THE SPIRITUALITY OF AFRICAN PEOPLES

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President Clark, Dean Smith, Senator Oliver, friends of the James Robinson Johnson Chair in Black Canadian Studies: First of all I should like to express my deep appreciation for the honour you have given me in inviting me to deliver this letter in honour of the James Robinson Chair in Black Canadian Studies. More importantly, I thank you, on behalf of all black Canadians for the wisdom both you and your government have shown in giving academic recognition to the experiences of African peoples who arrived on these shores more than two centuries ago seeking freedom and empowerment from centuries of enslavement and degradation.

I have chosen to speak on the subject, "The Spirituality of African Peoples" for the following reasons (a) because the life and destiny of black Canadians is tied up with that of African peoples everywhere; (b) that we as black Canadians cannot know our own history or arrive at an understanding of our own identity in isolation from African peoples everywhere; (c) that the categories of black Canadian self-understanding must emerge out of the African experience on the continent and in the diaspora; (d) that the history of black Canadians has been integrally tied to that of Africa, the Caribbean and the United States.

In this lecture I will argue that African people here and elsewhere are united by their common spiritual strivings. That is to say, they relate all dimensions of human life and especially their strivings for freedom and empowerment to some transhistorical source of power and meaning.

Thus, African peoples have never believed in an anthropocentric universe. Rather, they have always assumed that humanity is surrounded by a realm of spirits in which the Supreme God is thought to preside over a pantheon of sub-divinities and ancestral spirits. Alienated and capricious spirits are also thought to reside in that supernatural realm. More often than not, witches

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and sorcerers have located the source of their special powers in one or other of these alienated spirits. The widespread traditional African belief that the Supreme God is creator and Preserver of all reality may well be the single most important commonality that exist among the vast diversity of African peoples. There is general agreement among African scholars that this monotheistic belief was not the sole preserve of Christians. Rather, Africans have long claimed that all reality originates from God and is destined to return to God. Thus, Africans have always believed that nothing in the universe is ever finally lost. For the many diverse peoples both on the continent and in the diaspora, long threatened and oppressed by ubiquitous forces of destruction, this common belief in God's protective providence has been their primary source of meaning and strength. Consequently, African peoples are unexcelled in their reverence for an devotion to all spiritual phenomena which they readily incorporate into their thought and practice. Thus, no adequate research into African cultural life can be undertaken by ignoring the spirituality of the people.

It is interesting, however, that many African languages do not have a word for religion in spite of the fact that they view the whole of life as sacred. As a matter of fact, Africans cannot conceive of human life apart from its relationship to invisible spirits. That is to say, they believe that neither humanity nor nature is alone in the universe but surrounded by and dependent upon the superior power of eternal spirits. Thus, for them, the realms of nature, humanity and spirit comprise a cosmological whole and, hence, it is unthinkable for Africans to think of humanity apart from its connectedness with that larger world perspective.

Further, the African understanding of humanity is reflective of human experience as a whole and, consequently, it unites thought and experience, reason and emotion, person and community, present and past, nature, history and spirit. Similarly, African spirits and divinities are related to the whole of nature and history. Thus, spiritually pertains to the whole of life and more specifically, it is the principle by which the human spirit is related to its primary source of meaning and power. In the African world-view, all life is thought to be created, recreated, preserved and affirmed by the Supreme God. Hence, the chief function of humans is to create, recreate, preserve and affirm life in communion with God and all of God's spiritual associates which include not only sub-divinities and ancestral spirits, but all leaders, institutions and movements serving the well-being of their peoples.

Even a casual observer of African cultures quickly discerns that the continent is host to a vast diversity of cultures. Each traditional culture has its own cosmology and cultic practices. That is to say, each culture has its own spiri-

tuality. In addition, these various cosmologies have incorporated two guest religions into their pantheons namely, Islam and christianity.

Contrary to the thought of many, Christianity did not replace traditional African religions but, rather, traditional African religions absorbed christianity into themselves thus transforming both. Clearly, no continent in the world comprises a higher degree of multi-culturalism than Africa. Over a thousand distinctly different linguistic groups plus a larger number of dialects prove this claim.

Yet all of that rich cultural diversity has been constantly threatened by the countervailing spirituality of European domination evidenced in three and one-half centuries of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. It is conservatively estimated that approximately twenty-five million Africans were stolen from their homeland and packed like sardines into the bellies of slave ships to suffer the hell of the so-called middle passage. In the oppressive cauldron of bondage, a slave culture gradually emerged that united much of the African tribal diversity. But the unity was not realized apart from great sacrifice which included the loss of tribal identity and familial belonging; the loss of freedom and dignity. The lamentations and longings of African souls were expressed in word, song, music, dance and story. The spirituality of the people appeared in each of those genres. Each creative activity expressed in some way their communion with God and God's realm of spirits: the primary source of their power to endure, resist and transcend the evil forces they experienced. Clearly, the only thing that these oppressed people had to rely upon for strength and meaning was the spiritual resources that they had brought with them from their homeland: unseen mythical treasures deeply concealed in their consciousness and firmly written in their hearts. It was natural for these suffering people to call upon their ancestral spirits and their gods for relief. Accordingly, their priests and medicine men, conjurers, witches and sorcerers used their powers against their captors, but alas, to little effective avail even though many slave-owners often felt greatly threatened by the strange activities of conjurors, witches and sorcerers. Yet, the failure of the latter to overthrow the system of slavery by traditional methods alone, gave most of the Africans cause to view their captors as incarnations of evil forces with invincible powers.

As a matter of fact, traditional African societies believed that all misfortune was caused by human wrong-doing which caused an upset in the cosmological balance which, in turn, caused the resulting misfortune. This circular process implied the need for the restoration of the equilibrium which, in traditional African society, effective resolution required the careful attention of professional priests and diviners.

The earliest and most celebrated account of the process of enslavement is the autobiography of Olaudah Equiano, also known as Gustavus Vassa, son of an Ibo tribal ruler born in 1745. When his kidnappers first handed him over to the white slave traders he thought that he was being transferred into the hands of spirits. This terrified him more than anything else. He wrote accordingly:

> The first object that saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast was the sea, and a slave ship, which was then riding at anchor, and waiting for its cargo. These filled me with astonishment, that was soon converted into terror, which I am yet at a loss to describe, ... I was now persuaded that I had got into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me. Their complexions too, differing so much from ours, was very different from any I had ever heard, united to confirm me in this belief. [1]

No outsider could possibly imagine the intensity of Equiano's fear. It had to have been most terrifying for an eleven year African boy to have been snatched from the security of his familial and tribal community where faithful devotion to the ancestral spirits was a constant source of protection against evil forces. Believing that he was in the presence of evil spirits must have been a dreadful experience. Hence, we are not surprised to read, "I no longer doubted of my fate; and, quite overpowered with horror and anguish, I fell motionless on the deck and fainted.[2]

Assuming that his captors were evil spirits, it was natural for Equiano to ponder his fate and to conclude that he would surely be sacrificed and eaten by these strange beings."... I did not know what to think of these white people, though I very much feared they intended to kill and eat me."[3] His account of a storm at sea is similarly revealing:

> One night we lost a man overboard; and the cries and noise were so great and confused, in stopping the ship,that I, who did not know what was the matter, began, as usual, to be very much afraid, and to think they were going to make an offering with me, and perform some magic, in which I still believed that they dealt. As the waves were very high, I thought the Ruler of the seas was angry, and I expected to be offered

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1 "The Life of Olaudah Equiano," in Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Classic Slave Narrative*, (New York, New American Library, 1987) pp. 32-33.
2 *Ibid*., p. 33.
3 *Ibid*., p. 41.

up to appease him. This filled my mind with agony, and I could not any more, that night, close my eyes again to rest.[4]

Although modified and regulated in many ways, Equiano's intense fear of his white captors and his suffering at their hands, is paradigmatic of the African experience everywhere. For many long centuries, African peoples on the continent and in the diaspora experienced European peoples as their paramount enemy. Three and on-half centuries of slavery, followed by another century of colonialism demonstrates that fact. And the contemporary condition of African peoples everywhere on the continent, in the Caribbean, Latin America, Western Europe, United States and Canada is characterized by the conditions of neocolonialism, a synonym for economic dependency, political instability and systemic racism. In a world-wide market place of opportunity African peoples still lack the necessary conditions for adequate access to the means for a viable human life. In every country disproportionate numbers of African peoples suffer every kind of deprivation and impoverishment.

During the periods of slavery and colonialism Africans discovered that none of their traditional forms of resistance were effective instruments against the technological superiority of European weaponry which was the principal cause of their subjugation. Yet they held on to the only thing that Europeans could not fully invade and conquer, namely, the internal life of the human spirit. From within those concealed spaces there eventually emerged the fruits of their spiritual genius. These represent the spiritual strivings of their souls. In many opaque ways, usually embedded in the ordinariness of daily life, Africans shared with one another their deepest values and longings. Such sharing gradually issued in the development of a common ethos; a community; a shared life of meaning and power grounded in a supernatural source of power and meaning.

Under the conditions of slavery, the spirituality of African peoples expressed itself through the drudgery of daily work. Work songs, bodily rhythms, functional crafts, anecdotal stories, humour, mimicry, parody and code gestures of meaning finally reached their fullest reality in the creative concealment and development of slave religion which was an amalgam of Christian and African elements.

Under the conditions of colonialism, the spirituality of African peoples expressed itself through the many and various resistance activities of independent churches, charismatic prophets, mission schools, African newspapers

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4 *Ibid*., pp. 41-42

and cultural societies all of which, in one way or another, advocated some element of Pan-African independence from western hegemonic control.

Under the conditions of freedom in the so-called new world, freed slaves engaged in various forms of public resistance to slavery, segregation and discrimination. In the United States, these activities were usually centred in churches that were independently owned and controlled by blacks. Invariably these churches were the chief training ground for prophetic leadership of this sort. Further, the churches interpreted the prophetic leadership of their so-called "race-leaders" as blessed by God and, hence in alliance with God. This grounding in eternal power implied that the prophetic cause could not be defeated. This courageous type of leadership evidenced a new form of African spirituality militantly demanding an end to all forms of racism and colonialism. One exemplar par excellence of this type of spiritual leadership was Martin Luther King, Jr.

Wherever there were black churches or organizations, however, not fully owned and controlled by blacks, whether in the Caribbean, the united States, or Canada, strong prophetic leadership rarely developed. For example, whenever the governance of Black churches was under the jurisdiction of white denominational judicatories, or whenever black churches were dependent on white denominations for financial support, they were prevented from exercising their own independent judgments on social justice issues. Since freedom is the sine qua non of prophetic leadership, that is, public social criticism, the latter can only arise from within a spiritual context of freedom and independence. Thus black dependent churches, then and now, are not likely to rise beyond the function of being custodians of the sacred traditions. As such they are able to preserve the past, carry on the routinized functions of ministry and give their people various types of moral and therapeutic assistance. In short, they help their people to adapt to their conditions and to seek improvement in their situations through various forms of assimilationism. Because they are dependent and have no organized space of societal freedom, they are not likely to become agents of social change. Should they become independent, however, they might unite their pastoral functions with those of the prophetic reformers. Invariably, however, under the conditions of systemic racism, whenever dependent black churches seek independence they are generally blamed by their benevolent patrons as covert racists in reverse.

Interestingly, one of the first goals that the late Dr William P Oliver set for his ministry when he arrived at Cornwallis Street Baptist Church in 1937 was that of making the church independent of the Home Mission Board of the United Baptist Convention. At that time all the black baptist churches in

Nova Scotia had a long history of economic dependency on the predominantly white denomination. Dr Oliver was eventually successful in leading the church into financial self-sufficiency. The realization of that goal had a profound reciprocal effect on the spirituality of the people. The joyful experience of having become a self-determining church gave them a strong sense of pride and dignity in themselves and their own achievements. One of Dr Oliver's lasting legacies in Nova Scotia was his advocacy of economic independence throughout the African United Baptist Association. This activity allied him and others with all black independence movements in Africa and throughout the African diaspora. This philosophy of freedom laid the groundwork for all self-determining activities of Blacks in Canada and of these, the most prominent examples are: the Black United Front of Nova scotia, the Black Cultural Society of Nova Scotia, Black newspapers in various cities in Canada, various black cultural and professional associations.

It is also a fact that unlike Africa and many of the Caribbean islands, African Americans and African Canadians will never constitute sovereign nations but will remain racial and ethnic minority cultures within larger cultural contexts. This reality has been the cause of much spiritual strife and moral ambiguity among Blacks in this hemisphere caused by the evil of racism.

In his 1903 essay, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" W.E.B. DuBois articulated his famous theory of *double consciousness.* Here he argues that African Americans (and I might add, African Canadians) are bi-cultural, embodying African and American cultures that wage a constant strife within each person:

> One ever feels his twoness - an American, a Negro; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keep it from being torn asunder.... The history of the American negro is the history of this strife, - this longing to gain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows ... [5]

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5 W.E.B. DuBois, "The Souls of Black Folk" in *Three Negro classics*, (New York: Aveon Books, 1965), 214-215.

With the possible exception of the most isolated farmer on the African continent, African peoples everywhere are at least bi-cultural and countless numbers are multi-cultural. Additionally, African peoples in this hemisphere are bi-racial or multi-racial and this adds the additional element of complexity about which DuBois wrote. Thus slavery and colonialism have not only produced bi-cultural and multi-cultural peoples of African descent but also bi-racial and multi-racial peoples. Thus, African culture and African blood are mixed with Euro-American and Euro-culture and African blood are mixed with Euro-American and Euro-Canadian culture and blood to form a peculiar amalgam. Hence, all peoples of African descent in this hemisphere are aware of this dual or multiple consciousness about which DuBois spoke. In fact, African spirituality everywhere, but especially here, has been shaped by these bi-cultural and multi-cultural elements and their music, songs, dance, religion, literature, art and all other cultural expressions bear the marks of that struggle to syncretize disparate cultural elements into new patterns of meaning and coherence. Thus, African peoples may yet give to the world its most enduring forms of artistic expression because their creative urges and imaginative rationality emerge from a complex experiential reservoir of strife and suffering. Yet through it all they have always sought to give theological meaning to their human condition. And they have done this in numerous ways.

Ethiopianism has been one effective means of integrating the spirituality of African Christians in the diaspora. The African search for positive references to the submerged African tradition within the biblical text, led to the discovery of a text that has been a keystone for all African Christian nationalism, namely, Psalm 68:31, "Princess shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God." This text became the justifying source for the so-called "Ethiopian Movement" that swept the African continent in the 1880's. Its principal aims were resistance to colonialism and advocacy for the separation of African churches from European missionary control. Several Christian prophets in this movement were imprisoned and executed by the British. Prophet John Chilembwe of Malawi, was executed in 1915 and Prophet Simon Kimbangu (founder of the church of Jesus Christ of the Prophet Simon Kimbangu) was imprisoned from 1921 until his death in 1951 in the former Belgium Congo. All such independence movements in Africa and in the diaspora claimed some measure of inspiration from Psalm 68:31. The Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York City was organized by a group of Ethiopian traders who had resisted the segregated seating patterns of the white Baptist Church in New York.

Ethiopia's almost unique status of having been one of two African countries never to have fallen under the yoke of European colonial rule added immense significance to her sacred nature among African peoples everywhere. Further, the import of Ethiopianism was completed by the symbol of its throne: the resplendent majesty of her imperial Emperor, who traced his descent back through Queen Cleopatra to the Queen of Basheba, wife of King Solomon. Further, the Emperor was the defender of the faith and the head of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church which tradition claimed has been founded by St Thomas the Apostle. When his majesty Haile Selassie visited New York City in the 1930's he visited Abyssinian Baptist Church and presented the church with a gift of a six foot silver cross which is firmly embedded in the pulpit area of the present edifice. In Trinidad, Jamaica and other parts of the Caribbean, the Rastafarian Movement claimed the emperor Haile Selassie as the Living God and its devotees his followers, the Ras Tafari. In addition the movement claims that salvation comes only to those who are repatriated to Africa and live under the sovereignty of Africans. These claim continuity in philosophy and theology with the Marcus Garvey's "Black to Africa Movement" of the 1920's which also spread throughout the United States, Canada, and the Caribbean with the blessing of Bishop Alexander McGuire and his newly founded African Orthodox Church, a branch of which still survives in Sydney, Nova Scotia. (Happily, we have in the audience tonight Mayann Francis - Employment Equity Officer for Dalhousie University, the daughter of Father Francis who pastored the African Orthodox Church in Sydney for forty-one years). The founding of the Liberian settlement of repatriated American slaves in 1820 as well as the colonization of sierra Leone by returned slaves from Nova Scotia in 1792 contained many nationalist elements reflecting the spirituality of their peoples. Similarly, most black nationalist and pan-Africanise movements exhibit similar traits. Inspired by the independence of Ghana in 1957 under the charismatic leadership of Kame Nkrumah, black consciousness movements in the United States emerged and soon spread to Canada and linked up with similar movements in South Africa in the late sixties and early seventies. All exhibited the common goal of freedom and empowerment. The former is almost complete in our day but, alas, empty of substance. Empowerment seems still to be a far-off dream.

Another event that we must not overlook in our discussion of African spirituality is the process by which the term "African" was endowed with positive meaning by late 18th and early 19th century freed slaves. As indicated above, Africans in the diaspora were forced to construct a new identity. Even though most of them had absorbed the prevailing pejorative attitudes

towards Africa as being "uncivilized", "idolatrous", "savage-like", "cannibalistic" they, nevertheless, reinterpreted the term "Africa" for themselves and gave it transcendent meaning by elevating it to the symbolic order of sacred discourse. The results may well constitute one of their creative achievements.

The symbolization of Africa by the African diaspora enabled them to take possession of their own reality and, in so doing, they succeeded in thwarting what Charles Long calls their oppressor's "linguistic conquest."[6]

Clearly, symbols have no literal definitions since they transcend their liberal forms. That is to say, symbols point to realms of meaning beyond themselves. Accordingly, the symbol "Africa" referred to the newly-formed spiritual unity of disparate tribal groups made possible by the dreadful conditions of slavery. Charles Long describes its sacred value thusly:

> So even if they had no conscious memory of Africa, the image of Africa played an enormous part in the religion of the blacks. The image of Africa, as image related to historical beginnings, has been one of the primordial religious images of great significance. It constitutes the religious revalorization of the land ... In this connection, one can trace almost every nationalistic movement among the blacks and find Africa to be the dominating and guiding image. Even among religious groups not strongly nationalistic, the image of Africa or Ethiopia still has relevance. This is present in such diverse figures as Richard Allen, who organized the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the late eighteenth century, through Martin Delaney in the late nineteenth century, and then again in Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa Movement" of the immediate post-World War I period, and finally in the taking up of this issue again among black leaders of the present time.[7]

Thus, the basic struggle against the dehumanization process of slavery occurred in the spiritual consciousness of the African slaves. In the midst of their suffering they forged new structures of spiritual meaning, social identity, cultural expression and oral value. Their creative consciousness was typified in their loyalty and devotion to "Africa" as a transcendent symbol of meaning and power. This achievement marked a veritable watershed in their moral struggle against racial oppression: a struggle fuelled by the human impulse to preserve and enhance their humanity. The symbol "Africa" represented the continuity of a people with their past, the specific content of which was rapidly disappearing from their consciousness. The symbol implied free-

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6 Charles H Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols and Images sin the Interpretation of Religion*, (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1986), p. 106.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 176.

dom, empowerment and, above all, human *community*: the paramount moral and religious value among African peoples. As a prefix, the symbol designated transformative and foundational meaning: for instance, African Methodism; African Baptist, *et cetera*. symbolized a people's audacious effort to give positive meaning to a negative term and thereby take pride in their place of origin.

In every generation blacks have struggled to preserve their dignity in similar symbolic ways. The linguistic revolution of the 1960's purged "blackness" of its negative connotations and made it a symbol of pride and dignity, and in the 1990's, we are once again laying claim to our African identity and being empowered by it. A revival of the African liberation colours of black, green and red remind us of the homeland from which we are descended. Black refers to the people; green to the luscious African forests; red for the spilled blood of Africans for freedom. In recent years, the colour gold has been added to those emblems signifying the natural wealth that was stolen from Africa including her peoples, taken as property. In opposition to that status they struggled to preserve their humanity through various forms of activity.

Thus, spirituality of African peoples is united in their common, yet diverse endeavours to discern and construct value in their situation and to relate it to its transcendent depth, the source of all meaning and power. As a consequence, African peoples express their spirituality, that is, their quest for authentic freedom and dignity, meaning and power, in all the many and varied creative modes of artistic thought, religious practice and socio-political transformation. Further, and most importantly, all of these activities express a shared spirituality as seekers for independence and freedom and empowerment - the basic elements of genuine community.