



A SERVICE OF HEALING

(For those suffering emotional distress, grief, divorce, and physical ailments)

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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I. Healing and Evangelist Jessie Helen Rucker Burks

Yes-----Yes

Yes Lord-----Yes

Oh yes-----Yes
Oh yes-----Yes
My soul says yes-----Yes

We need you Lord, ----Yes
We need you Lord, ----Yes
We need you Lord, ----Yes
We need you Lord, ----Yes

Yes, Yes, Yes Lord.

This is the song my grandmother and other prayer warriors sang at the beginning of every church service. This song was the first song raised at my grandmother's funeral, which was held in the fashion of the many services and traditions that she followed during her sixty-four years of ministry. It is a simple but powerful call for the power of the Lord to come down. When it is sung, with the right harmony and energy put into the song, it can make the hairs stand up on the back of your neck.

I grew up in New Jersey with my late grandmother, Evangelist Jessie Helen Rucker Burks, who took me with her as she preached the gospel up and down the East Coast. She was a prophet, had the gift of healing hands (laying on of hands), she was also a preacher and social activist in her community.¹ Growing up with my grandmother exposed me to the tradition of intercessory prayer for healing physical, mental, spiritual and social ills. I remember praying at noon each day as a young girl. That schedule was not changed even if visitors were in the house; prayer was held at noon each day. Many times we went to Noonday Prayer at the church and people met us there, so that Reverend Burks could pray for them to be healed. Grandmomma said, "Time must be set aside to pray for folks who don't know how or can't pray for themselves." We also had to pray in the early morning with thanksgiving and for direction, and at night before going to bed for thanksgiving, protection and direction for the next day.

Grandmomma was known as a prayer warrior who could get a prayer through. Every fourth Sunday of the month, the missionary service was held at the church. This service was well-known for the powerful miracles that occurred through prayer by this circle of women and men who were focused, at least on fourth Sundays, on seeing miracles. First of all, they would sing until the power of the Lord came down, then they danced the holy dance.

Noonday prayer and Missionary Day were not the only times set aside for prayer service. We conducted home visits to the sick and shut-ins to pray for them every Wednesday after noonday prayer at church or at their homes. Sometimes Momma Burk's mentor, Mother Makel, who was also a great prayer warrior, accompanied us on these visits. When she and Mother Makel conducted a healing service at someone's home, we did not leave until the person declared "I am healed" and showed evidence by singing, dancing or praying for themselves. I remember one time the landlord knocked on Mother

Lockett's door while we were conducting a visit at her home and threatened to call the police because of the singing and loud praying and other demonstrations of praise.

In an interview, Alice Walker said, "There are those who believe black people possess the secret of joy and that it is this that will sustain them through any spiritual or moral or physical devastation." Momma Burks would always say to a person that no matter what was going on with them, **they had to praise the Lord over and above the situation. That is what brings the healing power down.** That is the secret of joy that my grandmother and Mother Makel talked about from time to time, praising the Lord over and above the situation.

II. Ancestral African Healing Traditions

As an African Priest in the Akan Akom tradition of Ghana, actively researching, studying, practicing and teaching Sankofa Theology, by which I mean the incorporation of ancient African traditions into contemporary spiritual and religious services, I began to realize that what had been my strict regimen as a child was actually embedded in the ancient traditions of indigenous spiritual practices. Libation, which is prayer, is at the center of most traditional African religious practices. I am certain that this is one of the surprising traditions that those involved in imperial expansion in indigenous cultures centuries ago found embedded in the daily routines of the people. In my experiences today, the elders of the Shrine Houses (religious institutions) continue to approach healing in much the same way.

There is an Akan Proverb that says: "The healer does not drink medicine for his patients." This proverb suggests that people must first acknowledge the need for assistance, believe in the methodology used, and demonstrate a willingness to do something about their condition. There are some, as in African tradition, who believe that the problem begins in the mind of the person, they bring forth the condition by focusing on the possibility of it happening. This may happen because of their past experiences, current news reports, historical family events, contact with persons with similar problems and a purely over-active imagination. The vibration and energy that are put into such thoughts is the conduit for making things happen, wanted or unwanted. Therefore, the first ritual that is performed in a traditional healing setting is that of exploring the thought patterns of a person to determine the route of their concentration (if the person is conscious), their belief in the healing power of God and the spiritual healing forces that are called upon, and their willingness to receive healing, physically or otherwise.

This approach is familiar to many church members who participate in Prayer Bands, the Missionary Circle, and other groups responsible for prayer for people within the church. When a person answers the altar call for prayer, oftentimes questions are asked to determine their state of mind. When we watch the televangelists, when the prayer line is called, one of the first questions they ask the person is "do you believe in the healing power of God?" Then the person is told to focus on that healing power and expect the healing to fall on them.

In African ancestral healing traditions, the second ritual performed is that of libation (prayer) regarding the need for healing and to call in the spiritual healing forces. The third ritual may be that of actually laying on of hands and anointing with traditional medicines. In Africa, the Priest then chooses the appropriate healing modality for a given situation which may include purification baths, fire rituals, herbal remedies, or a combination of all. In the book, The Healing Wisdom of Africa,² Malidoma Patrice describes some of the rituals used for healing in the Dagomba culture. He gives descriptions and explains the healing rituals that use fire and water, rituals to address grief, reconciliation, and prosperity with cautionary statements for the curious or practitioners.

African healing rituals always include singing, which again reminds me of the prayer services with my grandmother that always began with the familiar COGIC anthem . . . “Yes, Lord” (the opening song of this cultural resource offering). Prayer service was a favorite time for me because we always sang songs of faith in the healing power of God such as “Jesus Is on the Main Line.”

Jesus Is on the Main Line

Jesus is on the Main Line

Tell Him what you want.

Jesus is on the Main Line, tell Him what you want.

Jesus is on the Main Line, tell Him what you want.

Call Him up and tell Him what you want.

Other lines:

If you're sick and can't get well, tell Him what you want...

If you want your body healed, tell Him what you want...

If you want your soul to saved, tell Him what you want...³

At the end of the healing service, we sang thanksgiving praises such as “I Know the Lord Has Laid His Hands on Me.”

I Know the Lord Has Laid His Hands on Me

Oh I know the Lord, I know the Lord

I know the Lord has laid his hands on me.

Oh I know the Lord, I know the Lord

I know the Lord has laid his hand on me.

He healed my body and I can tell

I know the Lord has laid his hands on me.

He saved my soul from burning hell

I know the Lord has laid his hands on me.⁴

This is the same in African ancestral traditions. We find in the translations of the songs that the meanings of many are quite similar as those sung in black American churches.

III. A Traditional African Healing Ceremony

One of the traditional healing ceremonies in the Akan Akom tradition is done at the annual festivals. A fire is always built that burns for the ten-day duration of the festival. During the lighting of the fire, petitions are made along with singing as participants circle the fire seven times in one direction and reverse the circle seven times counter-clockwise. At a designated time during the week, festival participants are encouraged to jump the fire for healing or to spend personal time around the fire. At the end of the festival, the ashes of that fire are taken to the ocean, river or creek. The three women selected to carry the fire in basins on their heads are those who want to become pregnant or have some other special healing request.

An adaptation of that particular healing ceremony is practiced in AFSANI in the DC metropolitan area. This ceremony, which is preceded by special ancestral rituals can be used in any spiritual community; it is called the *Burning Bowl* and is held as close to the end of the year as possible. At this ceremony, a fire is also built and people traverse around the fire in a circle seven times in each direction. As the circle moves, people are told to drop into the fire pre-written requests that they want the spirit of the fire to address. In the first clockwise direction, requests for removal of the vibrations and energy of undesirable situations, burdensome or non-productive things they want burned out of their lives are dropped into the fire. In the counter-clockwise direction, persons drop into the fire requests connected to their purpose in life and pray for the energy and vibration of peace, love, and blessings in specific forms during the upcoming year. There are testimonies of healing in many areas of participants lives. One person said to me recently “You’d better be careful what you ask for at these burning bowls, you will get it!” This was her way of validating the ritual.

IV. A Healing Ritual Story from Bernice Johnson Reagon

Recently, Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon shared with me a very powerful healing experience she witnessed as a part of a revival meeting:

May 2007, I attended a revival service at an African Methodist Episcopal Church in Prince George County, where Bishop Vashti McKenzie was the guest preacher. It was a powerful experience for me. First, the style of the service was contemporary gospel with the great gospel singer and composer Myrna Summers leading the music from the choir stand. It was a large suburban church and it was amazing to arrive and see people streaming from their cars to enter a large sanctuary on a week night. After the sermon and offering, as the end of the service came, Bishop McKenzie came to the pulpit again and asked the pastor to bring baskets to the front of the pulpit and ensure that they would stay untouched for the night. She then asked us to write on a piece of paper something we were willing to surrender to God for healing or fixing. We did that and hundreds of us streamed down the aisles and placed our notes in the baskets. And Bishop McKenzie prayed and said it is done. She urged us not to take it back—to leave it in God’s hands. It was one of the most powerful exercises I have personally participated in. Every time I feel myself reaching to take back that which I turned

over that night, I remember that I have already place it within the eternal ongoing healing force of the universe and I gain peace again.

V. The Need for Sacred Days of Healing

Another aspect of healing in African culture is that several sacred days are set aside in recognition of specific healing activities that are taking place in the Spirit world to assist believers on the earth plane. The sacred days are recognized in the Akan Akom tradition as celebrations for the work that is being performed by various spiritual entities to bring individuals and communities into harmony with life's purposes and the protocols inherent in the culture. In my book, The Quest For Spiritual Transformation: Introduction to Traditional Akan Religion, Rituals and Practices, I have described many of the sacred days on the Akan calendar including Akwasiadae, Wukudae, Fofie, Festivals, and sacred days for specific deities. The annual festivals just mentioned are held during a week of healing which each shrine house organizes. Though this is termed a festival, the ultimate goal is to witness healing miracles which may appear in the form of physical, mental, spiritual, social, or family healing during the week of celebration that has many rituals connected to it. Homecoming Week or Month in African American churches is similar to the annual festivals where members and believers travel great distances to attend the events, especially Homecoming Sunday. In the weeks leading up to Homecoming Sunday and during the event, an effort is made to reconcile all differences, families get together; thus, healing occurs in the community.

A Day of Healing, a time set aside for healing the members of the community is a normal, prescribed and practiced event in indigenous cultures and especially in African culture. It has been observed in the black church for many years perhaps under different names, i.e., Homecoming. Nevertheless, the purpose is the same.

Establishing a day of healing aligns us with ancient traditions and rituals practiced by our ancestors. It is validated by the mere fact that this Day of Healing continues to be celebrated on the continent and many places in the Diaspora. This day allows us to tap into the benefits of our ancestral wisdom to keep our community members in harmony with life's purposes.

VI. Traditional Healing Songs

Can't Nobody Do Me Like Jesus.

Can't nobody do me like Jesus,
Can't nobody do me like the Lord,
Can't nobody do me like Jesus,
He's my friend.

Healed my body, told me to run on,
Healed my body, told me to run on,
Healed my body, told me to run on,
He's my friend....⁵

Lord, I Thank You

Lord, I thank you, thank you, thank you;
Lord I thank you, thank you, thank you;
Lord I'll thank you, all the days of my life.

Lord I thank you, thank you, thank you;
Lord, I thank you, thank you, thank you;
Lord I thank you, for being so good to me.⁶

VII. Contemporary Healing Song

I Trust You Lord

What if you call me and don't feel me near you
Will you still trust
What if I tell you to let go of the very thing that you think you have to hold
Will you trust me (Yes, I'll trust you Lord)
What if it costs my life (Yes, I'll trust you Lord)
What If I lose everything I love so dearly (Yes, I'll trust you Lord)
Yes, I'll trust you Lord. I'll trust you.

(I can hear Jesus singing)

I know that faith is easy, when everything is going well
But can you still, believe in me, when your life's a living hell,
And when all the things around you, seem to quickly fade away
There's just one thing, I really want to know.

Will you let go (I trust you Lord)
And stand on my Word (I trust you Lord)
Against all odds, will you believe, what I have said (I trust you Lord)
What seems impossible (I trust you Lord)
Will you believe (I trust you Lord)
Every promise that I made will you receive, and trust me?
(Yes, I will trust you Lord)...⁷

Notes

1. Evangelist Jessie Helen Rucker Burks, 1905-1995, the first woman to be ordained as a preacher in the Church of God in Christ and allowed to preach in the pulpit, continued her ministry for sixty-four years until her transition.
2. Somé, Malidoma Patrice. The Healing Wisdom of Africa: Finding Life Purpose Through Nature, Ritual, and Community. New York, NY: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1998.
3. Jesus Is On the Main Line. Traditional

4. I Know the Lord Has Laid His Hands on Me. Negro Spiritual. African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago IL: GIA Publications, 2001. #360
5. Can't Nobody Do Me Like Jesus. Traditional
6. Lord I Thank You. Traditional
7. McClurkin, Donnie. "I Trust You Lord." The Essential Donnie McClurkin. New York, NY: Verity/Legacy, 2007.