors, and many others. A session with a diviner, regardless the medium uses is often referred to as "getting a reading" or "getting read."

and I said, “Damn, that sounds like cannibalism to me!” But I'm not supposed to think it through like that. I thought, “This man could turn bread and wine into flesh and blood—he be juju man!” But I'm not supposed to think like that.

These are the people telling me that my ancestral traditions are savage. When I start to investigate them, everything they got they took from somebody else; mine and their own. Every temple, every cathedral known as Notre Dame originally belonged to a goddess. All of those goddesses come out of the Black Madonna. I know I'm preaching to the choir, so I won't go on. Y'all know what I'm talking about. So, a whole world opens up where I'm now again, secretly questioning everything at this point. I did baptism. I did communion. I did confirmation. I did all of that. And, see, this is how it is when the ancestors are working with you because the thing confirmation is supposed to confirm within me is the thing that it took me out of inside. Because I'm kneeling down before this man who's got all these jewels in his hat, who's got all his fine clothes. Who claims to have taken a vow of poverty, but *his* rent is paid. I kneel down in front of him, he slaps my face, and I'm supposed to kiss his hand? I don't like nobody playing in my face! And when I got up from that it was like, “This confirms that something ain't right here. That's what this confirms.”

See what I'm saying? It was that kind of thing. And I went from there to—and I know some of y'all have gone through this—that period of spiritual alienation, where I said the next time I get on my knees it's gonna be to look for my shoes, I ain't praying to *nobody*. That don't last too long. That's just to separate you from what does not work and to put you on the quest for what is truly yours.

Now, let us give praise and thanks for the blessing that I found myself in 1968 having gone to college in Oregon at the United Church of Christ School where religious studies were required. And we had a choice between Western Civilization, Bible Study, and Philosophy of Religions. I took Philosophy of Religions to get the big picture. From there I was blessed to get a scholarship as a teacher trainee with Katherine Dunham. Now the door is being kicked wide open. Now I'm living in the same house with people from Nigeria, Haiti, and Brazil, India, and all parts of Africa. And the way madame did it was holistically. You didn't just do the dances: you

ate the food, you wore the clothes, you learned the politics of the area. And here I was 22-years old with a mermaid's figure and rather attractive, somewhat conceited. And I'm dancing my ass off.

And I will never forget a performance where *Danbala* took me on stage. *Danbala took* me on stage![28] And I'm up here on the ceiling looking at myself dancing on the stage. That was a first real embodied experience of how spirit, how *lwa* and *orisa* can penetrate matter and enter not just into your consciousness but into your *body*. Now, prior to that, I want y'all to know that I had found a little book on West African folklore because I had read all the Greeks and all the Romans, and I knew all about Zeus and them. Right? There's a thing on Netflix right now where Zeus is a Black man. It's very interesting. It's really strange. And I knew all about them and there I was thumbing through this book and going, "Oh-goon, Oh-shoon, Oh-bah-tay-la. Who are they?" And even though I pronounced their names wrong they heard me. Even though I pronounced their names wrong they heard me.

And so, at the Dunne school I was learning things and I went from there to being the choreographer for a Black artist group in St. Louis. And now I know... I began to realize that my ancestors were answering the question, "What do the old folks know." And it landed me in the Fahamme Temple of Amun Ra in St. Louis where I learned that everything in the Western the world comes out of Egypt. And not this little country that they say is in the middle east, either. I'm talking about Egypt that went from the tip of North Africa to the tip of South Africa. Let us not ever be deceived to think that that little piece of land on the modern map is Egypt. That's a corner. That's a little cul-de-sac on the river. I went from there to Oakland, California and there they finished kicking the door wide open. All of a sudden, I'm dancing with a group called Bata Koto, playing bata drums. And now we got Yemaya Oya, Oshun, I mean all of them, all of them are right there.

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[28] Danbala is a *lwa*, or sacred presence, in the Haitian Vodou. Song and dance are believed to call these presences at which time they may possess an individual. This spirit possession is referenced in many ways, including being "mounted" or "taken."

So, I came into African spirituality through the music, and the dance, and through the story telling. Now, I'm a priestess of Oshun and Ifa, but Yemaya gave me a very important taboo.[29] She said, "Don't run around telling people what you know but if somebody asks you a question ask them if they want to hear the truth as you know it." And then if they say, "yeah," tell them the truth no matter what the consequences. So, from here on out I have to ask y'all, do y'all want to hear the truth, as I know it?

(The audience responds affirmatively)

I want to bless everybody in this audience for having dressed the way that you have.[30] Educated, intelligent people who are investing in our traditions says to me that I can die in peace. I'm gonna hang around another 20 years, but I want y'all to know that it does mean that I will be able to die in peace. Because certain problems that we have, the number one problem being that our own educated people were looking down on our own traditions and would invest in *anything* other than our own traditions. We have overcome that.

I want y'all to know that when I first wrote *Jambalaya*, it was under Yemaya's insistence. Y'all need to know that I tried not to write it. It took me 12 years to write it. And she'd get my ass up out the bed. "Didn't I tell you to go work on this? Go work on that!" You know? I was afraid, "Oh, I'm gonna be diagnosed with personality disorder. And oh, the Christians are gonna come get me." And all that kinda stuff. But when it first came out, my first support came from older Jewish women. And that was because it was at a time when feminist women were blaming their mothers for not already being liberated and turning against them. And I said, "People of the African diaspora don't do that. You honor your mama and all that she has experienced." And they said, "We're gonna support her because that's a message that everybody needs to get."

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[29] A taboo is a directive or prohibition given to a practitioner of an African and Diasporic religion at the time of being initiated or receiving a divination. It is believed that adhering to one's taboos helps one to achieve one's destiny.

[30] The majority of the audience was dressed in traditional African or African-inspired attire.

It took a while for people in the diaspora, our own people, to stop being afraid that we would be tarred and feathered. Remember the Black Codes. There was a time when you could be murdered for looking like this, for practicing this. And that is what was keeping people from moving forward in our own traditions. So now—and I'm happy to say with a certain amount of respect—we've gone from eavesdropping on those elders who were uneducated, and maybe ignorant, holding on to whatever they could hold on to, to now accepting, exploring, and dignifying our own. This makes me feel really good. Really, really good.

And I'm grateful to see all the books. I'm grateful to know that you can go to YouTube, put in and orishas name and get songs, and get prayers, and get information. Don't tell your daddy what I'm about to say. The truth of the matter is that when I was coming up, the way the brother stood here and taught us a song, that would not happen. But I was determined to learn and share knowledge, so I stole my baba's song book. And I ran to Kinko's and copied it. And I slipped it back. And when he wasn't looking I made copies and gave it to everybody else. This is the eavesdropper, you know, the deceptive little girl doing her covert stuff to get the information out. And he was upset, but not for long. Because now it's out.

Two more things I need to speak on. We want to be very careful and particular to know that sankofa says, *look behind you but fly forward*. It is wise to source Africa to authenticate certain things, but we're not flying backwards. As people in this hemisphere and especially in this diaspora we have experiences, knowledge, and information that must not be sacrificed. That must be explored. Yes? We really, really need to understand the responsibility that has been rained at our feet. Now, go with me for a minute. I doubt that there is anybody in this room that is pure anything. "I'm just Yoruba," or "I'm just Congo," or "I'm just this that or the other." If we are truly to honor our ancestors and make the best of what they have given us, we must realize we are a rich soup of our traditions and we have got to respect that soup. *All* the ingredients that they have given.

There was a time when I would sit in on somebody's *ita* and it was only about the Lukumi priest. There was a time when people wouldn't deal with Ifa, and a time when they didn't think Iyanifa existed. Well, I have sat

now in ita where somebody's divining and they say, “I don't understand what this is let me dig in deeper. Oh, this person needs to go into the *igbodu*. Oh, this person’s ancestors are saying go over here and learn Hindu meditation.” They are trying to give us the responsibility of not only harvesting all that we have inherited but moving it forward with an understanding that we are not stealing anything from anybody.

In the noetic sciences, you take beliefs which people would normally call “old wives tales” and subject them to scientific scrutiny. So, you may get a reading where somebody says, “You need a spiritual bath,” and you think that that's just something that your grandma said or that's just something that's in the *odu*. But now we can take that water and look at it under microscopic conditions. Say a prayer in that water and put it under the microscope and you will see that it has changed. Many so called old wives tales, old superstitions have been proven under the scientific scrutiny to be real. So understand, you are not practicing a form of spookism. You are *reclaiming*. Our *odu*, our folktales, our rituals… these are ancient spiritual sciences that have been rendered into poetic language. And I stand on that, I don't care where I am. That is truth and it is now provable.

What we *really* have to work on is our ethics. There's too much underhanded shit going on! There are people being exploited; we can't keep doing that. We have to respect our women, our men, our children, our allies, our Earth. This Earth belongs to me, and it’s one of the things that people sometimes get upset with me about. Y'all know there was a time when all the continents were in one place, right? There is now geological proof that Africa did this and she pushed Europe out the way we push a baby out. It has been proven. And whenever someone tells me, “You have to decide are you a Black woman first? Are you a woman first? Are you a human first? What are you?” I say, “Every human thing on this planet came from between my Black legs. Don't tell me I have to choose. I ain't got to choose a damn thing!” See what I'm saying?

I want to charge you all with the responsibility of looking at your own *ita*, your own destiny, what’s written for *you*. Never mind mine or somebody else's business. Look at your *own* destiny, look at your *own* ancestors. See what it is that they are offering you and make a commitment

to expand your consciousness, to identify your allies, and to do your work. And shoot me a note on your progress so I can die in peace.

(Re)Present: On the Intersections of Art and Spiritual Practice

marcus Sangodoyin Akinlana
Ikeoma Divine
Sula Janet Evans aka Sula Spirit
Jean-Marcel St. Jacques

In this panel, moderated by Funlayo E. Wood Menzies, visual and performing artists who are also practitioners of various African and Diasporic Religions (ADR) speak on the importance of the arts and how they connect with ADR.

Funlayo E. Wood Menzies: I'm excited to have all of these beautiful folks with us for this first panel called *Represent: On the Intersections of Art and Spiritual Practice*. You might notice that that "RE" is in parentheses. And one of the reasons for that is that we say that the artist both represents things that don't exist and also makes things that do exist present. And so, we represent things and make them present through the practice of art.

Since our inception, the African and Diasporic Religious Studies Association (ADRSA) has always had a featured artist every year because we understand that you cannot divorce what is erroneously called "art" from spiritual practice. What was pillaged from the village and put on display as "art" is actually *ritual technology*. It was not intended to just for looking. Sit there and look at it, "Oh, this is nice." No! These items were *used*. Used to call down the spirits. Used to honor the dead. Used to celebrate life. Used to do all of these things and more. So, it's always important to us to have artists with us of all ilk whether you work in wood, paint, wax, song, or show, all of these mediums are our ritual technology.

Here today to discuss these themes, we have with us Baba Marcus Sangodoyin Akinlana, Nana Sula Spirit, my sister Ikeoma Divine, and we have our featured artist whose image has been gracing all of our promotional materials, Jean-Marcel St. Jacques. To give you a little bit about him and his WOODEN QUILTS™ collection that we're honored to have a portion of here with us today. All of these pieces were made from wood salvaged from our brother Jean-Marcel's home which was damaged

in Hurricane Katrina in the Treme section of New Orleans. All of that wood is salvaged from the house, and he decided to make lemonade out of lemons and create this beautiful artwork from it. We'll hear more about that from the man himself shortly. This is just going to be a conversation; we'll give each of them a few moments to talk about their practice, and then we'll pose a few questions. So please, panelists, tell us about what your spiritual practice is, what your artistic practice is and just give us a little bit about yourself. We'll start with Baba Marcus.

MARCUS SANGODOYIN AKINLANA: *E kaaro. Orukọ mi ni Marcus Sangodoyin Akinlana.* (Yoruba to English: Good morning, my name is Marcus Sangodoyin Akinlana) Most people know me as a visual artist. People were shocked to find out that I kind of consider myself retired from being a visual artist. But I was so hardcore with it for so many decades that it is difficult to transition. I'm also an olorisa Sango, drummer, singer, and I train people in martial arts.

SULA SPIRIT: My name is Nana Sula Spirit, and I am a Nana Okomfo [in the Akan tradition]. I stand as representation of my ancestors. I stand for my great-great grandmother Marie Therese Coin-Coin, many people know her legacy here [in New Orleans]. I have a temple here called The Temple of Light, *Ile de Coin-Coin*, in respect to my grandmother, and in respect to the *Ewe*. I was initiated an Ewe priest, a Mamisi, a priestess of Mami Wata. And I was initiated in Ghana, West Africa. I've also been with the orisa tradtion since the age of 19 and with the Akan or Ewe traditions, in honor of my great-great grandmother, who was born in1742, they traced her lineage back according to her name, the name Kokwe, or Koke, or Koi Koi, or Coin-Coin, if you add the French pronunciation in Louisiana. She was a very powerful business woman. I say she's a juju woman all the way. And she did a lot of powerful things here in Louisiana. I lived as her then and I live as her now. Ase.

IKEOMA DIVINE: Good morning. My name is Ikeoma Divine. Everybody calls me Keke. I am a registered nurse and I come from a lineage of nurses and midwives. My paternal great-grandmother was a midwife in South Carolina and my great-grandmother on my maternal side was a midwife on a reservation in Virginia. My great aunt was also a nurse and a hairdresser, and I remember sitting at her table every Saturday because we would get our hair pressed for Sunday. I would watch how she did hair and would also

give remedies because she was a nurse.

Two years ago, I thought I was coming to South Carolina temporarily as a travel nurse. But I've been there going on two years now. And now I have a botanical boutique where I teach root work and sell spiritual supplies. It's a space dedicated to those of African descent, to all practices of African descent. My job from the ancestors is to reteach—to teach people to remember why and how we use this tradition. I don't teach the root work of how to keep your man from cheating on you. I teach the root work of how to heal yourself so that you can attract love that you're supposed to get.

Jean-Marcel St. Jacques: I'm one of those people who was born in the Louisiana Creole diaspora, way out on the West Coast, but ended up coming back. So, I made the trip back. Back down to where my ancestors are from. Sitting on the shoulders of a generation of men that were named for this human contraband that came after the Haitian revolution. A lot of Haitians came to New Orleans after the revolution. Some of them came willingly as actual migrants but some of them came as human contraband by getting smuggled in the hulls of the ship. This cat named Jacques, this rebellious slave, who I guess they chained down in the bottom, he came over during that time. And I descend from him, and his son Alcey Jacques, and then his son Altimo Jacques, and then his son Alston Jacques, and then his son Leonard Jacques, and then his son Shirley Jacques, and then me. So, we got seven generations.

And I just so happened to be able to be born out of captivity on the West Coast and got to kind of put it all together in exile and then come back and apply it. And the way it goes down is through this art. For lack of a better word I say I'm a Hoodoo practitioner, but I don't really like to get into labels. It's just an artist's creation and the ritual of creating is where I find that I would apply these gifts that I got from the ancestors.

Wood Menzies: That's a beautiful segue into one of the questions that I want to ask the panel, and you touched on it a little bit, Jean-Marcel. Why is making of all varieties so important for our community? What is that connection of art to the communities, to spirit? I recently moved to Philadelphia and Baba Marcus's work is all over the city. Philadelphia is known for its murals of beautiful black people and that's one of the things I love most about living there. So, Baba Marcus, why don't you start us off and tell us why making art is so important.

AKINLANA: So, I'm seven generations deep in New Orleans art. I'm the seventh generation of professional artists in this city in our family. Musicians, artists of all types. My uncle Charles, *iba e ba e torun*, created Sugar Bear.[31] If you're of a certain age and stage, you know Sugar Bear, he was a cereal logo and my uncle Charles, who went to Dillard, created it.

When we're talking about introductions to Yoruba culture, for me one of the guiding north stars is this here, "Africobra." They had a conference in 1970 in Evanston, Illinois. And they created eight aesthetic principles of African people in America's art. One of them was to have an atavistic aesthetic. Where you would tap into your *egun*, your ancestors before you would make a move.

I'm going to pull up some names, these are some of my mentors and some of them are sitting right here in this room. I'm going to give them a shout out in a minute. Are y'all familiar with this name right here, Bill Walker? This is one of the greatest of all times, a living legend, when he was here, ibaye baye torun. He's the founder of the mural movement in this country, which I joined in 1980. Not by himself, of course, he is the tip of the spear, one of the organizers of the Wall of Respect in Chicago in 1967, the year after I was born. The long story short is that there are these elders and many others going back to this great woman right here, Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller. She is one of my murals in Philadelphia that I did before I got wore out; I'm retired now. This is a 30-foot-high head of this great ancestor right here. Are y'all familiar with this ancestor? If you're not I wish that you would be. Raise your hand if you know who this is. This is one of the greatest of all time. We should know her name. We should big her up.

Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller is one of the revolutionaries who started our entire cultural movement, before the Harlem Renaissance. In the late 1890's she dedicated herself to not only making artwork that was liberational, but using our cultural technological genius as a traditional artist to inform her

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[31] This phrase means "I give reverence to you in the spiritual realm" and is typically uttered after the mention of an individual who has passed on, particularly when referring to one's physical or spiritual elders.

art. Our art affects our ori; our art informs our ori. And this ancestor has impacted each or you here, whether you know it or not. If you are into anything Afrocentric at all, you have received that from Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller.

SULA SPIRIT: To me art is an expression of the ancestors and an expression of wellness. I can say for me it was definitely a wellness journey into art. Only when I touched a paintbrush in my 30s did I remember that I won a mural contest when I was in my teens. I didn't even remember that I used to paint. But a *sangoma*,[32] a close friend of mine, Khulu Kevin Buckner, said one day, "You should start painting." He used to paint, and I used to go to his house and he would paint spaceships, celestial visions, and things to come, and planetary shifts... So, it was when I picked up the paintbrush that I remembered. "Wow, I remember I was an artist!"

But I've got so many layers on me in life. You know, work and corporate things, and responsibilities, and natural, silly worries. Myself and my sister, Andaiye, we're the band Zion Trinity, and about five years ago, the spirit really started pushing me to do more art but certainly about putting a body of work out in the world that would help us understand orisa music more. So, an ancestor very close to me, Martin Salinas, we say *iba e* to him; we're coming up on the 30-year anniversary of his death. It was important to me to put a body of work out there where people could learn orisa music. So, I started with the cover of the book. And I said, "I want all this to be my own art. Who is Esu to me? Who is Sango? And how do we draw them?"

At first, I was thinking, "Draw a pretty picture of Sango's face." But I was like, "No, I don't do faces well. Let me think of the symbols that they represent." So, I went and began to draw each symbol. That's how the book started. What *does* Esu look like? OK, Ogun is represented by a palm frond, let me draw that instead of something else of Ogun like a machete. So, I just began. And each orisa started giving me all the images that they wanted to represent them. And that was kind of the beginning of this book. My sister from Zion Trinity and I, we began to record the music. And so, this is a body of work called Spirit of the Orisa. It's a book and CD project that I put in the world. I thought it was important for people to be able to pronounce the

[32] Priest of indigenous Zulu spirituality

words and bring the work back to original Yoruba.

So, my art form is music. My art form is creative expression through painting and through drawing. Speaking of my art form of music. I have to say that I used to go to *bembes* in New York—I'm from New Jersey originally, I've lived here 22 years—when I first came into the orisa tradition in my early 20s. I could see that people were mouthing the words to the songs, but they didn't really know them. Everybody was mouthing something different. And I was like, "You know what, the more I learn the music, the better." Because when this ancestor passed in 1985 that's how I healed myself. This was the love of my life, and when he passed away I began to heal myself through the music. And so, all the chants I listened to, I would listen to the similar threads. I became a real stickler about words. I'm an English major from Rutgers. The words were important to me. And it was important that we get this right and bring it back to our people.

People ask, "Are they Lukumi songs? Are they Ifa songs?" I don't know. I don't really characterize them like that. To me, they're just all just African chants. They're just Yoruba chants that went to different places and sound a little different in those different places. The spirits showed me a translator, Omoba Adewale Adenle. If anyone has been to Congo Square and seen that metal plaque of the linked Africans, that is Omoba Adewale Adenle's work. He's a Yoruba brother from Nigeria and a good friend of mine, and the spirit kept showing him as a translator. Because I knew no one would believe me if I tried to put this body of work out in the world and I'm some little girl from New Jersey. Like, "You're not even an orisa priest! You're initiated in Ghana. What authority do you have to put this out?" Like Yeye Luisah Teish was saying, it took her 17 years, I believe, to put the book out. This has been in my heart since I was in my mid-20s. But I kept feeling that I didn't have the authority because I'm not a priestess.; I kept tricking myself into that nonsense.

And I also kept feeling that this is more of a man's world, if you will. I kept thinking, "How can I put this out?" I struggled with that for many years. Knowing that the whole time I was a singer. Knowing that the whole time from my early 20s they had given me the gift of this music. So, the authority came from them and I just came to accept that, especially when we were approaching the 30-year anniversary of this powerful ancestor's transition. He was the one who brought me into this work, and it was important that I

not only bring it back to its original state, but that I have full license over it. That I'd be able to say, "This is my artwork. This is my translation of the orisa." And now people use this as a study guide. It's now a study guide for Ifa universities. It's a study guide for people in their homes.

I have to say, for me, art was liberating. As I said, art took me back to remembering that as a child I won that mural contest, I used to paint. But then the world started crowding and coating me and I forgot I did that. It wasn't until I started to put paint to canvas for this project that I began to really, really remember. I want to say, anyone who's an artist, if you're someone who even wants to draw a line on a page, do it. Because it's your ancestors' expression. It's the way that you free yourself. It's a way that you heal emotional wounds. It's a way that we move forward from pains. It's a way liberate ourselves. It's a way that we get in touch with the divine feminine. It's a way that we get in touch with the divine masculine.

Sometimes the world will tell you, "You can't do that, you're not an artist. Or you can't do that you work for AT&T or you're a chemist." But there's a child in all of us that remembers when they used to draw. And I chose years ago to live in that child-self who wanted to draw and wanted to not be bound by people's opinions about what I could or couldn't do. I realize that they put this in my ori to do this project, and it was important to me to honor the Yoruba ancestors who brought this over across the water with no pen and paper, no drum, nothing. So, for me this has been one of the greatest artistic expressions that I have had in my life. I love art. I know that through it, we are just connecting to our native ancestors, and African ancestors, and European ancestors, and all of those beautiful rivers that run into us. We are simply just awakening them.

Wood Menzies: Beautiful, thank you Nana Sula. Sister Ikeoma, I would love for you to discuss a bit of your collection focused on the African American ancestors. That was one of the things that really drew me to this sister. If you haven't seen her table, she makes candles hat are dedicated to our African American ancestors. Harriett Tubman, Nina Simone, and Nat Turner. I'd like for you to share your experience with that particular energy with us, if you would.

Divine: First of all, I've never been the type to consider myself a quote unquote "artist." I've always loved drawing, painting, and poetry and all that. But I remember having a teacher in middle school, an art teacher. I

remember that he didn't like me for whatever reason, and no matter how much I put my soul into those paintings because I loved what I was doing, he would always give me a D or an F. And because of that, I stopped, and I shut that down. When I started my root work and all of that, I would go to these spiritual supply stores, *botanicas,* and they're usually Spanish-influenced. And they would have the "Open the Way" candle and they would have it in Spanish. And they would have their representation. And there's nothing wrong with that at all, in fact, it's beautiful. But, I never saw anything that represented *me*.

And that is what inspired my Harriet Tubman "Open the Way" candle, because that is the epitome of the energy of open the way. I don't know if any of y'all have ever taken Route 17 all the way down to Beaufort, between Charleston to Beaufort, South Carolina. There's this part that goes through this swamp and it's called the Harriet Tubman Way. And when I look over at it, I get chills. Because I'm like, "This woman went through this swamp with all the alligators and snakes, untouched!" Through that type of terrain, if that ain't open the way energy that she is tapping into... You understand? Same thing with Nat Turner. Some people's hero is other people's enemy. He's from the same county my grandfather is from. When he was ready to say, "We're about to do this," with that energy. They went straight for it. They didn't care who; everybody got to go. So, when I say "blockbuster," the energy of that Nat Turner Blockbuster candle is this: by any means necessary, everything gots to go.

You can buy candles from anywhere. But when I touch *these* candles, this is energy work for me. And that's what I really teach and what the real work is. I'm doing *energy work*, which has nothing to do with religion. You can use this under the guise of any religion. Religion is just a system to help you tap into the spirituality. But when you understand the *alchemy* behind it, this is what makes you that practitioner. It's like, everybody can prepare a meal, but everybody can't *cook*. There's a difference. Those true cookers know, they talk to their food. When they stirring, and they mixing it up. Real cookers, we don't measure. We don't do that. We get that stuff and we sprinkle. We be like, "OK, that's enough." And as we sprinkle we're putting our intention in the food. We've always done this. If you understand a lot of stuff that I'm reteaching, I'm just reminding people that we never stopped this in the first place. All the stuff we do has been unspoken practice. But there were reasons behind it, and those that did it knew why we were doing

it. But they didn't teach us why they were doing it.

Like, I just recently, a few years ago, figured out all this time I thought my aunt was just "going fishing." She called me to the pier one day where she was fishing; there were other people fishing, but at the part where she was, she was by herself. I'm telling you that by the time I got to the end of that pier, the whole energy shifted. She was sitting in ceremony and I felt it. I didn't even look at her. I sat next to her and the whole conversation we had that was going on about family, and I understood. "Alright, this is what I need to do. OK. But all this time I thought she was going fishing. Little things like that. Same thing when I went to Africa and I saw... By the way I grew up in Louisiana. Sweeping the front porch, we're thinking, oh they're just sweeping. You go to Africa and they sweep the whole front yard and I'm like why they sweeping the dirt? Right, they're getting rid of that negative energy. And it's those things as far as the conjure. I guess you can call it art. Cooking is an art, an artform. Whenever you mix those ingredients and activate those ingredients, that is an art form.

Wood Menzies: Yes, and it's ritual technology. All of this. The singing, the mixing of herbs, the dancing, everything that we do, the beads, all of it. We don't narrowly define art as just the ritual but all of it. Everything that we do and how they come together. Robert Farris Thompson has an installation and book called, "African Art in Motion," and he speaks about how we danced those statues around as we sang and all of that. And we take that food and we pray over it and we put it in our bodies, and there's that alchemy that happens. That's beautiful.

Divine: Yes! I'm also a dancer, though I don't dance professionally anymore. I've always been a dancer and I eventually left the south and go to New York, and I studied at Alvin Ailey and I used to teach and choreograph. But it wasn't until 2006 when I got the call to go to Africa for the first time that I *learned*. Mind you, after Vietnam my father came and stayed here in Louisiana, so, since the age of 6, I was here every summer. My father also belonged to a Pentecostal Holiness church, and back then in the 70s and 80s, as far as I'm concerned, church was a little bit different. It was real different. Very African. And what I learned was—especially when I went to Ghana for the first time and was invited to the Ewe people that brought me home, and I was able to see their ceremonies—the very same dances they were doing were the same shouts we was doing out at these tent revivals out in Bogalusa, out in Natchez. We didn't know. We thought we

was dancing for Jesus Christ.

That's how I learned that what we practiced had nothing to do with religion. What we call speaking in tongues, those are the ancestors coming through with a message. We have to have interpretations here. People are going to want to go to Haiti, which is another one of my places. That's home. They also have the same thing. When those entities come through, when those ancestors come through, it's speaking in another language. There's someone else that has to come and interpret it. It has nothing to do with religion, that's just what we do. This is who we come from. Even when I'm watching Soul Train I can see some of the African dance. Two years ago, I was studying with a dance company, some of the same dances they do, I'm like, "Child that's the Prep. I got you." Never changed. We kept it. We just changed the name of it. But when you understand what you do and the energy behind it those dances were used to conjure up the ancestors. Understand what we could do.

WOOD MENZIES: Yes! Understand what we could do! Now I'd like to pose just a question to brother Marcel and allow him to share a little bit with us. I want to ask about this energy of transformation. I'm sure you've talked about this before, and I would love for you to share with us that process, that energy that led you to take this material that came from a place of destruction, and how you turned that destruction into construction. Because this is a part of what we do as Africans as well. We repurpose things. We use everything. "The rooter to the tooter," as they say, right? Every single thing, even those things meant to destroy us, we can find a way to make it work for us. To take our pain and turn it into passion, to turn it into positive energy, turn it into money. That is what this brother has done, and I want him to share a little piece of that story with us. A little bit of where that ancestral energy came from that led you to completely transform these materials that came out of pain into something so beautiful, that has taken you to so many different places.

ST. JACQUES: The obvious thing that happened was Katrina hit. It blew the roof off my house, so, I had to figure out how to come out here from California and gut it, fix the roof, patch up the holes. As soon as I was able, I gutted it out, patched up the holes, kept all the wood and just put it away. And then went back to California. Then, a few years later all this gentrification started hitting the neighborhood out here in Treme that we

were already dealing with in Oakland, where I was living. So, I was like "I gotta rush back to Louisiana and save my house," because there was this White lady, who the county said had paid the taxes on my house. What people don't understand is that right after Katrina, everything was messed up, but the city was like, "Y'all still have to pay your taxes." So, we're all trying to pay taxes on places that ain't even liveable and I was trying to protest the tax thing but while I'm protesting, my taxes were like $7,000, $14,000, $21,000. They're going up, they're going up. So, by this time they're telling me I have pay all this money in taxes and I'm thinking, "How am I gonna do that?"

So, I came back out here to New Orleans, started the process, raised a little money. Went to go pay the $14,000 they were trying to make me pay. By the time I went to pay the $14,000 they were like, "No, Landrieu just passed a new ordinance where you can't pay your taxes if your house is on the blight list." What we didn't know while we was all out in the diaspora, doing whatever we were doing, they were charging us $500 a day for 30 days. So, there was this "imaginary lien" on most people's houses that was $500 up to 30 days which equals $17,500. If you went to pay your taxes, that lien was ahead of your taxes, so it would just absorb all the money. So, de facto, they're basically saying you have to get your house off the blight list before you can pay your taxes. That was probably easy for a person that had a little 14-foot shotgun house but my house was 45 foot tall, 120 feet back. It was one of the original mansions in Treme that the free people of color built. So, to fix the outside of my house alone it cost about $70,000. I talked to some people and got it down to about $50,000. So, now I'm like, "How am I gonna come up with $50,000 to fix the outside of my house to get off the blight list to pay this $14,000."

I'm describing all this to tell y'all the pressure that creates diamonds, the pressure that creates transformation. In the meantime, I'm in California trying to raise kids, and love a wife, and other stuff. And now I had to come back to New Orleans, and I was like, "What am I gonna do?" While I was out here camping out in my messed-up house, I brought this little blanket that my great-grandmother passed down to me when she passed away. My Big Mama. A quilt. I'm lucky enough to have about 5 of her quilts, and I brought my one lucky quilt with me. So, I was sleep on that quilt one night and I was like, "What am I gonna do?" So, Big Mama through this dream like, "Quilt it baby." So, I took her, like you said, ritual technology of quilting and applied it to what I had in front of me, which was scraps of a

messed-up house. So, I said, “Wooden Quilts, that's what I could do.”

Immediately I started making the assemblage pieces and going out to the French Quarter on the streets and selling them to tourists. I made $70,000 in 10 months. By the time that 10 months passed, that's when Beyoncé was doing the Superbowl and she blew the lights out. I remember it was February 10th or something like that because I had to pay the taxes that Friday before that Superbowl Sunday. That was my deadline, or they were about to auction my house off on the auction block. So, I went in there to pay the $14,000 but the $14,000 had turned into $22,000. So, I paid the $22,000 in $1s, $5s, $10s, $20s. I took in there just like I made it. So, they had to close the line. Everybody was cussing and getting mad because I was holding up the line. They had to bring the supervisor out to watch the counting lady. I was like, “Y'all do what you got to do because this is how I made it.”

And the crazy thing about it is that I didn't even owe that many taxes. The thing was, I got my damage waivers in. And they were telling me, “Once you pay this $14,000 you're gonna get $7,000 back because you weren't supposed to be paying that much tax anyway.” But they said I had to pay it first to get the money back. By the time I paid my $22,000, my $7,000 refund had come down to like $4,000 or something like that. So, it was just a scam, but I paid it. And with the other $50,000, I fixed the outside of the house, which allowed me to pay it.

All that to say, all that came out of the pressure. And then your ancestors, they hear you crying. They hear you begging. They hear you petitioning. Whether you're doing on pieces of paper and folding them up, all that stuff, or just sending out those silent messages. You know, like my grandma used to do. My grandmama wasn't as much of an overt ritualist. If we didn't have something, she would go in the back and come back out with it. Like, she would just manifest it. “Baby, I might have a little something back here for ya,” she would say. And she would come back with it. So, it was this silent conjuring that I inherited from her that I usually don't share with my mouth. The best way I could figure out how to translate that is through this silent way. You look in the back... that silent way. It explains it in a non-verbal way that I can't even begin to tell you, but it works.

It's important for people like me because I'm real verbose. I started as an

emcee, rapping. So, I know about talking and running my mouth. So, when Katrina hit, it put me in this silent meditation. Where it forced me to be quiet and to express all that talkativeness through this other form, through this visual art. It also helped me to mature, in a way. To be able to pass something through without confrontation. Because usually when I talk I'm confrontational. My name is Marcel, that means "little hammer." Then my middle name is Diallo, that means "the bold one." So, they're putting all this hot energy on me like, "Fight, fight! Hit!" So, I had to find a way to calm all that and deal with my grandma.

WOOD MENZIES: Hmm! And, you can feel all that energy through it. It's so interesting that you speak about your talking coming through the visual art. Because when I first looked at these pieces... Y'all got to go over to his house. But he has doors made of WOODEN QUILTS™ on it. The house is gorgeous, the way you fixed it up, and you can just feel its energy. You brought some of my first tears for the day. OK, maybe my third if I'm being honest. Because that's that pressure that makes diamonds. This is what we do: we bend but we don't break; we find a way. And I would have loved to have been in that bank on that day watching them count those 20,000 ones with you. I would have stood there like "Yeah, y'all count that! That's my brother right there!" That's beautiful.

Let me ask this to close and allow everyone to comment on this. We talk about how art helps with liberation. What responsibility do you feel those of us who create have in the community? Where do you see our responsibility? Where do you see a way we can be more impactful with our creation? Because we know we have a lot of stuff out here being created that is not for our uplift. And that's the stuff that gets pushed the most. And so how do we counter that with the positivity we're creating, with our Afrocentrism, with our spirituality, with our ritual technology? How do we push forward? And what are the next steps to taking that responsibility?

AKINLANA: I started out as a young professional artist. And art is everything. There's an art to everything and everything is art. There's an art to making this chair, to how we speak to each other. There's an art to brushing your teeth in the morning. Let alone music, dance, architecture, and all those types of things that we obviously associate with art. It occurred to me that, as a teenager, I was looking around our community... I was growing up in what you might call "the hood" and I didn't like what I saw. So, I was exposed to the mural movement and I was like, "What can I do to

help?" And I said well, the biggest thing I could probably do is get involved in making these murals because they have a massive impact on people's psyches. I knew that our problems, and the challenges people have were coming from *ori buruku*, from twisted up heads. I was thinking, "We've got this television and stuff that's twisting our heads. What can I do that could compete with that?" So, I accepted the responsibility that AfriCobra laid down that our art form should be done in the service of our liberation, our elevation. I accepted that responsibility along with many others. We were part of a movement. But I want to share a little story with y'all today, and I'm gonna close with this as far as my part.

In 1992, I got called into to do a mural by one of the great founders of the mural movement, John Webber. He was supposed to do it but couldn't do it. He's a mentor and an elder to me. I was here at home in New Orleans and they asked, "Can you come up to Chicago to do this mural? John can't do it. He's leaving the country." And I said, "I can do it, but I'm rolling with this organization called The Neighborhood Gallery." Some of y'all might know The Neighborhood Gallery, it's legendary around here. "And we're about to roll out to England. So, I'll do it, but when it comes time to go to England I gotta roll." That's the agreement we made. So, I get there, and I've got two assistants under me and I said "Look, this is a chance for y'all to get a come up. I'm not controlling the money. You ain't gonna get no more money but I'll let you come in and co-design this project with me, so you can learn. And I'll kick you back a little lagniappe on the money but really I'm not controlling the money but this is a come up for you." And they agreed. So, when it came time for me to head out to England I said, "We've got this thing 75% to 80% done and y'all know what to do. Close this thing out." And I left and went to England.

Well, that project didn't get done. Now, this is my reputation. You mess up one mural and your whole reputation is on the line all around the whole country. So, I get back to New Orleans and come to find out the project isn't done. And now that means I've got to go back with no more salary, no money, out of my own pocket and finish this project. So, I called my babalosha. And he cast on it for me. And he said, "You know what the problem is? You got to start relying more on our culture in how you do things. It's not just about being an artist but it's about relying on your culture from the get go." And it's true, because I was an organizer. I was in Cuba in the 80s and I was around a lot of left wing people. I was under the influence

of, let's say, “Socialists” in a way that was kind of Eurocentric. I was finding myself. I really got dedicated to Ifa in 99 but before that I was into other things. I would consider myself a Black revolutionary. So, my babalosa said, “You tried to do all this egalitarian stuff. You kind of tried to approach this in a Western modality, but if you just look at our culture you could straighten that out and you could go on in success.”

Now, my uncle who I mentioned at the beginning, he used to always give me these books. He was instrumental in the invention of silk screening in the United States and he would always be giving me these books on African art, how they do the thing in African art, how they make it from beginning to end. And that slap in the face in 1992 was beau coup enough for me to say “OK, we’re revamping this whole thing. I'm gonna set this thing up based on the ingenious traditions of African cultures and Yoruba culture, specifically. I changed my *One Mural Society* to be called *Walls of Nyabinghi*. I don't tell many people that, but I'm retired now. Who cares? It's too late. They can't do anything. I did 30 years of work, almost. People would say “What's the name of your company?” and I'd say, “One Mural Society.” And they'd say what's that stand for? We already one. But what it really started to stand for *Walls of Nyabinghi*, named after Haile Selassie's soldiers who defeated the Italians. You can go see our stuff in airports all over the country and them folks didn't know that they were hiring *Walls of Nyabinghi*.

So, here's the point. I revamped and started drawing from our traditional cultural genius in the social structure of how I organized One Mural Society. And from then on, you saw our stuff spreading all over the country. We have a youth project in the international section of the airport in Philadelphia and we did three *dafa* on that project alone. All our public monuments from the 80's until now, before every single one of them, there was beaucoup ebo going on and beaucoup *dafa*. That's how we did it. And I have never said this publicly every before in life, because this type of thing was still frowned upon. It's the first time today.

One of my mentors who helped me in Ifa is sitting right here. It's Baba [name]. For me all the arts are one. I was a professional break dancer, I was taught to sing when I was 14, and I started training hard in art in 1978, from 12 years old. I come from a family of all kind of rappers, artists, musicians, and priests. I started training in priesthood in 1989. It's all one to me. I never thought I would stop wanting to be in the visual arts, but now I know why I

did. It's to do the things we're doing now. We're creating a school, *Juju Power, Orisa-Voodoo inspired living*. Shout out to my Juju Power students that's sitting right up in here. We created (?). At least one of my (?) students is up in here. Self-defense and combat. It's all art.

Sula Spirit: When you talk about responsibility, for me... In the year 2012, the power of the Great Mother descended upon the planet. And that was a time that the spirit called me to start beading as a Mardi Gras Indian, this was my responsibility that I was told in Dream Time. As I string each bead and create what they tell me to create, they told me to bring the power of the Great Mother on the planet. So, every year, for the last five years, I've dedicated each suit to the power of a different *orisa* or a different mother. My first suit was to Mami Wata, who is my godhead, my mammisi, Mami Wata, Yemaya. The next year was to Osun and (Aje?), the sister of Osun who comes to bring wealth. Each time I come on the street, I bring the power of that particular Mother in that suit to the streets to the people, and to my own self. The Great Mothers and grandmothers reside over my head. I have to say, I love all *orisa*. I love all the *abosum* but I am a daughter of The Mothers and I am clear. And I'm clear that as a daughter of The Mothers I must bring her power on the planet. This year, I came out with the grandmother of the swamp, Nana Buruku. And it was important to give power the grandmothers because last year I took my own mother, who is 80 years old and wheelchair bound, into my home. And I said, "Grandmother, you have to show me how to care for my mother. You have to show me how to lovingly care for this crone mother that you have given me. I am now the mother of my mother. Show me how to do this please." And Nana Buruku said, "If you bead me, I will show you." And she did. I have a patience that's come over me. And a grandmother spirit myself that has come over me. So, I thank the orisa; this grandmother is going to show me how to be a grandmother. I don't have chick nor child, but I'm a grandmother.

Ikeoma Divine: Responsibility. Responsibility in the community. This is a really deep conversation for me because I'm constantly feeling it. On the platform as a healer, period, as a nurse, as an RN. I also didn't mention that my father has also been a bishop here in Louisiana. And I remember as a kid, I went from going from a church with nobody to him having churches under his church. So, coming from a spiritual background that spoke on how to heal things, and now as a nurse understanding that the physical manifestation is the last manifestation of what is already off in the spiritual

plane. This is where our traditions are important in helping us to maintain the balance. There is a time for cleansing and protection and, yes, there is a time for hexing and banishing. Whenever our son, or husband or grandfather was about to get whipped or hung, we knew how to take care of that.

And today, how that goes—I don't care what religion you're under—if we all got together and went to Spirit to banish this stuff that is happening to us we wouldn't be shot in the streets the way we're being shot! The stuff that's happening to us would not be happening to us. I have these conversations all the time in my store. I have younger women coming to me that had mothers that didn't have certain conversations about them, whether it was from the physical or spiritual angle. Similarly, I have elders that come to me and thank me for opening that store for those that did practice, because they were dying off and they never taught anybody anything. If you know, please teach. They come to you. And I'm not talking about with an arrogant, "You have to do this and you have to do that." No, you teach in love. And this is just my approach. I'm not here to send anybody on a certain path. I'm here to teach people how to connect with their own ancestors. If you come from Yoruba they're going to see you that way. If your path was Vodun or Lukumi or what have you, they're gonna send you that way. That's not my job. My job is just to teach you how to connect. Once you make that connection they will show you how to heal yourself and it's a constant thing.

That should be our responsibility. Not just to look good. Not just to dress in our *geles*. It's not just about that. What are you doing with that? How many conversations are you having with our youth? Especially our women. I'm talking about from women to women. And I understand the men, but, listen, they eat *our* food. *We* are the healers. They came from *us*. Let them speak and whatever it is they need to do but at the end of the day, they came from us. So, it's our responsibility to bring us back. It's our responsibility to make sure we are good as a community.

Wood Menzies: Please give all of our panelists a rousing round of applause. Baba Marcus, Mama Sula, Sister Ikeoma, Brother Marcel. Thank you so much.

Juju Justice: Policing and Black Religions

Aisha Beliso De-Jesús
N. Fadeke Castor
Allison McCrary

In this panel, scholars and activists come together to discuss issues of policing and surveillance in Black communities with particular focus on practitioners of African and Diasporic Religions (ADR). The panelists also discuss the connections between the practice of ADR and political and social liberation.

Funlayo E. Wood Menzies: I have the immense pleasure of introducing these three amazing women who are doing very important work along the lines of what we have been discussing in terms of understanding how our traditions can liberate our communities. Because of that liberative power within our traditions, they have been policed. Our communities have been over-policed. Our communities have been harassed. Our communities have been inundated. We just recently, maybe a few weeks ago, a group of orisa priests were arrested in San Antonio for performing animal sacrifice although that right was upheld by the Supreme Court, as I know many of you know. Of course, this issue of policing extends to people of color in general but to communities that practice traditional spirituality have been particularly targeted, not only here in the United States but also in places around the world, including Brazil, Cuba, Trinidad, and basically any place you can think.

We are going to talk about all of that in this panel called *Juju Justice: Policing and Black Religions*. On the panel, we have Dr. N. Fadeke Castor, who is a professor of Anthropology at Texas A&M and the author of *Spiritual Citizenship*, a book which talks about the connections between the practice of orisa and Black power in Trinidad. We have Dr. Aisha Beliso-de Jesús, who is a professor of African American Religious Traditions at Harvard University and the author of *Electric Santería* where she talks about the Transnational nature of the practice of Santería as well as it's connection with technology—that's where the electricity comes from. And we have Sister Allison McCreary, Esq., who is a civil rights

attorney as well as the executive director of the National Police Accountability Project. She is a nun and she is also a death row chaplain. Now, I want y'all to understand that when I saw her bio, I got chills because a lot of us talk a lot of stuff. But to really go into a place where someone is being held knowing they are in their last hours and to go and give that person comfort. I'm getting choked up just saying that. That takes a special, special kind of person to really understand the depth of that and what it really means to hold space for somebody for real. There's nothing like that.

We welcome them! And as we did our panel this morning, I want to give them an opportunity to introduce themselves briefly. Give us just a little bit of background in terms of what you do in this area and why this issue of policing in Black religious communities is important to you and how you fit into that.

N. Fadeke Castor: Good afternoon. *E kaasan*. *Aboru Aboye*.[33] I'd like to give greetings to everybody here. Special greetings to my elders. Special greetings to Yeye Luisah Teish, who brought me into the tradition many, many moons ago. And greetings to everybody. My work is based in the orișa and Ifa communities in Trinidad and, for today's panel, my focus is really on how orisa and Ifa open up pathways for liberation. Pathways for liberation that enable people to build community that's both within and outside of the institutional structures of power that have been put in place by colonialism and neo-liberalism, and the structures of power that are policing them. There is a dialectical move where you live in Eurocentric society, but you are also drawing on bodies of knowledge that come outside of Eurocentric norms, that are grounded in the African spiritual systems and the African knowledge systems that we've heard so much about here today. And that drawing from that strength you can build institutions in your community in a way that empower, in a way that liberate, in a way that protect, and strengthen and can be a source of strength against intrusive and oppressive policing. This is something that I'm examining within the context of Trinidad and the wider African diaspora, and a new project that I'm working on looking at social justice in African spirituality in America.

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[33] Yoruba: "Good afternoon, greetings to the priests of Ifa present."

AISHA BELISO-DE JESÚS: First of all, I want to thank you Funlayo and everybody here for this amazing conference. It's been such an inspiring day. And following the wonderful keynote earlier, I'm sorry we're having to talk about the negative things right now. But I think the powers that have been invoked today are present. I certainly know they are present here with me. I feel them, and I wanted to start with that. *Bendicion*. *Gracias*.[34]

My background is that I was born and raised in Afro-Cuban religions in the US, and I grew up seeing the daily criminalization of our practices both by institutions and individuals. Going to school—being afraid to go to school—and being treated differently because my parents wore white, I wore white, or had headwraps on. "What are those funny glasses of water?" Bringing people over to your house and having people get possessed and things like that. And having this consistent gaze upon the practices that, for me, were comfortable and familiar and strengthening, but which others were seeing as wicked or evil or demonizing. And that goes all across the board, from television shows, to literature, to the way that they're seen, and particularly how they're policed.

So, my longer journey of going into Anthropology was about trying to figure out why all the of the negative depictions that were produced about these practices were always produced from certain disciplines. I wanted to come to those disciplines and rewrite the things that were being written about us. Through this process of doing research for my first book I witnessed the pervasive policing and criminalizing of African diasporic practices in a range of different scenarios. I witnessed young *iyawos*[35] who are in their year of whites being criminalized by the teachers at their children's schools. Being accused of poisoning their children, particularly in New York and Jersey. I witnessed people's orisas being confiscated at airports and traveling through Mexico, where people's sacred items were consistently removed and not being returned. Then you would spend days and days trying to figure out where your items were and couldn't get them

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[34] Spanish: "Blessings. Thank you."
[35] Yoruba: "bride," indicated a new initiate into orisa religion. This period is typically marked with wearing white for a year, making new initiates particularly visible and vulnerable.

back. I've witnessed SWAT teams surrounding ceremonies and arresting people like we just saw in San Antonio, even though we have a Supreme Court ruling that does allow for the legal humane sacrifice of animals. And we have at the same time the very inhumane treatment of slaughterhouses and animals killed by euthanasia, things that are consistently occurring and no one looks at, but for some reason everyone cares whether we have a goat or a chicken that we ritually sacrifice and then consume with respect for the animal.

I did not address these questions about ritual sacrifice in my first book, partially because I didn't want the book to focus on that component because that's already been such a sort of fetishized dynamic. People see the religion as just about the sacrifice, or just about the animals, or just about the killing. But, because it kept coming up over and over again, I wanted to think about the ways in which I, as an Anthropologist and professor, could be useful. How the work that I do could actually make an intervention. So, I began to research the policing of African diaspora religions by first looking at how police were not actually properly trained on how to deal with racialized religions. For the past twelve years or so, I have been conducting interviews with some of the people I've been working with who were "police practitioners," so, practitioners of Ifa, Vodoun, or Ocha, Lukumi who are also police officers, who often practice in a clandestine way, so they wouldn't be seen by the force as having ulterior motives. Through discussions with them, I ended up doing a whole larger research project where I've been doing ethnography of police. I've done ride-alongs in several different cities, I have interviewed police officers, and I've also discussed with practitioners their opinions on how we might start have real conversations where respect for Black traditions, where the respect for religions is real and policing happen in a way that we don't see these incidents.

For me, what's important is thinking *with* each different community. And because of the ways in which policing is already such a disturbing every day form of violence enacted on black and brown bodies through pervasive white supremacy, we have to think about how that trickles down. So, part of my work is being able to help people in the community engage in rituals that they should be able to engage in without disruptions. As well, thinking about ways of making resources available to be able to properly train police officers, which is something that needs to be engaged in a thoughtful manner. It's the duel sides of those conversations.

ALLISON MCCREARY: Thank you all for allowing me in this space. It's a real privilege and an honor to be here, as someone who looks like me, and as a Catholic nun. I am here to continue listening and learning from all of you in this room, as many of you who live here in New Orleans have already taught me so much. Thank you.

I come here today in my official role is as Executive Director for the National Police Accountability Project. I do that work here from New Orleans, but we have 600 attorneys from all different states who focus full-time on suing the police, prisons, and jails for misconduct and for civil rights abuses. I got into cultural rights work and looking at international human rights law and cultural rights from that perspective. My mother's family in on the Cherokee reservation in North Carolina, the Eastern Band of the Cherokee. Seeing how our traditions are dying out and what is necessary to protect them led to me getting interested in cultural rights work. Here in New Orleans, it's been a privilege to learn and listen for the past 14 years. Doing work with the community here, representing the New Orleans Mardi Gras Indian Council, and several of our Mardi Gras Indian tribes. Working on copywriting of Indian suits to protect people from profiting from images of them. Working on challenging practices and policies that criminalize traditions in this city. We were part of struggle to keep St. Augustine church, which was the first Black Catholic church in the United States, open. Since it was founded, it has well-integrated many African traditions into the liturgy. So, it's important to protect a sacred space like that along with public spaces.

I work with the Congo Square Conservation Society along with Mama Sula, and Baba Marcus, and Freddie Evans, and others, and it's been an honor getting to learn from Mama Jamila and Baba Luther through our work to preserve that sacred space over the years. A lot of my work looks at policies and things like the comprehensive zoning ordinances for cities that limit access to public space where a lot of traditions are practiced. Looking, like Alisha, into police trainings and supervision, what is being taught in the academies, and what are the police being taught in terms of how to respect and protect cultural traditions rather than to criminalize them.

Before this current role, I was with the New Orleans Office of the

Independent Police Monitor and we started the New Orleans Community Police Mediation program after seeing how we could bring the police and the community together to talk about what they want policing to look like—and not look like—in our communities. Most of our government entities are democracies, or at least try to be, or to say that they are. Policing never has been democratic. We know its origins are in slavery and that it has never been for the people or by the people. And so, with the current institution of policing that we have, how do we try to create processes where we can try to democratize policing, where we can say what we want policing to look like and not look like in our communities? I have worked nationally creating such programs.

WOOD MENZIES: Thank you so much for that. Let me pose this question: I know there's a lot that as you said that is wrong. What is one thing that each of you can point to that is, right? What is the biggest positive stride that you can see being made? I know it's hard because for every one step forward it seems like there's two steps back at times. But what's something that has inspired you as you've done this work? What has made you want to keep doing it and/or what has made you feel that perhaps we may be able to turn the corner with some of this?

BELISO-DE JESÚS: Something that has inspired me has been seeing the ways in which our practices are so creative and useful. One of the things I've been writing about has been the practitioner's own way of mobilizing in terms of ritual activism and strategically targeting both individual and systemic white supremacy. For instance, people putting hexes on Donald Trump. These are the types of things that I'm documenting. And I'm talking about actual practices across different diasporic traditions where people are targeting and mobilizing together as a community. We've seen this happen a few times over history but it's especially inspiring to see this type of mobilization now.

One moment that was particularly poignant was after Hurricane Maria. We had gotten some phone calls from some of our Lukumi folks in Puerto Rico who when we called them, we were like, "What can we send to you? What can we give you? What do you need?" And they said, "We need you to do some work." Like, *trabajo*![36] And *immediately* 15 people

[36] Work, in this sense, means performing spiritual healing rituals.

collaborated. A goat was offered to Ogun, and the next day the Jones Act was lifted. I don't know if you all were following it, but at the time Donald Trump was refusing to lift the Jones Act which he always lifts in times of hurricanes, but he was refusing to do so in this instance. It was genocide. People were and still are in real dire needs in Puerto Rico. But we needed to get real supplies in and we didn't know what to do because we couldn't even send money. I was like, "Can I send money and you can get it from the ATM" and they said, "No. Go to the ocha." So, we all mobilized, and it was a beautiful act. Ogun stood up for that, and that was really inspiring in terms of juju justice and ritual activism.

The other thing that's inspiring is that, so far, the police communities or the agencies that I've spoken to have actually been surprisingly welcoming of the idea of being trained properly. They say, "Oh, we know we've been messing up." But the nature of the embedded system of racism, particularly with this administration and also historically, has made it difficult to counter. I think there have been a lot of good moves that were made—particularly Obama's 21st century policing ideology—that were trying to shift certain practices, but they are now being shut down. That's not so inspiring, but the juju justice and the hexing done by the Afro-Latinx crews, *that* was inspiring.

CASTOR: I want to cosign on the juju justice as inspiring. I think about it and talk about it in terms of spiritual practices and bringing spiritual technology to bear on our real life, everyday problems not only at an individual level, but at a community level. I have seen this work in Trinidad and the ways in which they are reaching out to different communities. inspires me. I can think of two examples. For one, there's an orisa called *Ase Wele* which is the orisa of lost travelers. And in Trinidad they have reestablished some shrines to Ase Wele to elevate the spirits of those who died in the slave trade and in slavery without the proper burial rites such that their spirits were not at rest; there was unrest and disturbance. This is the idea of addressing some of the spiritual disruption making communities vulnerable. Also important is paying respects to the ancestors; not only the elevated ancestors which we talk about so much through Egungun, but to elevating those ancestors that need that elevation. And remembering them, and talking with them, and bringing them back.

The picture on the cover of my book was taken at the establishment of an

Ase Wele shrine. This is a part of a larger move to build these shrines across the diaspora, across the Atlantic. There are plans to establish a shrine in Nigeria, in Badagry, which is one of the major slave ports. And to make a network of these shrines. I find inspiration in that kind of spiritual technology, and that responsibility for not only making the world a better place for those who come after us but making it a better place for those who came before us.

Another example along the lines of "juju justice" is what's happening on social media, which is a double-edged sword. It can create spaces for *wahala,*[37] where people come together and are divisive, and backbiting, and creating all sorts of disturbances—which I've been seeing since I did Master's work on this about two decades ago. But in recent years, I was inspired when I recently saw a group of practitioners who are in disparate locations across the United States, come together via social media to *dafa*[38] about the current political situation and the current political administration, and the killing of our brothers and sisters, our children, our parents in the streets. And to do the collective *ebo*[39] from that reading to address that issue. So, what inspires me is the strides that we're making at *that* level and the potential I see there. And the depths of spiritual knowledge and technology that we have which we can use to make a difference at the community level.

McCreary: Hope is really hard to find sometimes. Your question reminded me of St. Augustine of Hippo, who said: "Hope has two beautiful daughters, Anger and Courage. Anger at the way things are but the courage to change it." When I see people who stand up for the courage, who have the courage to stand up against the injustices. A lot of my work was also in the favelas of Brazil in Bahia and Rio de Janeiro, working with the practitioners of Candomble and seeing how the raids of the favelas for marijuana and cocaine would affect their ability to practice their traditions. How their shrines and altars were destroyed by the state during the raids that would happen weekly and documenting that.

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[37] Yoruba: "problems" or "confusion."
[38] Yoruba: Perform Ifa divination" in order to seek answers to a problem.
[39] Yoruba: a ritual prescription aimed at rebalancing universal energies and/or solving a particular problem.

The people who are rising up around the world to say "No" to the oppression, the information that we have now through social media, and being able to communicate and to be able to document some things… it gives me hope that all of these things are coming to light. *We* know it's been happening and now *everyone* knows it's happening. Now we can address it in new ways. So, that gives me hope. The building of community, the coming together at gatherings like this. I think that the basic human need for community will always exist and we have to find more ways to gather and co-create with Spirit together. And so, that gives me hope.

Wood Menzies: Hope *is* hard to find sometimes, and I know we know that. Like I said, it often feels like it's like two steps forward, three steps back. But this work is so very important that all of you are doing, and I'm so grateful for it. I see we have a few questions or comments from the audience.

Audience Member 1: My question is a little more philosophical and is specifically directed to the practitioners on the panel. I'm from Los Angeles. This is my first time in New Orleans and before I came out here, I was told a lot about a particular practitioner of Voodoo that everybody knows. Upon researching this practitioner, this mambo, I find out that not only are they Caucasian, but their particular temple has taken it upon themselves to do away with animal sacrifices. And I've been told that within the temple and with the practitioners that she initiates, animal sacrifice is considered a backward concept to them because they are vegan. From your perspective, would you consider this very well-known, well-discussed mambo's ideas about animal sacrifice to be sort of policing of our original traditions?

Wood Menzies: Great question, sister, thank you. And let me add, it isn't only this one particular person. There are several people, throughout the country in various practices that have decided they were going to do away with animal sacrifice although they are practicing in traditions where it is traditionally done. And whether the idea that animal sacrifice is not necessary is *itself* a form of policing particularly when it comes from practitioners who aren't Black and who therefore don't—as many Black practitioners see it— have the same "rights" to the tradition. That's a very interesting question. I think it begs a broader question here on the

changing of the liturgy: the changing of theology, particularly when it's something controversial and something that has been policed so heavily. Is it an answer to relieving the controversy? Is it another form of extending the policing?

CASTOR: It is a sticky wicky—you've asked a *very* thorny question. My first thought is that it really does invoke politics of respectability and, in that sense, it is a form of policing. I think about, for instance, how yoga is commodified and distributed as separate from its sacred practices. How the "enlightened woman of today"— the enlightened *White* woman—wears her yoga pants, has her yoga bag, her mat. It's all highly policed, that separation from brown bodies. Which is really a form of *blanquemiento*.[40] It's a white thing and, in that whitening, there is an intent at a type of purification. So, I think that's what you're speaking to, and I see that.

On the other side of it, we do know that there are many pathways and that Divinity speaks in many ways to different communities. For instance, I know of a less-well-known community that you would have never heard of, a very small orisa community that's not trying for a high profile. They were just quietly doing the work when the message came through to the *Iya*[41] very clearly that for her and the rituals that she was doing, there was to be no *eje*. There was to be no blood in the transmission of ase, or sacred energy. If her godchildren need a ritual involving blood, she calls somebody else in, because for *her* it's taboo. She's not railing against it for the religion, or trying to reproduce it in every space, but that is *her* pathway.

So, aside from this specific issue, the larger question really is: how do we protect ours from the policing, respectability politics and the whitening of commodification? And at the same time, how do we ensure that we, ourselves police divine transmissions and individual pathways? That's what makes the dynamic so sticky. But, yes, it's when people start using that as a calling card to promote themselves and trying to "elevate" it in terms of Eurocentric moral terms, then that's when it's very problematic.

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[40] Portuguese: "whitening," typically used when the movement toward whiteness—whether physically through racial mixing or ideologically—is deliberate.
[41] Yoruba: "mother" used, like baba ("father"), to denote a spiritual elder.

LUISAH TEISH (FROM THE AUDIENCE): You ever had a baby with no blood? Ask yourself that question: you ever seen a baby birthed with no blood? If there's no blood, you're talking about working at a lower level of life producing. Herbs are very, very powerful and there's a lot that you can do with just herbs. But if you're trying to birth something, you need some blood. Let's be real about this. Now, as Fadeke mentioned, there are particular roads of Obatala where a person will be told not to use blood but, instead, they are using smashed snail matter. The snail is androgynous, being both male and female, so that material is there for the birthing. But that is a very different thing from somebody just stepping in thinking they can just change it because they are too cowardly to face the fact that they are taking a life. If you put a live rooster in your hand and you move it from this level of existence to that level of existence in a sacred manner, you have to take more responsibility for it than the person who let somebody do it over at a slaughterhouse. I believe people ought to raise the animals that they sacrifice so that there's a real connection.

Addressing this idea of juju justice, we have clear examples of bringing spiritual energy to bear on specific problems. I can tell you some of us here in New Orleans worked on Standing Rock, and I especially want to mention one particular powerful incident. Living in Oakland, California, on the corner of 53rd and San Pablo, there was a liquor store called "Bottoms Up" owned by some Middle Eastern Muslims who were selling liquor to our children. But, you [as a Muslim] ain't supposed to drink! We went down there and told them, "Your prophet told you not to touch alcohol. Why are you selling this to my children?" And their answer was, "We'll sell it to anybody who buys."

So, what did we do? The women in my sacred circle, on full moon nights we went down there dressed in whites with white circles around our eyes, and we splashed formula on the street corner. Number one, don't no drunk or no drug addict want to see a bunch of Black women with white circles on their eyes, splashing some shit... And we did it, and we did it, and we did it. We did it several full moons. "Oh lord, the witches are down there," they would say. I will make a very long story short and tell you that if you go down to 53rd and San Pablo today and there is now housing for senior citizens.

(Rousing applause from the audience)

Audience Member 2: Hi, this is a kind of political and spiritual question. I felt that there was sort of an assumption underlying in our discussion here, and that assumption is that the police need to be reformed. But do we actually *need* police? If so, why? If we don't need police, then what is the work that we need to be doing to ensure that we don't need them anymore?

McCrary: What a great question, thank you! I'm an abolitionist, I think we need to abolish the police. We know the system was created was to keep people from their freedom and in slavery. That was what is was based on, and anything that is not based on liberation and freedom needs to be abolished. I think we need to be creative in posing alternatives. Restorative justice is really great as it brings people together. I think many of the traditions of the people here and of your ancestors have excellent models, and I encourage us to dig deep and listen to what our ancestors did before policing existed. How *did* we restore each other's wholeness and humanity when we didn't have state sanctioned people walking around with guns with the ability to take other people's lives from them and not be held accountable for it? I think things like restorative circles—bringing the people who've done harm and the person who's been harmed together in the same room with people who are trained spiritually and or professionally in how to facilitate those spaces—will help bring about healing and wholeness to everyone who's been affected by any harm that's perpetrated by anyone in the community. I think that's one thing that can help heal all of us.

Beliso-De Jesús: That's such a good question and it's so difficult to answer. I've done a lot of interviews with community members who are practitioners and I'm also working on a project right now in New Orleans on police use of force. As a part of that, we're interviewing people across the city; we've done about 500 surveys, and one of the things that keeps coming out in the interviews is that these people were *not* abolitionists. They consistently said, "We need police. We want police. And we want them to have weapons. We just don't want those weapons used on us."

So, I think a lot of deconstructing the pervasive sentiments around anti-Blackness also has to happen within our own communities and within our traditions and practices. Because even within our own communities, in our Black religions you have people expressing anti-Blackness. I got frustrated

with some of the conversations I heard growing up, those conversations that would sometimes put women down, put people of color down, or put queer people down. That's a systemic problem in all forms of practice, in all different religions, but we have to work cognizantly to dismantle those technologies that are embedded even in the ways that we interact with each other. It is so much about producing that love and that care. Like what you're doing, Funlayo, bringing out this *ase*[42] and amplifying it and magnifying it. That energy is so crucial to the healing and collective works that we need to do. So, there's that component as well, and we can't pretend that we can get rid of the police without dismantling everything else as well simultaneously. And the end of it all, we need to provide for our communities.

Importantly, we also need to recognize that people are not eating but we have animals that are being sacrificed and wasted. How do we join this? How do we create a system where those of us cook, and nourish, and pray over the animal? Back in the day we used to take our leftover meats to the homeless shelter in San Francisco. We used to take trays of already prepped food and they sanctioned it. Then there came a time when they said they could no longer take trays of food that are cooked or something like that. So, the structures continue to manipulate and create these barriers to sharing and cultural melding. That's a huge problem and it's constant.

WOOD MENZIES: Yes, unfortunately the litigious nature of our society has caused so many of those types of disconnects with people who are willing and able to help others. That absolutely needs to change. I want to thank you all so much for your contributions! Please give our panel a hand. We have a lot more work to do, but with the help of scholars, practitioners, activists like these ladies here and like many of you out in the audience who are also involved in this work, we are forging our way forward.

[42] Yoruba: Vital energy, spiritual force.

Wakanda to Where? Fact, Fiction, and the Way Forward

Yeyefini Efunbolade
Régine Romain
Anwar Osungbemi Uhuru
Kokahvah Zauditu-Selassie

In this panel, scholars, writers, and practitioners come together to discuss themes from the hit film Black Panther *as they relate to African and Diasporic Religions (ADR) and the way forward towards transformation. The panelists discuss the roles of fiction and Afrofuturism in creating a workable vision for the future.*

Funlayo E. Wood Menzies: You *know* we can't let 2018 go by without talking a little bit about the vision of Wakanda that was presented in the film *Black Panther* and the ways that it mobilized people. Some people saw it as a superficial mobilization, and we're going talk about that. Some people believe that it was a gateway for more, and we're going to talk about that, too. My personal feeling about it is that, generally speaking, I feel like anything that helps to present us positively, anything that helps to raise our vibration and gets us at all curious about stuff that we have been taught is "evil," that we have been policed about. All of these things we've talked about today. Anything that gets us there is a good thing.

I've had young people come to me after seeing the movie and say, "So tell me about the heart shaped herb. Is that real? Can I really talk to my ancestors like that?" And I say, "Yes, you can. I mean, they might not appear with a leopard under a baobab tree. They may not look like T'challa. But you can certainly talk to them." It has been a tool that has, at least, raised questions and opened lines of communication. I definitely want us to address this, and there are no better people for us to address it with than this illustrious group.

We have Régine Romaine who is a visual anthropologist, educator, artist, photographer, and founder of the Wawawa Diaspora Center. And I have to actually give her big ups for this panel because she was the one who said, "How about we do #wakandatoNOLA?" I was like, "Oh yeah, that's the hashtag." So, please big that up Wakanda to NOLA because part of it is taking that vision of Wakanda and bringing it here. Letting whatever energy has been generated by that fictional vision inspire us in the real world.

Next, we have Dr. Anwar Uhuru who works in literature around anti-blackness. We have Iyalode Yeyefini Efunbolade who is a ritualist, storyteller, priestess of Obatala, the founder of the International Institute of African Studies and Knowledge (IIASK) and of Yeyefini.com where you can learn about balanced living, which is beautiful. She has quickly become one of my treasured spiritual teachers and someone from whom I have gained much wisdom, and we're happy to have her. She's also one of the people who was a part of one of our *original* Wakanda which is called Oyotunji, that was founded in South Carolina. She was there, and she's going to speak about that. And last but certainly never ever least, one of my favorites, one of the baddest in the game Dr. Kokahvah Zauditu-Selassie, affectionately known as Mama Koko. I don't know what she's going to say, y'all, but I know it's going to be some fire. She is a professor at Coppin State University and just super-duper fly all around. They're all going to talk to us a little about this vision.

So, let's jump right in and open it up: The vision of Wakanda has been what everybody's been talking about. The movie made the most money out of any movie, it's broken every record. But more than that, the *vision* is what has really struck people and what has really opened up this dialogue about Blackness and about African civilizations. So, what—if anything—do you think the vision of Wakanda means for us? And how can we use that energy that has been pushed toward a fictional place to really strengthen and renew what we have amongst us in the real world.

KOKAHVAH ZAUDITU-SELASSIE: Greetings. Do I have permission from my elders to speak? Always start with language. "Wa" is a plural in Swahili. "Kanda" is a KiKongo word which means "community." Wakanda. Wakanda is a real word. So that means Wakanda is a real thing, because only that which exists can be named. So, Wakanda reminds us that we exist as a community. And that community is our navel, that's our circle, that's our guideline, those are our boundaries, those are our blessings. It reminds us that it's the community that keeps us whole. So, in that vision, following up on the last panel, power is never given to any external force or source to monitor the community's behavior. The community feeds *itself*. When you're too bad to be in the community, you're exiled. That is where you go: you go *away*. You're not attached. So, when we sing "Will the circle be unbroken?" That's the ring shout. It's reinforcing the importance of the

community. Wakanda forever.

YEYEFINI EFUNBOLADE: It is of course my pleasure and honor to be here, to be amongst what to me seems like the grandchildren of Oyotunji. Because the fact that we are here wearing African clothing and that many of us have African names is beautiful. Remembering the fact that, as was spoken so eloquently by our afternoon keynote speaker who said, "we are God." We are God! And when we know that we are God, we create such things as Oyotunji. Never before was something like that done. Out of the expression of the thought, out of the idea, out of the concept that we could create something in America totally dedicated to *Wakanda*—community as Koko said—totally dedicated to recognizing and remembering that we are God. That's how it started.

Whatever we say is a prayer; every word uttered is a prayer. I was a little girl in Panama, and in 1962 when I came to this country, that was the first time that I heard "Black is beautiful," and that being African had worth. Because when you're raised as a Latina in Central America and you're Black, you're nothing. Nothing that you see in front of you reflects back to you. So, in my quest to find who I was to be, I came to America in 1962. And in 1964 I went to the World's Fair, and at the World's Fair was the first time I felt the energy of our ancestors. This was a prayer that I made when I was a little girl running around in Panama. "This is not me. I don't feel like myself. I don't feel like I have value, like I have worth. I do speak Spanish and everything in my culture dictates that. But when I see what my mother has to do in the community that we live in, we are nothing." So, I was in the eighth grade, coming to America, and I'm going to the World's Fair, and seeing the *Drums of Passion*, Baba Olatunji, playing. Now I'm shaking, and I'm feeling the energy, and I don't know what it is. That day a man said to me, "You're feeling the spirit of your ancestors." It was the first time I ever felt such a thing.

Now, in Panama, I grew up smelling the candles. I grew up smelling the Florida water and all of that and knowing that there was something other than Catholicism and curious about all of the things that we were told were backwards. So, fast forwarding, I get to the World's Fair and I hear, "This is the energy of your ancestors." And in that same performance is Baba Efuntola Oseijeman Adefunmi I, *iba e torun*, he is there playing the shekere. And he's *playing* the shekere. And this is the first time I get introduced to the ancestors and what it meant. After that, I started going to the Schomburg

Library and rushing and just eating everything I could from Africa. And in 1971, when Oyotunji was started, the day that we made it Oyotunji, I was there. And I ended up being one of the wives of the same man who was there, who was present, when the ancestors presented themselves to me.

So, you see, when you ask, and when you make a statement that says, "This is not home for me, I don't feel this." In that moment your ancestors are doing the work. They're doing the work of bringing you together with what makes sense to *you*. Out of the vision and the dream that Baba Oseijeman had to have a place where we could speak Yoruba and call our ancestors with no apology. The first act of moving forward and creating a reality based on ancestral knowledge was to buy your own land. Get your land, raise your chickens, raise your food, and praise your God. Because your God has to look like you with no apology. When we moved out of the city and moved to South Carolina and started the village, we arrived on June 16th and we called the name *Oyotunji*, "Oyo rises again." There was no running water, and everyone had their African tribal marks, and everything. Out of Africa.

The whole purpose for it was, that little girl in Panama saying, "I need to go home. I need to feel a connection to Spirit. I need to feel that this is life." So, from being in Oyotunji from its inception, with the ideals of fighting racism, facing the KKK shooting and all of that. We were there. We made a statement. We said, "This is our right! This is our God! We are God! We know that we need this and we're going to take it with no apology." Those were the instructions that were given to us by the ancestors. So be careful what you ask for because they will show up! And what is it our job is to do? It is to do the work. Just do the work. Don't forget. Just do the work.

Wakanda has always been. Every 40 years we have a renaissance. We had a renaissance 40 years before this in which we had the Civil Rights Movement, and we were moving, and we were voting, and all of that. Before that, we had the Renaissance of the arts and music coming out of Harlem. So, this is *our* renaissance, our coming back. It is our time and we have never forgotten it or forsaken it. This is just the great discipline is coming. Now that we have technology it looks different, but it's the same thing. The same thing that made me give birth to children with no running water and no electricity in the bush in South Carolina in the 1970s is that same thing that we're doing now with the technology and saying "Wakanda." Wakanda has always been here.

Anwar Uhuru: Like Mama Koko, I need to ask permission of the elders. May I continue? Thank you. So, as a baby, or grandbaby as you said, I first of all want to say thank you to everyone in this room. I want to particularly thank Yeye Teish, Mama Koko, and Mama Washington, because without their work, I wouldn't have had a dissertation or defense study.

Now, what I think Wakanda is doing for younger generations is making us individually and collectively step up. We need to let our elders know that they didn't do all this work, blood, sweat, and tears, for us to just go "Hmph." So, that's what it's doing. I totally agree with you, Yeyefini, that it's causing us who grew up oblivious to realize how much work still needs to be done. To realize that of we continue to sit back and do nothing we will regress back to reconstruction, and lynchings. I think that's what Wakanda is making us do. To recognize that we can't continue to look forward individually. We have to find the leadership within ourselves and then together unite.

Régine Romaine: Within the Haitian tradition we have a call and response. And the call and response is: I say "honor," and you say "respect," and we say this three times. Honor! Respect! Honor! Respect! Honor! Respect! *Mesi*. *Mesi*. *Mesi*. I give thanks to everyone that's here. I give thanks to all of the elders who are here that have watched this movement, this wave, this ebb and flow that has happened with our culture, our traditions, with the way that we see ourselves.

My name is Régine Romaine, and I come from a long line of warriors. My ancestors are from Haiti. And before that they came from Dahomey, they came from the Congo, they came from Guinea, they came from the Nago, they came from the Igbo. Within our tradition in Haiti we kept our lineage, and it was through our rituals that we actually could call forth those names, those nations. And while there's a dismantling of our identity, while we do not understand really who we are, we get lost in the images of others. We begin to see ourselves dissolved. And that's not really why we're here. What the arts do time and time again, is they show us the creator in us. That is the reason why art is so significant. And that is also the reason why it is continuously taken out of school. Because every time you step into a space, whether you're working on a song, or you're painting, or you're writing, you're doing fashion designing. Or you're taking the wisdom of your grandma and you're building wooden quilts. That is because you're in a

space of creation. And when you move into that space of creation you realize that you are a creator, that you are accountable to that vision.

What Black Panther did, in essence, is a part of the way it's always been. We have always used the arts; that's how we have survived. I want to share something with you from my research, and that is a term called "dissociative fugue," formerly "fugue state" or "psychogenic fugue." It is a rare psychiatric dissociative disorder characterized by reversible amnesia for personal identity including the memories, personality, and other identifying characteristics of individuality. This state can last for days, months, or longer. Many of us are in that fugue state. We are in a state where we do not remember who we are. And sometimes, something as simple as a song being played— it brings tears to our eyes and we don't really know why. There's this energy that kind of comes over us and we feel like "What is this?" And then maybe we're thinking about someone who's passed away and we get this wave of emotion when their favorite song comes on or their picture falls down from the altar and we say, "I know you're here with me." As spiritual beings we know when that happens. But sometimes we're in denial of that because we're separate from ourselves.

And how do we reconnect? Any time and space that we find ourselves within the arts we are reconnected to that God space. So, though we know that Wakanda plays a role in fiction, we are also storytellers and we understand the role stories play in helping us to identify, to learn, to transform, to shift, and to move into a higher state. That's the road to be on. What is the role of the odu? The odu tells us the stories, right? This is the road. Stories are at the essence of who we are because, within that space, we create our God consciousness.

Zauditu-Selassie: You know sometimes on word can be 10, or 20, or 30 different things. So that "Wakanda" is community but "kanda" is land. Kanda is land. Kanda is medicine. So, the role of a person is to be medicine to the land. How do we recreate the kind of fever and fervor with which Wakandan ideas are meshed? Even if it's in your imagination in cosplay. We don't care. Ain't nobody policing how you gets down. But it's the idea that you can be medicine to this land. That you can be a better shepherd or shepherdess. That you could be a better tiller of it. And so, on the surface of the movie, there's two levels. You know, like Meek Mill said, "There's levels to this." You feel me?

On one level, if you look at the topography of the land of Wakanda it looks like liquor stores, and check cashing places, and Chinese places called Ding Dong because they hate you enough not to even name it nothing. That's what it looks like in our communities. On the surface, the land of Wakanda looks like people in thatched roofs and mud, but then when they drilled down under the surface of things where the superficial fades away and you're in deep root structure—down in the deep, deep earth—Wakanda was a different world for the Africans. Where they had access to their total selves like Obatala in the dark room of the mountain creating human beings to walk in light. So, that's what I like to think. That all of our communities, on the surface, they look like liquor stores, and churches, and food death palaces, and all of those things. Beepers, no credit check. Phones. But in the deep structure, where Black people's lives have always mattered because they are matter which is the root of mother— "matter," "matrix," all of those are coming from the Divine Mother. That Wakanda lives. And that Wakanda is not looking for a person to step out, it's looking for everybody to step in.

EFUNBOLADE: We cannot overlook or forget the fact that, in the movie, one of the biggest threats was when we forgot about the child that was left in the diaspora. That is our call. Our call is to stop calling us Panamanian, Jamaican, and whatever. We are *African*. That is what Wakanda means for me. It's coming back together globally and recognizing that we can do this without all of the negative things. Again, I say that we are gods! So we think, so we have it. If we think globally, we have to think diaspora. We cannot leave our children behind! That's what it means to me. That was the most poignant point for me. Unfortunately, at the end of it we have Black on Black crime and that was the part that was a little disturbing for me, when we had two relatives fighting.

WOOD MENZIES: Dr. Uhuru will you talk about that a little bit? Because I see you nodding hard. Of course, everything can be criticized, but that was one part that was particularly troubling. And what does that mean?

ANWAR UHURU: One of the hardest, most gut-wrenching parts for me—and I saw it twice just to make sure I wasn't tripping. First regular and then 3D. It was research. What made it interesting is, I made a concerted effort to see it in a Black space:125Th Street, Magic Johnson Theater, in Harlem. What was interesting about the release of the film is, first and foremost, it was during Black History Month. Second, when it really took off as far as

viewership, the first week of it was spring break for the kids. So, you're in a place that's normally empty by 8:00 pm and you've got strollers and babies. And I don't care if you were seven or 77, when Killmonger makes that statement about where he wants to reside for eternity, the inability to express myself came relentlessly for the second time. Because I felt the weight of all the nameless people in the Atlantic, and the Caribbean, and so on.

That was one of the points, as Cynthia Harmon discusses, the afterlife. It's hard for people from elsewhere to understand, how much of that we still carry that on. There's that meme that goes around, "The difference between you and I is where the boat landed." One of the things for us to truly embody the always and will be of Wakanda is we have to deal with the non-apology of the middle passage. That was one of the disjunctures. And I remember the only people who would truly articulate it were the Hebrew Israelites and now other people are starting to say, "Well, yeah, that is the most problematic part." And that's the thing that collectively is the affect and effect of what happened those—as Iya Washington brought up—those 360 years ago and counting. Because after the 13th amendment we still had to deal with, and we are still dealing with, how this looks. And that is the part that truly shows that if we continue with anti-blackness within and between communities the Killmonger syndrome will continue.

ROMAIN: It was particularly powerful for me to watch the film and then discuss it with my students. The first time I saw the film I was in Benin, and I had been living in Benin for about two years. I just got back in February. I came back to the tundra that is New York, I don't know why. But I had to come back, it was the time. And one of the things that I always do as an educator is to incorporate the arts into everything that I do, into how I teach. So, for me, this is a tool. Whatever it is that you think about it. Whatever it is that it may or may not mean to you. It's a place where we can connect with our children. The same way that a new song comes out, and there's a new dance, and you're like, "Oh, we did that." And, so as not to condescend, we learn the dance. Go ahead and learn it because it's also nice to see; it's nice to see the new expression. And then we show them what we used to do. And then somebody will come along and show us what they used to do. And all of it is a big circle. So, we take it and we use it.

We are reclaiming, and we can also reclaim whatever comes out of America

because it came from us. You can't be upset about what you've built. The essence of it is that what is here is for you. But you didn't understand that. We were building thinking we were making other people strong but, in essence, this is for us. Part of it is reclaiming and understanding who you are. So that when we see what is happening around us, when Hollywood now that wants to make all these films, you take it and you use it and you keep moving forward because what's most important is what is our intention. The tools have always been there, and the arts are a part of that.

One of the things that I always try to do, is I correlate what's happening in the film to real life history. When we think about warriors within my lineage, I know that I'm descended of a Haitian revolution. So, within that same context, I can take your Black Panther story and I can talk to them about the ceremony of *Bois Caiman*, that happened on the 14th of August 1791. And let them know about the rituals and connection to the ancestors which is eluded to in the film. I can talk to them about the *mapou* tree that's symbolized through the baobab. I can talk to them about the connection to the ancestors in the dream space because that is how we survived the TransAtlantic trade system. It was in the ways in which our ancestors spoke to us. So, though we did not come with an encyclopedia that told us, "Use this herb. Do this. Do that," we came here with a connection that is *divine*. And that, in essence, was our salvation, though we did not have anyone telling us. Sometimes we were the only ones from wherever we came from who knew whatever we knew, but we had to figure out a way. And how did we do that? Well, we always had that information but we had to reach a point where we could start to use it and not be afraid. A big part of recognizing the God force within you is being able to see the beauty within you. Being able to see that you are worthy. Being able to see that the vision you have should be brought into fruition. That's the arts, and that's why we can use Wakanda. We can use the Blaxploitation films. We can use any and everything, because we are creators. So, we can always take something and transform it.

Luisah Teish (from the audience)**:** What is wonderful about Black Panther is that is falls into the category of Afro-futurism. Everyone in the diaspora likes to contemplate where we're from. That question that always bothers *me* is, "Who would we have become if we had not been interfered with?" Black Panther allows you to pose that question, to go into your consciousness and pull out creative processes that brings that to the front. Take total creative license because it's "speculative fiction." I don't actually

believe there's such a thing as fiction, I think that there's arrangements of suppressed knowledge.

Audience Member 1: I saw the film three times. I enjoyed it and I was disturbed by it. What I was disturbed about was that we didn't see African state craft at work. What is the role of the Queen Mother? The Queen Regent? Or the Queen Consort? And what are the differences? We don't see that and that's one thing that's disturbing to me amongst some other things. The thing that disturbed me the most was Killmonger. As one in the diaspora how do we calibrate identity? Is it by phenotype? Or is it by culture? And the question that I have with Killmonger going and fighting to become king—which I don't think really would have happened in the first place in quite that manner. But even with that happening, how is it that his identity is not even questioned? Is it just because of his phenotype? Because he can lower his lip and show something distinctive there that he is Wakandan? How do we deal with these similarities and differences?

Audience Member 2: I am Queen Diambi from the Congo. The main thing I want to say to you is that when I saw the conference, it said African American spirituality. And it's nothing but African spirituality. And if I'm here today and I can stand proud representing my people or all people that come across my path, it's because the African ancestors entrusting in your ancestors very, very precious treasures. And those treasures were not just for you in the diaspora. Those treasures were for the humanity and for those Africans who come from Africa. Because had it not been for your ancestors of this land, of all of the diaspora, I wouldn't be standing right here in front of you. Because I became the woman that I am and I'm trying to develop my potential as the leader of the (?) thanks to very, very precious people in the community of the diaspora. One of them is on the panel and it Yeyefini Efunbolade who initiated me into understanding the treasures that laid beyond the African continent. And resided in the heart of the African descendent of the diaspora. I have to also commend my other godmother Efunlayo Maxey who worked very diligently within the community to embrace me as an African of the land. To give me back something that your ancestors went through the fight, and through the crossing of the path, and through the songs and the dance, and the hidden messages, and the hidden meetings, and the pain gave birth to you. So Wakanda forever. Wakanda is not the color of my skin. Wakanda is not because I speak this language or that. Wakanda is not because I'm Lutu, I'm Lutu from the Luban Empire. Or

you are from Panama or you are from America. Wakanda is what unites us, and I believe this spirituality. That makes us recognize who we are. We are God. And we are God to create. We are God to give birth. And this is what this has done. Your ancestors are still giving birth to new gods. They talked about the new orisas. This is who we are. And it doesn't matter where. You give birth to me as well and I'm from the Kongo.

Audience Member 3: I give thanks for being here. And the ancestors that are here, the elders, the little ones that I am learning from. I'm full. So, thank you. My question is about a fundamental concept for a new existence from reclamation to proliferation. Because we're talking about reclaiming a lot. I wonder how Wakanda, for example, shows us a vision of proliferation? Of being in it.

Zauditu-Selassie: Global White supremacy it's a beast. They don't allow you to have two masters; it's either them or you. So, you have to decide on self. I want to sneak in a point on behalf of Killmonger and the idea of the women. First off, even when your daddy's outside child comes to your house, there's an introduction. When somebody says, "I'm your people and them from down there." And they say, "Didn't somebody say he had a boy that look just like him?" And they go, "Mm hmm." Killmonger says, "Hello Auntie." And ain't nobody offered him nary, nary, Nathan-iel. Come on! None of the mothers said, "Oh, that's so and so's boy. Where's that cup of milk that we give to people that come back? Where's the whatever we use to reintegrate people into the community?"

When it looked like wasn't nobody gonna stir a stew or skin a goat or anything. He was like, "Damn, well I guess y'all ain't my people then. OK, so this is how this go." So, it's not either or. It's both and. It's half a dozen and six. That identity is a deep thing but ultimately you have to know *yourself*. Ain't that what they say in the market? He or she who listens to others will never buy anything. You already know what you came to get.

I want you to challenge even what it is that you see and don't sleep on those White boys that are left in the land of Wakanda. Where whiteness has become so normative that nobody looks up. There are two trains running in that movie. There's the one that gets you hypnotized into Black Panther power forever. And there's the one where you're not mesmerized, and you say, "Why is AfriCOM on the continent? Why did they have an army, a militia deal to create an all-Black army to protect European interests?" So,

we could go the political thing. And we have to. We can't ever get so holier than thou that we don't understand that we are at war with global White supremacy.

Anwar Uhuru: In addition, where was Killmonger's mother? Where was the mama? We don't know. And why was she erased? So, that adds on to that narrative of global White supremacy and the removal of the feminine along with the masculine.

Wood Menzies: If I might take a little moderator's privilege, I'd like to add that part of what struck me was the fact that, as many times as we heard T'challa say to other people, "What happened to Killmonger wasn't right. What happened to him wasn't right." He never said it *to him*. So, this speaks, as well, to masculinity and how men relate to each other. How many times they can say what they have to say to everybody else, but when it comes time to really facing the other and saying, "I'm sorry. What happened to you wasn't right" to his face. Not, "Mama, you know this isn't right." There was never that man to man conversation and reconciliation. Everything that we see in terms of masculinity is always couched in terms of violence. They couldn't talk. He couldn't say, "Listen, you are my brother and what happened to you was wrong. And come here let me give you a hug. I know you tried to stab me but let me hug you." He couldn't say that. Instead, they said, "Oh, well, we doing it? We 'bout it? Then let's be 'bout it." This speaks to the toxicity of masculinity and patriarchy, which rides on White supremacy and was introduced by it in many places and cases. That particular part for me was very, very striking.

Of course, it's a movie and you have to have some drama. It wouldn't have been the same movie if T'challa would have said, "You know what, I love you my brother." And Killmonger said, "OK, I love you," and they hugged it out. It definitely would have been a little shorter. But that struck me as something that was missing.

As we prepare to close, I want to ask our elder queen mothers, if I might, for just one thing... You know my parents are pastors, so I have to do a little Black Baptist once in a while. One of the things that I find the most heartbreaking and the hardest to deal with is when I think that you made as many strides as you made, and that there's any possibility of that work not being carried on, or to feel like the work has been in vain, or anything of

that nature. What's one thing that you can say to us that would renew you. And make you say, "Look, if I see you young people do *this one thing*, I'll know that my work wasn't in vain. I'll know my vision of real Wakanda has been built and that you're maintaining it." What's one thing that you can leave us with and charge us with to carry on this legacy of the real life Wakanda here in America and beyond?

EFUNBOLADE: My spirit wanted me to start off by saying what we did in Oyotunji, because It's very, very important. And we can see the influence of that now, in all of you. You're wearing African clothes. You have African names. That's what we started in the 60s, and it wasn't popular then. But we were doing the work. So, when we get to the point where we see people actually changing their names legally to an African name, that meant so much to us. When we settled, that infused the power from the ancestors to Oba Oseijeman. He said, "We cannot continue being Negroes, we have to go back to being African. And we have to have our own land. We have to have our own language, and we have to speak it. We have to raise our children this way." That was what he wanted. That was what the ancestors wanted. They just used him. If he wasn't there, they would have used somebody else.

So, for me to see everyone here with African names and really understanding the power of Spirit, knowing the power of Spirit that says you can move out of Harlem, go down and get a piece of land, and do your thing even with people calling you all kinds of names. What gives me the strength is that people like Funlayo doing the work. I feel just like my dear friend Yeye Teish: If I leave here, I'm good. I'm not leaving until I'm 104, that was the understanding I had. But seeing the young people carry this on is what makes it worth it. It's time for the elders to pass on the baton. It is time for us to pass it on. Because when I see you doing what you're doing, you're me and I am you. You're impressing my great-great-great-grandchildren to you and what you're going to do for them. That's what makes me feel good is that these young people are here taking on the internet. Taking every conceivable form of studying this spiritual practice, downloading all of the things that you want and creating something that is real, that is not fiction. Something that is real for us. That's what makes me happy.

As we leave here I bless each one of you to look at yourself and say, "I am God. I am African." We have to collaborate with each other in all systems

to create a community of people who are going to support indigenous African spiritual traditions. We have to remove anything that keeps us from understanding that we are each other. And when we look at each other that's what we are. So, I bless you. I pass my baton on. And any time you need anything from me in terms of my ability and the things that I have been through, in coming forward from where I've come from to here, I am ready. Ask me. Question me. If I don't know I will ask my elders, my sister-friend.

We need to take this to another level; the next level is in everything that we are doing, downloading what it is that our ancestors want us to do. And we must not write the women out. *We must not write the women out.* Because in many of the things that we are starting up and we're doing in downloading information depending on who is writing, the women have not been respected. The women have not been afforded their rights. The sacrifices the women made have not been written into the books. Even when you look at what has been written about Oyotunji, when you hear the history, it's often that the king, the *Oba*—may he rest in glory—that he did the work. But who was his supporting cast? Who was giving birth to his babies? Who was keeping us? The women kept each other. "How do you stay warm in the winter? Don't run away! These are the secrets to making African clothes with winter cloth. Here's what we have to eat." Those are the things that are not written down in the book.

We must place the women where they're supposed to be. We were the originators. Because the person who infused the concept of creating a village in Africa through the Oba—may he live forever—was his mother. She was a Pan Africanist Garveyite. And said, "You have the responsibility to create what it is that we need, and what it is that Marcus Garvey stands for, and what it is that we are supposed to be. We are God and we owe it to ourselves. With no apology. Without a grant. Do what you know to be African."

Zauditu-Selassie: Three sides of my family are from here in New Orleans, Napoleon Hill, and Assumption Parish. Remember, when Haiti fell the sugar came here. Ask the Tulanes about that. In KiKongo language there is something called *simba simbi*, "hold up that which holds you up." I just want to leave you with a challenge. Everybody: hold up that which holds you up. Beliefs that you have that no longer serve you, get rid of them. Ideas that you have that no longer propel you towards your eternal light self, get

rid of them. Hold up that which holds you up. So, we're just gonna close it with everybody saying on this stage, “I hold up that which holds me up.” It could be in the ice cream parlor, “I hold up that which holds me up.” Wherever you are, take this chant: “I hold up that which holds me up.” *Simba simbi*. That's all you got to know. *Simba simbi*. The eternal spirit. *Simba Simbi*.

KNOWING AND DOING THE WORK OF THE GODS

TERESA N. WASHINGTON

Scholar of Yoruba studies, Teresa N. Washington, traces the fundamental elements of power—touching on money, intellect, feminine power, among others—and their importance for knowing and doing one's work in the world.

The theme of this symposium, Roots, Rocks, and Ring Shouts**,** has deep significance. In this era of grandiose exhibitions of excess and shameless *shakara*, the fundamental elements of empowerment are easily and often overlooked. But Roots, Rocks, and Ring Shouts provide us with all we need to thrive.

With roots we create the *òògun* (Yoruba: medicine) necessary to heal ourselves and debilitate our foes. The roots that can fashion a protective home for the soul and those that can be planted in the ground to facilitate the digging of an oppressor's grave are waiting beneath the soles of our feet—charging every step we take and sparking with every ring shout shuffle. The ring shout, the juba of self, soul, and survival that our ancestors traced upon the earth with feet that moved like Damballah writhes, is a gateway to enter and commune with the cosmos.

Our ancestors understood the relationship of the Earth to the cosmos, so when they declared, "I got a home in that rock," their meanings were many. Bedrock provides the surest foundation for our homes. Rocks contain minerals essential to our well-being. And rocks were ammunition that our enslaved ancestors, like Esteban Montejo of Cuba,[43] hurled at their wretched enslavers as they ran to freedom. Our ancestors also used the ancient understated àṣẹ of stones to introduce the Òrìṣà to this land so that they could join us in the curvilinear work of liberation and revelation.

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[43] Esteban Montejo, *Autobiography of a Runaway Slave,* edited by Miguel Barnet, translated by Jocasta Innes, (London: The Bodley Head, 1968).

Consecrated rocks powered Èṣù's directives while the God hid in Lazarus' riddled shell. Ṣàngó's thunderstones, veiled by Santa Barbara's skirts, struck oppressors' heads with pinpoint accuracy, while Ọya's lightning bolts razed plantations to the ground. Our ancestors felt the clang of the Ògún's red hot iron being shaped and then sharpened on the whetstone for his son, Nat Turner, who undertook some of this world's most important work. The waves born in the seafloor that is Yemọja's contracting and expanding womb welcomed the bodies and bones of millions of our ancestors who made the Ethiopic Ocean their home by choice and by force.

While they were being rocked and rolled days from death in the Middle Passage, our ancestors not only paid their dues but they paid ours too. And they chose to give birth to us and ensure our existence because they knew our true identities. We have survived atrocities that would have destroyed any other people. And here we are: Shining like the Suns we are; glowing like the Gods we are. Even though many of our Ancestors had little more than Roots, Rocks, and Ring Shouts to bequeath us, we grew strong and infinitely resourceful, because with our inheritance we are eternally equipped for anything. With our roots, we literally have world full of medicine, science, and technology. With our rocks we have eternal monuments to the Gods that can never be destroyed because they will always be overlooked. With our ring shouts we open and enter the time-space continuum so that we can rejoice and strategize with Our-God-Selves.

When we see the red clay of the Dirty South, we see soil and roots enriched by our DNA. That mud ain't red for nothing. That red is the blood we've been shedding since 1526, when the first Africans were dragged to this land in shackles by an enslaver named Vasquez de Allyon.[44] In 1526 we started the most important compilation in the world, and this Work, with a capital "W," grew in knowledge as more Africans were introduced to the bosom of Babylon. The Work of which I speak is the compilation of every African wisdom system we brought with us from Africa. From Medu Netcher to Nsibidi; from Nyame to Nkulunkulu; from Kindoki to Bwiti; from Ifá to Fa, to Afa; from Vodun to Voodoo; from Àjẹ́ to Ajalagba. Right

[44] William Loren Katz, *Black Indians: A Hidden Heritage* (New York: Atheneum, 1997), 22.

here, in this land, we massaged every skill, medicine, writing system, philosophy, proverb, incantation, mathematical formula, and scientific compound we knew to create the force humbly known as Hoodoo.

Hoodoo, also known as Roots and The Work, is perhaps the only spiritual system that is born of resistance to oppression. Hoodoo is also unique in that it was created by Africana people for Africana people to give us the means to hit straight licks with crooked sticks and do the impossible with ease. Because of its foundation in freedom fighting and the absence of expensive accoutrement, Hoodoo does not enjoy the prestige of some of its sibling spiritual systems. However, Hoodoo represents the resounding and often confounding truth and proof of the power of Roots, Rocks, and Ring Shouts. Hoodoo confirms that African powers are in all ways all ready and infinitely potent. Hoodoo also stresses for us the significance of understanding our biological and biochemical roots, because when we possess fundamental knowledge of self, we can see through the glitz and gewgaws designed to distract us and derail our destinies. And in this era, we are bombarded with more distractions than at any other time in history. For this is the era in which multitudes have been working tirelessly from various platforms to convert African spiritual systems into organized religions.

I define religion as a tool of ideological, cultural, and economic control. By contrast, a spiritual system is a way of living, being, and doing that strives to affect holism, balance, and development through various means including the study and application of botany, mathematics, science, physics, chemistry, logic, geology, analysis, artistry, geophysics, astronomy, biology, and more. When individuals decide to corrupt a spiritual system—like Vodun or Ifá—and make it a religion, the first things to go are education, balance, holism, and science. The imbalanced/corrupted agent is only concerned with what he or she stands to gain and the quickest way to attain success. The study of the disciplines that are the roots of spiritual systems are only interesting to the religious person in so far as they can be manipulated to control thoughts or coerce alms. What is more, the study of mathematics, botany, science, geology, chemistry, and the like are time consuming; struggling to gain wisdom, knowledge and understanding is considered too cumbersome for some (like

students who simply want to know what will be on the test) and too dangerous for others (like elders who shouted at me, "You don't question god!!!" And who even tried to beat that lie into me).

But what god would not delight in questions, debates, and discourse about creation, power, life, healing, harming, astronomy, the actual purpose of the moon? What god would demand to have adherents who are "believers" who must shun wisdom acquisition? The only god I can think of is one that is an impostor and who doesn't want you to know it; one who has lied that he is the alpha and omega, but doesn't understand the vital all-life giving power of menstrual fluid. A god who demands money and gives lies in exchange, a god who wants you to be ignorant but constantly bearing offerings is not a god—that is an enslaver.

As I write in my book, *The Architects of Existence: Àjẹ́ in Yoruba Cosmology, Ontology, and Orature*, the true and living Gods have a clear objective: to make more Gods.[45] The creation of divinity may occur through the womb or through the Word, whether books or Ọ̀rọ̀, divine utterances, or knowledge dropped in a cipher.

In the study of divinity, we can learn so much from the Five Percent, who casually herald the truth of one another with the simple greeting, "Peace, God," and whose mission in life is to share wisdom, knowledge and understanding, not only amongst themselves, but, most importantly, with those who do not have but desperately need knowledge of self. The Five Percent live by the mantra that "The duty of the civilized is to civilize the uncivilized."[46] In their work, which they undertake holistically as a part of their existence, the Five Percent are truly Gods who are doing the divine work of creating more Gods. And they are not alone.

I discuss in my book, *Manifestations of Masculine Magnificence: Divinity in Africana Life, Literature, and Lyrics,* an important observation that Cornelius O. Adepegba makes in his article, "Associated Place-Names and Sacred Icons of Seven Yoruba Deities: Historicity in Yoruba Religious

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[45] Teresa N. Washington, *The Architects of Existence: Àjẹ́ in Yoruba Cosmology, Ontology, and Orature* (Ọya's Tornado, 2014), 13.
[46] Poor Righteous Teachers, "Gods, Earths, and 85ers," *The New World Order* (Arista, 1996), CD.

Traditions." Adepegba reveals, "Ifá, the God of Divination, is said to emphasize that Yoruba deities, including himself, were originally humans who displayed extraordinary wisdom, skill, or power."[47] The Òrìṣà were once human beings, just like us. They manifested their destinies in their lifetimes, and they became true and living Gods. A Yoruba proverb reveals that *aíkú pariwà*, immortality is the perfect manifestation of existence. So rather than working for a paycheck, or a Lamborghini, or a title we need to be working to attain immortality, working to become Gods, just like the Òrìṣà did. In order to do this, we need to know what gifts we have to give and what work we are able to do that is essential to this world—and then we need to do that Work and shoot that Gift.

One of the first things we will have to do is disabuse our minds of the fear of blasphemy. Although we walk the paths of Africana spiritual systems, many of us have roots in the Christian church, and the ideological conditioning and terrorism to which many of us have been subjected remains embedded in our psyches. There is a reason why organized religions are foisted upon children in their formative years; it is because that is when the mind is most malleable. However, no matter one's age, if one is analytically minded, one can find revelations in any source.

It is satisfying for me that we can look to the Bible, which Zora Neale Hurston and other Two-Headed doctors refer to as "The greatest conjure book in the world,"[48] to better understand our divinity. The Bible makes it clear that there many Gods, and the many include *you*. Psalms 82:6 asserts, "Ye are gods." While divinity is your identity, without knowledge of self and the courage to manifest your divinity you will "Die like men." Later, in John 10:34, when certain patriarchs are preparing to kill Jesus for claiming to be the son of god and at one with god, Jesus reminds them, "Is it not written in your law, I said, 'Ye are gods'?"

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[47] Cornelius O. Adepegba, "Associated Place-Names and Sacred Icons of Seven Yorùbá Deities: Historicity in Yorùbá Religious Traditions," quoted in Teresa N. Washington, *Manifestations of Masculine Magnificence: Divinity in Africana Life, Lyrics, and Literature* (Ọya's Tornado, 2014), 24.
[48] Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1935), 280.

With this reminder, Jesus' persecutors are faced with a dilemma. Rather than attacking Jesus for manifesting his divinity, Jesus' reminder of Psalm 82:6 challenges them to show how, if at all, they have been manifesting their divinity! The patriarchs, like many worshippers, missed the point, and the point is easily missed because there is nothing more convenient than putting all of your responsibilities on the shoulders of someone or something else—even if that thing or person doesn't exist. Indeed, the absence of "actual facts" is why *belief* is crucial to organized religion. However, as Samuel M. Opeola confirms in his article "The Divine Nature of Yoruba System of Thought," *belief* is not a property of Yoruba spirituality.[49] It is rooted in wisdom, knowledge, and understanding. One need not believe in Sango to get acquainted with one of his thunderstones. It is not necessary to believe in Ọya to be incinerated by her lightning bolt. Furthermore, belief is irrelevant when one is armed with knowledge. The RZA reminds us succinctly in the song "Deep Space" that "The truth is what raises you."[50]

Arguably, the most difficult work in the world is to be a God who makes more Gods. The elders' desire to stone Jesus reminds me of Lil Wayne's reaction to true and living Gods' revelation that they are Allah/God as manifest in their Arm, Leg, Leg, Arm, Head. Wayne's response in the song "Tha Heat" was to rap, "I shoot your arm-leg-leg-arm-head."[51] This is similar to the reaction that I have gotten from some students who have been identifying with the myth of "nigger" for so long that the concept of being a God terrifies and enrages them.

One of the most dangerous things you can do is hold up to an Africana person a mirror that reveals to them their true identity. Many will shatter that mirror and attempt to use the shards to cut your head off, but a shining few will recognize their numinosity glowing back at them and begin the work of catalyzing their divinity and that of every other person they can reach.

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[49] S. Modupeola Opeola, "The Divine Nature of Yoruba System of Thought," *Yoruba Ideas* 1:1 (1997): 62. (62–68).
[50] Lord Jamar featuring The RZA, "Deep Space," *The 5% Album* (Babygrande, 2006), CD.
[51] Lil Wayne, "Tha Heat" *Tha Carter* (Cash Money Records, 2004), CD.

True and living Gods understand that being God isn't about being worshipped or obeyed or sitting on high and looking down low. It is not about walking on water or flying—although there are numerous African technological devices such as *kánàkò*, *egbé*, *ekili*, and *satulmo* of the Yoruba, Igbo, and Dagara, respectively, that can endow individuals with these and countless other abilities.[52] Please read John Umeh's two volume set, *After God is Dibia*, and the interviews of African Americans compiled in *Drums and Shadows* to learn more about our sciences and technologies.[53] With actual African technology at our fingertips, we don't need a comic book Wakanda to inspire us, but if we seek inspiration from Hollywood and CIA agents, we will get exactly what we deserve…. Being God isn't about acting like a Caucasian superhero or glory-seeking, because when you become cognizant of the eternal nature, cosmic scope, and unimaginable weight of your responsibilities; you become synonymous with the Work.

The Work is not a task one completes in a few months. The Work is unending; it is curvilinear; it is cosmic—as are we all. Fittingly, the Work begins in the infinite Cosmos of the Self.

In order to understand ourselves and our divinity, we have to undertake a search within. One of the most important skills needed on this journey is also a key component of Yoruba art and culture. Rowland Abiodun refers to this attribute as *ìlutí*, the ability to listen well, which is also translated as "teachableness."[54] The person who exhibits *ìlutí* has one of the attributes necessary to be considered fit to walk with the elders, and it is when walking with the elders, at their pace and on their time, that the seeker with *ìlutí* reveals she has the understanding necessary to integrate to wisdom and knowledge. I have found *ìlutí* to be essential everywhere I have gone in Pan-Africa, from the Mississippi Delta to Ilé-Ifẹ̀, Nigeria. If you are

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[52] Teresa N. Washington, *Our Mothers, Our Powers, Our Texts: Manifestations of Àjé in Africana Literature* (Ọya's Tornado, 2015), 86–91 and Washington, *Manifestations of Masculine Magnificence*, 40 and 208.

[53] John A. Umeh, *After God is Dibia*, two volumes, (London: Karnak House, 1997 and 1999) and Georgia Writers' Project, *Drums and Shadows* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1940).

[54] Rowland Abiodun, "Identity and the Artistic Process in Yorùbá Aesthetic Concept of Ìwà," *Journal of Cultural Inquiry* 1:1 (December 1983): 25.

unable to listen well, you reveal that you are incapable of learning and are not worthy of receiving knowledge. No elder will pour sacred wisdom into a vessel with a cracked bottom. The only way elders can determine whether or not someone has *ìlutí* and *ìwà-pẹ̀lẹ́* is to spend time with them, years with them. Genuine relationships of this nature do not spring up overnight and they don't spring up over banknotes.

I often ponder the response given to me by one of the elders I was privileged to walk with when I asked him about a term that was used as a slur for a certain Nigerian ethic group. The elder answered by offering me a vignette from Yoruba daily life. As many of you know, Yoruba is a language with many dialects, and not all of them are mutually intelligible. He told me that a Yoruba man from a particular region will board a bus and will ask in his dialect of Yoruba, "Is anyone here?" If no one on the bus can answer him, he assumes everyone on the bus is a nonentity (*ainiwà*). My elder's revelation blew me away for many reasons. It elegantly confirms the inextricable relationship between Yoruba language, culture, and spiritual systems, and the irreducible significance of knowing and respecting the language in order to comprehend the culture. The anecdote also led me to wonder, if this is what some Yoruba think of other members of the Yoruba world, what then do certain Yoruba folks think of African Americans and African Caribbeans; what of Latinos and Caucasians?

In this era, one can find African nations flooded with folks clutching dollars, euro, naira, cedi, cefa that they cannot hand over quickly enough for some spiritual endeavor or initiation. But what purchasing power does currency have in the spiritual universe?

It is important to compare the ways we have been introduced to and are processing and negotiating Africana spiritual systems today with the ways our Ancestors lived them. Yemi Elebuibon's book, *The Adventures of Ọbàtálá*, includes an ìtàn in which Ọbàtálá's three brothers destroy themselves pursuing money. Ọbàtálá resuscitates them and declares

Money is the death

Money is the trouble

Money is all evil

He said, "Since you have broken the taboo

And you all love money

Whoever's interested in these kinds of things

Will not live long."[55]

The traditional relationship between babaláwo and money is also telling. There is a Yoruba axiom asserts, "Nobody becomes a babaláwo to make money," and in *Olódumáre: God in Yoruba Belief,* Bolaji Idowu describes the characteristics of a true babaláwo and his relationship to money:

> It is laid down that a *baba'láwo* must not abuse his office in any way. . . [N]o *baba'láwo* should use his position to enrich himself in any way; he must not refuse anybody his service on account of money—if the person is too poor to pay the customary pittance for divination, the *baba'láwo* must divine for him free of charge; or if the person cannot afford the prescribed sacrifice, the *baba'láwo* must take whatever he can afford and translate the will for the deed. It seems, in fact, that the *baba'láwo* is under a vow of poverty, *to spend himself in the service of the community, making just enough to keep himself, his real reward being in the service of Ọ̀rúnmìlà*. Now that materialism is the order of the day, however, this sacred injunction is largely disregarded, and there are many who appear not to know it at all. Charlatans abound.[56]

In *The Architects of Existence*, I state that "Idowu's use of language is genius, for in 'spend[ing] himself in the service of his community' the babaláwo is a spiritual repository whose funds can never been depleted, overdrawn, misappropriated, or embezzled because they continuously

[55] Ifayemi Eleburuibon, *The Adventures of Obatala* (Osogbo, Oyo: A.P.I, 1989), 69.
[56] E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olódùmarè: God in Yoruba Belief* (1962; reprint, New York: Wazobia, 1994), 80.

cycle from the Cosmos to the Earth through the babaláwo to the community."[57]

Throughout the historical Pan-African world, we find spiritwork existing in a plane that is beyond economic concerns. Piet Meyer's article, "Divination among the Lobi of Burkina Faso" also describes the diviner as "spending himself" in his community:

> [T]he diviner earns practically nothing for his divinatory services. . . He receives five cowries (about half a cent) per consultation when he divines at home and twenty cowries at another location chosen by the client. Furthermore, a diviner enjoys neither high social status nor any particular privileges; *he gains prestige only if his divination is particularly good*.[58]

It is also helpful to recall Malidoma Some's grandfather and his cohorts who Somé describes in *Of Water and the Spirit* as being so focused on spending themselves in their communities that they don't bathe or undertake any act of grooming. The funk that these elders emit is overwhelming, and it is the utmost honor to have *ìlutí* sufficient to be embraced by them. Somé reveals that

> Unlike modern Christianity, which links cleanliness to godliness, Dagara culture holds the opposite to be true. The more intense the involvement with the life of the spirit, the more holy and wise an individual is, the less attention is paid to outward beauty.[59]

Somé goes on to ponder "if those who spend their lives obsessed with looking beautiful are not fighting to cover up something ugly deep within."

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[57] Washington, *The Architects of Existence*, 121.

[58] Piet Meyer, "Divination among the Lobi of Burkina Faso," in *African Divination Systems: Ways of Knowing*, edited by Philip M. Peek (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 93, emphasis added.

[59] Malidoma Somé, *Of Water and the Spirit* (New York: Penguin, 1994), 21.

Consequently, Dagara elders "focus their energies where they really count—on matters of the soul."[60]

The sacred world of Àjẹ́ is also rooted firmly in spending oneself in one's community and the development of the soul. Toyin Falola's memoir, *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt* offers the reader a portrait of Ìyá Lekulẹja. Her name means The Mother who has Rats and Fish—not the Mother with the biggest beads, or the grandest boubou, or the most Bugattis or the biggest bungalow, but rats and fish, because those humble animals symbolize her unlimited medicinal knowledge, the scope of her medicine chest, and her sphere of influence which encompasses the land and the sea.

In *The Architects of Existence* I observe that

> . . . Ìyá Lekulẹja's God does not demand specific types of gin and cigars or certain denominations of currency. The needs of Òrìṣà Ìyá Lekulẹja are as humble as those of Ìyá Lekulẹja because neither . . . are self-interested capitalists who are thrilled by glitzy gewgaws or ego-building tributes. In fact, Ìyá Lekulẹja … offers a riveting portrait of a true and living God dwelling amongst mortals, and she differs from many of the recorded portrayals of Òrìṣà and rulers in that she has no interest in wealth, ego, prestige, spouses, or glory. Ìyá Lekulẹja's clothing is solely what is sufficient to cover her body. She probably offers her God more food than she feeds herself. Ìyá Lekulẹja does not adorn herself in sumptuous robes or station herself on golden thrones; she does not organize expensive initiations or charge a cow or its equivalent in exchange for information. Ìyá Lekulẹja is, quite simply, the truth. And the truth, like the bounty and wisdom of the Earth is free.[61]

I also analyze the humility and directives of Ìyá Lekulẹja:

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[60] Somé, *Of Water and the Spirit*, 184.
[61] Washington, *The Architects of Existence*, 235.

> Ìyá Lekulẹja's focus on healing her community is so complete that her vocation is her identity. She does not have lengthy titles of honor or respect; she does not proselytize or preach; she does not stand on the necks of others so that she can appear to be taller than she is. She simply harmonizes and harnesses the powers of the Earth. Although she is shunned by many, those with open *ojú inú* know her power. Falola, for example, does what no one else dares or cares to do—sit in her shop and observe her while she works.[62]

The bond between Ìyá Lekulẹja and Falola develops to the point that when his actions threaten not only their relationship but their lives and the lives of others, Ìyá Lekulẹja necessarily reveals the potency of the medicines in her ìgbádù.

Falola's elders hold him down and shave his head. After this, Ìyá Lekulẹja "came with a new blade and made over a hundred incisions on [his] head. She opened a small container and rubbed a dark looking powder on the small cuts."[63] After Falola's head is cleansed, anointed, and remolded, Ìyá Lekulẹja uses *eku*, a rat, her synecdochal signifier, to mix the surest and most potent of all medicines: "She removed her cloth, and stood naked for all to see. She moved in circles many times, uttering archaic words in rapid succession. Then she knelt over the bowl and washed her breasts and vagina into its contents."[64] By removing her clothes and assuming the posture of ìkúnlẹ̀ abiyamọ, Ìyá Lekulẹja opens her sacred Igbádù and accesses her Àjẹ́ and àṣẹ for the benefit of Falola who drinks her rarified liquefied power.

In the *Architects of Existence*, I expound on the power in the medicine that Ìyá Lekulẹja prepares for Falola:

> The ritual suckling of the breasts that Rowland Abiodun describes in his article "Women in Yoruba Religious

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[62] Washington, *The Architects of Existence*, 235–236.
[63] Toyin Falola, *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt: A Memoir* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 190.
[64] Falola, *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt: A Memoir*, 190.

> Images" as a healing medicine that a mother of any age can administer to a child of any age, is expanded by Ìyá Lekulẹja who charges the omi ẹ̀rọ̀ of her breasts with the cleansing waters of her vagina and the cauterizing power of her clitoris. By drinking his medicine, Falola is effectively reborn and baptized in Ìyá Lekulẹja. He literally tastes the Mother; and as a result, he is placed under her protective auspices for life. It is important to note that Ìyá Lekulẹja's actions are performed at the request and under the watchful eyes of Falola's biological mother, grandmother, and grandfather. His progenitors know the power and guidance that Ìyá Lekulẹja offers, and they know that a child can never have too many loving mothers. Indeed, it appears that even with all of the various degrees and dimensions of mother-love in which Falola is steeped, the undiluted Àjẹ́ of *the* Mother is essential for his safety and self-actualization.[65]

Many westerners would describe what Ìyá Lekulẹja does for Fálọlá as an initiation, but it is not: It is an act of necessity; it is beyond intimate; it is completely organic; it is devoid of synthetic adornments and objects for show. There is no exchange of money, and there is nothing to post, generate likes, or frame. There is only soul-deep power and gifts only Gods can give.

And those gifts are genetic, as Brother J in the song "The Jewels of Evolution" raps, "I'm talkin bout the godly genes / I'm talkin bout the godly genes /yes, yes, Tehun."[66] The genetic, cosmic, deoxyribonucleic power that Ìyá Lekulẹja possesses and uses judiciously and effectively is identical to that which enslaved Africans brought with them to the lands of oppression and enslavement and passed on to us. Listen to W.E.B. DuBois describe the Hoodoo or Two-Headed Doctor of African America in *The Souls of Black Folks*:

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[65] Washington, *The Architects of Existence*, 237 emphasis in the original.
[66] Dark Sun Riders featuring Brother J, "Seeds of Evolution," *Jewels of Evolution* (Island Record, 1996), CD.

> He early appeared on the plantation and found his function as the healer of the sick, the interpreter of the Unknown, the comforter of the sorrowing, the supernatural avenger of the wrong, and the one who rudely but picturesquely expressed the longing, disappointment, and resentment of a stolen and oppressed people.[67]

When we envision wisdom workers like Somé grandfather Bakhye, Ìyá Lekulẹja, and antebellum Two Headed Doctors, we see individuals who are so invested in their communities that money is completely irrelevant to them. Such a selfless way of life was astounding to individuals who worked to commoditize everything on this earth, from the land, to water, to human beings. I am reminded of British anthropologist Percy Amaury Talbot who tried to buy knowledge of Nsibidi, the sacred written language of the Egbo secret society. Talbot recalls, an Egbo elder "refused point blank, though a good remuneration had been offered for his services."[68] The elder was amazed at Talbot's request and said, "If I taught him Nsibidi, he would know all the Egbo signs, and the secrets of the animals."[69]

In the early 1900s when Talbot was researching and writing, the dispensation of sacred wisdom to a random person for money was inconceivable. In our era, the opposite appears to be the case. We must ask: when did the sacred become so cheap that anyone can buy it—or is the sacred really being exchanged in contemporary transactions? What has happened and is happening to our traditions? What responsibilities, if any, do we have to ourselves, to our communities, and to our Culture?

Those of us who wish to address these issues will find the answers are as unique as each questioner. As for myself, I am ecstatic that my orí led me to question, research, seek, and write. My books are not tenure texts or promotion tomes, they are curvilinear literary umbilical cords that pulsate

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[67] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk,* 1903, (New York: Bantam, 1989), 138.
[68] P. Amaury Talbot, "The Egbo Secret Society," in *A Treasury of African Folklore: The Oral Literature, Traditions, Myths, Legends, Epics, Tales, Recollections, Wisdom, Sayings, and Humor of Africa,* edited by Harold A. Courlander (1976; reprint, New York: Marlowe & Co., 1996), 271.
[69] Talbot, "The Egbo Secret Society," 271.

with both my elders' wisdom and my ancestors' and daughter's lifeblood. They contain my Motherdear's tears, my mother's steadfast support, and my Ìyá's worlds of wisdom. Most significantly, my books are my daughter's inheritance. This world is filled with tricks and traps, and if my daughter ever loses her way or forgets her path, all she needs to do is read these books to realign herself with her identity, destiny, and divinity. I actually wrote these books so that they would serve the same purpose for every reader. This is my lifework, and I take it seriously. When I was five, my father recognized me as having Ọ̀rọ̀, power of the word, and he impressed upon me the importance of using my words with great care—and I endeavor to do this.

My words and work are sacred. They are not playthings for plagiarists and profiteers. My work represents me whether I am present in the flesh or not. I write for my people, like Margaret Walker Alexander, to ensure the circle remains unbroken. I write because I want people to do with my books what a sister named Amber did for me: She gave me her copy of *Jambalaya* by Luisah Teish and provided me with both a resounding personal confirmation and a path for elevation that brought me to this place. That is what I have designed my works to do, and I am honored that is the work they are doing. Someone posted a quote from my book *The Architects of Existence* to social media, and an African American sister realized her identity and wrote, "So, I am God!" And that is all I want. I want us to have the full knowledge of self that is our birthright.

Freedom and knowledge of self are complementary—one is not effective without the other. And no wisdom-worker would ever withhold from you knowledge that is central and crucial to your identity or destiny or extort money from you in exchange for wisdom. We should not be in the business of enslaving others or of making slaves of ourselves—for any reason, purpose, or person.

There is no true and living God who would support or countenance slavery in any form, because bondage is antithetical to the work of the Gods. We need to have the courage to investigate and expurgate vestiges of slavery from our lives and from the ways of life that we are embracing. Or we need to be honest about the systems that we are reproducing. Luisah Teish reminds us that "Each of us was born with *sekpoli*, a personal destiny.

None of us can ever *be* or *own* any other person. It's a spiritual absurdity to think otherwise, and an *osogbo* to act as if we can."[70]

Both Àjẹ́ and the Five Percent are rooted in and devoted to wisdom-acquisition, balance, and personal and community evolution and elevation. The Gods of the Five Percent and Àjẹ́, the Gods of Society, both understand their roles in the world and the work they are charged with undertaking. Neither of these divine societies has a hierarchy—both *mọ ìwà fun oníwà*; they recognize and respect individuals' right to self-directed existence because they exist. Consequently, their members build and grow communally, holistically, and eternally. There is no Grand God the Five Percent pray or bow to. There is no such thing as priest or priestesses of Àjẹ́. That concept is laughable. That would be like me need a priestess of myself, or my daughter, Odùduwà, who came to this earth with knowledge of her divinity and identity—she revealed to me when she was two-years-old that she was Odùduwà and refused to answer to any other name—needing a priestess of herself. The thought is ludicrous, and the only reason such a thought exists is because of peoples' fundamental misunderstandings and deliberate misinterpretations of Àjẹ́. And these deliberate misinterpretations are designed to do two things: advance Caucasian supremacy and further works of con artistry.

Let me be clear: You, Africana women, are Àjẹ́. You are your ojúbọ/shrine. You are òògùn. You are Ọ̀rọ̀. Your womb is your Ìgbádù, your clitoris is Ẹyẹ Àjẹ́. Listen to the wisdom of Rowland Abiodun from his article, "Woman in Yoruba Religious Images":

> Though very rarely mentioned by field informants, there are indications that the fact of being female contributes to the power of women and perhaps also their entry into and participation in the Eegun cult. For example, the clitoris is traditionally believed to possess some kind of "power", similar to the power possessed by the Eegun, for according to an informant, both are concealed, unseen, and use the

[70] Luisah Teish, *Jambalaya: The Natural Woman's Book of Personal Charms and Practical Rituals* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1988), 249.

> power of "our mothers". This is the reason, perhaps, behind the belief that any man, no matter how medicinally skilful or powerful, can be disarmed by a woman.[71]

This information illuminates why clitoridectomies are performed in so many nations, including Nigeria, but it also puts *your* power clearly into perspective, ladies; because it would not be incorrect to conclude that the clitoris is the Root, the Rock and the Ring Shout!

They say that if you want to hide something from Africana people, put it in a book. Well, this information is in my book, in Prof. Abiodun's articles and books, and, most importantly, it is in your Book of Self. In a recent interview a sister asked me where I thought the hidden books of the Bible were, and I responded that ***we*** are the hidden books of the Bible. Take Lord Jamar's advice, open your books, and "Study your lessons, Study your lessons."[72]

Don't let anyone con you into thinking you have to pay *them* to access *your* power. Don't let anyone trick you into thinking you can buy Àjẹ́. Don't let anyone twist your mind into thinking that you can purchase soul. Heed the words of X-Clan's Brother J from the song "Primetime Lyrics": "I never let the beast come near it / Never exchange the paper for spirit."[73]

Àjẹ́ is the spiritual and biological power of Africana women—it is inherent and organic; it is our DNA; and it not only predates Ifá by millennia, but it is also the Mother of All Being. Àjẹ́ are called Ayé because Àjẹ́ is the Earth, itself—the foundation and source of All Existence. Fittingly, in Wole Soyinka's play *Madmen and Specialists*, Àjẹ́ is a

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[71] Rowland Abiodun, "Woman in Yoruba Religious Images," *African Languages and Cultures* 2:1 (1989): 11.
[72] Lord Jamar featuring feat. Sadat X and Queen Tahera Earth, "Study Ya Lessons," *The 5% Album* (Babygrande, 2006), CD.
[73] X Clan, "Primetime Lyrics," *Mainstream Outlawz* (United Family Music, 2009), CD.

described as a power that "moves as the Earth moves."[74] So if you want to understand Àjẹ́ you have to go beyond Ifá to the Source, which is Àjẹ́.

Àjẹ́ and Imọlẹ̀ are the cornerstones of the way of life of the autochthonic inhabitants of Ilé-Ifẹ̀. The Yoruba migrated to Ilé-Ifẹ̀ from Adú-Láwọ, which is Mecca or Egypt, depending on the ìtàn.[75] The Yoruba chose to settle in Ilé-Ifẹ̀ with the Imọlẹ̀, the original inhabitants. The Imọlẹ̀ way of life was and is rooted in Àjẹ́, which has always been structured as an Ẹgbẹ́ Ọgba, a Society of Equals and has always been centered on morality and familial development. The merging of two ways of life was difficult and caused great upheaval for decades. Ògbóni was originally created to ensure the autochthonic way of life survived, and eventually it became a way to unify all inhabitants of Ilé-Ifẹ̀.[76] Ògbóni and Àjẹ́, together, work to ensure law, order, prosperity, and progress.

Ifá appears to be is a product of the Yoruba migration from Ilẹ̀ Adú-Láwọ. J. Olumide Lucas and William Bascom have documented Yoruba root words, concepts, and divination systems across Northern and Northwestern Africa because the Yoruba apparently shared and exchanged knowledge with various peoples on their sojourn to Ilé-Ifẹ̀.[77] However, when they met Àwọn Ìyá Wa, the Yoruba had to pause because they were encountering the true and living "Gods of Society," to quote Henry Drewal's *Gelede*.[78]

As I detail in *The Architects of Existence*, Ọ̀rúnmìlà recognizes the supremacy and significance of Àjẹ́. He understands that without their

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[74] Wole Soyinka, *Madmen and Specialists*, quoted in Washington, *Our Mothers, Our Powers, Our Texts*, 119.

[75] E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olódùmarè: God in Yoruba Belief* (1962; reprint, New York: Wazobia, 1994), 22–29; see also Ọmọ Yóòba, "Ìtàn Ilé Ifẹ̀," (23 Dec 2012), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ptxgt4PzEM8&list=PLxmaCFMmSraHOF7Jm2adY_Utw553xumU_&index=3&t=0s, accessed 18 April 2018. Ọmọ Yóòba's video is what sparked my daughter's knowledge of her divinity and identity. My daughter and I are grateful to Ọmọ Yóòba for creating a bevy of deep, rich and diverse educational videos!

[76] Idowu, *Olódùmarè*, 23–24.

[77] Please see J. Olumide Lucas, *The Religion of the Yorubas* (C.M.S. Bookshops, Lagos, I948) and William Bascom, *Ifa Divination: Communication between Gods and Men in West Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), 5–8.

[78] Henry John Drewal and Margaret Thompson Drewal, *Gẹlẹdẹ: Art and Female Power among the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 8.

acceptance he, Egúngún, male rulers, Ọ̀sanyìn, and any other male agents and agencies will be able to accomplish nothing. Consequently, Ọ̀rúnmìlà does everything he can to find out the secret of Àjẹ́ and find a way to share in their power. After several attempts, including unsuccessful attempts to trick the mothers, Ọ̀rúnmìlà succeeds in learning how to interact and work with Àjẹ́. He becomes a son of the Mothers and thrives under their protectives auspices. This is the unique position that the Africana man enjoys and that is his birthright. Mother's nourishing milk, her healing and restoring waters, and her infinite wisdom bolster, enrich, and support him so that he occupies the most honored and envied position in the world. This is what the Mothers do for their sons. This is what Ìyá Lekulẹja does for Toyin Falola. She does not make him a slave to her power. She demands no money from him. She uses her power to benefit her entire community, in general, and to introduce Falola, specifically, to and immerse him in his own power and glory.

What about you?

Are your Gods preparing you to stand beside them? Are you prepared to go inside the world and cosmos of the Self and understand and manifest your destiny?

In "Roots" Bob Marley sings, "Some are leaves / Some are branches / I and I are the root."[79]

Ẹyin nko?

Are you a leaf, a branch or the root?

In this world some of us will be chopped and used for kindling, while others will provide sanctuary for the soul. Some of us are the children of High John de Conqueror; while, some of us are what Zora Neale Hurston described as "slave ships in shoes."[80] We have to give our identity and

[79] Bob Marley and the Wailers, "Roots," *Exodus*, Deluxe Edition (Island Records, 2001), CD.
[80] Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (New York: Harper Perennial: 1942), 85.

divinity serious thought, if not, we may find our legs being burned to warm an enslaver's body; or our heads being used as footstools for the wicked; or our hands being used to shuffle some a con artist's cards. We may find our souls positioned as sacrifices on a thief's altar to deception.

If we are tapping our roots, and at home in our rocks, and reconstructing physics in our ring shouts, we cannot be misled. We cannot be slaves to anyone or thing when we understand that our dues were paid centuries ago. Taste the salt in the Ethiopic and know for yourself. Smell the blood in that red mud that flowed from our lynched kin.

In Africa, Caucasians created factories where they struggled to turn human beings into slaves. So vicious, methodical, and stringent were their tactics that they thought they had beaten all of Africa from our bodies, minds, and spirits, and whatever shreds of Africa were left were surely rocked away in the hulls of their ships of horror that promenaded through the Ethiopic Ocean. They were wrong. We didn't need anything but ourselves to bring Africa, Àjẹ́, Ifá, Egungun, Nkisi, Nzombi, Netcher, Nommo, Azen, Afa right here with us. We are the truth and the proof.

Our ancestors, who were told that they *were* nothing and *had* nothing, gave us priceless gifts—the knowledge and tools to get free and stay free. They gave us Hoodoo, the root of all power, but you have to get in that dirt and dig in those fields to find it. You have to open and read everything you can, most importantly the Book of Your Self. Because within you is power, divinity, wisdom, technology, and medicine waiting to be utilized, catalyzed.

Ousseynou B. Traore, a true "friend of my mind," shared with me a Wolof proverb that asserts that the best medicine for a person is another person. This proverb illustrates how much wisdom, healing power, knowledge, and divinity each of us has in our own unique beings. Knowledge of self is the best medicine you can ever imbibe and share. Consequently, the Five Percent's greeting is as much medicinal salve as it is simple acknowledgment: Peace, God. Peace, God.

Peace Gods! Rise and shine, Gods; we've got work to do, and the Òrìṣà are waiting for you. Zora Neale Hurston, who wrote that within our

flesh is "all the religion that anybody need[s],"[81] is waiting for you. August Wilson, who charged that, "When you look in the mirror, you should see your god. If you don't, then you have the wrong god,"[82] is waiting for you. Bishop Carlton D. Pearson who declared, "The best God you may ever know is the God you are" is waiting for you.[83] Abbey Lincoln is waiting for you to acknowledge that you are the answer to her question:

Where are the African Gods?

Did they leave us on our journey over here?

Where are the African Gods?

Will we know them when they suddenly appear?

The ones dismissed with voodoo, rock and roll, and all that jazz

and jungle mumbo-jumbo and the razzmatazz?

Where are the African Gods who will save us from this misery and shame?

Where are the African Gods?

Will we find them while we pray in Jesus' name?

Where are the African Gods who live and set us free?

We are the African Gods, you know. . .

We are!

You and me![84]

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[81] Zora Neale Hurston, *Seraph on the Suwanee* (New York: Harper Perennial: 1948), 350.
[82] Kim Powers, "An Interview with August Wilson," in *Conversations with August Wilson*, edited by Jackson R. Bryer and Mary C. Hartig (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2006), 9.
[83] Quoted in Washington, *Manifestations of Masculine Magnificence*, 9.
[84] "Abbey Lincoln: 40 Years Later," *Nothing But a Man*, 40th Anniversary Special Edition (DuArt 2004), DVD.

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