

Venerating the Black Feminine in Theology, Poetry, and Political Society

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the concept of the Black Feminine from antiquity to the present day. The first half of this paper explores depictions of the Black woman in religion and the creative arts, considering notions of power, beauty, sexuality, and motherhood, while tracking the development of a culture lauded for its strength. The second half of the paper explores Black female activism from the age of slavery in the Americas to post-colonial Africa.

Keywords: Black Women, Feminism, Motherhood, Poetry

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Part 1

The Black Feminine, from Antiquity to Hip Hop

In this conversation, we're going to track the development of femininity within Black cultures from antiquity to the Hip Hop, meaning we're going to start our conversation by exploring religious and mythological conceptions of femininity from seventh century West Africa and finish up with more [recent] lived experiences from African, Afro-Caribbean and African American cultures, both on the continent and in diaspora.

My aim here today is two-fold. Firstly, I would like to inspire you to think more about the multiplicity of the female experience and how western conceptions of femininity are by no means universal, and how Black conceptions of the feminine can provide answers to many of the political and social challenges we face today, both those that are gendered and those that are not.

Secondly, I would like you to leave seeing the Black feminine as a distinct conceptualisation (sic), the understanding of which is integral to understanding the agency and activism of Black women today.

[Discussion – Dictionary definition of “feminine” as ‘having qualities regarded as characteristic of women and girls, such as gentleness, weakness, delicacy, or modesty’]

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I. Oshun

I want to take you back, to around the 7th century. I want to take you to West Africa, to a community that would later coalesce into an empire. An empire that would become one of the most influential in the modern world. An empire whose human capital would be devastated by the European slave trade dispersing its people, and with them its conception of femininity, all over the Americas. An empire whose descendants continue to furnish leaders, prime ministers and presidents across a number of contemporary West African nations. I want to take you to the Yoruba people of West Africa, whose ancient Ifa religion's conception of femininity is where we are going to begin our journey.

And the best place to begin is at the beginning, by telling you the story of how the Yoruba believe life came to earth. So, here is part of the Yoruba creation story:

After he had created the earth, Olodumare, the supreme God of all gods, sent sixteen of his strongest orisha, the minor deities who rule all of existence with him, down to bring life to earth. These sixteen male orisha were the strongest that Olodumare had ever assembled with the power of all of existence in their hands and the ability to move mountains and uproot planets confined in the warmth of their breaths. No greater council of orisha had ever met and they were tasked to give birth to Olodumare's greatest creation, life itself.

They combined all of their forces with the singular task of bringing forth new life. They focussed all of the energy that had ever existed in every time and place ever existing and yet, not one single drop of water fell, not one shoot rose from the ground and not one hoof of any animal pushed down into it. For several days and several nights, they laboured amongst themselves yet not one life fell from the warmth of their breaths.

And it was then, almost at the same time, that they all understood what was missing. Looking from man to man, their breaths crippled by the exertion, they decided that it was time to call on Oshun, the only female deity who had been sent to earth but who until then they had ignored.

You see, Oshun is special. Oshun carries rivers in her chest and sweetness on her tongue. The whole of nature manifests in her breath and even Olodumare accepts, there are few Orisha that in their kingship could match the power of the feminine housed in Oshun.

When the sixteen male Orisha arrived in front of her, she wasn't ready to receive them, she was there but she was not going to be so easily willed to their task; she hadn't originally been asked. They didn't send a representative; no, all sixteen of them met and arrived in ceremony to plead in unison that she help them to bring forth the life that only she held captive in the oceans balanced between her shoulders. They pleaded and they pleaded, but her life was her own, she would not be so easily compelled.

Eventually she agreed to help them, for her love of Olodumare and her love of life itself. She merely had to open her mouth and from her tongue dripped sweetness and from her throat flowed water. And in the mixture of that water and

that sweetness all of life existed, manifesting into the flora and the fauna to which today still she is most deeply connected. For all the might of sixteen men, all of life came from the breath one African woman.
(‘Oshun Creates Life’, © Apeike Umolu)

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What this shows is that, for the Yoruba, though a patrilineal society in which titles and wealth pass through the males in a family, one woman is equal sixteen men!

I can see the male heads spinning all the way from Lagos to London.

This depiction of feminine energy as the creator of life is very important and stands in stark contrast to the role played by woman in the Judeo-Christian creation story. In that story, it is the supreme God, an energy traditionally depicted as masculine, that creates all life. And in the second account of creation in the Bible, woman is created from the bones of a man. Woman have no role in life-making in that version of creation. It is surprising then that she should have been chosen to incubate all life thereafter. Surely it is Adam, with his life-giving ribs, and the extra space in his abdomen that the loss of a rib affords, that should be the incubator of life, if any of it is to make sense.

But it’s perhaps the role of woman as harmer of life in the Judeo-Christian creation story that most distinguishes her from the Black feminine.

II. The Black Feminine and Colonialism

In the story of Adam and Eve, Eve is a corrupting force who succumbs to temptation and by that action damns the whole of humanity for all eternity. So powerful is this corrupting force that femininity can no longer be trusted and, in fact, those unfortunate enough to be vessels of femininity, that is women, need to be protected from themselves and all of humanity from their sexuality.

This concept of the corruptibility of female sexuality manifested itself prominently in the deep discomfort that Europeans felt about African female sexuality in the 19th and 20th centuries with devastating effect of African womanhood.

On the attack on Black female sexuality under British colonialism in Africa, Diana Jeater writes:

‘The late 19th and early 20th century in Britain was characterised by a blanket silence concerning female sexuality. Victorian ideology sentimentalised marriage; popular art and literature heavily emphasised love and duty. Sexual restraint was integral to female respectability, and was enforced as a means of controlling women. Prostitution, social purity, and venereal disease dominated public gender discourses, and were either promoted or prohibited as ways to repress or deny female sexuality. In African cultures, by contrast, control over women’s fertility was more significant than control of their sexuality. Female sexuality was fully recognised, albeit often in overt attempts to control it through ritual and authority granted to senior woman. While this recognition did not produce sexual freedom for women, it did at least acknowledge them as sexual beings, something colonial officials in Britain’s African colonies found hard to digest. They believed that it was their duty to civilise social relationships by not only eradicating slavery, but also by requiring African woman to behave like respectable, middle-class women

in Britain... African men and women were regarded as already belonging to a lesser race, which accounted for the 'uncivilised' condition of sexuality in their societies. Some observers recorded Africans as incapable of sexual restraint. As one missionary put it, "the great curse of the native men is licentiousness, and, I believe, it is the same with the woman. We may say they are virtuous, but I believe they are not." Such arguments were often gendered so that women's sexual activities were seen as the source of denigration, not least through the spread of venereal disease. The attorney general in Southern Rhodesia asserted, "disease is certainly spread by promiscuous intercourse, but the agent is the woman not the man". While both men and women in Africa were perceived as dangerously sexual, Victorian ideology found a woman's sexuality impossible to accept.'

(Extract from, "The British Empire and African Women in the Twentieth Century" by Diana Jeater, in Black Experience and the Empire, Morgan and Hawkins (Eds))

Oshun herself was a sexual being, married to another deity and Olodumare's favourite because of her beauty and sensuality – she was at once sexual and powerful.

On this point, the historian Diedre Badejo of the University of Baltimore writes:

[Badejo, Quote 2]

Now, you can begin to see from whose image that definition from the Oxford dictionary is derived. The weakness, the delicacy – so easily corrupted – the modesty, which is perhaps another way of saying shame, shame about being the definition of mistake. This is a concept of femininity that many Western and Eastern societies yearn to leave behind.

As you can see, Oshun's role as creator of life means that African notions of femininity are quite the opposite. The Godhead itself contains iterations of the feminine in the form of female Orishas. Oshun in particular, as the giver of life, cannot do anything than harms it, making her the very negation of corruption. To condemn life would be to condemn herself, which she cannot do, because she is a manifestation of God.

I hope this alternative characterisation of the feminine is inspiring to you and is giving to you what all historical discourse hopes to give you, which is the power to challenge what we have received as truth. By peeling back and understanding the multiplicities of philosophies around femininity we can perhaps begin to value the multiplicities of the lived experiences of women and girls in our societies.

And perhaps the greatest work needs to be done against that difficult word, "weakness".

Oshun's most important role is as a protector of humanity. And by a protector I don't mean that she merely watches over her people or places obstacles in the paths of their enemies. No, she is a warrior celebrated for her military defence of her people.

In a veneration to her that is sung, it says:

*Oshun, you who despite being a woman is as tough
As the trunk of a tree
The one who stealthily surrounds the town
I salute you, owner of the township
Owner of a solid house*

What this veneration tells us is that she is a leader, she is an oba, and like all kings she leads her armies.

One of my favourite Yoruba proverbs states: “It does not matter whether a snake is sighted by a man and is killed by a woman, all that matters is that the snake has been killed”.

III. The Black Feminine and Hip-Hop Poetry

This tradition of the Black feminine as being steeped in strength, not just possessing it habitually but being a source and manifestation of it, continues to run deep in Black consciousness today.

To get a sense of this, we’re going to look at the poetry of African American Hip Hop culture and we’re going to turn first to Tupac Shakur. Shakur was a poet, rapper and actor and in all his artforms a vehement activist for Black consciousness. Both his parents were activists, and he was raised within a strong Black power narrative that, through organisations such as the Black Panthers, gave agency to the women of the American civil rights movement. They were not intended to be merely supporting acts, but militant activists in their own right, a number of whom we’ll explore in more detail in next week’s lecture on Black female activism.

All of this is to say that Shakur grew up within a culture that saw Black woman as soldiers.

The work I’m going to read from today is from his early career and in style bears almost no resemblance to the poetry that would be the basis of his later music career. It gives us an insight into the mind of a young Black man in 1980s/1990s America and his conception of the Black feminine.

The poem I am going to read to you today is called Black Woman and he dedicates it to a woman named Marquita. He could have named the poem “Marquita” but instead places this dedication as a sub-title choosing instead to frame this poem as an ode to all Black women:

[Marquita by Tupac Shakur]

Shakur says that in seeing this woman he sees strength, not that he saw that she was strong, but that she was strength itself. He places femininity and strength as near synonyms, interchangeable. He compounds this with his declaration that in seeing strength, he saw “pure woman” – as in woman is pure strength, and strength is pure woman. This is to say that any depletion of her femininity would be to the detriment of strength, not just her strength, but strength as an ideal. This harkens back to Oshun because Shakur says that “it will be your strength that will keep us both standing” – standing like a solid house, that solid house that is held up by Oshun, on the banks of the river named after her, the river that she pours out into the world.

Shakur is not intimidated by this strength; in fact, it is the reason he chooses this woman. He does not choose her for her delicacy or modesty, but for her strength. And he acknowledges the role he could potentially play as a usurper of her strength, of her position in society when he says, “my negative side with attempt to change u”. And he urges her to fight him to protect her position. For Shakur, a young Black man steeped in Black consciousness, he expects Black women to be strong and he expects that they will fight for their traditional and inherited positions in society.

And it's important here to distinguish between the philosophy and culture on the one hand and the lived experience on the other. We all know that both men and women in every culture possess strengths and weaknesses in equal measure. But this is about which psychology underpins a society.

The historian Dierdre Badejo says it best when she says:

“The place that women occupy within [a] religion validates or negates their voices and power...Western sexism has denied its own womanhood legitimacy through its mythicoreligious systems first by demoting European womanhood from adult status to legal minors, and then by denying them access to the priesthood, a phenomenon that never occurred in traditional African societies”.

And I think by extension, the place that women occupy within consciousness has the same effect.

The eminent African American thinker WEB Du Bois captures the place of the Black woman in Black consciousness when he writes of the African American woman:

[Du Bois as quoted in Badejo, Quotes 3 and 4]

This veneration of women, and in particular the mother, is a major theme in Black consciousness. Similar to the veneration of Oshun that I mentioned before, the mother in Black consciousness holds a special place. Of course, motherhood is revered in all societies but the rejection of femininity and the demonisation of sexuality within the western world creates a confusion which Du Bois I think puts brilliantly when he says:

[Quote 1 from Du Bois]

And it is Du Bois that gives us a wonderful overview of the centrality to the mother in African consciousness writing:

[Quote 2 from Du Bois 2]

One of my favourite veneration of the Black mother however comes from Sizzla, the Jamaican reggae artist who writes of his mother this:

*Thank you mama for the nine months you carried me through
All those pain and sufferin'
No one knows the pressure you bare a just only you
Give you all my love*

*Mama I would never let you down
I'll never go away, I'll always be around
You know why you do it, such love that you found
I'm always gonna let you wear that crown
Through the roughest of times you maintain your calm
Jah was your only help While shelterin' me from the storm
And when its cold you wrap me in a towel so warm
Oh ma oh ma, I'm so glad I was born*

Part 2

The Black Feminine and Black Female Activism

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I. On Garvey

I'm actually going to start with Garvey, which is such a woman thing to do – in a conversation about Black female activism my first point of reference comes from a man – typical! But when you are the godfather of near-everything that is Black consciousness, there are almost no conversations about 20th century Black activism, particularly in diaspora, that could leave out the work of Mr Garvey. A Jamaican pan-Africanist working primarily in the United States in the first half of the 20th century, few have matched his energy and his achievements in championing the economic emancipation of Black peoples. He may not have achieved everything he set out to do, which of course many people like to remind us, but he paved the way, in more ways than you may be aware of.

In his 1937 work titled, “The Course of African Philosophy”, in the chapter on leadership he writes:

God does not build cities, towns, nations, homes or factories. Men and women build them and all those who want them must work for themselves and pray to God to give them the strength to do it.

God does not build cities, men and *women* do, everyone must work for themselves, both materially and spiritually to bring their vision to fruition. Men and *women*.

I emphasise this because he was writing in 1937. Most universities in the western world were yet to admit women and no western power was allowing women to regularly fight on the front lines of their armies. It wasn't until 1944 that women in the United Kingdom, where I live, were allowed to remain in employment in the public sector after they had married. So, when in 1937, Garvey puts the onus on both Black men and women to build the cities, towns, nations, homes and factories that would fuel Black liberation, and to gain the psychological fortitude to see the task to the end, he was in this way forward thinking by western standards in his beliefs about the role that women should play in the liberation of their people. They were not to stand idly by. And boy, they did not.

Garvey wrote this three years before he died. He wanted to pass on his teachings to others. So, in secret, he assembled a group of the leading lights of his organisation, the United Negro Improvement Association, leaders from different American states came together to learn the essential elements of Black consciousness from Garvey himself - 12 hours a day, seven days a week, for an entire month, he taught them lessons like this, about how the struggle was to be fought, how everybody was expected to participate.

He says it clearly, men and women must work for themselves to shape their own realities both materially and psychologically. But to what extent did Garvey put his thesis into practise. To what extent did he actually seek to empower women – he talked

a good talk, but did he translate it into action. Of the 8 graduates to the Course of African Philosophy in 1937, how many were women?

Garvey did put his trust where his spirit had been, and *half* of the graduates of his first course were women. I can give you their names – they were:

Sarah Isaac for Pennsylvania
Theresa Young from Kentucky
Ethel Waddell from Indiana; and
Elinor White from Illinois

Garvey entrusted his legacy, 50% to men and 50% to women. It is important also to note that all delegates invited were the heads of Garvey's organisation in their states. Thus, these four women were not just activists, they were leaders of Garvey's movement in their states, so they were no small people, these were the elites of the Black resistance. If the UNIA, Garvey's organisation, were the government, then these women were the heads of state assemblies, in 1937.

And this is how I want to introduce you to Black Female Activism – in many Black communities, it is not the exception, it is the expectation that in the defence of the race, Black women will fight alongside their men, no special treatment. There is no prevailing ideal that as a woman you should be relegated to the side lines in the struggle for Black emancipation, all hands are needed, everybody must play a part. No damsel in distress, no deified notions of a weak femininity that needs protection. No.

Later on, we'll talk about Black female responses to misogyny and inequity within their own communities, but for now let us start by looking at Black female activism in defence of their communities.

II. Defence of Community

a. In the Diaspora

And to do that I'm going to that you back, because as a historian for me that is where it always starts. And we're going to start today, not in Africa, but in diaspora. We're going to head straight to the Caribbean, straight to Jamaica, straight to an uprising that would reach epic proportions.

It was 1760, and Apongo, an African-Jamaican nobleman enslaved on the Gold Coast and brought to the island in bondage, was leading the biggest rebellion against slavery that the British empire would ever face. Over a thousand enslaved Black people would maintain the resistance for a year and a half. Over 500 Black men, women and children would be slaughtered in war and in repression, and many of those who survived took their own lives in a form of resistance seen over and over and over again in the slavery states of the Americas, suicide and infanticide, by poisoning and by stabbing. Apongo's uprising shook the psychology of slavery to its very core. And the Jamaican spirit to this day draws something of its energy from this prolonged resistance known as Tacky's Revolt.

But what of women? In his book called "Tacky's Revolt", the historian Vincent Brown writes this:

Historians and their readers have commonly assumed that women were less militant in their resistance to slavery than men. Despite the prominence of Nanny of the maroons in accounts of Jamaican slave rebellions, women's resistance to slavery has seldom been viewed as a military phenomenon. Because women often had children and domestic worlds to fight for, violent uprisings were the prerogative of men; so we have thought. Yet here women represent 40% of the first known rebels captured during the latest insurrection of the British Caribbean in the 18th century. Whether they acted in supporting roles or engaged in direct combat, some of these women must certainly have been part of the core community of insurgents. [p. 151]

40%! Garvey was a Jamaican. Garvey would have been raised by women who were the inheritors of this legacy; he would have been told this story in his youth and he would have known the statistics. 40%. Therefore, it is not surprising that almost two centuries later, this son of Jamaica would expect Black women to fight in the struggle too.

And Brown provides further evidence for the role played by women when he writes that when a number of the Black men were sentenced to death:

The court determined that the women Sappho, Princess, Sylvia and Doll appeared to have had "some knowledge of the conspiracy." [p. 159]

They had some knowledge of the conspiracy; they were part of the conspiracy! And when describing one particular militia known as Simon's militia, we are told that:

The militia was a light and mobile force. By the estimation of the White planters, it consisted of about fifty men and women with maybe a dozen rifles. [p. 200]

Men *and* women. And the historian CLR James too was very specific when writing of the Haitian Revolution, saying that the women fought alongside their men.

One of my favourite soldiers in Jamaica at this time, and I call her a soldier because she was, was Mary, a washer woman, who in July 1760 was deemed so dangerous that she was removed from the island and taken to British Honduras. Of her it was said that she was the most dangerous type of Black woman because, and I quote:

She was endow'd with such a surprising facility of Speech [p. 211]

Speech! That was her skill, she could speak terror into her oppressors, she terrified them with her words, she had fire for a tongue.

But you see Mary was like every other Black woman in Jamaica. She wasn't special. I mean her powers of speech were clearly special and as somebody who likes to speak, I would have loved to hear her speak the speak that got her banished from the island. In that way, yes she was special. But Mary was like almost every other Black woman in Jamaica at this time, because Mary was a survivor of rape. I should rephrase it – Mary's number 1 purpose on the island was to be raped. Because a Black woman's number 1 purpose in Jamaica at that time was to produce children, and those children were the majority of the time the products of rape. To the point of forcing Black men to rape Black women, or white men raping Black women themselves. Yes, Mary was being

systematically raped which was not against in the law, in fact it was the prerogative of the state. And we know this because when she was put up for sale, because as a washerwoman she had been able to spread the news of the insurrection through the town like venom, her rapist wrote of her this:

She is a good washerwomen but is in possession of other qualifications which the purchaser will soon discover [p. 211]

But as we say in the mean streets of the South East of London where I'm from, Mary wasn't having a bar it. And whether she did it herself, or she enticed another with the blades of her tongue to do it, the throat of her rapist was slit while he slept.

Black women did not bow down in slavery; theirs was a unique oppression and they dealt with it in unique ways.

Women went to great lengths to fight the oppressions of the slave state and the most harrowing resistance came in the steps that Black women took to protect their children. There are two accounts I want to give you, because I think they will help you to understand the uniqueness of the oppressions faced by Black women and the uniqueness of their responses in the face of these threats. The first comes out of Haiti, and CLR James writes of it this:

The most dreadful of all this cold-blooded murder was, however, the jaw sickness – a disease which attacked children only, in the first few days of their existence. Their jaws were closed to such an extent that it was impossible to open them and to get anything down, with the result that they died of hunger. It was not a natural disease and never attacked children delivered by white women. The negro midwives alone could cause it, and it is believed that they performed some simple operation on the newly born child which resulted in the jaw-sickness. Whatever the method, this disease caused the death of nearly 1/3 of the children born on the plantations.[p. 13]

In fact, in another account, James tells us that:

a Black nurse declared in court that for years she had poisoned every child that she brought into the world. [p. 13]

That was their resistance, with the little agency that they had, they fought for their rights and for the rights of their children to not have to endure slavery.

This sought of resistance was unique to Black women in diaspora, because their oppression was unique. These accounts of resistance form an important part of their story.

I'm going to give you one more account, and for that we travel out of Haiti and to mainland North America, to Kentucky, 1856. A group of 17 slaves have fled their plantation and made it to Cincinnati. They split up to evade detection. But they are being tracked. And those of you who have watched the Handmaids' Tale on Netflix and think it is terrifying, remember that Margaret Atwood has said that she did not include anything in her book that has not happened to women somewhere at some point in human history. The idea that women would be confined to farms to produce children is not the stuff of nightmares, it was the reality of many Black women; and the ideas of

giving birth to children who would be taken from you and given to the service of a higher race was not a fantasy, but a reality; and the idea that women who tried to run away would be hunted down was not imagined but true. Perhaps Margaret Atwood had in mind this story, the story of another Margaret, Margaret Garner, one of those 17 runaways. Her story goes like this:

Margaret, the mother of the four children, declared that she would kill herself and her children before she would return to bondage. The slave men were armed and fought bravely. The window was first battered down with a stick of wood, and one of the deputy marshals attempted to enter...the pursuers then battered down the door with timber and rushed in. The husband of Margaret fired several shots and wounded one of the officers but was soon overpowered and dragged out of the house. At this moment, Margaret Garner, seeing that their hopes of freedom were vain, seized a butcher knife that lay on the table and with one stroke cut the throat of her little daughter ... she then attempted to take the life of the other children and to kill herself but she was overpowered and hampered before she could complete her desperate work ... [Verner, p. 61]

What such accounts offer is a view of activism in which men did not have a monopoly over violence or terror. It is to say that there was no disconnection between one's femininity and one's ability to use force. It is not to advocate the use of it, it is just to say that female activism need not be confined to the regal or pretty, it grapples with the psychological as well as the material, it manifests in both action and speech.

What these accounts also offer is an appreciation of how the different histories of women will inform their methods and intolerances. That is to say, you cannot decouple Black female activism in diaspora from slavery. It's not possible. Black women in the Caribbean and the Americas are descended from these very activists, these women ready to make the ultimate sacrifice for the sanctity of their families. Thus, in seeking to understand and engage with contemporary manifestations of Black female resistance, you must understand and value the unique experiences of Black women in history. Not all women have faced the same oppressions, and some women's oppressions have been uniquely faced.

But what if the destruction of your community is coming from within. How have Black women responded to such attacks. To explore that, we go now to Africa and come a little forward to the 20th century.

b. On the Continent

We are now in Liberia, West Africa, a nation established to receive African Americans looking to return to Africa after emancipation.

The year is 2003. The country has been locked in civil war for 14 years. 14 years! It's not really important why for our purposes other than to say that it was one of the most devastating wars that has ever occurred. It was particularly devastating because of its specific attacks against the African family. Children were stolen, drugged, militarised and sent back to their villages to kill their own parents. It was a human catastrophe unlike anything the world had ever seen before.

Both men and women were devastated by the conflict. Women had to hide their husbands and their sons to prevent their kidnap, and where this failed, they were left to

manage their community and bury their dead. Women bore the heavy burden of trying to maintain some semblance of normality in the hope that there would still be communities to come back to when the fighting stopped.

By 2003, women had seen a culture of mismanagement become so entrenched that it was as easy to look forward to 14 more years of civil war as it was to gaze back at the 14 they had already lost.

Into that despair rose a coterie of women that would change the course of Liberian, and by extension, African history forever. Their leader was Leymah Gbowee and hers is a unique and inspiring leadership narrative that is an example of a different iteration of Black female activism, using not destruction as ultimate power, but construction.

Gbowee had to flee Liberia aged just 17 with her family and take refuge in a refugee camp in Ghana. But she had no intention of making exile her normality and when she could she returned to Liberia. Her activism came in the form of healing. She trained as a trauma counsellor and chose to work with the child soldiers whose lives had been devastated by the war. But she wasn't content with individual healing, she understood that her country, still racked by civil war, was in need of healing. She was going to stop this war, and she wasn't going to fire a single bullet. And here's why:

One of the biggest debates in feminist theory, is the relationship between femininity and masculinity. We spoke last week about how femininity in the African tradition is not the negation of strength. To be a woman is not by definition to be weak. But just because one is not weak, does not mean one possesses power; the philosophy and the reality of the thing do not always coincide. Black women, like all women, have and continue to bear the weight of a myriad of misogynies. But what is different about Black feminism is that its response is not to attack Black masculinity. The reaction was to seek harmony with it because, harmony is where African philosophy holds that everything started.

Last week we spoke about the West African deity Oshun, how powerful she was, how connected she was simultaneously to her strength and her femininity. How she was creation itself. But there is another part of the story. Oshun is married, to another orisha, another god, and his name is Shango. Shango is the God of thunder who shoots fire, like lightning, out of his mouth when he speaks. He represents the wrath of God and the dispensing of fierce justice. His symbol is the *oshe*, a double-headed battle axe and idols made in his image sometimes have this fearsome axe emerging from the tops of their heads. He is retribution itself.

Shango has many wives and Oshun is one of them. She is unique because she cannot do anything to harm humanity. So, she is a balance to his destruction. Thunder and lightning are essential of course, but in moderation. Oshun's instinct to protect humanity is matched by Shango's propensity to be vexed by it.

In the African tradition, everything is about balance. Gbowee in her approach was seeking to reimpose that balance. On the women's movement she came to lead Gbowee said this:

It is time for the women of Liberia to take the destiny of Liberia into our own hands. In the past we have been silent but after being killed, raped, dehumanised and infected with diseases, war has taught us that the future lies in saying no to violence and yes to peace.

That is the spirit with which Gbowee organised and led the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace. The movement crossed religious and tribal lines. The women donned the white outfits of traditional African worship and took their protests to the street. The protests were non-violent, but they were not simply an exercise in theatre – women withheld labour and intimacy and evoked traditional notions of female divinity by using the language of divine retribution, promising continued chaos on the spiritual level should the men leading the peace process not commit to peace.

Integral to this display of female mass action was there was no attempt to usurp power, to delegitimise processes or condemn masculinity. Women did not see themselves as the victims of toxic masculine leadership but instead saw society as the victim and therefore were advocating equally for the rights of both men and women. They were protesting as much for their husbands and sons as for themselves.

What Gbowee highlights is that women are essential participants in government. The promise of peace is a common inheritance. The women in Liberia did not act to break down the structure of society but to restore it to a functioning in which both men and women had parts to play.

The action worked. They forced the President to listen to them and attend peace talks in Ghana. But they did not leave it there – they followed the men to Ghana, where, like Mary, remember that woman with a tongue like fire that got her cast off the island Jamaica, like her they surrounded the conference hall, 200 strong, dressed in white, dominating the conversation, and when the men scaled the walls and tried to jump out of the window to escape from the women's talk, they blocked all the doors and the windows and prevented anyone from leaving without a resolution. They weren't going to do this war anymore – it was over for them. And that's how one of human history's worst tragedies came to an end.

And those same women, just three years later, would be integral in returning African's first elected woman head of state in modern times, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. And she, along with Gbowee, would be awarded the Nobel peace prize in 2011 for their role in ending the conflict and rebuilding their nation.

The mobilisation of women in this way was a shock to African male consciousness. It cannot be said that they ever feared the women – there was never a threat of the women co-opting the military and summarily executing all the men. But for the women to take action in this way in a patriarchal society was an indication that they felt they had exhausted all that they could achieve by other means of coercion. And that sounded the death knell on the collective consciousness.

What we learn from Gbowee is that, feminism, if we take as its definition the attribution to women of an agency limited by nothing, must not just co-existing with masculinity, but the two fuel each other – this is essential to Black feminist consciousness.

Drawing on this distinguishing feature of Black feminism, the historian Dierdre Badejo writes that:

While there are some legitimate and common issues in the American feminist movement irrespective of race, for women of African descent whose mythologies disclose interdependence with our men, the European definition of womanhood is culturally deficient.

She continues:

[Extract from Badejo]

But that's not to say that every woman wanted to be the calming force to masculine wrath or even saw the female role as complementary, as one part of a duo. In reading and listening to the work of Winnie Mandela, you get the very deep sense of a woman fighting for her own place in the history of her people's struggle. In an interview she gave later in life she spoke about the fear she had of being reduced to somebody's wife. She felt such a rejection of it, that all of her hard work would forever be viewed through the lens of her marriage; that her work and the work of other women would always be a harbinger to the work of the men in their society. She fought not only for Black emancipation from the brutalities of apartheid, but for the right of women to be acknowledged in their own rights as soldiers, as fighters.

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