

# **Exploding the Myth of the Black Christian Past: What Can the New Black Church Learn From the Funeral Ceremony of Nelson Mandela?**

by

Salim Faraji, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Africana Studies  
California State University, Dominguez Hills

*Editor note:* The following editorial originally appeared in the January 12, 2014 issue of *The Los Angeles Post* and thus, published here by the permission of the author. Dr. Salim is a member of the editorial board of *The Journal of Pan African Studies*.

Rolihlahla Mandela was born and raised in the royal court of the Thembu people one of several ethnic groups of Xhosa nation in South Africa. He was given the name “Nelson” by a school teacher in the Methodist primary school he attended as a child in his ancestral village Qunu—the same place where he was laid to rest according to Xhosa traditional funerary rites on December 15, 2013. The “Christian” name Nelson was imposed on him as a customary practice to Europeanize black South Africans and usher them into the beneficence of Western Christendom. The result however was not so much the obliteration of his Xhosa identity, but the unfolding a man who had the ability to manage and negotiate the multiple cultural worlds of South Africa. Yet in a recent *Time Magazine* article about Nelson Mandela’s legacy as a protester, prisoner and peacemaker Richard Stengel notes that when he once asked Mandela about his own mortality and death, Mandela remarked he would be joining his ancestors. It had occurred to Stengel that he had never heard Mandela talk about God or heaven. His impression of Mandela was that despite his legal training, worldliness and Methodist education it was the wisdom of Mandela’s Xhosa elders that most guided his life’s work and mission to forge a democratic South Africa. Mandela’s legacy as an anti-apartheid revolutionary, freedom fighter, peacemaker and founder of a democratic South Africa had been incubated in the traditional values and culture of Africa, South Africa—the traditions of his people the Xhosa.

These same traditions that nurtured Mandela as a child also served as the basis of his funerary rites to facilitate his return to the spirit world, the ancestors. Given his role as a statesman and his upbringing as a Methodist one may ask why were the Christian and official state ceremonies insufficient. Why were they not enough? What was the significance of bidding farewell to Mandela according to Xhosa traditional culture and spirituality?

The most obvious response is that Mandela was raised in the royal house of the Themba people and like his father was groomed to serve as an advisor to the king—a rank equivalent to a Themba chief. Therefore it was appropriate that Mandela be buried in the tradition of Themba royalty. Second Mandela's body and hence his spirit could not remain in Pretoria because it was necessary for the Themba elders to accompany and escort his spirit back to the ancestors by talking to his body and preparing him for his return journey. This ritual also consisted of various purifications, the slaughtering of a cow and ox, the wrapping of the body in animal skins and the draping of Mandela's casket in a lion skin. All of this could only happen in Mandela's home village Qunu. Third and I believe the most crucial to understanding African and African Diaspora culture and spirituality is the persistence, resiliency and vitality of African Traditional Religion despite the historic presence of Christianity, Islam and to a lesser degree Judaism in global African communities. Colonization, Christianization and even Islamization has not eradicated the traditional culture and spirituality of African people, but in an ironic twist have often unwittingly served as the mediators of the reinvention and revitalization of these traditions.

Ali A. Mazrui popularized the notion of Africa's triple heritage of westernization, Islam and Christianity, but what must also be acknowledged is Africa's most enduring and fundamental heritage, humanity's most ancient spiritual culture, African Traditional Religions. This is what the world witnessed in the burial of Madiba—the idea that in Africa neither the state nor Christianity has the final word regarding death, but the ancestors reign supreme and represent the cultural and metaphysical core of a plethora of African cultures. In fact Mandela's funerary rites signaled the prevalence and commonality of African traditional culture in guiding the most important life stages in African culture such as death, birth, puberty, marriage and elderhood.

A recent study of African religious practices conducted by the Pew Research Forum on Religion and Public Life in 2008 and 2009 found that although Christianity and Islam are the dominant religions in Africa, African traditional religion and culture have not evaporated and the majority of African Christian and Muslims continue to practice traditional religion and culture in some form even, if the practice is limited to the ancestral, familial and medicinal spheres. The study also noted that the practices are not mutually exclusively—it is not an either-or scenario between traditional culture and the Abrahamic faith traditions.

What meaning does Mandela's ancestral funerary rites have for the North American context specifically African American religion and the Black Church tradition? Simply stated it challenges the Myth of the Black Christian Past and reminds us that the African enslaved for a period of over 150 years on the plantations of North America recreated the cultures and religious worldviews of classical and traditional Africa.

From the time of arrival of the first African persons enslaved at Jamestown, Virginia in 1619 to the establishment of the first Christian church for Africans in Savannah, Georgia in 1777 Africans practiced, although within the constraints of slavery the traditional cultures and religions of their homeland. Nearly four centuries of slavery, Christianization and the repression of African religion in the United States could not expunge the heart of African American religion, Africa's spiritual heritage.

W.E.B. DuBois in his classic work *The Souls of Black Folk* written in 1903, under the sub-heading *Of the Faith of the Fathers* provides an excellent description of the historical evolution of the Black Church originating in Africa. He suggested that the "music of Negro religion" sprung from African forests and the organizational structure and culture of the "Negro Church" was the most characteristic expression of its African character. DuBois argued quite convincingly based upon his own sociological, ethnographic and historical research that the "Negro Preacher" and what he called the first "Afro-American institution," the Negro church arose out of influential practices of the traditional priest and "medicine-man" on the plantations of the United States. He directly challenged the Myth of the Black Christian Past by asserting that the Negro Church was not initially Christian, but an amalgam of various African Traditional Religions—in fact the origin of the Black Church for DuBois was "Voodoo."

Yet as opposed to acknowledging and judiciously resourcing its traditional African spiritual heritage the New Black Church has sold out to what Dr. Paula McGee calls the 'Walmartization of African American Religion,' a consumerist, one-stop, capitalist, brand wielding, market-oriented mega-church that privileges the rich, blames the poor and feeds on Black women—through prosperity theology. Maybe Eddie Glaude was right nearly four years ago when he suggested that the Black Church is dead—dead because of its inability to resolve the conflict between mimicking and regurgitating European and Euro-American Christian protestant traditions and honoring its own ancestral spirituality.

Mandela's funeral and the countless Xhosa elders who presided over the rites, many of whom are Christian say loud and clear to the New Black Church don't run and hide from yourself—proclaim your spiritual legacy boldly and unapologetically standing before the world with dignity and self-respect. The great scholar of Black Religion Gayraud Wilmore prescribed with great prescience 30 years ago that it was desirable to try to recover some of the great enduring values of the traditional religions of Africa for the revitalization of Afro-American Religion in the United States but he also remarked that "only the theologians of the black churches may reasonably be expected to take such an initiative seriously and do something with it." What would be gained from such an enterprise? I believe there are 5 lessons that Mandela's funeral provides for exploding the Myth of the Black Christian past and re-asserting African spiritual heritage—that is whether to be a Wal Mart Church or a New Dynasty of African Spirituality:

- Africa and the African Diaspora’s enduring spiritual heritage is African traditional religion
- Multiple religious and cultural identities need not be mutually exclusively or in conflict—it is not an either-or scenario
- Respect and Venerate the Ancestors. Sacralize and memorialize their contributions
- Religious pluralism is an asset not a liability
- Western caricatures and demonization of African traditional religions is unfounded, biased, chauvinistic and racist.

Now for my Christian colleagues who may be wondering what does African indigenous spirituality have to do with Jesus? Well, let us appeal to the spirituality of Jesus as described in the New Testament—walking on water; changing water into wine; healing a blind man with medicinal clay and a fresh water bath; divining a women’s whole life by the well; ancestral invocation (the appearance of Elijah and Moses during the transfiguration); Mary and Joseph offering a sacrifice at the temple for the birth of their new child; the early Christian community conducting divination (casting lots) to determine who would replace Stephen after his assassination all resemble the practices of the traditional healers and shamans of Africa and other indigenous cultures around the world. In fact I have never observed or witnessed any of this in Christian churches in North America—mainline, charismatic or non-denominational, so it seems then there is much to learn from indigenous religions of African and Mandela’s funeral may point the way.



*Salim Faraji* is the author of *The Roots of Nubian Christianity Uncovered: The Triumph of the Last Pharaoh* (Africa World Press, 2012). He completed his M.Div. at the Claremont School of Theology and M.A. and Ph.D. at Claremont Graduate University. He specializes in early Christian history, Africana and Africanist historiography, Coptic Studies and the Sudanic, Napatan, Meroitic and Medieval periods of Nubian history. He is a licensed minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and he has been initiated in the Okomfo tradition of the Akan people in Ghana, West Africa.