

Flash of the Spirit

Homily for October 19, 2003. By Lone Jensen

If I ask you this morning if you are familiar with Buddhism, or Hinduism or Zen, I bet I'd get a few hands. But if I ask about African Spirituality other than maybe Egypt I bet I'd get very few hands. Unfortunately unless you happen to be African most of us know little, shamefully little, about Africa. And it is a shame, not only because the reasons we know so little are shameful: racism, colonialism, ethnocentrism, but also because of what we are missing out on: a rich and wonderful spiritual resource. Today we honor a small part of this varied and diverse heritage. Take it as part of a struggle against all those forces that has for too long barred us from those spiritual rivers. Long ago as a seminary student in Chicago I lived in a small 13th floor apartment near the busy Lakeshore drive. Night and day loud city noises rose from below: cars honking, fire trucks, ambulances, the rumbling of trains, infernal continuous car alarms and occasional shouts and now and then what sounded like either gun shots or car backfiring. On a corner shelf in my city apartment stood a small clay jar and I felt, even though I am a mostly rational person, just a little safer because of it. It was my metaphorical container for the Yoruba Goddess Oya, the powerful spirit of nature that was said to control the winds, the whirlpools in the waters

and yes, even the hurricanes. She seemed to be very much at home in the chaos of that windy city. A strong, but unpredictable life force just like the storms howling in from the Great Lakes, like the teeming river of humanity, the creative chaos of a large city. She represents the forces of nature outside us but also the forces of nature within us. Like our life force she can be used for good or evil, exploding sometimes, much as the storms, into violence and destruction.

Here in the desert nature bakes us, dust storms swirls and the wind brings rains as blessings. The desert has little mercy. But plenty of sun unlike a winter day in Chicago when the grayness is so pervasive it seems to invade even our souls. It was on such a day I found her in the quiet library at the University of Chicago, a perfect expression for all the changes taking place in my own life at the time: the whirlwind Oya. And with her I discovered the rest of the Yoruba Pantheon. It turned into a voyage of wonder and discovery much like the young American missionary who one bright morning in the middle of the 19th century ascended a lofty granite boulder and looked down upon the Yoruba city of Abeokuta. He wrote: *What I saw disabused my mind of many errors in regard to Africa. The city extends along the bank of the Ogun for nearly six miles and has a population of approximately 200.000 - instead of being the naked, lazy savages I had been led to expect I saw a lively industrious city. The men are builders, blacksmiths, basket*

makers, hat makers, traders, barbers, tailors, farmers and workers in leather and morocco, they make razors, swords, knives, hoes, billhooks, axes, arrowheads and make soap, dyes, palm oil, nut oil and all native earthen ware and many other things used in the country. It was a city much as those I had left. It is not strange he was surprised, no one had told him, just as I was never told, that Africa was more than Egypt and Ethiopia, that it held rich treasures of many cultures and religions. The young man came to save soul of those what he had been told were savages, to give them religion. How else do you justify missionary work? He found a sophisticated city instead. Why was Africa where humanity originated called the “Dark Continent”? Why is there no outcry to save Liberia? Sure today we know better but the majority of us still know very little about Africa, and even less about the wonderfully varied and rich spirituality of that continent. We tend to stop at King Tut and look no further. It is our loss for this world is as rich and varied, and considerably more sophisticated at times, than any Greek mythology we may have learned in school. If you were to ask about African spirituality many Westerners go blank. I too fell in that category. The reasons for this lack of knowledge are found in the shameful history of colonialism and slavery and in zealous missionaries who have come in and tried to wipe out these religions. Even today you are more likely to find information about ancient African religions in the art museums than in the religion section of the library.

But the spirits are powerful. The Orishas entered this country held safely within the human hearts and souls of captive African slaves. You can find traces of that ancient African influences in the black culture both here in the U.S.A. and in South America, the West Indies, Cuba and Haiti.

Today though I am not here to tell you again about the history of oppression and the resultant suppression of ideas, instead I want to share with you the richness and beauty of African Spirituality. If you come away with anything after this service I hope it is a deep curiosity and a wish to learn more.

And should you wish to explore further on your own I have made a few copies of a bibliography covering this subject. Just ask me after the service. See, I went to the University of Chicago and they believe in salvation by bibliography there.

This is one particular form of African spirituality, a small part of the rich heritage of Mother Africa. The Yoruba people were city dwellers and had been so since medieval times. Their holy city Ile-Ife flourished with an artistic and poetic richness, not unlike the city-states of ancient Greece. This was their religion

In Yoruba religion the various spirits and deities represent elemental forces, energies, which is why many of them are traditionally kept in containers, baskets or clay jars. But they are really embodiments of Ashe, translated as creative energy, spiritual command and the

power to make things happen. In this way they symbolize empowerment for mortal women and men. The supreme deity is known as Yoruba Olurun, master or mistress of the heavens, the sky. But Olurun is neither male nor female but a vital force, the ultimate Ashe.

As a Unitarian Universalist I am reminded of one of our spirits, Henry Nelson Wieman who used the phrase: the Creative Energy for Good to mean God.

Ashe according to legend came to us in the form of animals. Especially holy are the python, the viper, the white snail, the woodpecker and the earthworm. Yes, you heard right: the earthworm, that most humble of creatures. Human beings have been given the power to make things happen for good or for bad. The animal messengers reflect this ambivalent power, some like the viper are dangerous, others patient and slow moving or deliberate like the woodpecker. The earthworm has the most elemental power, ventilating and cooling the fertile earth. Following the moral sanctions, keeping one's cool and balance is Ashe. A work of art with spirit that transcends the ordinary contains Ashe. Birds represent both the human spirit and also the Ashe of the Mothers. Birds are often shown on the top of beaded headdresses. The Ashe of the Mothers, of older women is considered to be especially full of mystical powers. As a woman over 55 in a youth culture I think this idea is worth considering.

So far it sounds like we could all agree here. But the Orishas come with a price. You do not chose a deity, or spirit, they choose you. To become possessed by the spirit is to “make the God” to capture the numinous flowing life force within one's body. The saints then go marching in, God’s spirits dancing in human form. The radiance of the eyes reflects the brightness of the spirit. The Orishas have both inner spiritual eyes to see the soul and outer eyes to view the world with.

The goal of Yoruba religion is the development of good character referred to as coolness, gentle generosity. We here in the dry desert can appreciate their images of this mystical coolness of deep river waters. Cowrie shells, the ancient Yoruba coins and wealth comes from such waters. " *A man may be very, very handsome, handsome as a fish within the water, but if he has no character he is no more than a wooden doll.*"

The ideal person follows a gentle path of moderation, observes important customs and understands the laws of the earth, the grounding life force. When you give something you do so with both hands so as to be giving fully and generously. Generosity is one thing we as 20th century Desert city people can learn from these ancient African city dwellers. For newcomers here today let me be clear, no I do not believe in the literal physical existence of these deities as separate supernatural entities. They are metaphors for the forces within us, rich and poetic

names for nature's powers. The Orishas they have the whatever power we give to them, or the power of nature.

But there are important lessons here. First of all these powers are seen as ambivalent or neutral. It is up to us to choose how to use them: for good or for evil. The Orisha of the crossroad, Eshu is indeed important for he symbolizes our choice. But our human powers are limited. This second point is something we as Religious Liberals often have a hard time with. We have such a deeply ingrained belief that anything is possible if we only work hard enough or appoint the right committee or task force! As in this old joke about how it was announced that the Ice cap was melting and the entire landmass; all of the continents would be submerged under water in 30 days. So naturally there was a lot of praying going on with special services in all the churches, temples and synagogues. The Unitarian Universalists also called a special congregational meeting and the speaker said; We have a lot of work here. We better get some committees going right away. We only have one month to learn how to breathe under water! Now I love this about us, if we believed in hell we would reform it, but there are times in our lives when we have to accept that there are powers we can not control so that we can use our energy wisely. The serenity prayer expresses this well. Give me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change those I can and the wisdom to know the

difference. Finally I want to draw your attention again to the Yoruba ideal moral character. The ideal is that of coolness, evidenced as gentle generosity of character.

For just a moment try to imagine what this world, this country and this city might be like if this was the highest ideal? If to give generously of our time and our possessions with both hands was our highest aspiration as a society? It boggles my mind, this dream of that kind of society where no one would be homeless, no children go hungry, where no one would have to remain ill because they couldn't afford medical care, where education was available to those who sought it and 202 people would not die in the desert trying to cross the border to find work in this country. Imagine mystical coolness, mystical indigo blue coolness to cool our angers, cleanse our wounds and heal our earth. I call upon such a gentleness of character, a life giving generosity with strength to make it happen.

Deep in the waters the river spirits promise abundance. May the cleansing waters and their mystical coolness soothe our souls! Forces for good or evil help us to choose, the right path, the righteous path! Ashe! So be it! And next time you see an earthworm that has lost it's way, pick it up and put it back on the grass, remember it too is a messenger of Ashe.

(The participants are seated spread out among the congregation and as they are "called forth" they introduce themselves and place their symbolic objects upon the altar.)

We will now create the altar and honor those forces that make things happen, the embodiment of the life force, of Ashe, the Yoruba deities, the Orisha.

Nana Bukuu. I am Nana Bukuu, the mother of the Orisha. I am the courage and accomplishment of women. I know many secrets, some terrifying. My symbol is my staff, embodying my intimidating powers. Many things become possible when you use my staff. If the people of a town know how to use this staff they will be able to prevent war. I am the voice of experience, of age and of wisdom. Listen to my words!

Eshu-Elegba. I am Eshu, also known as Elegba. I am the guardian of the crossroads, the place where decisions are made. I am the change, the power to make things happen. I help those who have to distinguish between truth and falsehood. I am the guardian of the crossroads. You implore me when you have to choose a path, make a choice. My symbol

is the red parrot feather, worn upon the brow, the seat of mind and judgment. I am the power of change, use me wisely!

Yemoja. You hear me in a thousand voices, the myth of conflict that threatens to destroy the world and the mystic coolness in my waters that brings back order into the world. My symbols are the Cowrie shells, the wealth of the Yoruba people. I am the calmness within you, the flowing coolness of your soul. Drink deep from my waters!

Osanyin. I am Osanyin, the healer, the spirit of the forest. I know which herbs to use for cures and represent the healing power of the forest, greater than any document. But I myself am wounded, because at first I would not share my knowledge. I have one eye, one arm one leg. But wounded I heal others. My symbols are beads, shining beads that represent my herbs, my powers of restoration.

I am the healing power within you. Those of you that are wounded, use me well and wisely.

Ogun. I am Ogun, the lord of the cutting edge, of war and of iron. I live in the blacksmiths forge, in his anvil and in the cutting edge of knives. You can use me for evil and for good. All iron is my children, the hoes, the rakes, the axes, and the guns. I am the Lord of possibilities,

of the cutting edge. My symbols are all irons, but most of all the knife embodies my powers. I am the cutting edge use me for good!

Oshun. I am Oshun, a mother of twins, considered among my people to be especially lucky. I am the deep water, the powers to predict, to foretell what will happen. Close to the earth, at the bottom of deep waters I listen. You hear me in the waves of the oceans, rushing like the sound of my bracelets.

To honor me, my people cast flowers upon the waters, for wishes. I am the future, I am your hopes. Listen to my voice, listen !

Shango. I am Shango, the tempest, the storm, and the thunder. I dance across the skies and strike the courtyards I bring rain and renewal. The earthworm is my special messenger. As I dance across the sky he dances within the earth making it fertile. My symbol is a flaming stone. I am your powers of creation, of renewal! Follow me!

Oya. I am Oya, the spirit of the whirlwind, the tornado, and the whirlpool, of earth's powers untamable powers. My worshippers disguise themselves and dance. You only call upon me when you really need me, because although I will give you strength, I am unpredictable. My symbol is the clay jar in which I am kept, with cloth tied around it to secure my powers. I sweep the world clean and back in order.

I am nature's spirit within you. I am the spirit of life! Teeming,
untamable, pulsating, creating life: Let my spirit move you!

It is time for Oya let me open her jar.