

African Cosmology in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*

(1989)

Preparation

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Abstract :

This paper is devoted to exposing the inherent connection with the African roots and their spiritual affinity to the African ancestors. Its main purpose is to unveil the African Americans' close attachment to the tenuous African homeland in spite of living in a racist society. It not only focuses on their challenges in a white society, but also reflects their journey to a spiritual fulfillment through the commitment to the African cosmology. In this sense, the paper makes room for the African cosmological beliefs. In other words, it is set to celebrate the deeply-rooted perspective of African spiritualities. It tackles the continual inheritance of the old traditions and spiritual beliefs that tie them to the African nature. In doing so,

the present article evokes the ethics of the African community's bonding and wisdom that will exclusively be examined through the lens of Harris's ecowomanism, a theory that enhances the existence of African American women and their unique contributions in the African American environmental history.

Key words: Ecowomanism, African land, African cosmological traditions and beliefs, spiritual fulfillment, Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*.

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Introduction

Naylor takes the ecowomanist standpoint in a wholly new direction by exposing the African American women's intimacy with nature through evoking the flavor of African cosmology. African cosmology is an African-centric view that involves everything related to Africa. It is also an integral part of the African Americans' authentic identity. Unlike the Euro-American centric perspective, ecowomanists adopt an Afrocentric approach that enhances the black communities that are exposed to the dire

oppression that causes their disempowerment. According to Shamara Shantu Riley (2004), the Afrocentric ecowomanist “understands and articulates the interconnectedness of the degradation of people of color, women, and the environment. In addition . . . an Afrocentric ecowomanist also strives to eradicate this degradation” (p. 409). Women and nature are the most victims of such oppression. However, the spiritual communication with nature helps in overcoming this unbearable racial inferiority. This brings about "personal wholeness, communal interdependence, and purpose in the social, global, and cosmoic web" (Perez, 2007, pp. 22-23). Thus, spiritual practices lead to the "reintegration of the psyche fragmented by the internalization of loathing the native self" (p. 21). In doing so, they "express, preserve, and transmit cultural and gender-based religious and political difference . . . that are visionary with respect to social justice and transformation" (p. 92).

African cosmology

African cosmology enhances the fluid interconnectedness between the Heaven, Earth, spirit, nature, and humans. The natural

realm is in resonance with all beings that have a deep connection to the land. It evokes the ethical values that are imperative to preserve the land that has to be honored. For this reason, the adherence of African cosmology stimulates African Americans to struggle against dualism that causes binary oppositions: black/white, women/culture, nature/humans. Such oppositions must be broken down in order to live in harmony. Implicitly, "African cosmologies present a more holistic religious perspective on the Earth, in which the realms of Nature (the Earth), humanity, divinity, and the Spirit are connected" (Harris, 2017, p. 92). Environmentists have to awaken them towards a reconciliatory world devoid of bias and violence, not only to humans, but to the whole planet as well. All violent acts against nature and humans must be eliminated. The ecological violence causes unbalance to the whole Earth. For this reason, the conscience must be provoked. In this sense, "the urgency of the need to repair the most impacted places on Earth is based not simply on claims for justice, but on recognition of the

common dependence of all living things on heavily affected living systems” (Collins & Collins, 2005, p. 217).

Analysis

Accordingly, *Mama Day* is based on an Afro-centric approach that puts the light on African cosmology that includes spiritual beliefs and cultural norms. The novel seeks to reconstruct the cultural norms that emphasize the spiritual relationship between nature and African American women. In doing so, it explores the African-centered cosmology that "promotes a kind of innate ethical message to care for the planet An ethical mandate to care for the earth is often communicated by African cosmologies because of interconnectedness," on the basis that "[t]o care for the earth is to care for the self and vice versa" (Harris, 2017, p. 70). This means that everything on the Earth is sacred and deserves to be respected. In this regard, the novel celebrates the reciprocity among all creatures: human and non-humans. For this purpose, abundant practices, including the worship of nature, rituals, and ancestral presence, are incarnated. All characters are situated in the African

cosmological frame that helps in maintaining their African roots. They follow their unique heritage for a spiritual healing. For instance, the ritual of the Candle Walk is described below:

Over here nobody knows why every December twenty-second folks take to the road—strolling, laughing, and talking—holding some kind of light in their hands. It's been going on since before they were born, and the ones born before them . . . It'll take generations [Miranda] says, for Willow Springs to stop doing it at all. (*Mama*, 1989, pp. 110-111)

The above quote implies the African Americans' firm adherence to their heritage. This emphasizes that the spirituality of ancestors is in progress. It is inherited from generation to another in order to strengthen their spiritual ties with ancestors. The light from the Candle evokes a spiritual healing. It symbolizes the presence of their great great grandmother who is a symbol of their cultural heritage that satisfies their spiritual needs; they are fortified with its remembrance. In doing so, the spiritual relationship with the

African American culture is exemplified. They firmly adhere to the rituals that link them to their ancestors. Such rituals are obscure to the outsiders because they are distinguished with unbelievable secrets. No one can understand them except the Willow Springs' inhabitants. In remembering such rituals, they incarnate the collective ecomemory of the ancestors that satisfy their spiritual fulfillment. It is the best illustration of the ecowomanist tenet of wholeness and togetherness.

The adherence of Cultural Traditions

In essence, the Willow Springs community is culturally based. It identifies the African cosmology that indigenizes their roots. In this sense, it focuses on the cultural hegemony and women's spiritual resistance. They shoulder the responsibility of preserving the spiritual beliefs of ancestors. In doing so, the sense of belonging is strengthened. On the other hand, internalizing the Western values causes the loss of authenticity African Americans depend on. African cosmology is functioned as a medium that helps in understanding the African American indigenous life. It activates

the ecomemory of the rural land of Africa that provides them with a strong connection to nature. They perform the ritualistic practices that make them navigate to Africa. In preserving such indigenous features, they feel superior as human beings. "The African cosmology is not a static idea but a dynamic and evolving worldview that responds to the changes in time, place, and need" (Fabien, 2014, p. 32). This enhances the embodiment of the African culture. As a consequence, the knowledge of the community's history is still solid. "The legend of Sapphira wade is passed along not by re-tellings, but through intuitive, transcendent ways of listening and knowing" (Eckard, 1995, p. 129). In this sense, the "distinctive Gullah heritage makes the Sea Islands an actual and symbolic African presence, one rich with magico-religious beliefs" (p. 180). For this purpose, Naylor peppers the novel with a number of African concepts that are grounded in the African culture including the concept of mammy. Patricia Hill Collins (2009) elucidates that "[i]n local African American communities, community other mothers become identified as powerful figures

through furthering the community's well-being" (p. 132). Women are the "bearers of their culture's African heritage" (Alexander, 1993, p. 20).

The African Presence

Apparently, the African presence permeates the novel. Being led by a matriarch is an aspect of African culture. In *Black Feminist Thought* Patricia (1991) Hill Collins details the stereotypical "controlling images" that Black women are forced to contend with by society, one of which is that of the matriarch," (p. 83) that are described as "working mothers," spending "too much time away from home," and "ostensibly could not properly supervise their childrens' failure at school" (p. 75). In essence, the concept the other mother is a conventional use in African culture. They help the biological mothers in raising their children. In portraying them as earth mothers, Naylor opposes the stereotypical view of mother. They represent the African maternal community. African American women in *Mama* are labeled as earth mothers. Cocoa is not raised by her biological mother, but by Mama Day, the successor of

Sapphire. Likewise, in Sonia Sanchez's piece (1999) "Woman," the earth is called "earth mother," namely, both women and earth are harshly exploited. She explains that "[c]ome ride my birth, earth mother/ tell me how I have become . . . sing me my history O earth mother..../ tell me. tellllllllllllll me. earth mother/ for i want to rediscover me. the secret of me. the river of me" (p. 1497).

Mama Day is the last member of the matriarchal lineage of the Day family. She is a direct descendant of the legendary Sapphire Wade; she represents the last of a line of conjurers dating back to the legendary mother Sapphira Wade. She represents the affinity between the real and magic; the past and the present. As a conjurer and healer, she has superhuman capabilities that are used in tune with nature to cure the sick. Her healing abilities are derived from nature. She uses the natural rituals of healing and inherits the magic power that works at the service of the whole community. Consequently, she becomes in communication with the ancestors' spirits for guidance and advice. Generally, the conjuring figures are depicted below:

Conjurers are said to be closer to their African roots than other, more acculturated African slaves. Also, conjure abilities are found to run in families; the conjure man or woman inherits his / her aptitude and the mantle of power, along with an expertise in herbal medicines. (Tucker, 1994, p. 176)

The Conjuring Women

It can be understood that the conjuring woman is an aspect of the African culture that Americans see supernatural; she subverts the white dominate culture. Moreover, she is an aspect of African religious practices that are derived from the Yoruba and Igbo religions. Yoruba and Igbo are the African tribes from which most slaves are bought to work in the American South. For example, in *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Chinua Achebe portrays the character Chielo as the priestess of Agbala that is the Oracle of Hills and Caves. Okonkwo's child is healed at the hands of Agbala. This figure keeps them in tune with their African traditions in spite of living in a multi-racist society. In essence, the figure of conjure

comes “from two different realms: the realm of healing and that of spirituality, which could be positive or negative [T]hrough uncanny powers conjurers could contact and sometimes control invisible forces” (Saber, 2018, p. 376). Likewise, African Americans possess conjured abilities. They possess the pre-knowledge that enables them to connect to nature. Thus, “[c]onjure women often carry the Mother and hold considerable power within their communities, and conjurers . . . are known to have second sight” (Tucker, 1994, p. 176).

In this sense, African American women establish a land in the American South to provide them the sense of rootedness. They are able to resist for their self-definition in a hostile environment and challenge the white supremacy that denies their existence. The powerful expression of their presence is the adherence of roots and beliefs in the Southern America. The creation of the island by an enslaved woman is the best expression of the spiritual activism that lies at the forefront of the ecowomanism. A. Vijayalakshmi and R. Padmavathi (2011) assert that “Naylor establishes feminine power

and dignity amidst institutionalized patriarchy” (p. 4). Naylor chooses a woman to change the patriarchal ideology that diminishes their sense of autonomy. The community of Willow Springs witnesses the Afro-American consciousness towards the importance of self-worth. The existence of ancestors is embodied in what Maxine L. Montgomery (2010) illustrates that the legend of Sapphira “subverts predetermined meaning encoded in institutionalized discourse . . . the master narrative of white, patriarchal dominance” (p. 38). He views the “cultural memory as a site of resistance against the imposition of colonial rule” (p. 38). Her resistance empowers them to be resilient. As being the goddess of the island, she has the ability to create the Willow Springs Island and reclaim its autonomy. She has the god-like qualities whose instructions rule their life. Thus, the African roots of Willow Springs are the source of ecospiritual healing; the genealogy of the island evokes an ecospiritual recovery.

African Ideological Beliefs

African ideological beliefs are based on the interconnection between God, spirits and humans. Women cannot be accepted to be the goddess in the American society. Whites attempt to dismantle all indigenous gods, and in doing so they erase their indigenous heritage. They embody cultural colonization. The ecowomanist mechanism frees them from the cultural appropriation. It is the best incarnation of the environmental activism. In this regard, “[e]co-womanism . . . embraces African cosmological beliefs and practices that ethically engage with fellow human beings and the earth” (Lazenby, 2019, p. 108). Being detached from their heritage implies the elimination of their African roots. For this reason, “[a]lthough certain West African societies view the *Umntu* or Great God as being distant from humans, they do believe that the spirits have direct contact with humans and that people can influence their decisions” (qtd. in Fabien, 2014, p. 33). African indigenous religion embraces the realm of spirits. It is grounded in the interconnection between spirit, nature and humans. The divinity of spirits is its top priority. The harmonious relationship with the spirit realm secures

the survival of mankind. Lightning and thunder are caused as a result of the anger of spirits. For this reason, the African cosmological perspective promotes the necessary moral ethics that enhance the honoring of nature. “This moral order that is established by the universe functions to guide humans on how to have ultimate respect for the earth. This is also an ecowomanist principle” (Harris, 1987, p. 32). In this respect, Sofia Betancourt (2016) elaborates that "eco-womanism seeks to build a new space of ethical engagement” (p. 6).

Thus, the African traditional spiritualities seem ambiguous in the Western world. Accordingly, there is a big difference between spirituality and religion. “[T]he purpose of religion is to order our relationship with our fellowmen and with our environment, both spiritual and physical. At the roots of it is a quest for harmony between man, the spirit world, nature, and society” (Opoku, 1978, p. 13). In this sense, the indigenous spiritualities of Africa are flourished in the American South. The popular religion in the secularized environment of the Western world is devoted to the

material and capitalist deeds. It helps in understanding the African American indigenous spiritualities that are permanent. For this reason, African spiritualities are instrumental in constructing their authentic African identity. An example of the traditional spiritualities is done by the Kenyan practitioner, Sussy Gumo who claims that African spiritualities are committed to preserving the natural elements. According to African spiritualities, it is believed that the deities dwell every aspect of nature. Such practices enhance the revival of African spiritualities. Both the religious and ecospiritual fulfillment shapes their sense of pride. In spite of the geographical distance, still they belong to their roots. In doing so, it enhances the sense of liberation. To feel themselves as human beings, it is to be tied to their past roots. In contrast, sometimes African spiritualities are merged with the Western world influence. Those, who are easily influenced with the Western realm, embrace impaired African spiritualities. They feel ecospiritually empty, unable to practice such spiritualities wholeheartedly. This is because they use them for commercialized benefits. In doing so, their

authentic African identity is distorted. Consequently, the longing for Africa becomes fabricated. The Western sophistication does not secure the authenticity of Africans. They live away from their geographical continent. However, they stick to their African spiritualities, as illustrated below:

Spiritualities in Africa would imply that the Vodou practitioner in Yoruba land, for example, would learn and learn from Louisiana Vodou practitioner in the United States [T]he affiliation with the Western world and the financial benefits involved make the African docile to the influences of the outside partner, not just in orientations and political objectives, but also in rituals and beliefs. (Nweke & Okpaleke, 2019, p. 261)

Moreover, a sign of power is to dominate a nation's language. This is because the sense of nationalism is embedded in language. It is sacred for its potential of securing the sense of belonging. For this reason, it is a vital issue for those whose roots belong to a foreign culture. This is because the fact that language is a clear sign

of individuals' preservation of culture. It attacks the Eurocentric view that seeks hegemony on African language. In this sense, the authentic language is the source of power for any community. Thus, to guarantee the African Americans' existence, it is to preserve culture. Language is a part of culture. In doing so, it is the epitome of the cultural loyalty. The entire community refuses to dilute its significance because the loss of culture is the loss of African identification. The Willow Springs Island has its linguistic identification that shapes its authenticity. The Gullah's Creole quality is the language that permeates the Willow Springs community. This guarantees their survival and secures their social bonding and cultural identification. The Willow Springs' inhabitants speak Gullah that expresses their self-definition. They are aware of the hegemonic authority that may deconstruct their African authenticity. *Mama Day* becomes consequently a true example of the cultural nationalism that intensifies the sense of community; it satisfies their ecospiritual fulfillment. Susan Meisenheider (1993) views that the novel "deals with the issue of

maintaining black cultural identity in the face of attempts by the white world to order, control, and define black people" (p. 405). It is a crossroad that reflects the heterogeneity between different cultures. The heterogeneity of different cultures is embodied in the encounter between Cocoa and George who emphasizes the fact that the barrier between two different worlds can be possibly transcended. In other words, the harmony between the blending use of dialect and language becomes possible. In this regard, the novel moves between the Standard and non-Standard English. George, for being an educated man, uses the Standard English language. On the other hand, Cocoa's linguistic innovation does not have an influence on the Sea Island Creole as a sign of her firm adherence of the African heritage. A creole language emanates from the mixture of two languages or more together. It is known as a pidgin that is depicted as "a limited speech code typically used for business dealings between people who don't know each other's language and don't want to" (Chaika, 1994, p. 340). Despite the fact that she speaks the Standard English; still she shows a great adherence of

traditions and customs. Salikoko Mufwene (1991) asserts that "[s]ome of those islanders that left for the city have returned home, dissatisfied with city life and sometimes determined to stick to tradition, which includes language" (p. 221). For this reason, the cultural loyalty is permeated the Willow Springs Island. In other words, the increasing use of the Sea Island Creole is the best embodiment of authenticity.

The Notion of Authenticity

However, authenticity does not mean that the mediation between two different cultures is not possible. For this reason, the dichotomy between rootedness and hybrid culture is evocative. The conventional anthropological strategies are based on the cultural rootedness; they adhere to non-Western cultures. They adopt terms such as "unique speech patterns," pure "cultural preservation" and "ethnography". In this regard, the traditional anthropology "has privileged relations of dwelling over relation of travel" (qtd. in Hamdi, 2015, p. 231). On the other hand, it is necessary to put the light on the hybrid cultures. In doing so, it allows the possibility of

overcoming the traditional anthropology that "must work on hybrid nature of cultures than on rootedness" (p. 231). For this reason, *Mama Day* evokes the issue of the cultural confrontation taken place in the Willow Springs Island and New York. The former inhabitants show the necessity of cultural preservation. *Mama Day* "recognizes that aspects of traditions remain and mingle with the new; that a hybrid culture is, and has always been developing" (Lamothe, 2005, p. 164). In this sense, hybridity can be intertwined with the cultural uprootedness. This notion is exemplified in George' description of his blood; "the blood flows in, it leaks out a little. Flows in, and leaks out a little. As long as too much blood isn't pressured in, the hole gets no larger, and the leak stays small" (*Mama*, 1989, p. 107). This description implies the possibility of the fact that hybridity goes in parallel with interminglement and preservation. However, the continuation of the Day family is the longevity of heritage. Unlike Naylor's previous novels, the authentic spirit strengthens African Americans' link to homeland. The family tree of the Day Family implies deep roots and heritage.

It enhances the ecospiritual affinity to Africa. Despite the fact that it addresses the modern American society; it is grounded in the authentic African traditions.

Nostalgia for the Past

Accordingly, African Americans live in nostalgia for the past. They long for a place and its traditions. It is the repository of their past ecomemories where they have brought up. Literary texts seem to be “an apparently purely material site, like an archive *Lieux de mémoire* are created by a play of memory and history, an interaction of two factors that result in their reciprocal over determination” (Nora, 1989, p. 19). Jessica Adams (1999) writes that returning to the past places “manufacture a nostalgia for the days of slavery as a tragic tableaux of an American dream rudely curtailed by war” (p. 168). The nostalgic longing for homeland and its various aspects heals the sense of ecospiritual satisfaction. The sense of autonomy is healed by the ecospiritual connection they have with the land of ancestors. For a better understanding, it is necessary to realize that a reflective nostalgia remembers the past

with its incidents in a positive way. Adams remembers how people were kind and considerate. On the other hand, a restorative nostalgic hopes the past to continue in the present time. It has a nationalist form. “Restorative nostalgia manifests itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past, while reflective nostalgia lingers on the ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time” (Boym, 2001, p. 41). What intensifies this sense is the fact that the cultural integrity is refused by the American society. For this reason, Naylor constructs an ecospiritual environment in the Willow Springs Island in order to connect African Americans with their ecology. This connection is not only physical, but ecospiritual as well. The ecospiritual connection to the land and all its aspects becomes vital because it satisfies their sense of self-definition.

Conclusion

To sum up, *Mama Day* examines the African cosmological framework that considers a focal feature in African American environmental history. It emphasizes the rich oral traditions that

feature the African sacred cosmos and how African Americans view nature and deal with it. Humans' relationship with nature is ruled by several profound operating principles: respect and justice. In this sense, ecowomanism provides a sharper lens in illuminating the African American environmental history and investigating their indigenous life. It provides a cohesive force that views human and non-human beings as the co-inhibitors of the earth. In doing so, it enhances the spirit of respect, balance and justice among all the earth's creations. Moreover, in preserving the cultural inheritance, African Americans embody the interconnection of the past, the present, and the future. Consequently, they pay permanently homage to the African American pastoral traditions. Eventually, it goes in parallel with the whole ecowomanist objectives the whole study attempts to evoke.

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الكونيات الأفريقية في رواية ماما داي لجلوريا نايلور (1989)

مستخلص:

تختص هذه الورقة البحثية بكشف العلاقة المتأصلة مع الجذور الأفريقية والارتباط الروحي بالأسلاف الأفارقة. فهي تهدف الى كشف الارتباط الوثيق بين الأمريكيين من أصول أفريقية بالوطن الأفريقي رغم العيش في مجتمع عنصري. فلا يركز البحث فقط على التحديات التي يواجهونها في المجتمع الأبيض، ولكنه يعكس أيضًا رحلتهم نحو الإشباع الروحي من خلال التمسك بالروحانيات الأفريقية. وبهذا المعنى يفسح البحث المجال للمعتقدات الكونية الأفريقية. وبعبارة أخرى، فهو يحتفل بالروحانيات الأفريقية من منظور أفريقي متأصل. ويتناول البحث أيضا الميراث المستمر للتقاليد القديمة والمعتقدات الروحية التي تربطهم بالطبيعة الأفريقية. ومن خلال القيام بذلك، يستحضر هذا المقال أخلاقيات ترابط المجتمع الأفريقي وحكمته التي سيتم فحصها حصريًا من خلال عدسة نظرية المنظور النسوي- البيئي لهاريس ، وهي نظرية تعزز وجود النساء الأمريكيات المنحدرات من أصول أفريقية، ومساهماتهن الفريدة في التاريخ البيئي الأفروأمريكي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المنظور النسوي- البيئي، الأرض الأفريقية، التقاليد والمعتقدات الكونية الأفريقية، الإشباع الروحي، جلوريا نايلور ماما داي