

African Indigenous Spirituality: It's Not a Thing of the Past!

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The trans-Atlantic slave trade – and its lesser-known counter part, the intra African slave trade that took place between Southern and Northern Africa – changed the world in irreversible ways. While we as Africans and African descendents are largely aware of the fact that our original languages and cultures were changed as a result of these events, many of us are relatively unaware of one of the most important changes imposed on us as a people: the denial of the right to continue our indigenous spiritual practices.

The Black Church has, no doubt, been a vital institution to the African American community and many of our greatest Black leaders have come from the Christian (and Islamic) tradition. Nevertheless, the history of how we as Africans – both on the continent and the Diaspora – came to be Christians, Catholics and Muslims is largely an ugly one filled with violence, slavery, and, most detrimentally, the denial and demonization of our indigenous traditions. Both enslaved Africans brought to the Americas and those remaining on the continent were taught to believe that indigenous African spiritual practices were primitive, backwards, and inherently inferior to the revealed religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam and that in order to be true human beings we had to convert to one of the above. Those lessons have certainly been well-taught and well-learned, as many continental and Diasporic Africans still hold these views and many still look upon indigenous African spiritual practices with fear and apprehension.

Despite the attempts to obliterate African indigenous spiritual practices during the slave trades and colonial periods, many Africans did manage to bring sacred traditions to the Americas with them and, through the years and against heavy opposition, African descendents in the “New World” have maintained many of the practices of groups like the Yoruba, Bantu and Akan, from which many of our ancestors hail. Yoruba-based Ifa as well as Ghanaian-based Akan, some indigenous Senegalese traditions and others are practiced in the in the United States. Yoruba-based Lucumi and Congo-based Palo Mayombe are practiced in Cuba, Puerto Rico and the United States. Congo-based Vodou is practiced in Haiti. Yoruba-based Condomble and Umbanda are practiced in Brazil. Yoruba-based Shango Baptist is practiced in Trinidad and the list goes on. The traditions have taken on different names and adaptations depending on their locations, but their very presence here in the Americas speaks to the strength of the traditions and the resilience and determination of the ancestors to maintain them.

African indigenous spiritual practices are also still maintained in a big way on the African continent, and many African descended peoples in the United States make pilgrimages to West Africa and the Caribbean each year to become initiated as practitioners in these traditions. In some cases, the ancient traditions have been blended with Christian, Islamic – and particularly Catholic – practices and shrouded in secrecy out of necessity in order to maintain them, since they were often banned under slavery and colonialism. Despite the blending that has taken place, African indigenous spiritual traditions are still viable in their own right and there is a definite push to remove the non-African influences and bring the traditions out of secrecy, as it is no longer necessary.

African indigenous spiritual traditions are not a thing of the past: they are still alive, well and being practiced by Africans and African descendents around the world every day. The philosophies behind these practices have become the subject of study at many of the most prestigious American universities like Harvard, Berkeley, Temple, Yale and right here at the City University of New York. There is still much ignorance and sensationalism around African indigenous spiritual traditions, but misinformation is being challenged by scholars and practitioners alike from around the world and the vitality of African philosophies and world-views are being brought to the forefront through research and scholarship, which is promising. While a good majority of African and African descended peoples will more than likely remain members of our adopted religions, we do, at least, have the option of learning about the rich spiritual traditions of our ancestors and practicing them openly and freely if we so choose. Whether or not we decide to become practitioners of African indigenous spiritual traditions, recognizing their value and validity and, most importantly, giving them respect pays homage to those who came before, and that is something all of our religions and traditions can agree on.