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The Significance of John S. Mbiti's Works in the Study of Pan-African Literature

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The critic Rosemary Traoré places John S. Mbiti among those pioneering Black intellectuals such as Cheikh Anta Diop, Abu Abarry, and Kwame Gyekye who “have argued for Afrocentricity on the basis of the existence of an African worldview” and “have helped to delineate the elements of an African worldview.”¹ Using selected Black Diasporan literary texts such as Zora Neale Hurston’s book of folklore *Mules and Men* (1935), her novel *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939), Elizabeth Hart Thwaites’s memoir “History of Methodism” (1804), Anne Hart Gilbert’s memoir “History of Methodism” (1804), and Mary Prince’s narrative *The History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave, Related by Herself* (1831), this essay will demonstrate Mbiti’s strong influence in the study of the African presence in African American and Caribbean literature. The Africanisms in New World Black writings can easily be identified and interpreted through the use of Mbiti’s works, such as *African Religions and Philosophy* (1970), *Concepts of God in Africa* (1970), and *Introduction to African Religion* (1991). As my analysis of these seminal books will suggest, the ethnographic theories that Mbiti develops in his scholarship can be used to demonstrate the connections among continental African cultures and those between such continental African traditions and their equivalents in the New World. Mbiti’s theories of Africanisms can also be used as frameworks for developing a methodology of Pan-African literary and cultural studies that stresses the importance of African worldviews in Black Diasporan literature and culture.

Redefining Africa and Africanisms in Non-Eurocentric and Pluralistic Terms

With a population of 1.2 billion, who speak 2,000 languages not counting dialects, the continent of Africa covers no less than 11,699,000 square miles, and is as big as the combined territory of the United States, Western Europe, India, and China.² Africa has a cultural diversity reflected not only in the variety of the ethnic groups that crisscross national boundaries and traditional languages, but also in the multiplicity of its traditional religions that co-habit peacefully with Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and other monotheistic faiths. As Mbiti notes in *African Religions and Philosophy*, “We speak of African traditional religions in the plural because there are about one thousand African peoples,” understood here as ethnic groups, “and each has its own religious system.”³ This hybridism makes one wonder why the adjective “African,” which traditionally served to locate a diverse people, came to be used in some diasporic cultural nationalist movements and studies as a generalized structure and model for all Black people in the world.

In “African, African American, Africana” (1998), Lucius Outlaw attempts to find out how Black scholars could help shape the intellectual praxes of Africana studies to serve the interest of African peoples without falling into the tendency of “abstract naiveté and romanticism.”⁴ Outlaw’s argument about the danger of using the adjective “African” as a composite abstraction rather than a discrete term to describe a multiplicity of African values is well-founded.⁵ Africa is not a monolith of cultures and human experiences, and neither is the rest of the world. However, Outlaw must recognize that unique historical experiences such as slavery, imperialism, colonialism, and neo-colonialism that have caused forceful migrations of Black people from Africa to America, the Caribbean, Europe, and other parts of the world justify the existence of communalistic perspectives among Black cultural nationalists who view European attitudes toward Blacks as a continuum of

¹ Rosemary Traoré, “Implementing Afrocentricity: Connecting Students of African Descent to Their Cultural Heritage,” *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 1, no. 10 (2007), 64.

² Charles E. Cobb, Jr., “Africa in Fact,” in *National Geographic*, ed. Editor (City, State: Publisher, 2005). John Reader, *Africa: A Biography of the Continent* (New York: Vintage, 1997), 2-6.

John Gunther, *Inside Africa* (New York: Harper, 1955).

³ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Garden City: Anchor, 1970), 1.

⁴ Lucius Outlaw, “African, African American, Africana,” in *African Philosophy: An Anthology*, ed. Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 36.

⁵ Ibid.

racial and/or socioeconomic and political exploitation. The subjectivities that Blacks develop from such traumatic experiences should not be labeled as “abstract naiveté and romanticism,” because any critical way of understanding the cultures of the Black diaspora should begin with an examination of the historical contexts, feelings, and ideologies that motivate African-centered scholars such as Mbiti, Lawrence Levine, or Sterling Stuckey to use terms such as Africanism, Africanness, and Africanity in their studies of Pan-African literature and culture.

The concept of Africanism is part of a long cultural and intellectual debate in which many intellectuals (Black and White) have attempted to demonstrate or disprove the existence of African cultural survivals in the New World. According to Basil Davidson, the word “Africanism” is old, and “over a prolonged period has possessed different but more or less consecutive meanings.”⁶ The earliest use of the term is recorded in 1641, when the English referred to “the Africanisms of the early Church fathers,” giving it a meaning which had to do with scriptural exegesis.⁷ In 1882, a dictionary of Christian biography was found explaining that the principles sustained by Origen Alexandria correct “the Africanism which, since the time of Augustine, has dominated Western theology.”⁸ By 1641, the word “Africanism” was used by European travelers “to label African cultural features taken to be exotic; and this meaning acquired a brief currency in North America when describing the linguistic ‘Africanisms’ of black slaves.”⁹

Two centuries later, in 1862 to be exact, a long and heated debate upon matters of the structure and origin of slave religious music began to produce a vast literature in North America, spearheaded by early White folklorists such as Lucy McKim and William Frances Allen.¹⁰ According to Levine, after a brief visit to the Gullah Sea Islands in the Southern United States in 1862, Lucy McKim “sounded a note which generations of folklorists were to echo when she despaired of being able ‘to express the entire character of these Negro ballads by mere musical notes and signs...’”¹¹ McKim described what she thought was the “odd” distinctiveness of African American music and noted “the odd turns made in the throat; and that curious rhythmic effect produced by single voices chiming in at different irregular intervals... [that] seem [to her] almost as impossible to place on score, as the singing of birds, or the tones of an Aeolian Harp.”¹² Although it was a primitivistic, alienating, and ethnocentric in its assumption that the orchestral and vocal form of slave songs cannot be written, McKim’s statement suggests a distant, possibly African, origin of African American musical aesthetics.

By 1920, the debate over Africanism in North America changed as a new group of scholars, including the African Americans James Weldon Johnson and Alain LeRoy Locke, and later, the Jewish Americans Melville J. and Frances Herskovits, challenged the racist and ethnocentric assumptions of their predecessors on the nature of African American folklore. A major contribution in this scholarship was Lorenzo D. Turner’s validation of African remnants in Black Diasporan culture. In his infamous essay, “African Survivals in the New World with Special Emphasis on the Arts,” later published in *Africa Seen by American Negroes* (1958), Turner, an African American linguist, states,

A study of the influence of African culture upon the Western Hemisphere reveals that the slaves on reaching the New World did not wholly abandon their native

⁶ Basil Davidson, *The Search for Africa* (New York: Times Books, 1994), 79.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: African-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 19.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 255.

culture, but retained much of it with surprisingly little change. Much of it also has been considerably modified by contact with Western civilization, and a good deal of it, as would be expected, has been lost entirely. Those aspects of African culture which have been tenacious throughout the New World are survivals in languages, folk literature, religion, art, the dance, and music; but some survivals from the economic and social life of the Africans can also be found in the New World.¹³

The above discussion attests to the pervasive influence of African traditions in New World Black cultures. Although they are visible in the language, naming, rituals, and other aspects of these cultures, the Africanisms are also apparent in New World Black literature.

The retention of the African background in New World Black literature is apparent in the ways in which Hurston's *Mules and Men* represents the influence of voodoo in the folklore of New Orleans Blacks during the first part of the twentieth century. Voodoo is a traditional African religion that exists in the United States, the Caribbean, and in other parts of the Black Diaspora. Alma Jean Billingslea-Brown defines voodoo as a belief in supernatural phenomena manifested in the acts of healing, divination, incantation, and in the use of curative herbs, amulets, and fetishes.¹⁴ According to Billingslea-Brown, voodoo is called *hoodoo* in the U.S., *vodun* in Haiti, *shango* in Trinidad, *camdoble* and *macumba* in Brazil, *santeria* in Cuba, and *cumina* or *obeah* in Jamaica.¹⁵ Voodoo evolved out of Africa since, as Robert Farris Thompson argues in *Flash of the Spirit* (1984), it is a traditional religion that is based on spiritual traditions from Dahomey, Yoruba land, Kongo, and Roman Catholicism.¹⁶

Voodoo is also an African American spiritual tradition, since Hurston represents it in the second part of *Mules and Men* as the focus of initiation ceremonies in which she participated in New Orleans in 1928.

First, Hurston describes the importance of initiation in voodooism. In order to participate in a voodoo ritual, a student must be trained by a person who is called a doctor, a priest (or priestess), or, in the case of females, a queen. Hurston tells the story of Marie Laveau, a nineteenth-century Black woman in New Orleans who was called the "voodoo queen." Marie Laveau's fame came from the respect held by many New Orleans African Americans for African culture during the early twentieth century. In the introduction to her fieldwork on voodoo, in *Mules and Men*, Hurston says, "New Orleans is now and has ever been the hoodoo capital of America. Great names in rites that vie with those of Hayti in deeds that keep alive the powers of Africa."¹⁷ Laveau might have been one of these "great names." Yet, even a great "voodoo queen" such as Laveau had to be initiated to voodooism before she could have the prominent status that Hurston gives her. As Hurston suggests in *Mules and Men*, Laveau was selected to become a voodoo priestess by Alexander, the man who was known as the "two-headed doctor" who "felt the power in her" and told her that "she must come to study with him."¹⁸ When Alexander made the offer to her, Laveau was reluctant to accept it because she did not want to stop going to balls and falling in love. Yet when a rattlesnake came into her bedroom and "spoke to her," Laveau changed her mind and went to study voodooism from

¹³ Lorenzo D. Turner, "African Survivals in the New World with Special Emphasis on the Arts," *Africa Seen By American Negroes: Africa from the Point of View of American Negro Scholars* (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1958), 103.

¹⁴ Alma Jean Billingslea-Brown, *Crossing Borders Through Folklore: African American Women's Fiction and Art* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 34.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), 163.

¹⁷ Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (New York: Harper, 1990), 183.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 192.

Alexander.¹⁹ The snake fulfills the role of carrier of a divine message, which is traceable to the African belief that animals are mediators between spirits and people. In *African Religions and Philosophy*, Mbiti argues that the Igbira of Central Nigeria believe that animal spirits such as those of snakes and hyenas are intermediaries between gods and society.²⁰ Mbiti's rationale is important for the study of African American literature and culture because it helps us provide a scholarly evidence of the possible relationships between the snake worships in Africa and in the Black Diaspora.

In African worldviews, humans cannot survive without a co-existence with animal species such as snakes and alligators that serve as totems linking the visible and invisible worlds. This sacred bond that exists between the totem and Africans is reflected in the close relationship that Laveau had with her snake. As Hurston suggests, when Laveau becomes old, "the rattlesnake that had come to her a little one when she was young" came to see her again.²¹ When she hears the snake sing, "she [Laveau] went to her Great Altar and made [a] great ceremony. The snake finished his song and seemed to sleep."²² These passages show the familial bond that exists between Laveau and her snake totem. This unity between Laveau and her totem is visible in the snake's disappearance when Laveau dies. Hurston writes, "It is said that the snake went off to the woods alone after the death of Marie Laveau."²³

Later in *Mules and Men*, Laveau's altar is betrothed to Luke Turner, who is now the keeper of his mother's temple. Turner's role in voodoo is to communicate with his deceased mother and instruct the students who visit the voodoo temple. Turner's close relationship with his mother is noticeable when he spends a few hours praying to the "spirit" of Laveau, who taught him how to conjure or charm a person.²⁴ According to Hurston, the "spirit" tells Turner that "dust of Goofer" can be used to bring "damnation and trouble" on someone else.²⁵ This communication between Turner and his departed mother is traceable to the African belief that the spirits of ancestors are connected with those of their living relatives.²⁶ For example, as Noel Q. King suggests, the Akan, among other African ethnic groups such as the Yoruba and the Wolof, believe that the spirit of an ancestor revisits his/her living relatives.²⁷ In his study of the traditional religions of the Akan, Suniti Kumar Chatterji found a hierarchy of divinities such as *Onyankopon* (the Great Supreme Being who is Unique and without a second), the *Obossoms* (the lesser divinities who are but forms of *Onyankopon*), and next to these two gods, the ancestors whom the individual worships in shrines in order to receive personal and social welfare.²⁸

In a similar vein, King argues that the Akan believe that the spirits of the ancestors reincarnate themselves in the names, spirits, and personalities of the children who bear their names and in nature.²⁹

Another African element in *Mules and Men* is apparent in the way in which Turner performs the ritual of being in oneness with his mother's spirit. This practice is both secular and religious, since it is designed to strengthen the individual who seeks knowledge and maturity. Commonly

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 91.

²¹ Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 194.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 195.

²⁴ Ibid., 196.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Noel Q. King, *African Cosmos: An Introduction to Religion in Africa* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1986), 22..

²⁷ King, *African Cosmos*, 16.

²⁸ Suniti Kumar Chatterji, *Africanism: The African Personality* (Bankim Chatterji Street, Calcutta: Bengal Publishing, 1960), 118.

²⁹ King, *African Cosmos*, 22.

known as “retreat” or “initiation,” this moment of isolation and rebirth is a “rite of passage” that most Africans go through before and/or after pivotal experiences such as circumcision, marriage, education, and exile. In *Introduction to African Religion*, Mbiti lists eight functions of “initiation” in African society: (1) a bond is made by the shedding of blood; (2) a youngster becomes an adult; (3) he/she is allowed to get married; (4) a bridge between youth and adulthood is created; (5) a mark of unity with the people is celebrated; (6) the individual is educated in tribal matters; (7) he/she returns home with a new identity; and (8) the initiation brings the people together.³⁰

One element that Mbiti does not mention is “spiritual retreat,” which is a custom in which the individual lives alone in an isolated place under deprivation for a short period in order to acquire power and knowledge. In West Africa, where Islam has been present since the seventh century, “spiritual retreat” is known as *khalwa* which, as Constant Armés suggests is a Sufi and Islamic ritual in which a person withdraws himself or herself into loneliness in an attempt to seek knowledge from a higher power.³¹ *Khalwa* (the Arabic word for retreat) is one of the principles of Sufi philosophy developed by the Arab scholar Muhyiddin Ibn-`Arabi (1165-1240 A.D.) under the categories of *al'uzla* (loneliness) as a pathway to spiritual self-discovery. The initiate of *khawla* is expected to retreat alone for forty days in a meditation room with only a mat. `Arabi explains, “The one who undertakes *khalwa*, like a dead man, surrenders all worldly and exterior religious affairs, as the first step to surrendering his own existence. In complete seclusion he continuously repeats the name of God.”³² Contrary to Donald B. Cruise O'Brien's claim that Africans did not conceive of God in mystical terms as did the Sufis, there is evidence showing that Africans were practicing *khalwa* at least during the Atlantic slave trade.³³ Knut S. Vikor corroborates this possibility when he points out that *Khalwatiya*, the movement which derived its name from “the importance it lays on the brethren going into seclusion,” also had “local beginnings” in Africa from the Niger Sahara to West Africa during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.³⁴ The millions of Africans who had been enslaved into the Americas during this trade probably included practitioners of *khalwa* since this term, as G. Michel La Rue argues, also describes Koranic schools where African students had been kidnapped and sold into slavery.³⁵

The practice of *khalwa* was retained in African American culture where it signifies “spiritual retreat.” One example of “spiritual retreat” in African American culture is apparent in *Mules and Men*, in which Turner asks Hurston to isolate herself in a room for sixty-nine hours in order to allow her to gain spiritual strength. Hurston writes, “Three days my body must lie silent and fasting while my spirit went wherever spirits must go that seek answers never given to men as men . . . I could have no food, but a pitcher of water.”³⁶ Hurston's isolation is a spiritual rite of passage which parallels the West African Islamic practice of *khalwa*. Islam, like Christianity, became integral to African societies before the end of the Atlantic slave trade. Moreover, as Mbiti suggests, both Islam and Christianity were religions that Africans mixed into their own traditional religions even if they had received them from Arab and European enslavers and colonizers.³⁷

³⁰ John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (London: Heinemann, 1982), 93-96.

³¹ Constant Hamés, “Magic, Morality, and Religion in West African Talismanic Practices,” *Religiologiques* (Automne 1998), <http://www.religiologiques.uqam.ca/18/18texte/18hames.html#fn0>.

³² Ibn Muhyiddin `Arabi, *Journey to the Lord of Power: A Sufi Manual on Retreat. Konya, Turkey, 1204-1205* (New York: Inner Traditions International, 1981), 110.

³³ Donald B. Cruise O'Brien, “Islam and Power in Black Africa,” in *Islam and Power*, ed. Ali E. Hillal Dessouki & Alexander S. Cudsi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 158.

³⁴ Knut S. Vikor, “Sufi Brotherhood in Africa,” in *The History of Islam in Africa*, ed. Nehemia Levtzion & Randall L. Pouwels (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000), 449-450.

³⁵ G. Michael La Rue, “Khabir 'Ali at Home in Kubayh: A Brief Biography of a Dar Fur Caravan Leader,” *African Economic History* 13 (1984), 69.

³⁶ Hurston, *Mules*, 199.

³⁷ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 30-32.

Another Africanism in Hurston's works is apparent in *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, in which she revises the Biblical legend of Moses that Paul Laurence Dunbar told in his 1896 poem, "An Ante-Bellum Sermon." Both Dunbar and Hurston fictionalize the story of how God commanded Moses to go to Pharaoh and free the Hebrews from bondage and tyranny. The ways in which Dunbar and Hurston narrate this well-known Judeo-Christian story bears witness to a striking similarity between the two authors' use of Black religious folklore. In the second stanza of "An Ante-Bellum Sermon," the poem that attests the most to Dunbar's strong interest in spirituals, the narrator compares Hebrew slavery and liberation with African American slavery and liberation. First, the narrator says, "Cose ole Pher'oh b'lieved in slav'ry, / But de Lawd he let him see, / Dat de people he put bref in,— / Evah mothah's son was free."³⁸ A few lines further, the narrator says,

But when Moses wif his powah /
Comes an' sets us chillun free,/
We will praise de gracious Mastah/
Dat has gin us liberty;/
An' we'll shout ouah halleluyahs,/
On dat mighty reck'nin' day,/
When we'se reco'nised ez citiz'—/
Huh uh! Chillun, let us pray!³⁹

This passage suggests the African slaves' belief that they will be freed from the bondage of Europeans by the same divine power that liberated the Hebrews from Pharaoh's slavery. The speaker perceives these two kinds of liberations as similar experiences, since he/she represents "Moses" and "de gracious Mastah" as two individuals through whose actions the "Lawd" will free enslaved people and bring the joys and privileges of freedom such as "liberty" and "citizenship" to them.

Moreover, these passages show how Dunbar melded Black humor with Judeo-Christian legend in order to express the manner in which African Americans used humor during the antebellum era as a means of interpreting and overcoming their difficult lives in America. The dialogue between God and Pharaoh in the poem has a dual connotation. From a literal and historical point of view, the dialogue is an account of the Judeo-Christian story of how God appears to Moses on the Mount of Sinai and tells him in a solemn voice to go free the Hebrew slaves from the tyrannical Pharaoh of Egypt. The second meaning of the dialogue, which is metaphorical, is the idea of resistance against hegemonic, imperialistic, and authoritarian forces such as those of the slave owners, planters, sharecroppers, and overseers that Antebellum African Americans preserved in their folklore as a means to imagine the end of their suffering from such oppressions and the racism, classism, sexism, and other forms of injustices that accompanied them.

Although slavery had ended by the time Dunbar's poem was published, the memory of suffering that helped produce it was kept alive in the mind of African Americans and was often expressed in the form of legends. Reinterpreting the Bible provided African Americans with a means for expressing, albeit behind a mask of words and humor, their belief in the possible end to their suffering. In this sense, the humor that the narrator conveys when identifying God as an old, patient man who sends Moses to do his job because he "got tiahed" of Pher'oh's "fooling" suggests an ironic kind of comedy behind which lies the pain and subjugation from the oppression of sharecropping that perpetuated the legally and officially ended slavery, through the early twentieth

³⁸ Paul Dunbar, "An Ante-Bellum Sermon," *The Vintage Book of African American Poetry*, ed. Michael S. Harper & Anthony Walton (New York: Vintage, 2000), 82.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 83.

century.⁴⁰ If Pher'oh had conducted himself as a mature and responsible man by freeing the slaves earlier, then God would not have been disturbed by this irresponsible and immature person who symbolized the new landowners who continued to oppress the freed Africans despite the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863. Pher'oh's immaturity is evident in his unfair exploitation of the "chillun" whom he keeps as field workers in his plantation.⁴¹ Note the affective significance of Dunbar's replacement of the conventional term "people" with "chillun."

Like Dunbar, Hurston drew from an African American humorous revision of the Judeo-Christian legend of Moses and Pharaoh. Hurston's revision of this story is apparent in the middle of *Moses, Man of the Mountain* in which the character of Moses hears a voice saying,

"Moses, I want you to go down to Egypt."

"Into Egypt? How come, Lord? Egypt is no place for me to go."

"I said Egypt, Moses. I heard my people, the Hebrews, when they cried, when they kept on groaning to me for help. I want you to go down and tell that Pharaoh I say to let my people go."

"He won't pay me attention, Lord. I know he won't."

"Go ahead, like I told you, Moses. I am tired of hearing the groaning in my ear. I mean to overcome Pharaoh this time. Go down there and I'll go with you."⁴²

Like Dunbar's, Hurston's narrative is a comical reinterpretation of the Judeo-Christian story of why God sent Moses to Pharaoh. Like Dunbar's, Hurston's Moses is playfully deferent toward God and appears to be so teasingly disobedient and mischievously rebellious toward God. Instead of remaining silent when God orders him to go to Egypt and free the Hebrews, Hurston's Moses retorts with surprise and astonishment by asking, "Into Egypt?" and demanding that God explain to him why he should be the one to go to Pharaoh.⁴³ When he asks, "How come, Lord?" Hurston's Moses is acting like a spoiled child who is not enthusiastic about what his father has told him to do. This Moses cleverly searches for excuses for not wasting his time with Pharaoh. Then, like in a theatrical performance, God, who knows that a child needs his/her parent's patience and compassion, promises to help his beloved Moses fulfill his mission: "Go down there and I'll go with you," the Lord tells Moses, suggesting the intimacy and friendship that exist between Moses and his God. This intimacy and friendship between God and Moses can be traced back to African American and African religions in which the relationships between man and God are conceived as personal and intimate. Levine writes, "The God the slaves sang of was neither remote nor abstract, but as intimate, personal, and immediate as the gods of Africa had been."⁴⁴ The close relationships between God and human beings are also apparent in the filial affection and conversational interaction between God and the two Moseses that Dunbar and Hurston depict. These relationships are rooted in the African American belief that God is a close father who can be befriended and talked to. This conception of God is perceptible in the following African American slave spiritual:

In de mornin' when I rise,
Tell my Jesus huddy [howdy] oh,

⁴⁰ Dunbar, "An Ante-Bellum Sermon," 81.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Hurston, *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (Philadelphia, New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1939), 162.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 35.

I wash my hands in de mornin' glory,
Tell my Jesus huddy oh.
Gwine to argue wid de Father and chatter wid de son,
The last trumpet shall sound, I'll be there.
Gwine talk 'bout de bright world dey des' come from.
The last trumpet shall sound, I'll be there.
Gwine to write to Massa Jesus,
To send some Valiant soldier
To turn back Pharaoh's army, Hallelu!⁴⁵

Like the two Moseses, the slave narrator in this spiritual signifies the privileged relationship he has with God and Jesus. The narrator has a private agency which is evident in his power to “argue” and “chat” with God and Jesus and his role of witness, informant, and ambassador of God. This relationship between African Americans and a reachable God reminds us of African traditional religions in which the presence of the Creator is felt in the daily lives of people. This African worldview is apparent in the following assertion in Mbiti's *African Religions and Philosophy*: “For most of their life, African peoples place God in the transcendental plane, making it seem as if He is remote from their daily affairs. But they know that He is imminent, being manifested in natural objects and phenomena, and they can turn to Him in acts of worship, at any place and any time.”⁴⁶ It is this imminence that allows for possibilities of conversation and argument between the individual and God in Pan-African religions. It is from such imminence that the two Moseses and the narrator of the spiritual establish their relationship with God on utilitarian as well as spiritual terms. The two characters behave as diplomats who dialogue with God on the subject of Pharaoh's dictatorship, the end of which they regard as another proof of God's mercy and impartiality.

Mbiti and Afro-Caribbean Literature

The significance of Mbiti's work in the study of New World Black literature is also apparent in the important roles that his theories of African traditions play in an analysis of the African elements in early nineteenth-century Caribbean literature. One example of this literature is Elizabeth Hart Thwaites' memoir, “History of Methodism,” which indicates a blending of Methodist Christianity and African traditional religiosity. The influence of Methodism in this narrative is visible in the rejection of the earthly things that Thwaites' Methodist parents taught her. She pays homage to her grandmother, Frances Clearkley, “who was converted to God by the ministry of the Rev. Francis Gilbert and who died in the Faith, with my Dear Mother (gone to Glory).”⁴⁷ Thwaites thanks her parents, who were “united to the Methodists and trained up the younger branches of the Family, myself among them, in the fear of God and the observance of religious duties.”⁴⁸ This passage shows the Christian foundation that later attracted Thwaites and her sister to asceticism. In *The Harts Sisters*, Ferguson writes, “After their Methodist conversion, the sisters changed their habits, dressed plainly, and renounced what they considered worldly pursuits.”⁴⁹

Thwaites' reference to her deceased mother reflects the African concept that death is a passage into a world that is inseparable from that of the living. Mbiti argues in *Introduction to African Religion* that some African societies believe that “the departed remain in the neighborhood

⁴⁵ Ibid., 36.

⁴⁶ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 43.

⁴⁷ Elizabeth Hart Thwaites, “History of Methodism,” in *The Hart Sisters: Early African Caribbean Writers, Evangelicals, and Radicals*, ed. Moira Ferguson (Lincoln and London: 1804; University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 89.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Moira Ferguson, *The Hart Sisters*, 9.

of their human homestead. They are still part of the family ... Their surviving relatives and friends feel the departed are close to them."⁵⁰ Although it depicts the Christian concept of the distance that exists between the living and the dead, Thwaites' representation of her departed mother as a person who has "gone to Glory" also suggests the erasure of such a distance in African worldviews. For instance, in the late eighteenth century African Antiguan culture that influenced Thwaites, the idea of death did not prevent Blacks from believing in the African notion of the continuity between the world of the dead and that of the living. As David Barry Gaspar suggests, this African worldview survived in Antiguan slave culture where the Akan and Coromantee rebels took their oaths "with grave dirt that signified that the world of the living was intertwined with that of the dead, that they were united with their ancestors, by whom they swore to be true to their solemn obligations or incur dreadful sanctions."⁵¹

Later, Thwaites praises the genealogy of her family by celebrating the mother and father who gave her life. She writes, "I was also blest with an affectionate Father who ever watched with the tenderest solicitude over the morals of his children, as did others of our Relations, who by their kind attention prevented our feeling the want of Mother's care after her Death."⁵² This statement introduces a concept of kinship based on the sanctity of the parents' love for their children that was central in traditional African societies. Mbiti suggests that both the Mende (of Sierra Leone) and the Nandi (of Kenya) viewed the parents' love for their offspring as the sole power that can ward off evil from them.⁵³ This conception of parenthood as a shield against evil is consistent with Elizabeth's representation of her parents as the most important protectors of their children.

Like Thwaites' memoir, Anne Hart Gilbert's "History of Methodism" (1804) is also permeated with Africanisms. One early example of such African retentions in Black Diasporan culture is apparent in the passage in which Gilbert describes the manner in which slaves in early nineteenth-century Antigua honored the deceased members of their community by playing music and performing various death rituals. She writes,

Their Dead were carried to the grave attended by a numerous concourse, some of them beating upon an instrument they call a "Shake Shake." (This is a large round hollow Calabash fixed upon the end of a stick, with a few pebbles in it) and all singing some heathenish account of the Life & Death of the deceased; invoking a perpetuation of their friendship from the world of Spirits with their Surviving friends and relations, & praying them to deal destruction among their enemies; especially if they thought their death had been occasion'd by the power of Witchcraft. (59)⁵⁴

It is ironic that Gilbert, who pretends to dislike slave culture, knows so much about it that she can describe the central "emic" value that insiders attach to it. Gilbert's representation of this culture provides rich insights into the African remnants in Antigua's slave culture. The "Shake Shake" is an African musical instrument that the slaves used as a symbolic means of protest against

⁵⁰ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 122-23.

⁵¹ David B. Gaspar, *Bondmen and Rebels: A Study of Master-Slave Relations in Antigua, with Implications for Colonial British America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 245.

Olive Senior, "Ancestral Poem," in *The Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse in English*, ed. Paula Burnett (New York: Penguin, 1986), 320.

Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 30.

⁵² Thwaites, "History of Methodism," 89.

⁵³ John S. Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 201-02.

⁵⁴ Anne Hart Gilbert, "History of Methodism," in *The Hart Sisters: Early African Caribbean Writers, Evangelicals, and Radicals*, ed. Moira Ferguson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 59.

the planter. This instrument served the same function that Tommie Lee Jackson ascribes to the drum that was taken and played “in defiance of the slavers who had reasoned that ‘He [the slave] serve us better if we bring him from Africa naked and thing-less.’”⁵⁵ The “Shake Shake” performs a similar subversive role by fueling the stamina of Antiguan slaves against their oppressors. There is strong evidence that the “Shake Shake” derived from West Africa.*

In addition, Gilbert’s description of the death rituals of Antiguan slaves reveals African elements, such as the participants’ singing and account of the departed person’s life, and their testimony of his/her good relationships with the community of the living and the deceased ancestors, parts of traditional funerals in Africa. In *Introduction to African Religion*, Mbiti describes these rites as “rituals of death” that are “intended to send off the departed peacefully, to sever his links with the living, and to ensure that normal life continues among the survivors. People, especially women, wail and weep, lamenting the departure of the dead person, recalling the good things he said and did, and reminding themselves that he lives on in the next world.”⁵⁶ These funerals are usually accompanied with feasts and songs of mourning that last a day or two after the burial.⁵⁷ Music and dance play an important part in funerals, because they allow the living to accompany the deceased to their new world. As Mbiti states, “By ritualizing death, people dance it away, drive it away, and renew their own life.”⁵⁸ These rituals of death continue through yearly anniversaries, tributes, and prayers for the deceased that are similar to the yearly celebration of the spirits of the departed among Antiguan slaves that Gilbert describes in her memoir as follows:

The Grave yards & burying places, both in Town & Country, would be crowded on Christmas mornings with the friends & relatives of deceased persons, strewing quarters of boiled and roasted, meat; or fowls & yams, & pouring bottles of Rum, upon the graves of their departed friend. The Obeah men and women of that day were very rich people; possessed of large sums of money; being kept in constant pay, by those that could afford it, to prevent their enemies from injuring their persons or properties, to procure, & keep the favor of their owners, to give their children good luck, and to make them prosperous in every thing.⁵⁹

All these rites, including the libation, which can be done with either water or liquor, exist across Africa where various spiritual leaders that perform services to the family of the deceased and their guests play the role of the Caribbean Obeah man. While they rarely demand money beforehand, most African spiritual leaders expect it. Like the Antiguan slaves, Africans use the services of their spiritual guides to protect their families and themselves. Mbiti traces this worldview to the culture of the Mende of Sierra Leone, in which God’s power and protective work are considered as being mediated through ancestors.⁶⁰

In a similar vein, one finds Mbiti’s work to be very important in the study of *The History of Mary Prince*. Prince’s recreation of family bonds in this narrative shares parallels with the ways in which characters in Bermudan and Antiguan folktales re-establish threatened kin groups. In some of these tales, female and male characters demonstrate true affections toward their children and each other during peculiar moments of hardship.

⁵⁵ Tommie Lee Jackson, *An Invincible Summer: Female Diasporan Authors* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2001), 40.

*The “Shake Shake” derived from two African instruments called the *yenca* and the *axatse/shekere*.

⁵⁶ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religions*, 121.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁵⁹ Gilbert, “History of Methodism,” 59.

⁶⁰ Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa*, 201.

In a variant of the Antiguan tale, "The Ordeal," which was collected by Elsie Clews Parsons between 1933 and 1943, a woman saves her children from death. Helen L. Flower summarizes the tale as follows: "Three children ate the grain of rice and the fish bone which their mother left. She went to the well to drown them, but pulled them out before they sank."⁶¹ This anecdote attests to the affection that Black Antiguanians had for their children for whom they had special filial bonds and motherly instincts, as noticeable in the manner in which Prince's parents rescued her from her abusive owners.

One example of this rescue is the Antiguan tale, "Under the Green Old Oak Tree," collected by John H. Johnson in 1920, which Flower also summarizes as follows: "A boy killed his sister to get her flower bucket. He buried her under an oak tree where a shepherd boy later picked up a flute made of bone. It played only one tune until the mother played it. She fainted. When the brother played it, it sang, 'It is you that killed me.' He fainted and died."⁶² This tale depicts the African belief in the resurrection of the spirit of dead persons whose ghosts return to do either good or evil. One example occurs when Prince describes the ramble in and around the home of her owners that occurred when she was being beaten by Mr. I——. Prince writes,

He beat me again and again, until he was quite wearied, and so hot (for the weather was very sultry), that he sank back in his chair, almost like a faint. While my mistress went to bring him drink, there was a dreadful earthquake. Part of the roof fell down, and every thing in the house went—clatter, clatter, clatter. Oh I thought the end of all things near at hand; and I was so sore with the flogging, that I scarcely cared whether I lived or died. The earth was groaning and shaking; every thing tumbling about; and my mistress and the slaves were shrieking and crying out, "The earthquake! The earthquake!" It was an awful day for all of us.⁶³

This passage illustrates the impact of African cosmology on Prince's interpretation of natural calamities from spiritual viewpoints. Her allusion to the "groaning," "shaking," and "tumbling" of things in her owner's home indicates her belief that such ramblings are driven by supernatural forces attempting to end the injustice of her owner. The intervention of spirits in the world of the living, for good or bad purposes, is not unfamiliar in African cosmology. Mbiti argues that within traditional African societies, "the spirits can do both good and evil to people, just as people do both good and evil to their fellow human beings."⁶⁴ The Caribbean equivalents of these ambivalent spirits are the *Rada* and *Petro* deities of Haitian vodun, who can do either good or bad depending on the situation at hand. The *Rada* are "a pantheon of *loa* [deities] who originated in Africa, named after the Dahomean town of Arada" while the *Petro* are "the pantheon of *loa* who originated in Haiti."⁶⁵

The "clatter" Prince describes can be interpreted as a divine intervention of *Rada* and *Petro* deities who combine supernatural forces to free her from slavery. This intervention of African and Diasporan spirits is evident in the shrieks and cries of the slaves, which appear as ritualistic incantations for the ominous interference of the "living-dead." As Mbiti argues, in African religions,

⁶¹Helen Leneva Flowers, *A Classification of the Folktales of the West Indies by Types and Motifs* (New York: Arno Press, 1980), 456.

⁶² John H. Johnson, "Under the Green Oak Tree," in "Folk-lore from Antigua, British West Indies," *Journal of American Folklore* 34, no. 131 (1921), 267.

⁶³ Mary Prince, "The History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave. Related by Herself. 1831," in *The Classic Slave Narratives*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: New American Library, 1987), 196.

⁶⁴ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 79.

⁶⁵ Carole Cleaver and Selden Rodman, *Spirits of the Night: The Vaudun Gods of Haiti* (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1992), 12-14.

the “living-dead” are conceived as “the departed who are still remembered personally by someone in their family and in whose names the family makes sacrifices and offerings as a symbol of fellowship, respect, and the recognition that ‘the departed are still members of their human families.’”⁶⁶ From this African worldview, the cries and shrieks of the Antiguan slaves can be interpreted as African and African Diasporan lamentations and prayers for the end of oppression, signifying the horrible nature of a trans-Atlantic slave trade that critics still need to explore in further detail.

The significance of Mbiti’s work in the study of Black Diasporan literature and folklore is easily ascertained in the numerous theories of African worldviews, religions, and cultures that he provides to any scholar who wishes to analyze the African survivals in African American and Caribbean literature and culture. As suggested in the above interpretation of the Africanisms in Hurston’s *Mules and Men* and *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, Thwaites’s “History of Methodism,” Gilbert’s “History of Methodism,” and Prince’s *The History of Mary Prince*, New World Black writings and traditions are permeated with African elements that can be better understood when examined in the light of the extant theoretical, ethnographic, anthropological, and historical scholarship emanating from both Africa and the Black Diaspora since the early twentieth century. This kind of scholarship expands the interdisciplinary methods through which New World Black literature and culture can be examined, helping students better understand the importance of African traditions in the narratives and ideologies of African-descended peoples.

⁶⁶ Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa*, 179.