

**ENGAGING THE ORISA: AN EXPLORATION OF THE
YORUBA CONCEPTS OF *IBEJI* AND *OLOKUN* AS THEORETICAL
PRINCIPLES IN BLACK THEOLOGY**

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ABSTRACT

The author contends in this essay that the thematic scope of Black theology can be significantly broadened through a consideration of tensive aspects and mysterious elements in African Diasporic religions. These motifs are explored through a theoretical examination of *Ibeji* and *Olokun*, two Yoruba principles encompassing tensionality, mystery, and a superabundance of meaning. The study counteracts a form of positivism found in James Cone's articulation of liberation and in the works of other Black theologians who embrace his formulation. This feature of Black theology is problematic, for it functions to distort and downplay the great complexity of Black religious experience. If Black Theology is to maximize its relevance, meaning, and impact in the Black Atlantic Diaspora, then it must identify and develop new discursive trajectories such as the one offered herein. The author's approach adds to those utilized by Charles Long, George Thomas, Josiah Young, Dianne Stewart, and others.

Keywords: African Diaspora, African religion, Black theology, *Ibeji*, *Olokun*, Yoruba.

Introduction

Since its emergence in the late 1960s, Black theology has undergone several conservative modifications which have sought to enhance its relevance and cogency as a mode of discourse. Some of the primary modifications involved increased attention to Black cultural idioms, the inclusion and thematic

elaboration of Black women's experience, and a movement toward dialogical engagement with liberation theologies produced by oppressed communities in Africa, Latin America, Asia, and other parts of the so-called Third World.¹ However, despite these seeming advances, Black theology now finds itself at an impasse. The impasse is of a methodological, conceptual, and theoretical nature. Black theologians are not unaware of this problem.² Yet few solutions are forthcoming. The latter is due, in large part, to an immoderate investment by many Black theologians in the theological positivism of James Cone,³ a positivism most strongly expressed in his articulation of the meaning of

1. Some works that are indicative of these modifications include James H. Cone, "From Geneva to Sao Paulo: A Dialogue between Black Theology and Latin American Liberation Theology," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, Volume 2: 1980–1992*, eds James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993); James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (New York: Seabury Press, 1972); Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*, American Academy of Religion Academy Series, 64 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989); Dwight N. Hopkins, *Shoes That Fit Our Feet: Sources for a Constructive Black Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993); J. Deotis Roberts, "Common Themes: Black Theology and Minjung Theology," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, Volume 2: 1980–1992*, eds James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993); Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993). Additionally, see Josiah U. Young, *Black and African Theologies: Siblings or Distant Cousins?* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986). We should also be aware of the presence of liberation theologies in the South Pacific. See G. W. Trompf, *The Gospel is Not Western: Black Theologies from the Southwest Pacific* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987).

2. Somewhat ironically, Hopkins, for example, identifies the need in Black theology for alternative approaches. He writes that: "the complexities facing the Black community and church in the twenty-first century demand a more sophisticated theoretical framework. What structure of concepts can aid the liberation conclusions and practices of Black theology? What insights might be taken from a host of academic disciplines and related experiences from liberation theologies in the Third World? What theories can help Black theology move from its primary sources of the African American experiences to its theological conclusions about God's intention for oppressed humanity?" Dwight N. Hopkins, *Heart and Head: Black Theology—Past, Present, and Future* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 167.

3. One of the works most demonstrative of the positivism I detect in Cone is James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1975). I also have in mind here the work of theologians such as Noel Erskine, James Evans, Jacquelyn Grant, and Dwight Hopkins. See Noel Leo Erskine, *Decolonizing Theology: A Caribbean Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981); James H. Evans, *We Have Been Believers: An African-American Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992); Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*; Dwight N. Hopkins, *Being Human: Race, Culture, and Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005); Hopkins, *Shoes That Fit Our Feet*; Hopkins, *Heart and Head*.

liberation, which will be treated below. Regrettably, this has functioned to obfuscate the tremendous complexity of Black religious experience.

The way forward for Black theology is not to be found in an ongoing and hegemonic re-inscription of Cone's discursive paradigm. Rather, I propose it is to be found in a redefinition of the scope of Black theology guided by an understanding of Black religious experience as deeply tensive and mysterious. Furthermore, apt resources for this task are abundantly present in the various non-Christian faith communities comprising the wider African diasporic religious world, especially those communities in North America that practice Yoruba religion.⁴ Theological encounters with these spiritual domains could aid significantly in reconfiguring Black theology along less confining, sublimating lines. More specifically, I argue that the thematic scope of Black theology can be substantially expanded through a consideration of tensive aspects and mysterious elements in African diasporic religions. I aim to explore these motifs through a theoretical examination of *Ibeji* and *Olokun*, two Yoruba principles encompassing tensionality, mystery, and a surfeit of meaning.⁵

A Note on Positivism

Before beginning, it is necessary to say a bit more about positivism generally, as well as the type that characterizes Cone's thought. As a branch of Western philosophy created and developed by French thinker Auguste Comte,⁶ positivism roots human knowledge in materiality. It is only by way of sense experience understood through the method and language of science that knowledge is reliably produced and transmitted. Thus, conclusions drawn about the physical world, which are based on close empirical analysis, can be advanced with certainty, with a firm belief in their veracity. The positivist model of thought as conceived by Comte has little interest in metaphysical speculation and therefore contrasts sharply with, for instance, the apophatic theological tradition in

4. Hunt provides a somewhat instructive historical account of one of these communities. See Carl M. Hunt, *Oyotunji Village: The Yoruba Movement in America* (Washington: University Press of America, 1979).

5. Paul Ricoeur has interrogated human discourse as a phenomenon that results in overabundances of meaning. See Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976).

6. Some of his major works include Auguste Comte, *Système de Politique Positive ou Traité de Sociologie Instituant la Religion de l'humanité*, Réimpression de l'ed. 1851–1881 (Osua-brück: Zeller, 1967); idem, *A General View of Positivism*, official centenary edition (New York: R. Speller, 1957); idem, *Cours de Philosophie Positive*, 5th ed. (Paris: Schleicher Frères, 1907); idem, *The Catechism of Positive Religion*, 3rd ed. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, and Trubner, 1891).

Christianity, a tradition seeking complete union with the Divine through the negation of language, concepts, mythological and theoretical paradigms, worldly attachments, and all else in which the material consists.⁷ We find in Comtian positivism and apophatic theology, then, two radically distinct epistemologies.

Let me be clear at this juncture. I am not suggesting that Cone is a positivist in any strict philosophical sense, nor am I implying that Cone's ideas are in any significant way influenced by Comte. What I am claiming is that insofar as his work is controlled by a desire to *affirm* the reality of a liberating God whose constant, partisan activity on behalf of the poor and oppressed is an absolute and unchanging truth, a truth attested to in scripture and by the global struggle of "the least of these" for freedom and a better quality of life, it is *positivistic*. Just as positivism holds fast to what the procedures of science reveal about the natural and social worlds, so too does Cone cling to what he believes is revealed in the poor's fight for liberation. Consider the following statements made by Cone:

There is no liberation independent of Jesus' past, present, and future coming. He is the ground of our present freedom to struggle and the source of our hope that the vision disclosed in our historical fight against oppression will be fully realized in God's future ... Christ *really* enters into our world where the poor, the despised, and the Black are, disclosing that he is with them, enduring their humiliation and pain and transforming oppressed slaves into liberated servants ... liberation is not a human possession but a divine gift of freedom to those who struggle in faith against violence and oppression. Liberation is not an object but the *project* of freedom wherein the oppressed realize that their fight for freedom is a divine right of creation ... While the meaning of liberation includes the historical determination of freedom in this world, it is not limited to what is possible in history ... There is included in liberation the "not yet", a vision of a new heaven and a new earth. This simply means that the oppressed have a future not made with human hands but grounded in the liberating promises of God.⁸

The Christocentric, actional, and affirmational language in these statements links them together; Jesus Christ, the sole fount of all liberative power, *enters* the lives of the poor, *endures* their suffering, and *transforms* them into liberated persons; liberation *is* a divine *right*, a *gift*, and a human *project*; yet it is more than human effort; liberation also exists in a future time, in a new, not-yet-fully-established order of being made possible by God's *promises*.

7. Pseudo-Dionysius and Marguerite Porete are two quintessential figures in the apophatic tradition. See Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, trans. Ellen L. Babinsky (New York: Paulist Press, 1993); Pseudo-Dionysius, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibhéid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987).

8. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 125–27, 145.

The language used in the passage just cited describes a decisive reality. It gives a proclamatory account of the way things *are* based on evidence provided by the scriptural witness and the Black experience of subjugation. The tone of Cone's writing is one of resoluteness and of surety. Cone's theology is one of strong declaration rather than timid speculation. Our short analysis helps us begin to see the discursive edifice erected by Cone which, I would argue, has become paradigmatic for Black theology.⁹ The affirmative pattern of thought, the careful selection of language, and the strikingly confident articulation of spiritual ideas in Cone's work all point to a very specific way of doing theology that, we might say, has a positivistic thrust.

One purpose in explicating what I mean by "positivism" is to shed more light on my reasons for focusing on tension and mystery. However, owing perhaps to their perception of Black theology as having everything to do with confronting and helpfully responding to the experience of tension and mystery in the Black community brought on by racism and other forms of oppression, some may still be confused by such a decision. These persons should be reminded that I am not accusing Black theology of being completely oblivious to the complexity of Black religious experience. I acknowledge the fact that Black theology understands itself to be a provisional, dynamic answer of sorts to the unrelenting racial, social, economic, political, cultural, and spiritual tensions of Black life in America, to the painful mystery experienced by so many Black families and individuals of not knowing how they are going to survive from day to day. Even Cone identifies tension as a major factor in his own experience:

The dual reality of White injustice and Black faith, as part of the structure of life, created a tension in my being that has not been resolved. If God is good, and also all powerful, as Black church folk say, why do Blacks get treated so badly? That was the question that my brother Cecil and I asked at an early age, and it is still the question that creates the intellectual energy and passion for my writing today.¹⁰

9. James Evans, for example, clearly operates within Cone's paradigm. He explains, "To speak of liberation as God's work and intention in the world means that one must understand liberation as a permanent, final, and ultimate feature of one's existence. That is, God's will is irresistible, and God's work cannot be thwarted ... This liberation, however, is also partial, fragile, and incomplete, because the drama of the struggle is yet being played out on the stage of history" (Evans, *We Have Been Believers*, 16).

10. James H. Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, *Journeys in Faith* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982), 18.

I respect Black theology's attempt to address Black experience in a way that is both hope-inspiring and empowering. This attempt, however, on the whole, has been insufficient and simplistic, particularly with regard to Black spiritual experience. Contrary to what some may think, Black theology is *not* primarily shaped by rigorous study of and reflection upon the more unsettling regions of said experience, regions that severely impugn Black theology's assertions about God and the liberation of poor Black people. Instead of embarking on a careful, constructive exploration of the kind of experience Cone *briefly* mentions and others like it, Black theologians (including Cone!) tend to reject these experiences as major topics of prolonged, explicit discursive engagement. As we have seen, Black theology is ruled by a positivistic triumphalism that vigilantly guards against the integration of any countervailing idea or trajectory of thought. The time now seems especially ripe for a troubling of such seemingly stagnant waters.

Tensionality and Mystery

Tensionality and mystery are foregrounded in this study not only because of their great potential for theoretical and discursive generativity, but also because of their often underappreciated presence and status as dimensions of Black religious experience. While acknowledged by Black theologians, these experiential dimensions are, nonetheless, routinely given short shrift in their work. Serious attention to tensionality and mystery is eschewed by many Black theologians in favor of recapitulating the ideological confessionalism typical of earlier formulations of Black theology.¹¹ This is unfortunate given that the tensionality of Black religious experience, for example, is a quite visible theme in the writings of early and more recent non-theological scholars such as W. E. B. DuBois, Benjamin Mays, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Caroyln Rouse and Marla Frederick.¹² Through the methods of sociology, history, anthropology,

11. Many texts in Black theology reflect this impulse. See, for instance, Kortright Davis, "Jesus Christ and Black Liberation: Toward a Paradigm of Transcendence," *Journal of Religious Thought* 42, no. 1 (1985): 51–67; Evans, *We Have Been Believers*; Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*. For works that, at moments, are less bound by this impulse, see Karen Baker-Fletcher and Garth Baker-Fletcher, *My Sister, My Brother: Womanist and Xodus God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997); Kelly Brown Douglas, *The Black Christ* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994); Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*.

12. See W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*, 4th ed. (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1904); Marla Faye Frederick, *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Benjamin Elijah Mays, *The Negro's God as Reflected in*

and ethnography, these scholars position tensionality as a prominent feature of Black religious experience. To the best of my knowledge, the only Black theologians who offer thematic treatments of mystery are Howard Thurman, and Josiah Young in his most recent book, *Dogged Strength within the Veil*.¹³

Clarification is in order concerning my use of the terms *tensive* and *mysterious* in relation to Black religious experience. The word *tensive* refers to its unresolvability, to its simultaneously adequate and inadequate knowledge of God; the at once comfortable and uncomfortable divine-human relationship to which it bears witness.

For instance, as Cone sparingly reminds us, Black American Christians who affirm a God of liberation are immediately confronted with the irreconcilability of that affirmation with their continued existence in a White supremacist society.¹⁴ We might say that an effect of this consciousness is a persistent,

His Literature (Boston: Chapman & Grimes Inc., 1938); Carolyn Moxley Rouse, *Engaged Surrender: African American Women and Islam*, George Gund Foundation Imprint in African American Studies (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004). The findings of Mays and Frederick are especially interesting. Mays' above-cited study spans a period of over one hundred years (1760–1938) in its analysis of Black spirituals, novels, social-scientific writings, poems, sermons, and other literary forms. What is most intriguing about Mays' data is their disclosure of the fact that attitudes toward God in Black literature during the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries ranged dramatically in character from a liberative Christian monotheism to a kind of skeptical deism. Referring to some of the writings of Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Nella Larsen, and others which appear highly suspicious of religion—especially Christian religion—Mays comments that “in the development of the idea of God in Negro literature there is a tendency or threat to abandon the idea of God as a useful instrument in social adjustment.” Mays, *The Negro's God as Reflected in His Literature*, 218. In researching the spirituality of Black Christian women in Halifax County, North Carolina, Frederick discovers that, for these women, “Spirituality is about living through moments of struggle and moments of peace and ultimately acquiring a better life, a life that is filled with a deeper knowledge of God.” Frederick, *Between Sundays*, 14.

13. In addition to mystery, tension is also salient in Thurman's writings. See, for example, Howard Thurman, *The Inward Journey* (New York: Harper, 1961); Howard Thurman, *Deep is the Hunger: Meditations for Apostles of Sensitiveness* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1973); Howard Thurman, *The Creative Encounter: An Interpretation of Religion and the Social Witness* (New York: Harper, 1954); Josiah U. Young, *Dogged Strength within the Veil: Africana Spirituality and the Mysterious Love of God* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003).

14. In a gender-exclusive fashion, Cone notes of “the Black man's” experience that “When he first awakens to his place in America and feels sharply the absolute contradiction between *what is* and *what ought to be* or recognizes the inconsistency between his view of himself as a man and America's description of him as a thing, his immediate reaction is a feeling of absurdity.” James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), 8–9, original emphasis.

spiritually-rooted anxiety that Cone and other Black theologians are unwilling to probe in a way that does not involve an appeal to Jesus' transcendent significance.¹⁵ In using the term mystery, what is signified is not a temporary condition of unknowing but an experience of God as ultimately unsearchable in the sense of the Yoruba word *ookun* which, roughly translated, means "unfathomable" or "unfathomable darkness."¹⁶

Why the Yoruba Diasporic Context?

More so than many other transplanted African religious cultures, Yoruba religious culture is conspicuously present in much of the Black Atlantic Diaspora. While certainly not un-influenced by contact with Christianity, Islam, as well as differing geographic and sociocultural environs, diasporic forms of Yoruba religion have continually distinguished themselves over the course of centuries as unique traditions with a remarkable degree of ritual and theological complexity, depth, and sophistication.¹⁷ As such, the aim of these

15. It is appropriate here to invoke the perspective of Cecil Cone because it bears on my discussion of the anxiety of Black religious experience. Cone argues that Black theology suffers from what he calls an "identity crisis" which stems from its incompatibility with White academic theology and its failure to ground itself in Black religion. Cecil Wayne Cone, "The Identity Crisis in Black Theology: An Investigation of the Tensions Created by Efforts to Provide a Theological Interpretation of Black Religion in the Works of Joseph Washington, James Cone and J. Deotis Roberts" (PhD dissertation, Emory University, 1974). See also William R. Jones, "Theodicy and Methodology in Black Theology: A Critique of Washington, Cone, and Cleage," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, Volume 1: 1966–1979*, eds James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

16. John Mason, *Olókun: Owner of Rivers and Seas* (Brooklyn, NY: Yorùbá Theological Archministry, 1996), 2. While the term *ookun* does not directly refer to an *orisa* and all of its attendant characteristics, as the term *Olokun* does, it is nevertheless important for our purposes in that its very existence in the Yoruba lexicon lends support to my suggestion that a deep sense of relentless mystery helps shape Yoruba diasporic worldviews. In fact, we may plausibly imagine that the venerative embrace of the mysterious *Olokun* by devotees throughout the African Diaspora is a manifestation of the discreet sensibility or mode of awareness evoked by the idea of *ookun*.

17. Relying heavily on missionary accounts, J. D. Y. Peel argues, problematically, that the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria did not view themselves as a discrete people until encountering Christianity. See J. D. Y. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, African Systems of Thought (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000). The diasporic persistence of Yoruba culture is skillfully demonstrated by multiple scholars in Toyin Falola and Matt D. Childs, *The Yoruba Diaspora in the Atlantic World* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004); Toyin Falola and Ann Genova, *Orisa: Yoruba Gods and Spiritual*

traditions is not necessarily to commend themselves to Black Christianity for the purpose of assimilative integration. I submit that the aforementioned characteristics of Yoruba diasporic religion (prevalence, resilience, complexity, depth, sophistication, unapologetic uniqueness) stand collectively as a compelling answer to the question of why Black theology should be open to disruptive, transformative encounters with this religion. More generally, we could add to this rationale Wole Soyinka's point that "the protean nature of the symbols of African metaphysics, whether expressed in the idiom of deities, nature events, matter or artifacts, are an obvious boon to the full flow of the imagination."¹⁸

In addition, although fairly marginal in Black religious studies, African and African diasporic cultures have proven to be of serious interest to a cadre of Black scholars. Though others may be named, chiefly composing this group are Charles Long, George Thomas, Gayraud Wilmore, J. Deotis Roberts, Josiah Young, and Dianne Stewart.¹⁹ This reflects the presence of a minority tradition

Identity in Africa and the Diaspora (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2005). See, for instance, Christine Ayorinde, "Santería in Cuba: Tradition and Transformation," in *The Yoruba Diaspora in the Atlantic World*, eds Toyin Falola and Matt D. Childs (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004); Sabrina Collins, "Appropriation and Transformation: A Study of Black Nationalism," in *Orisa: Yoruba Gods and Spiritual Identity in Africa and the Diaspora*, eds Toyin Falola and Ann Genova (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2005); Joni L. Jones, "Yoruba Diasporic Performance: The Case for a Spiritually and Aesthetically Based Diaspora," in *Orisa: Yoruba Gods and Spiritual Identity in Africa and the Diaspora*, eds Toyin Falola and Ann Genova (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2005); Babatunde Lawal, "Reclaiming the Past: Yoruba Elements in African America Arts," in *The Yoruba Diaspora in the Atlantic World*, eds Toyin Falola and Matt D. Childs (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004); Russell Lohse, "Africans in a Colony of Creoles: The Yoruba in Colonia Costa Rica," in *The Yoruba Diaspora in the Atlantic World*, eds Toyin Falola and Matt D. Childs (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004); Michael Marcuzzi, "The Ipanodu Ceremony and the History of Orisa Worship in Nigeria and Cuba," in *Orisa: Yoruba Gods and Spiritual Identity in Africa and the Diaspora*, eds Toyin Falola and Ann Genova (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2005). See also Joseph M. Murphy, *Working the Spirit: Ceremonies of the African Diaspora* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994); George Eaton Simpson, *Black Religions in the New World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).

18. Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature, and the African World* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 121–22.

19. See Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986); Charles H. Long, "The West African High God: History and Religious Experience," *History of Religions* 3, no. 2 (1964): 328–42; J. Deotis Roberts, *Africentric Christianity: A Theological Appraisal for Ministry* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2000); J. Deotis Roberts, "Black Theology in the Making," in *Black Theology: A*

within Black religious scholarship whose gaze is fixed on Africa and the African Diaspora. Increased participation of Black theologians in this tradition could contribute significantly to its growth and survival.

Ibeji and Olokun

Our discussion of *Ibeji* and *Olokun* will privilege the voice of the practitioner rather than the scholar. This methodological point of departure is intended to allow *the practitioner's understanding* of these two principles to shape our understanding of them. My close attentiveness to the practitioner's voice is intended as a nod in the direction of re-empowering diasporic religious communities by affording them a larger measure of control over the presentation of their beliefs and practices.²⁰

Our efforts will center on the North American branch of the Black Atlantic Diaspora. In particular, we will highlight the work of John Mason, a well-known African-American priest of Obatala (an important Yoruba deity) whose grasp of Yoruba religion has been strengthened under the tutelage of Cristobal Oliana-Oba Ilu Mi, one of the first Black Yoruba priests in America, and by substantial involvement with Yoruba communities in both Nigeria and Cuba.

Documentary History, 1966–1979, eds James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993); Dianne M. Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Dianne M. Stewart, "Womanist Theology in the Caribbean Context: Critiquing Culture, Rethinking Doctrine, and Expanding Boundaries," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 20, no. 1 (2004): 61–82; George B. Thomas, "African Religion: A New Focus for Black Theology," in *Black Theology 2: Essays on the Formulation and Outreach of Contemporary Black Theology*, eds Calvin E. Bruce and William R. Jones (New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 1978); Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Pragmatic Spirituality: The Christian Faith through an Africentric Lens* (New York: New York University, 2004); Josiah U. Young, *A Pan-African Theology: Providence and the Legacies of the Ancestors* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1992); Josiah U. Young, "God's Path and Pan-Africa," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1980–1992*, eds James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993). See also Will Coleman, *Tribal Talk: Black Theology, Hermeneutics, and African/American Ways of "Telling the Story"* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000); Ulysses Duke Jenkins, *Ancient African Religion and the African-American Church* (Jacksonville, NC: Flame International, 1978).

20. The movement among displaced indigenous communities to reclaim socio-cultural and political control of their ideas and practices in order to preserve endemic traditions is to be applauded and vigorously supported. Thomas Greaver broadly describes this trend as "an amazing crescendo of indigenous political assertiveness throughout the Western Hemisphere." Thomas Greaver, "Cultural Rights and Ethnography," *General Anthropology* 1, no. 2 (1995): 3–4.

Mason is affiliated with the Yoruba Theological Archministry in Brooklyn, New York and has written several books on Yoruba diasporic belief and practice.²¹ My concentration on Mason should not be taken to suggest the non-participation (or insignificance) of women in the exposition of Yoruba diasporic religion. To the contrary, women actively share in the process.²² Their absence here is due only to my inability to find texts by women that directly address *Ibeji* and *Olokun*.

Ibeji and *Olokun* are *orisa*, or deities, in the interminable Yoruba pantheon. They are imbued by *Olodumare* (the Supreme Being) with degrees of spiritual power and are variously efficacious in the material world. The meanings attached to these realities encompass more than what will be highlighted in the present essay. Due to space limitations, a discussion of these wider meanings appears where appropriate in the footnotes.

In his book, *Black Gods: Orisa Studies in the New World*, which he co-authors with Gary Edwards, Mason explains that *Ibeji* is related to the “phenomenon of twinning” and literally means “to give birth to two.”²³ He claims further that *Ibeji* has a dual signification:

The idea of *Ibeji* has had both social and philosophical implications in Yoruba society, and is based on two separate but related phenomena. First, there was the birth of human twins and its meaning to the community at large; and second, the development of *Ibeji* ideology as a source of religious contemplation.²⁴

21. These books include Gary Edwards and John Mason, *Black Gods: Orisa Studies in the New World*, rev. 4th ed. (Brooklyn, NY: Yoruba Theological Archministry, 1998); Mason, *Olóókun: Owner of Rivers and Seas*; John Mason, *Orin Orisa: Songs for Selected Heads* (Brooklyn, NY: Yoruba Theological Archministry, 1992); John Mason, *Four New World Yorùbá Rituals*, 3rd ed. (Brooklyn: Yorùbá Theological Archministry, 1993).

22. See, for example, Yvonne Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomblé* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005); Modupe Oduyoye, *The Vocabulary of Yoruba Religious Discourse* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Daystar Press, 1971); Oyeronke Olajubu, *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere*, McGill Studies in the History of Religions (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003); Sophie B. Oluwole, *Witchcraft, Reincarnation and the God-Head* (Ikeja, Lagos: Excel Publishers, 1992).

23. Edwards and Mason, *Black Gods*, 62.

24. *Ibid.* Historically, the occurrence of twins in Yoruba society has been viewed as a supernatural omen which, among other things, signaled improper sexual relations between spirits and the mothers of twins. In response to the appearance of twins in a Yoruba community, one of three options was normally employed: (1) One of the two twins was killed; (2) Both twins were killed; (3) Both the twins and the mother were killed. This practice, though, appears to have dwindled in recent times, and there has been a positive shift in the way that twins are perceived in these communities. Twins now have a divine status in Yoruba culture and are often associated with the *orisa* Sango. Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion:*

I will attempt below to expound Mason's view of *Ibeji* as a basis for "religious contemplation" in conjunction with his elucidation of its dyadic nature. He says of *Ibeji* that it

makes concrete the idea of the cleaved spirit, of the mirror image, of one spirit that inhabits and animates two, sometimes identical bodies. *Ibeji* represents the duality of man. They represent the idea that man is made up of two opposing yet complimentary [*sic*] forces or poles which we can label as constructive and destructive or positive and negative. *Ibeji* are night and day, left and right, up and down, in and out ... *Ibeji* is symbolic of the spirit that connects all the things that people conceive as different but which are in reality the same. For example: life and death (existence), man and woman (human beings), right and left (direction), youth and maturity (age).²⁵

In pondering *Ibeji*, not only as deity, but also as ground for theological reflection and as an idea that communicates something true about the universe and the beings that inhabit it, we begin to see *Ibeji*'s operation as a *theoretical principle*. According to Mason, *Ibeji* offers an account of the human condition and the spirit world. His account may be usefully thought of as conflictual, or tensive. Mason's rendering, at its deepest level, is structural in nature. Within the logic of *Ibeji*, bifurcation is the cloth from which the cosmos and human beings are cut. Constituting all things are competing energies that, paradoxically, are dependent on one another for self-definition and creativity. Although, ultimately, both the unseen and seen dimensions are held together in unity, tensionality is never erased. Thus, unity is not synonymous with resolution. Wande Abimbola, a renowned Nigerian scholar and practitioner, states thus:

In the Yoruba belief system, conflict rather than peace is the order of the day. Resolution can only be achieved through the offering of sacrifice via the intervention of *Esu* who is at the same time an *Orisa* and a master of the *Ajogun* [malevolent forces who are 'negators' of the *orisa*]. But we must always remember that

The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 147. Edwards and Mason, *Black Gods*, 63–64. In the Yoruba religious sphere, twins play a central role in worship. Mason notes that "The Yoruba venerate twins to such a degree that they cannot be barred from any esoteric religious ceremony" and are thought to have enormous power to assist or harm. He continues, "The Yoruba believe that the spirit of the twins must always have two bodies or vessels in which to live while on earth. Therefore, when either one or both twins dies, a wooden doll is carved to represent the corporeal reality of the departed twins. The doll is given the same care that the surviving twin receives." Edwards and Mason, *Black Gods*, 64–67.

25. Edwards and Mason, *Black Gods*, 65.

resolution is temporary. It is not, unlike conflict, a permanent feature of the universe.²⁶

The response of Yoruba communities to the tension of existence is acceptance and regular sacrifice. Ideological suppression of this verity is not an option. In these communities is a profound recognition of the unresolvability of human experience which, for them, is at every moment spiritual.

Olokun ("owner of the sea") is believed to be the master of all bodies of water and to have authority over other "riverine deities."²⁷ It is important to note here that, like many other *orisa* such as Ochosi, *Olokun* has been rendered in masculine terms in the Black Atlantic Diaspora. However, many Yoruba communities in Nigeria and other parts of West Africa view *Olokun* as female. In an effort to affirm both the diasporic and continental perspectives, I will variously refer to *Olokun* as male and female. Contained in *Olokun* are the secrets of the divinatory arts.²⁸ Her reign over the waters of the earth and her ownership of the mysteries of divination point us to one of the ideas she most symbolizes: the unknown. Mason relates that:

Olokun embodies the principle that there are certain things which are unknowable, and this acts as a check on man's possible arrogance. He is representative of that part of reality that every religious doctrine depicts as the void; the realm of nothingness, and oblivion ... *Olokun* is associated with ... the unreachable.²⁹

26. Wande Abimbola, "Gods versus Anti-Gods: Conflict and Resolution in the Yoruba Cosmos," *Dialogue and Alliance* 8 (1994): 86.

27. Edwards and Mason, *Black Gods*, 78. *Olokun*, Mason says, is also "the highest manifestation of *orisa*, after *Obatala*, to whom he concedes the right to rule out of respect for *Obatala*'s wisdom, age, and tact, and because *Olofin* decided that this was to be the order of things." This passage shows that, on one level, *Olokun* represents proper deference to the greater wisdom of elders. Edwards and Mason, *Black Gods*, 78.

28. Edwards and Mason, *Black Gods*, 80. Yoruba (*Ifá*) divination is an incredibly intricate corpus of mystical practices that enable communication with the invisible realm for material ends. For an in-depth explanation of the sacred oral literature invoked during Yoruba divination, see Wande Abimbola, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus* (Ibadan: Oxford University Press Nigeria, 1976).

29. Edwards and Mason, *Black Gods*, 80–81. In *Olóòkun: Owner of Rivers and Seas*, Mason shares a poem entitled "Stick and Carrot" that sheds light on his perception of *Olokun*:

Our fear of the dark
compels us to worship the owner of darkness.
Our terror of death and decrepitude
Forces us to worship the owner of strength.
Our dread of the pains of hunger

While some answers to human questions are to be found in *Olokun's* kingdom,³⁰ there, nevertheless, remain questions for which no answers exist. Through *Olokun*, the universe is both known and unknown. He sets the boundaries of cognition, thereby frustrating the human creature, while also inspiring awe in her at what she does not, indeed cannot, know. *Olokun* emerges as the principle of mystery, as that reality over which the mind ceaselessly puzzles.³¹ She is the inexhaustibility, the opaque moreness, of human experience. *Olokun* represents the uncertainty accompanying the human endeavor to access and manifest immateriality.

Pushes us to worship the owner of fullness.
 Our anxiety over the scattering and
 loss of things we have worked to acquire
 Advises us to worship the owner of ropes.
 Our love of children
 Prompts us to worship the provider of children.
 Our desire for wealth and status
 Coaxes us to worship
 the owner of the precious beads of title.
 Our hope for immortality
 Demands that we worship
 The owner of the eternal rivers and seas.

Mason, *Olókun: Owner of Rivers and Seas*, 1. Awolalu and Dopamu offer further commentary on the qualities of *Olokun*: “Olokun is regarded as a beneficent divinity. He has all the material well-being at his disposal and can distribute this to men according to his will. He sends the rain, and the fertility of the soil is attributed to him. Since he is the owner of all property, people pray to Olokun for riches, success in trade and undertakings, and total well-being. His emblems include pots containing water, pieces of White chalk, peeled rods and White cloth ... He is the divinity of inspiration and idealism and those who come under his tutelage are believed to have [a] powerful, magnetizing mind, overwhelming charm, and magnificent accuracy in all things. Indeed, they are known to be quite original and are highly sensitive in nature, becoming geniuses in one way or another” (J. Omosade Awolalu and P. Adelumo Dopamu, *West African Traditional Religion* [Ibadan: Onibonjo, 1979], 96).

30. Edwards and Mason, *Black Gods*, 80.

31. A wider discussion having bearing on our understanding of the notion of mystery in African and African-derived religions occurred among certain scholars of religion many years ago. See Emefie Ikenga-Metuh, “The Paradox of Transcendence and Immanence of God in African Religions: A Sociohistorical Explanation,” *Religion* 15 (1985): 373–85; Long, “The West African High God”; Austin J. Shelton, “The Presence of the ‘Withdrawn’ High God in North Ibo Religious Belief and Worship,” *Man* 65 (1965): 15–18.

Ibeji, Olokun, and Black Theology

We have explored the Yoruba concepts of *Ibeji* and *Olokun* and in so doing have established a sense of how they may be understood, albeit selectively, as theoretical principles. Let us now turn to an exploration of how the thematic scope of Black theology may be widened through a critical consideration of these principles. We should remember that Black theology is not devoid of the ideas of tensionality and mystery.³² However, they are present only latently. What I am proposing is that they be viewed as *patent* theoretical components. My suggestion is not only that Black theology adopt a Yoruba diasporic understanding of these principles, but that it also affirm the irreducible experiences and realities they signal, as robustly as do Yoruba diasporic communities. This would require Black theology to re-organize itself in order that new themes, which go beyond the limits of previous ones, can be incorporated and developed, thereby increasing its thematic scope. Four of these themes, all of which are consistent with tensionality and mystery as explained above, might be (1) the absence of liberation; (2) discursive ambiguity; (3) the irreducibility of Black religious experience; (4) the de-centralization of the Christian narrative.

As we have seen, tensionality has to do with polarity, with the concurrent existence of dichotomous energies. This arrangement is found in the essential composition of the universe, and is definitive of the personal realm, the realm of experience. As such, the situation of tensionality would have to be understood as having severe implications for the reality of liberation. Perhaps most prominent among these implications is the assailability of liberation, or, in other terms, the presence of forces whose inertia constantly threatens to eradicate the possibility and manifestation of liberation.

32. Tensionality is an important feature of Delores Williams's theological analysis. She avers, "Black theologians, in order to present a true rendering of the faith of the African-American community, must not be concerned only with the tensions between the contemporary Black community and the biblical community. They must also reveal the tensions in the community's faith, so that the African-American Christian community can become aware of how these tensions affect its theology and life ... The truth of the matter may be that the Bible gives license for us to have it both ways: God liberates and God does not always liberate all the oppressed. God speaks comforting words to the survival and quality of life struggle of many families" (Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 148–99).

We might also mention Anthony Pinn's theory of Black religion as a movement toward what he calls "complex subjectivity." See Anthony B. Pinn, *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 173–79.

The latter might be thematized in Black theology as “the absence of liberation.” Black theological discourse courageous enough to set for itself the task of grappling with this theme would not assume a shared experience of liberation in oppressed communities. In fact, the very meaning of liberation, as traditionally articulated, would be called into question; its compatibility with daily experience thoroughly examined and routinely contested. The goal of this discourse, however, would not necessarily set out to demonstrate the untenability of all positive expressions of liberation. Yet it would view as dubious any absolutizing assertion of the same. In such an interpretive setting, the reality of liberation would, in a final analysis, be understood as contingent and episodic, as perpetually (and creatively) entwined with non-liberation. Black theology, in this mode, would counteract the nearly unbridled positivism of past years, through its demand for much more carefully constructed statements about liberation.

Consideration of tensionality as a theoretical principle would also draw attention to the very nature of language. As semiology and hermeneutics teach us, the meanings created by language are at every turn ambiguous.³³ It is the function of language to signify human experiences of the world both positively and negatively. The production of language results in densely populated, highly complex and interrelated sign-worlds or, to use T. U. M. Lotman’s term, “semiospheres.”³⁴ It is within this complicated network of human consciousness that discourse is forged. Despite the fact that, as Charles Morris insists, discourse is by definition always purposive, it cannot escape the inherent ambiguity of the language by which it is constituted.³⁵ Mikhail Epstein’s insights are helpful here:

Usually it is words that speak, while things keep silent. But when words approach the boundaries of silence, this silence of things begins to speak for itself. The greatest challenge is to find the words that will set off the thing itself as its own

33. See the chapter entitled “The Problem of the Text in Linguistics, Philology, and the Human Sciences: An Experiment in Philosophical Analysis,” in M. M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, eds Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. Vern W. McGee (University of Texas Press Slavic Series, 8; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986). See the essay entitled “Semiotic Space” in T. U. M. Lotman, *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990). See the discussion of language on pp. 445–49 in Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

34. Lotman, *Universe of the Mind*, 2.

35. Charles Morris, *Writings on the General Theory of Signs* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), 203.

singular, sought-for, and irreplaceable word. Only then does it become itself—a message (*vest*), a voice sounding in silence, in answer to all the words uttered on its behalf.³⁶

There is an elusive quality in the “things” or aims for which discourse reaches. The facticity of the desired end of discourse never fully resembles the language used to describe it. Discourse is at no point equivalent to its *telos*. It is utterly unable to claim such an achievement. Insofar as language cannot infer *meaning* in any direct, scientific way, equally, discourse is incapable of univocality. This unavoidable condition of discursive ambiguity is a foremost conclusion of the Yoruba theory of tensionality. Any Black theology which took this principle seriously would have to acknowledge the ultimate semantic insufficiency of everything it tried to forward, vis-à-vis its *raison d’être*. This would likely foster in Black theologians a more disciplined use of language. The thematization of discursive ambiguity means that Black theology would have to nakedly confront the imprecision of language and struggle with its implications for all its so-called knowledge of God. This need not, however, have a choking or silencing effect on Black theology. Conversely, embracing the impossibility (and, for that matter, undesirability) of univocality invites polyvocality; Black theology would be given the opportunity to devise, experiment with, and cultivate new and different ways of linguistically figuring God.

Olokun, the Yoruba principle of mystery, has import with regard to Black religious experience. Historically, Black theology has distorted this experience in an effort to make it appear largely consonant with the liberationist paradigm. In so doing, the diversity and complexity of Black religious experience were overlooked, much to the detriment of Black diasporans, many of whom do not consider themselves Christian. The Yoruba theory of mystery, as conveyed in the meaning of *Olokun*, avoids these pitfalls. A Black theology informed by the principle of *Olokun* would have a quite different perception of Black religious experience. It would no longer be viewed as a more or less monolithic, containable, and therefore manipulable phenomenon, to be placed in the service of Black theology. Instead, this experience would be understood as highly diverse and irreducible. In a manner similar to that of *Olokun*, Black religious experience would represent both the dimly known and the powerfully felt unknown. Black theology would have to deal with the stark inexhaustibility of this experience and accept the fundamental inadequacy of all

36. Mikhail Epstein, *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture*, Critical Perspectives on Modern Culture (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 275.

interpretive models deployed in an attempt to gain degrees of cognitive control over it.

Through its struggle with this phenomenon, Black theology would also be faced with the broader problem of the unintelligibility of all human experience. The less than clear, less than comprehensible nature of experience, implies that Black theology would have to revisit and rethink its assumptions about what it actually means for human beings to “experience” divinity.

In other words, the question of what is being communicated by someone who purports to have experienced God would become crucial. Furthermore, Black theology would have to interrogate and do away with its tendency to hierarchicalize religious experience in favor of the liberationist agenda. In short, Black theology would have to strive for accounts of Black religious experience that formatively reflect its final context—mystery.

The Christian narrative lies at the core of Black theology. While Black theology has, of course, refracted it through the lens of what has come to be known as the “Black experience,” it nonetheless retains most of the classical markers of the Judeo-Christian tradition. In its proclamation of the Christian gospel as the preeminent source of Black liberation, it attributes to Christianity a superior status among other Black diasporic religions. In an engagement with the concept of *Olokun*, a major crisis is precipitated in Black theology that stimulates recognition of all religious myths as equally impoverished in their inability to fully capture the Infinite. The Christian narrative is, in effect, relativized or de-centralized; its lofty standing revoked. The demotion of the Christian narrative would not be followed by the elevation of another, but rather, by the ascendance of mystery. This does not force Black theology to completely retreat from its confessionalism. Even so, Black theology would be compelled to reflect on the limitations of confessionalism, and on the ways in which it militates against constructive interreligious dialogue, for instance.

Black theology would also be compelled to investigate the connections between its own ideological program and its wish to exalt Christianity. A deeper implication of *Olokun* as a theoretical principle in Black theology is that Black theologians would have to re-train themselves to construe Black theology as an undertaking perfectly capable of being rooted in non-Christian religious traditions, of having little or nothing to do with Jesus Christ. It is my belief that the de-centralization of the Christian narrative, along with the other themes outlined above, have great potential to move Black theology into uncharted, but fruitful territory.

Conclusion

A guiding motif in this essay is Black theology's desperate need to form new conceptual and rhetorical repertoires. I have attempted to argue for the suitability of the Yoruba concepts of *Ibeji* and *Olokun* in helping Black theology to jumpstart this process. Fierce objections to my position are inevitable. Many of them will likely stem from profoundly-felt commitments to the Christian narrative and to specific expressions of liberation. I empathize with these commitments. Yet, I also empathize, deeply, with the commitments of those in other religious traditions, such as the one discussed in this study. As long as Black theology insists on recycling itself in accordance with the canonical Christian narrative, and as a corollary, liberationist paradigm, its relevance, meaning, and impact will be greatly restricted, thus solidifying its place as a discourse of little or no consequence for a sizable portion of the Black Atlantic Diaspora. Hence, in the spirit of relevance, meaning, and impact, indeed, in the spirit of community, this study is presented as a gesture toward a mode of Black religious discourse not primarily wedded to the Christian mythos.

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