

Wanted: A Grammar of Black/African Spirituality

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When the late Léopold Sedar Senghor, African philosopher and co-founder of Negritude, described Black people as emotive, he was accused of reinforcing the negative, Eurocentric, stereotype of Black people as childlike, feeble-minded, or sub-human. This invidious epistemology gained currency during the Enlightenment. Since then it has promoted, across the centuries, the view that Black people were neither capable of rational thought, nor had the ability to create and sustain culture as the infrastructure of human civilization. Indeed, western thinkers such as Hegel, Hume, Kant, and Locke, in their writings, promoted the notion that Black people had nothing to contribute to humanity. Even Montesquieu, despite his more liberal intellectual attitude, would only accept that “les nègres sont beaux, mais sans génie”!

It is obvious that a major component of western intellectual heritage has been the promotion of Euro-American, white, supremacy and the denigration of Black/African people's humanity. The enslavement of Africans, the colonization of Africa, the christianization of the same, as well as the attendant destruction and disruption of cultures all have been justified by supremacist epistemology in glaring and subtle ways. The past five centuries have witnessed the arduous defense of this egregious trope of the emotional Black person given to fits of rage and passion, in and outside academia. It should therefore not surprise anyone when Black/African scholars reflexively reject anyone (Senghor included) who presents the emotive African/Black person as worthy in the theater of ideas...

As part of his response to the intellectual oligarchy of the west, Senghor posits, not an African-centered epistemology that is the mirror opposite of Eurocentric supremacy, but one that recognizes the reality of every human culture's contribution to the spiritual experience—which is universal. It is his discourse, not his thought, (as expressed in *Liberté*, vol. 1, 24) that has generated much disagreement from Africanist, especially Black, intellectuals. This is because the opening phrases of this (in) famous quote (“si l'émotion est nègre, la raison est hellène...”) has been reduced by Senghor's detractors to a caricature of what he actually meant, or how he actually lived and embodied the Negritude of the “civilization de l'universel”.

Globalization, cosmology, astrophysics, computer technology, environmentalism, and even destructive transnational religious fundamentalisms, all seem to show how visionary Senghor's call for a synthetic and symbiotic human culture has been. We live in a world of competing geographies--and increasingly reduced distances between geographies and histories. One people's biography is but part of the universal human story. The world is truly becoming postcolonial and panoramic in outlook. This is why the essays in this volume are a pertinent conversation about the centrality and pertinence of Black /African spirituality in universal spiritual experience.

The trope of Black/African emotionality as proof of inferiority needs to be reassessed, and rejected, within the general discourse that circumscribes the Black/African ontology in its various expressions in Africa and its Diasporas.... The basic postulate is this: emotion is an essential precursor to the formulation of moral and ethical character. This is not an argument about the psychosomatic features of emotion since there are more than enough experts involved in that enterprise. Rather, we posit, for example, that it is the emotion of Negro spirituals that sustained Black America's ability to create a totally new civilization and culture in an otherwise psychically noxious atmosphere. It is the emotional power of the telling of African *griots* that sustained the will to survive slavery, annihilation and colonization. It is the emotion of African music that gave Sufi Islam its magical poetry as the *gnawas* of Berber Africa will attest. In our time it is the emotion of jazz, reggae, rap and hip hop (to cite a few examples of Black expressivity) that chants the death knell of predatory, dehumanizing, neo-colonialism and capitalism.

Emotion is not a weakness; it is not a failure. Indeed the book of Psalms presents emotion (as vision, *Intuition*, dream, trance, music) as a deeper source of wisdom and knowledge (Psalm 16:6). It is a reaching out; an effort to engage the other; indeed to understand the world. It is a metalanguage that transcends biography and history, and is accessible to all who acknowledge its power. Black peoples have always known that. For Black/African peoples, this reaching out is expressed in myriad forms—music, art, language, mythmaking, and so on.... It emphasizes synthesis over category; commonality over individuality; universe over world; wholeness over separation. It affirms and confirms Black peoples' intuitive understanding of the social nature of mankind, and of the need to be part of, not to dominate, the world. In this regard, we need to recall the simple and initial gesture of a newborn. The baby cries out; it expresses emotion before ever acquiring, or deploying, the ability to be rational or linguistically expressive. Furthermore, it bears repeating that the basis of all religious experience and spirituality is emotion, not logic. It is the capacity to sympathize, empathize, and connect with the world around and beyond us; a primal scream. Emotion, etymologically understood, will thus have to be accepted as part of the grammar of Black, (or any other) spirituality.

Paul Gilroy, in his seminal work, *The Black Atlantic* stresses the underlying transnational humanism (or versatility for our purpose) of Blackness. Collectively, the essays in this edition are a pertinent effort to further this idea of the versatility, indeed transcendental nature, of Black/African emotionality. The major objective of this special issue is to establish what Black/African spirituality—as epitomized by Africana art, literature, religion, myth and other cultural practices--shares with other spiritualities. The contributors to this volume make a convincing case not only for the uniqueness of Black/African spirituality; they also argue, persuasively, for its versatility and regenerative capacity as well as its contributions to the universal humanity's spiritual heritage.

Dr. Teresa N. Washington eloquently discusses the undying spirit of African American *mythopoesis* as well as its connections to mother Africa, through folklore, ethno-botany, and religion. She demonstrates its capacity to create new, hybrid, forms of expressions in the “New World” even after the trauma of the Middle Passage. Her approach is both anthropological and ethnographic.

Dr. Bode Omojola's powerfully evocative celebration of Black/African communication modes as a form of spiritual experience is clear in his essay on Yoruba drums and ethno-musicology. Each musical instrument possesses its own identity while participating in life-affirming rituals, dance and music. Parallels can be found, by the discerning reader, between Omojola's essay and music theories pertaining to jazz—Black America's enduring gift to the world of music.

Matthew Kustenbauder's passion for the intersection of African theology and culture are evident in his study of Christianity's influence in Africa. His essay—a discussion of the multiple expressions of Christianity in Africa reflects a desire and need to avoid a flat or uniform reading of Christianity's influence on the continent. The political expressions of the spiritual are not ignored in a perceptive sociological study of African Initiated Churches, or AICs.

Dr. Teresa Booker's anthropological essay discusses how various Sudanese ethnic groups' notions of right and wrong result from their religious beliefs. Using examples from the indigenous religions of the Nuer, Shilluk, Atout, and Dinka, Booker elaborates on African beliefs in God, the concept of justice and, where possible, how victims and offenders should be treated and rendered whole. Here justice is not simply legal. Its foundation is ethical and located within the peoples' spiritual traditions.

Dr. Yolanda Pierce's essay is unique in the collection because there is not much critical work about the role of religion in Edwidge Danticat's novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, even though religious language is pervasive throughout the text. Dr. Pierce uses the literary fiction of the Haitian-American writer in her discussion of the intersection of fictional literature and religion in Black/African spirituality.

With particular focus on the operation of syncretic religious traditions in the Black Diasporas of both Haiti and the United States, Pierce explores how spirituality can provide healing from physical and emotional trauma; particularly for Black/African women who reclaim religious practices as modes of empowerment and transformation. In some respects this essay echoes some of Dr Booker's perspectives on ethnic Sudanese justice.

Dr. Adebayo Oluwole's essay is both evaluative and prescriptive for several key reasons, chief among which is the fact that his is the only essay in this collection that addresses the issue of mental health as an element of spirituality in an African context. Using his clinical, analytical, as well as scholarly skills to bear on mental health and identity, the author contributes to a better understanding of masculinity construction and the role of religion in modern African societies. Of note are his copious references that highlight not only the thoroughness of his research, but also the increasing relevance of religion and mental health in understanding future African leaders and society.

All the essays draw strong linkages between Africans, African American, and, other African Diasporas. Such connections dispel the enduring Eurocentric vision of Blacks/Africans as people without culture or humanity. A major theme among the essays is the presence of hybridity as the ultimate expression of spirituality. Thus the creative spirit of the people fashion new spiritualities in new circumstances—whether from collective or individual historical trauma. The hope is that the essays in this edition are a pertinent effort to further the idea of the transcendental nature of Black/African spirituality.