

Knowing and Doing
The Work of the Gods

Written by Teresa N. Washington, Ph.D.

Presented by Teresa N. Washington, Ph.D., and Odùduwà

at

“Roots, Rocks, and Ring Shouts”:

The African and Diasporic Religious Studies Association Symposium

20 April 2018

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* 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,¹ 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.

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 *Oya*’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 *Yemoja*’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.² 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 Àjé to Ajalagba. Right 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: Àjé in Yoruba Cosmology, Ontology, and Orature*, the true and living Gods have a clear objective: to make more Gods.³ The creation of divinity may occur through the womb or through the Word, whether books or Òrò, 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.”⁴ 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 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.”⁵ 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 *aikú 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,”⁶ 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?’”

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.⁷ 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 Oya 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.”⁸

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.”⁹ 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.

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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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 *ilutí*, the ability to listen well, which is also translated as “teachableness.”¹² The person who exhibits *ilutí* 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 *ilutí* reveals she has the understanding necessary to integrate to wisdom and knowledge. I have found *ilutí* to be essential everywhere I have gone in Pan-Africa, from the Mississippi Delta to Ilé-Ifè, Nigeria. If you are 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 *ilutí* and *iwà-pèlẹ́* 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 ethnic 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 Obàtálá* includes an *itàn* in which Obàtálá’s three brothers destroy themselves pursuing money. Obàtálá 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.”¹³

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 Òrúnmilà*. 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.¹⁴

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 cycle from the Cosmos to the Earth through the babaláwo to the community.”¹⁵

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*.¹⁶

It is also helpful to recall Malidoma Somé’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 *iluti* 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.¹⁷

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.” Consequently, Dagara elders “focus their energies where they really count—on matters of the soul.”¹⁸

The sacred world of Àjé 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 Lekuleja. 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 Lekuleja’s God does not demand specific types of gin and cigars or certain denominations of currency. The needs of Òriṣà Ìyá Lekuleja are as humble as those of Ìyá Lekuleja because neither . . . are self-interested capitalists who are thrilled by glitzy gewgaws or ego-building tributes. In fact, Ìyá Lekuleja . . . offers a riveting portrait of a true and living God dwelling amongst mortals, and she differs from many of the recorded portrayals of Òriṣà and rulers in that she has no interest in wealth, ego, prestige, spouses, or glory. Ìyá Lekuleja’s clothing is solely what is sufficient to cover her body. She probably offers her God more food than she feeds herself. Ìyá Lekuleja 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 Lekuleja is, quite simply, the truth. And the truth, like the bounty and wisdom of the Earth is free.¹⁹

I also analyze the humility and directives of Ìyá Lekuleja:

Ìyá Lekuleja’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.²⁰

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

Falola's elders hold him down and shave his head. After this, Ìyá Lekuleja "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."²¹ After Falola's head is cleansed, anointed, and remolded, Ìyá Lekuleja 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."²² By removing her clothes and assuming the posture of *ikúnlẹ abiyamọ*, Ìyá Lekuleja opens her sacred *Igbádù* and accesses her *Àjẹ* and *àṣe* 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 Lekuleja prepares for Falola:

The ritual suckling of the breasts that Rowland Abiodun describes in his article "Women in Yoruba Religious Images" as a healing medicine that a mother of any age can administer to a child of any age, is expanded by Ìyá Lekuleja who charges the *omi ẹrò* 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 Lekuleja. 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 Lekuleja'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 Lekuleja 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 *Àjẹ* of the Mother is essential for his safety and self-actualization.²³

Many westerners would describe what Ìyá Lekuleja 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."²⁴ The genetic, cosmic, deoxyribonucleic power that Ìyá Lekuleja 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*:

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.²⁵

When we envision wisdom workers like Somé grandfather Bakhye, Ìyá Lekuleja, 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.”²⁶ 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.”²⁷

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 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 Òrò, 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.”²⁸

Both Àjé 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 Àjé, 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 iwà fun oniwà*; 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 Àjé. 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 Àjé. 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 Àjé. You are your ojúbọ/shrine. You are òògùn. You are Ọrò. Your womb is your Igbádù, your clitoris is Eḡe Àjé. 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 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.²⁹

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.”³⁰

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 Àjé. 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.”³¹

Àjé 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. Àjé are called Ayé because Àjé is the Earth, itself—the foundation and source of All Existence. Fittingly, in Wole Soyinka’s play *Madmen and Specialists*, Àjé is described as a power that “moves as the Earth moves.”³² So if you want to understand Àjé you have to go beyond Ifá to the Source, which is Àjé.

Àjé and Imọlẹ are the cornerstones of the way of life of the autochthonic inhabitants of Ilé-Ifẹ. The Yoruba migrated to Ilé-Ifẹ from Adú-Láwo, which is Mecca or Egypt, depending on the itàn.³³ The Yoruba chose to settle in Ilé-Ifẹ with the Imọlẹ, the original inhabitants. The Imọlẹ way of life was and is rooted in Àjé, which has always been structured as an Egbé Ogba, 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-Ifẹ.³⁴ Ògbóni and Àjé, together, work to ensure law, order, prosperity, and progress.

Ifá appears to be a product of the Yoruba migration from Ilé Adú-Láwo. 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-Ifẹ.³⁵ 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*.³⁶

As I detail in *The Architects of Existence*, Òrúnmilà recognizes the supremacy and significance of Àjé. He understands that without their acceptance he, Egúngún, male rulers, Òsanyìn, and any other male agents and agencies will be able to accomplish nothing. Consequently, Òrúnmilà does everything he can to find out the secret of Àjé and find a way to share in their power. After several attempts, including unsuccessful attempts to trick the mothers, Òrúnmilà succeeds in learning how to interact and work with Àjé. He becomes a son of the Mothers and thrives under their protective 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

Lekuleja 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”³⁷

Eyin 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.”³⁸ We have to give our identity and 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, Àjé, 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],"³⁹ 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,"⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹ 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!⁴²

- ¹ Esteban Montejo, *Autobiography of a Runaway Slave*, edited by Miguel Barnet, translated by Jocasta Innes, (London: The Bodley Head, 1968).
- ² William Loren Katz, *Black Indians: A Hidden Heritage* (New York: Atheneum, 1997), 22.
- ³ Teresa N. Washington, *The Architects of Existence: Àjẹ in Yoruba Cosmology, Ontology, and Orature* (Oya's Tornado, 2014), 13.
- ⁴ Poor Righteous Teachers, "Gods, Earths, and 85ers," *The New World Order* (Arista, 1996), CD.
- ⁵ 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* (Oya's Tornado, 2014), 24.
- ⁶ Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1935), 280.
- ⁷ S. Modupeola Opeola, "The Divine Nature of Yoruba System of Thought," *Yoruba Ideas* 1:1 (1997): 62. (62–68).
- ⁸ Lord Jamar featuring The RZA, "Deep Space," *The 5% Album* (Babygrande, 2006), CD.
- ⁹ Lil Wayne, "Tha Heat" *Tha Carter* (Cash Money Records, 2004), CD.
- ¹⁰ Teresa N. Washington, *Our Mothers, Our Powers, Our Texts: Manifestations of Àjẹ in Africana Literature* (Oya's Tornado, 2015), 86–91 and Washington, *Manifestations of Masculine Magnificence*, 40 and 208.
- ¹¹ 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).
- ¹² Rowland Abiodun, "Identity and the Artistic Process in Yorùbá Aesthetic Concept of Ìwà," *Journal of Cultural Inquiry* 1:1 (December 1983): 25.
- ¹³ Ifayemi Eleburuibon, *The Adventures of Obatala* (Osogbo, Oyo: A.P.I, 1989), 69.
- ¹⁴ E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olódùmarè: God in Yoruba Belief* (1962; reprint, New York: Wazobia, 1994), 80.
- ¹⁵ Washington, *The Architects of Existence*, 121.
- ¹⁶ 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.
- ¹⁷ Malidoma Somé, *Of Water and the Spirit* (New York: Penguin, 1994), 21.
- ¹⁸ Somé, *Of Water and the Spirit*, 184.
- ¹⁹ Washington, *The Architects of Existence*, 235.
- ²⁰ Washington, *The Architects of Existence*, 235–236.
- ²¹ Toyin Falola, *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt: A Memoir* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 190.
- ²² Falola, *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt: A Memoir*, 190.
- ²³ Washington, *The Architects of Existence*, 237.
- ²⁴ Dark Sun Riders featuring Brother J, "Seeds of Evolution," *Jewels of Evolution* (Island Record, 1996), CD.
- ²⁵ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903, (New York: Bantam, 1989), 138.
- ²⁶ 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.

- ²⁷ Talbot, “The Egbo Secret Society,” 271.
- ²⁸ Luisah Teish, *Jambalaya: The Natural Woman’s Book of Personal Charms and Practical Rituals* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1988), 249.
- ²⁹ Rowland Abiodun, “Woman in Yoruba Religious Images,” *African Languages and Cultures* 2:1 (1989): 11.
- ³⁰ Lord Jamar featuring feat. Sadat X and Queen Tahera Earth, “Study Ya Lessons,” *The 5% Album* (Babygrande, 2006), CD.
- ³¹ X Clan, “Primetime Lyrics,” *Mainstream Outlawz* (United Family Music, 2009), CD.
- ³² Wole Soyinka, *Madmen and Specialists*, quoted in Washington, *Our Mothers, Our Powers, Our Texts*, 119.
- ³³ 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!
- ³⁴ Idowu, *Olódùmarè*, 23–24.
- ³⁵ Please see J. Olumide Lucas, *The Religion of the Yorubas* (C.M.S. Bookshops, Lagos, 1948) and William Bascom, *Ifa Divination: Communication between Gods and Men in West Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), 5–8.
- ³⁶ Henry John Drewal and Margaret Thompson Drewal, *Geḷeḷe: Art and Female Power among the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 8.
- ³⁷ Bob Marley and the Wailers, “Roots,” *Exodus*, Deluxe Edition (Island Records, 2001), CD.
- ³⁸ Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (New York: Harper Perennial: 1942), 85.
- ³⁹ Zora Neale Hurston, *Seraph on the Suwanee* (New York: Harper Perennial: 1948), 350.
- ⁴⁰ 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.
- ⁴¹ Quoted in Washington, *Manifestations of Masculine Magnificence*, 9.
- ⁴² “Abbey Lincoln: 40 Years Later,” *Nothing But a Man*, 40th Anniversary Special Edition (DuArt 2004), DVD.