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Vanessa Perez March 25, 2021

Yoruba Religious Aesthetics in Popular Culture: A Visual Analysis of Beyoncé's Reclamation of Blackness Through African Spirituality

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Abstract

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Through outlets like The Walt Disney Company, the media has historically misappropriated Lucumí and other African heritage religions by demonizing the practices. Consequently, contemporary artists and practitioners themselves have actively counteracted the media's irresponsible handling of such traditions by using social media and popular culture to reclaim the representation of African heritage religions. While early studies of African diaspora religions addressed issues of syncretism and the Herskovits-Frazier debate concerning African "retentions," contemporary studies are now analyzing a broader array of themes, including gender, ritual process, sexuality, and sensuality. These themes as well as Beyoncé's engagement with Lucumí in her public performances and productions have sparked controversy over the boundaries of propriety and respectability regarding the secular representation of African heritage religions. Through a visual analysis of Yoruba religious aesthetics in *Black is King,* I will argue that contrary to critics who find Beyoncé's work disrespectful, her public embodiment of the Orisha is a practice integral to the essence of Lucumí. The intersection of religion and themes surrounding race and Blackness in her work effectively challenges white supremacy and the historical degradation of African culture. I will also explore how Lucumí's reclamation by popular culture icons like Beyoncé actually affords scholars an opportunity to examine corrective representations of African heritage religions in the media that reflect nuanced interpretations of sacred knowledge, practice, and performance.

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Introduction

"I can't say I believe in God and call myself a child of God and then not see myself as a God."[1]

Within the context of a society that privileges Western Eurocentric religions, referring to oneself as a God is not a public norm. However, African spirituality is rooted in this exact perspective; one cannot see oneself as an extension of the divine without acknowledging the divine power that is held within. As a result of the transatlantic slave trade, African religious practices have traveled outside of Africa into the wider diaspora. However, the global demonization of Africa and African spirituality has resulted in a public rejection of African heritage religions. Through outlets like film and television, mainstream media has historically furthered this misappropriation of African-based religions.[2] Consequently, contemporary artists and practitioners themselves are actively decolonizing society's understandings of Africa by using social media and popular culture to reclaim the representation of African heritage religions.

Mainstream media has a history of maligning religions such as Lucumí and Vodou with the label "black magic." In films and television shows, African heritage religions are almost always paired with the undertones of horror and suspense. The overall treatment of African spirituality in the media serves to promote the colonial notion that any engagement with African spiritual practices is equivalent to entering a pact with the spiritual world or devil that will seem convenient on the surface, but always comes with a personal expense. While the media's

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[1] *Black is King,* directed by Beyoncé Knowles-Carter, Emmanuel Adjei, Ibra Ake, Blitz Bazawule, Jenn Nkiru, and Kwasi Fordjour (2020; Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures), digital film.

[2] Some film examples include: *White Zombie, Night of the Living Dead, Childs Play, Dogma, Pirates of the Caribbean, Voodoo, The Sugar Hill, The Deep, Zombie Child, Chucky*

historical pattern of demonizing African heritage religions stretches over several decades, I will briefly discuss a contemporary example that can be found in plain sight.

The Walt Disney Company's *Princess and the Frog*[3] (2009) is an animated musical film about a struggling waitress in New Orleans with the dream of one day opening her own restaurant. For many people in younger generations, this is the first exposure to a Black, specifically African American, Disney princess and storyline surrounding Black characters — granted, the Black characters are frogs for most of the film. Other than the grossly rich princess of New Orleans and her father, it is important to note that the rest of the main characters in the film are Black.

The villain of the film is a mischievous witch doctor, Dr. Facilier, who carries a cane with a mystical bulb on top of it. He wears the colors purple, black and red, a necklace made of fangs, and a top hat with a skull and two bones in the shape of an X. It is evident by the protagonist's weariness of Dr. Facilier that he has a negative reputation and is feared by most locals. He possesses the power of "black magic" and uses it to manipulate and scam others. Dr. Facilier also goes by the name, Shadow Man, which alludes to the scary dark spirits that surround and control him throughout the film. He makes a pact with these seemingly evil spirits to sacrifice living souls in exchange for wealth and uncontrollable power. When he fails to complete this task, the shadows take his soul.

Specifically, the directors name his business "Dr. Facilier's Voodoo Emporium" making it clear that the villain is a practitioner of Voodoo Hoodoo. His lair is decorated with skulls, bones, Voodoo dolls, tarot cards, snakes, tribal masks, and bongo drums. Loa, which are spirits

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[3] *Princess and the Frog*, directed by John Musker and Ron Clements (2009; United States: Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures), DVD.

in Vodou, are an important element of the religion that the film incorporates, but they are poorly and irresponsibly explained. The dark shadows that control Dr. Facilier are named "the Loa" and he refers to them in his song, "Friends on the Other Side," where he sings, "I have Voodoo, I have Hoodoo" while displaying a Voodoo doll and a chicken. These are the same spirits that take his soul at the end of the film.

The Princess and the Frog mainly targets children as the audience. Thus, this film serves as the first instance of exposure to African heritage religions for many of child audiences. Unfortunately, the directors continue Western practices of grouping all African spiritual practices into a singular religion — in this case Vodou. The film's distortion of sacred religious attributes like the loa falsely conveys Vodou as a primitive, evil practice rather than a religion. The overall message received from the incorporation of this religion in the film is to be weary of practitioners of Voodoo Hoodoo, or it might result in consequences like being turned into a frog, being murdered, or losing one's soul.

In my original project, I intended to explore how racism and Afrophobia affects the practices of the Afro-Cuban religion Lucumí in the United States and in Cuba. As Ennis Edmonds and Michelle Gonzalez argue in *Caribbean Religious History: An Introduction,*[4] Lucumí is an integral part of African heritage. Scholars such as Edmonds, Gonzalez, Mary Ann Clark, and Miguel De La Torre have presented historical research on Lucumí, its origins, and the misconceptions surrounding it. However, I sought to interrogate how African American, Cuban American, and Cuban practitioners' acknowledgement versus concealment of the African origins of Lucumí impacts their discourse and religious practices.

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[4] Ennis Edmonds and Michelle Gonzalez, *Caribbean Religious History: An Introduction* (New York: NYU Press, 2010).

I had planned to conduct an ethnographic study in Atlanta, Georgia and La Habana, Cuba over the course of summer 2020. I wanted to target participants of white and Black phenotypes in order to consider how one's physical appearance affects perceptions of Africanity. Some of the questions that would have guided the structure of my interviews are: how do practitioners understand the Catholic elements versus the African elements in Lucumí? Why do certain practitioners prefer the saints over the Orisha? How do practitioners feel about the bleaching and white-washing of deities? And how accurately do they see their religion represented in the media?

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I was unable to travel to Cuba to conduct in-person interviews. However, over the summer of the year 2020, I witnessed the exploration of my culture and religion on a mainstream platform in a positive light by my favorite artist for the first time. On July 31, 2020, Beyoncé released the visual album, *Black is King*,[5] on the streaming platform Disney+ and completely shifted the focus and scope of my research project. *Black is King*, is a visual reinterpretation of *The Lion King* (1994) film;[6] the visual album directed, written, and produced by Beyoncé, is set in various locations in Africa and brings to life songs from the album "The Lion King: the Gift."[7] This album, also produced by Beyoncé, is the soundtrack for the 2019 remake of *The Lion King*[8] where Beyoncé plays the role of Nala. In the film, *The Lion King* (1994)[9], Nala is the protagonist's, Simba's, best friend, future wife, and

[5] *Black is King,* Knowles-Carter, Adjei, Ake, Bazawule, Nkiru, and Kwasi.

[6] *The Lion King*, directed by Roger Allers, and Rob Minkoff (1994; United States: Buena Vista Pictures), film.

[7] Beyoncé, *The Lion King: The Gift*, released 2019, Parkwood; Columbia, digital musical album. Henceforth, this album will be referred to as *The Gift.*

[8] *The Lion King*, directed by Jon Favreau (2019; Burbank, California: Disney), digital film.

[9] *The Lion King*, Allers, 1994.

eventual queen. The producer of the 2019 remake, Jon Favreau, notes that he emphasizes Nala's role in the film because Beyoncé's beauty, talent, and involvement in the musical numbers allowed for greater things to be done with the project.[10]

Upon first glance, *Black is King* can be seen as Beyoncé's appreciation, or as critics argue appropriation, of African culture. The visual album can also be understood as a Pan-African project because of Beyoncé's emphasis on showcasing different countries and cultural practices from the continent of Africa. However, there is a dearth of scholarship about the film's representation of the Orisha and ceremonies rooted in African heritage religions. In fact, Beyoncé's cultural reset completely challenges how Hollywood has distorted Africa and Yoruba spirituality in the past. In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*,[11] Patricia Hill Collins analyzes how society confines Black women to an inferior social position by assigning identity tropes, which she calls "controlling images" that generalize them as a whole. Society's imposition of these controlling images can be studied through the angry Black woman trope, the Sapphire caricature, and the Welfare Queen stereotype that all characterize Black women as the inferior counterparts to white women. Beyoncé actively challenges this colonial imposition by reconfiguring the image of herself, a Black woman, as a divine being. Additionally, Beyoncé takes this reconfiguration several steps further by changing the narrative of how Africa, African cultures, and African religions are represented in mainstream media. She does this by incorporating a plethora of elements from different African cultures throughout the film, emphasizing the multifaceted identities the media

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[10] Marc Snetiker, "How 'The Lion King' Landed Beyoncé," EW.com, Entertainment Weekly, 26 Apr. 2019, ew.com/movies/2019/04/26/the-lion-king-beyonce/.

[11] Patricia Hill Collins*, Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 69.

ignores when portraying the popularized generic imaginary of Africa. Specifically, Beyoncé's artistry reverses Western associations of Africa with poverty and precarity and instead, equates Blackness with wealth and luxury.

While Beyoncé accesses various African religions in her work such as spiritual traditions from the Dogon peoples and from Kongo religious culture, which has interacted with Yoruba religious culture in Cuba across time, Beyoncé's principal devotion is to Lucumí thought, symbols and aesthetics. Other than Vodou, Lucumí is one of the most popular African heritage religions in the diaspora. However, despite Lucumí's popularization, it remains stigmatized by colonial misrepresentations of African-ness.

In this project, I perform an extensive visual analysis of the Yoruba religious aesthetics in Beyoncé's *Black is King,* mainly analyzing how Beyoncé's public reclamation of African heritage religions empowers the Black identity. Her incorporation of the themes of Black spirituality and Black Power addresses Black "anthropological impoverishment"[12] and the world's assault on Blackness. She invites her Black audience members to return to African spirituality and reimagine the meaning of Blackness as divine. Additionally, Beyoncé places herself in conversation with scholars of religion by engaging in this theological exercise through the medium of film. While many blogs and individuals on social media outlets have explored the hidden meanings in *Black is King*, there remains a lack of scholarship on the religious implications of this specific film (to my knowledge).

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[12] I borrow the phrase "anthropological impoverishment" from Englebert Mveng's, "Third World Theology—What Theology? What Third World? Evaluation by an African Delegate," in *Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983), 220, to refer to the global imposition of domination, racism, and institutionalized poverty on Black bodies, particularly Black women.

My exploration begins with a historical contextualization of Lucumí's appearance and proliferation in Cuba. I analyze issues of race and the effects of Afrophobia on the development of Yoruba religious practices throughout the diaspora. Subsequently, I provide an overview of Lucumí cosmology as a prelude to my visual analysis of the Yoruba religious aesthetics in *Black is King*. Then, I engage in a thorough scene-by-scene analysis of the visual album. While I rely on secondary sources to provide philosophical and theological context, most of my research will consist of film analysis. Primarily, my methodology will encompass a combination of semiotic analysis and narrative analysis. In other words, I will conduct an examination of the symbols and repeated objects, costumes, and colors throughout the film. Additionally, I will combine this analysis with my interpretations of lyrics, character development, and plot in order to interrogate how Beyoncé is using Yoruba religious aesthetics to guide her audience on a journey to spiritual fulfillment. I conclude by discussing the significance of Beyoncé's work to the study of African religions and to popular understandings of African heritage religions in mainstream society and around the world.

Lucumí's Appearance in Cuba and Reappearance in the United States

During the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, enslaved Africans brought their Yoruba religious practices from Nigeria and modern-day Benin to Cuba, establishing the Afro-Cuban religion Lucumí. Yoruba religion's diasporic development along with the racial oppression of enslaved Africans in the diaspora has inspired a variety of religious expressions such as Lucumí in Cuba, Orisha in Trinidad, and Nago-Candomblé in Brazil. Historically, Spanish colonizers used the Yoruba term Lucumí to refer to the Yoruba-speaking Africans in Cuba. However, the term

Lucumí (which is a greeting meaning "my friend") was brought to Cuba from Africa by the Yoruba people themselves. Religious scholar Mary Ann Clark specifies, "by 1886...between 500,000 and 700,000 Africans had been transported to Cuba...between 1850 and 1870, over a third of these were designated as Lukumi [sic]."[13]

"Lucumí" is the historically emic term for the religion rather than the term "Santeria." To explain, scholars of religion Ennis Edmonds and Michelle Gonzalez explain that practitioners deem the term "Santería" problematic because Santería translates as "way of the saints," emphasizing the Catholic influence on the religion rather than its African roots.[14] The term "Santería" is often misunderstood as a separate practice in Latinx communities. The popularity of Santeria in these communities is due in large part to the intentional concealment of the religion's African origins. Practitioners also refer to this religion as Regla de Ocha meaning "rule of ocha or orishas;" however, they do not use this term as frequently.[15] For this reason, Mercedes Cros Sandoval argues that Regla Lucumí (rule or way of Lucumí) is the most appropriate name for the religion, since practitioners use "Lucumí" to refer to themselves and their language."[16] With this in mind, "Lucumí" will be used to identify the religion throughout this thesis.

After the Haitian Revolution ended in 1804, the demand for labor in Cuba due to the sugar boom sparked "economic changes [which] echoed in the relations between races."[17] As a

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[13]Mary Ann Clark, *Santería: Correcting the Myths and Uncovering the Realities of a Growing Religion* (Westport, Conn: Praeger Publishers, 2007), 17.

[14] Edmonds and Gonzalez, *Caribbean Religious History: An Introduction, 93.*

[15] Edmonds and Gonzalez, 94.

[16] Edmonds and Gonzalez, 93.

[17] George Brandon, *Santeria from Africa to the New World: The Dead Sell Memories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 80.

result, Afro-Cubans were treated worse and the government began to target African Cabildos.[18] Originally, African Cabildos were only accessible to Afro-Cubans who spoke the Yoruba language. George Brandon, an expert on the development of Yoruba religious practices from Africa to Cuba concludes,

> Membership was probably opened gradually to non-Yorubas who spoke the Yoruba language such as some peoples from the modern Republic of Benin (formerly Dahomey), then to people who could trace Lucumí descent. With the cessation of the trade in slaves, membership became open to non-Lucumí; these people became Lucumí not by birth or descent but by initiation. In time the secret religious practices ceased to be solely the property of Afro-Cubans.[19]

While people who were not of Lucumí descent eventually were allowed into Lucumí communities, Lucumí originally belonged to Afro-Cubans. Though non-Blacks became a part of these communities, the vile racism in Cuba remained. Naturally, the imposed racism in Cuba resulted in disagreements between practitioners of Yoruba spirituality.

Prior to the Cuban Revolution (1953-1959), the United States and Cuba had a tumultuous political history. By 1895, the Cuban Independence Movement led by Maximo Gomez, Calixto Garcia, and Jose Marti, sought liberation from Spanish colonial rule through insurrectionary strategies such as economic protests, the burning of sugar fields, and the destruction of public

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[18] Brandon, 82. In Cuba, African Cabildos were societies or nations of freed formerly enslaved Africans from the same regions in Africa.

[19] Brandon, 83.

properties. Marti's death combined with Spain's violent response to the insurrections threatened the success of the Cuban Independence Movement. However, in 1898, America joined Cuba and sparked the Spanish American War. Subsequently, the United States government expulsed Spain and established military occupation in Cuba.[20]

Cuba was successful in gaining independence from Spain; however, it inadvertently fell under American imperial rule. The United States government created the Treaty of Paris which essentially granted the U.S. power over political affairs in Cuba. America flexed its imperial authority through multiple interventions in Cuba, particularly in the years 1906 and 1917. The United States continued to colonize Cuba and reap the political and economic benefits from the sugar producing colony.

In 1933, the United States former president, Teddy Roosevelt declared neutrality and ended American imperial rule in Cuba. By 1952, however, Cuba was once again facing political unrest. The United States government backed the implementation of dictator Fulgencio Batista as president. When Batista was overthrown by Cuban revolters, the United States government placed an embargo on Cuba, intentionally damaging its economy and the livelihood of many Cuban nationals.

Following the Cuban Revolution in 1959, an influx of Cubans fled the island and emigrated to the United States.[21] Because of the large Caribbean migration into Miami, Atlanta, and New York City, these cities remain hubs for Yoruba religious practice in the United States. As the religion has developed, so has its participants. While Cubans reestablished their Yoruba religious practices through Lucumí in the United States, concurrent with the Black Power

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[20] "Aviva Chomsky, *A History of the Cuban Revolution* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2015), 15.

[21] Tracey Hucks, *Yoruba Traditions and African American Religious Nationalism*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012), 145.

Movement, African Americans began to establish their Black identity through the reclamation of African heritage religions.[22]

A prominent source of Yoruba religious knowledge in the United States is the Oyoutunji Yoruba African Kingdom, founded by Oseijeman Adefunmi in 1970. Oyotunji African Village is North America's the first known community based on Yoruba culture. The village currently sits on 27 acres in the swamps of South Carolina.[23] Adefunmi described Oyotunji African village as a "conflation of 'Yoruba culture with Black racial unity.'"[24] While trying to create a Yoruba religious space in the United States, Adefunmi sought Yoruba religious knowledge in Matanzas, Cuba. In 1959, Adefunmi was initiated into the Yoruba tradition in Cuba, and in 1960, he returned to Cuba and "was appointed by the ancestors in a séance."[25] Thousands of African American practitioners have followed a similar path, but seeking religious guidance from priests in Oyotunji village and from Lucumí communities in Cuba.

Contestations Over Race and Religion: Lucumí and its African Heritage Among Practitioners

Because Lucumí is now practiced by various communities — not just Black Cubans —- the racial, cultural, and religious bias that practitioners maintain affect how they incorporate African elements in their religious practices. Historically, Yoruba spiritual communities, like Oyotunji African village, deemed Cuba as a source of knowledge and guidance on Yoruba religious practice. Many devotees embrace a Cuban-centered practice of Yoruba spirituality

[22] Hucks, 146.
[23] Hucks, 171.
[24] Hucks, 173.
[25] Hucks, 217.

because of the notion that the slave societies in Cuba and other countries in the Caribbean were able to better cultivate their Yoruba religious practices than slave societies in the United States.[26] However, it is important to note that scholars like Jadele McPherson disagree with this viewpoint because it ignores the institutionalized racism and historical erasure that all slave societies, including Cuba, were subject to and the process of ethnogenesis these groups participated in.[27]

While some Communities of Asé[28] draw their knowledge from Lucumí communities in Cuba, other practitioners seek guidance from Ifa communities in Nigeria to establish their religion in the wider diaspora. Although there exists both collaboration and disconnection between African American and Latinx Lucumí communities, "African American and Latino [sic] practitioners have disagreed on aesthetics and ideologies in Orisha practice."[29] Primarily, division seems to sprout from the controversy of deeming Cuba as a valid source of Yoruba religious practice. Disagreement stems from a debate on the authenticity of African heritage religions in the diaspora and the effects of Afrophobia and racism on the practices of Yoruba spirituality.[30] McPherson explores the influence of race on the Orisha worshipping communities formed by African Americans compared to Latinxs. Primarily, she explores conflicting views of Cuba as an authentic source for Yoruba religions. Specifically, the writer shares that a few African American communities (or iles) in Chicago reject Cuban-centered practices of Lucumí

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[26] Jadele McPherson, "Rethinking African Religions: African Americans, Afro-Latinos, Latinos, and Afro-Cuban Religions in Chicago," *Afro-Hispanic Review*, vol. 26, no. 1(2007): 121–140, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23055252.

[27] McPherson, 122.

[28]Communities of Asé is another term for a religious group of Orisha worshipping practitioners.

[29] McPherson, 123.

[30] See note 27 above.

and instead draw from Nigerian Yoruba practices. These iles deem Nigerian Yoruba practices as a more direct and therefore most connected route to practicing the Yoruba derived religion.[31]

Gabriela Castellanos Llanos describes how the complex Afro-Cuban identity has influenced culture in Cuba. In regard to Lucumí, she questions how white practitioners, who live in a racist and racially segregated society, can uphold a racially driven systemic structure while worshipping African gods. The author highlights that she is unaware of any studies done on white Cuban practitioners of Lucumí with racist ideals.[32]

Additionally, anthropologist Kali Argyriadis describes the complexities of the trans-nationalization of Cuban Santería (Lucumí) within Veracruz, Mexico. She notes that the African elements of Lucumí are rejected due to the association of Black Cubans with the lower class. [33] While the rejection of African elements in Lucumí illustrates that racism affects Communities of Asé by stigmatizing practitioners, there is a dearth of scholarship on how racism and Afrophobia impact interactions between practitioners within the religion. Consequently, some practitioners and scholars, particularly those that embrace Yoruba religious practice as a tool of Black empowerment, reject the notion that Cuban-centered Lucumí is an accurate representation of the Yoruba religion.

Similarly, Akissi Britton analyzes how race relations affect the interaction between Cuban Lucumí and Nigerian Ifa-Orisha communities.[34] Britton engages with a Black and African

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[31] Ibid.

[32] Gabriela Castellanos Llanos, "Identidades Raciales y De Género En La Santería Afrocubana," *Historia, Antropología Y Fuentes Orales,* no. 40 (2008): 167-78, www.jstor.org/stable/27920004.

[33] Kali Argyriadis, "*Santeros, Brujos, Artistas y Militantes: Redes Trasnacionales y Usos de Signos "Afro*" *Entre Cuba y Veracruz*," *Ollin Centro INAH Veracruz,* no. 12: 17.

[34] Akissi Britton, "Lucumí and the Children of Cotton: Gender, Race, and Ethnicity in the Mapping of a Black Atlantic Politics of Religion," PhD diss., City University of New York, 2016).

American Orisha worshipping community in Brooklyn, New York that emerged out of racial oppression. She follows their interaction with a predominantly white Cuban and Cuban American Lucumí community in Miami which did not want to be associated with them because of their infamous rituals and practices spread by the media. The Black Lucumí community thought that the rejection it faced was due to racism and reacted by reinitiating themselves into the Traditional Yoruba Religion. In response, a group of self-proclaimed officials of Lucumí, the Oba Oriatés of South Florida, disseminated the following message: "each tradition [Traditional Yoruba Religion and Lukumi Religion] should be considered an autonomous tradition and should remain within the parameters of its own cult and doctrine…ensuring that our rituals are not confused and/or mixed."[35] Oba Oriatés' public separation and othering of the African American Lucumí community illustrate how deep the division between practicing communities can be.

While I am sympathetic with the position of seeking Yoruba spiritual knowledge from Ifa communities in Nigeria, it is unreasonable to discount the sacredness of Yoruba spirituality once it travels to Cuba and develops into Lucumí. This process of developing and adapting occurs within every religion as time passes and the practitioners of the religions move throughout different regions of the diaspora. Invalidating Lucumí as a variant of Yoruba religion yet using current day Yoruba practices in Nigeria as a source of religious knowledge is essentially developing a different variant of the religion. Once a religion travels from Africa to the United States, it will naturally adapt to the political, social, and cultural circumstances beyond its original cultures of origin — making it a diasporic religion.

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[35] Britton, 9.

The conversation of whether or not diasporic religions maintain their sacredness may seem futile and unproductive. Because the connotations of the word "sacred" vary based on individuals' religious background, this analysis can quickly become another practice of placing a Judeo-Christian lens on an African religion. However, it is important to acknowledge that the division between Lucumí communities arises from the effects of white supremacy and systemic racism that privilege Western religions. In order to achieve a more holistic understanding of what sacredness means in Lucumí, the perspective of the practitioners themselves must be highlighted. Until then, this exploration will remain based on speculation of what has been historically documented rather than empirical research.

Scholars' Opinions of Cuba as a Source of Yoruba Spiritual Practice

Jacob Olúpònà, an expert on Yoruba religious knowledge, emphasizes how African heritage religions cannot be studied through a Judeo-Christian lens because these perspectives lack understanding of the sacredness of "cultural geography [and] spatial dimensions in Yoruba religious traditions and culture."[36] A critical aspect of the sacredness of Ifa is its connection to geographical sacredness. In fact, his main argument is that "place occupies a significant category in the phenomenology of African religion because place is regarded as the site where individuals, origin, and ends are located."[37] Olúpònà delineates what makes a place sacred. Initially, he explores the city Ile-Ife which is located in present-day Osun State in Southwestern Nigeria. He

[36] Jacob Olúpònà, "The Meaning of Homeland in Sacred Yorùbá Cosmology," *Experiences of Place*, edited by Mary N. MacDonald (Boston: Harvard University Press for the Center for the Study of World Religions Harvard Divinity School, 2003), pp 87-88.

[37] Olúpònà, 90.

illustrates that the city is sacred because it was created by Obatala through the order of Oludumare. Additionally, Ile-Ife is the sacred city because it is the origin and center of the world.

While he presents Ile-Ife as the sacred city in Yoruba tradition, he also notes that wherever Ifa divination ritual occurs marks that place as sacred.[38] Furthermore, places can become geographically sacred if they are created by miracles or acts of the divine, or if miracles and acts of the divine occur there. The descent of the Orisha into a particular place is an example of an act of the divine. Olúpòna notes, "we all saw how unusually bright the moon was in December 1999, in California, an indication that a new millennium was about to begin. Several places became imbued with sacred qualities either because the descending gods made these places their abode or because certain 'miraculous' events occurred there."[39] Most importantly, the experience of people, memory, and the recounting of these memories are what allows a place to remain sacred. Using this logic, while Olúpònà seems to privilege Ile-Ife as the sacred city, he does conclude with the notion that diasporic sacredness of place outside of Ile-Ife exists in Yoruba tradition.

Olúpònà would agree that the diasporic transference of Yoruba tradition from Africa to Cuba still holds its sacredness in practice because of instances of Orisha descending onto Cuba, such as the appearance of Oshun to *los tres Juanes* and the practice of Ifa divination that takes place on the island. He utilizes the term dynamic sacred space to demonstrate the notion that sacredness can be both tied and "untied to any particular location."[40] Olúpònà writes, "in

[38] Olúpònà, 98.
[39] Olúpònà, 99.
[40] Olúpònà, 89.

dynamic sacred space, sacred space is tied directly to sacred peoples."[41] However, he does not define who sacred people are. While I can infer that sacred people in Yoruba tradition are those who originate and descend from Ile-Ife, Olúpònà does not define this directly. Still, he makes a distinction between insiders and outsiders of Yoruba tradition. He argues that outsiders are unable to acknowledge the sacredness of land, its connection to history, and the *being* of its peoples.[42] While Olúpònà seems to favor religious experiences in Ile-Ife, the concept of dynamic sacred space suggests that he understands that experiencing the sacred is unquestionable across the diaspora.

Olúpònà concludes, "many African scholars sidestepped the 'comparative history of religions' and adopted a spurious approach to African indigenous religions, as though looking through Judeo-Christian spectacles or as if clothing indigenous religious experiences in foreign garments."[43] While the scholar does not agree with the imposition of a Judeo-Christian lens on the study of African heritage religions, the simile of clothing religious experiences in foreign garments brings into question who has the right to claim and experience African spirituality and who is considered foreign.

Similar to Olúpònà's argument, Brandon challenges the Western perspective of labeling Lucumí as a syncretic religion.[44] By tracing how the Yoruba religion traveled from Africa to Cuba, Brandon illustrates that Lucumí naturally developed as any other religion does. Brandon understands Lucumí as a religion with "dual heritage" because "its component traditions include European Christianity (in the form of Spanish folk Catholicism), traditional African religion (in

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[41] See note 38 above.
[42] Olúpònà, 90.
[43] Olúpònà, 87.
[44] Brandon, *Santeria from Africa to the New World: The Dead Sell Memories*, 59.

the form of Orisha worship as practiced by the Yoruba of Nigeria), and Kardecan spiritism, which originated in France in the nineteenth century and became fashionable in both the Caribbean and South America."[45] He describes Lucumí to be a variant of Yoruba religion and therefore deems Cuba as a sacred source of Yoruba tradition.

Lucumí Cosmology

Lucumí's cosmology originates in the Yoruba religion and concerns the relationship between the integral elements of the universe. Four realms exist in Lucumí: the spiritual realm, the human realm, the material realm, and the invisible realm. Humans reside in the physical realm. The ancestral spirits live in the invisible realm and also have an influence on people in the physical realm. According to Edmonds and Gonzalez, "ancestors are either blood or 'religious' relatives who, after death, have become part of 'Ara Arun,' or the residents or people of heaven."[46]

Olodumare is the supreme being and creator of the world. Before the creation of humankind, Olodumare orchestrated the creation of a livable land on earth. They then breathed life into human bodies. Joseph Murphy, an expert on Lucumí, explains that "Olodumare means 'the owner of all destinies.'"[47] However, they are not known to control human affairs. Deriving from Olodumare, Asé is the energy that gives the world life and operates between the different realms. Asé is fundamental in obtaining positivity. In fact, "the purpose of [Lucumí's] religious rituals and practices is to intensify one's Asé or to make stronger Asé available for the

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[45] Brandon, 2.
[46] Edmonds and Gonzalez, *Caribbean Religious History: An Introduction*, 94.
[47] See note 44 above.

accomplishment of certain tasks."[48] Practitioners participate in ceremonies and rituals to obtain Asé in order to overcome day to day obstacles.

Yoruba religious practice is centered around the worship of Olodumare's divinities, the Orisha. Orisha are concentrations of Asé. Originally, certain Yoruba cities worshipped specific singular or related groups of Orisha. Naturally, the practitioners in these specific cities began to expand the different Orisha they worshipped.[49] The introduction of external Orisha into different Yoruba cities happened in a multitude of ways. For one, Orisha were introduced through exogenous marriage. The wife, who typically moved to a home provided by her husband, could either worship the Orisha her husband venerated, or she could choose to continue to worship the Orisha of her hometown. The two options were not mutually exclusive. Additionally, strangers living in the same compound would introduce different Orisha to one another.[50] In the late nineteenth century, two Yoruba women in Cuba saw distinct differences between how the Orisha were worshipped in Cuba in contrast with Yorubaland. As a result, they reorganized Orisha religious practices into a single unified system, standardizing the worship of an established group of Orisha.[51] Out of fear of prosecution, practitioners kept their Yoruba religious practices hidden from outsiders.

Persecution of practitioners heightened the secrecy of Lucumí in Cuba. Clark explains that "by incorporating Catholic saints, iconography, and sacramentals...into their own practices, the Yoruba peoples in Cuba were able to domesticate these powerful spiritual forces for their

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[48] Ibid.

[49] Clark, *Santería: Correcting the Myths and Uncovering the Realities of a Growing Religion,* 17.

[50] Clark, 18.

[51] Clark, 23.

own use."[52] To illustrate, La Caridad del Cobre, a Catholic saint and the official patroness saint of Cuba, serves as an example of how Lucumí permeated the practice of Catholicism in Cuba. Miguel De La Torre narrates the story behind this country's heavenly advocate:[53] Approximately in the early 1600s, *los tres Juanes* left El Cobre in search of salt. El Cobre was a mining town where African slaves worked as copper tunnelers. While on their rowboat, they encountered a wooden plaque depicting the Virgin Mary engraved with the words "I am the Virgin of Charity." Even though the plaque was floating on the water, it was not wet which signified that the experience had been orchestrated by the Divine. *Los tres Juanes* returned to El Cobre and built a shrine in the Virgin's honor.

In Cuba, La Caridad del Cobre is associated with the Orisha Oshun because both have a connection to water. Oshun, the Orisha of beauty, love, and sexuality, is most often depicted wearing yellow silk and gold jewelry because she belongs to the tribe of the sun.[54] Amongst other attributes, Oshun is believed to be the creator of music and dance. De La Torre further explains, "just as the Yoruba slaves found a source of support and comfort in Ochun[sic] when facing the difficulties of colonial Cuba, exilic Cubans today discover the same support and comfort in La Virgen de la Caridad when facing refugee status in a foreign land." Practitioners worship La Caridad del Cobre as an embodiment of Oshun; most Cubans view them as the same deity. Distinctively, certain Afrocentric Lucumí practitioners refer to La Caridad del Cobre as

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[52] Clark, 22.

[53] Miguel De La Torre, "Ochún: (N)Either the (M)Other of All Cubans (n)or the Bleached Virgin," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 69, no. 4 (2001), 837–861.

[54] La Caridad del Cobre wears a sun crown because of her association with Oshun. There is a pataki (stories of the Orisha) that Oshun flew to/towards the sun as a peacock and the sun burnt the feathers off her head. In the end, her bravery earned her a sun crown/practitioners began to associate and depict Oshun with a sun crown.
More information can be found here:
https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/signs/session13/oshun.

Oshun, whereas other practitioners place an emphasis on the Catholic elements of the religion and refer to the deity as solely a saint.

Because earlier depictions of Oshun originate in southwestern Nigeria, the Orisha is commonly depicted as a dark-skinned woman across the diaspora. In Cuba, however, Oshun and the patron saint La Caridad del Cobre are depicted as *mulatta*. De La Torre conveys that Oshun's brown skin tone "serve[s] as a catalyst for reconciliation among Cubans" who are racially divided. De La Torre also delineates, "the Divine appeared in the form of a bronze-colored woman, a color symbolizing death (the color of the mined copper responsible for the death of Amerindians and Africans) as well as life (the color of the Cuban new race)." In other words, Cuba's depiction of Oshun and La Caridad del Cobre as a woman with brown skin is both reconciling and empowering to Cubans. Because the Divine is not depicted as a white woman, it served as a source of power to the enslaved Africans who saw themselves in the deity they worshipped. At the same time, because the Orisha is not depicted as a dark-skinned Black woman, white Cubans or Cubans with *mestizo* skin can identify with the deity and saint. However, the bleaching of the African deity's skin still reveals how white supremacy slowly began to penetrate Orisha worship in Cuba.

Beyoncé's Inspirational Experience with Lucumí

In 2013 Beyoncé and her husband Jay-Z traveled to Cuba, and news of her trip was widely reported in the media. Following her trip, she began to openly allude to Lucumí through her embodiment of La Caridad del Cobre and Oshun and her implementation of Yoruba religious aesthetics in her artistic work. Because Beyoncé's trip to the island took place before the United

States lifted the embargo on Cuba, there are not many details on the artist's actual activities while there. However, there is speculation across personal blogs and social media posts that Beyoncé and her husband initiated into the Yoruba religion.[55] In Cuba, Beyoncé met with Haila María Mompié, a musician who specializes in Lucumí ritual and ceremonial music. Additionally, Beyoncé met with Juana Bacallao, a famous performer whose "breakout role was…in a play title *El Milagro de Ochún*."[56]

Santería priest Alexander Fernandez shares his reaction to Beyoncé's embodiment of Oshun in her 2016 music video, "Hold Up," from her visual album, *Lemonade*. He recounts, "I was out of my skin."[57] The worldwide exposition of Yoruba-Cuban religious practices shocked him. By the same token, Cuban Mexican priest Maximiliano Goiz publicized on Facebook, "I honestly just feel so privileged that although #Lemonade is not necessarily directed at me [but rather at black women], it still [somehow] connected to my Cuban roots and the Afro-Diaspora at large and that I was able to see myself reflected in it, even in the simplest way."[58] Similarly, Afro-Dominican doula Ynanna Djehuty praised Beyoncé's wholistic representation of Orisha worshippers' religious aesthetics. Djehuty shared, "To see a haunting representation of Ochún as both [a] beautiful goddess and [a] scorned hateful woman is to see her in her entirety."[59] While

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[55] Example of blog post speculating Beyoncé and Jay-Z initiated into Santería while in Cuba: Alex Alvarez, "The Afro-Caribbean Connection in Beyoncé's Lemonade You Might Not Have Known About," *Mitú,* April 26, 2016, https://wearemitu.com/mitu-world/the-afro-caribbean-connection-in-beyonces-lemonade-you-might-not-have-known-about/.

[56] Amanda Alcantara, "Followers of the Yoruba Faith Reflect on the Impact of Beyoncé's 'Lemonade,'" *Remezcla*, April 28, 2016, https://remezcla.com/features/music/beyonce-lemonade-yoruba/.

[57] Ariel Zirulnick, "Nigeria By Way of Cuba: Where Beyoncé and Ibeyi Get Their Fierceness," *The New Tropic*, May 6, 2016, https://thenewtropic.com/beyonce-ibeyi-yoruba-cuba/.

[58] See note 54 above.

[59] Ibid.

many Yoruba devotees saw themselves in Beyoncé's work, critics found her embrace of African spiritually controversial and pondered whether she had been legally cleared to travel to Cuba in the first place.

Shortly after the couple's trip to Cuba, the United States Treasury Department launched a federal investigation to determine whether or not Beyoncé and her husband had abused their government issued license under the "people-to-people" educational exchange program to travel during the embargo. This license allows travel to Cuba under the pretense of learning about Cuban life and sharing insights of American life through personal interaction which Beyoncé executed. Eventually, the couple was found not guilty.[60] Still, the public demanded answers as to why the Beyoncé was able to make this trip. Others critiqued Beyoncé's portrayal of the Black female body and the seductive elements of the visual album following her travels to Cuba. bell hooks emphasizes the notion of "a world of fantasy feminism" when writing that *Lemonade* does not call for the end of emotional violence against Black females [sic].[61] There are also critics who deem Beyoncé's use of Yoruba religious aesthetics in her visual album as demonic and ungodly. The artist's own drummer, Kimberly Thompson, filed a civil harassment suit against Beyoncé for allegedly "practicing 'extreme witchcraft.'"[62] These kinds of allegations only

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[60] Damien Crave, "Trip to Cuba by Beyoncé and Jay-Z Is Investigated," *The New York Times,* April 8, 2013, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/09/world/americas/cuba-trip-by-beyonce-and-jay-z-is-investigated.html.

[61] Sameer Rao, "What You Need to Know About the Reaction to bell hooks' Critique of 'Lemonade,'" *IMDiversity*, May 12, 2016, https://imdiversity.com/diversity-news/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-reaction-to-bell-hooks-critique-of-lemonade/.

[62] Noah Yoo and Evan Minsker, "Beyoncé Ex-Drummer's Restraining Order Over 'Extreme Witchcraft' Dismissed," *Pitchfork*, October 12, 2018, https://pitchfork.com/news/beyonce-ex-drummers-restraining-order-over-extreme-witchcraft-dismissed/.

increased after Beyoncé began to verbally allude to the Orisha and her ancestors through her lyrics in *Black is King*.

As a pop artist, Beyoncé's music videos and performances can be interpreted as the exploitation, tainting, and appropriation of Lucumí. For example, her album, *Lemonade*, presents Yoruba inspired costumes, makeup, and scenery in a manipulated, aesthetic combination to fit Beyoncé's music and personal vision. However, upon close inspection, Beyoncé's Lucumí aesthetic demonstrates that she honors the religion and intends to properly represent it.

La Caridad del Cobre in Beyoncé's Aesthetic

Beyoncé's Orisha imagery is inspired primarily by Lucumí rather than any other African heritage religion, because in her 2017 Grammy performance, she honors La Caridad del Cobre. During her performance, Beyoncé pays tribute to La Caridad del Cobre and Oshun through her outfit choices. Beyoncé wears an aureole halo gold crown resembling the sun which directly mirrors the crown La Caridad del Cobre wears. Beyoncé's attire also includes a gold necklace, gold earrings, and a gold embroidered dress. Beyoncé's choice to embody not only Oshun but also La Caridad del Cobre demonstrates that the artist is specifically representing Lucumí aesthetics as opposed to Nigerian Yoruba or other diaspora expressions of Yoruba spirituality.[63] Oshun is often depicted with children because following her relationship with Shango, Oshun gave birth to the twin Orisha, Ibeji. Similarly, La Caridad del Cobre is often depicted holding a

[63] Some critics have not paid attention to this and misinterpret Beyoncé's work as an interpretation of all African continental expressions of spirituality rather than the Lucumí practices of Yoruba spirituality.

child in her arms. Notably, during her performance, Beyoncé is pregnant with her twins which could be the reason she decides to embody this Orisha and Cuban saint.

Beyoncé's Grammy performance addresses themes of power, unity and female solidarity. The opening scene features Beyoncé surrounded by a cast of women wearing blue, white, and tan dresses surround her. The colors of the dancers' dresses are intentional. Their water-like flowing movements and color scheme allude to Yemaya, the Orisha of the sea and maternal compassion; water surrounds her in her human depictions, and she is always dressed in blue. Additionally, the white dresses allude to Obatala, the Orisha of heaven and Shango,[64] the Orisha of thunder and drums. Subsequently, Beyoncé's dancers later circle around her, while she is standing in a garden which symbolizes fertility and once again, alludes to Oshun, the Orisha of fertility. At the end of the performance, the dancers hold hands and lift their arms in unison — portraying the power in the unity of women and the power in the unity of the African diaspora. The colors of the women's costumes represent the four pillar Orisha of Lucumí: Yemaya, Obatala, Shango, and Oshun.[65] By acknowledging this structure, it is apparent that Beyoncé possesses foundational knowledge of the religion.

Oshun in Beyoncé's Aesthetic

Additionally, Beyoncé's *Lemonade* visual album incorporates Orisha imagery. In the music video, "Hold Up," the artist is initially submerged in water reciting the poem "Denial." When she emerges from the water, after having "wor[n] white, abstained from mirrors, [and]

[64] White is one of the two colors – red and white – associated with the Orisha Shango.

[65] "Obatala," *Santeriachurch.org,* Santeria Church of the Orishas, Accessed March 25, 2021, http://santeriachurch.org/the-orishas/obatala/.

abstained from sex"[66] the audience understands that the character has gone through an initiation. She reemerges as an Orisha, sporting a yellow dress, gold rings, and gold earrings indicating her embodiment of the Orisha Oshun. As the Orisha of fresh waters, water frequently surrounds Oshun. At the beginning of the song, Beyoncé symbolically breaks through a dam with the powerful force of rushing river waters. Oshun opens the gates of the building, causing the water to flood out. As an embodiment of Oshun, Beyoncé emerges. As she steps out of the building through two large doors, her bare feet touch the water while it rushes out.

Next, a young boy wearing a red and black shirt hands Beyoncé a bat. These colors allude to Elegua, the Orisha of crossroads; he accepts toys as offerings and the prototype of a mischievous child often represents him. With the bat, Beyoncé breaks a yellow fire hydrant, causing the water to rain over a group of dancing children. Water is an essential element in this video because it is the first element with which Beyoncé interacts; water purposefully surrounds her which aligns with depictions of Oshun.

As the artist continues to smash objects with her bat, strong winds hit her — which she embraces by smiling and slowing down her movements. In the same way, "folktales of Oshun describe her malevolent temper and sinister smile when she has been wronged."[67] Comparatively to Oshun who is thought to be vain, jealous, and happily wreak havoc when upset, Beyoncé's facial expression reveals that she takes pleasure in destroying her surroundings. Next, a fire explodes behind her which alludes to the Orisha of fire, Shango, one of Oshun's partners. The elements of water, wind, and fire lead to Beyoncé's reconnection with the fourth element, earth.

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[66] Beyoncé, vocalist, "Denial (Poem)," written by Warsan Shire and Beyoncé, *Lemonade*, (Parkwood Entertainment: 2016), visual album.

[67] Kamaria Roberts and Kenya Downs, "What Beyoncé Teaches Us About the African Diaspora in 'Lemonade,'" *Pbs.org*, April 29, 2016, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/what-beyonce-teaches-us-about-the-african-diaspora-in-lemonade.

She breaks two cameras throughout the course of the video, one during the middle and one at the end— renouncing the policing and restricting of African heritage religions by the media. Beyoncé shamelessly showcases Lucumí and reclaims this religion through her artistic platform. By highlighting the elements of nature, Beyoncé is acknowledging the importance of cherishing the Earth — a stressed ideal in Lucumí — suggesting too that she has studied the religion.

***Black is King*: A Visual Analysis**

Through the use of Yoruba religious aesthetics in *Black is King*, Beyoncé's reclamation of African heritage religions furthers her agenda of empowering the Black community. The visual album begins with a bird's eye view of a baby carriage flowing through the river. The director borrows a few spoken lines from *The Lion King*'s (2019) narrator to help set the scene:

> Everything you see exists together in a delicate balance. You need to understand that balance and respect all the creatures from the crawling ant to the leaping antelope. We are all connected in the great circle of life.[68]

As these words are spoken, the audience sees various closeups of different Black faces such as babies, children, adults, and an elderly woman. We see circular rocks, round faces, and a young man wearing a (circular) crown. The repeated symbolism of circles emphasizes the theme of the circle of life. In African heritage religions, the circle of life is depicted through different

[68] *The Lion King*, Allers, 1994.

symbols such as the Kongo cosmogram. The circle or spiral symbolizes the cyclical journey from the physical world to the spiritual world that occurs in the cycle of eternal life. In Lucumí, the understanding that human spirits are reborn until they become ancestors follows this integral belief in the circle of life.[69] The audience continues to see the theme of the circle of life throughout the film with instances of a boy's birth, his spiritual rebirth, his ancestor's eternal life, and his father's transmission to the afterlife.

Next, the audience is met with the image of Beyoncé standing on the beach. Here begins the storytelling. She is wearing a flowy, white and sand-colored dress made out of tool-like material that moves with the wind, mimicking the waves of the ocean. In her arms, she is holding a baby wrapped in white cloth. Throughout the film, Beyoncé's voice narrates the story with brief messages. She poetizes,

> Bless the body, born celestial. Beautiful and dark matter. Black is the color of my true love's skin. Coils and hair catching centuries of prayers spread through smoke. You are welcome to come home to yourself. Let Black be synonymous with glory.[70]

The opening narration signifies that Beyoncé's target audience is the Black community. She refers to her "true love's skin" as the color Black because this film is a love letter to Black people. "Coils and hair" which allude to coily, kinky hair is usually presented as the direct counterpart of straight, long hair that popular culture deems as desirable. However, Beyoncé

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[69] Kete Asante, "Eternal Life," *Encyclopedia of African Religion*, edited by Asante, Molefi Kete., and Ama Mazama (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2009), 247-48.

[70] *Black is King*, Knowles-Carter, Adjei, Ake, Bazawule, Nkiru, and Fordjour.

directly protests the idea of kinky hair as ugly, and instead, presents it in a celestial light. The last line, “Let black be synonymous with glory” evokes the elevation of the world’s view of Blackness that will be showcased throughout the film.

In relation to Lucumí, Beyoncé challenges her audience to unlearn the widely held belief that African heritage religions are evil. In fact, she prompts her viewers to revere the Orisha, their ancestors, and the earth and educate themselves on the validity of these traditions for their religious, spiritual, and holistic needs. Beyoncé presents the child to two men; one is dressed in a white robe similar to those worn by Lucumí priests, and the other is dressed in white shorts and has white paint across his chest. The man in the robe swings a thurible, a metal censer that burns incense, indicating that a religious ceremony is taking place. This scene immediately beckons the audience to appreciate the earth and the four elements. The earth is represented by the sand on the beach, the wind is represented by the waves and the flowing movement of Beyoncé’s dress, water is represented by the ocean, and fire is represented by the smoke from the burning incense. A reverence for the elements of the earth is a fundamental principle in Lucumí. While the camerawork emphasizes earth, fire, wind and water in the opening scene, the reverence for nature is consistently emphasized throughout the film.[71]

Next, the audience sees a man painted in blue wearing beige-colored pants holding a wooden bowl. As Beyoncé continues to walk west towards the sun, she is met with three Black women holding babies themselves. They stand in the shape of a circle as they dip their hands into a wooden bowl — similar to the one the man painted in blue is holding — and spread water across the babies’ bodies and arms; Beyoncé does the same. This scene alludes to a rebirth, a part

[71] Kete Asante, "Earth," *Encyclopedia of African Religion*, edited by Asante, Molefi Kete., and Ama Mazama (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2009), 229.

of the Lucumí initiation process that involves being physically submerged or washed with water to represent a spiritual cleansing. Water is an important element in Lucumí and outside of the initiation process, it is often used in rituals as a medium to communicate between realms.

As this process goes on, Beyoncé sings to the baby, "You're part of something way bigger."[72] With open arms and palms facing the sky, she looks up while reciting the lyrics, "Look up, don't look down, then watch the answers unfold,"[73] signaling that she is referencing the spiritual world outside of the human realm. As the primary director of the film, Beyoncé creatively stages the images of Yoruba spirituality to communicate that with guidance and protection from the Orisha and the ancestors, humans can successfully navigate daily obstacles. Beyoncé directs her listeners, "Rise, the spirit is teachin'...Bloom into our actual powers."[74] These lyrics illuminate the objective of the film which encourages audience members to recognize their spiritual abilities and return to themselves. This opening song sets the main tone of the film and targets those who belong to the African diaspora.

The man painted in blue walks east, away from the sun, and appears to be on the same beach as Beyoncé and the rest of the people. However, they never once cross paths, and they never appear in the same frame together. The director does this to demonstrate that the man painted in blue and Beyoncé are not on the same spiritual realm. The man can be understood as a physical manifestation of Olokun, the Orisha of the oceans and deep seas. Olokun is an androgynous Orisha that takes multiple forms and is represented by the colors blue and beige. As

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[72] Beyoncé, vocalist, "BIGGER," by Beyoncé, Derek James Dixie, Stacy Barthe, Rachel "Raye" Keen, Akil "Fresh" King, Richard Lawson, recorded 2019, track 2 on *The Lion King: The Gift*, Oakland 13 Music (ASCAP), digital recording.

[73] See note 67 above.

[74] Ibid.

one of the most commanding Orisha, it makes sense that the director chooses to invoke the spirit of Olokun first.

Olokun is the respected authority over all the water Orisha and is associated with dreams, wealth, prosperity, and healing.[75] Also, this Orisha is often associated with two other deities, Yemaya and Oya. Yemaya is the Orisha of lakes and the shallow waters in the sea. She is represented by the color royal blue. The director invokes the image of Yemaya in the next scene. Beyoncé wears a royal blue dress and continues to sing in front of the water. She holds her daughter Blue Ivy alluding to Yemaya as the Orisha of motherhood. Similar to the darkness that exists in the depths of the sea, Olokun represents the darkness in us. As the saying goes, "In the same way that Yemaya is the creative force of life, Olokun is the equally necessary destructive force of life."[76]

In the next scene, Oya, the Orisha of the wind and daughter of Yemaya, is represented. Oya is associated with the color burgundy or red wine and is known as the protector of women. Beyoncé and a group of seven other women are dancing in dark red, string-like outfits making wind-like, graceful movements. They maintain a fierce look on their faces, similar to the temperament of Oya, and stand in a shield-like formation. The women convey the message that they are forces to be reckoned with. Olokun and Oya work together to flood the earth with storms and hurricanes. Furthermore, Olokun keeps those who die in the sea and chooses when they can be released to become an ancestor.[77]

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[75] Diedre Badejo, "Olokun," *Encyclopedia of African Religion*, edited by Asante, Molefi Kete., and Ama Mazama (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2009), 489-490.

[76] "The Orishas: Olokun," *Original Botanica*, June 20, 2017, https://www.originalbotanica.com/blog/the-orishas-olokun/.

[77] Judith Gleason, *Oya: In Praise of an African Goddess (*Indiana University: Harper San Francisco, 1992).

Next, the audience is taken to a scene displaying a home with two men guarding the entrance, indicating that it is the home of a royal family. Beyoncé narrates, “History is your future. One day you will meet yourself back where you started, but stronger.” A man who appears to be the father of the royal family sits on a gold throne, with his wife to his left side and his two children to his right, a young boy and a young girl. Above them is a golden symbol that is repeated throughout the film. While this is the first time the audience sees it, the symbol of two golden lions in the shape of a circle is the cover art of the film's album, *The Gift*. This symbol resembles the yin and yang sign and the imagery of two twins in a uterus. The album cover art actually evokes the twin Orisha, Ibeji, which intensifies the theme of the circular nature of life by augmenting the cycle of birth with the image of two babies.

Then, we are taken to the controversial moving image of Beyoncé on a horse. She turns her head to face the camera and reveals a crown of two horns with a circle in the middle, constructed by small intricate braids. Critics on social media reacted to this crown by labeling it as devil imagery, claiming that Beyoncé was paying tribute to the devil’s or demons’ horns. The public’s overall reaction was negative because people assumed that Beyoncé was worshiping other gods rather than the Christian God through her work — and grooming children to do the same.

Upon deeper analysis, the meaning of the circle of life is emphasized at this point of the film. The Kongo cosmogram, which can be studied as a salient example of the circle of life in African heritage religions, is connected to the following proverb: “the horn of the gazelle, your ears hear, your eyes see, unless you lack intelligence.”[78] This literal translation of the Kongo

[78] “The Deep Meaning of the Kongo Cosmogram,” *The Kraal,* accessed August 2020, https://www.thekraal.co/traditions-spirituality/the-deep-meaning-of-the-kongo-cosmogram/.

proverb highlights the horns of a gazelle because they are surrounded by spirals. The braids spiraled on the horns Beyoncé is wearing imitate this shape and structure. In Kongo cosmology and philosophy, spiral symbols, similar to spherical symbols, are understood as representations of a person's life. The shape of the spiral is revered because it "indicates the origin and destiny of mankind."[79] Elements connected to the creation of life such as the shape of the galaxy and the shape of DNA are all in the form of a spiral, which confirms the importance of the spiral in the circle of life.

To elaborate, the Bukôngo use the words *zingu*, meaning spire or cycle, and *kimoya*, meaning "the consciousness of being alive," to describe life. When someone dies, a *zingu* or cycle ends. Since the *komoya* or consciousness is eternal, that person transcends and begins another cycle of life. Therefore, the spiral, "symbolizes the eternity [and progression] of the cycles of life."[80]

The spiral is also connected to the Bukôngo word, *Kimahungu,* which translates to "the divine completeness of being." The belief that the divine is within us while also around us is integral in the *kôngo* religion*,* as well as other African heritage religions. Beyoncé's opening words, "Bless the body, born celestial," alludes to this notion that we are divine beings ourselves. She directs audience members to return home to themselves,[81] and declares "history is your future,"[82] which aligns with the circular, spiral-like nature of life spiritual orientation, and related religious symbols and practices that she conveys throughout the film.

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[79] See note 73 above.
[80] Ibid.
[81] *Black is King*, Knowles-Carter, Adjei, Ake, Bazawule, Nkiru, and Fordjour.
[82] See note 76 above.

At the end of this scene, an elderly woman paints the little boy's face with white marks. This act indicates that a naming ceremony is taking place.[83] In Lucumí and other African heritage religions, naming ceremonies often occur about a week after the child is born. A Babalawo or priest in the religion assigns the child a name and welcomes him or her into the physical world.

As the camera zooms out, a painting of Beyoncé in the same white dress she is wearing on the beach appears hanging on the wall. Beyoncé is holding a baby wrapped in white cloth, and she is wearing a gold, solar-like crown which indicates that she is embodying La Caridad del Cobre, the Cuban Patroness Catholic Saint who is understood as Oshun in Lucumí. The hummingbird, which is also associated with Oshun, sits by Beyoncé's ear. The oval shape of the portrait and the placement of Beyoncé in the middle of the frame surrounded by cotton flowers indicates a saint-like reverence for her. The adoption of Catholic iconography when representing the Orisha is common practice in Lucumí, which further solidifies that Beyoncé is primarily focused on retrieving and representing Lucumí aesthetics in the film.

In the next scene, Beyoncé's voice narrates, "A journey is a gift. Something to offer at the door to the rooms of your mind. This is how we journey, far, and can still always find something like home."[84] During this transition, Beyoncé is holding the little boy's hand, walking towards the sun as it sets. The boy's face and body remain marked by white paint after the naming ceremony. He has completed the initial stage of birth into the physical world. The audience sees this with the child's spiritual cleansing followed by his naming ceremony.

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[83] More information about different naming ceremonies in African cultures can be read here: Afe Adogame, "Naming," In *Encyclopedia of African Religion*, edited by Asante, Molefi Kete., and Ama Mazama (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2009), 467-39.

[84] *Black is King*, Knowles-Carter, Adjei, Ake, Bazawule, Nkiru, and Fordjour.

As the film brings the audience into the second stage of the boy's journey, it has become nighttime. The camera pans towards the sky, moon and stars as the narrator describes, "The great kings were here long before us. Ancient masters of celestial lore."[85] Here, the speaker is referencing the Dogon of Mali. The Dogon's belief system promotes reverence for the earth, ancestors, and celestial bodies. The sacred-science experts of culture are referred to as "ancient masters" and "great kings"[86] in the film because they held extensive knowledge of astronomy. The Dogon are represented in the film by men dressed in skirts and a double-crossed head piece, the Kanaga mask. A bright star bursts to reveal these individuals which further solidifies the Dogon's philosophical and scientific theories about the universe and outer space.

The Dogon use Kanaga masks in ceremonies such as Sigui and Dama. Sigui is a ritualistic ceremony that celebrates adolescent boys' transition to manhood. Once boys are of age, they undergo circumcision and are initiated into the Awa society. The Dogon highly revere the Awa society because these men perform the Dama ritual. As the scene unfolds, the director showcases different positions of power in Dogon society that embody Black excellence detached from Western standards of success. The director integrates the Kanaga mask into the characters' costumes at this point in the film to allude to the boy's journey into adulthood. This integrative aesthetic strategy could also be an allusion to Simba's growth from a young prince into a king.[87]

The Dama is a mourning ritual for the newly deceased and a ceremony to celebrate death anniversaries of loved ones. Individuals dance and make music to usher the spirits of the dead to the ancestral realm. Additionally, the masks themselves help guide the spirits to the afterlife.

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[85] See note 79 above.

[86] Ibid.

[87] I am referring to the *Lion King* (1994) film's protagonist, Simba, and his journey to becoming king.

This ceremony is highly valued by the Dogon people because it prevents the chaos that surrounds death and instead prompts the spirits to become protective ancestors of their descendants. The Kanaga mask in this instance could also be a reference to the death of the boy's previous life. Alluding to this death ceremony hints to the audience that a rebirth is coming. Furthermore, the invocation of the Kanaga masks foreshadows the pivotal death of Simba's father in the subsequent scene of the film.

The narrator interrupts, "Let me tell you something my father told me. Look at the stars. The great kings of the past look down on us from those stars. So whenever you feel alone... just remember those kings will always be up there to guide you. And so will I."[88] The camera pans upward towards outer space and switches to a scene of four women lying down on sand. The women are in dark sparkly outfits and the frame is upside down which creates the image of these women appearing to be the stars in the galaxy. The dualism of the women as both themselves and the stars is a key theme in the film which teaches the audience that a person's higher self is not above them, rather within them. When the narrator mentions the "great kings," the image of two men in Kanaga masks is once again flashed. The director employs this device to reiterate that the "ancient masters of the past"[89] are a reference to the Dogon. Beyoncé guides the women as they walk up a sandy hill. This image communicates that while these women are on a journey following the stars, they *are* the stars themselves. The costuming of the women as stars serves as a metaphor for the boy's spiritual journey. While he is welcoming the presence of his ancestors, spiritual guides, and the Orisha, the spiritual fulfillment he seeks he finds within himself by the end of the film.

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[88] Ibid.
[89] Ibid.

Beyoncé continues to narrate, “this is how we journey far, and can still always find something like home”[90] as she and the boy walk towards the sunset. As the boy embarks on his spiritual journey, the director takes the audience to a scene of the boy standing next to what seems to be a father figure in front of a lake, reminiscent of the scene in the *Lion King* where Simba speaks to his father. The man hands the young boy a ceremonial object as the scene flashes between this exchange and the stars and spiritual guides. The stars in the sky circle in a counterclockwise motion, again making a reference to the Kongo cosmogram and the circle of life. The boy then holds the ceremonial object up to the men in the Kanaga masks. The object and the diamonds in the headpiece begin to sparkle, indicating that an enlightenment is beginning. By illuminating the men’s headpieces, the director attempts to demonstrate the spiritual importance of the head or “ori” in Lucumí which refers to a person’s spiritual intuition.[91] This scene foreshadows the introduction of the boy’s crown (or designated) Orisha in the film. The director alludes to Simba's spiritual awakening and initial recognition of his ancestors as his spiritual guides in the *Lion King*.

As the boy turns his palms to face up, similar to the Catholic depiction of a saint-like person, angel, or divine being, a light starts shining at his head. The boy seems to be levitating or flying upwards. The scene zooms in and out as the boy seems to travel like a shooting star within and outside the earth. A light bursts to reveal that the boy lands on a desert planet on top of a sandy hill. The director includes the earth and the moon in the background to indicate that the boy has traveled outside of this world. He is now in the spiritual realm and has reached ascension.

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[90] Ibid.

[91] Kunbi Labeodan, "Ori," *Encyclopedia of African Religion*, edited by Asante, Molefi Kete., and Ama Mazama, (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2009), 499-501.

The song, "FIND YOUR WAY BACK," begins. Beyoncé sings, "come back home," and "remember who you are."[92] As the title of the song suggests, the singer's lyrics urge viewers to return to themselves in terms of ancestral lineage and spirituality. She repeats, "circle of life...I might not make it" while making circular motions with her palms throughout her choreography. Beyoncé lifts her arms above her head to form a circle with them and turns her body. This scene emphasizes the theme of the circle of life in the film. Notably, the director introduces the concept that one is on limited time to reach spiritual enlightenment. While the film has been positive and uplifting up until this point, the lyrics of "FIND YOUR WAY BACK" introduce the concept of death, indicating that a shift is about to occur in the film. There is also a subtle acknowledgement of the trappings of colonial Eurocentric ideologies that permeate so much of Black life. In other words, the reason an African descended person might not be able to "make it" is because they are alienated from African heritage religions — their African ancestral spiritual heritages — in the worst possible ways. It is possible that African descendants might not find a way out of the colonial matrix of Anti-Africanness, especially when it comes to understanding and valuing African heritage religions.

Beyoncé's eyes are covered in black diamond shades to signify that she is representing a divine being. Midway through the song, Beyoncé transitions from the tight diamond-like outfits to a stringy loose dress reminiscent of the festival wear used in Egungun or Ancestor Masquerade. In Yoruba religious practices, the masquerader is believed to be mounted by the ancestors. Additionally, Beyoncé's dress looks similar to the costumes the Zangbeto group of

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[92] Beyoncé, vocalist, "FIND YOUR WAY BACK (CIRCLE OF LIFE)," by Beyoncé, Brittany "Starrah" Hazzard, Bubele Booi, Robert Magwenzi, Abisagboola "Bankulli" Oluseun, Osaretin Osabuohien, recorded 2019, track 4 on *The Lion King: The Gift*, Oakland 13 Music (ASCAP), digital recording.

Benin, Togo and Nigeria would wear to ward off enemies. The Zangbeto wear strands of hay and are known as guardians. While this is not the first instance of Beyoncé or her sister Solange wearing these string-like costumes, Beyoncé 's incorporation of it in the film supports her aim to be inclusive of as many African cultures as possible. Representing as many African cultures is important because it decolonizes the media's reduction of several African cultures into a singular, monolithic African identity.

A shooting star hits the seashore and reveals Beyoncé in green and black body paint. Still, her eyes are covered in shades. As she dances on the beach, it is evident that she is embodying the warrior Orisha Ogun. Ogun is represented by the colors red, black, and green and associated with blacksmiths and iron. The second confirmation that Ogun is present is the consistent light burning in the background — imitating the light produced from iron welding. Since Ogun is the remover of obstacles in both the physical and spiritual realm, it makes sense to invoke the image of Ogun when telling the story of the spiritual journey upon which the boy is embarking. By invoking Ogun, Beyoncé aids the boy in removing any obstacles that may be blocking his destiny.

In the next scene, the little boy stands in front of the two men in the Kanaga mask, the man in blue (representation of Olokun), and Beyoncé in her diamond suit illustrating that he has support from his spiritual guides, the Orisha, and his ancestors. He has a smile on his face to show that he receives comfort from his spiritual support system. Additionally, the director dresses the boy in an all-black suit and red shoes. He emphasizes the boy's red shoes to allude to the boy's crown Orisha, Shango, who will be introduced to the audience later in the film.

As the camera zooms out of the sandy desert, the audience is taken back to the boy's village. He and his parents are dressed in cultural wear and the boy leads as they walk through

two lines of men dancing and chanting. During the ritual dance, the camera switches between a close up of the boy's front and the boy's back — giving the audience the sense that they are following and monitoring the boy closely. The suspense builds as the boy continues to walk slowly with a frightened look on his face.

Next, the director introduces Elegua, the Orisha of crossroads. Elegua, similar to Ogun and Oshun, is also one of the warrior Orisha. Elegua is often represented as an elderly man or child with a mischievous trickster nature. His colors are red and black and the crossroads Orisha often appears in multiples of threes.[93]

The boy walks towards an older man dressed in the colors black and red. The camera flashes between the older man beating the drum and the boy walking. The images switch at an increasing speed indicating that this is the rising climax of the film. Viewers see flashes of the older man three times before the scene and music completely stop. In Lucumí, Elegua is the first and last Orisha to be invoked during rituals because without him, the doors to communicate with the spiritual realm do not open and close.[94] It is evident that a ritual event has just ended, or another has just begun.

Beyoncé narrates, "Lead or be led astray...follow your light or lose it," as the boy seems to be returning to consciousness in front of a red and white warehouse door, indicative of the Orisha Sango's colors. A monkey motions for the boy to enter and he follows. The monkey alludes to the fictional monkey in the *Lion King* who was Simba's spiritual guide throughout the film. The warehouse has an eerie tone similar to Scar's (the villain's) den in the original film.

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[93] Femi Euba, "Esu, Elegba," *Encyclopedia of African Religion*, edited by Asante, Molefi Kete., and Ama Mazama (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2009), 245-246.

[94] See note 87 above.

There are trash cans set on fire throughout the building, and the children inside are dressed in either all white or in the colors black and red.

The director then introduces the audience to Eshu, often understood as Elegua's shadow or reflection. While African heritage religions generally do not consider Eshu a separate Orisha, Eshu can be described as the darkness to Elegua's light. Together, they create balance between the positive and negative in the world. Next to Eshu is a little girl sitting on a chair relatively close to the ground; she is wearing an all-black suit with a red bow tie. Her eyes are covered in black shades and she resembles the image of Eleguas that practitioners place outside their doors for protection. The director is intentional in the young girl's placement by sitting her significantly low to the ground compared to the man's tall standing stature which serves as visual distinction between Elegua's calm, demanding nature and Eshu's trickster flashy ways.

Next to the young girl walks a man in an all-white suit wearing gold jewelry and a yellow and white snake around his neck. He carries a red and white cane with a snake on it, similar to the depictions of Eshu's staff. His villain-like attitude alludes to Scar, and he recites Scar's line, "Who are you?"[95] As the messenger Orisha, Eshu is often called the difficult teacher of life. In fact, Eshu is known to tempt humans and lead them to tribulations to prompt their development.[96] In the film, Eshu's character serves as a derailment to the boy's spiritual journey. As the boy allows himself to be led astray, he experiences both loss and personal growth.

While in the warehouse, the boy allows himself to be distracted once he overcomes his initial fear. He runs around with fire sparklers in his hands, alluding to the fire Orisha Shango. The director shows glimpses of the older man representing Elegua from the previous scene. The

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[95] *The Lion King*, Allers, 1994.
[96] Euba, "Esu, Elegba," 245-246.

older man approaches the warehouse along with two other men dressed in red suits. These men, or extensions of Elegua, encourage the boy to gamble. As he jumps and smiles with excitement from winning money, a man in a Kanaga mask watches him from behind — signaling that his spiritual guides are nearby. While it is clear that the boy is making a mistake, his free will to make his own decisions is evident.

The boy sees a shiny bike that looks perfect for his size, as if it was made for him. The yellow and white snake wraps around the bike — indicating that the boy is receiving this gift under unknown conditions. As the scene continues, the camera flashes between two depictions of the boy. In the first depiction, he is wearing an all-white suit with gold chains while enjoying himself with the flashy jewelry, bikes, and games in the warehouse. In his second depiction, the boy is covered in white paint from the ceremony and his face communicates that he feels fear and confusion while roaming around the warehouse. These contrasting depictions illustrate the boy's struggle in following the appropriate path, both spiritually and during his journey in the physical realm from prince to king.

While outside the warehouse, the boy is excited by the men in red suits riding around on motorcycles. These men allude to the hyenas in Scar's den in the *Lion King* (1994), smaller but villainous characters in the film. They create two circles around the boy and ride in a counterclockwise direction, alluding to the Kongo cosmogram and the sun's path of rising and setting. This image resembles a portal-like opening — blurring the realms of the physical world and afterlife. Then, the boy's father blocks the boy from getting hit and jumps in front of a motorcycle, giving up his life to save the boy's. This scene mirrors the turning point in the *Lion King* when Simba's dad loses his life trying to save Simba from Scar's stampede.

Next, the director takes the audience to an all-white scene. Six shirt-less Black men covered in white paint carry a white casket towards an all-white castle. This scene is accompanied by a slow yet tranquil song, "NILE," by Beyoncé and Kendrick Lamar. The lyrics, "I'm in denial, deep in denial, I'm in the Nile, deep in denial,"[97] illustrate the bittersweet reality of death. Beyoncé incorporates a play on words; she describes herself as being in denial to demonstrate the initial shock humans feel when losing a close loved one. Simultaneously, the artist compares the state of loss to the Nile river that floods every year to produce fertile land and a prosperous harvest season.[98] These lyrics describe how the little boy is processing the death of his father. He feels a sense of loss and sadness because his father is no longer with him in the physical realm. However, the director simultaneously illustrates how death is understood in African cultures.

Rather than conveying the image of a mournful funeral, the director presents a beautiful ceremony of the transitioning of a physical being to an ancestral presence. Unlike funerals in Western cultures, in many African cultures, white clothing is appropriate when celebrating someone's transition to the afterlife. Beyoncé emphasizes the beauty of African understandings of the life cycle and its visible and invisible phases, in the following segment:

"One time I took a swim in the Nile (one time I took in a swim in the Nile)

I swam the whole way, I didn't turn around, man, I swear (I swear)

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[97] Beyoncé and Kendrick Lamar, vocalists, "NILE," by Beyoncé, Kendrick Duckworth, Mark Spears, Hykeem Carter, Keanu Torres, Denisia Andrews, and Brittany Coney, recorded 2019, track 10 on *The Lion King: The Gift*, Oakland 13 Music (ASCAP), digital recording.

[98] Adeniyi Oroge, *Egypt and the Nile Valley,* v. 5, No. 2. (London: New York: Published for the Historical Society of Nigeria by Longman; Humanities Press, 1977).

It made me relax when I came down (when I came down)

I felt liberated like free birds, I'm stimulated now (stimulated)"[99]

Initially Beyoncé is conveying how the death of the human body leads to the liberation of the spirit. Liberation in this sense does not mean that the human body holds the spirit down or prohibits the spirit from being free. Instead, Beyoncé uses the term "liberation" to describe the process of the spirit leaving the body as a pleasant, natural detachment. Comparing this liberation to the flying of "free birds" demonstrates the spiritual release that takes place once one's soul travels outside of the physical realm. Additionally, in Egyptian culture, the Nile river was revered because the people understood it as a portal between the physical realm and the afterlife. Beyoncé's is honoring this Egyptian belief through her recreation of Simba's father's funeral into a reference of the Nile river.

Beyoncé also compares this transition to swimming in water. She describes, "I swam the whole way" which alludes to the fluidity between the four different phases in the Kongo cosmogram. As mentioned, water can serve as a portal between different realms. Beyoncé builds on this belief by alluding to the African spiritually-based idea that dreaming of swimming fish signifies new life. In this visualization, spirits swim to the earth from the ancestral realm in the form of new human life, and spirits swim back to the ancestral realm from the earth by releasing the human body.

Later on in the film, Beyoncé returns to this African foundation of life and transmission and references Igbo landing also known as the story of the flying Africans. She narrates, "you're

[99] See note 91 above.

swimming back to yourself, you'll see yourself at the shore. The coast belongs to our ancestors...we orbit."[100] Certain interpretations of the story hold that a group of enslaved Africans on the coast of St. Simon's Island, Georgia walked into the ocean and committed suicide in order to escape a life of slavery.[101] However, there is another version of the event which claims that these enslaved Africans walked into the ocean and flew back to their home, present-day Nigeria, Africa.[102] Beyoncé recapitulates the recurring theme of orbiting and swimming back to oneself throughout the film with the baby carriage flowing through the river (opening scene), the boy's physical ascension outside of earth, and through her lyrics and narrations.

In many African heritage religions, death is not understood as a negative occurrence or punishment. Instead, it is a natural transition within the cycle of life. The relief or relaxation Beyoncé describes directly contravenes Western evocations of death and the way that Western religions have conveyed the process of death in African cultures. For instance, in *The Princess and the Frog*[103], the Voodoo practitioner's death is perceived as painful, terrifying, and a tragedy. His ascension or descension to the spiritual world, as the film attempts to portray, is one that results in eternal punishment.

In this scene, Beyoncé is wearing a white laced and beaded garment. The beads on her necklace gradually melt and connect to her dress. She wears white shades to cover her eyes and the lower half of her face is covered in white paint. The artist is representing Obatala at this

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[100] *Black is King*, Knowles-Carter, Adjei, Ake, Bazawule, Nkiru, and Fordjour.

[101] Hamilton, Virginia. *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales*. New York: Knopf, 1985.

[102] María Ponmier Taquechel, "*El Suicidio esclava en Cuba en los* Años 1840," *Anuario de Estudios Americanos* 43. Sevilla (1986): 69-86.

[103] *The Princess and the Frog,* Musker and Clements.

moment, the Orisha known as the creator of earth and owner of all heads. Obatala is credited as the creator of humans because he placed the head on human bodies and is the Orisha of thoughts and dreams. Obatala is associated with the color white and with human conceptualizations of the afterlife and heaven.[104]

Beyoncé chooses to embody Obatala because of the Orisha's role in the creation of earth and human beings. Rather than mourning the death of the little boy's father, the director conveys that his soul is rightfully returning to the ancestral realm. Subsequently, Beyoncé once again emphasizes the film's theme of returning to one's spiritual roots. The scene ends with an excerpt from the spoken word poem, "Uncle Sam" by Joshua Abah. His voice recites,

> "I don't even know my own native tongue, and if I can't speak myself I can't think myself, and if I can't think myself I can't be myself, but if I can't be myself, I will never know me. So Uncle Sam tell me this, if I will never know me, how can you?"[105]

Abah's poem explores the topic of identity and belonging to two separate worlds. He comments on his personal experiences as a Nigerian immigrant raised in the United States. His personal struggle with identity highlights the importance of knowing one's history. The poet questions how he can be himself, speak for himself, or think for himself when Western culture in America

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[104] Ibram H Rogers, "Obatala," *Encyclopedia of African Religion*, edited by Asante, Molefi Kete., and Ama Mazama (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2009), 470-471.

[105] Joshua Abah, "Uncle Sam," *Black is King* (United States: Walt Disney Pictures, 2020), audio recording.

has already perpetuated the anthropological impoverishment of Black people. The United States specifically has socialized its citizens to consume anti-Blackness. Through artistic forums such as poetry and Beyoncé's visual album, Beyoncé and other artists are invalidating these false narratives surrounding Black identity. When Eshu questions the boy, "who are you," it prompts the self-realization that the boy does not know his history or where he comes from. The poem "Uncle Sam," parallels Simba's uncle Scar's attempt to destroy Simba's lineage – a metaphor for how colonialism attempts to erase the history of African descendants.

In the next scene, the boy is riding in the back of a cheetah print Rolls Royce. A person in a Kanaga mask is sitting in the driver's seat communicating that the boy's spiritual guide is driving him towards a life of luxury. They speed by the man representing Olokun and Beyoncé dressed in all red wearing shades. The two keep their eyes on the little boy because they are protecting him from afar during this last transitional moment in his spiritual journey. The voices of Pumba and Timon from the *Lion King* (1994) film are heard in the background — equating the boy's spiritual guides to the wise friends that aid Simba in his return to his path toward becoming king.

The little boy awakens outside of a mansion. There are several men, women and children inside and around the house wearing animal print clothing such a cheetah print, zebra print, and leopard print. The director does this intentionally to contest the animalistic and caged up representation of Black women by the media. The mansion is full of Black individuals dressed in designer clothing and gold jewelry. The camera zooms in on the stone statues around the house and the renaissance inspired paintings featuring Black models. The director performs an overlay of Western interpretations of high socety and Black excellence in an African context and environment, merging the qualifications of success in regards to Black people. The dual

presentation of Black excellence in a Western and African context is emphasized through themes of Black beauty and Black power as I will briefly discuss later on.

Then, the director finally reveals the boy's crown Orisha, Shango, represented by Beyoncé's husband, Jay-Z. Shango is the Orisha of fire, lightning, thunder, and war. Shango is also the patron of music and his feast day is December 4th,[106] the same day as Jay-Z's birthday.[107] These could be the reasons that Jay-Z feels connected to Shango and refers to the Orisha in his music and on social media.[108]

The director flashes between shots of Jay-Z and the little boy walking around the mansion, wearing identical outfits: a cashmere suit and a gold chain necklace with a sizable red stone. This is an indication to the audience that Jay-Z represents the boy either in the spiritual realm as his Orisha Shango or in the physical realm as his adult self. Jay-Z is seen playing chess, and more chess symbolism is sprinkled throughout the scene to allude to Shango as the Orisha of strategy.[109]

This mansion scene illustrates the boy at his point of spiritual fulfillment while still in the physical realm which is the first scene where the boy overcomes the struggles of life and reaps the benefits of his spiritual journey. Beyoncé deploys this motif of a young child on a spiritual

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[106] William Bascom, *Shango in the New World* (Texas: African and Afro-American Research Institute, University of Texas at Austin, 1972).

[107] Michael Saponara, "'50 Years of Greatness': Swizz Beatz, Wale, DJ Khaled and More Wish Jay-Z a Happy Birthday," *Billboard*, December 4, 2019, https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/hip-hop/8545358/jay-z-birthday-wishes/.

[108] Jay-Z, verse on "The Never Ending Story," by Jay-Z, The Dream, Mirtha Defilpo, Litto Nebbia, The Alchemist, and Jay Electronica, recorded March 13, 2020, Roc Nation, digital recording. He raps, "I'm a miracle born with imperial features//I'm a page turner//sage burner, Santeria//Chongón, December baby, my Orishas//Saint Hov"

[109] Baba Canizares, *Shango: Santeria and the Orisha of Thunder*, (Michigan: The University of Michigan, 2000).

journey in order to inspire her audience to learn their history, return to their spiritual roots, and think highly of themselves. The film's principal message is that embarking on the journey of exploring one's history and spirituality leads to abundance in the physical realm. The director illustrates the benefits of returning to one's spiritual roots through the abundance of clothing, gold jewelry, food, cars, and accolades found inside the mansion. Additionally, the boy seems to experience happiness in the mansion as he is laughing surrounded by family and friends. He achieves a life of luxury once he learns his history, shows gratitude to the Orisha and his spiritual guides, and keeps the memory of his ancestors alive. Still, the boy continues his embarkation of his coming-of-age journey as he learns what the true meaning of being a king is. He eventually stumbles into the trap of consumerist culture and with the help of his spiritual guides, returns to the position of serving others. He grows up to recognize that "being a king is…making sacrifices." The director emphasizes this point towards the end of the film as a male voiceover narrates, "taking care of people, that's kingship to me."[110]

Conclusion

Beyoncé accesses a long-standing tradition in Africana spiritual culture by presenting herself and others as sacred and divine. She includes a voiceover in the film of a woman reciting, "I can't say I believe in God and call myself a child of God and then not see myself as a god. That wouldn't make any sense… I know my history, I did the research, I'm the creator of all

[110] *Black is King*, Knowles-Carter, Adjei, Ake, Bazawule, Nkiru, and Fordjour.

things."[111] This is arguably the most important message in the film. While some interpet this announcement as Beyoncé's disrespect toward the Christian God by equating herself to the figure, she is actually embodying the essence of Orisha theology. When practitioners are initiated into Lucumí, they carry the Asé or energy of their Orisha, literally in their bodies. Therefore, presenting oneself as the Orisha one is crowned under is an integral practice in Lucumí because the goal is to live a life so divine that one actually become an Orisha.

The sacred texts of Yoruba culture, the Odu Okanranadasaee, for example, suggests that persons should aspire to become Orisha:

> Orunmila said,
> Human beings become Orisa
> I said, human beings become Orisa.
> He said don't you see Ogun
> He was a human being when he was brave and wise
> He became Orisa
> He said, Don't you see Oosala,
> He was a human being
> When he was brave and wise
> He became Orisa
> They only worship those knowledgeable

[111] See note 107 above.

It is the human being that become[s] Orisa[112]

As communicated in this Odu, Ogun, whom Beyoncé embodies in the film, was a human being who later became an Orisha himself. Beyoncé chooses to embody different Orisha throughout the film to teach her audience about this integral practice essential to Orisha devotional communities. To recapitulate, in the opening song, Beyoncé embodies Yemaya, the Orisha of lakes and the shallow waters in the sea. In the next scene, Beyoncé represents Oya, the Orisha of the wind and daughter of Yemaya. The audience also sees Beyoncé as Oshun, the Orisha of the river, sweetness, love, and fertility. Oshun is the Orisha Beyoncé most often identifies with in her shows, performances, and lyrics. During the mansion scene in Beyoncé's song, "MOOD 4 EVA," she reiterates, "I am the Nala, sister of Naruba, Oshun, Queen Sheba, I am the mother."[113] Beyoncé's consistent reference to Oshun demonstrates that while embodying several Orisha, she maintains her reverent connection to her crown Orisha. Finally, the audience sees Beyoncé as Obatala, the creator of humanity and head of all the Orisha.

Throughout the film, actors other than Beyoncé embody different Orisha such as Olokun, Elegua, Eshu, Ogun, and Shango. Beyoncé's choice to have characters other than herself embody the Orisha proves that Beyoncé's intentions are not to idolize herself or put herself

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[112] Toyin Falola, *The African Diaspora: Slavery, Modernity and Globalization* (University Park, Pennsylvania: University of Rochester Press, 2013), 209.

[113]Beyoncé, Jay-Z, Childish Gambino, Oumou Sangaré, vocalists, "MOOD 4 EVA," by Beyoncé, S. Carter, Donald Glover, Khaled Khaled, Floyed Nathaniel Hills, Denisia Andrews, Brittany Coney, Anathi Bhongo Mnyango, Ant Clemons, Michael Uzowuru, Teo Halm, Jeff Kleinman, and Oumou Sangare, recorded 2019, track 12 on *The Lion King: The Gift*, Oakland 13 Music (ASCAP), digital recording.

above others. Instead, she is encouraging her audience to acknowledge the fact all humans are divine beings themselves.

Additionally, Beyoncé educates her viewers about the importance of keeping one's ancestors alive by verbally and visually incorporating the boy's ancestors throughout the film. In several scenes throughout the film, Beyoncé often stands in the background watching the boy from afar. Her outfit and makeup drastically change throughout each scene indicating that she is representing various ancestors rather than a single loved one. Beyoncé also uses the ever-changing presence and appearance of other characters watching the boy to introduce the concept of collective ancestors which is a prominent foundation of knowledge in many African heritage religions.

The boy is watched by various ancestors, Orisha, and spiritual guides throughout the entire film. As the film is ending, Beyoncé explains, "The Orisha hold your hand through this journey that began before you were born. We never forget to say thank you to the ancestors, noble and royal, anointed, our blessings in the stars."[114] Her confirmation of the boy's ancestors as his protectors demonstrates the positive effect spirituality and religion has on the boy's life. Beyoncé strategically waits until the end of the film to explicitly verbalize her incorporation of the Orisha and ancestors. Her timing is effective because she seamlessly destigmatizes African heritage religions for audience members who may not have knowledge on this topic. By the time the audience realizes that this film is a homage to Lucumí and African religions overall, Beyoncé has already presented the religious practices in a prideful and positive light.

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[114] *Black is King*, Knowles-Carter, Adjei, Ake, Bazawule, Nkiru, and Fordjour.

Throughout *Black is King*, Beyoncé takes the audience on a spiritual journey, consistently navigating between the spiritual realm, ancestral realm, and physical realm. The journey of stepping into one's own power is the overall theme of the visual album which correlates with the message of the *Lion King*. On the surface, the audience sees this theme in Simba's journey from a lost prince to the king of the jungle. In the visual album, we see this with the boy who is led by his spiritual guides and goes through ritual processes before he is crowned king and reaches spiritual ascension.

While Beyoncé explicitly explores the representation of the Orisha and the reverence of ancestors, she uses symbolism to hint at the various themes intertwined in the production like Black Power and Black unity. For instance, the audience — specifically those belonging to the African diaspora — is exposed to the theme of returning to themselves and their roots in traditional African spirituality. The audience hears this call of return in the lyrics of "BIGGER"[115] and in the song "FIND YOUR WAY BACK (CIRCLE OF LIFE)."[116] Upon further analyzing the film, other important messages are conveyed as the director reveals a glimpse of Beyoncé reading the book *Black Kings and Gods: Yoruba Art at UCLA*[117] to highlight a crucial resource informing how the artist is strategically using Yoruba religious aesthetics throughout the film. Additionally, later on in the visual album, a group of people are seen dancing and celebrating holding the Pan-African flag also known as the Black liberation flag. This flag symbolizes the underlying themes of unifying the African diaspora and appreciating African culture. Further, Beyoncé illustrates African spirituality in a positive light by showing

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[115] Beyoncé, "BIGGER."

[116] Beyoncé, "FIND YOUR WAY BACK (CIRCLE OF LIFE)."

[117] Robert Farris Thompson, *Black Kings and Gods: Yoruba Art at UCLA* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1976).

the abundance of beauty and wealth found in Africa. Beyoncé contributes to the effort for Black unity by effectively disrupting countless derogatory myths about African religious practices and Black identity.

Beyoncé tackles issues concerning the undesirability of Blackness when emphasizing the theme of Black beauty. The audience sees this in the song "BROWN SKIN GIRL"[118] where the beauty of Black women is admired in an elegant, flower-filled environment. This scene alludes to a debutante ball. Beyoncé purposely incorporates the colonial imagery of a coming out debut to solidify the reimagining of the Black female identity that she is formulating. She presents the women as members of upper-class society which challenges the wider society's practice of degrading Black women. Furthermore, all of the Black characters are being served by a white butler — the only white character in the entire film. Presenting Black women in a position of power and a white man in a position of servitude is a compelling visual statement. While many white bloggers across social media criticize the positioning of the white character in the role of servitude as a statement of Black superiority, the public's upheaval exposes the gross absence of Black women's empowerment in the media. Therefore, the director is effective in portraying the racial inequity that Hollywood promotes.

As such an important and influential popular culture icon, Beyoncé's public embrace of Lucumí in *Black is King* positively shifts how the media represents African heritage religions. While this visual album is housed by a public streaming service, the artist makes it clear that her intended audience are those of African descent. The film challenges the Black community to reject

[118] Beyoncé, Blue Ivy Carter, Saint Jhn, Wizkid vocalists, "BROWN SKIN GIRL," by Beyoncé, Carlos St. John, Adio Marchant, S. Carter, Stacy Barthe, Anathi Bhongo Mnyango, Michael Uzowuru, and Richard Isong, recorded 2019, track 13 on *The Lion King: The Gift*, Oakland 13 Music (ASCAP), digital recording.

the afrophobia that global white supremacy has ingrained in society. Specifically, it sparks the questioning of why the public, geographical textbooks, and Hollywood depict Africa as an arid, primitive continent infested with poverty and barbarism when so much wealth and variety of climates and cultures make up Africa. Moreover, Beyoncé challenges her Black audience members who demonize African spirituality to realize that they are actually rejecting themselves. Her seamless incorporation of African heritage religions through the characters costumes, symbolism, and lyrics communicates that the ancestors, Orisha, and spiritual guides are a reflection of humans themselves. By double casting the human characters in the film as the divine entities, Beyoncé decolonizes the public's imaginary of African heritage religions.

Black is King is a singular achievement because it moves the public imagination into a Yoruba cultural and spiritual world. Rather than attempting to tell the story of Black African characters in the context of the United States, Beyoncé transports these characters away from American culture to a Yoruba traditional context. Furthermore, this visual album is produced by the mass media production company Disney, which is infamous for historically maligning and misrepresenting African heritage religions. In specifically using Disney as a platform to share her work, Beyoncé is reclaiming mainstream media's representation of Lucumí by redressing the misappropriation of Africa and African religions. Her lyrics combined with the embodiment of the Orisha popularize Lucumí and help to demystify Yoruba religions.

The intersection of religion and themes surrounding race and Blackness in her work effectively challenges white supremacy and the historical degradation of African culture. Beyoncé's exercise of Black power is impactful because as a Black woman whose existence has been historically demonized, she reclaims her Blackness and African spirituality by educating the public on Yoruba religious practices while centering herself as multiple divine beings. Beyoncé's

reclamation of Lucumí through a mainstream platform affords scholars an opportunity to examine corrective representations of African heritage religions in the media that reflect nuanced interpretations of sacred knowledge, practice, and performance. Her artistic staging and performance of Lucumí aesthetics in *Black is King* has the potential to change America's collective imaginary regarding African heritage religions because it showcases traditional African religions in a positive, corrective light, establishing spiritual and aesthetic tastes for children (and adults) who may be encountering Yoruba traditions for the first time.

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