



AFRICAN HERITAGE SUNDAY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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Akan Queen mother and Chief Priest Asomdwee Fie, Shrine of the Aboson and Nsamanfo, Int'l (AFSANI), Washington, D.C. and Ghana, W. Africa

I. Growing up With People Who Honored Africa

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 healing hands (did laying on of hands), and worked as a preacher and social activist in her community. It was through her that I learned about my African ancestors in stories about her mother, grandmother, and siblings. I remember going to North Carolina on many occasions to visit Aunt Cordie, Aunt Ossie, Uncle Rowe, Uncle Bea, and 'Cousin' Chris. The discussions were always about the Bible, religion, our

ancestors, and their stories about plantation life and the changes in the world at that time. I was allowed to sit and listen, quietly. Momma would later ask me questions as we were riding on the train on the way home, and corrected me when I missed a detail.

Much later in life, as a missionary and while holding other offices in church, I began to see some of the things that she talked about in the traditions and rituals of our services in the Pentecostal church. Now, as an African priest in the Akan Akom Tradition of Ghana, actively researching, studying, practicing and teaching **Sankofa Theology**, and incorporating ancient traditions into contemporary spiritual and religious services, I find that there is nothing new under the sun. Nor is there a need to limit the movement of Sankofa to culture without including religion. Jesus, during his formative years, through divine intervention was exposed to Egyptian traditions and culture (Egypt, North Africa). His experiences, as told in the Bible, were an introduction to religion that is practiced in varying degrees in continental Africa and in the Diaspora. Which brings us to the question of what does African Heritage have to do with Christianity in the Black Church? The answer is everything. If we believe the Biblical stories about our ancestry, then we also believe that Jesus was the most renowned ancestor in the Christian religion. The earlier records about the birth and lives of several prophets in the Old and New Testaments, place them in Africa. Subsequently, we must consider that because of our heritage from various parts of Africa, through the Middle Passage, there must be recognition of this within our religious institutions. For those of us living in the Diaspora, we are African people who were forcibly migrated to different parts of the world. In this dispersion and the system of enslavement, we were culturally attacked, and in taking on the cultural aspects of our oppressors, we learned more than languages. Embedded in our lessons were often teachings by our oppressors that were against what we have within us. However, the culture that encompasses our sacred systems could not be destroyed.

In an 1832 sermon entitled *The Religious Instruction of the Negro*, Dr. Reverend Charles Colcock Jones reveals his sense that the slave population is without God, and a nation of heathens, in need of the Gospel. In no way is it revealed that the people who are to be instructed have anything within them to be cherished and respected. It is as if Africans taken into slavery were empty vessels and being under a complete control of the plantations, provided an optimum opportunity for indoctrination in the ways and rewards of being a Christian.

It is a matter of astonishment, that there should be any objection at all; for the duty of giving religious instruction to our Negroes, and the benefits flowing from it, should be obvious to all. The benefits, we conceive to be incalculably great, and [one] of them [is] there will be greater subordination... amongst the Negroes.

Reverend Jones's sermon reveals an attempt to wipe clean indigenous beliefs and religious traditions. We know now that in many ways such efforts were not successful. However, some of these ideas have become embedded in the psyche of many African Americans of the Christian faith, blocking acknowledgement of our African heritage in religion and spirituality. During the past forty years, many of us have been involved in a

reclamation process of activist study, practice, and organizing that has opened new understandings of how much we have lost of our African past and how much we retained that heritage as part of African American culture.

Daily, via our families, communities, religious institutions, and through our habits and rituals, we show that we have maintained parts of our African heritage including ancient proverbs, warnings, child-rearing practices, and ways of being in relationships. This is a positive and important thing. Part of the reason for the survival of our African heritage in America is the fact that much of what we do that is African has not been named. An African proverb states, "A log may stay in water for ten years but it will NEVER become a crocodile." We can celebrate and cherish that which is African within us without being outside of communion with God because we are children of God.

II. I Am An African – A Mediation

This mediation is written in the characteristic style of African Praise Songs that the Southern African recites before a Chief on important occasions. Sometimes a man will sing praises of himself also, telling of some strong personal experience, such as a battle, in former days, while today it might be about working in the mines or a long sojourn in a strange land.

I Am An African Gabriel Setiloane

They call me African;
African indeed am I;
Rugged son of the soil of Africa,
Black as my father, and his before him;
As my mother and sisters and brother, living and gone from this
world

They ask me what I believe . . . my faith.
Some even think I have none
But live like the beasts of the field

'What of God, the Creator
Revealed to mankind through the Jews of old
The YAHWEH: IAM
Who has been and ever shall be?
Do you acknowledge him?'

My fathers and theirs, many generations before,
Knew him.
They bowed the knee to him

Awurade, Our Lord, Our Master;

Nyamenekosa, the One in whom I can confide, and more.

Examples of some African Proverbs are:

All wisdom is from God;

All things rest with God;

God is not asleep;

If you want to speak to God, speak to the winds;

If God gives you a calabash full of palm wine and a living man kicks it over, God fills it up again.

These are all proverbs that parallel Old and New Testament scriptures.

Think about the sayings of the elders in your very own family and community. Some of my memories of those sayings or proverbs that my grandmother passed on to me are actually from Africa: Mama said, "Go to bed when it is thundering and lightening, God is talking, so be still." "Don't put your hat on the bed, it's bad luck." "Don't open an umbrella in the house, it's bad luck." "Don't lay your pocketbook on the floor; you'll lose your money." "Cover your head for church or any Spirit can enter you." "If you make your bed hard, you have to sleep in it." "A hard head makes a soft behind." "Life is like a boomerang." "Don't split poles." "A whistling woman and a crowing hen, ain't no good." "Don't walk around the house or outside eating food, it makes the house poor."

After investigating these warnings and others, I realized that they were not her idiosyncrasies, but sayings that had been passed down for generations leading right back to the Middle Passage and Africa. I am sure that some of the elders in your congregation can relate to this form of storytelling and warnings.

IV. Another Aspect of Our African Heritage

Our beliefs surrounding ancestors and reincarnation: Don't we go to the cemetery to place flowers on special days? Do we not make shrines of places where community members especially children were killed by placing teddy bears, toys, flowers, notes, cards, etc.? Do we not have prayer and candle light vigils or rituals around those same places or other significant locations? What happens when a baby is born and has some traits that we remember or when the child looks like someone who has died? Don't we say as we are admiring the baby, "Aw, she/he looks just like Momma, or Uncle (fill in the blank) or Aunt (fill in the blank)," etc. We always point out something about a baby and later the growing child that is similar to one of our deceased relatives. We are very proud to make these analogies, which have, sometimes, been the source of serious family

disputes if everyone is not in agreement, especially the parents who don't necessarily believe in "that old stuff."

As we investigate some of the other traditions of spirit possession (Holy Spirit, Holy Ghost), music (drums and the penetrating bass guitar lines that call forth the Spirit), Holy dance (shouting) baptism (purification), communion (rememberances), offerings (sacrifices), prayer (libation), weddings, funerals, and burials, we clearly recognize that many of our contemporary religious rituals directly connect to our African heritage.

V. Libation

Honoring our Ancestors: In order to pour libation as did our African ancestors, you will need a beverage such as wine, palm drink, or water; a glass or small glass pitcher in which to place the beverage; and a vessel to pour the beverage into as you are pouring libation (praying) such as a quart size white or glass bowl, small white basin or a tall or large plant. Or, when the weather conditions are conducive, you may pour libation outside directly into the soil. After libation has been poured into the vessel (if not a plant), the contents should be taken outside and poured near the edifice in soil or on the ground to continue the presence of the ancestors and energy that you have called in through prayer. The oratory sequence for the libations is Invocation, Message, Solicitations, and Curse. Thanks are given at the beginning and the end of all libations. During the invocation, the officiant invokes the forces of beneficence, observing the Akan religious hierarchy where God is the Supreme Being, followed by Mother Earth, the pantheon of lesser gods or spirits, and the ancestors. The message segment of libation highlights the occasion and the purpose of the prayer. In the solicitation portion, the speaker solicits support for the spiritual, moral, and material well-being of the society (delicate political problems can be mentioned here also). The final segment is used for a pronouncement of a curse on the forces of evil. End the libation with thanks for the work that will be done. The libation is done in a call and response fashion. The officiant says a line, pours a small amount of the beverage into the vessel, and says, Nsa (come and have a drink). The congregation answers with an affirmative response alternately with saa (yes) and ampa (true). Or they can simply say, Yes or Amen to affirm their agreement with the libation. At the end, the cry by the officiant and the congregation is Yoooooo to signify that it is finished. Following is a sample libation.

Sample Libation

INVOCATION:

Officiant

God, the dependable one.
Asaase Yaa, Mother Earth
Holy Spirits of the living God
Spirits of all the African Clans

Congregation

Nsa Saa
Nsa Ampa
Nsa Saa
Nsa Ampa

Spirits of all the Ancestors of this Congregation Nsa Saa
 Here you can allow the congregation to call out names of their beloved
 ancestors, those who have died, and those who lived a good life
 contributing to their family and community. After each name called, as
 you can hear it, you say "Nsa." After a period of time, close it with the
 following:

All of our community ancestors,
 The unborn who are coming back Nsa Saa
 And those whom we forgot to call Nsa Ampa
 All the rivers associated with the Clans here Nsa Saa
 It is the men and women of valor on whom we call
 If you did not lead a worthy life,
 Your name is not invoked in death! Ampa

Thanks.

For this beautiful day, the blessings Ampa
 And enlightenment that you have afforded us today. Saa
 Thank you for the new Saa
 understanding of our African Heritage and Ampa
 connection to our religious principles, etc. Saa

Solicitation:

As we offer this drink, we seek life and prosperity
 We seek long life and good health, Nsa Ampa
 You know the path that we take,
 Help us to continue along the way Nsa Ampa
 Etc.....

Curse:

For those who wish to block our path
 in this quest for understanding and knowledge
 I ask that you intervene and let those balls of confusion
 bounce back like a boomerang.
 Reveal who they are and their plan. Nsa Saa
 Remove them from our way... Nsa Ampa
 Etc.....

Final Thanks:

And for this prayer and All other blessings, we give thanks. Nsa Saa
 We say, Thank You, Thank you, Thank you! Yoooooo
 Yooooo

AMEN

VI. A List of Traditional Songs

These songs may be used to remind us and to acknowledge the traditions and rituals of our African heritage. Most are found in the African American Heritage Hymnal and other hymnals.

Count Your Blessings	Libation
I Shall Not Be Moved	Culture
Jesus is on the Main Line	Ancestral veneration
Give Me That Old Time Religion	Tradition and culture
Precious Memories	Residual Memories
Take Me to the Water	Baptism/Rituals
Wade in the Water	Baptism/Rituals

VII. Audio Visual Suggestions: African proverbs, the Adinkra symbol, and a definition for it can be placed on screens. For the symbol, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sankofa>, <http://www.marshall.edu/akanart/akanknow.html>, or <http://africanhistory.about.com/library/bl/blfreestencil-AdinkraSankofal.htm>.

VIII. Other Cultural Resource Information

Sankofa (**San**=Return or go back; **ko**=go or return; **fa**=pick up): As the present generation advances forward into the future, they need to turn back to pick up some of the good ideas from the past to help them in their present existence.

Tradition Remains in the Ear: Tradition remains as each generation keeps and repeats what it heard from the past.

Notes

1. Opokuwaa, Nana Akua Kyerewaa. The Quest for Spiritual Transformation Introduction to Traditional Akan Religion, Rituals and Practices. New York: iUniverse Inc., 2005. Online location: <http://www.afsani.org/nanakyerewaa/index.html> accessed 10 November 2007

2. Evangelist Jessie Helen Rucker Burks, 1905-1995—the first woman to be ordained as a preacher in the Church of God In Christ—was allowed to preach in the pulpit, continuing her ministry for 64 years until her transition.
3. Jones, Charles Colcock. The Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States: a reprinting of the Religious Instruction of the Negroe and other works. Commentary by Kamau Makesi-Tehuti. Morrisville, NC: Lulu Press, 2006.
4. The late Reverend Dr. Gabriel Molehe Setiloane was a Methodist minister; he helped establish the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Botswana and Swaziland (1975-78). Dr. Setiloane is especially noted for his important book The Image of God among the Sotho-Tswana (Rotterdam: A. A. Balkema, 1976), an essential work for all students of religious history.