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Flashes of the Spirit

Maureen Elgersman - Lee (ed.)

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.

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.

Maureen Elgersman Lee is assistant professor of history and faculty scholar for the African American Archives of Maine, University of Southern Maine Library.

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, the rise of 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 deities 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 deities, 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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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 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

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

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