

SOULS AND SPIRITS IN AFRICA AND THE NEW WORLD

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ABSTRACT: Comparative study on the concepts of souls and spirits in Africa and the New World. Through cultural comparisons, it documents relationship of the double soul complex in West Africa with similar components in the Americas. The African beliefs and rituals gradually syncretized through the European concepts of Christianity, have been conserved until the present in many parts of the Americas.

Students of Afroamerican cultures have found among Blacks in the New World a belief in two or more souls that dwell in the body of man, each with specific functions. This complex is closely connected with the belief in spirits of the dead, who may linger in the world and have finally to be sent away for good.

Although Spanish folk-beliefs center around spirits of the dead and the Afroamerican belief-systems are also influenced by European superstitions, due to their long exposure to Christian elements, there is no doubt about the fact that structurally and functionally the double-soul complex is of African — most likely Westafrican — origin, a fact that I shall try to prove in this paper. In some parts of the Americas, — notably the culture of the Black Caribs in Central America — shows some traits derived from Amerindian concepts: the alter ego and nagualism.

For the purpose of my investigation I have used mainly sources from the 19th and 20th century, as the study of this interesting complex is hampered by the fact that there are hardly any ethno-historic sources from the 16th, 17th and 18th century available. In those days historians were no trained ethnographers and hardly penetrated into such subtle matters. Even today it is not easy for an anthropologist to obtain a satisfactory answer to an inquiry concerning the "soul", as people do not know or do not think much about this subject. This is not only true for Westafricans or Afroamericans but also for Europeans, who lack a

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formal education and are not used to think in abstract terms. Some older sources mention only burial rites (Cavazzi, 1694:144-6, Dapper, 1670:518).

In order to find a point of departure let us turn to Westafrica. The following traits best describe the "double soul complex" in Westafrica, where the belief systems are fairly uniform in an area stretching from Ghana to Nigeria (Ellis, 1894: 125 ff., Luchas, 1942:246 ff., Idowu, 1962:169 for the Yoruba of Nigeria - Ellis, 1887:149 ff., 237 ff. for the Tshi of the Goldcoast — Ellis, 1890: 101 for the Ewe of Togo — Field, 1937:92-99, 202 for the Ga of Ghana — Rattray, 1923:46 for the Ashanti of Ghana — Herskovits, 1938 II: 358 and 1933:50 for the Fon of Dahomey/Benin — Talbot, 1923:119 ff. for the Ibibio of Southern Nigeria — Bradbury, 1964:57 ff. for the Bini of Benin/Nigeria):

- 1/ The belief in two or more souls seems to be universal and forms part of the basic Westafrican belief system,
- 2/ One of the souls represents the vital force of the human being and comes from the Supreme Being, who resides in heaven. He is the creator of the universe, but delegated his powers to the divinities, who are invoked by men to assist them to solve their daily problems.
- 3/ After death the vital force disappears or enters the Land of the Dead or returns to the Supreme Being. It may be reborn in the body of a member of the same Family,
- 4/ The other soul is the shadow - soul, a spiritual entity that dwells in the body but may also roam outside of it,
- 5/ The shadow-soul roams around when the person is asleep. An evil-doer may steal it. In that case the owner falls ill or dies. The soul may be recaptured by a magic curer,
- 6/ Sometimes the shadow-soul is considered to be a guardian spirit,
- 7/ After death the shadow-soul becomes a spirit, that roams around the world until the completion of the burial rites, it is then sent off to the Land of the Spirits or disappears,
- 8/ The shadow-soul may reincarnate in a new-born child of the same family, that usually shows similar body features as the deceased,
- 9/ The proper burial rites assure the deceased his proper place among the ancestors and at the same time prevent the spirit to remain in the world and disturb the living relatives,
- 10/ Wakes are usually held 4, 7, 9 and/or 40 days after the funeral and end with a special ritual, that marks the end of the mourning period. The personal belongings of the deceased may be burned on this occasion,

- 11/ Wizards and sorcerers may enter a covenant with roaming spirits or capture them so that they may work evil for them,
- 12/ An ancestor cult is common everywhere, sacrifices and libations are made in front of the ancestral shrines almost daily and public ceremonies are celebrated at least once a year,
- 13/ The shadow-soul is often related to the day of the week on which the person was born and as the person is named according to the day of his birth during the week there is a ritual and mystical connection between the name of the person and his soul. Hence there is often a reluctance to reveal one's name.

In order to illustrate the matter further, let me take up an example: Ellis (1894:125 ff.) states that the Yoruba believe in four souls, three of which are personal guardians. Olori the "head" soul is located in the head of a person, guiding his actions. This soul has to be fed regularly by placing sacrifices on one's own forehead. Ipin and Ipori are two guardians that are not further described. Okan is the shadow-soul, called also "ghostman" by Ellis. After the death of a person it turns into a spirit. It roams around until the burial rites are performed. It then enters the Land of the Dead. The spirit often dwells near the former home of the deceased and appears to his relatives in dreams and visions, telling them about hidden treasures or adverting them of imminent danger. Spirits may also scare lonely travelers on crossroads during the night. The shadow soul may leave the body while the person is asleep.

The description of different authors concerning the belief system of a certain ethnic group are not always identical. Some authors confound guardian deities with guardian spirits. For our investigation, however, these differences are only of minor importance.

When we now turn to European folk-beliefs concerning the soul, we have first to give the orthodox Christian definition according to scholastic theology of the soul as the vital form of the body or principle of life, that is individual, immortal and reasonable, deriving from God and returning Him after death. Only human beings are endowed with souls and therefore animistic concepts are rejected. It is interesting to note that this view was only made a dogma during the Middle Ages. Medieval speculations centered for a long time around body, soul and spirit. Thomas of Aquin distinguished between the soul as the life-giving principle of the body and the vegetative and sensitive powers of the soul, although for him these qualities were inseparable.

In the Old Ages, Greek thinkers made a clear distinction between psyche and pneuma, soul and spirit. Later pneum was considered to be the material vital

principal while psyche or the mental principal turned into the concept of an immaterial spiritual Christian soul (MacDougall, 1910).

This proves that the double-soul complex was apparent in a certain way even in the Old ages in the Mediterranean area. Although I did not have time to investigate the matter any further, I suggest that this complex might have been introduced to Westafrica from Egypt through Meroe and the Sudan in the same manner as other cultural traits originated in the Mediterranean basin reached Westafrica.

When investigating the folk-Catholicism in Spain we realize that the double-soul complex is lacking completely. People believe, however, that the soul of a deceased person may roam around in the world before it finds peace. Some "poor souls from Purgatory" have to linger around until they have made penance for their sins. People call these "souls" "spirits" and are afraid to be harmed by them. The spirits of criminals may return to the site of their crime, spirits of relatives may appear in dreams or to lonely travelers on crossroads at night. Spirits may go into the world at midnight, but have to return to the Land of the Deceased (Purgatory, Heaven) before dawn. Spirits who carry lights come from the Purgatory, those who travel without lights come from Hell and are evil. People believe that Catholic priests may conjure or exorcise spirits and thus help them to find peace. Masses are said for the "almas en pena" and sometimes food offerings are placed in the grave-yards (Machado, 1886:234 ff.).

In Southern Europe it may be common to pray not for but to a soul in Purgatory and when the prayer is answered ex-votos are placed on the grave. Thus eventually a soul/spirit may become a folk/saint. Until the 13th century many of our real saints may have originated in this way, as at that time "vox populi" was considered to be "vox Dei" and miracles were taken for granted.

In Spain people believe that a person may lose his soul which may be captured by a sorcerer (Hoyos Sainz, 1947:198, 366/7, 358). Other authors describe similar beliefs among Spanish peasants (Rodriguez Lopez, 1895:129 ff., Coluccio, 1966:38 ff.). Let us now turn to the belief systems of the New World Blacks, that by now can be clearly identified as being mainly a relic of African heritage, preserved over the centuries. The documentation is based on recent sources, as ethnohistorical reports on this subject are lacking.

According to my own studies among Venezuelan Blacks, the following points came to light:

- 1/ The belief in two indwelling souls can be found occasionally although the younger generation has mostly forgotten the details,

- 2/ One soul is equivalent to the vital energy of man. It comes from God and after death either disappears or returns to Him. It is located in the head or in the heart or in the brain and guides the human action. The person is healthy when the soul is strong. Weak souls may cause illnesses,
- 3/ The other soul is considered to be either a shadow or etheric being or something like a guardian spirit. Some think that it is a duplication of our own identity and may live either inside or occasionally outside of the human body,
- 4/ When the person is asleep the shadow-soul may roam around. Its adventures are reflected in our dreams,
- 5/ The shadow-soul may be captured by a sorcerer and then is used to do evil. In the meantime the person falls ill or dies. The soul may be recaptured and restore to the body by a curer.
- 6/ After death the shadow-soul leaves the body but remains near the corpse and the mourners until the completion of the burial rites and wakes. They always leave a cup of water next to the corpse or on the altar where they recite the "novenaria", so that the soul may quench its thirst. After completion of the wakes it goes to the Land of the Dead, a vague concept that may describe Heaven, Hell and Purgatory. On the 9th night after the funeral the final prayers are said and the personal belongings of the deceased are burned, the spirit is asked to leave for good,
- 7/ Spirits appear in dreams and visions to their relatives,
- 8/ Spirits of those who never received a proper burial turn into "duendes", who haunt houses or scare travelers on crossroads at night. They may also be caught by sorcerers to do evil,
- 9/ Some believe that spirits live in silk-cotton trees (ceibas), in Westafrica these trees are also considered to be the abode of spirits.
- 10/ Some people believe that the shadow-soul may reincarnate in a newborn child of the same family,
- 11/ a few also mentioned a vague mystical relationship between the shadow-soul and the name of the person, but they were not aware of an actual connection,
- 12/ Some people pray to the souls of persons who recently died and ask miracles. Their ex-votos are placed on the grave and eventually the "anima" turns into a folk-saint.
- 13/ These "muertos milagrosos" or "animas milagrosas" may also be summoned in spiritistic sessions, they possess mediums in trance and give advice to the faithful, some of them may only have local importance, others have devotees in the whole country,

14/ People do not really accept the Christian view of a retribution of good and bad deeds in the after-life, a concept that is foreign to most Westafricans too. Sins are rather punished here and now, a view that is clearly reflected in the belief system of Afrovenezuelans too.

15/ Ancestors are often asked to help, people talk to their deceased relatives on the grave-yard and pay for their help with flowers and candles.

Similar beliefs concerning the "soul" or "souls" are found in most parts of Afroamerica. Only a few facts may be mentioned here: The Maroons of Surinam make a distinction between different types of shadow-souls, according to the day on which the person was born. The child is named according to the day of birth.

Wakes are common. Annual memorial services are held for the deceased and the spirits are conjured in order to assist the living. The head-soul or guardian spirit is fed with sacrifices that are placed on the forehead (Hurralt, 1961: 216, 219, 159 ff., 173, Herskovits, 1936: 1 ff., Herskovits, 1964: 268 ff.).

In Jamaica the same tradition concerning a mystical connection between the name of a person and his soul is found (Ramos, 1947:112).

The double-soul complex is also documented for Columbia (Atlantic coast) (Escalante, 1954: 279, 281 - Velasquez, 1961: 63 ff., - Jaramillo, 1961: 159 - 170).

In Haiti people distinguish between the Gros Bon Ange and the Petit Bon Ange, as the two souls of man. They believe that the shadow-soul lingers around the house after death until the completion of the final burial rites. After a bath of oblivion in the "abysmal waters", the soul may enter the body of a newborn baby of the same family (Métraux, 1963: 131 ff., Deren 1953: 18, 26, 44, Courlander, 1960:30 ff., Simpson, 1966:17, Ramos, 1947:104, Herskovits, 1937:205 ff.).

The belief system of Brazilian Black was greatly influenced by Yoruba concepts. Like in Cuba (Diaz Fabelo, 1960:10 ff.) "ori" is the soul that dwells in the head. It has to be fed in the same manner as mentioned in Surinam and Westafrica. Spiritistic influence (a la Kardec) is noticeable in the Umbanda rituals, but while the Kardecists summon spirits for the purpose to converse with them and help them to improve, Umbandistas call them to help them to solve their problems. (Bastide, 1958:119 ff., João do Rio, 1951:14, Frickel, 1940/41:197, 200-1, Da Costa Eduardo, 1948:108 ff.).

In Trinidad the Blacks distinguish between soul and shadow, the later turning into a "jumbi" or spirit after death. Sorcerers may catch a jumbi that has then to work for him. When the soul or the shadow is caught by a magician, the person falls ill or dies. Jumbies are often roaming around during the night and

people close their windows carefully, so that they may not enter and do evil (Herskovits, 1947:227 ff., Simpson, 1965:24, 25, 120).

When we turn to Mexico and Central America, we find a tropic soul complex, that clearly shows Amerindian influence on Westafrican beliefs. The Blacks of Cuijla (Mexico) and the Garifunas (Black Caribs of Honduras) believe in a vital force and a shadow soul/protector, but they also know about another soul, that is considered to be the nagual or alter-ego, a concept that is definitively of native American origin, which we find among many different ethnic groups from Columbia to Northamerica.

Representations of alter-ego figures on the sculptures of St. Augustine (Columbia) prove that this concept is very old (Taylor, 1951:102, Aguirre Beltran, 1951:170 ff., 184).

To sum up: The following traits are found among New World Blacks may be of Spanish-Christian influence:

- 1/ The soul that disappears with the body and/or returns to God after death may be identified up to a certain extent with the concept of soul according to Christian teachings,
- 2/ Folk-Catholic superstitions turn this soul into a spirit, that may roam around the world or appear to the living, these spirits may turn into folk-saints or in spirits that are summoned in the spiritistic cults popular now all over the Caribbean and Southamerica,
- 3/ Sorcerers and Christian priests are said to be able to exorcise these spirits,
- 4/ The poor souls of Purgatory are equated with roaming spirits, that appear to the living asking for masses or prayers. These elements are present in both Westafrican and Folk-Catholic (European) belief systems,
- 5/ The celebration of wakes in the presence of the corpse and after the funeral is common both in Westafrica and in Southern Europe, but in Afroamerica the final rites are more "African" in nature and in concept. The same may be said of the annual memorial rites for the deceased (placing food on the graves),
- 6/ Blood sacrifices are never made for the ancestors.

Thus we can say that the majority of elements associated with the double-soul complex can be identified as being of Westafrican derivation.

It seems to me that not only the double-soul concept by itself but the whole attitude towards the dead and the spirits is very "African" and this attitude is also present when the ritual or the specific trait may look quite "Christian" to a superficial observer.

We can say for sure that the following elements are of Westafrican origin:

- 1/ Belief in two souls
- 2/ One soul is the vital force that perishes with the body or returns to the Supreme Being or goes to the Land of the Dead
- 3/ the shadow-soul remains on earth until the completion of the mourning rites, it turns into a spirit
- 4/ the shadow-soul may eventually reincarnate in a newborn child of the same family
- 5/ the spirit or disembodied shadow soul may appear to relatives in visions and dreams, haunt or linger around crossroads. It may be captured by sorcerers
- 6/ The shadow-soul and/or the other soul may wander while the person is asleep
- 7/ Spirits are summoned for practical purposes and a deal is made with them to assist the living
- 8/ Spirits can be controlled by magical means
- 9/ The soul that is protecting the person may live in his head and sacrifices are made to it, which are placed on the forehead
- 10/ There are strong and weak souls, their type being connected to the day of the week on which the person is born and to the name he carries. There is a mystical connection between the personal name and the soul
- 11/ The destiny of the soul after death is not related to the good or bad deeds of the deceased, for sins are retributed here and now and not in the after-life. The concepts of heaven, hell and purgatory are of Christian origin
- 12/ Although there is no proper ancestral cult in the Americas, with the exception of Surinam, the spirits of the dead are occasionally fed with offerings (libations, food, blood sacrifices).

Cultural comparisons document the relationship of the double-soul complex in Westafrica with similar concepts in the Americas. African beliefs and rituals gradually syncretized with European Christian concepts, that were conserved until the present in many parts of the Americas.

RESUMO: Estudo comparativo sobre os conceitos de alma e espíritos em África e no Novo Mundo. Esta análise de comparações culturais revela a relação existente entre o complexo de dupla alma da África Ocidental e a presença de componentes similares nas Américas. Conservaram-se em países americanos as crenças e os rituais africanos, gradualmente sincretizados através dos conceitos do cristianismo europeu.

UNITERMOS: Almas, Espíritos, Comparações culturais, Crenças africanas, Cultura afro-americana.

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