

Nickels in the Nation Sack: Continuity in Africana Spiritual Technologies

by

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Abstract

This essay examines continuity in African and African American philosophies, rituals, and spiritual phenomenon. Many researchers have dismissed the African origins and the cultural significance of African American phenomena altogether and relegated them to the realm of “Negro” myths and superstitions. However, research into continental African sciences, spiritual technologies, and philosophies makes it clear that the skills and technological advances of Africa survived the Middle Passage and were put to use in the Western Hemisphere.

In the comparative analysis of Africana technologies, including second sight, physical flight, and death by invocation, this essay draws on rich and diverse sources including interviews, academic studies, autobiographies, novels, and data from the author’s field research in the United States, the Caribbean, and Africa. While the majority of African American rituals and technologies are traced to the Igbo and Yoruba ethnic groups, this Pan-African study includes data from BaKongo, Akan, and Dagara cultures as well as data from the Caribbean. In addition to placing African America in the grand continuum of Pan-African culture, science, and spirituality, this essay seeks to inspire a reassessment of Africana powers and power-wielders.

Introduction

The ability to “hit a straight lick with a crooked stick” is recognized as the forte of Africana peoples. Many argue that the ability to do the impossible with ease and without detection results from a spiritual-genealogical relationship with Old Testament prophet Moses. Others extend the line farther to such African Gods as Olódùmarè, Nana Bùrúkù, Nzambi, and Atum. Whether their practices are called “The Work,” Hoodoo, Obeah, or Ifá;¹ whether their rituals and philosophies are shrouded in secrecy, heralded, or ridiculed, Africana people have a long and complex relationship with spiritual power, and this kinship extends to African Americans.

Although the genealogical and historical connections to Africa are obvious, many well-known African American beliefs, spiritual technologies, and rituals have never been associated with Africa; they have been dismissed as idiosyncratic “Negro” superstitions. Using comparative analysis, I hope to show that African American rituals and powers are indeed part of the African continuum and that the umbilical cord that links Africa to African America is strong and intact. I also feel that this research is important because Africana philosophies and technologies continue to face multi-pronged attacks from modernization, westernization, and organized religion. Consequently, many Africana peoples discredit and are ashamed of their original and phenomenal sources of power. I hope that this discussion of the skills, significance, and permanence of Africana powers and power-wielders will inspire us to give a proper reassessment of and have a deeper appreciation for Africana ritual arts and sciences.

Marking and Signifying Behind the Veil

In the traditional African world view one’s vision is not necessarily limited to the range of one’s physical eyesight. Human beings can also be endowed with spiritual vision. What the Yoruba refer to as *ojú inú* (inner eyes) and what others call the third eye is the source of spiritual vision. In Africana communities, acquisition of spiritual sight is attributed to either circumstances of birth or material preparations. Southern African American elders hold that pigs can see the wind, and, by introducing sow’s milk into the eyes, human beings can see the wind too (Hurstun, *Mules*, 127-8). Ellis Strickland of Georgia asserts that the Black Cat Bone gives one the ability to see the wind, and he states that it looks “like a red blaze of fire” (Rawick, *Georgia Narratives*, Part 4, 262). Use of material preparations to foment spiritual vision is also recorded by Gabriel Bannerman-Richter who discusses twin sisters who purchase a preparation that endows them with x-ray vision and the ability to look inside of the human body (41). Among the Igbos of eastern Nigeria, certain flora are combined and given to worthy initiates so that they can *ifu mmuo* or “see the Spirits” (Umeh 213). In addition to material preparations, many Africana peoples believe that being born with a caul (also called a veil) over one’s face endows one with spiritual vision.

In Yoruba philosophy, Àjé are spiritually empowered human beings, mostly women, who are revered as the Gods of Society. Àjé have the power to do and undo and to create and destroy as is necessary for holistic evolution and expansion, and Àjé are central to the processes of spiritual and biological creativity and creation. The Yoruba, in acknowledging the suzerainty of Àjé, state that “The sack tied by the gods cannot be unraveled by anyone” (*Òké ti òrìṣà di ọmọ ar’aiyé ò lee tuu*) (Drewal and Drewal 251). The Gods in question are Àwọn Ìyá Wa, the great spiritual and communal mothers who own and control the power called Àjé. The sack to which the Yoruba refer is the amnion. In Yorubaland, children born with the amnion (*òkẹ*) over their faces are recognized as the direct progeny of the Àjé.

A deity of Àjé who holds a unique link with veiled children is *Oya* whose praisename is “Ìyánsàn, mother of nine—who bore small children in a caul” (Bascom, *Sixteen*, 231). The caul that held *Oya*’s nine spiritually gifted children reflects the modern veiled child’s relationship with the astral realm, spiritual powers, and transmigrated ancestors. And *Oya* herself is important to this discussion. *Oya* is the *Òrìṣà* (Deity) of Transformation. She guards the path between the living and the transmigrated ancestors. In that some infants are recognized as returning ancestors, it is fitting that *Oya* frequents cemeteries. Tornadoes and hurricanes symbolize her force, and her number nine is used as a spiritual catalyst in numerous Africana rites. Many important rituals, especially those relative to childbirth and the protection of children, are galvanized through the number, signs, and symbols of *Oya*.

The sack tied by the Gods remains strong despite centuries of dislocation and attempts at cultural genocide. The significance of children born with veils and the rituals that accompany such births are well-known in African America. Elders hold that a child who is born with the amnion covering her face will see spirits. In order to keep the child from being constantly harassed and possibly driven insane by harmful spiritual forces the child must drink a tea made from the caul. Some customs demand that the caul be preserved so that as the child grows older she can have a tactile as well as spiritual connection with the power-giving caul. In other rituals, the caul, like the umbilical cord, is buried at the foot of a significant tree. These rituals, which were once staples of African American midwifery, have been immortalized in contemporary literature, most notably in Tina McElroy Ansa’s *Baby of the Family*. But some of the most significant information about spiritual sight comes from testimonies of people who were born with cauls. Carrie Nancy Fryer of Augusta, Georgia gives her personal account as to the gifts her caul afforded her: “Hunh! My mother said [the caul] cover my head, shoulders and all! I kin see ghosts” (Rawick, *Georgia Narratives*, Part 1, 339). Fryer goes beyond seeing spirits; she interacts with them. As is the case with many West and Central African herbalists, Fryer’s ancestors teach her cures for high blood pressure, worms, rheumatism, headaches, and bad blood (Rawick, *Georgia Narratives*, Part 1, 337).

Fryer's link to the spiritual realm, which she and others attribute to their veiled births, exceeds astral communication. Oya's sack endows Fryer with knowledge and power, and Fryer uses Oya's number nine to protect her children and ensure their physical development, "All my babies grewed straight cause I swept em nine times for nine mornings from de knees down an out dataway" (Rawick, *Georgia Narratives*, Part 1, 337). Fryer's methodology is similar to that of Igbo mothers who chant "Uso, Uso, Uso" while stretching and strengthening their infant children's limbs (Nwapa 34). Oya and the ancestors can also be found protecting children at homes and at graves. At one time, Africana tradition demanded elders pass a surviving infant back and forth over the grave of her mother to prevent the mother's spirit from summoning or haunting the child (Creel 87). Expanding on this custom, Fryer uses a grave to cure her daughter, who had a growth on her neck. Fryer explains that after her daughter was passed "nine times across, nine times straight [over the grave]. . . . dat child was cured." Many hold that the recently deceased have the power to remove sicknesses. To cure afflictions, Zora Neale Hurston suggests visiting the corpse of someone who had been kindly disposed to you, whispering their name, and asking them to take your illness along with them to the other side (Hurston, *Sanctified Church*, 20-21).

The respect and assistance that living beings and ancestors provide one another is indicative of a world-view centered on curvilinear time and cosmic-terrestrial reciprocity. However, the world is complex, and events from the seemingly mundane to the definitely otherworldly can have profound influences and repercussions. Marking provides a wonderful example of cosmic-to-physical interplay. Marking occurs when an unborn child is physically affected by the expectant mother's exposure and/or reaction to an event. Marking can range from the innocuous lines and discolorations known as birthmarks to serious psychological and physical indicators.

After attending a funeral while she was pregnant and crying uncontrollably, Mildred Heard marked one of her children with crying. And after visiting the zoo and laughing at a monkey's antics, a diversion no expectant mother cognizant of marking would engage in, Heard bears a child marked by the monkey (Rawick, *Georgia Narratives*, Part 2, 168). Heard's child grew out of the marking, but some marks can be permanently debilitating. Fryer, the owner of the veil, recalls how she marked her son:

My sister-in-law made me ruin't my other child. Twas an old man coming along. He was ruptured [he had a herniated scrotum]. He had on a white apron, and she bus' out laughin' and say: 'Look at dat!' I jus' young gal, ain' be thinkin' and I bus' out laughin' too, he did look funny. I ruin't my boy. He was in de same fix and when I look at him I feel so bad, and think 'dat didn' have to be'. (Rawick, *Georgia Narratives*, Part 1, 338)

The most serious marks apparently result from the mother finding amusement in someone's pain or deformity or from her being shocked or traumatized. Midwife Easter Sudie Campbell offers a stern warning: "Mothers oughter be more careful while carrying dey chilluns not ter git scared of enthing for dey will sho mark dar babies wid turrible ugly things" (Rawick, *Kentucky Narratives*, 91).

Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* includes a number of prenatal restrictions and precautions that protect the mother and the fetus, such as insisting that pregnant women be accompanied by a companion during excursions and that they should not venture about at night because heightened spiritual energies increase the potential for marking or miscarrying children (Nwapa 29-30).

Marking is indirectly related to another African phenomenon: the Yoruba *àbíkú* or Igbo *ogbanje*. *Àbíkú* means, "born to die," and *àbíkú* children are born, live a short while, and die only to return to the mother's womb and continue this cycle. One could hypothesize that the mother's womb is marked to attract *àbíkú*. Babatunde Lawal posits that the *Àjé* punish women who have committed offences by having *àbíkú* enter their wombs (Lawal 260 n. 9). When parents, elders, and doctors recognize that a woman has given birth to an *àbíkú* and the child dies, it is marked before burial. The marks, slashes, and cuts about the face and arms are meant to discourage the spirit's return, but a "stubborn" spirit will be re-born with its scars (Achebe 54-55). As depicted in Lawal's *The Gèlèdè Spectacle*, there are also unique facial marks given to the living *àbíkú* child that are meant to "scare away its spirit companions" (237). In addition to rituals and supplication, parents use empowered naming to try to persuade *àbíkú* children to remain on earth and also shield them from harm. *Àbíkú* children are adorned with names such as *Durójayé* (Stay-and-enjoy-this-world) and *Dúró-orí-ké* (Wait-and-see-how-you-will-be-pampered) (Lawal 263). With every lullaby, summons or greeting, the *àbíkú* is reminded of his terrestrial obligations and the joys that come with earthly life.

In addition to some first generation African Americans having been physically marked by their African parents to re-member them to the cultural identity stolen from them (Georgia Writers' Project 71), African Americans continue to employ African protective ritual naming or linguistic marking. It is not uncommon for a southern African American to have a legitimate name that is entirely different from the one that appears on her birth certificate. After the legal name is logged it is immediately supplanted by at least one other name. For example, a mother may name her daughter Juba at birth but never use the name. Once home, Juba is given the day- or nick-name Yula. As she grows and manifestations of ancestors are evident in her character, Donnie, the name of a grandmother, is considered to be a more suitable name than Juba. Ultimately, Juba enters school, the employment arena, and marriage as Donnie.² What appears to be an odd naming practice is an ancient African way to signify, claim, and protect as circumstances dictate. The novel *Efuru* provides an example of using names to signify and protect as a mother describes how, after giving birth to numerous *ogbanje* children, she births a daughter who lives: "I named her Ibiakwa—have you come again? After a year and she did not die I called her Nkem—my own" (Nwapa 90).

Africana names and naming practices are rich with spiritual meaning and power. As J. A. A. Ayoade explains,

A name is the neatest encapsulation of a man's being. In a large number of cases it is believed that a man's name and the names of his parents are most essential to the control of the man because these names are regarded as the total summary of the person's being since they indicate his origin [*iponri*]. (Drewal and Drewal 271 n. 4)

Given the history, identity, and cosmology contained within it, the *iponri* is powerful and its force must be carefully safeguarded. Knowledge of a person's *itàn iponri*, their history and lineage identity, "gives one the power to kill a person by summoning his ancestral guardian soul, and some informants hold that one will die if he even talks about his *iponri*" (Drewal and Drewal 271 n. 4). Ayoade goes on to discuss how sacred names can be used to unlock cosmic energies:

The second and more difficult level [in evoking spirit forces] is that in which the spirit forces still remain dormant until they are called forth through the utterance of words of power. The knowledge of the secret names of spirits and of incantations is of special importance in concretizing the inner essence of an object. (Drewal and Drewal 5)

A two-headed doctor from Mississippi echoes Ayoade's assertions. Menthy states that in order to wield power, one must learn one's "secret name." She states that the name is used to make medicines effective and can never be revealed to anyone (Bass 382).

Reshaping the Shifting Self

The power of sacred names is not restricted to human beings. In *Of Water and the Spirit*, Malidoma Somé reveals that the Dagara recognize certain seeds and plants as having sacred properties that are so potent and important that they cannot be named "because naming them would kill them. Among the Dagara, some things are known not for what they are, but for what they do. The Dagara avoid naming them in order to ensure that their magical properties stay alive" (170). Knowledge of the secret names and mystical properties of flora and fauna is central to African technology, and it may be the key to one of the most often recorded and often discredited of African skills: human flight. Using their ability to understand and harness the material and spiritual powers encapsulated in *iponri*, sacred flora, and *Òrò*, power of the word, many enslaved Africans put spiritual technology to use and flew away from their oppressors.

African American testimonies about physical flight are diverse. Shad Hall describes a group of Africans who use a river as a catalyst and runway for their flight back to Africa (Georgia Writers' Project 169). Wallace Quarterman describes Africans uttering mystic words, throwing a hoe to the ground, and becoming buzzards: "I knowd plenty wut did see em, plenty wut was right

deah in duh fiel wid um and seen duh hoe wut dey lef stickin up attuh dey don fly away” (Georgia Writers’ Project 151). Priscilla McCullough recalls Africans who, while working in a field, ran around in a circle with increasing speed until one by one, “dey riz up an take wing an fly lak a bud.”

McCullough states that the overseer “run an he ketch duh las one by duh foot jis as he was bout tuh fly off” (Georgia Writers’ Project 154). Esteban Montejo, an African of Yoruba and Kongo ancestry who was enslaved in Cuba, asserts that the BaKongo of Central Africa “flew the most” with the help of a “prenda,” a spirit-charged device they tied around their waists (43-44).

Some individuals make prendas to wear on their bodies, and others are born with spiritual prendas in their souls. In a poignant testimony, Rosa Grant describes how her great grandmother, Theresa, liberated herself from a plantation in Georgia:

“Theresa, wuz caught too an . . . wuz brought tuh dis country. Attuh dey bin yuh a wile, duh mothuh git to weah she caahn stan it an she wannuh go back tuh Africa. One day muh gran Ryna wuz standin wid uh in duh fiel. Theresa tun roun—so—” here Rosa made two quick swings with her skirt. “She stretch uh ahms out—so— an rise straight up an fly right back tuh Africa. Muh gran say she wuz standin right deah wen it happen. She alluz wish dat uh mothuh had teach uh how tuh fly. She try an try doin duh same way but she ain nubuh fly. She say she guess she jis wuzn bawn wid duh powuh.” (Georgia Writers’ Project 145)

It is important to note that witnesses of African physical flight include devastated relatives, Euro-American overseers, and Spaniards. Esteban Montejo, described Spanish enslavers as refusing to acquire Africans from certain ethnic groups because so many flew away that “it was bad for business” (131).

To better understand the technology that freed humans from gravity in the western hemisphere, it is necessary to examine human flight and other feats on the African continent. In *Knowledge, Belief and Witchcraft*, a Yoruba *onísègun* (traditional physician) reveals that “If the ‘powerfuls’ want to travel to somewhere like Lagos, they will be making a lot of preparation [spiritual medicines and tools] in the afternoon. And when it is night time, they will tie all the medicine on their body. Then they will rise from the earth to the sky and they will be moving” (Hallen and Sodipo 108). This technology is similar to the BaKongo prenda and an Igbo technology called *ikwu ekili* which uses power of the word to transform the *dibia* and all he or she seeks to transport, including other humans, into a beam of light which can fly to any destination (Umeh 209).

In *After God is Dibia*, John Umeh describes several Igbo transportation devices and transformative abilities that are comparable to African Americans skills. *Ikwu eli* gives one the ability to move through time and space or disappear from one place and reappear in another. *Igho* allows a human being to transform into an inanimate object. Jack Wilson recalls that his uncle had a power comparable to *ikwu eli*, as he “could disappeah lak duh win, jis walk off duh plantation an stay way fuh weeks at a time” (Georgia Writers’ Project 7). Wilson’s uncle could also use a technology similar to *igho* to turn himself into the wind, the mist, or a tree: “One time he git cawnuhed by duh putrolmun an he jis walk up do a tree an he say, ‘I tink I go intuh dis tree.’ Den he disappeah right in duh tree (Georgia Writers’ Project 7). Evans Brown witnessed a man who liberated himself by shapeshifting. Brown recalls the police arresting a man and handcuffing him to a wagon. Seconds later the officers found they had arrested an “ole gray mule” (Georgia Writer’s Project 31). Westerners often relegate such phenomena as these to the realm of the magical or preposterous, but these skills are simply the products of African technology. Discussing a technology called *satulmo*, the ability to cook upside down on the ceiling, Somé reveals that “There are secret plants in nature that are very powerful. By using some of these plants, known only by healers and men and women in touch with the great medicine of Mother Earth our cooks were able to produce, for a short time, a area free of gravity” (52).

An understanding of the interdependence and interrelatedness of all the various forms, forces, and entities that share this planet and cosmos is central to comprehending Africana spiritual systems and technologies. When a person understands his relationship to the dandelion, the saw palmetto, the fly, the lizard, the Sirius system, and the sea, and recognizes that he is each of these things and more, then he is able to harness infinite powers, skills, and knowledge.

The African American cultural repository of infinite spiritual knowledge that makes the impossible possible is Hoodoo. All too many researchers have taken pains to define Hoodoo as a conglomeration of superstitions underpinned by “magic.” Such assessments bespeak ignorance of the holistic nature of the African world-view and the origin of Hoodoo. Hoodoo is a melding of various West and Central African and Caribbean beliefs and technologies. In terms of etymology, the Ewe and Fon spiritual systems, Afa and Fa, respectively, are derived from the Yoruba Ifá; similarly, the African American term Hoodoo is a linguistic sibling of Haitian Voodoo, which comes from Fon Vodun. Vodun and its linguistic kin all simply mean “Spirit,” and they are holistic spiritual systems. Furthermore, the *babaláwo*, *dibia*, and two-headed doctors who divine, heal, and prognosticate recognize and access the power resident in life forms (human beings, flora, fauna, rivers) as well as various objects and phenomena (certain stones, mountains, tornadoes, thunder, planets, eclipses, *ad infinitum*).

Cosmic Signs and Spiritual Literacy

Africana spiritualists are adept at harnessing flora, fauna, and spirit forces, and their abilities manifest themselves in myriad ways—from the extraordinary to the everyday. Some of the most obvious forms of African continuity can be found shining at homes, graves, and farms. It would be unusual to drive through a southern town in America and not see trees with white rings emblazoned on their trunks, front doors sparkling with mirrors, and bottle trees of various colors and styles glistening in the yards of peoples of various ethnicities. These signs and objects, which are routinely and mistakenly classified as “southern,” are African in origin.

The white painted trees of America are the offspring of African trees that are tied with white or red cloths that signify that they are the sacred abodes of spirits (Awolalu, 49). African American homes that are protected by mirrors and other visible as well as buried devices have their sources in Africa. Among the Yoruba, the Baale (Chief) of Ogbomosho has protective Gods surrounding his home and a barrier of spiritual implements installed in the ground “from one side of his compound to the other” (Georgia Writers’ Project 204 n. 11 c). The celebrated bottle trees of America were also born in Africa. Yoruba merchants and farmers use *ààlè*, which often take the form of bottles filled with powerful medicines, to protect their wares and crops. The medicines contained in *ààlè* can kill, maim or derange a thief or trespasser (Sheba 10-13).

Ritual adornment and protection also serve the human body. Until recently, African American parents protected their children with nation sacks filled with asafetida and other herbs and jewelry that consisted of black thread knotted nine times. But one of the most ancient protective tools is bling, and this befits a people whose displays of wealth are legendary. The original African bling is gold; this is evident in the material wealth of such ancient empires as Nubia, which means the “Land of Gold,” and the Golden Empires of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai. Gold also signifies spiritual wealth, as is apparent in the Yoruba saying “*Ìyá ni wùrà*,” which means, “Mother is gold.” In addition to denoting material and spiritual riches, in African America gold is said to strengthen vision. Consequently, wearing gold earrings reflects inner and outer treasures and serves a practical purpose. Silver money also used to be a popular form of adornment among African Americans, but the goal was not to flaunt wealth but to protect life: Silver wards off conjure, and tarnished silver indicates that one has been conjured.

In *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*, J. Omosade Awolalu reveals some of the sources for African American spiritual adornment in a discussion that emphasizes the degree to which technological preparations are part of the collective consciousness, ritual protection, and external adornment of the Yoruba:

In consequence of belief in magical power, many Yorùbás are found wearing all kinds of charms—copper rings (*òrùka bàbà*), amulets (*ifún pá*), and preparations sewn up in leather [belts] (*ońdè*). . . . Some babies wear coils round their necks and waists; men and women have some black powder injected into their bodies through incisions (*gbéré*). (79)

George Boddison, the mayor of Tin City, Georgia, provides a brilliant example of the use of òrùka bàbà and ifún pá in America:

His wrists and arms were encircled by copper wire strung with good luck charms; his fingers were covered with several large plain rings. A copper wire was bound around his head and attached to this wire were two broken bits of mirror which, lying flat against his temples with the reflecting side out, flashed and glittered when he moved his head. . . . a brass ring had been inserted in his mouth in the place of a lower jaw tooth. (Georgia Writers' Project 20-21)

Boddison informs the interviewers that thanks to his bling, “[E]bil caahn dwell on me. It hab tuh pass on. . . . Long as I weahs em deah is nuttn kin do me reel hahm” (Georgia Writers' Project 21).

The beaded crowns of Yoruba *Òni* (Kings) are similar to Boddison's in style and purpose. Ayanna Gillian notes, “The wearing of the sacred crown or *adenla* is a symbol of his spiritual power and authority. The crown is veiled to protect his subjects for no one can see the face of a God. Possibly the most important element of his crown is the presence of the *Ashe* from which his power is derived” (Gillian). The *adenla* have powerful protective medicines sewn in them; likewise, Mayor Boddison's crown protects him from harm and protects others from the power of his visage. With power-conducting copper wire and mesmerizing mirrors, Boddison attracts attention but repels evil. And similar to the Yoruba *adenla*, the same mirrors that protect Boddison reflect (pun intended) his power and authority.

External spiritual adornment protects and sparks internal cosmic gifts. Internal gifts can then be used to help one understand external forces and foretell future events. One of the most consistent and enduring way of knowing is interpretation of signs. Some signs are well-known in African America: If one's right palm itches one will receive money. If the left palm itches, one will receive a letter. If one dreams of a wedding, it is a sign of a funeral. To dream of a funeral signifies a wedding. If one's eye itches one will see a stranger. If the foot itches, one will go on a journey. A dream of fish is a sign of a pregnancy. There are many signs of death: a cock crowing at night, dogs howling unceasingly (they see the spirit making preparations to leave the host), and dreams of raw meat.

African American semiology is better understood in the context of what the Igbos call *icheku oku*. In addition to the two physical eyes and the third eye, which the Igbos call *akpa uche*, the human body also has *icheku oku*, which is literally translated as “fireballs.” These fireballs are spiritual receptors. They react to stimuli, or witness events before they occur, and alert human beings through signs: twitches, itches, tingles, and dreams. According to Umeh,

The relevant spots located in the various parts of the body are all psychic seeing spots which receive appropriate messages from *uche* ["Universal Consciousness"] as soon as it lands at *akpa uche* and [is] decoded by *ako*, the intellect or cognitive faculty.

Thus the beating of *okwudu* such as twitchings on the eyes (*anya odudo*) . . . may be a sign that one will weep or will enjoy happy scenery or dance; *ukwu okpukpo* and *ukwu odudo* . . . may stand for a . . . looming good or bad journey. . . . (75)

The ability to receive and interpret signs manifests itself in various ways. An important skill, especially to an agrarian people, is the ability to read and interpret astronomical phenomenon and control the weather. Henry Rogers of Georgia boasts such gifts:

Regarded highly as the local weather prophet . . . Henry gets up every morning before daybreak and scans the heavens to see what kind of weather is on its way. He guards all these "signs" well and under no consideration will he tell them. They were given to him by someone who has passed on and he keeps them as a sacred trust. If asked, upon making a prediction, "How do you know?" . . . Henry shakes his wise old head and with a wave of the hand says, "Dat's all right, you jess see now, it's goin' ter be dat way". And it usually is! (Rawick, *Georgia Narratives*, Part 3, 218-219)

Rogers guards the source of his knowledge as closely as the Igbos guard the wisdom shared with them by spiritual entities, for, as Umeh makes clear, "Some of the herbs and Ogwu shown to one in the dream must not be made public property or revealed to unauthorized, uninitiated persons unless one is permitted to do so" (132). Often it is important that what is sacred is kept secret.

Some individuals can read events in clouds; others can control clouds. In *Ewé*, Pierre Verger includes Yoruba preparations to stop and produce rain. The ritual for rain calls for wild lettuce and salt. The lettuce is cooked and water is squeezed from it. Salt is poured on the ground and the Odù (divination sign) of *Òbàrà òsé* is written in it. The following incantation is recited,

Vegetables always arrive at the market drenched in water
Salt cannot be wrapped without turning to water
Òbàrà òsé go and direct the rain to the earth
Òbàrà òsé go and direct rain to the ground. (Verger 391)

The ritual is grounded in sympathetic conjure, and it makes clear the interconnectedness of weather, agriculture, human sustenance and economics.

An African American ritual to produce rain uses salt and spiritual-scientific principles. Overlea, a conjurer from Mississippi produces rain by “crossing two matches and sprinkling salt on them” (Bass 382). Overlea combines his spiritual power with the phosphorous of matches and sodium chloride to produce nucleation and clouds of smoke. His use of salt is similar to that employed in hygroscopic cloud seeding, in which salt is introduced into clouds to cause particles of water and dust to grow until they result in precipitation (Nye and SOAR).

In contrast to using salt to produce rain, the Yoruba have a medicine to stop rain that uses pepper and involves “tying some seeds of alligator pepper and some other objects in a handkerchief or tying palm-fronds into knots and swinging these overhead swiftly as incantations are uttered” (Awolalu 78). African American methods of cloud splitting are much simpler. Lenell Harris of Mississippi has two ways to split a storm cloud. With the first, an individual positions himself under the storm cloud and takes an axe and throws it into the ground. As the axe splits the ground, so too will the storm cloud split. Overlea uses this method and can even split clouds by throwing an axe into the floor of his home (Bass 382). The other method for cloud splitting involves the Bible, the book that elders call “the greatest conjure book in the world” (Hurstun, *Mules*, 280). One simply opens the Bible under the thunderhead and it will split (Harris). Harris offers the caveat that these acts are dangerous and are not to be used casually for if the split cloud rejoins, the storm will be an especially violent and destructive one.

Evening Unjust Odds

Controlling the elements is an important skill for an agrarian people. For displaced and disenfranchised people who are constantly under attack as a result of unjust judicial systems, controlling the elements often translates into ensuring the most elemental right, freedom. The Yoruba have many preparations for extrication from judicial entanglements. *Ewé* offers two prescriptions for *afòràn*, avoiding a judicial procedure. In the first, the accused pulverizes *gbégi* (crabgrass), *àgbon* (leaf of a cocoanut tree), and *èèsún* (elephant grass) and mixes them with black soap while chanting:

Ogbè alára, help me dismiss this case
Gbégi says it will be forgotten
Cracking is the destiny of *àgbon* [coconut]
Gbégi is meant to be uprooted
The vibration of *èèsún* is harmless. (Verger 335)

The flora used in the medicine are specifically chosen and their properties are invoked so that the client’s case will be uprooted and castoff like crabgrass, cracked like a cocoanut, and unlike the ominous vibrations of the elephant, be rendered as innocuous as elephant grass. Another medicine uses roasted flora because:

Roasted beans can never grow if planted
My case should not surface again
Roasted maize can never grow if planted
My case shall not come to light again
Roasted peppers can never grow if planted
My case should not come to light again (Verger 335)

The criminal injustices that Africans in America face call for liberation strategies that are culture-specific and diverse. In *Mules and Men*, Hurston includes a number of rituals for success in court battles. For the defendant to control the courtroom and his adversaries, he can have his shoes or entire body, depending on the severity of the charges, “dressed with the court” to ensure victory (Hurston, *Mules*, 224). One can also enlist the aid of High John the Conqueror to win one’s case by steeping nine pieces of High John the Conqueror Root in whiskey for thirty-eight hours and mixing the extract with Jockey Club cologne (Hurston, *Mules*, 275). The defendant who is “dressed” with High John’s power is dressed for spiritual and judicial success.

Hurston also reveals how to silence opposing witnesses:

We took a beef tongue, nine pins, nine needles, and split the beef tongue. We wrote the names of those against our man and cut the names out and crossed them up in [the] slit of tongue with red pepper and beef gall, and pinned the slip up with crossed needles and pins. We hung the tongue up in a chimney, tip up, and smoked the tongue for thirty-six hours. Then we took it down and put it in ice and lit on it from three to four black candles stuck in ice. Our client read the Twenty-second Psalm and Thirty-fifth also, because it was for murder. Then we asked the spirits for power more than equal to man. (Hurston, *Mules*, 225)

It is important to note that spirit workers use the Bible without compunction, because there is no contradiction. As a holistic belief system, Hoodoo is without limitations and boundaries; it accesses spirit and power wherever they are.

In addition to galvanizing rituals with verses from the Bible, Koran, Odù Ifá, or other holy texts, spirit workers infuse common objects with power. Awolalu states that, in Yoruba spiritual pharmacopoeia, “Other acts may involve . . . locking an enchanted padlock [to an effigy] to make it impossible for an accuser to speak against one in the law court” (78-79). Similarly, Father Watson teaches Hurston that to keep someone who is imprisoned from being released, one must write the name of the party on a piece of paper, and place the paper into a deep container like a sugar bowl. One adds red and black pepper, a one penny nail, and ammonia to the bowl. The practitioner then places one door key inside the bowl and places another at the side of the bowl. “Go to your bowl every day at twelve o’clock and turn the key that is standing against the side of the bowl. That is to keep the man locked in jail. And every time you turn the key, add a little vinegar” (Hurston, *Mules*, 218).

Yoruba babaláwo say there is an ese Ifá for every one of life's dilemmas. Igbo dibia hold that there is ogwu, or medicine, for every illness (Umeh 121). There is also a medicinal or technological work of Hoodoo for all of life's predicaments. But it is important to understand that combining various herbs and roots is not the same as making an effective medicine. Herbalists and diviners train for decades. They must know the laws of nature, the chemical and spiritual properties of flora and fauna, the rules of the Ancients, and the words of power. Workers of Africana spirits and technologies are also expected to use their powers responsibly and share wisdom only with conscientious people who are mentally and spiritually balanced, and, often, initiated. An Igbo proverb informs us that "Herb is a gun / It fires frontwards / It fires backwards" (Umeh 134), meaning herbs can be used to kill and cure, and misdirected preparations can boomerang on the creator of that technology. Furthermore, individuals who experiment with herbs can kill themselves or others out of ignorance. It is fitting that one of the laws of Àjé is "Do not dabble in herbalism" (Opeola 15).

Til Whodo(?) Us Part

One must "carry power" or be a spiritually aligned and empowered person—a babaláwo, dibia, nganga, or two-headed doctor—to successfully enact many of the rituals discussed in this essay. But one does not need extensive knowledge to "work roots" on someone. Women have a natural gift and advantage over men that many use to get and keep lovers—the gift is the Àjé resident in their menstrual blood. One of the most common Pan-African works involves a woman putting her menstrual blood in her beloved's food or tying a pork chop to her inner thigh so that her menstrual blood will drip onto it before she prepares the meat for her mate to eat.

A Yoruba medicine to "win the heart of a man" also employs blood, but its technique is different. One grinds together the feathers of a vulture and a partridge, draws the Odù of *Òfún òsé*, and utters the following incantation:

Female and male partridges do not dare part from each other
If they fly together, they perch together
Both the male and the female vulture lay in the same place
May so-and-so be unable to part with me.

The woman then cuts her body and mixes her blood with the ground feathers and Odù and gives the intended this medicine in food or drink (Verger 367). With the literal and symbolic assistance of feathered fauna, the woman and the object of her affection will be love birds of a feather. Menthy of Mississippi has an interesting work to unite a couple that employs literal binding through symbolic flora. "Menthy gets some hair from the head of [the woman and the man]. She takes this to the woods and finds a young sapling that has grown up in a fork. She splits the tree a little at this fork and puts the hair in the split place. When this tree grows up the two will be eternally united" (Bass 384).

What is put together via Hoodoo is difficult to tear asunder—unless the bound individuals are not meant to be together. Consequently, there are as many preparations to sow seeds of discord as there are works to foment love. A Yoruba medicine for upheaval uses gun powder and a broken clay pot. After placing the powder in the pot, one lights the concoction, but, “do not let the smoke reach your eyes, otherwise you too will take part in the fight.” The medicine is activated by the following incantation:

The day that fire set eyes on gunpowder
That day it will explode
Èjìogbè, this very day you must carry evil to them
Èjìogbè, fire and gunpowder always fight till they part. (Verger 309)

While working with a two-headed doctor named Eulalia, Hurston encounters a woman who wants to break up a marriage so that she can be tied to the man. Eulalia tells the woman, “Ah’m a Christian woman and don’t believe in partin’ no husband and wife but since she done worked roots on him to hold him where he don’t want to be, it tain’t no sin for me to loose him” (Hurston, *Mules*, 188). Eulalia and Hurston prepare a salt bowl and lemon. They write the husband’s and wife’s names nine times on a piece of paper, cut the lemon, and insert the names into the fruit along with gunpowder. When they arrive at the couple’s vacant home, Eulalia consults the sun and tells Hurston to dig a hole in a certain spot and bury the lemon bloom end down where the setting sun will shine on it. Once inside the house, Hurston and Eulalia salt and pepper the home while Hurston throws Eulalia chants, “Just fuss and fuss till you part and go away” (Hurston, *Mules*, 189). The Yoruba and African American medicines both employ destructive sympathetic agents—gunpowder, broken pots, salt, lemons and pepper—and both include commands for the parties to fight until they are separated.

Once the quarrelling begins, it may be necessary to banish one’s antagonist from one’s home and even one’s existence. There are numerous works for such eradications. The Yoruba have a medicine “to make a person get lost” that is similar to African American “running feet.” The Yoruba work uses *iyerosun* (camwood powder), red pepper, male and female pigeons and the divination sign of *Òbàrà wòrì*. Once the objects have been charred, bound, and set in a moving body of water, the practitioner chants the following:

The river does not look backwards when it is running
Ifá help me destroy their sense totally
Qparum oko destroy their sense
Òbàrà kòsì, Ifá help me remove their sense to make them stray
May so-and-so get lost and never return
A pigeon flies about restlessly in the bush
A pigeon dies while flying from one bush to another
So-and-so should die while roaming strange places. (Verger 417)

To enact “running feet” the rootworker takes the unwanted person’s right footprint and parches it in a frying pan. A dirt dauber’s nest is parched with the footprint and cayenne pepper is added. The entire concoction is wrapped in the offender’s sock and taken to a river at noon. When coming within forty feet of the river’s edge, the rootworker must run to the shore, “Whirl suddenly and hurl the sock over [the] left shoulder into the water and never look back and say, ‘Go and go quick in the name of the Lord’” (Hurston, *Mules*, 226 and also 219).

The “medicine to make a person get lost” and “running feet” share material elements and logic: The Yoruba medicine, galvanized by the victim’s name, will cause the person to flit about aimlessly like a pigeon; the pepper will derange the mind; the river will impel the victim to run until he dies. “Running feet” utilizes the spiritual DNA of the victim’s foot print, which is heated and laced with pepper to inspire speed. Wandering like a dirt dauber and running like the river, this victim will also run to death. While diluted, as a result of western linguistic and religious imposition, the force of incantation is retained. While it may be tempting to define “running feet” in western terms as a work of “evil,” it, as all Africana spirit work, is neutral: “Running feet” may well save the life of a tormented person.

From roasted corn to pepper to vinegar to padlocks, many of the ingredients in Africana technological preparations are harmless by themselves. But combined and directed by the hand and mind of Power, they are potent or lethal, as the case may be. However, there is also continuity in African and African American ways to soothe and cleanse tormented souls. In *Jambalaya*, Luisah Teish describes how pigeons, Àjé’s powerful spirit birds, can be used for uncrossing, healing, and cleansing:

If there has been too much illness and/or insanity in your home, purchase a pigeon or dove and talk to it about the problem. Let it fly around the house at will for nine days. . . . Then release the bird in a park or other open space.

For a particular illness, press the bird gently to the appropriate spot while visualizing blood flowing from you to it. If you find the bird dead, give it a proper burial and say a prayer of thanks. (196)

The works Teish describes are similar to Yoruba prescriptions:

At times, a live pigeon is used as a sponge, to which special soap is applied, for washing the head and the whole body. When used in this way, the bird is squeezed and weakened in the process. In some cases, it is expected that the bird must die and be thrown into the river to carry away the supplicant’s impurities and misfortunes as the river flows away. And, in some other cases or circumstances, the bird is released alive to fly away, thus carrying with it the supplicant’s unhappiness, misfortunes, disease, or death. (175)

Firing Forwards and Backwards

Africana spirit work's continuity and contextuality are also apparent in the various ways there are to summon someone's spirit and kill or heal the spirit's human owner. In *African Philosophy, Culture and Traditional Medicine*, Moses A. Makinde describes *apeta* as one of the "strongest and most terrible" powers in Yorubaland. Called "invocation by shooting," *apeta* involves the construction of a mud image of the intended victim. The victim's name is called three times, which causes his spirit to enter the image: Here, again, we see the importance of keeping sacred names secret! With the spirit installed, the mud image is shot. Makinde finds that, "Apeta presents a problem to modern doctors because, although the symptoms of gun shots are seen, there are no visible marks to assist diagnosis" (96).

Among members of the Egbo secret society in eastern Nigeria, *apeta* is known as "shadow calling," and its method of actualization involves smoke. P. Amaury Talbot describes shadow calling as he witnessed it:

Within the open space in the center of the compound a fire was burning. On this . . . medicine was thrown, which caused clouds of smoke to rise. These died down, save for isolated puffs, which after a time assumed definite shape. The spectators sat on the ground in a half-circle behind the fire, and facing a low mud wall, beyond which, against the background of the moonlit sky, dark silhouettes began to pass, each clearly recognizable as that of some person known to be absent at the time. (272)

In *The Man-Leopard Murders*, David Pratten discusses a similar technology called soul-trapping, which is used by the Ibibio and Anang of eastern Nigeria:

. . . . [D]iviners and specialists in the preparation of medicines . . . could "trap" a bush soul by attracting it with familiar food, catching it in a wooden dish . . . and then spearing it in order to kill the soul's human form. Variations of this process relate ways in which a person's soul is drawn out and imprisoned within a pot, which is then hung over a slow fire so that the body of the victim withered. (Pratten 43)

It helps to compare the preceding accounts to the power of Malidoma Somé's grandfather, Bahkye. Known as the upside-down arrow shooter, Bahkye defends his community with an *apeta*-like technology called Pintul: "If he wished to destroy an enemy, he would retire to the quiet of his chambers place an arrow upside down on his bow, and magically hit his target. The arrow would kill whomever or whatever he named, then rematerialize in his chamber ready for more" (Somé 24). Bahkye uses Pintul to thwart the French who sought to rape, pillage, and colonize the Dagara (Somé 41).

Bahkye also has a complex security system undergirded by a clay pot that is filled with water that never touched the ground in its descent from the clouds. “He saw everything that happened throughout the farm by looking into this water,” and if animals were raiding the crops, all he needed to do was throw a pebble at the offending animal’s water-image, and the animal would die (Somé 25 and Somé Lecture).

Using spiritually charged objects to see, control, or kill entities is also found in African America. In *The Sanctified Church*, Hurston describes how Uncle Monday uses apeta to exact revenge for Mrs. Bradley, whose daughter was seduced, impregnated, and abandoned by John Wesley. Uncle Monday sits Bradley before a mirror and places a pistol and a dagger before her.

She looked at both of the weapons, but she could not decide which one she wanted to use. Without a word, he handed her a gourd full of water and she took a swallow. As soon as she water passed over her tongue she seized the gun. He pointed towards the looking-glass. Slowly the form of John Wesley formed in the glass and finally stood as vivid as life before her. She took careful aim and fired. She was amazed that the mirror did not shatter. But there was loud report, a cloud of bluish smoke and the figure vanished. (36)

As she makes her way home, Bradley learns that Wesley has “dropped dead.”

Another African American variant comes from Kentucky and features Henry Coulter and apeta that heals. A woman identified as Mrs. Duncan witnesses Coulter’s apeta in action, as when her husband “got down in his back,”

he went to Henry Coulter. He just shot him in the back with a glass pistol, and cured him. Of course there was not any bullet in the pistol, but it cured him. He could draw a picture of a chicken on a paper and shoot it, and a chicken would fall dead in the yard. (Rawick, *Kentucky Narratives*, 36)

Coulter does not have Bahkye’s virgin water to view and protect his farm, but he can kill offenders and put food on his table by drawing images and shooting them with a glass pistol. One might hypothesize that the dirk, smoke, gun, or pot is not as important as the ability to summon spirits and command, heal, or kill them as necessary.

Rather than terrorize their communities, Bahkye and Coulter use their powers to heal and empower. Duncan, who relates Coulter’s story, further emphasizes the contextuality and elasticity of Hoodoo and the African origin of African American spiritual technology when, later in her interview, she describes how forces of Hoodoo first struck and later healed her daughter, Della. Because it takes power to combat power, when her daughter falls ill, Duncan does not sink to her knees and pray; she hires a two-headed doctor named Linda Woods.

Seven African Powers candles, incense, and oils can be purchased commercially in modern America. These syncretized spiritual facilitators boast seven colors and are packaged with pictures of Catholic saints who bear the names and powers of seven Yoruba Deities: Orunmila, Osun, Sàngó, Ogún, Obàtálá, Èṣù, and Yemoja. Linda Woods, working in the early 1900's, was making the Seven African Powers oil commercially marketed today. Duncan describes Woods as using a concoction that was

all striped with all colors, but when you shake it up it was all the same color. She rubbed her leg with it and told me to get all the life everlasting [or rabbit tobacco, an herb] that I could carry in my arms, and brew it for tea to bathe her leg in. Then pour it in a hole in the ground, but not to cover it up. Then not to go down the road for nine days. (Rawick, *Kentucky Narratives*, 35)

The Seven African Powers work in conjunction with the oft-unmentioned but indispensable eighth and ninth powers: Imolè, the Yoruba Earth Mother Deity, receives and neutralizes the conjure; and the entire ritual is aligned with Oya's number nine, which demarcates the closing of the cycle. Additionally, baths in the aptly named "life everlasting" herb ensure Della's full recovery. Just as life everlasting continues to flourish in America, so too do the Seven African powers continue to assist dislocated Africans in their quests for spiritual expansion and holistic evolution.

The Serpent and the Rainbow and the Radar

The Seven African Powers brand offers irrefutable evidence of continuity, but it also establishes a false hierarchy and omits important Gods. Without Imolè there is no life; without Oya human beings cannot transform, evolve, and become Ancestors; and without Òṣùmàrè human beings have no covenant with the Divine and no path for immortality. Òṣùmàrè is the Rainbow Serpent who emerges from the Womb of Origins to ensure humanity's continuous life, death, rebirth, empowerment and elevation. Embodied in the Rainbow Boa and symbolized by a serpent biting its tail or a serpent encircling the earth, signifying immortality, Òṣùmàrè is central to Yoruba cosmology and is significant to this discussion because her earthly emissaries have "power of vision" in the form of a stone. This stone provides the terrestrial boa, which goes blind with age, with the ability to see via radar. The stone illuminates even the darkest surroundings, and it gives its bearer good fortune and spiritual powers such as clairvoyance.

Given that Òṣùmàrè symbolizes immortality, it is fitting that the God, her Rainbow Serpent emissaries, and their stones of power survived the Middle Passage. In *The Sanctified Church*, Hurston discusses the serpents and how to obtain their "diamond of diamonds":

The singing stone...is the greatest charm, the most powerful "hand" in the world. It is a diamond and comes from the mouth of a serpent (which is thought of as something different from any ordinary snake) and it is the diamond of diamonds.

It not only lights your home without the help of any other light, but it also warns its owner of approach.

The serpents who produce these stones live in the deep waters of Lake Maitland. There is a small island in this lake and a rare plant grows there which is the serpent's only food. She comes only to nourish herself in the height of a violent thunderstorm, when she is fairly certain that no human being will be present.

It is impossible to kill or capture her unless nine healthy people have gone before to prepare the way with The Old Ones, and then more will die in the attempt to conquer her. But it is not necessary to kill or take her to get the stone. She has two. One is embedded in her head, and the other she carries in her mouth. The first one cannot be had without killing the serpent, but the second one may be won from her by trickery.

Since she carries this stone in her mouth, she cannot eat until she has put it down. . . . So when she comes upon the island to feed, she always vomits the stone and covers it with earth before she goes to the other side of the island to dine. (Hurston 34)

Hurston goes on, in great detail, to explain the means by which the stone may be obtained without violence.

What many would dismiss as a nonsensical inclusion is actually, from symbols to serpents, one of the most profound examples of African continuity ever recorded. As is apparent throughout this discussion, *Oya's* number nine is a prominent and recurring unifier in Hoodoo. And *Òrìṣà Oya* nods subtly in Hurston's account through the "nine healthy people" who must join the Ancestors in order for the stone to be obtained. Stormy, overcast, or rainy weather is considered most favorable for spiritual works, so it follows that thunderstorms are essential to both the serpent's peaceful nourishment and to those seeking the serpent's stone. Such weather also portends *Àjàláyé*, the winds of the world, a praisename for *Oya*. The phrase, "The Old Ones," relating to the Ancients who guard the gates of acquisition, is almost a direct translation of the Yoruba phrase *àgbàláàgbà*, "old and wise one," a praisename for *Àjé*.

The mysterious serpent of Florida has many Central and West African kin. The Igbo Serpent Deity, *Olisa N'buluwa*, "He who is spread out everywhere and carrying the world," is a progenitor (Metuh 26). The Fon's *Aido-Hwedo*, who shaped Earth's mountains and valleys, left riches where she defecated, and is presently coiled under and supporting the Earth (Herskovits and Herskovits 135), is another elder of the Maitland serpent, as is the Fon Rainbow Serpent Deity called *Dan*. However, Hurston's serpent's closest relative is the Nigerian Rainbow Boa, the terrestrial embodiment of *Òrìṣà Òṣùmàrè*. *Awo Fatunmbi* reveals important information about the serpent:

There exists in Nigeria a real snake known as the Rainbow Python [*sic*], and this snake is used as one of the symbolic images that represent *Olódùmarè* [the Great Creator]. When the live Rainbow Python [*sic*] gets old, it loses its eyesight. At the same time that the snake goes blind, it discharges a small florescent stone that radiates with the colors of the rainbow. The sightless snake is able to sense the radiations from the stone and will strike anything that blocks its perception of them. This gives the Rainbow Python [*sic*] the ability to survive after it can no longer see. Hunters who locate the stone use it as a charm for invoking abundance. (84)

Òṣùmarè is said to “deliver a covenant between Olódùmarè and the people of Earth” and to represent human beings’ ability to “become transformed and experience rebirth” (Fatunmbi 84-85). In *Olódùmarè: God in Yoruba Belief*, Bolaji Idowu describes this covenant as being manifest in the actual rainbow and the Rainbow Boa and its stone:

The Yoruba believe, generally, that the rainbow is produced by a very large boa: the reptile discharges from its inside the sulphurous matter which sets all its surroundings aglow and causes a reflection, which is the rainbow (*Òṣùmarè*), in the sky. The matter which is so discharged is known as *Imi Òṣùmarè* (“rainbow excrement”) and is considered valuable for making people wealthy and prosperous. (34-35)

As does Hurston, Idowu explains how difficult it is to obtain *Imi Òṣùmarè* because of the serpent’s vigilance. But only Hurston, who published her work nearly thirty years *before* Idowu and sixty years before Fatunmbi, gives an exact location for the serpent *and* specific methods for procuring the stone. That Hurston found, in a rural Florida community, the same serpent and stone discussed in ancient and contemporary Africa provides stunning evidence of continuity.

Conclusion

A nation sack contains the spiritual and material implements of one’s traditional and neo-African identity. Those small bags filled with roots, coins, promises, hairs, and prayers were tied near to secret and sacred places, the womb or heart, where they recharged and strengthened the soul. In the process of shielding the spiritual self in the face of religious terrorism, some of the esoteric knowledge was pushed so deeply into the sack it was forgotten. Many elders who are now ancestors saw our internal fragmentation occurring and refused to share wisdom and powers that could be misused. Protecting and balancing practices that were once considered essential, such as rituals for veiled children and expectant mothers, slipped out of the communal nation sack at great psychological, spiritual and physical cost.

However, even in a bling-bling society, where iron chains have been exchanged for platinum ones and Hoodoo bags are considered passé, the imprint of the soft cloth bag and the residual dust and effluvia of the spiritual implements remain—glowing the soul, sparking the wisdom, spitting ancient literature, and silently conjuring. The powers have not been lost; they are waiting for us to re-member our empowered Selves. And there are many wisdom-keeping power-wielders among us who are facilitating our reunification. Although they might not utter a word about their powers publicly, you will know them when you meet them—they have two heads, and they shine like new money.

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Notes

¹ African proper names and places are not italicized; except for direct quotations, African concepts are italicized in the first usage only.

²Although the names are changed, this example of ritual protective naming is taken directly from my maternal forebears all of whom have sacred names that appear on their birth certificates but are never used. Indeed, my father had no idea what my mother's "legal"/sacred name was!