SHE IS
EVERYWHERE!

AN ANTHOLOGY OF WRITING IN
WOMANIST/FEMINIST SPIRITUALITY

VOL. 2

GATHERED BY ANNETTE LYN WILLIAMS, M.A.,
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Sacred Images of African and African-American Women

Arisika Razak

Like many young Black women in America, my soul sang when I first read Ntozake Shange’s famous lines: “I found God in myself/and I loved her/i loved her fiercely” (63). Growing up as a young Black feminist in America during the 1960’s, I experienced the “cultural humiliation” that Cheryl Gilkes documents in If It Wasn’t for the Women, a groundbreaking text on African-American women in the Afro-Christian church (181). Many activists and scholars of color have explored the enormous impact that racism and oppression have had on the bodies, lives, and culture/s of African-American women — whether that oppression is internalized by African-Americans, or imposed by the greater society (Ani; Collins; Davis; hooks; Lee).

According to Gilkes, “(s)elf-hatred may be one of the deepest sources of conflict and turmoil within the African-American community. This may be especially true concerning women and their bodies” (181). Contemporary African-American women are inundated by images implying that our bodies are still socially and culturally unacceptable. The absence of large, dark, natural-haired, full featured African Diasporan women in popular media; the disproportionate use of Black people’s bodies to illustrate social and cultural deviance in scientific and academic discourse; and the lack of our likeness in mainstream religious iconography all contribute to our perceptions of imperfection and marginalization. Living in a culture that usually defines ‘femininity’ as small, fair, delicate, and dependent, we find ourselves to be large, dark, independent women — women who are too large, too loud, too Black, too nappy-headed! Openly or covertly, our parents, partners, religious leaders, health providers and teachers all remind us that our natural bodies are somehow flawed.

For some Black women, pressure to succumb to these negative constructs is overwhelming. Marimba Ani writes:
limit our ability to construct self-referenced, multi-dimensional sexualities, and obscure the fact that we are all embodiments of the sacred. Our eroticism, creative powers, beauty and transformative energies are our own divine gifts— and their sharing and dispersal must be under our control.

Many practitioners of women's spirituality (Christ; Goboldre; Noble; Teish) suggest that women need embodied, female images of Spirit in order to claim first class spiritual citizenship. Rachel Bagby's spirited memoir, Divine Daughters, explored the repercussions of the lack of a divine female presence in the Black Christianity of her youth; while Carol Christ's essay, "Why Women Need the Goddess" suggested that:

Religious symbol systems focused around exclusively male images of divinity create the impression that female power can never be fully legitimate or wholly beneficent... A woman... can never have the experience that is freely available to every man and boy in her culture, of having her full sexual identity affirmed as being in the image and likeness of God (25).

In a similar fashion, I believe that some African-American women need a Black or African Goddess if they are to find wholeness and meaning at the heart of the world/s in which they live. These images are currently more available to women and men who want them because modern artists, activists, spiritual practitioners and healers have resurrected or re-created African or Afro-centric pantheons which include: traditional African spirits, orishas, and loas; African goddesses and sacred queens; Black Marys; and deified Diasporan ancestors, community activists and soul mothers.

In this article I explore a few of the images created by traditional and modern African Diasporan artists who seek to transmit positive, life affirming images of African and African-American women.

Our African Heritage

African cultural history begins millennia before the slave trade, readily antedating the racism and "racialized slavery" (Drake 1990) of the last five hundred years. Our African foremothers were: "...senior sisters, revered mothers, farmers, textile workers, merchants, healers and religious leaders" (Rushing 124). Most African cultures were spiritually based embodied cultures that valued the roles, spirits and physicality of men and women. The power and authority of male social roles were balanced by the power and authority of female social roles, for the moral, physical and spiritual power/s of women complemented the moral, physical and spiritual power/s of men, including in some instances, the power/s of the king (Badejo; Rushing; Stoeijlje). Dance and music supported personal and community
Adorn their bodies. Lhote and Jeffries believe these images were connected to agricultural or fertility cults and rituals, and Lhote suggested that their remote placement was an indication of their spiritual nature.

It is... strange that we should have discovered so many splendid paintings in a massif so difficult of access and so little suited for human habitation... we may well ask ourselves in view of the character of their art whether they did not make Aouanrhet a high place for religious initiation and for secret mysterious cults (83-84).

Sacred Women of Egypt

Egyptian art presents us with many images of historic African women who were revered as goddesses and sacred queens. Deciphered hieroglyphic writing frequently accompanies these images. Lesko indicates that by 4000 B.C.E., agriculture was established in Egypt, and people of the Badarian culture had begun to lay out their dead in well-conceived graves (7). There is evidence that women's graves in the pre-dynastic period were generally larger than men's graves—and artifacts found in grave sites and on pottery allude to the high status and authority of women. Lesko writes: "The independence and leadership roles of ancient Egyptian women may be part of an African cultural pattern that began millennia ago and continued into recent times" (13).

Adult women of authority in Egypt were typically depicted wearing a semi-transparent garment of linen and jewelry that symbolized power, life and health. Sometimes an open work bead dress surmounted this gossamer sheath which was held in place by strap/s over the breasts (Hawass 112). A close fitting vulture crown with wings enfolding the ears was frequently worn by Egyptian queens, for Nekhbet, the vulture goddess, represented the lands of the south, and Wadjet, the cobra goddess symbolized the north. Royal women wore jewelry made of semi-precious stones, while less wealthy women wore multi-colored beads similar to the jewelry of the nobility. The many-stranded wesekh collar was linked to the goddess Hathor and worn by royal and non-royal women alike. Egyptian women's elegantly dressed hair appears resembles the braids and dread locks of contemporary African Diaspora women.

Female imagery from Egypt includes a myriad of goddesses. Some goddesses combined depictions of power and death with functions of compassion and protection. For example, Selket, the scorpion goddess was the protectress of birthing and nursing mothers. A golden sculpted image found in King Tut's tomb, portrays her as a beautiful woman wearing a
scorpion on her head. The swelling contours of her breasts and belly are delicately outlined beneath her linen dress; her hands reach out to guard; and her dark-kohl-rimmed eyes are fixed and far-seeing, as befits a spiritual teacher and protectress of the dead.

Queen Nofretari's tomb at Abu Simbel depicts the goddess Isis leading Nofretari to the underworld. Dressed in linen overlaid with beads, Isis wears the solar disk and horns of Hathor. Nofretari wears the vulture crown and white tunic of the New Kingdom. The two women are radiant, powerful, beautiful, and slim, they walk hand in hand, fearlessly moving forward.

The historic queen Ahmose-Nofretari reigned during the 18th Dynasty. According to Schwartz-Bart this ruler, priestess, and protectress of the poor (40) is the first Egyptian queen named as a wife of the god Amon. Schwartz-Bart makes the following comments on the intimacy of images of the god Amon's wives:

Among the most beautiful and carnal of all feminine representations, the god's wives are frequently depicted in the company of Amon, during the Ethiopian period. Often facing his wife, the god presents the ankhu, the sign of life, while expressing his bliss to 'the one who fills the shrine with the scent of her perfume'. Moreover, these love scenes include captions... etched by the god himself: 'she who delights the god's flesh, who makes love with the god, she who is fulfilled when she sees Amon' (32).

Writing of Ahmose Nofretari, Schwartz-Bart adds:

People say that the god Amon visits her regularly, that he lives in her body and strokes her breasts, and never tires of contemplating her face; and those who come near her at the temple in Thebes whisper that a spark of peaceful, blissful, truly divine sensuality shows in her gaze (39).... The veneration which surrounds Ahmose-Nofretari has left her image intact... 'black skin, beautiful face, elegant, her hair crowned with feathers' (34).

Sacred Women of Historic Sub-Saharan Africa

Traditional African art depicts women as powerful members of African society. Even when living under patriarchy, they were recognized as powerful beings. Maulana Karenga (1999) in his translation of "Odu Ifa", the sacred oracle of the Yoruba people of West Africa, offers this rendition of Osa Meji:

This is the teaching of Ifa for Odu,
Obarisa and Ogun,
When they were coming from heaven to earth.
Odu asked 'O Olodumare, this earth where we are going,
Ogun has the power to wage war.
And Obarisa has the ase (power) to do anything
he wishes to do.
What is my power?
Olodumare said: 'you will be their mother forever.
And you will also sustain the world'.
Olodumare, then, gave her the power.
And when he gave her power, he gave her
the spirit power of the bird.
It was then that he gave women the power
and authority so that anything men
wished to do,
They could not dare to do it successfully
without women.
Odu said that everything that people would
want to do,
If they do not include women,
It will not be possible (72-73).

Beliefs about the world-sustaining power of African women's spirituality (as above) are linked to women's fertility. Women's spirituality scholar, Hallie Austen, writes in *The Heart of the Goddess*:

In Africa... artistic images of mother and child are widespread.
Unlike many depictions of Euro-Western Madonnas, however,
the emphasis is on the mother, rather than the child. Traditional
African societies consider children divine gifts and value women
as the mothers of culture, as well as for their equally miraculous
ability to conceive, give birth and feed their physical children...
The Mande... believe that one derives one's character, capabilities
and destiny from one's mother (22).
Sub-Saharan African Images

A sculpted Gwandumu figure from sub-Saharan Africa is one of many images of female African divinity depicted in The Heart of The Goddess (Austen 23). The figure is from the Bamana culture of Mali, and Austen quotes Kate Exra as saying that the name Gwandumu

implies a character that embodies extraordinary strength, ardent courage, intense passion and conviction, and the ability to accomplish great deeds" (22). The image's head dress is highly ornamented; her waist beads rest on softly rounded thighs; and the child she holds embraces her elongated torso. Her large breasts shield her child, providing nurturance and shelter. Her gaze is lowered and inwardly focused; her posture erect and aware. Like Thompson's description of another mother-child figure in African Art in Motion, she is "...relaxed but proud, powerfully emphasized breasts telling of... womanly force, and ancestrally based fertility" (51).

The Heart of The Goddess includes pictures of several open legged images that depict a sacred woman, clan mother, or female deity displaying her sacred vulva, which represents the “gateway to life” (118). A 19th century African image from Gabon shows a being with closed eyes whose open arms and legs simultaneously suggest spiritual power and inner peace. The figure is radiant with grace, self-contained and confident. Absorbed in spiritual work, her layered hair, diamond glyph markings, and slightly rounded belly all carry ritual or social significance (121).

Noting that the beautiful and elaborate hair designs depicted by Africans are markers of social status, occupation, or material and spiritual power, Rushing writes:

"Neatly arranged hair is much more than a matter of personal choice for the Yoruba, to whom tousled hair is a sign of chaos, rather than free-spirit sexiness. It is the special province of the powerful, elegant female orisa deity Osun — one of whose oriki praise names is ‘owner of the beaded comb’ (130).

Among the Yoruba “… where the head is the site of one’s spirit/soul/destiny” (Rushing 129), it is the beaded comb of Osun that parts the pathways of destiny (Badejo 7). Commenting on the social implications of the hair styling of a Bamana image, Thompson writes:

The elegance of her coiffure is a cryptic statement on a life lived well, for such an elaborate crest could only be made through the cooperation of others, sympathetic sisters or co-wives or friends (Art in Motion 51).

Images of Sacred African Women by Contemporary Diasporan Artists

I have chosen to review contemporary art by two modern-day African American artists, Earthlyn Manuel and AfraShe Asungi. Each of these artists works outside of the Christian tradition, creating visionary images of sacred African and African-American women. In accordance with African artistic traditions, their images may be based on mythic or historic ancestral figures or emerge spontaneously from dreams and visions.

Many contemporary African-Americans follow Afro-centric spiritual paths, honoring Afro-centric divinities in personal rituals or community celebrations. AfraShe and Earthlyn have shared their visions with the larger community, marketing their images in the form of cards, paintings, candles and textile images.

The term “Afro-centric” is a contested term with many meanings. I am using it to define attempts by African-Americans to locate their current experiences and history within a perspective serving the individual and collective needs of peoples of the African Diaspora. Writing on rituals of the Imani Temple Church of Philadelphia, which was formed in response to the racism of the Catholic Church, Catharine Goboldtret declares:

"For African Americans, the reclamation of African-centered cultural perspectives and ethos is liberatory praxis. To determine ourselves Afro-centrically is to ‘literally place African ideas at the center of any analysis that involves African culture and behavior’... (242).

When an Afro-centric aesthetic joins a women-centered worldview explicitly celebrating Black women’s power, agency, creativity, and leadership, it becomes a womanist world view. Alice Walker’s In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens introduced the term “womanist” to define “a Black feminist or feminist of color” (xi). Her four part definition praised Black women’s historic ability to take leadership in liberation struggles benefiting the entire African American community; validated our right to love, support and nurture other women “sexually and/or non-sexually” (xi); honored our physical beauty, curvaceousness, and diversity; and proclaimed the importance of self-love, spirituality, rest, resistance, healing, music, dance, food and nature. This is the tradition in which I situate the work of Earthlyn Manuel.

The term “Afro-centric” is not acceptable to AfraShe Asungi, the other contemporary artist whose work I am reviewing. In an interview in
Woman of Power, Asungi states:

... (It) has been a personal goal of mine ... (to) transform what
I consider the co-opted matriarchy in Africa and in Afrikan
tradition, and to actually intuit, pull out and retrieve the essential
elements of the unenfranchised female, or feminist spirituality. I do
not completely agree with what is known as Africentric theology
because it is very male based.... A word that I had developed in
1985 was ‘Afracentrik’, meaning that we are going one step beyond
feminist and one step beyond patriarchal Afrikan analysis to look
for that particular vision where the Black female has been revered
as norm, as a healthy image in the culture (Asungi, Africentric
Visions 42-43).

Each of these two artists utilizes a very different aesthetic and
liberatory framework for her visual depiction of Black women’s bodies.
Asungi’s “Afracentrik” images depict our spiritual and cultural past in
the lost matriarchies of ancient Africa (Asungi, Africentric Visions 42).
Her images show Black women as empowered spiritual creators, whose
idealized forms reflect Diasporan women’s embodied spiritual powers/ing
us to art, culture, nature, and civilization.

Earthlyn Manuel’s work defiantly embraces aspects of Black women’s
bodies which have been defined as negative by the dominant society.
By depicting them as ‘worthy’, she demands that the observer reframe
and reject the racist lens through which Black women are viewed. In this
strategy, the natural bodies of Black women are emphasized, and the artist
celebrates our full features, largeness, nappy hair and irregular contours.
The inner strength, moral character, and womanly gifts of ordinary women
are emphasized. This artist’s work refutes oppressive paradigms which
create idealized and unattainable universal beauty standards.

Images of AfraShe Asungi

AfraShe Asungi is a visionary artist, writer, priestess and healer. She
founded MAMAROOTS: AJAMA-JEBI an “AfraGoddess sistahood
dedicated to Africentric spirituality and cultural awareness” (Asungi,
Africentric Visions 42). She has been producing art that celebrates Black
women for over thirty years, and writes in a notebook depicting her art:

I needed to see strong, self-contained and focused Black wimmin,
so I reached into our tales, myths, goddesses and other spiritual
realities and thus created this series as my visual song, in praise of
the wonders of the feminine spirits I found there .... (1982)

In her pastel painting, Dunham’s Life Song, Asungi depicts a dark,
radiant bare-breasted Black woman holding a snake in one hand and a
unicorn in the other. A large pair of wings emerges from her back, and
another set covers her eyes like a ritual mask. The orange, blue and soft
magenta colors of her wings are in strong contrast to the starry night in
which a dark moon dances. Her colors and symbols indicate a woman of
authority, and Asungi writes this about her piece which is one of a series
of “Amazons”:

Katherine Dunham is a great choreographer, anthropologist and
priestess of the Haitian religion. She is represented by the snake,
also symbol for Damballah, the Haitian god. But she has also been
represented by the unicorn, symbol of the mysterious positive life
forces and ultimate power of the universe. Other symbols are her
golden arm bands – which give her the blessings of Ochun, the
river Goddess, the navel guard which is the symbol of Isis, and the
moon Goddess, Yemaya (Note card 1982).

Asungi’s image of Ochumare, Goddess of the Rainbow, presents a
nude Black woman wearing a winged mask who sits in lotus position on
a pad created from the starry night. The spinning earth, with the African
continent foremost, sits at her navel; she wears golden armbands, and
balances the rainbow between her outstretched arms. Behind her, two
pyramids rise, and a crescent moon sits at her left shoulder. Her hair is an
extension of the night sky. Asungi writes:

Ochumare as the rainbow moves the sea waters between the
heavens and the earth. I see her as the cosmic channel amongst
the goddesses of the universe and the earth. Here she rests in the
beauty of self awareness ... she sits upon the universal waters and
the cosmic lily pads symbolizing her ever presence. She is nude,
symbolizing her purity and ultimate pride of self. Her mask is a
sign of strength and mystery. The Earth in her lap is spinning
from the absolute energy that she provides from her navel which
is a source of cosmic power. (Note card 1982).

Asungi’s images are situated in our spiritual past in ancient ‘Kamaat’;
the term she uses to name our lost pre-Egyptian matriarchy. This term:

... integrates several ancient root words: ‘Ka’ which means
‘black-faced’ or ‘Sun-kissed’, and ‘Maat’ the name of the Mama
of Righteous Truth ... which means ‘sacred temple and lands’ of
‘Genuine Truth’ and much more. ... The interpretation loosely
means ... Sacred Sun-kissed lands where the Black faced Mama
of Genuine Righteous Truth dwells ... (Asungi, Africentric Visions
44).

Asungi’s images depict Black women as mythic goddesses, historic
queens, and spiritual warriors who are embedded in nature, and supported by cosmic reflections of the Divine Feminine. Asungi reminds us that the dark and the night are sacred, and she uses clothing, jewelry and adornment to indicate spiritual empowerment, freedom, and woman-centeredness. The lush roundness of the women's bodies, and their radiant, powerful nudity, freedom and ease of posture connect us to an ancient African past in which women and their sexualities were honored and revered.

Earthlyn rejects idealized images of Afro-centric beauty. She emphasizes the full lips, wildly explosive hair, and irregular contours of real Diasporan women's bodies. Her stark, simply drawn, multi-colored images are a radical revisioning that reflects African beliefs emphasizing the pre-eminence of inner character over the impermanence of outer form and appearance.

Following African tradition, she highlights spiritual function rather than natural form (Thompson). 'The Teacher', for example, is a hybridized tree-woman wearing a red necklace. Her roots reach into the ground while her upwardly flowing locks, encased in leaves and branches, erupt into a dawn or twilight sky. Her broad nose and wide mouth are indisputably African and her closed eyes and serene expression evoke the remoteness of African masks. 'The Lover' is depicted nude; she is an ordinary looking black woman who rests against a cushion; her short hair is nappy; her thighs wide; her belly wrinkled. Her erotic power lies in self love and knowledge of her own self worth, as indicated by her relaxed stance, and joyful singing, rather than idealized outer beauty.

Manuel's images of spiritual Black women validate the ordinary woman's body, and the very features that white racism would most condemn. This artist honors and reclaims the soul sustaining activities utilized by our ancestors to create and nurture generations of our people. She has consciously designed her work to represent spiritual revival and awakening, and she writes:

When I look closely at the artwork on the surface, I see the hairstyles and hats as natural halos. Our wings, representing the ability to rise are in our spirit, lying unseen to the ordinary eye. The chairs and large pillows are thrones on which an angel can rest from the work of unveiling souls. The vibrant colors represent the process of awakening and revival. Revival is light and light is not always white; it can be bright yellow, orange, green, fuchsia or even black. In the art of these symbols, light becomes a feeling expressed in many colors. Even the color of our skin in the cards, going from yellow to purple to blue is an expression of the various essences of our souls. (15-16)
Affirming Ourselves

In closing, I'd like to remind us of the importance of continuing to resist social assaults upon Black women's bodies. Our female bodies are our first point of entry into the world, and it is through the body that we experience life. Rejection and hatred of the female body, and personal and social dissociation from it have produced a wide variety of personal, social and cultural ills (Chermin; Northrup; Wolf; Griffin; Shepherd; Spretnak). Conversely, acceptance and love of the body may be linked both to individual and personal health, and to ecological sustainability and planetary well being. (Allen; Christ; Starhawk; Walker). Our emotional health as Black women may depend on our ability to generate authentic, embodied, spiritual re-visionings of our bodies, even as we reject the voices of internalized oppression which are the crippling legacy of racism and color prejudice.

African American women are the daughters of Africa. Our skin is black, brown, ivory; caramel, cinnamon, and honey. We reflect the rich colors of the earth and all the world's peoples. Our large hips embody the strength of trees; the curves of our thighs echo the shapes of hills. Our broad noses declare our strength of character, and our hair is a wilderness holding sunlight, rain, and the spiral patterns of galaxies.

We are the spiritual daughters and great-granddaughters many times removed of powerful African women who became enslaved. We honor and remember them as we unearth their histories, recreate their world views, and salute their spirits which live again in us. I offer my gratitude to all the

Diasporan artists, scholars, theologians, teachers, and healers who work to re-discover and re-create womanist culture for Diasporan women. In closing, I offer words from twentieth century poet Mari Evans:

I am a black woman
tall as a cypress
strong
beyond all definition still
defying place
and time
and circumstance
assailed
impervious
indestructible
Look
on me and be
renewed
(Evans 70-71)

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