**America: The treasure chest**

For as long as I can remember, I always wanted to come to America as I thought of this country being a treasure chest. I grew up in Africa and spent several years of my life in different European countries as my father’s diplomatic carrier assigned him abroad. My base was Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, previously known as Zaïre. There, my window to the word, our black and white TV showed me life in America. Starsky and Hutch, Kojac, the Love Boat and Dallas were only a few of the images that made me dream about visiting this country. The numerous hours spent listening to and dancing on the popular tunes of the BJs, James Brown and the Jackson Five made my heart long for the experience that inspired such amazing creativity. American athletes like Carl Lewis, John McEnroe and Mary Lou Retton had me hold my breath while they were breaking records and showing the world the best America had to offer.

With all my dreams in mind I came to the USA for the first time in the mid eighties. I landed in San Francisco and spent a month studying English in a small private college in Oakland. It was an exhilarating experience, I felt as if I did not have enough with my one brain to soak up all the information I was being exposed to. America lived up to her promises of grandeur; the streets were wide, the cars were big, the buildings were huge and the people just seemed to be broader than life. Although I had visited and lived in many countries before, America was in a class of her own; I had the impression that I had stepped into my TV set and entered another reality. Many things seemed surreal, although I was here, I was only an observer but rarely a participant; I hardly ever spoke to Americans except when I was buying some souvenirs in a shop or engaging with my professors.

I did not fail to notice that that although on one hand black people were holding some prominent positions in businesses and administrations, which was not the case in Europe, one the other hand, the poorest people and the least educated were black Americans. The neighborhoods that we were discouraged to go to were always those with a higher concentration of black people. Hence the clichés that I had seen in movies and TV shows about how black Americans were dangerous were reinforced by my lack of experience with black Americans during my first visit. Although I started to recognize that this society was highly divided and compartmentalized, I returned to Europe with a greater desire to know more about this country.

When I landed in New York City few years later, I knew that my experience was going to be quiet different than when I first visited the USA. This time I was here to stay a while; I was about to start my college education in the Big Apple. My understanding about the American culture grew as I was meeting and interacting with real Americans this time around. Even though I was still very much impressed by the American innovative and dynamic spirit, I was yet again confronted with the harsh reality of cultural and racial divide. I had always been a pretty forward person, who was very comfortable around anybody regardless of how they looked or where they came from. In college, the only people who seemed approachable and manifested a genuine interest in knowing me were black.

My encounter with a new reality about America and myself began when I started to meet African American students who later became some of my best friends. I realized how surprised they were to meet an African like me because I defied all the clichés they had about Africans. Just as I was thirsty to learn more about the black experience, they were eager to know more about the Africa from which I had come. The meager information about Africa that made it through the filter of the media was always about some humanitarian catastrophes or about cruel war crimes committed by some warlords hiding in the wilderness. The other images that were shown were of malnourished orphans in arid desolated places begging for the publics generosity to donate money to some Christian organization with a mission to save those children from famine and by the same token from ignorance of the true savior God.

No one here had heard the amazing music of OK Jazz, Papa Wemba, Koffi Olomide or Zaïko Langa Langa. Here they had never admired the monumental artwork of masters such as Liolo or Cheri Samba nor read novels by Sengor and Cheik Anta Diop. No mention of the African film festivals or fashion weeks taking place in various prominent cities of the African Continent. Nothing, nada, zéro information about daily life in Africa was to be found in the mass medial or elsewhere for that matter. The historical references about Africa were limited to what revolved around slavery and geographical data. Most people made me feel as though I came from another planet where everyone looked the same, spoke a unique awkward language and shared a single common culture.

I was not better of when it came to knowing about the African American experience, I soon found out. Besides great corner stones of the African American history such as slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction and the Civil Rights Movement, I did not know more about the daily struggle of the contemporary African Americans. The information about America that reached the rest of the world was also filtered and censured. What we saw of America included no reports of the constant violations of the Civil Rights, no information about the sad state of affaires for African Americans when it came to education, housing, professional training and employment, health and health care, etc. I was in for a rude awakening from my dream about the America of my childhood.

I felt a pressing need to integrate all that I was learning about the African American experience with my own as an African of the main land. This could only be possible by an exchange of information and by an exposure to each cultural reality. The more I got to know, the more I realized how blinded I had been form the harsh struggles of my peers here and equally to their greatest achievements and cultural riches. I also started to recognize the common denominator in our cultures, traditions and practices. Lastly, I had to face my own limitations about my own knowledge about my Africa; the more my friends wanted to know, the more areas of shadow appeared in my own understanding of what was African. This void was the source for my desire to know more about myself and about my home, the Congo. After completing my degree, I returned to Europe but this time determined to pursue my education in African affairs.

As years passed by and I continued to evolve and learn more about African cultures, History, languages, philosophies and spiritual systems, my thirst for more seemed to never be quenched. I eventually came back to live in the United States where yet another phase of my formation about my African identity was to take place. I met African of the Diaspora (direct descendants of African Ancestors or anyone with philosophical and/or cultural affiliation and/or affinity to Africa) who, just like myself, cultivates a profound love and interest for all that was of Africa. The difference is that this time the emphasis was mainly on the African spirituality. I have met few extremely knowledgeable and influential people such as the Yoruba Priestess Iyalode Yeyefini Efumbolade, Yoruba Priestress Efunlayo Awolaye, Lukumi Priest Obá Oriaté Miguel Willie Ramos, Palo Tata Oscar Guerrero and Lukumi Priest Rivelinho Bolivar. I have augmented my experiential understanding of the African concept of God in an exponential way. My spirituality- my life has since taken another sudden turn to yet another facet of the best Africa has to offer to Humanity: Spirituality.

As I became a student of the African spiritual practices, I began to recognize that the mere fact that I was here in the United States, learning about this vast body of knowledge was an amazing manifestation of the power of Africa. Although I grew up in Kinshasa, here I was in South East Florida learning about my own ancestral history and culture from people who inherited this knowledge from one generation to the next for centuries from the time the first boat with African captives set shore on this side of the planet. As Africans on the mainland had gone through both physical and cultural genocide in the hands of the imperial and colonial powers over centuries, on the western hemisphere, the descendants of African captives were keeping alive knowledge and practices from the ancestral land at the peril of their own life so that one day, I and a new generation of Africans would be able to retrieve it and reconnect with a powerful spiritual treasure.

As I have now been a student of African spirituality for the past five years, I have also recognized that despite the fact that the great majority of sub-Saharan Africa have been coerced into practicing foreign religions like Catholicism, Protestantism and Islam, the daily lives of African people is imbued with ancient and powerful spiritual practices. Those have transcended time and all obstacles to find themselves in the mist of modern African cities like Kinshasa. References to Ancestors, spirits of Nature, God the Creator and its multitudes of facets are common in today’s music, literature and the arts, marriage, birth and death ceremonies and rituals, conflict resolution and problem solving strategies. Although this presence seemed subtle, it was nevertheless powerful since that information was to be encoded in my own life without me taking much notice about it until I began to find its equivalents here in America.

Along side my apprenticeship mainly with the Yoruba and Lukumi system, I came across something even more potent in terms of my own cultural heritage with the practice of Palo Mayombe. Palo practices, rituals, songs and language resemble what I have been accustomed to see in the Congo so much that I am baffled by the fact that distance and time were not able to significantly alter what the Africans from the Congo came here with. The base of the practices and the core of the beliefs remained intact. I find this familiarity I have with those concepts astonishing since I have not had any formal teaching or training in those matters in the Congo. Which leads me to believe that knowledge of spiritual matters is innate and integrated throughout society in such way that no one can escape it but can only choose to ignore it.

As my knowledge deepens, I have also come across different and diverse body of experiences concerning the practice of the Ancient African Spiritual Systems. I have come to see that despite its sacred nature, African spirituality is not immune from criticism by outsiders and insiders alike. In addition to the facts that there are different systems, there are also different currents and schools of thoughts in each system. That diversity promotes controversies pertinent to the legitimacy of such and such practice or belief or even the authenticity and orthodoxy in reference to the African tradition of some rituals and philosophy. I do not find these debates or controversies to be unhealthy or detrimental. To the contrary, I find them quite necessary if we hope to promote these systems to the next level. Those divisions are only symptomatic of the emergence of these practices from the shadow of secrecy where they were kept not so much because the Truth itself was to be kept secret but rather for the mere fact that it was to insure its survival as well as the one of those who found truth and solace in those ancestral systems during slavery, and later because of intolerance and prejudice.

It goes without saying that with the emergence and the rapid spread of this body of knowledge to a more general public, many who have been working and consecrating their life to the use and teaching of these system may find themselves divided in two distinct camps as to the becoming of these systems, namely the pessimists or the optimists. To the optimists I will say to press on and accept the challenges ahead. Lets continue to learn, integrate those concepts in our lives and actively participate in the debate with the purpose of bringing light to darkness and order to chaos. I want to encourage the pessimists to take a step back to gain a broader perspective of the issues at hand and trust that these spiritual systems have been around for centuries if not millenniums and have managed to survive a continental transplantation, the brutal repression during slavery, the transculturation due to they opening to non-Africans, the exportation to other continents, repatriation to Africa and hyperspace. I agree that the rigor of orthodoxy to keep the traditions alive has been instrumental to the survival of these religions. However, debates and controversies could well signal a time to integrate new knowledge, new reality, new technologies and new worldview to anchor those practices in the next era of human development.

Africa may be the most ancient home of humanity but certainly does not want to be stock in time, there was a time when what we call tradition today was novelty. The human race is by nature fervent of innovations, which is an asset in this ever-changing reality. I believe the adaptability and sense of innovation are the main qualities that allowed our African forth fathers, who arrived captive with their bare hands in the New World, to perpetuate their religious practices and beliefs. Our generation has the obligation to find the tools and the balance to continue to foster the expression of the Universal Truth so that it can become accessible to all. Indeed the Truth cannot reinvent itself but can certainly continue to reinvent its forms of expression.