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The Spirituality of African Peoples*

I should like to express my deep appreciation for the honor given me by the invitation to deliver this lecture in honor of the James Robinson Johnston Chair in Black Canadian Studies. More importantly, I thank you, on behalf of all black Canadians, for the wisdom you and your government have shown in giving academic recognition to the experiences of African peoples who, after centuries of enslavement, arrived on these Canadian shores more than two centuries ago in search of freedom and empowerment.

I have chosen to speak on the subject, "The Spirituality of African Peoples" for the following reasons: (a) because the history of black Canadians has been integrally connected with that of Africa, the Caribbean and the United States; (b) because we as black Canadians cannot know our own history or arrive at an understanding of our own identity in isolation from African peoples everywhere; (c) because the categories of black Canadian self-understanding must emerge out of the African experience on the continent as well as that in the diaspora; (d) because the life and destiny of black Canadians is tied up with that of African peoples everywhere.

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In this lecture I will argue that African peoples here and elsewhere are united by their common spiritual strivings. That is to say, they relate all dimensions of human life and especially their struggles for freedom and empowerment to a transhistorical source of power and meaning. In fact, Africans have always assumed that humanity is surrounded by a realm of invisible, powerful beings comprising sub-divinities and ancestral spirits governed by one supreme God.¹ Alienated and capricious spirits are also thought to reside in that supernatural realm.

The widespread traditional African belief that the Supreme God is Creator and Preserver of all reality may well be the single most important commonality that exists among the vast diversity of African peoples. There is general agreement, however, among contemporary African scholars that this monotheistic belief has not been the sole preserve of Christian thought.² Rather, Africans have long claimed that all reality originates from the one supreme God and is destined to return to that same God. Thus, they have always believed that nothing in the universe is ever finally lost. For the many diverse peoples both on the continent and in the diaspora, long threatened and oppressed by various ubiquitous forces of destruction, this common belief in God's protective providence has been their primary source of meaning and power. Consequently, African peoples are unexcelled in their reverence for and devotion to all spiritual phenomena which they readily incorporate into their thought and practice. Thus, no adequate research into the cultural life of African peoples can be undertaken by ignoring their spirituality.

In spite of the fact that many African languages do not have a word for religion they nevertheless view the whole of life as sacred. As a matter of fact, Africans cannot conceive of life apart from its relationship to the realm of invisible spirits. That is to say, they believe that neither humanity nor nature is alone in the universe but, rather, is surrounded by and dependent upon the superior power of the supreme God, numerous sub-divinities and ancestral spirits. Thus, for them, the realms of nature, humanity and spirit comprise a cosmological whole and, hence, it is unthinkable for them to think of humanity apart from its connectedness with that larger world perspective.

Further, the African understanding of humanity is reflective of human experience as a whole and, consequently, it unites thought and experience, reason and emotion, person and community, present and past,

nature, history and spirit. Similarly, African spirits and divinities are related to the whole of nature and history. Thus, spirituality pertains to the whole of life and more specifically, it is the principle by which the human spirit is related to its primary source of meaning and power.

In the African world-view, all life is thought to be created, re-created, preserved and affirmed by the Supreme God. Hence, the chief function of humans is to create, re-create, preserve and affirm life in communion with God and all of God's spiritual associates which include not only sub-divinities and ancestral spirits, but all leaders, institutions and movements serving the well-being of their peoples.

Even a casual observer of African cultures quickly discerns that the continent is host to a vast diversity of cultures. Each traditional culture has its own cosmology and cultish practices. That is to say, each culture has its own spirituality. In addition, these various cosmologies have incorporated two guest religions into their pantheons namely, Islam and Christianity.

Contrary to the thought of many, Christianity did not replace traditional African religions but, rather, traditional African religions absorbed Christianity into themselves thus transforming both. Clearly, no continent in the world comprises a higher degree of multiculturalism than Africa. Over a thousand distinctly different linguistic groups plus a larger number of dialects prove this claim.

Yet all of that rich cultural diversity has been constantly threatened by the countervailing spirituality of European domination evidenced in three and one-half centuries of the transatlantic slave trade. It is conservatively estimated that approximately 25 million Africans were stolen from their homeland and packed like sardines into the bellies of slave ships and after suffering the hell of the so-called middle passage were sold on auction blocks to the highest bidder. In the oppressive cauldron of bondage, a slave culture³ gradually emerged that united much of the African tribal diversity. But the unity was not realized apart from great sacrifice which included the loss of tribal specificity, familial belonging and human dignity. The lamentations and longings of African souls were expressed in word, song, music, dance and story. The spirituality of the people appeared in each of those genres. In fact, every creative activity expressed in some way or other their communion with God and God's realm of

spirits; the primary source of their power to endure, resist and transcend the evil they experienced.

Clearly, all that these oppressed people had to rely upon for strength and meaning were the spiritual resources that they had brought with them from their homelands:⁴ unseen mythical treasures deeply concealed in their consciousnesses and firmly written in their hearts. It was natural for these suffering people to call upon their ancestral spirits and their gods for relief. Accordingly, their priests and healers, conjurers, witches and sorcerers used their powers against their captors but, alas, to little effective avail even though many slaveowners often felt greatly threatened by their strange rituals and invocations. Yet, the failure of the latter to overthrow the system of slavery by traditional methods alone, gave most of the Africans cause to view their captors as incarnations of evil forces with invincible powers.

As a matter of fact, traditional African societies believed that all misfortune was caused by human wrongdoing which, in turn, caused an upset in the cosmological balance as manifested in the resulting misfortune. This circular process implied the need for the restoration of the equilibrium which, in traditional African society, required the careful attention of professional priests and diviners.

The earliest and most celebrated account of the process of enslavement is the autobiography of Olaudah Equiano, also known as Gustavus Vassa, son of an Ibo tribal ruler born in 1745. When his kidnappers first handed him over to the white slave traders he thought that he was being transferred into the hands of spirits. This terrified him more than anything else. He wrote accordingly:

The first object that saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast was the sea, and a slave ship, which was then riding at anchor, and waiting for its cargo. These filled me with astonishment, that was soon converted into terror, which I am yet at a loss to describe, . . . I was now persuaded that I had got into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me. Their complexions too, differing so much from ours, was very different from any I had ever heard, united to confirm me in this belief. (Equiano 32-33)

No outsider could possibly imagine the intensity of Equiano's fear. It had to have been most terrifying for an eleven-year-old African boy to

have been snatched from the security of his familial and tribal community, where faithful devotion to the ancestral spirits was a constant source of protection against evil forces. Believing himself to have fallen into the presence of evil spirits must have been a dreadful experience for him. Hence, we are not surprised to read, "I no longer doubted of my fate; and, quite overpowered with horror and anguish, I fell motionless on the deck and fainted" (33).

Assuming that his captors were evil spirits, it was natural for Equiano to ponder his fate and to conclude that he would surely be sacrificed and eaten by these strange beings. ". . . I did not know what to think of these white people, though I very much feared they intended to kill and eat me" (41). His account of a storm at sea is similarly revealing:

One night we lost a man overboard; and the cries and noise were so great and confused, in stopping the ship, that I, who did not know what was the matter, began, as usual, to be very much afraid, and to think they were going to make an offering with me, and perform some magic; in which I still believed that they dealt. As the waves were very high, I thought the Ruler of the seas was angry, and I expected to be offered up to appease him. This filled my mind with agony, and I could not any more, that night, close my eyes again to rest. (41-42)

Although modified and regulated in many ways, Equiano's intense fear of his white captors and his suffering at their hands, is paradigmatic of the African experience everywhere. For many long centuries, African peoples both on the continent and in the diaspora have experienced European peoples as their paramount enemy. Three and one-half centuries of slavery, followed by another century of colonialism and racial apartheid demonstrate that fact. Further, the contemporary condition of African peoples everywhere on the African continent, in the Caribbean, Latin America, Western Europe, the United States and Canada is characterized by the conditions of neocolonialism, a synonym for economic dependency, political instability and systemic racism. In a worldwide market place of opportunity African peoples still lack the necessary conditions for adequate access to the means for a viable human life. Wherever they appear in sizable numbers, disproportionate percentages of African peoples suffer every kind of deprivation and impoverishment.

During the periods of slavery and colonialism Africans discovered that none of their traditional forms of resistance were effective instruments against the technological superiority of European weaponry which was the principal cause of their subjugation. Yet, they held on to the only thing that Europeans could not fully invade and conquer, namely, the internal life of the human spirit. From within those concealed spaces there eventually emerged the fruits of their spiritual genius. These represent the spiritual strivings of their souls. In many opaque ways, usually embedded in the ordinariness of daily life, Africans shared with one another their deepest values and longings. Such sharing gradually issued in the development of a common ethos; a community; a shared life grounded in a supernatural source of power and meaning. Here in the cauldron of slavery, Africans did not meet God for the first time. Rather, they discovered that God had accompanied them into this experience of living terror. Thus, their spirituality was shaped under varying conditions of oppression.

For instance, in slavery, their spirituality expressed itself mainly through the drudgery of daily labor. Work songs, bodily rhythms, functional crafts, anecdotal stories, humor, mimicry, parody and code language were the chief means of expression. These creative gestures of meaning finally reached their fullest reality in the creative concealment and development of slave religion which gradually emerged as an amalgam of Christian and African elements. Under the conditions of colonialism, the spirituality of African peoples expressed itself through the many and various resistance activities of independent churches, charismatic prophets, mission schools, African newspapers and cultural societies all of which, in one way or another, advocated some element of Pan-African independence from western hegemony.⁵

Under the conditions of freedom in the so-called new world, freed slaves engaged in various forms of public resistance to slavery, segregation and discrimination. In the United States, these activities were usually centred in churches that were independently owned and controlled by blacks. Invariably these churches were the chief training ground for prophetic leadership.⁶ Most importantly, the churches interpreted the prophetic leadership of their so-called "race-leaders" as blessed by God and, hence, in alliance with God. This grounding in eternal power implied that the prophetic cause could not be defeated. This courageous type of

leadership evidenced a new form of African spirituality militantly demanding an end to all forms of racism and colonialism. In our day, Martin Luther King, Jr. represented one of the many exemplars par excellence of this type of moral and spiritual leadership.

Wherever there have been black churches or organizations not fully owned and controlled by blacks, however, whether in the Caribbean, the United States or Canada, strong prophetic leadership rarely developed. For example, whenever the governance of black churches has been under the jurisdiction of white denominational judicatories, or whenever black churches have been dependent on white denominations for financial support, such conditions have greatly hindered them from exercising their independent judgments on social justice issues. Since freedom is the *sine qua non* of prophetic leadership, i.e., public social criticism, the latter can only arise from within a spiritual context of freedom and independence. Thus, black dependent churches, then and now, are not likely to rise beyond the function of being custodians of the sacred traditions. As such they are able to preserve the past, carry on the routinized functions of ministry and give their people various types of moral and therapeutic assistance. In short, they help their people to adapt to their conditions and to seek improvement in their situations through various forms of assimilationism. Because they are dependent and have no organized space of societal freedom, they are not likely to become agents of social change. Should they become independent they might then unite their pastoral functions with those of the prophetic reformers. Invariably, however, under the conditions of systemic racism, whenever dependent black churches seek independence they are judged by their benevolent patrons as covert racists in reverse.

Interestingly, one of the first goals that the late Dr. William P. Oliver⁷ set for his ministry when he arrived at Cornwallis Street Baptist Church in Halifax in 1937 was that of making the church independent of the Home Mission Board of the United Baptist Convention. At that time all the black Baptist churches in Nova Scotia had a long history of economic dependency on the predominantly white denomination. Dr. Oliver was eventually successful in leading the churches into financial self-sufficiency beginning with his own church. The realization of that goal had a profound reciprocal effect on the spirituality of his congregation in particular. The joyful experience of having become a self-determining

church gave the people a strong sense of pride and dignity in themselves and their own achievements. One of Dr. Oliver's lasting legacies to the African United Baptist Association was his advocacy that each of its member churches become economically independent. This activity allied him closely with all black independence movements both in Africa and throughout the African diaspora. More specifically, this philosophy of freedom laid the groundwork for all self-determining activities of Black Nova Scotians, the most important of which being: the Black United Front of Nova Scotia, the Black Cultural Society of Nova Scotia, black newspapers, various black cultural, social and professional associations.

It is also a fact that unlike Africa and many of the Caribbean islands, African Americans and African Canadians will never constitute sovereign nations but will remain racial and ethnic minority cultures within larger cultural contexts. This reality has been the cause of much spiritual strife and moral ambiguity among blacks throughout this hemisphere because of the endurance of racism from one generation to the next.

In his 1903 essay, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," W. E. B. DuBois articulated his famous theory of double consciousness. There he argued that African Americans (and I might add, African Canadians) are bicultural, embodying African and American cultures that wage a constant strife within each person.

One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keep it from being torn asunder.

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows. . . . (DuBois 214-5)

With the possible exception of the most isolated farmer on the African continent, African peoples everywhere are at least bicultural and countless numbers are multicultural. Further, in this hemisphere, African peoples

are biracial or multiracial which contributes to the complexity about which DuBois wrote. Thus slavery and colonialism have not only produced bicultural and multicultural peoples of African descent but also biracial and multiracial peoples. In other words, African culture and African blood are mixed with Euro-American and Euro-Canadian cultures and blood to form a peculiar amalgam. Undoubtedly, all peoples of African descent in this hemisphere are aware of this dual or multiple consciousness about which DuBois spoke. In fact, African spirituality everywhere, but especially in North America, has been shaped by these bicultural and multicultural elements. Consequently, our music, songs, dance, religion, literature, art and all other cultural expressions bear the marks of that struggle to syncretize disparate cultural elements into new patterns of meaning and coherence. Thus, African peoples may yet give to the world its most enduring forms of artistic expression because their creative urges and imaginative rationality emerge from a complex experiential reservoir of strife and suffering. Yet through it all they have always sought to give theological meaning to their human condition. And they have done this in numerous ways.

Ethiopianism has been one effective means of integrating the spirituality of African Christians on the continent with that of African Christians in the diaspora. The African search for positive references to the submerged African tradition within the biblical text, led to the discovery of a text that has been a keystone for all African Christian nationalism, namely, Psalm 68:31, "Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God." This text became the justifying source for the so-called "Ethiopian Movement" that swept the African continent in the 1880s. Its principal aims were resistance to colonialism and advocacy for the separation of African churches from European missionary control. Several Christian prophets in this movement were imprisoned and executed by the British. Prophet John Chilembwe of Malawi, was executed in 1915 (Boahen 223) and Prophet Simon Kimbangu (founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Prophet Simon Kimbangu) was imprisoned from 1921 until his death in 1951 in the former Belgian Congo (Boahen 223). All such independence movements in Africa and in the diaspora claimed some measure of inspiration from Psalm 68:31. The Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York City was organized by a group of Ethiopian traders who had resisted the segregated

seating patterns of a white Baptist Church in New York's "Hell's Kitchen." Ethiopia's almost unique status of having been one of two African countries never to have fallen under the yoke of European colonial rule added immense significance to her sacred nature among African peoples everywhere. Further, the import of Ethiopianism was completed by the symbol of its throne: the resplendent majesty of her imperial Emperor, who traced his descent back through Queen Cleopatra to Queen Basheba, wife of King Solomon. Additional titles of the Emperor included, defender of the faith and the head of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church which tradition claimed had been founded by St. Thomas the Apostle. When his majesty Haile Selassie visited New York City in the 1930s he made a special point of visiting the Abyssinian Baptist Church where he presented the church with the gift of a six-foot silver Cross which is firmly embedded in the pulpit area of the present edifice. In Trinidad, Jamaica and other parts of the Caribbean, the Rastafarian Movement⁸ continues to claim the Emperor Haile Selassie as the Living God and its devotees his followers, the Ras Tafari. In addition the movement claims that salvation comes only to those who are repatriated to Africa and live under the sovereignty of Africans. The Ras Tafari claim continuity in philosophy and theology with Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa Movement" which, in the 1920s spread throughout the United States, Canada, and the Caribbean with the blessing of Bishop Alexander MaGuire and his newly founded African Orthodox Church, a branch of which still survives in Sydney, Nova Scotia.⁹ The founding of the Liberian settlement of repatriated American slaves in 1820 as well as the colonization of Sierra Leone by returned slaves from Nova Scotia in 1792 also contained many nationalist elements that reflect the spirituality of their respective peoples. Similarly, most black nationalist and Pan-Africanist movements exhibit similar nationalist characteristics. Inspired by the independence of Ghana in 1957 under the charismatic leadership of Kwame Nkrumah, the black consciousness movement in the United States emerged in the 1960s and soon linked up with similar movements in Canada, South Africa and the Caribbean. All such movements exhibited the common goal of freedom and empowerment. In many places, the former goal is almost completely realized in our day but, alas, empty of substance. The second goal, empowerment, still seems to be a far-off dream.

Another event that we must not overlook in our discussion of African spirituality is the process by which the term "African" was endowed with positive meaning by late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century freed slaves. As indicated above, Africans in the diaspora were forced to construct a new identity. Even though most of them had absorbed the prevailing pejorative attitudes towards Africa as being "uncivilized," "idolatrous," "savage-like," and "cannibalistic," they nevertheless reinterpreted the term "Africa" for themselves and gave it transcendent meaning by elevating it to the symbolic order of sacred discourse. The results may well constitute one of their most creative achievements.

The symbolization of Africa by the African diaspora enabled them to take possession of their own reality and in so doing, they succeeded in thwarting what Professor Charles H. Long calls their oppressor's "linguistic conquest" (106).

Clearly symbols have no literal definitions since they transcend their literal forms. That is to say, symbols point to realms of meaning beyond themselves. Accordingly, the symbol "Africa" referred to the newly-formed spiritual unity of disparate tribal groups made possible by the dreadful conditions of slavery. Charles Long describes its sacred value thusly;

So even if they had no conscious memory of Africa, the image of Africa played an enormous part in the religion of the blacks. The image of Africa, as image related to historical beginnings, has been one of the primordial religious images of great significance. It constitutes the religious revalorization of the land, . . . In this connection, one can trace almost every nationalistic movement among the blacks and find Africa to be the dominating and guiding image. Even among religious groups not strongly nationalistic, the image of Africa or Ethiopia still has relevance. This is present in such diverse figures as Richard Allen, who organized the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the late eighteenth century, through Martin Delaney in the late nineteenth century, and then again in Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa Movement" of the immediate post-World War I period, and finally in the taking up of this issue again among black leaders of the present time. (176)

Thus, the basic struggle against the dehumanization process of slavery occurred in the spiritual consciousness of the African slaves. In the midst of their suffering they forged new structures of spiritual meaning, social

identity, cultural expression and moral value. Their creative consciousness was typified in their loyalty and devotion to "Africa" as a transcendent symbol of meaning and power. This achievement marked a veritable watershed in their moral struggle against racial oppression: a struggle fuelled by the human impulse to preserve and enhance their humanity. The symbol "Africa" represented the continuity of a people with their past, the specific content of which was rapidly disappearing from their consciousness. The symbol implied freedom, empowerment, community, the paramount moral and religious value among African peoples. As a prefix, the symbol designated transformative and foundational meaning: African Methodism, African Baptists, and so on, symbolized a people's audacious effort to give positive meaning to a negative term and thereby take pride in their place of origin.

In every generation blacks have struggled to preserve their dignity in similar symbolic ways. The linguistic revolution of the 1960s purged "blackness" of its negative connotations and made it a symbol of pride and dignity and in the 1990s we are once again laying specific claim to our African identity and being empowered by it. A revival of the African liberation colors of black, green and red remind us of the homeland from which we are descended. Black refers to the people; green to the luscious African forests; red for the spilled blood of Africans for freedom. In recent years, the color gold has been added to those emblems signifying the immense natural wealth that was also stolen from the continent.

Thus, the spirituality of African peoples is united in their common, yet diverse endeavors to discern and construct value in their situation and to relate it to its transcendent depth, the source of all meaning and power. As a consequence, African peoples express their spirituality, i.e., their quest for authentic freedom and dignity, meaning and power, in all the many and varied creative modes of artistic thought, religious practice and socio-political transformation. Further, and most importantly, all of these activities express a shared spirituality as seekers for independence, freedom and empowerment: necessary elements of human dignity and genuine community.

NOTES

1. Some principal sources for my understanding of African cosmological thought are the works by Mbiti, Awolalu, Parrinder, and Idowu, all of which concur with the claims I make about God, the sub-divinities and ancestral spirits in this essay.
2. Mbiti expressed the views of many African scholars in the following statement: "The God described in the bible is none other than the God who is already known in the framework of traditional African religiosity" (Mbiti, "Encounter of Christian Faith" 817). A strikingly similar viewpoint is expressed by Setiloane (29).
3. Some excellent sources for an understanding of this slave culture are the works by Raboteau, Blassingame, Genovese, Levine, and Sobel.
4. See Levine (53); also see, Holloway.
5. An excellent yet concise discussion of this subject is found in Boahen 217-28.
6. For a full analysis of this subject see Wilmore.
7. The best extant study of Dr. Oliver is that by Thompson. Concerning the matter of financial independence see especially pp. 54-57.
8. For one of the best studies of this movement see Barrett.
9. Happily, for the lecture in Halifax, the audience included Ms. Mayann Francis—Employment Equity Officer for Dalhousie University, the daughter of Father Francis who pastored the African Orthodox Church in Sydney for 41 years.

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