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978-0-521-88504-1 - Toni Morrison and the Idea of Africa

La Vinia Delois Jennings

Excerpt

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I

*Introduction: finding the elusive but
identifiable Blackness within the culture
out of which Toni Morrison writes*

I don't like to find my books condemned as bad or praised as good, when that condemnation or that praise is based on criteria from other paradigms. I would much prefer that they were dismissed or embraced on the success of their accomplishment within the culture out of which I write.

I don't regard Black literature as simply books written *by* Black people, or simply as literature written *about* Black people, or simply as literature that uses a certain mode of language in which you sort of drop *g*'s. There is something very special and very identifiable about it and it is my struggle to *find* that elusive but identifiable style.

Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation"¹

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An amalgamated West and Central African traditional culture in the African diaspora of the Americas, the culture out of which Toni Morrison writes, sets the decisive criteria for the identifiable qualities of Blackness that her novels of African-American life stylistically exemplify. In addition to possessing an oral, participatory nature and a choral narrator,² her narratives draw upon the Middle Passage survival of traditional cosmologies from these regions that New World-enslaved Africans creolized into a collective worldview that Western hegemony and time later subverted in the United States. Because Africa has more than a thousand cultural groups whose traditions and beliefs are tribal and not universal, African philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah, comparative literature specialist Valentin Y. Mudimbe, and African historiographers have rightly argued against the notion of a monolithic "African worldview." But as literary scholar Gay Wilentz points out, a collective concept is not impractical "in relation to African American history because of the intermingling of cultures from west and central Africa during the slave trade. From the different interactions and retentions of traditions during and after slavery, there evolved a worldview alternative."³ The

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combined remnants of that worldview alternative taken from many African civilizations survive, in defamiliarized forms, beneath European-American New World culture. As a collective worldview, it operates largely below the threshold of modern African-American consciousness, influencing the perceptions and actions of its real life human repositories and the imaginary ones that inhabit Morrison's fiction.

A Classics scholar, Toni Morrison is well versed in the ease with which Africa's contributions to other civilizations have been overwritten into non-existence. It took little time, she asserts, for the Greeks' record of African influence to be explained away as "Egyptomania," in order "to eliminate Egypt as the cradle of civilization *and* its model and replace it with Greece."⁴ A similar explaining away occurred with respect to African religious retentions' intersection with and influence on Christianity, New World thought, and American culture. An aesthetic goal of Morrison's fiction is to dust off the survivals of West and Central African traditional civilizations that Christianity obscures in the Western hemisphere. It is a challenging recuperation because the Middle Passage and American slavery from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries fostered countless cultural suppressions and erasures for inestimable Africans and African Americans. Reflecting reality in its situation of West and Central African traditional religious beliefs as buried but not dead in the African-American personal and collective (un)conscious,⁵ Morrison's fiction exposes an African palimpsest upon which European-American culture superimposes itself. Lying latent under that superimposition, and at times commingled with interpolations from indigenous peoples' beliefs, are decipherable, identifiably Black, traditional, cosmological inscriptions thought lost to the North American experience. To evoke their presence Morrison turns to the most discernible African symbol in the Americas, the cross within a circle, which survived the Middle Passage and the transatlantic slave trade. She uses it as the substructure for her literary landscapes and interior spaces, and as a geometric figure performed by or inscribed on the bodies of her characters.

The symbol of the cross within a circle that took root in the Caribbean and culturally migrated to various spaces in the Americas was Kongo's⁶ geometric Yowa or cosmogram. The cross within a circle, or "tree" within a circle, from Kongo became the signage under which the creolizing of West and Central African traditional religions occurred in Haiti's Voudoun. Kongo's Yowa united with Dahomey's Vodun (the Fon word for god) to produce the symbol and name under which the Caribbean manifestation of many African peoples' beliefs were preserved in the Western hemisphere. An ancestral cosmogram, the Yowa signifies reincarnation,

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renaissance, and mediation of spiritual power. Also referred to as “the four moments of the sun,” the Kongo Yowa emblemizes in contradistinction to Western thought the “backward” or “counterclockwise” spatialization of time as governed by nature, from east to west or right to left. The east-west rise and descent of the sun and its counterclockwise movement reinforce the flow of time from generation to generation, each spiraling backward into an infinite past. The right, east, or “sunrise” compass point of the horizontal axis of the cross indicates birth and the beginning of life; the left, west or “sunset” point indicates decline and approaching death. The “mid-day” or summit of the sun on the vertical axis indicates the strongest moment of life, while the southern or “midnight” moment of the sun indicates one’s descent into the afterworld. The radius of the cross within the circle invokes the crossroads: the intersection of the physical and metaphysical planes. Their point of contact, where flesh and spirit meet, is the moment when the loa – the gods, spirits, or saints of the Voudoun pantheon – temporarily manifest themselves in serviteurs, devotees of a specific loa. Materially formed by a tree encircled at its base, the vertical axis of the cross in Voudoun is the spiritual avenue by which the immortal loa travel to the mortal realm. The philosophies behind Kongo’s Yowa, Dahomey’s Vodun, and other West African traditional cosmological beliefs, like those of the Yoruba people in the area now known as Nigeria, found expression in not only Voudoun in the Caribbean but also Voodoo in the United States and Candomblé in Brazil.

Literary scholars have read Toni Morrison’s characters and their behaviors mainly through the interpretive lens of Western civilization and Christianity. Critically analyzing them, however, through the socio-religious directives of the cross within the circle and the philosophies of Voudoun, Candomblé, and their two African-based pantheons of gods – respectively the loa and orixás that hark back to West Africa’s Vodun – has been uninitiated heretofore. Yet the philosophies, practices, rituals, and divinities of Voudoun, Candomblé, and African traditional religions in general operate as the optimal Black standard in interpreting the deweys’ inseparability in *Sula* (1973) as the Voudoun Marassa-Trois invoked as Marassa-Dossu-Dossa (Dew-sō-Dew-sä) or Eva Peace’s burning of her son Plum as the maternal prerogative of Ayizan, the preeminent loa of the psychic womb, in the baptism by fire of bruler-zin.⁷ The assonant naming of the “blind” horsemen in *Tar Baby* (1981) suggests the “divine” horsemen or loa who “mount” serviteurs in Voudoun possession rituals. And Beloved’s extreme and sporadic emotionalism gravitates between dual manifestations of the loa Erzulie. On the one hand, Beloved is the infant Erzulie Ge-Rouge, the tragic goddess

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of love who laments the shortness of life and the limitations of love. On the other hand, she is the seductive Mistress Erzulie Freida, whose jealous love cannot tolerate rivals and whose symbol is the pierced, red heart of the valentine. These and other spirit personalities, such as the loa Ogoun and Legba of Voudoun and the orixás Yemanjá and Oxóssi of Candomblé, manifest themselves in principal characters throughout Morrison's literary canon.

In order to "Blacken" her fiction, Morrison's writerly vision offers more than the presence of a particular African cosmological or religious artifact; it focuses "on the philosophical-psychological linkages" between Africans and African Americans. Her texts display surviving Africanisms in social roles, behaviors, rituals, and cosmologies embedded in what Wade W. Nobles calls African Americans' "experiential communality," the sharing of particular experiences by a particular group of people through time and space.⁸ African survivals have been noted to persist in regional and geographical locations where their carriers are racially segregated or physically isolated from the dominant, host culture; where there is a Black majority; and where African orientations do "not openly conflict with the cultural-behavioral elements of the 'host' society."⁹ Racial segregation during the ante-bellum period in the American rural South and in post-bellum northern ghettos, island isolationism like that of Haiti in the Caribbean and Sapelo Island off the Georgia coast, and black majority populations in Louisiana, South Carolina, and Brazil where aspects of Vodun did not openly conflict with Christianity fostered the retention of West and Central African traditional religion derivatives in the Americas.

The above determinants of survivals are directly compatible with the geographical and religious formulations of the Bottom in *Sula*, the Michigan Southside and Shalimar, Virginia in *Song of Solomon* (1977), Dominique in *Tar Baby*, the African-American community on the periphery of Cincinnati in *Beloved* (1987), and Ruby in *Paradise* (1998). These fictive communities are insulated from the dominant Anglo-European culture, and like many African traditional tribes, their members share, at the conscious and unconscious levels, a common conception of unity, balance, reconciliation of opposites, time, death, immortality, accidents, and communal collectivism. Specific, traceable, West and Central African, ethnographic artifacts – the dancing of the Chiwara antelope from Malian cultures, the duping by the trickster spider in Ashanti Anancy fables, and Kongo's sacralizing of a venerable person's or martyr's postmortem remains in a kimbi sack – reinforce an African ethos. Rich, guiding African traditional cosmologies are at the core of Morrison's fiction.

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Having knowledge of the particulars of those cosmologies is not essential to the appreciation of her novels, but interpreting her literary art without them diminishes the aesthetic, cultural, historical, and political force of the artist and her artform.

Morrison's novels contain identifiable West and Central African traditional religious subscriptions by which her novels may most effectively be read. Those subscriptions are not implemented as metaphors but as real and discernible presences in African-American life and culture. Critics of her works may parallel these subscriptions with the "mythic" substructuring that James Joyce, for example, employs in *Ulysses* (1922). The association, however, falls short because the "mythic" with respect to West African traditional beliefs and practices transcends the mythological and enters the present moment. The roles, practices, and pantheon of Vodun and its diaspora derivatives not only appear in folktales and legends but survive in the ritual, ceremony, and daily experience of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Traditional priests and priestesses still officiate at religious ceremonies performed in a circle and the loa or spirits still incarnate themselves in the bodies of serviteurs. And African-descended peoples in the diaspora of the West continue to syncretize, juxtapose, disidentify, and misidentify the retentions of traditional Africa in modern life. The fictional characters that perform traditional rituals and roles knowingly and unknowingly in Morrison's American and Caribbean settings occupy the secondary and tertiary stops on an east-west trajectory that originated in West and West Central Africa. Starting in the Harlem Renaissance, African-American writers sought, through the drum and other African "relics," to recover an authentic ancestral past that would forge a definable link to Blackness. Morrison's selection of the cross within a circle and the influence of Vodun in the Western hemisphere forges that link and reveals a more complex vision of Black Atlantic cultures. She depicts a compelling overlay of diasporic retentions that moves toward a formulation of diasporic modernism, an alternate form of modernism that strives to disrupt not conventional modernism but dominant perceptions of experience and reality and to reconnect broken bonds between the psychological and the cultural.¹⁰

The following chapters of *Toni Morrison and the Idea of Africa* aim to expose the African palimpsest lying latent in Morrison's fiction and in African-American culture and life. Chapter 2, "Dahomey's Vodun and

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Kongo's Yowa: the survival of West and Central African traditional cosmologies in African America," extends the discussion of the cross and circle cosmogram and the creolization of traditional beliefs and practices under its signage by the Bakongo and the Fon, Yoruba, and other West African peoples who contributed to Haiti's Voudoun. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 and their Kikongo titles – "bandoki" (witches), "kanda" (juniors, living elders, and ancestors), and "banganga" (specialists) – honor Kongo's profound impact on African-American social and religious life and on Morrison's fictional world. The titles convey a methodological approach that investigates the most historically resilient West and Central African traditional socio-religious roles that appear as major cultural features of Morrison's literary aesthetic. African scholar John S. Mbiti asserts that "Because traditional religions permeate all the departments of life, there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and the non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life." A study of traditional beliefs and practices "is, therefore, ultimately a study of the peoples themselves in all the complexities of both traditional and modern life."¹¹ In short, traditional beliefs and practices operate through social roles, subject positions, or personages within the community who perform in various and decidedly conventional ways in keeping with religious behavioral expectation and necessity. Thus these chapters interpret the principal centuries-old socio-religious roles and worldviews found in traditional villages from Senegambia to Kongo-Angola, as Morrison fictively mediates them in New World cultures. Her treatments of religious beliefs and practices, the cultural elements that are most resistant to temporal and spatial changes, correlate with "examinations of preslavery Africa" and affirm, as Nobles's research posits, that "many [West African] tribes shared one overriding philosophical system" that they expressed through religion.¹² Her depictions of African traditional witches, living-dead ancestors, living elders, medicine (wo)men, and priest(esse)s mirror identifiable qualities of Blackness, ancient African ways of being and knowing, that presently linger consciously and unconsciously in African America.

Chapter 3, "Bandoki: witches, ambivalent power, and the fusion of good and evil," examines the nonreligious role of the witch and the witch imaging imposed on female characters in *Sula* (1973), *Beloved* (1987), and *Paradise* (1998) as the residual of an African traditional orientation and (un)consciousness. In a real sense, African Americans are conditioned to living with and surviving evil since "[w]e may in fact," as Morrison maintains, "live right next door to it, not only in the form of something

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metaphysical, but also in terms of people.”¹³ In terms of people, evil of the criminal variety often makes the African-American community its haven. Outlaws of both African and European descents who have committed censurable moral evil, crimes that injure others, commonly live in Black neighborhoods as anonymous, undocumented social exiles in order to evade capture and (re)incarceration. Conflating the metaphysical with the human, many African Americans in the twentieth century were familiar with accounts or had direct knowledge of individuals rumored or known to work roots (practice sympathetic magic) or to cast the evil eye – that is, cause misfortune psychically with a glance. Morrison asserts that Black people do not as a default reaction annihilate evil. It functions as a “fourth dimension in their lives.” They neutralize it by nondestructive means. They survive it.¹⁴

The African traditional mind concerns itself with the causes and effects of evil, not its origin, since the concept of the Devil does not exist. Traditional religions recognize misfortunes that are the product of moral evil, acts committed by one person against another that damage relationships. Almost always considered to be female, African witches, the principal agents of moral evil, unconsciously and involuntarily visit dis-ease, death, and material misfortune on familial and communal members in close spatial proximity to them. Witches, who remained within their tribes despite the threat that their presence posed to kings, living elders, and communal stability, were among the first that Europeans enslaved when their value as trade goods rose. Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood maintain that

A “considerable part” of the African women sold into slavery in the Americas was reported to have been convicted of witchcraft . . . Persons who were suspected of being witches were seized and confined until a slave vessel arrived, whereupon they were transported to the Americas as slaves, by that means continuing and preserving many traditional beliefs and practices in Afro-Atlantic cultures.¹⁵

If the number of African women accused of witchcraft increased exponentially during the transatlantic slave trade because of material greed, then a surge in witchcraft lore also traveled to the New World even when legitimately divined witches did not.

The African-American communities of the Bottom in Medallion, Ohio; of Cincinnati, Ohio, surrounding the Bluestone Road former way station; and of Ruby, Oklahoma, respectively, deem Sula Peace, Beloved, and Consolata Sosa witches in their midst. As individuals whose practices set them in opposition to institutionalized religion, they are immoral, anti-social destroyers of relationships and revered traditions who use valid and

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good power for invalid and evil ends. Because the quintessential African traditional witch's craft, in addition to being involuntary, is psychic – she neither mixes potions nor casts spells – Sula, Beloved, and Consolata may in fact be witches without their own cognizance. Self-awareness is immaterial.

In their respective settings the sign of Kongo's four moments of the sun circle and cross appears subliminally inscribed on the natural landscape in order to forward symbolically that a Christian ethos is not the only belief system actively defining the social behavior of select characters or their neighbors' interpretation of them. Morrison elaborates on this traditional influence by assigning the characteristics of the spirits or gods of the Vodun pantheon to some of her central characters as those divinities have been preserved and mediated in the African diaspora of the Western hemisphere. In the twentieth-century United States, African Americans under the domination of Christianity and basing their conception of witchcraft on a Eurocentric model erroneously blurred the practices of Voodoo with witchcraft and regarded both with fear and as a collective of absolute, demonic evil. Nevertheless, as Morrison's fiction posits, traditional witchcraft practitioners, or *bandoki* – a Kikongo word I have chosen to designate female witches throughout the West and Central African regions – are regarded as principal agents of moral evil but not absolute evil personified.

The four elemental emanations of the face of Sula set up a paradigm of quaternal balance that reconciles conflicting impulses and alludes to the notion of a fourth face, or oppositional dimension, of God. That fourth face, within the frame of an African traditional monistic theodicy, explains malevolence related to Him and other religious powers. A monistic theodicy does not define good and evil as an absolute, exclusive binary but reconciles the two as an ambivalent, inclusive unity. Morrison bases the Bottom's recognition of a fourth or evil dimension of God on the stabilizing balance of the four fundamental constituents of the universe. The passive and feminine elements, earth and water, temper the active and masculine elements, air and fire. The quaternary integration of opposing yet balancing elements and their inclemental influences – cold, rain, heat, and wind – formed the nucleus of ancient and medieval cosmologies. The ambivalent and inclusive quaternity preceded the univalent and exclusive Trinity of Judeo-Christian belief that ushered in the Manichean dualism of absolute good and absolute evil, God and Devil. African traditional cosmologies fuse good and evil in the higher religious powers – God, the gods, and the ancestors – who dispense both blessings and curses, while the agency of witches, also capable of harming and protecting, largely account for humanly precipitated evil.

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Morrison completes the character portraits of *Beloved* and Consolata Sosa as African traditional witches by opening their representations to the possible interpretation that they practice *kindoki kia dia*, soul or psyche-eating witchcraft, the incorporeal, spiritual, and symbolical eating of a victim's flesh that physically presents itself as a wasting dis-ease. Although Consolata would be considered a sacred priestess in an Africanist community aware of its traditional roots, Christian hegemony and the erosion of memory over time foreclose the possibility of her community interpreting her role as a sacred one, transmuting it to a morally evil one. Embodying the potential for good and evil, these female characters, however, temper oppositional forces in their African-American communities.

Focusing on Morrison's characters whose socio-religious roles compose the familial matrix, Chapter 4, "Kanda: living elders, the ancestral presence, and the ancestor as foundation," discusses *Song of Solomon*, *Tar Baby*, and *Beloved* as an ancestral trilogy with *Tar Baby*'s Caribbean setting, bridging representations of African Americans' present and past, marking the liminal site, the crossroads, of imminent New World ancestral attrition and retention. All African traditional societies believe in an afterworld where the ancestors – living-dead – reside when their earthly lives expire. Benevolent familial advisors if the living properly honor them, ancestors serve active religious roles in which they instruct their surviving lineage whose remembering of them and active calling of their names indefinitely extend their personal immortality in the afterworld. The living-dead ancestor and living relative reciprocally insure the continued life of one another, respectively, in the metaphysical and physical worlds. The death of the ancestor, permanent disremembrance and severance from involvement with earthly kin has yet to occur in the infinite past, where time spatializes backward into an inverted future. The ancestor ultimately becomes collectively immortalized, anonymously subsumed into the graveyard of time.

Sequentially, the plots and settings of *Song of Solomon*, *Tar Baby*, and *Beloved* substructure regressive temporal and spatial images and patterns that map the historical conveyance of ancestorship to the New World and its subliminal survival in the American space. They treat what has been genealogically forfeited and culturally retained in African-American life with respect to the slippage of the ancestor into the interstices of spatial dispossession, temporal discontinuity, and familial disremembrance. Each of these novels addresses, given the confluence of past and present from a traditional perspective, the African-American socio-psychological disconnect brought about by the Middle Passage and an American slavery that

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prohibited New World Africans from knowing the names of their living-dead kin and from continuing their responsibility of reciprocity to them in the circle of life. Because the ancestors regress in time from the present, to the recent past, to the remote past, understanding the Africanist concept of time is key to interpreting the religious philosophy controlling the simultaneity of past and present in these texts. Although she is not an ancestor, *Beloved* is the only Morrison character to date with a traceable life in the timeless afterworld. Her ontological profile establishes a paradigm for the concurrence of past and present and the counter-clockwise regression of the living-dead through time that Kongo's cosmogram maps.

Abetting critical uncertainty concerning which character functions as the ancestor in each of her novels, Morrison conflates the office of the living-dead ancestor with the living elder, converging and diverging their ontological boundaries to create a hybrid, an "ancestral presence" that mediates the two socio-religious roles at the apex of eldership. The ancestor and the living elder act as a unity. Last with and closest to the ancestor, the ancestral presence disseminates information to the junior lineage and, at moments, exudes supernatural traits not unlike a spiritual being or the ancestor that s/he mediates. The living elder, acting as the ancestral presence, gives earthly "presence" to the absent living-dead ancestor. In *Song of Solomon* Pilate, the ancestral presence, and Macon Dead the first, the ancestor, are prime examples of the conjoining of the former with the latter that fuses their offices and the physical and spiritual planes of the living and living-dead. The representations of Ma'am, Nan, Sixo, Baby Suggs, and Mary Thérèse Foucault, the blind horsemen, and the swamp women provide subjective variations on the expression of the ancestral presence.

Chapter 5 discusses the final social category, "Banganga: the specialists – medicine (wo)men and priest(esse)s," and elevates the general interpretation of "conjurers" in Morrison's fiction to the specific socio-religious roles that the sacred African traditional specialists enact. Stronger in West African traditions than in other parts of the continent, the tradition of the priest receives substantive treatment in Morrison's Western diasporic representations. Morrison imbues her priests and priestesses, the medicinal and psychical healers of their respective communities, with characterizations based on the official priestly roles of the Haitian houngan (Fon for "priest"), the Haitian mambo (the French transcription of the Carib term "great priest/snake"), and the Brazilian mãe de santo (Portuguese for "mother of the saint").