

African Mythic Science or Vodou Methodology

by

Denise Martin, Ph.D.

Denise Martin (seshmartin@gmail.com) is an independent researcher specializing in the sacred traditions of African and African descended peoples. Her writing appears in the groundbreaking two-volume collection *Encyclopedia of African Religion* as well as in *Africa and the Wider World*, *The Search for Wholeness and Diaspora Literacy in Contemporary African American Literature*, and *The Oprah Phenomenon*. She is currently writing a book on African Mysteries. She earned a Doctor of Philosophy degree in African American Studies at Temple University and has served as an associate professor of Pan African Studies and Humanities at the University of Louisville.

Abstract

African cultures, from a classic viewpoint, use myth to define, describe and give meaning to all aspects of life—natural, civil, sacred and social. African mythic science or Vodou methodology proposes a similar approach of applying myth to life by using knowledge archived in African myths to discuss and give meaning to the experiences of African and African descended people. Archetypes, metaphors, patterns, symbols and rituals associated with myth become key points of analysis in the development of the mythic mind, an intellectual perspective valuable for interpreting the African experience mythically and one that is both culturally centered and holistic.

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*Atibo Legba, open the barrier for me
Papa Legba, open the barrier for me
To let me through,
When I come back, I will salute the loa
Voodoo Legba open the barrier for me
When I return, I will thank the loa¹*

“Voodoo,” Papa or Atibo Legba guards the threshold between the physical and spiritual worlds according to the Haitian Vodou tradition. He also delivers messages to and among the *lwa*, who are the deities, divinities and supernatural powers in the Vodou cosmos. For these reasons, he is the first *lwa* petitioned during Vodou rituals. He is saluted first here because the purpose of African mythic science is to present a method for analyzing the experience of African peoples using African myth as a frame of reference. In other words, mythic science connects the physical world of experience with the spiritual world of myth—similar to the way African cultures themselves interpret their own experiences.

This article introduces the basics of an African mythic science or Vodou methodology by first describing myth from an African cultural perspective and then discussing how myth is a living phenomenon by applying prominent archetypes in African myths to the African/African-American experience. Lastly, the article presents tools for a mythic analysis or developing a “mythic mind.” The tools include recognizing and decoding symbols, metaphors, patterns and archetypes described in myths, again demonstrated by analyzing the lived experience of African people. With this foundation, the reader will be able to use the principles in African myth to generate a holistic African-centered analysis of African people.

Mythic science is an integral part of an African-centered theoretical perspective which challenges the researcher to place African values at the center of their analysis. With myth as a valuable, if not pre-eminent, source for knowledge and meaning within African culture, it is a necessary component for an African-centered methodology. Myth details creation, origins, deities and their functions, the first people and ancestors, animals, nature and the relationships amongst them all. African cultures view their societies as extensions of their myths. The mythic events flow directly into society in a very tangible way. Far from being fanciful and fantastic, African myth contains knowledge necessary to negotiate the various rhythms of life. Myth supports all religious, political, social, and cultural activities. Therefore, a methodology based on myth enhances the discussion of any aspect of culture. Mythic science is holistic enough to allow for a multidisciplinary analysis and specific enough to support an analysis from a single discipline. In these aspects, plus the fact of being rooted in a most essential aspect of African culture, mythic science resonates with African-centered theory and methodology.

African mythic science is described as a Vodou methodology because, like Légba, who opens the gate between the worlds, it opens the world of experience to the world of myth. It also comes from the exquisite ability found in Vodou to choreograph the rhythms of various mythic/spiritual traditions and cultures into the Haitian experience. Vodou includes the essential elements from the sacred cultures of Africa, the harsh experience of enslavement, the joy of emancipation, the presence of French Catholicism, the reality of poverty and the enduring struggles to live a full life in harmony with each aspect. The diverse elements of Haitian Vodou are bound together by Guinen.²

Guinen is the spiritual essence of Africa and the means by which Vodou is validated. According to Joseph Murphy, Guinen is “the criterion for harmonious and moral action” and the standard of authority for tradition.³ Harmonious and moral action is none other than Maat from Kemetic culture and the authority for Vodou is based on spiritual knowledge from Africa. By serving Guinen, Vodou places the spiritual sphere of Africa at the center which is the epitome of African centeredness. In an African ontology the spiritual is both central and omnipresent. In ritual, the *poto mitan* is the central post that connects present day ritual participants to the historic, symbolic and metaphysical Guinen, which is the source and lifeline of Vodou as well as an “orientation to a historical memory and a living reality.”⁴

African mythic science or Vodou methodology is like the *poto mitan* in that it is an orientation to memory and reality that reconciles the historical and living experience of African people with African spiritual and cosmic reality. Reconciliation is important because “experienced reality is a symbolic statement of universal or cosmic truth.”⁵ The reconciliation of experience into a broader cosmic reality establishes Maat by ordering the physical and spiritual worlds. In addition, like the practice of Vodou, myth also helps people heal.⁶ The sacred narratives, or myths, of African cultures are archives for the deeper mysteries of Life and matters of cosmic reality. Through story and symbol mythic archives explain how to negotiate the relationships and rhythms of Life. African mythic science correlates the rhythms of Life discussed in the archives with both the collective and personal experience of African people. African mythic science seeks patterns and symbols in these experiences and correlates them with Guinen.

The transient and enigmatic qualities of the mythic archives of Guinen present a welcome challenge to the scholar, researcher or intellect interested in an African-centered methodology as it relates to symbolism, archetypal patterns, polycentric thinking as well as African epistemology and ontology. Like Vodou, myth is a living practice that evolves and transforms with the people. Engaging myth requires the use of an African epistemology that calls on intellectual faculties, intuition, extrasensory perception, humility and a holistic worldview.⁷ African epistemology also requires a “special kind of interpretation” of extraordinary life events and natural phenomenon.⁸ Mythic science integrates these qualities of knowing that are determined by and essential to African culture into a methodology. “Mythological insight starts where scientific inquiry stalls.”⁹

Astonishing Word

Given the insights into the deeper mysteries of Life possible using a mythic sphere of inquiry, the Dogon description of myth as “astonishing word” is appropriate for this discussion. In the Dogon tradition, myth constitutes the whole of the coherent themes of creation and the structure of the universe both of which are expressed through their everyday and ritual life.¹⁰ It is as important to know and *innerstand* the themes and structures as it is to live them.¹¹ Therefore everything in Dogon culture correlates to their myth.¹² Though the Dogon archives contain rare

explicit references to myth as a concept as it relates to their knowledge, they are not alone in their use of myth. Other African cultures use myth as the fundamental organizing narrative to express their worldviews. Myth describes the origin of the Earth, human beings, and the relationships among both as well the entrance of death into the world. Myths declare and define the deities, divinities, powers and principalities in creation and how to engage them. Myth determines the structure of society and the occasions for and aesthetics of ritual. Myth informs all creative expression.

Myth reveals the ultimate nature of existence. It is in this sense that they are “true.” They explain what Life is all about beyond the concerns of everyday living.¹³ As Ford writes, “Properly read, myths bring us into accord with the eternal mysteries of being.”¹⁴ “Properly read” means that interpretations of myth be symbolic, metaphoric, and archetypal as opposed to literal and true in the objective, empirical sense. The truth of myth is experiential; one that is validated in the lab of life. Myth is so essential to African culture the Dogon proclaim it to constitute “real history;” in Kemet the myth of Ausar and Auset sustained the people for millennia; and the Yoruba oral archive of myth known as the Odu Ifa is consulted faithfully for guidance with life’s concerns.¹⁵ These myths assume various forms—stories, poems, dances, masks, sculptures, paintings, shrines and stone etchings among others—and constitute the collective traditional, classical, or indigenous African mythic archive.

Though myths influenced by Christian, Islamic or European thought and culture also exist on the continent, the focus of this analysis is the mythic archives indigenous to the African mind and/or that give primacy to the African experience regardless of cultural space and time. For example, the Vodou tradition of Benin, Togo and Nigeria includes myths from Fon, Ewe, Yoruba as well as Catholicism, Islam and Hinduism. However, the worldview, practices, and aesthetics and *function* of Vodou are distinctly African. Likewise, the extensive mythic archive of Kemet for all practical purposes was quite dormant among African people for millennia until the twentieth century when it was activated by both intellectual and social communities.¹⁶ It exerts a powerful influence over the spiritual psyche of many African people. In turn the African people who awaken to the mythic archive of Kemet increase and fortify its *ashé* or occult cosmic power. Thus cultural space and time belong to the mundane not the mythical. However the mythical very much belongs to the mundane because it helps make sense of the mundane.

Living Myth

“What is the myth you are living?” noted psychoanalyst Carl Jung would ask.¹⁷ This question can be interpreted several ways: what particular mythic figure most mirrors your life or what particular mythic tradition are you living? The answers are rarely straightforward because there are different myths operating in the world and a person experiences different stages of life so rarely would one myth apply to all of them. Also, the nature of myth is such that even within a

specific myth, there are several variations of narratives. Myths are constantly reinterpreted by people so they reflect a variety of life experiences. In the African mythic tradition for example, the myths of Ausar in Kemet and Ogo among the Dogon both have several variations though the overall themes of each remain the same.¹⁸ The same holds true for Lègba/Eshu in the Vodou/Yoruba traditions who each have multiple even apparently contradictory aspects.¹⁹ The complexity of myth is further increased with experience and from encounters with the mythic archives of other cultures. The mythic archive of Africa spans the primal mythmakers of Central and Southern Africa, through Kemet, right up to the complex milieu of contemporary African culture. In addition, when indigenous African myths interact—whether through migration, alliances or conflict, each readily adjusts and expands to accommodate new relevant knowledge. An example occurs among the Yoruba and Fon who share geographic and cultural borders, as well as myth and deities, such as Eshu who is Lègba according to the Fon. Regardless of the complexity of the mythic landscape of Africa, with Lègba saluted, it is possible to identify the myth African people are living. This discussion examines African people who experienced the Middle Passage as it is a key experience in reconciling the myth.

African-American Mythic Experience

Based on the mythography of Joseph Campbell, Clyde Ford suggests that African-Americans are living the myth of the hero's journey.²⁰ Ford recognizes that Campbell lacks expertise in African mythology but does see value in the use of the archetype of the hero. This is significant because although Ford does not make the conscious connection in the text, the Greek hero derives from Heru, the archetypal persona of Kemet. Mythic methodology recognizes that a researcher or artist can access the collective African mythic experience—without full awareness of the extent to which it is a source. In the Yoruba tradition, the proverb, “Humans are the mouths of the *orisha*,” speaks of how humans convey information from the *orisha* who live in the mythic or spirit realm.²¹ When a practitioner approaches Ifa during divination with a situation for resolution, answers come from Ifa as well as the speech of family, neighbors or business associates in everyday life. These people may not even be aware that they are providing an answer or vital clue from the mythic realm. This is the case with a mythic method science in which the researcher must discern the connection to myth from the “mouths” of a population that may be limited in mythic consciousness to that which they are referencing. This approach is similar to epic or blood memory in African aesthetics in which artists access the collective ancestral creative archive to prepare their works.²² In such instances, conscious awareness of ancestral creativity can occur but is not a prerequisite. Epic memory becomes evident when the endeavor is complete and affirmed by both the community and critic. Ford's investigation of the collective African-American experience as the journey of the hero is an example of epic memory as it applies to myth and an important point of departure for this discussion.

In the journey, the hero travels across an ocean or abyss to a foreign land, encounters strange gods that both challenge and help the hero, remembers an oath or spell during the most

challenging moment, emerges victorious and receives the proverbial hero's welcome or the lesser known, but all too real, hero's rejection and scorn.²³ The crossing of an abyss or ocean to a strange land is the Middle Passage from Africa to the Caribbean and Americas. The encounters with gods that challenge and/or help the hero is Christianity. Christianity challenges African spiritual identities and provides the first socially sanctioned refuge in the strange land of America. The suffering of the hero, though a phase in Campbell's assessment, is a constant during the African-American journey. Suffering begins at the moment of enslavement in Africa, and continues through the residual racism of today. The remembering of an oath, spell or charm is the phase that saves the hero. Like suffering, remembering is a constant for the African-American hero. For the enslaved, remembering is simply affirming their humanity in any way possible by such explicit acts as violent resistance and rebellion to the more subtle refusal to internalize the status of being less than human that was constantly thrust upon them. For the emancipated, remembering is continuing to affirm humanity while seeking a cultural and spiritual identity.

The hero bestows gifts to societies as a result of the struggles. The African-American hero bestows music, language, innovation and vibrancy to America in addition to freedom and equality.²⁴ African-American heroes force America to sift out flaws in its interpretation of justice, freedom, equality and democracy, all of which had to be rethought, expanded and reapplied given the persistent demands of African Americans. The same gifts of freedom and equality apply to American Christianity, which for centuries struggled but more often using biblical justification, sympathized with slavery and the "downpression" of African-Americans. White American Christians were forced to examine and apply the tenets of their faith in a very worldly manner.

Campbell's mythographic cycle concludes with two variations: one in which people joyously receive the gifts and the heroes and one in which the hero is destroyed and rejected. Both of these apply to the collective African-American experience. The contributions of African-Americans to the practice of Christianity and democracy are scarcely celebrated as part of the collective consciousness of America though these two ideologies, along with capitalism, are among the most celebrated by America. In addition, it could be argued that capitalism thrives because of the free labor of enslaved Africans available at its inception as well as their innovations in technology excluded from patents. Yet again, neither are celebrated. In the second variation the hero is destroyed and rejected. Millions of African Americans were destroyed and rejected physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually during enslavement. Millions more continue to be destroyed and rejected during the era of emancipation. However, these two outcomes are not the end of the hero's journey.

The journey of the hero or Heru is actually one in a series of concentric journeys recounted in the mythic archives of Kemet. One prominent mythic sequence in the archives features Ausar, Auset, and Heru and addresses essential Life rhythms of resurrection and transformation.²⁵ For transformation to occur, Ausar has to die which prompts Auset to resurrect

him and conceive a new being of his seed, Heru. Heru is raised in secret until it is time for him to avenge his father by doing battle with Set, his uncle who is responsible for killing Ausar. This is more than a family fight; Set is the adversary par excellence, the challenger who encourages transformation through adversity. Therefore, the struggle between Heru and Set is one of the most vital sequences in the Kemetic mythic archives. In the collective African-American experience as the journey of Heru, the struggle with Set is one of the major transformative challenges. Applying African mythic science to this struggle reconciles a most difficult period for African people with the mythic archives of Guinen.

Heru and Set

In the lived experience of African Americans the struggle between Heru and Set is mirrored in the relationship between Black and White people. Their struggle takes various forms: violent combat, slavery, torture, rape, legal proceedings, the struggle for basic human and political rights, systemic poverty, medical experimentation, attempted genocide, economic exploitation, etc. This mirrors the Kemetic archives in which Heru and Set have numerous encounters, with each inflicting damage but no clear winner.²⁶ Eventually the *neter*, Kemetic deities, grow weary of the contest and mediate reconciliation. Reconciliation between Black and White people could be interpreted several ways using mythic science. The Civil Rights Era being the most poignant choice because both Blacks and Whites participated and in the myth both Heru and Set agree to reconciliation. The reconciliation is also referred to as the “taming of Set” which correlates to the power White people once had to freely abuse and oppress blacks was beginning to be checked, legally, politically and socially, courtesy of the Civil Rights movement.

The affirmation that the *neter* indeed mediated the reconciliation is found in the observation by Charles Finch, “Almost as soon as the sheets of sound emerged from Coltrane’s tenor saxophone, Chaos descended on jazz in 1959...”²⁷ Finch keenly observed that patterns in popular African-American music traveled on a trajectory that mirrored the 2ⁿ mathematical series noted in Kemet which culminates in Chaos.²⁸ Finch’s choice of words is significant. Chaos with an upper case “C” denotes the Greek goddess rather than the generic term for confusion and disorder. In the Orphic tradition of Greek myth, Chaos exists at the beginning as a primordial entity. Similarly, in Hesiod’s tradition, Chaos came into being first followed by Gaia or Earth.²⁹ In Kemet, a form of Chaos is Neith because of her appearance as a primordial sky *neter* though Neith’s other associations are many.³⁰ In this guise, Neith existed before the beginning as the celestial cow, Mehueret who gives birth to the sky and is the mother of Ra. Neith arbitrates the dispute between Heru and Set in one version of the Ausarian myth. So when Finch writes that it is Chaos who descends, mythic science reveals that this is Neith. His choice and style of wording is significant to mythic science because in many myths, gods, deities and/or primordial ancestors are said to descend to Earth from their abode in the sky. The descent is more dimensional than directional, as vapor condenses or descends into liquid. Thus the primordial mythic power

appeared in the African-American experience during the Civil Rights era, through arguably the most powerful medium of liberated spiritual and cultural expression of the day: jazz music.³¹

For Finch, the mathematical counts of jazz music ceased to follow the orderly repetitions of the 2ⁿ mathematical series within the music of John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, and Cecil Taylor. But why jazz? According to Linda James Myers, there is a sacredness to jazz that exists because musicians allow themselves to be in Spirit or inspired and allow creativity to emerge unrestricted.³² Musicians who played in the church were sometimes able to improvise and allow the authenticity of Spirit to emerge but this varied on the location, denomination, style of worship, and deity worshipped by a particular congregation. In mythic words, the Spirit emerging depended heavily on the orientation of the congregation. In these instances, it was overwhelmingly toward the Christian trinity. Jazz musicians did not have any prerequisites or restrictions. Night after night in clubs and in jam sessions, sometimes with the help of alcohol, tobacco, or other shamanic substances, jazz musicians explored musical boundaries and accumulated *ashé*. Others used their religious devotion as a muse: noted jazz musicians were Muslim or exploring non-Christian religious traditions. In fact, Coltrane's *A Love Supreme* in 1964 was a "humble offering to god" after years of spiritual searching.³³ Jazz musicians enjoyed a spiritual freedom that few Blacks had access to in America at that time. They were the first initiates of the god Chaos. Coltrane would continue his style of free jazz until his death in 1967.

With Chaos or Neith as the mediator, a settlement can be reached between Heru and Set. As is characteristic of myth, there are several settlements and consequently several interpretations using mythic science. Correlating the reconciliation of Heru and Set to the Civil Rights Movement provides an opportunity to discuss the significance of the event in mythic terms. *Ashé* is important to mythic science because it indicates the direction, destination or strength of the collective energy of African people within the myth. Thus, the reconciliation translates as the restoration of the collective *ashé* of African Americans or in African-centered terms, agency.³⁴ With *ashé* and agency African Americans are no longer collectively fully invested in the turbulent struggles of Set such as enslavement, segregation, racism, and overt discrimination. Though there will be challenges because Set still rules his domain—which is part of the settlement arranged by the *neter*—he is no longer in direct confrontation with Heru thereby freeing *ashé* for other aspects of the myth.

While there is a collective orientation of *ashé*, it is polycentric. It permeates multiple areas of the mythic archives and multiple traditions simultaneously because it is a cosmic energy. The destination of the *ashé* determines the aspect of the myth being lived. The question, "What is the myth you are living?" could be rephrased "Where is your *ashé* going?" The collective *ashé* of African-American people appears in the Civil Rights Movement, the Million Man March, O.J. Simpson trial, Hurricane Katrina, and the inauguration of Barack Obama to list a few more prominent appearances. Though *ashé* is still directed toward the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, it lacks the strength of the collective. In addition, *ashé* can align with different

traditions from Guinen simultaneously. For example, the theme of the hero's journey also appears in the Bântu-Kôngo tradition which like the Vodou tradition fuses the journey of lived experience into the journey of myth.

Hero-Ancestors

The Bântu-Kôngo tradition affirms the experience of enslavement through myth. The narrative states those who were captured and sold to white men in ships were taken first to *mputu*, then an island where there is a forest with no food in it, but eventually God provides all of their needs.³⁵ *Mputu* is the realm where the hero journeys to battle beings and forces before returning home. It is also the realm of the ancestors where souls journey before incarnating on Earth. In the Bântu-Kôngo tradition, heroes are in reality hero-ancestors, or heru-ancestors. The island they are taken to could be Haiti, or any of the other islands of the Caribbean with forests used as brutal boot camps to initiate the Africans into slavery.³⁶ That there was no food is quite literal because often enslaved Africans were given just enough to stay alive but never be satisfied. However, this reference to no food speaks to spiritual food or knowledge or nothing to sustain them as in the sacred story of myth, just as God, eventually providing all of their needs, refers to more than physical things; it refers to sacred sustenance.

The Bântu-Kôngo tradition affirms the lived experience of African-Americans—indeed all who were enslaved—through the myth of *mputu*.³⁷ The Bântu-Kôngo keep the myth and the hero-ancestor African-Americans, Haitians, Afro-Caribbeans, etc. live the myth. Interestingly, Ford shares an account of an elderly man in Kinshasa who anxiously awaits the return of these hero-ancestors from *mputu* and proclaims Kinshasa as their country.³⁸

Rhythm Recognition and the Mythic Mind

Mythic science is based on an African epistemology that considers multiple ways of knowing such as intuition, extrasensory perception, divination, supernatural revelation as well as intellect.³⁹ Such an eclectic, holistic and inclusive technique can be challenging but not impossible to approach as a method. In fact, the eclecticism and inclusiveness of African epistemology allows for methods that are equally eclectic and inclusive. Of course simply mirroring the methods of divination, extrasensory perception and supernatural revelation and other aspects of epistemology that are well developed in African cultural traditions is always an option. However, much like Vodou, which recognizes the spiritual essence of several traditions and then synergistically creates from them something new, mythic science favors a synergetic blend of methods to develop mythic analysis. This mythic mind interprets events using language, symbolic literacy and ritual.

Language—the power, meaning and choice of words—is vital to mythic science. In

Kemet, Ptah speaks creation into existence and in the Dogon tradition Amma creates the world using the word. This fundamental power of the word is amplified in African cultures in the use of words to name or call into being. The key to the power of words is *ashé*. The Bântu-Kôngo teach that to call a person's name is to raise the vibration of the person or increase his or her *ashé*. Cultures take great care in naming babies and people receive names throughout their lives. Deities are summoned, addressed and thanked by calling, chanting or singing their names and by speaking artful words during the pouring of libation. Names are important in the language of mythic science. Given that African naming traditions today include words from Christian, Muslim, Asian, Indian, European, as well as popular culture, it is important to decipher their meaning, regardless of cultural origin. Finch applies the "compulsion of names" proposed by Jung and earlier Stekel as methods of deciphering names in a multicultural world.⁴⁰ The "compulsion of names" provides valuable information for mythic reading—such as the relationship of hero to Heru. Another aspect of the esoteric power of words involves speaking the secret or hidden names of things or using ritual language. Because these words are not widely known in their community, their power to raise vibrations is even stronger and is used in special circumstances. The word is *ashé*, the word is also a carrier and amplifier of *ashé*.

The choice and context in which words appear provide important information needed to decode a myth. The previously mentioned example of the word "hero," chosen by Campbell and Ford, traces to the mythic tradition of Kemet. Interestingly, the word "myth" itself, a derivation of meta, traces to Kemet.⁴¹ Finch's purposeful capitalization of Chaos directs the mythic scientist to a specific Greek deity which can then be compared to *neter* in Kemet or any other tradition. Citing the work of Martin Bernal, Ford unravels the meanings of the words "black" and "negro" to reveal a mythic connection to Africa.⁴² Again by going through Greek myth particularly the goddess Melanthe whose name contains the word *melan* meaning black, the Kemetic connection emerges. *Melan* appears to derive from the Kemetic *m3nw* meaning "Mountain of the West." The association of the Mountain of the West with blackness comes from the simple observation that in Kemet, the western mountains are the location of the setting sun. However, they are also a reference to the entrance of the *duat* or underworld.

Interestingly, Ford writes that the phrase black people can be read mythically as "people of the mountains of the west."⁴³ Not only does this echo the association of enslaved Africans with the Bântu-Kôngo underworld or *mputu*, but is an intriguing geographical reference to Western Hemisphere, the place where the struggle of Heru and Set takes place. *Mputu*, the land of the hero-ancestors, means "agitated water" and refers to the Portuguese (*Mputuleezo*) who were responsible for taking the enslaved away.⁴⁴ The choice of *mputu* fuses literal, historical and symbolic significance because agitated water speaks to the ocean on which the ships sailed, the societal conditions surrounding enslavement, and those perpetrating slavery. Identifying key words, discovering their origins, evolutions and multiple meanings is a valuable method for the mythic scientist when approached holistically.

Another essential technique in mythic science is symbol literacy. As previously mentioned, Amma creates the world using the word. However, the Dogon use “word” to mean idea, thought as well as symbol. The physical world is a thought, idea or symbol inside of the mind of Amma. Thus, the Dogon say all things are manifest by symbol or thought, and do not exist by themselves.⁴⁵ Indeed, the fundamental perception of existence within African traditions is symbolic. Symbols awaken and expand consciousness by conveying information from the mythic archives to the spiritual consciousness. Symbols are also used to create associations between the lived experience and mythic archives.

Because of these qualities, symbols are vital transmitters of *ashé* and appear in every aspect of culture. The so-called conventional arts of dancers, musicians, sculptors, mask makers and artisans employ symbols as do healers, priests and spiritual adepts. In the contemporary sphere, writers, researchers, entertainers, intellectuals, filmmakers and designers or anyone attuned to spirit also engage symbols in such a way that *ashé* from the mythic archives of Guinen manifests for celebration, teaching, healing, beauty, awe and harmony. Each specialist engages symbols in at least one of three essential ways: creation/activation, recognition and interpretation. For example in Vodou, the raft of the *lwa* Agwe contains symbols drawn from the mythic archives of Guinen and their contemporary experience that are activated in ritual. Agwe is the sea on which the spirits travel from Guinen, or Africa, to Haiti as well as the sea by which the enslaved arrived on and the French enslavers fled Haiti. Agwe personified is an admiral. Agwe faithfully receives those who die at sea.⁴⁶ The raft symbolizes the safe passage of Africans, both bodies and spirits, across the waters. A raft is an efficient, humble and inexpensive vessel used in Haitian Vodou to send offerings to the ocean. The ocean is a symbol of the Creator because it is the thought of Amma. The ocean is also a symbol of the primordial waters of creation, the waters of the womb, and the journey of enslaved Africans away from Guinen. An admiral is the highest ranking and most respected human on the sea. This symbol reveals the respect for which Haitians hold the sea and those who traversed and perished in it during the Middle Passage. The luxurious goods on the raft are befitting the exquisite taste of an admiral, and to an extent a sacrifice because they are provided by a community in constant struggle with poverty. The color scheme is blue and white, which are the colors of Agwe and, quite simply, the colors seen when looking out on the ocean. Each time the raft is built, decorated and launched during ritual *ashé* is generated that sustains Guinen and the people. Similarly, offerings of perfumes and sweets for Ezili Freda guarantees the presence of beauty, love and luxury even amidst crushing poverty. Plentiful meals of corn, beans, tripe and *clairin* (homemade rum) thank Cousin Zaka for allowing Haitian farmers to earn a living through agriculture.⁴⁷ These symbols affirm the Haitian experience. Symbolic meaning is based upon nature, as well as the intellect, experience and creativity of people, rather than an expression of pure materialism.

Symbol literary involves identifying symbols that correlate to the myth. Modern culture is saturated with symbols, but not all of them carry the *ashé* of Guinen. Context is important in identifying symbols more so than the medium in which the symbols appear. The example by

Finch demonstrates the ability to recognize symbols from the mythic archives within the audible symbols of music and contemporary creativity. The context of the creativity provides additional clues to further identify the symbol and how it correlates to the myth. Free jazz was born just as the Civil Rights movement intensified into turmoil. According to the mythic archive something profound is always born of turmoil and a deity is always in attendance at a birthing. In the Dogon myth, humans are born of the sacrifice of the *nommo anagonno* with other *nommo* as witnesses. Identifying mythic symbols in lived experience requires careful consideration of the context or situation. Turmoil is an important marker so is any other situation with strong emotion or *ashé* accompanying it.

The last element of symbol science is interpretation. Once a symbol has been created/activated and identified, it needs to be interpreted. What does the appearance of the symbol mean within the lived experience and the myth? The African-American experience can be interpreted as a journey through the underworld when read using Bantu-Kongo or Kemetic myth. The Bantu-Kongo cleverly fused the *ashé* of the words *mputu*, meaning underworld, with the phoneme for Portuguese *Mputuleeza* to make a clear statement that those being carried away in enslavement are entering the place of the hero-ancestors' journey. Similarly, the "people of the mountains of the West" can be interpreted as the people of the underworld according to Kemetic mythic archives. The underworld is symbolic of the tests and challenges that await the hero-ancestors and Ausar, rather than a "place" beneath the Earth. Those who complete the journey through *mputu* have a warm homecoming awaiting them in Kinshasa and according to Kemetic tradition, the *Sekhet-hetepu*, or Fields of Peace.⁴⁸ These are not geographical, political or social relocations but spiritual ones. The hero's return is a spiritual event. Interestingly, two of the major traditions on the continent associate the African experience in the West with the underworld though there are other ways to interpret an experience symbolically. This is because cultures create symbols and determine their meanings which are then reinforced through ritual.⁴⁹ By applying the lens of different cultures, multiple interpretations are possible. In addition, regions, communities, families and individuals create their own symbols which adds more dimensions to interpretation.

Symbol literacy constantly creates/activates, identifies and interprets symbols based on the mythic archives of Guinen as well as the contemporary experience of African people. Thus to be symbol literate is to recognize symbols in ancient Kemet as well as Nollywood. It is the ability to recognize in contemporary music a pattern from Kemet or the Underground Railroad as a metaphor for the Kemetic underworld.⁵⁰ Whether identified in nature, generated through creativity, or some combination of both, symbols and their meanings are influenced by context. They contain information encoded from the experiences of specific groups of people.

The last aspect of mythic analysis is the identification of ritual. Ritual is an occasion that focuses attention and activity to affirm, acknowledge and direct the flow of *ashé* or Life rhythm. The scale of ritual spans a simple libation poured by a person in remembrance of another who is

deceased to a small gathering of nervous initiates to extravagant multi-day events with participants from all over the world. Whatever the occasion, ritual moves and punctuates energy. In the case of the libation, the liquid calls to the realm of the ancestors. For the initiates, the ritual affirms the new energies available to them as young men and women, devotees, priests, or elders. The large and lavish rituals such as Gelede, Egungun, Osun of the Yoruba and Sodo of Vodou, affirm the power of the ancestors and deities.

On such occasions, ritual is quite explicit in that *ashé* is openly engaged and affirmed. However, there is a context to ritual that is implicit. These are occasions during which the engagement of *ashé* is much more subtle, often buried amidst social, political, economic, and cultural concerns. So much so that they are not even considered ritual by the participants. But, like epic memory, can manifest *ashé* unbeknownst even to the participants. These rituals are scattered throughout the landscape of the African experience and mark the collective energy of African people at any given point. Some examples, in no particular order are the coronation of Haile Selassie, various emancipation/independence celebrations, The Million Man, Women, Children and Family Marches, Hurricane Katrina, the inauguration of Barak Obama, the presence of Michelle Obama, and the transition of Michael Jackson. Each can be reconciled to the mythic archives of Guinen using the words, symbols, and context associated with the events.

For example, the coronation of Haile Selassie triggered a tremendous surge in the collective *ashé* of African people. The political and cultural implications of this event are common topics of discussion as is the mysterious statement attributed to Marcus Garvey regarding looking for the crowning of an African king as a sign of the redemption of African people.⁵¹ The truth of whether or not Garvey uttered the statement means less than the power of the words in the collective consciousness. Garvey (or whomever) was giving a sign that a change in the rhythm of Black life was to occur. Finch connects the coronation of Selassie to the stellar mythos of Kemet in which the Ethiopian king refers to a circumpolar constellation due to return to the position of the pole star.⁵² In Kemet, the shifting celestial-scape influences the symbolic and paraconscious life on Earth. Therefore the myth of the returning African king also can be read into the Million Man March and the inauguration of Barack Obama—symbolic returns of African kings.⁵³ These events, often convened because of dire, social, economic or cultural circumstances, are also occasions during which *ashé* is generated and directed.

Mythic science is concerned with identifying the appearance and direction of *ashé* in the African experience. This concern in no way diminishes social, economic and cultural circumstances. In fact, according to an African epistemology and worldview, *ashé* is the force that moves social, economic and cultural circumstances. Therefore, applying a mythic analysis of language, symbols and rituals, allows the researcher a more holistic perception of a situation that is in alignment with African approaches to knowledge.

Conclusion

An African approach to knowledge seeks a spiritual cause to phenomena in the physical world. Spiritual causes are explained in myth. Often criticized by contemporary intellectuals, such an approach is a mainstay in African cultures spanning from Kemet to Vodou. Intellectual inquiry into mythical phenomena is lacking and needed to bring balance to studies that too often succumb to conventional methodologies that are preconditioned to exclude myth as valid, the spirit realm as a primary source and events as having an exclusive materialistic context. African mythic science, which is an expression of African epistemology, is clearly connected to the realm of the ancestors and deities through *ashé*. Given this connection, mythic inquiry equates with the development of specific qualities of mind that comes from studies and encounters with symbols and rituals rather than objective, material or detached inquiry. Using established epistemologies and mythic methodology, intellectual inquiry into myth, ritual and *ashé* as living phenomena in the African experience produces a vibrant area of meaningful research. The inquiry, like the practice of Vodou it is named for, seeks a holistic view and reconciles all circumstances and situations with Guinen, the spiritual essence of Africa.

NOTES

¹ Phyllis Galembo, *Vodou: Visions and Voices of Haiti* (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 2005), 4.

² Joseph M. Murphy, *Working the Spirit: Ceremonies of the African Diaspora* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 38.

³ Murphy, *Working the Spirit*, 38.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Dona Marimba Richards, "The African Aesthetic and National Consciousness," in *The African Aesthetic: Keeper of Traditions*, ed. Kariamu Welsh Asante (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993,1994), 69.

⁶ Clyde W. Ford, *The Hero with an African Face: Mythic Wisdom of Traditional Africa* (New York: Bantam, 1999), 5.

⁷ Mutombo Nkulu-N'Sengha, "Epistemology" in *Encyclopedia of African Religion vol 1*, eds. Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2009) 242-245.

⁸ Nkulu-N'Sengha, "Epistemology," 243.

⁹ Ford, *Hero with an African Face*, 5.

¹⁰ Marcel Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen, *The Pale Fox*, trans. Stephen C. Infantino (Chino Valley, AZ: Continuum Foundation, 1986), 62.

¹¹ Derived from the Rastafarian tradition's emphasis on the power of words, *innerstand* denotes internalizing, applying and living information. *Overstand* is to have knowledge therefore power over an idea or concept whereas understand is not used because it implies a lack of mastery of knowledge because it is "over" you. Numerous other African traditions stress the importance of knowledge beyond the gathering of facts. Knowledge is to be lived or applied which in turns generates experience and hopefully wisdom which is to be shared.

¹² All daily activities and rituals of the Dogon are symbolically connected to their myth as is everything in their environment, natural and manmade.

¹³ Life with a capital "L" includes existence both within and beyond the physical forms whereas life speaks to physical existence or life that is perceived in the physical realm senses.

¹⁴ Ford, *Hero with an African Face*, viii.

¹⁵ There are 256 chapters, or Odu, within the oral archives of Ifa, the *orisha* of knowledge and wisdom. According to Wándé Abímbólá, each chapter contains approximately 600-800 verses totaling 208,000 verses. Traditionally these verses are learned and recited orally by *babalawo* or *iyanifa*, priests and priestess of Ifa. Some are available as written text though most are only known orally. Wándé Abímbólá, "Ifa: A West African Cosmological System," in *Religion in Africa*, eds. Thomas D. Blakely, Walter E.A. van Beek and Dennis L Thomson (London: James Currey, 1994) 101-116.

¹⁶ Intellectually, *Stolen Legacy* by George G.M. James and *Wonderful Ethiopians of the Ancient Cushite Empire* by Drusila Dunjee Houston (Black Classic Press) and later Cheikh Anta Diop's *African Origin of Civilization* prepared the foundation for African people to live the myths of Egypt by providing alternatives to views of Egypt based on Christianity. Socially, Egyptian myth was known within the Black Freemason and Moorish Science Temple communities, as well as the esoteric teachings of the Nation of Islam. The Ausar Auset Society, founded in 1973, is devoted exclusively to living the mythic knowledge of Egypt.

¹⁷ Ford, *Hero with an African Face*, 10.

¹⁸ One of the most thorough accounts of the Ausarian myth is from Plutarch. Though Greek, it contains the essential elements documented in the Egyptian originals (Charles S. Finch, III, *Echoes of the Old Darkland: Themes from the African Eden [Atlanta: Khenti, 1998], 57-87*). In all versions, Ausar is unquestionably the Lord of Resurrection as Ogo is challenger to divine order in various ways. See Griaule and Dieterlen, *The Pale Fox* for a description of Ogo's escapades.

¹⁹ Esu is described as a trickster because he channels both supernatural forces, those that assist and those that challenge making his appearance simultaneously welcome and unwelcome.

²⁰ An elegant example of how to read the collective African-American experience mythically occurs in the first chapter of Clyde W. Ford's *The Hero with an African Face: Mythic Wisdom of Traditional Africa* (New York: Bantam, 1999), 1-15. The relationship of language, race and myth are discussed on pages 6-15.

²¹ Relayed by Wándé Abímbólá in a series of public lectures sponsored by the Louisville Public Library, Louisville, Kentucky, 2005.

²² Kariamú Welsh-Asante, "The Aesthetic Conceptualization of Nzuri" in *The African Aesthetic: Keeper of Traditions*, ed. Kariamú Welsh Asante (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993,1994), 1-20.

²³ Joseph Campbell, *The Mythic Dimension: Selected Essays 1959-1987*, ed. Anthony Van Couvering (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 1-10.

²⁴ See *Africanisms in American Culture*, ed. Joseph Holloway, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991 for details of African influences on African American speech, music, arts and culture which in many cases have been absorbed by American culture.

²⁵ See *The Egyptian Book of the Dead: The Book of Coming Forth by Day*, trans. Raymond O. Faulkner (San Francisco: Chronicle, 1998); Jan Assmann, *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt*, trans. David Lorton (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2005); and Jeremy Naydler, *Shamanic Wisdom in the Pyramid Text: The Mystical Tradition of Ancient Egypt* (Rochester, VT: InnerTraditions 2005).

²⁶ A papyrus scroll prepared during the reign of Ramses V (20th Dynasty) details a humorous account of the battle of Heru and Set. The story is referred to as the Contendings of Horus and Seth and the scroll is called the Chester Beatty Papyrus.

²⁷ Charles S. Finch III, *The Star of Deep Beginnings: The Genesis of African Science and Technology* (Atlanta: Khenti, 1998), 98.

²⁸ The 2nd series is a mathematical formula developed in Kemet as a means of adding using multiplication. The exponentially increasing pattern eventually ceases to have pattern and culminates in Chaos.

²⁹ Patricia Turner and Charles Russel Coulter, *Dictionary of Ancient Deities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 122.

³⁰ Patricia Turner and Charles Russel Coulter, *Dictionary of Ancient Deities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 341.

³¹ Just as the Civil Rights movement sought liberation with increased intensity in the 1950s, jazz musicians sought liberation from the musical and societal conventions. Jazz musicians allowed themselves to be vessels for the free expression of spirit. Jazz is distinct from blues and gospel—expressions of Spirit that are filtered through everyday life and Christianity—because jazz forgoes all

previously held perceptions and conventions of music in order to manifest sounds from the depths of the musicians and the spirit realm. Since the music of this era was often without lyrics, they were able to reach the non-literate, symbolic depths of the listener's minds. According to Linda James Myers, this level of creativity is Optimal and should be the goal artists in all genres. See Linda James Myers, "The African American Aesthetic as Optimal Consciousness," in *The African Aesthetic: Keeper of the Traditions*, ed. Kariamu Welsh Asante (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993,1994), 21-29.

³² Myers, "Optimal Consciousness," 21-29.

³³ John Coltrane, *A Love Supreme*, CD, Liner Notes.

³⁴ Agency within the context of the sacred is discussed in Mambo Ama Mazama, "Afrocentricity and African Spirituality," *Journal of Black Studies* 33 (2002): 218-32.

³⁵ Ford, *Hero with an African Face*, 6.

³⁶ Many islands of the Caribbean—Hispaniola, Puerto Rico, Barbados, Jamaica for example—were covered with lush tropical forests before being cleared for the growing of export crops on large-scale plantations.

³⁷ The agitated water is also a reference to *kalanga*, the mythical river that separates the human from the spirit realm in the Bantu-Kongo tradition.

³⁸ Ford, *Hero with an African Face*, 6.

³⁹ Nkulu-N'Sengha, "Epistemology," 243.

⁴⁰ Finch III, *The Star of Deep Beginnings*, 271-275.

⁴¹ R.A. Waldron, *The God Genes Decoded: Secrets of the Universe Revealed in the Anatomy and Evolution of Consciousness in Ancient Egyptian Cosmology*, vol 1, rev. (Owl and Dove Publications, 2008), 45.

⁴² Ford, *Hero with an African Face*, 8.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁵ Griaule and Dieterlen, *The Pale Fox*, 59.

⁴⁶ Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, *Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santería to Obeah and Espiritismo* (New York: New York University Press,

2003), 111.

⁴⁷ Galembo, *Vodou: Visions and Voices*, 22-25; and Olmos and Paravisini-Gerbert, *Creole Religions*, 112.

⁴⁸ According to the Papyrus of Ani commonly translated as the *Book of Coming Forth by Day*.

⁴⁹ See Richards, "The African Aesthetic and National Consciousness," 63-82.

⁵⁰ Ford, *Hero with an African Face*, 8.

⁵¹ Rupert Lewis, "Marcus Garvey and Early Rastafarians: Continuity and Discontinuity," in *Chanting Down Babylon: The Rastafari Reader*, eds. Nathaniel Samuel Murrell, William D. Spencer and Adrian Anthony McFarlane (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 145-158.

⁵² Finch, *Star of Deep Beginnings*, 172-180.

⁵³ Charles S. Finch, Free Your African Mind Lecture Series, Harlem, New York, June 2008.