

Fall 1999

## Flashes of the Spirit

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# THE GRIOT



Preserving  
African American  
History in Maine

University of Southern Maine

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## From the Editor's Desk

For the past year, Oprah Winfrey has closed each of her shows with a segment entitled "Remembering Your Spirit." These few minutes are devoted to the ways in which people slow down and tap into the spirit (or Spirit) within themselves, or simply do those things which bring happiness, clarity, or a greater sense of peace. Prayer and meditation, reading, keeping a journal, and enjoying nature have been just some of the ways in which people have reclaimed their lives.



Maureen Elgersman Lee

A tradition longer than Oprah's feature, however, has been Susan Taylor's editorial entitled "In the Spirit," found monthly in *Essence* magazine. Taylor, the magazine's editor-in-chief, published a collection of these essays in a book of the same name; it has remained an inspirational favorite among African-American women ever since. For me, one of Taylor's most powerful writings appeared in one of this summer's issues of *Essence*. It was something very simple, but profound. She wrote that the everyday work of living is sacred. Whether one understands sacred to be "of God," or whether it simply means "of value," it can change the approach to just about anything.

While Taylor has not necessarily changed the way I feel about scrubbing out the bathtub or washing a sink full of dishes, this mantra helps me to remember that the day to look forward to is today.

This year's Convocation theme at USM is "Religion and the Human Experience." In keeping with that theme, this year's editions of the *Griot* will focus on the Black church, its history, and its presence in Maine. This fall edition will focus on some of the fundamental principles of traditional West African religions and spirituality. This desire to "begin at the beginning" was spurred on by a recent visit to the Museum of African Tribal Art in Portland. This edition's "A Place in Time" feature is replaced by an exploration of the common principles found within the spiritual traditions of the people of West and Central Africa. I borrowed the title for this section from Robert Farris Thompson's *Flash of the Spirit* for two reasons. First, Thompson's work is one of the best publications to capture the highly spiritual nature of various African peoples and its expression in material culture. Second, it summarizes what I believe others try to convey about raising individual, spiritual awareness, and honoring the sacred in the everyday.

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## Flashes of the Spirit

The cultural heritage of millions of people of African descent in the Americas can be traced to West and Central Africa. For those whose roots mingle with the history of the Atlantic slave trade, it may be quite vague; for those whose arrival has been more recent, the path is clearer. Nonetheless, the traditional religions of these African regions are based on the principles of a spiritually charged world, the importance of family, and inseparability of form and function. It must be noted that they are emphasized to various degrees and are manifest in a variety of forms.

In the *spiritually charged world* of many peoples of West and Central Africa, to include the Igbo, Yoruba, and Ashanti, there is opportunity for contact between

the material or physical world that humans inhabit, and the world of the spirits—the deities, those who have been born and have died (the ancestors), and those who have yet to be born. In various models of African cosmology, there exists a Supreme Deity, as well as lesser divinities that have powers over specific domains, such as fertility, or exist as manifestations of specific aspects of the Supreme. Ancestors, sometimes known as living-dead ancestors, are the deceased of five generations or less. They are believed to be able to affect the lives of relatives still on earth. In general, spirits can be benevolent or malevolent. Encountering a spirit at night is generally undesirable, while spirits are encouraged to communicate with and even temporarily possess humans during important rituals or ceremonies. The Yoruba (Nigeria) claim

more than a thousand divinities, while others recognize considerably fewer.

The *importance of family*, especially children, cannot be overlooked or underestimated. Not only are children important in proving a husband's manhood and a wife's womanhood, they are important in securing the family's survival in agrarian or semi-agrarian societies. Children, especially sons, are expected to take care of their parents in their old age and bury them with honor. But offspring are also critical to their parents' ascent into the spiritual domain: there must be children on earth to remember their parents and to utter their names, so as to secure their fathers' and mothers' personal immortality.

Perhaps, it is in the *form and function* of West and Central African artistic traditions that the flashes of the spirit are

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## Flashes of the Spirit

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best illustrated. The concept of art for art's sake is foreign to many African artistic traditions. Bowls, furniture, even doors can be both functional and meaningful. Consider the *akua ba* dolls of the Ashanti (Ghana, Ivory Coast). These dolls exemplify the Ashanti standard of beauty, but are also associated with fertility. Pregnant women are not to look at any deformity for fear that their child may resemble it; also, by gazing upon these dolls a mother encourages beauty in her child. Consider also the antelope head-dress, representing the spirit *chi wara*, used in planting and harvest celebrations to encourage a good crop. Some masks are created for regular, ritualized use; other masks or headdresses are created to mark one specific event, such as a child's passage into adulthood, and will never be used again. Because they are designed to be used in movement and to appease or



Ashanti akua ba dolls

encourage a godly/ancestral presence, a used mask is likened to a shell. Because the aesthetic indicators remain, European interest in African masks helped fuel the commodification and mass production of African art. It must be understood that the pieces' separation from their purpose renders them spiritually void—the flash of the spirit has come and gone.

### Bibliography

Khapoya, Vincent B. *The African Experience: An Introduction*. 2d ed. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1994.

Mbiti, John. *African Religions and Philosophies*. 2d ed. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1990.

Thompson, Robert Farris. *Flash of the Spirit*. New York: Random House, 1984.

Willett, Frank. *African Art: An Introduction*. Revised ed. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993.

To learn more about West African religions and philosophies—particularly those of the Igbo (Nigeria) nation—and how they are manifest in the material culture of the people, I encourage you to visit and support:

The Museum of African Tribal Art,  
122 Spring Street #1  
Portland, ME  
(207) 871-7188

Oscar Mokeme, Museum Director

At press time, the Museum featured the mask collection, "Spirits of the Igbo Tribe," and the shrine exhibition, "House of the Ancestors."

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## Calendar

*The following courses are scheduled to be offered in Spring 2000:*

### HTY 142I – African American History Since 1865

The continuation of HTY 141, this course explores the history of African Americans from the beginning of Reconstruction to the present. Topics will include the Black Codes, segregation, the Harlem Renaissance, the civil rights and Black Power movements, and Black popular culture. There are no prerequisites, and this course is open to all students or members of the community who wish to enroll. 3 credit hours.

Tuesdays and Thursdays, 11:30 a.m.-12:45 p.m. Portland campus.

### HTY 399 – The Black Church Cross-Culturally

This course is being offered in honor of the Convocation year theme, "Religion and the Human Experience." It will explore the religious principles of African and African-American religious traditions and the place of the church, in its various forms, in the lives of its followers. Religions studied will include those of West Africa (traditional), Haiti (Vodun), Cuba (Santeria), Brazil (Candomblé) and African-American (African Methodist Episcopal) traditions. There are no prerequisites, and this course is open to all students or members of the community who wish to enroll. 3 credit hours

Tuesdays, 4:00-6:30 p.m. Portland campus.

Please call 780-5239 or check the Spring 2000 schedule to confirm days and times.