

Chapter 1

African American Spirituality: An Overview

There is so much talk about soul these days, much of it linked to Africa and black cultures scattered across the planet. This book provides an in-depth look at the source of soul in African culture, as contained in traditional healing arts and crafts. Healing traditions—including earth-based spirituality, rites of passage, midwifery, and herbalism—form the foundation of this book. In the chapters that follow, we will delve into activities that are deceptively simple on the surface, to reveal the mysticism, spirituality, and mythology that lie beneath and give these practices their magnetic power. The book is designed to be informative while providing hands-on recipes, rituals, projects, and resources to help you become an active participant in these wonderfully soulful African traditions.

African American spirituality is a complex subject because its origins stretch across borders and touch on many different cultures. In this chapter, we examine African American spirituality as it is influenced by various African and Caribbean practices. We explore basic concepts in the lexicon of African earth-based spirituality such as ashe, ase, nyama, and daliluw, and in so doing find expanded meaning for the term we typically use to refer to nature being alive with spirit—animism.

This first chapter is a journey into the heart of earth-based spirituality as it presents itself in Africa and the diaspora. It is designed to help readers who not only simply want to understand these practices but also those who want to become practitioners of African-styled earth-based spirituality, master the concepts behind these practices, understand Africanisms, and appreciate the deep connection our spirituality has to continental Africa and various locales in the African diaspora. To get to the heart of this eclectic group of practices, we must consider the term often applied to African American practices—soul. We start by looking at the African relationship to spirit.

Africanisms

Africanisms are African derived or inspired cultural practices present in traditions, language, and beliefs of a related culture, such as the African descended people of the Americas and Caribbean.

Spiritual Terms: ATRs and ADRs

African traditional religions (ATRs) are the original (pre-Christian, pre-Islamic) religions of the indigenous sub-Saharan African people and include the Ile Ifa of the Yoruba people.

African derived religions (ADRs) are the types of spiritual practices found in the African diaspora and include Santeria, Obeah, Lucumi, Regla de Ocha, Orisa, and Quimbois.

A Boundary-less Spirituality

Many African Americans are descendants of sub-Saharan cultures that honor spirit as alive within nature. This includes the well-defined corpus of beliefs held by the Yoruba on the path of Ile Ifa, the cosmology of the Igbo, the shamanism of the Zulu and neighboring groups of Southern Africans, the wise griots, jelis, and priests of Bamana further northwest, and the healers of Democratic Republic of Congo from which many African Americans descend. All of these and other diverse groups' colorful belief systems were shared on the slave ships for generations, spilling over onto New World soils, filling our thoughts with the capability of seeing the universe and, indeed, certain objects as alive, powerful, and filled with potentiality.

Crossing cultural boundaries is a normal part of life for many multicultural people from our earliest history in the Americas. We speak various tongues, whether an officially recognized language or Creole, patois, tribal language, or perhaps a colloquial language of our homes and neighborhoods that differs from what is taught in schools. As we travel through life communicating with various people in ways that seem most appropriate, we resist the fixed linguistic and spiritual spaces or boxes that are often imposed on us.

Where in the World?

The Banishing and Survival of Sacred Rites

When my people were enslaved and brought to the United States, they quickly learned that speaking of nature spirit (spirits of nature such as trees, mountains, bodies of water, and stones) was a “no-no” punishable even by death. Eventually, African

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traditional religions (ATRs) and African derived religions (ADRs) were made illegal in the United States and parts of the Caribbean; such incursions have even been made recently in various parts of Africa.

Rather than communicate their beliefs to each other or with other cultures, enslaved Africans adapted their language to the Christian or Islamic faith of the dominant culture. In their healing work in the Americas and the Caribbean, they incorporated prayers of the dominant faith while maintaining various elements of African traditional spirituality (ATRs and ADRs). The scripture from the Holy Bible often masked the ATRs in the Christian cloak of the Protestants or Catholics, that is, an “acceptable” religion. Rather than describing herbs as being imbued with spirit or a healer as being connected to the spirit of nature, practitioners described the connections as coming from the Christian God. In this way, healing remained sacred work, but it was communicated in a language more acceptable to the mainstream instead of the language associated with ATRs.

When newly freed people of color began pressing for political and economic representation in both the British and French Caribbean islands, they were subdued first and foremost through their religious practices. For example, Obeah and Quimbois were suppressed or made illegal in the French Caribbean. During this time, one could be persecuted simply for practicing either religion, which those with power considered both dangerous and superstitious. These organized efforts to interfere with Obeah and Quimbois prevented practitioners from openly observing their ancestral rituals, ceremonies, and priestly duties.

There has always been a strong sense of survival underlining African Caribbean spirituality, however. Though these traditions were temporarily underground, they have survived to the present day.¹ Despite the best efforts to destroy connections to African traditional religion, there remains in the African diaspora a cultural perspective that healing using natural objects such as minerals and stones, various parts of plants, and animal teeth, bones, and skins is sacred because everything in nature is imbued with spiritual power.

Quimbois, Obeah, Shango, Vodou, Myal, Hoodoo, Lucumi, and Regla de Ocha (the religion of the Orisha) continue in the African diaspora because they fill a vital function in black society: the ability to address the physical and spiritual realm as well as the environment in a way that reflects traditional African healing.

Spiritual Terms

Babalawo—a healer/priest of Ile Ifa, “keeper of secrets”

Orisha—a deity in the Yoruba Ile Ifa cosmology

Oshun—Orisha of beauty, sensuality, and freshwater

Padrino—godfather/spiritual parent in Santeria or Ifa

Shango—fire, trickster Orisha in Yoruban pantheon

Yemaya-Olokun—Mother/Father of the sea in the Yoruba pantheon; Yemaya is the upper ocean goddess and Olokun the deep-sea god.

The Broad Spectrum of African American Spirituality

In thinking of spirit in a Western context, healing, prayer, invocation, and the church naturally come to mind. Like most Africans and African descended people, my family has close ties to organized religion and, in fact, my maternal grandmother was a spiritualist minister of a Holiness Church. My second father, however, was a babalawo of Shango. My uncle, a drummer and a well-respected priest who did healing energy work, was a spiritual padrino of sorts to me and became one of the most influential figures in my spiritual life.

The following are a few of the ways and concepts through which African spirituality has survived into today.

Ancestor Spirits

In Haiti’s Vodou, the Ghede are a family of spirits. In parts of West Africa and on the path of Ifa, Egun (which translates as “bones”) refers to spirits. Both Ghede and Egun refer to the spirits of the ancestors, those who have passed on. Many of us among the living realize that these spirits are a guiding force in everyday life as well as sacred activities, thus we erect and maintain altars in remembrance of them. We visit with the ancestors in our dreams and vision quests, inviting their energy to bless medicinal blends so that they are infused with their spirit of goodwill, which will provide potent healing energy that grows from their connection with a wide array of entities. This is a very important facet of African-inspired healing work and holistic health.

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Magickal Herbalism

When undertaking magickal herbalism for holistic health, honoring the pot, fire, candle, and tree as living entities with souls is essential. This is used cross-culturally throughout Africa and the African diaspora. Magick with a k is the art and science of causing change according to one's intention, which is distinct from the magic of illusion.

Neopaganism

Understanding our past is critical to our ability to self-heal our communities today. In neopaganism and fused paths, it is still important to preserve and disseminate the older ways of thinking because they offer a distinctive vision of the universe that remains viable. Engagement with ATRs and ADRs helps us maintain a spiritual connection with our planet as well as contact with our ancestors, who mediate between humans, gods, goddesses, nature spirits, and the creator being herself on our behalf.

Shamanism

Shamanism encompasses an array of traditional beliefs and practices found around the world with a major emphasis on communication with the spirit world. Shamanism has existed for thousands of years and is still practiced today. A practitioner of shamanism is known as a shaman. Shamans address matters of the mind, body, and spirit in the community, home environment, and individual. They are intermediaries between the human and spirit worlds. They can treat illness and are capable of entering supernatural realms to provide assistance to their clients. In sub-Saharan Africa, the shaman, who is often a hunter or warrior, heals by knowing and applying the collective power and proper mixture of plants and the elements. Here the term "shaman" is less common; the person who performs these practices is more often called a warrior, hunter, midwife, or healer. Around the world, shamans go by a variety of names and vocations.

Spiritual Concepts and Practices

The following are concepts and practices important to understanding the manifestation of spirit and soul in African cultures.

Animism and Ashe

Animism is the belief that natural objects are alive and have a spirit and soul.

Through an animistic lens, there is an important purpose for us once we make that final journey over into the realm of the spirit. In death, we continue to be honored by our family and ancestors and continue to have a vital role in our communities. As spirits, we live free of the constraints that society or even a corporeal body previously imposed on us.

In our ceremonial and ritual life, we experience natural and supposedly inanimate objects as alive because of this guiding belief in animism. This belief also allows us to meld more easily into the environment, coexisting meaningfully with the seasons, traveling freely with the Wheel of the Year, becoming as one with nature. We travel into the spirit realm through ecstatic dance, chant, and special songs, or with the aid of potent herbal medicines prepared by specialists.

In some regions of the world, however, particularly in West Africa, you are much more likely to see the word ashe used in conjunction with African shamanism rather than the word animism. Ashe means the invisible power of nature. It is a West African word that describes magical forces and energies of the universe. Ashe is present in nature, herbal preparations, and art made from nature materials. Herbal teas, incense powders, spiritual washes, healing balms, soap, charms, medicine bundles, and even the purposefully spoken word contain ashe. The Igala people of Nigeria, for example, consider any type of plant life to be filled with both medicinal power and the knowledge required to cure disease. Medicines, whether designed to address spiritual or physical complaints, are believed to derive their power from ashe.

Power Objects

What we consider African Art often serves a utilitarian purpose within sub-Saharan African communities. For example, power objects, which are shields, masks, sculptures, amulets, or charms, are all gifted by the power and energy of natural spirit. Each power object is a conglomeration of different elements of ashe. For example, both the Bamani Komo Society masks and Boli figurative sculptures are encrusted with feathers and quills. The mystical powers of the bird and porcupine are bound through wrapping and tying with string, thus encouraging them to share their unique ashe with the object. Encrustation is the result of

people feeding the power object and demonstrates its life force; the object becomes encrusted with its power food. To remain alive and powerful, the objects must be fed.

The Well-Fed Object

Food is an important tool, for it sustains the life and empowers the soul of the magickal object. Feeding may consist of applying to the power object ground stones or plants; leaves; feathers; ground bones; the skins, teeth, sexual organs, or horns of powerful animals; chicken blood; saliva; or even semen.

Medicine Bags

A medicine bag is a collection of power objects contained in a pouch or bag. It is charged through feeding an infinite variety of natural materials, though some are manmade, including glass and gunpowder. The best examples of these magical figures or accumulative sculptures come from Central Africa. The Yaka, Suku, and Kongo peoples prepare sachets made from shells, baskets, pots, bottles, food tins, plastic bags, or leather bags.

The Bamana of the Western Sudan use power objects such as medicine bags that are imbued with ashe for addressing various ills. These objects are used to express warrior power, to fight supernatural malaise, and to foil evil intentions. The bags contain bilongo (medicine) and a mooyo (a soul).

Other materials encased in a mojo bag include ephemera associated with the dead: coffin nails, ground bones, or graveyard dirt. The objects—whether stick, stone, leaf, or bone—have a corresponding spirit (ancestral, deity, or natural) and particular medicinal language ascribed to it.

Soul Bags

One can well imagine enslaved Congo and Angolan medicine people bringing the concept of bilongo and mooyo together in the New World to produce what we call mojo bags or soul bags. In addition to the conceptual connection of mooyo as soul, there is the visual connection between the words mooyo and mojo, which may suggest that the latter is an Anglicized translation.

In Hoodoo practice, mojo bags are prepared by a specialist akin to the nganga (healer or priest/priestess; plural, banganga), called in English a rootworker or conjurer. With the aid of their soul food, the individual objects within each bag become a cumulative force that guides the spirits to understand the reason their help is sought.

Nkisi/Minkisi

Nkisi is a Kongo power figure (minkisi is the plural). Ne Kongo, a cultural hero, carried the first healing medicines (minkisi) with him from heaven to earth. He prepared the medicines in a clay pot, set on top of three stones or termite mounds, creating the widely held belief that a healer (nganga) needed to create and dispense medicine.

Minkisi include elemental objects, representative of land, sky, fire, and water. Minkisi, also called charms, are empowered by the spirit of nature. These figures help people heal and can serve as a safe spot or hiding place for the soul. They might contain seashells, feathers, nuts, berries, stones, bones, leaves, roots, or twigs. Minkisi are as diverse and plentiful as the types of illnesses that exist on Earth.

A nkisi nkondi, for example, is a figure into which nails are inserted to bind the figure's powers. Leaves and medicine, combined with various elements, increase the strength. Each ingredient has an action on humans, and the bringing together of various natural forces becomes a source of healing.

In another form of empowering feeding, the Yaka, Kongo, Teke, Suku, and Songhai pack a cavity in the belly of their sculptures with a wide array of ashe-containing materials: bones, fur, claws, and elephant footprints; crocodile teeth, scales, and sexual organs' lightning excreta; bones, flesh, and nails of sorcerers; and remnants of suicide victims and of warriors. The figurines are covered with the skins of power animals (buffalo, wild cats, lizards, antelope, and birds) and then decorated with raffia, cloth, bells, beads, metal, and nails.

Daliluw

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All of this mixing of disparate elements requires skill and knowledge that border on the metaphysical. Daliluw are the series of recipes and techniques for mixing the various medicinal constituents. Herbal chemistry is used, but some daliluw require spoken healing words, also called ase, and other metaphysical rituals during preparation. A West African word that translates roughly as “spiritual blessing,” ase refers to when an illness is addressed directly in its own language. Another meaning is the use of powerful herbs that are chewed ritualistically as the power words (ase) are spoken. The ritualistic element enhances the daliluw by activating or controlling the energies that animate the world—animism.

Healer’s Terms

Ase—spiritual blessing
Ashe—the invisible power of nature
Bilongo—medicine
Mooyo—soul
Nganga—healer, priest/ priestess; plural, banganga

Jiridon and Tree Whispering

As a spiritual practice, Jiridon recognizes that trees are not only alive and contain spirit but are also teachers and can pass their knowledge on to sensitive humans. Rather than learn through an apprenticeship with a human healer, the seeker can learn directly from the trees and plants. To learn the art of Jiridon, the seeker, whether hunter, warrior, healer, or shaman, must spend ample amounts of time alone in the wilderness observing the workings of nature, including the expression of animals and the whispering of trees. Jiridon could be called “the science of the trees.”

In early African American historical accounts, there are written testaments of people who spoke the language of the trees. They were called tree whisperers. Tree whisperers in the United States spend time living with and studying a single tree.

Qualities of Tree Whisperers

- ~ Tree whisperers are highly observant.
- ~ They are willing to forgo community life for a time.
- ~ They listen attentively to the reactions the tree has to the lashing of wind and to warm sunny days.

Outcome of Study with Trees

- ~ Eventually, the tree whisperer hears the studied tree speak clearly.
- ~ The tree teaches those who will listen to be Masters of Jiridon.
- ~ Masters of Jiridon become Master Empirical Herbalists and adept ecologists through metaphysical research.

Bringing Spirit Home

Organic objects are replete with potentiality and healing ashe, so they have a universal energy force within, connecting us all like an umbilical cord connects a fetus to its mother. It is important to address each element or aspect of nature with the assertion that it is alive and our partner. This approach puts us in touch at once with the past, present, ancestors, and nature spirits. Knowing we share stewardship with a living world, which we do not own but are a component of, allows us to move more easily toward a spiritually rich, sustainable future. Borrowing practices from the complex realm of African spirituality helps build new traditions and spiritual practices that put us in touch with the spirit realm enriching our soul.

Healer’s Term

Master Empirical Herbalist—one who masters understanding of the herbal kingdom through observation and self- or spiritually directed experiments rather than through scientific assay.