

Axis of Belonging: The Quest of Sobonfu Somé's African American Students

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In response to a perceived spiritual malaise in “the West,” Sobonfu Somé, a Burkinabé émigré, functioned as a teacher of Dagara spirituality in the United States and emerged as a contemporary ritual leader until her recent death. Analyzing in-depth interviews with selected African American followers, I map Somé along a continuum of Africa-centered religious interest for African Americans. Central to this exploration is African Americans’ quest for “authentic” religiosity from West Africa. Through an ethnographic examination of black American engagement with Somé’s Dagara ritual life in the United States, it becomes clear that Somé’s unique contribution as an arbiter of a distinct, Burkinabé-centered worldsense is critical to her African American devotees specifically. Unlike her majority white American following who often learned from an assortment of ethnically-coded new religious movements, the subset of African Americans who found Somé’s teachings useful did so within a broader canopy of interreligious Africana cultures and, relatedly, African American religious nationalism. Interreligious knowledge production, dissemination, and re-interpretation emerge as significant tenets of African Americans’ practice of Dagara ritual.

Keywords: Sobonfu Somé, Africa, African religions, African diaspora religions, Africana spirituality, African American, Dagara, ritual

Dagara Iterations of an African Sacred Heritage

In the December 2005 edition of *Essence*, a popular African American women’s magazine, Burkinabé spiritual teacher Sobonfu Elisabeth Somé sat with then-editor Susan Taylor, and they both beamed brightly at the camera.¹ The photo evinced friendship and familiarity. Readers bore witness to a moment of their time together in a portion of a transcribed interview. Taylor began:

Endings and new beginnings. In the tradition of your Dagara tribe and throughout our West African homeland, does this time of year have special significance in the life of the community?

Somé responded:

It is a time of renewal, a time to check your whole life and ask, What are the things burdening me and how can I release them? There are ancient rituals to help, like one called “the clearing of the village,” where a mask is carried around by elders and if you have been holding onto something, you speak it and let it go. And we make an offering of black-eyed peas, placing them in the four corners of the house. This is symbolic of good luck and the releasing of unconscious negative energy.

Taylor affirmed Somé’s ritual:

¹ Susan Taylor, “Ritual and Renewal with Sobonfu Somé,” *Essence*, December 2005, 144–145.

Over the seas and centuries, we’ve held on to some traditions of our Motherland, like cooking black-eyed peas for good luck on New Year’s Day, and surely to our love of life, laughter, celebrating and praying together—being in community.

And so the conversation began—the black-eyed pea parallel establishing a common Burkinabé and black American victual through which Somé could share vignettes from her life and philosophy with Taylor and, in so doing, *Essence’s* broad African American readership.

This moment is an emblematic way to theorize Sobonfu Somé’s public face, particularly in front of African American devotees. Together, Sobonfu Somé and her ex-husband Malidoma—both Burkinabé émigrés—professed that they had come to cure “the West” of its ailing self-concept by immunizing it with injections of indigeneity via rituals, trainings, and initiations. Effectively, both Somés embarked upon an indigenous reconnaissance mission for any student who cared to learn. Though this conjecture is shared by many an “indigenous” teacher from the “East,” an imagined region in which Africa is often not included, Malidoma Somé bolsters this positionality as a decorated “Western” scholar who is also Dagara. While, as rhetorician Jane Iwamura argues, “The Oriental Monk” trope persists today through the Dalai Lama and Deepak Chopra,² Malidoma and Sobonfu attempted to introduce North America to a different trope of “exotic” spiritual authority: a Burkinabé couple. After their divorce around 2002, Sobonfu Somé launched an independent career, which flourished until her untimely death in January 2017.

Somé’s unique contribution as a migrant functioning as an arbiter of a distinct, Burkinabé-centered worldsense³ was critical to her African American students. They looked to her teachings for this “new” religious knowledge, here named spiritual technologies, to borrow Gerrie Ter Haar’s term,⁴ to add to a compendium of extra-Christian sensibilities and practices.⁵ Typically malleable

² Jane Naomi Iwamura, “The Oriental Monk in American Popular Culture,” in *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, ed. Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). In a more recent article, “The Hindu in Hoodoo: Fake Yogis, Pseudo-Swamis, and the Manufacture of African American Folk Magic,” religious historian Phillip DeSlippe compellingly argues that the twentieth century found many Americans of African descent relying on South Asian tropes in order to manufacture Hoodoo-inspired products and, importantly, subject positions. While this history of nomenclatural slippage relies on fundamentally racist, discursive mismatching, it also points to a longstanding American history of the ethnicized, exoticized “Other” making spiritual headway based on popular tropes of racialized spiritual authority (*Amerasia Journal* 40, no. 1 (2014): 34–56).

³ See Oyěwùmí Oyèrónkẹ́, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 3.

⁴ I borrow religionist Gerrie Ter Haar’s definition of “spiritual technologies.” She locates “spiritual technologies” within “communication with the invisible world that people believe to exist ... based on systematic thought and experimentation. ‘Spiritual technology,’ as we may call the elaboration of such methods, aims at awakening and mobilizing human faculties in reference to a spiritual world that is considered to be a source of real and effective power. Believers may use spiritual technology in an attempt to improve their material life.” See Gerrie Ter Haar, *How God Became African: African Spirituality and Western Secular Thought* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 6–7. Relatedly, Dianne M. Stewart Diakité and Tracey Hucks label similar phenomena as “Africana mystical technology and theurgical epistemologies,” an understudied locale of Africana sacred traditions. This description is an equally appropriate way to understand Somé’s students’ practice. See Dianne Stewart Diakité and Tracey E. Hucks, “Africana Religious Studies: Toward a Transdisciplinary Agenda in an Emerging Field,” *Journal of Africana Religions* 1, no. 1 (2013): 43.

⁵ I agree with religious historian Yvonne Chireau, who suggests that “a rigid dichotomy between Christian and non-Christian expressions in black folk traditions belies practitioners’ own experiences.” The term “extra-Christian” does not affirm this binary; rather, it acknowledges that from the vantage point of my interviewees, Somé’s practices were

and efficacious, spiritual technologies take on a variety of forms for Somé's African American students. This exploration examines what these students do with these creations and how that practice may be understood within a longer inheritance of multicultural encounter and ever-migrating, dynamic African Atlantic religions. Regardless of how they imbibe these technologies, however, recovering an African past as a focal point of knowledge figures prominently into how Somé's African American students interpret her project. Unsurprisingly, race and ethnicity mediate these pupils' consumption of Somé's teachings. I assert that unlike her majority white American following, who often learned from an assortment of ethnically-coded new religious movements, the subset of African Americans who find Somé's teachings useful do so within a broader canopy of interreligious Africana cultures and, relatedly, African American religious nationalism. Interreligious knowledge production, dissemination, and re-interpretation emerge as significant tenets of African Americans' practice of Dagara ritual. This article's primary concern is how African Americans integrate Somé within a longstanding project of African recovery.

African American Religious Nationalism and Somé

African Americans endow Somé's teaching with great significance because she embodies Africa's function as a religious symbol.⁶ This interpretation of Somé, however, is not immediately legible because she did not set forth an explicitly racial or ethnically targeted message in her written work. In her books, the category of "Westerner" is not race-based; Somé does not distinguish between how black and non-black Western students might understand her teachings. From Somé's perspective, to be a Westerner is to be unconcerned with practicing "indigenous" ways of being. Westerners, for Somé, can be Burkinabé or American people who make no time in their lives to conduct rituals. Regardless of ethnicity or nationality, all Westerners share in the same affliction. Her message uses a regional identifier, "Westerner," as shorthand for an overall epistemological orientation. It makes sense that persons from multiple racial and ethnic backgrounds find her books appealing and accessible; there, she affirms everyone's indigeneity. In order to heal, she posits, seekers must reconnect to their "old" ways of being; students must return to their ancestors' land and wisdom.⁷ Somé's Dagara recorded traditions, then, become a portal for every student's sense of indigenous belonging ("My grandfather was Cherokee, therefore I should practice Cherokee ways"; "My parents' families emigrated from Nigeria; I should visit sometime"; "They called my grandmother a witch in old Sicily; Wiccan practice returns me to her worldview"). Importantly, whether these "indigeneities" are archivally grounded, ensconced in familial narrative, or

placed in synchronistic or oppositional dialogue with Christianity. See Yvonne Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 4.

⁶ With the kernels of his 1971 assertion that "the distinctive nature of black religion" needed to be examined on its own terms and his pointing to a) Africa as historical reality and religious image; b) the involuntary presence of the black community in America; and c) the experience and symbol of God, historian of religion Charles Long set forth a pivotal collection of arguments in *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1986). *Significations* describes Africa "as symbol, historical reality, and religious image." For Long, Africa functioned primarily as an orientation or, more precisely, "an 'orientational meditation' upon itself as it navigates this New World locus and its subsequent 'terror of time'" (Charles H. Long, "Perspectives for a Study of Afro-American Religion in the United States," *History of Religions* 11, no. 1 [1971]: 55.) See Stewart Diakité and Hucks, "Africana Religious Studies," 45, and Tracey E. Hucks, *Yoruba Traditions and African American Religious Nationalism* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012), 49.

⁷ In my observation, this is a primary distinction between Sobonfu and Malidoma Somé's teachings: whereas Malidoma Somé takes more students back to Burkina Faso yearly to explore indigeneity from a Dagara perspective, Sobonfu Somé affirmed everyone's capacity to access some indigeneity from their biological ancestry.

productions of a DNA test, Somé encourages people to delve into their sense of past in order to rightly understand the present. Accompanying this discovery process is an unspoken understanding of a baseline, uniform standard; Dagara ritual can become an opening because all indigenous traditions, for Somé and her students, hold similar truths.

In addition to appealing across traditions, Somé’s indigenous reconnaissance mission complements a series of African American cultural recovery and restoration projects, from the Herskovits and Frazier conundrum to African American religious nationalism, a spirituo-cultural movement that privileges African descent as the critical cornerstone of black sacred identities.⁸ When Somé appeared in Afrocentric⁹ African American spaces—whether in text or flesh—people celebrated her as a purveyor of indigenous *Africa*. In person, she returned this honorific descriptor by affirming African American students’ senses of their African identity, consistent with an African American religious nationalist sensibility. Her vocal investment in this ongoing cultural project granted her favored access into Afrocentric African American spaces. For example, at a 2014 grief ritual conducted at First Afrikan Presbyterian Church, an Afrocentric congregation in Georgia, she offhandedly encouraged the all-black grieving participants to surrender to the ritual process because “*you all know* how to do this!”¹⁰ Even if everyone is indigenous, Somé’s assertion that African Americans “know” how to conduct ritual suggests that persons of African descent could intuitively apprehend and apply her teachings in a way that an all-white audience could not.

⁸ According to religious historian Tracey Hucks, the designation “African American religious nationalism” has seven characteristics: 1. Black religious nationalism subverts the association of blackness with deified evil and makes a deliberate attempt to theologically realign blackness with divine essence; 2. A primary motivation is the need to *deslave* or deobjectify (thus rehumanize) the *historical corporality* of black Atlantic people in the aftermath of traumatic enslavement, with the goal of redesignating as sacrosanct the spiritual body and essence of postslavery African people; 3. Race becomes a central hermeneutical prism for conceptualizing sacred community and determining religious membership. In this collective community, individual differences are transcended, and direct continuities and links to ancient black communities are envisaged; 4. Religious practices reflect strict moral and ethical codes of behavior and religious expression is often patterned on ancient or traditional interpretations of culture; 5. New modes of creation and primordialism are mythologized and often textualized. History is also used as a “system of narration” in the quest “not only for identification and inspiration” but also for collective “legitimacy”; 6. Iconic renderings of the sacred and the divine are racially recast and rearticulated as affirming of black physicality while subverting the supremacy of an Anglo *imago dei*. New theologies are espoused that emphasize the inherent divinity or primordial universality of blackness; 7. Africa is often revalued and historically honored as a sacred source of ancient philosophies and traditions. The image of Africa and African humanity are deprimativized and rescued from pejorative European typologies. See Hucks, *Yoruba Traditions*, 44–45.

⁹ According to Molefi Asante, pioneering purveyor of Afrocentrist intellectual philosophy, “Afrocentricity [proposes] an adjustment to black disorientation, decenteredness, and lack of agency. The Afrocentrist asks the question, ‘What would African people do if there were no white people?’ In other words, what natural responses would occur in the relationships, attitudes toward the environment, kinship patters, preference for colors, type of religion and historical referent points if there had not been any intervention of colonialism or enslavement?” While this perspective was the animating impulse of Black Studies departments in the 1960s, its critics have cited its U.S. base, androcentrism, and heterosexism as significant shortcomings. Afrocentricity and African American religious nationalism are twin social movements, sharing similar animating impulses and demographic representations. Throughout this article, I use “Afrocentric(ity)” to signal communities that privilege separatist black social formations and gatherings as a source of collective black empowerment. See Molefi Asante, *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change* (Buffalo, NY: Amulefi Publications, Inc., 1980) and Molefi Asante, “Afrocentricity,” April 13, 2009, <http://www.asante.net/articles/1/afrocentricity>.

¹⁰ Sobonfu Somé, “Grief as an Act of Justice: Ritual and Sacred Conversation,” First Afrikan Presbyterian Church, Lithonia, Georgia, September 26, 2014.

Somé's knowledge of Dagara ritual made her an expert among African American followers. Also in 2014, I witnessed Somé sit on a panel at an African American seminary and function as the keynote speaker for a predominantly black-attended academic conference at Harvard University themed around African and diasporic religious cultures. Somé's function as a teacher of African spirituality defied the convention that differentiates a spiritual leader from a scholar; Somé's African American students affirmed her Dagara knowledge as always relevant in the predominantly black places to which she was invited. Somé positioned herself along this continuum, affirming the work African Americans have done to create, identify, map, and display an African heritage and ongoing Afrocentric identity. Somé also spoke publicly regarding unjust racial systems in the United States; as an immigrant who had lived in the United States for over twenty years, she had been exposed to the day-to-day experience of black life in white America. In her rituals, she anecdotally told the story of a racist neighbor and a racially-motivated, corrupt political system.¹¹

If for African Americans Somé functioned as a guide within a religious nationalist continuum, it makes sense to attempt to understand her African American students as creating something specifically African American using her Dagara teachings. Somé's African American students understood her Dagara particularity as expanding and enhancing their encyclopedia of Afrocentric practice and, thus, their spiritual technologies.

Two key features are significant to African American Dagara practice specifically within Sobonfu Somé's ritual/spiritual community: 1) acquiring novel information—apprehended as cosmologies, stories, and “skills”—and redistributing that information through scholastic modalities such as books and lectures;¹² and 2) modifying Dagara rituals as taught by Somé and, thus, serving their own culturally specific needs. In other words, they were deeply interested in both understanding the theoretical and cosmological underpinnings of practice (perhaps because a Dagara sensibility is, effectively, functioning as a proxy) *and* having continued access to a how-to guide. African American Dagara ritual practitioners¹³ enact both elements of what religious

¹¹ Within groups of African Americans, Somé does not significantly distinguish between her identity as someone born in Burkina Faso and African Americans born in the United States. As I established above, however, Somé's birthplace is significant for her black students. Therefore, her discursive choice to not privilege her Burkinabé identity in black American spaces may be rhetorically astute. For example, in the *Essence* interview, Somé assumed the relevance of her topic—“sharing knowledge from the Motherland”—and proceeded to talk candidly about the benefits and setbacks of her divorce with Malidoma Somé. This particular “kindred” subject-position runs counter to longstanding popular narratives about how recent West African immigrants distance themselves from African American identities. Gesturing toward the irreconcilable “problem” of intraracial cultural difference, filmmaker Kobina Aidoo troubles how/if the category of “African American” is expansive enough for contemporary relationality with Americans at all. Somé worked to bridge this chasm. See Taylor, “Ritual and Renewal,” *The Neo African Americans*, directed by Kobina Aidoo (Create Space, 2009.)

¹² This preference resonates with a larger African American religious nationalist sensibility insofar as reading communities were as much a part of early religious nationalist communities as conversion. In *Yoruba Traditions and African American Religious Nationalism*, Hucks argues, “Textuality, particularly for the African American Yoruba, served as a critical agent for disseminating and localizing a new religious consciousness. Texts united African American readers not only within the context of a modern national populace but also within a reputed historical lineage of ancient nationhood.... Textual production and the ‘politics of writing’ were closely tied to the larger 1960s black-nationalist philosophies, which advocated authoring and reclaiming one's history” (124).

¹³ Here, I name Sobonfu Somé's students “ritual practitioners” and not “religious practitioners” because, although I am locating them within a particular religious orientation, most of Somé's African American students publicly

historian Tracey Hucks calls “religious coexistence,” which includes “daily ritual practice” and “ritual texts for collective edification.”¹⁴ The combination of theory with practice is a long part of the Afrocentric and, by extension, African American religious nationalist sensibility. Working at the intersection of ritual practice and instructive, devotional texts, Somé’s pedagogy is consonant with this tradition. Many of my interviews with African Americans suggest that books have a primacy in their ritual enactment; Somé’s books function as sacred texts, resource guides, and instruction manuals for prosaic ritual.

Parsing “Information”: African American Reproductions of Dagara Knowledge

For African American students of Sobonfu Somé, information about how rural Dagara persons live—both historically and in the present—functions as a lifestyle aspiration and, ultimately, a healing balm. For two elderly students, Edie Jackson and Imani Phillips, this “information” has been so compelling that they primarily identify as “Dagara” in the way that a modern-day Methodist would claim the United Methodist Church as an axis of belonging. Jackson and Phillips understand information as the propelling catalyst toward a Dagara way of life and wholeness. Implicit in this claim is the belief that information must be consumed sincerely and cyclically redistributed to other African Americans.

Edie Jackson, an African American student of Malidoma Somé living on the outskirts of Boston, articulated a desire to work with Sobonfu Somé to obtain more “information.” In fact, I met Jackson at the 2016 gathering of the African and Diasporic Religious Studies Association (ADRSA), spearheaded by Òrìsà priestess and historian of religion Funlayo E. Wood-Menzies.¹⁵ Ever voracious in her quest for more “information,” Jackson attended the day-long academic symposium as a practitioner seeking more knowledge about herself as an African-descended woman.

In a later interview, I would learn that Jackson had already worked quite intensively with Malidoma Somé and his East Coast Village community in upstate New York. Briefly, she shared that Malidoma Somé’s deceased grandfather facilitated their encounter. At the time, she was living in a homeless shelter. The shelter mandated that Jackson, along with other residents, leave the property every day at 5:30 a.m. Wandering around Boston during the day, she would often land at a local public library. One day, she reported hearing a voice that said, “I want you to meet my brother.”¹⁶ Later intuiting that voice as Malidoma Somé’s grandfather, who often referred to Somé as “brother,”¹⁷ Jackson opened a nearby book, looked inside, and saw a picture of Malidoma Somé. Three years later, she would meet him in person at a community lecture. Through these brief encounters—one in a book and the other in person—Jackson became involved in the East Coast

identified within another religious culture (e.g. Christianity, Ifa-Orisa, etc.) or, as I discuss later, held a few different religious leanings of which “Dagara” was one part.

¹⁴ Tracey E. Hucks, “‘Burning with a Flame in America’: African American Women in African-Derived Traditions,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 17, no. 2 (2001): 90.

¹⁵ Special thanks to Matt Alpert, student and independent researcher of Malidoma Somé and Dagara philosophy, who facilitated my meeting with Jackson.

¹⁶ Interview with Edie Jackson, April 2016. All of my informants are identified by pseudonyms.

¹⁷ Malidoma Somé, *Ritual: Power, Healing, and Community* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 47–48. Somé’s grandfather understood Somé to be his deceased brother, reincarnated, and thus referenced him as “brother,” especially concerning important matters.

Village community. Working with Malidoma Somé for over ten years, Jackson steeped herself in the search for greater self-knowledge. ADRSA, then, was only the latest stop in her ongoing search for a greater African-centered cognizance.

During the early part of her journey, Jackson had listened to Sobonfu Somé's audiobook *Women's Wisdom from the Heart of Africa*. She became convinced that Sobonfu could help her in a way that Malidoma did not. Learning from Sobonfu Somé via audiobook, Jackson became aware of a lacuna that she believed only Sobonfu Somé could fill. This conviction was decisively gendered and centered around a presupposition that only an African *woman* teacher could be fully helpful to her:

When I did my training with him, I found out that they weren't together! Oh, I was hot! The first [book] I got was *Welcoming Spirit Home* and then *Falling Out of Grace*. I read her books after I read his. But that was ten years ago. The way they, [white people who are members of the East Coast Village community], do things? They have no respect for the feminine as a whole....

[Thinking about] my own spiritual growth, I have been dealing with the Western side of African spirituality. I miss Sobonfu's presence! ... I started off thinking about them as a couple. Her magic and his magic were going to be that place where I was launched! Not that I feel that I was stuck with him. [It's just] he has nothing close to a feminine side: nurturance. No bedside manners; none of that. If she was working with him, I would be in a different place. There's no feminine. Like, the feminine divine was removed from my training. Now, sistergirl did what sistergirl did; I got some motherfucking skills. I got what I got from him [and]...the [African American] women that I went through the training with.

See, his [deceased] grandfather ain't no joke. [His community] wouldn't have set their relationship up if their work wasn't complementary.

If timing and my money didn't allow me to get to her...she would read me three miles out.... Just fifteen minutes [with her], it would make a world of difference.... I am all good with Malidoma, but I miss Sobonfu in my spiritual growth.¹⁸

Jackson's anecdote elucidates a more persistent concern for African American persons: not only "information," but a subset of "information" called "skills." Somé's popularity within some African American circles has to do with a longer cultural preoccupation with enactable knowledge "from Africa." Jackson desired additional technologies that could assist her to better interact with a spirit world. As Jackson indicated, she believes that African- and woman-centered spiritual capacities working in tandem are a potent combination.

While Jackson has gone through a standard initiation at East Coast Village (ECV), Malidoma Somé's primary intentional Dagara-practicing ritual community in Cherry Plain, New York, she attributes her "skills" to a subset of the ECV community: African American women. Jackson, who has been a spirited Somé apprentice for over ten years, insinuated that she wanted

¹⁸ Interview with Edie Jackson, April 2016.

her training with both Malidoma and Sobonfu Somé because she believed that there was something inherently harmonious about their work that delivered more advantageous spiritual potency than either teacher working independently. It is almost as if Jackson wanted to be “re-conceived” by the Somés together, spiritual mother and father hand in hand.

Following this familial, spiritual model, which is typical in African diasporic religious communities, Jackson professed a connection between the Somés, knowledge, and gender. For Jackson, the missing piece was no longer “African knowledge” but African *woman-centered* knowledge. In Jackson’s worldview, Sobonfu Somé takes a privileged position over the other African American women with whom Jackson works. In other words, Sobonfu Somé possessed specific *African* skills that the other African American women did not. Jackson suggested that this information is intuitive, replete with the capacity to “read” persons “three miles out.” I became aware, in listening to Jackson, that the “information” of which she spoke was not acquired facts, but an embodied, intuitive capacity to apprehend natural phenomena (including persons) supernaturally.

This woman-centered mystique, Jackson declared, would aid her spiritual growth in a way that would be impossible for Malidoma Somé, as a man, to teach or understand. Indeed, this perspective reflects her gender-specific training in ECV, a community that seeks to ritually replicate the gender segregation and homosociality found in rural Burkina Faso. Orienting herself gynocentrically, Jackson assumed that “women’s power” functions best with an expert, like Sobonfu Somé, at hand. Because she did not feel as if white community members at ECV honor women at all, Jackson almost utopically imagined a life-fulfilling encounter with Sobonfu Somé.¹⁹ Without access to her, however, Jackson kept searching for this “information” at spaces like ADRSA.

Despite this quest, Jackson boasted power of her own. As we talked, I also learned of her spiritual skillset: a capacity to manipulate everyday phenomena for an advantageous result. Her characterization of her practice echoed the long history of African American conjurers from centuries past and contemporary hoodoo practitioners.²⁰ Having cultivated these strategies at ECV, Jackson laughed that white ECV practitioners with whom she had trained would often consult her for spiritual help. Between exclamatory cackles, Jackson suggested that black women are custodians of a distinctive power; her “skills,” cultivated in community with ECV African

¹⁹ Jackson’s longing for Sobonfu Somé indexes a theoretical presupposition made by historians R. Marie Griffith and Barbara Savage when they suggest: “Predictably, we find women keeping faith alive and sustaining ritual and spiritual communities in concrete, daily acts ... yet looking at this subject from the positions and perspectives of women and listening to women’s voices and visions ultimately discloses more dissonances and resonances, revealing specific ways of living religion that are not coterminous with one another. Diverse places of origin, different experiences of displacement, and disparate living conditions are connected in women’s religious lives to equally distinctive modes of religious expression and ritual action, dynamics of adaptation and innovation, and strategies that maneuver within and across religious and social settings” (*Women and Religion in the African Diaspora: Knowledge, Power, and Performance* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006], xiv). Foregrounding women’s capacity to keep religious traditions across context and time, Griffith and Savage corroborate Jackson’s inclination.

²⁰ When discussing how she communicated with her ancestors, Jackson reported that she gave them a cold Guinness beer when they acted in ways that pleased her, and a hot Budweiser beer turned upside down when they acted in ways that displeased her. Adapting an ECV practice of regularly offering beer-drinking ancestors their favored drink in order to appease and communicate with them, Jackson modified the ritual foodstuffs slightly in order to prompt or vex her ancestors into action.

American women, if lacking the guidance of Sobonfu Somé for further heft, were still nurtured within an already-existing African Atlantic worldview.²¹ Without saying it explicitly, Jackson set up a spiritual hierarchy wherein, for her purposes, Sobonfu Somé, as an African woman, reigned supreme. As an African man, Malidoma Somé was next. Immediate continental African descent was primary in Jackson's hierarchy, regardless of gender. Other African American women and Jackson herself, as women of African descent, figured next. Finally, white people who sought to practice African ways figured last in this model.²² Here, knowledge is directly valued and implicated based on the body that transmits it. African-descent and feminine gender identification work contrapuntally to create, define, and distribute knowledge, understood as "information" and "skills." Working within this skillset, Jackson offered to put "something on [my] 'paper'" (referencing my field notes and dissertation) in order to ensure its successful defense. Even within the artificial constraints of a research interview, Jackson's skills were both pragmatic and helpful, signaling her belief that the purpose of Dagara "information" gathering was to enact and transfer helpful energies to persons who crossed her life path.

Some students take this knowledge-seeking imperative to the next level, publishing their own volumes in an attempt to make meaning and recapitulate Dagara teaching for African American consumption. Understanding both Somés as knowledge producers—in addition to being a teacher herself—Imani Phillips, perhaps, embodies this orientation toward knowledge as "information" and "skills" more fully. Phillips is one of the earliest students of both Sobonfu and Malidoma Somé. When the two teachers divorced, she sustained an allegiance to both of them, unlike many who split with the pair altogether or chose one teacher with whom to work. From Detroit, Michigan, Phillips met the Somés when Malidoma Somé was a professor at the University of Michigan. From the early nineties forward, she began to participate in different Dagara rituals with them. Traveling to both Burkina Faso and Jamaica, she also completed a yearlong training. Instead of receiving a certification after these trainings, the participants created their own ritual communities, naming themselves a "village." Phillips had a Chicago "village" that dissolved after some time. At the time of our interview, Phillips reported that, while Sobonfu Somé still visited Detroit pretty often to conduct rituals, it had been three years since she had done a ritual with Malidoma in Boston and Toronto.

Like Jackson, Phillips positioned herself to have Dagara "information" from which to draw. In the active style of an apprentice, Phillips studied with both Somés for almost two decades in order to be able to offer her own textual, ritual advice. Phillips published a book in 2009 about her learnings with the Somés. Endorsed by a Malidoma Somé-written preface, the book details Phillips's autobiographical narrative and the racial and socioeconomic realities of Detroit in the 1970s, which made an Africa-centered orientation and a focus on Sobonfu and Malidoma Somé "logical" outcomes for her. From there, Phillips gives detailed advice on how students can better apply the "African medicine wheel," an adaptation of the Somés' Dagara medicine wheel, to their own lives. The categories of "Dagara" and "African" were interchangeable for Phillips; she embraces a pan-African sensibility for her presumably black American readership.

²¹ La Francis Rodgers-Rose, *The Black Woman* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1980).

²² Jackson's model poses a significant challenge to the diverse, multiracial nature of Somé's community. Though she conversed about black and white students exclusively, the nature of Somé's communities included persons of Asian, Latinx, and Native American descent, among others.

Harnessing this power, Phillips wanted to transmit it to others in the African American community. Her book manifested this effort. In one of her last chapters, Phillips gives step-by-step, alphanumeric instructions on how to translate a name into a meaningful, personal African medicine wheel chart. Whereas the advice given in each of the Somés’ books suggests that a person’s character is determined by the last number of the year in which they were born (if someone is born in 1984, for example, they would be a “mineral person”—as is anyone else with the last numbers “4” or “9” in their birth year), Phillips details how to dissect a given name, through its letters, in order to understand its purpose/meaning.

Phillips understands herself as someone who has adopted Dagara teachings through the Somés and seeks to disseminate their contribution more broadly throughout African American communities, across religious boundaries. She speaks frequently to Afrocentric religious organizations, like the Shrines of the Black Madonna in Detroit, to elucidate a more specific Dagara understanding. Importantly, Phillips renders her “African medicine wheel” as a significant complement to Dagara spiritual consultation as offered by Malidoma Somé, Sobonfu Somé, or one of their trained students. When a person has an opportunity to receive a Dagara divination, Phillips affirms that their African medicine wheel reading must cohere with the results of such a spiritual consultation. Here, the knowledge of a spiritual expert prevails as the calibrating force of knowledge. However, Phillips’s African medicine wheel is a significant secondary source in apprehending Dagara spiritual knowledge. Phillips’s chief preoccupation is that African American people know how to make this knowledge accessible and use its power to better understand themselves. Her last chapter contains a set of “usable” information—how to access the elements to fortify life enrichment. Much like the Somés, Phillips touts her book as offering specific strategies for employing Dagara technologies, thus reaffirming the necessity of “information” for African American persons.

Manuals and Toolkits for Survival: The Dagara Strain of Multi-Religious Allegiance

Whereas for Jackson and Phillips, the primacy of Dagara teachings was apparent in their zeal for consuming and redistributing Dagara knowledge, I found that younger African American students of Sobonfu Somé were more interested in how they could enact Somé’s guidance along a continuum of multi-religious allegiance, which I define and discuss below. Somé’s Dagara teaching was one of many tools that these students used to enact personal and political change in their lives. While their commitments to black people were, arguably, as Afrocentric as those of their elders discussed above, these interests did not flatten their curiosity about other aspects of African religions. Rather, Somé’s teachings proved functional, if malleable, in these students’ quests toward an Afrocentric belonging.

For Shanice Praylow-Black, an African American scholar and preacher in her forties, Somé’s teachings are also consonant with those of her larger ecclesial community, the aforementioned First Afrikan Presbyterian Church in Lithonia, Georgia.²³ This church community

²³ In *Walkin’ The Talk: Keepin’ the Faith in Africentric Congregations* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2005), church historian Julia Speller conducts an ethnography of three “Africentric” congregations. She argues that each of these congregations live into culturally relevant, Christocentric values by incorporating the *Nguzo Saba*, the seven principles of Kwanzaa, into their philosophical values: “They tap into the richness of an African spiritual worldview, reshaping and reinterpreting it into an experience that is culturally relevant for them in the American religious context. In their worship and ministries, Christ-rooted and African-centered congregations display cultural pride through artifacts,

holds African descent as a central nexus around which its members articulate their cultural identity and theological meaning. For Praylow-Black, Somé does not provide a philosophy for an African-descended sensibility but, rather, gives instruction for *how* to go about navigating ritual.

Praylow-Black finds Somé's books particularly helpful. In our interview, she discussed the centrality of Somé's book *The Spirit of Intimacy: Ancient African Teachings in the Ways of Relationships* in her marriage. Eschewing the conditions of romantic love and sexual attraction, *The Spirit of Intimacy* suggests that shared purpose, communal input, and frequent ritual in amorous relationships contribute to their longevity and success. Somé's book has enabled Praylow-Black to make ritual a central part of even the most minute parts of her life. While Praylow-Black's ritual work with Somé was limited—she only attended two grief rituals—she conducts rituals at church and home regularly. For example, she described the ways that she and her spouse integrated *The Spirit of Intimacy* into their conflict resolution process:

I'm remembering a time—Keith and I were going through something and it was pretty tense.... I got the book out and we went in the backyard and we just followed it right as she, you know.... Made the little circle, made the circle, we got inside the circle, and we started talking through what our issue was. So, it's just really important. Opening—one—my eyes to the importance of ritual. But helping me to have a particular community to walk back to. For her—being the Dagara people. To actually retrieve the utility of these practices for healing and for wholeness. And I think when you couple that with a space like First Afrikan Presbyterian Church, it already—it's just a good complement. And so, you know, one major takeaway for me just in terms of daily practices is really just trying to let stuff go. If you can't do it every day, [do] it weekly. I'm thinking about this concept of grief for [Sobonfu Somé].... As I talk through it more, it helps me to connect to an ancient, indigenous way. That is important to me. That helps me to fill in certain blanks. Where practice becomes the vehicle to faith.²⁴

Whereas both Edie Jackson and Imani Phillips claimed that Sobonfu Somé herself housed a particular kind of knowledge, Praylow-Black incorporated Somé's book utilizing a homegrown improvisation. *The Spirit of Intimacy* served as a toolkit to help Praylow-Black and her spouse resolve an interpersonal difficulty. Somé describes any couple within the ash circle as “there because they have first admitted that they don't know what they're doing.” The ash circle, then, “enable[d] spirit to come and become their teachers.”²⁵ Not only did the book offer novel knowledge, but the ritual that Praylow-Black enacted was a search for shared, interpersonal knowledge and meaning-making that would enable the spouses to amicably resolve their conflict. Somé's teachings helped Praylow-

rituals, music, and dance, and they have an active knowledge of and appreciation for the history and culture of African people from antiquity to present. It is important to note, however, that their Africentric identity is not based solely on the things they do or the knowledge that they have acquired but on their self-identity as a part of a larger African diaspora, revealing an important notion of communality” (xxii–xxiii). First Afrikan Presbyterian Church imbibes these values. Tracey Hucks suggests further that churches like First Afrikan Presbyterian Church have members who are also within the identifiable bodies of black American Yoruba practitioners (*Yoruba Traditions*, 253–268). Sobonfu Somé visited First Afrikan Presbyterian Church on several occasions.

²⁴ Interview with Shanice Praylow-Black, October 2015.

²⁵ Sobonfu Somé, *The Spirit of Intimacy: Ancient African Teachings in the Ways of Relationships* (Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Hills Books, 1997), 93.

Black foreground the primacy of ritual in an event as seemingly miniscule as an everyday conflict, thereby orienting the family to seek spiritual knowledge in every aspect of their lives. Somé’s capacity “[t]o fill in the blanks” provided Praylow-Black with a generative specificity: the ability to admit that she and her spouse needed help to come to peace. By housing her conflict resolution strategy within a Dagara ash circle, she created a significant cultural link, one that ultimately created peace between the couple.

Praylow-Black’s household ritual reflects the innovation of many a contemporary Afrocentric self-motivated spiritual practice, adapted with specific individual and social healing needs in mind. A similar example of practices like Praylow-Black’s emerges and is theorized in theologian Monica Coleman’s “The Womb Circle: A Womanist Practice of Multi-Religious Belonging.” Coleman outlines her individual and collective journey working through Queen Afua’s²⁶ *Sacred Woman: Healing the Feminine Mind, Body, and Spirit*.²⁷ Facing painful uterine growths, Coleman utilized Queen Afua’s strategies alongside care from a medical doctor. Dedicating four months to this practice, Coleman recited a series of special prayers and meditations daily during the early morning hours. She constructed an elaborate altar in a corner of her bedroom and called on biological and spiritual ancestors. In an earnest effort to rally useful deities and spirits, she fed them their favored foods. Finally, she gathered together a group of women—her “Womb Circle”—and as she recounts: “[We] ate raw and cooked vegan food with recommended ingredients [and] set up an altar upon which we placed an item we considered sacred. We lit candles, took deep breaths, and talked about our experiences with the rituals. As per *Sacred Woman*’s recommendation, we surrounded ourselves with the images and sounds of women.... We discussed our Womb Journals.”²⁸

Adapting Queen Afua’s practice to the various needs of individuals that comprised the practicing group, Coleman’s chosen community took seriously Queen Afua’s instruction manual on how to heal their reproductive systems. Coleman’s practice echoes Praylow-Black’s experience; modern-day African American women disconnected from traditional “African” practices may need step-by-step instruction on *how* to conduct ritual in order to effect the change they seek. Though the historical ledger has it that many of these traditions transmit this kind of information orally, Queen Afua and Somé instantiate a genre of instruction that relies upon the instructional modalities of cookbook-like self-help books. Step by step, they help their reader prepare a filling ritual of African origin.

What Coleman and Praylow-Black teach us is that, around the country, African Americans are flocking to self-led ritual spaces. These do-it-yourself rituals respond functionally to pressing concerns. Praylow-Black needed to resolve an intense conflict with her spouse and her typical modes of conflict resolution—rounds of dialogue and communal input—were not proving

²⁶ A holistic healthcare practitioner, Queen Afua has used an African-inspired lens to promote her books, workshops, and products. For Queen Afua, care of the body and spirit are crucially interconnected. Well known for her manuscripts *Heal Thyself for Health and Longevity* and *Sacred Woman: A Guide to the Feminine Mind, Body, and Spirit*, Queen Afua has spent over forty years functioning as a nutritional and spiritual teacher in black American communities, particularly in Brooklyn, New York. See “Queen Afua: About,” *Queen Afua*, <http://www.queenafua.com/about-queen-afua>.

²⁷ Monica Coleman, “The Womb Circle: A Womanist Practice of Multi-Religious Belonging,” *Practical Matters* 4 (2011): 1–9.

²⁸ Coleman, “The Womb Circle,” 4.

effective. Similarly, Coleman sought to heal a chronic case of fibroid tumors. Wrestling with the potential devastation of an invasive surgery, she opted to follow *Sacred Woman's* spiritual and nutritional lifestyle guide in order to heal her uterus. Both women suggest that, respectively, Sobonfu Somé and Queen Afua offered a toolkit that abetted their respective relational and corporeal urgencies. Queen Afua and Sobonfu Somé empowered the women to believe they themselves hold the power to energetically and physically change the obstacles that they face. Books that offer directions can, thus, be added to a longer legacy of what ethicist Stephanie Mitchem calls “African American folk healing.”²⁹

After harnessing Somé's conflict-resolving technologies, Praylow-Black used *The Spirit of Intimacy* to re-commit to her marriage. When we talked, Praylow-Black had just finished celebrating her ten-year anniversary. At the anniversary festivity, guests took turns reading *The Spirit of Intimacy* out loud in honor of Shanice and Keith's commitment. In Praylow-Black's home, *The Spirit of Intimacy* functions as what literature critic Henry Louis Gates calls a “speakerly text.” Gates theorizes the style of writer and African Atlantic religious theorist Zora Neale Hurston as a progenitor of the “speakerly text.” A “speakerly text” is meant to be read out loud and, as such, takes on a life of its own in a given community.³⁰ By participating in the reading ritual at her anniversary celebration, Praylow-Black's community honored the inherent orality of Somé's text. After all, Somé dictated what would later become *The Spirit of Intimacy*. Praylow-Black's community reproduced the book's orality during the celebration, thus creating an extraliterary ritual with the text itself. Re-articulating helpful tools in relationships, *The Spirit of Intimacy* affirmed the spouses' longevity in conversation with Somé and their chosen community.

Praylow-Black is not the only one who found *The Spirit of Intimacy* useful in her relational life or helpful in cultivating a particularly innovative spirit toward the practice of Dagara ritual. Such was the case for Amon Tarik, who received the book as a gift on the occasion of his wedding. Like Praylow-Black, Tarik is also a part of an Afrocentric community. Under the tutelage of his mentor, Justice Opembe, he organizes the D.C. chapter of the Institute of African Learning (IAL): the “Remedy Makers' Collective.”³¹ In this leadership role, Tarik hosts weekend retreats for African Americans in an effort to “heal the wounds of oppression.” The weekend workshop maintains that all of its participants should be equipped to understand their familial, communal, and vocational work as endeavors to fight for, heal, or uplift African and African-descended communities. It mirrors the work of other organizations countrywide that, through an ongoing commitment to Afrocentricity, engineer community spaces in order to teach pan-Africanist

²⁹ For Mitchem, African American folk healing is comprised of a diversity of historical and contemporary strategies that depend on “the ability of the healer to draw on the power to control, protect, or attack, in short, to orchestrate the flow of the natural, the spiritual, and relational aspects of life” (*African American Folk Healing* [New York and London: New York University Press, 2007], 17).

³⁰ See Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

³¹ IAL describes itself as a “national, African-centered education [center] enrolling middle and high school students.” While its chief goal is children's education (through a web, conference-based model), the Remedy Makers' Collective seeks, through weekend workshops, to orient the adults that are in the children's lives to IAL's epistemology. IAL website excluded for anonymity of informants; accessed November 5, 2016. Justice Opembe and his spouse founded both the school and weekend workshop. During informal conversations with other Remedy Makers' Collective workshop participants, I learned that Opembe (often referenced as “Baba [father] Justice,” is a well-regarded leader among Afrocentrists in the Atlanta and D.C. metro areas.

principles.³² Though these groups take seriously tenets of multiple African philosophical and spiritual worldviews, they, like Somé, eschew any identifier that hinges on the category of “religion.” When I asked Tarik about the connection between his day-to-day religious and spiritual life and IAL, he responded:

I just kind of refer to traditional African practices. You know, in the area where I live, there is a large Akan community. There’s a large Yoruba community. You have this organization called Ausar Auset. You have ... the Vodun tradition. All of the different traditions come together once a year in this area. And stand together for the people. And I consider my practice consistent with that....

I generally tried to find out about all of our spiritual practices. It’s hard because you have to make the transition—from, you know, being ... raised in a Christian church—and making the transition to let go of that. And even to let go of this notion of religion and saying that “religion” is even a foreign concept. This notion of going to church on Sunday is not ours. Healthy peoples of the world incorporate; there’s no separation between the spiritual walk and the normal life. It’s all one. It’s strange to even ask to separate the two....

Recognizing the cultural and spiritual unity that underlines all our systems, you know?³³

Tarik and other members of the Remedy Makers’ Collective promote their weekend workshop as containing “spiritual components” but, ultimately, endorsing an objective of “education.”³⁴ For the Remedy Makers’ Collective participants, education means attending a three-day workshop, staying in frequent contact with workshop participants after it is completed, and seeking out other community-based activities—like weekend Somé retreats—that reinforce the principles taught in the Remedy Makers’ Collective weekend. Tarik has cloistered himself in a network of African American friends and family who share similar values. Like Praylow-Black, Tarik is an active member in a cultural space that takes ritual life seriously.

Tarik understands Somé’s teaching as a part of the “cultural and spiritual unity” that he described above. Since Tarik’s community privileges Africa-centered education at the heart of a moment geared toward overcoming white socioeconomic oppression, Sobonfu Somé, a self-defined teacher of “African spirituality,” figures prominently under this larger canopy. For Tarik and his community, Somé is an artifact in a library of resources on Africana epistemology.

While Tarik, like the informants above, valued *The Spirit of Intimacy*’s accessible book instruction, he also desired firsthand teaching from Somé and signed up for a local grief-ritual workshop with her. Using his prior knowledge as a student of Opembe and a leader of the Remedy Makers’ Collective, bolstered by Somé’s encouragement to create satisfying rituals for oneself, Tarik crafted his own practice within the grief ritual.

³² For a full-scale ethnography of a religio-cultural group similar to IAL, see Jacqueline Copeland-Carson, *Creating Africa in America: Translocal Identity in an Emerging World City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

³³ Interview with Amon Tarik, July 2015.

³⁴ Interview with Danielle Adkins, April 2015; interview with Chantel Richardson, May 2015.

[The grief ritual] was what I expected in the sense that it was mostly white people. I knew that white people were very supportive of and had attached themselves to the work that Malidoma and Sobonfu have done. And, so, I knew I wasn't going to an all-African ritual beforehand. And, I knew that, I had an expectation that it would be authentic—meaning really authentic—from the continent, from their people, from Sobonfu's people. And I was on a mission to connect with that. And I wasn't going to let the presence of white people stop that from happening....

I also know that, for me, it was a little bit tricky. I had to navigate it because I came to get what I wanted to get and have the best possible experience. And I connected with the African people who were there. And one aspect involved placing pictures of your ancestors on an altar. And everybody who participated was putting all their pictures of their ancestors on the altar. Well, I was not about to put my ancestors' pictures on the altar with the pictures of people who had, you know, basically oppressed them. So, I actually made a separate altar outside for my ancestors. And I made a mini replica of the shrine outside, too, so that I could connect in that way.³⁵

Tarik's interest in cultivating an African-centered worldview brought him to Somé's grief ritual. On one hand, Somé represented something "authentic" that Tarik presumed he could not learn from the other diasporic spaces he frequented—whether IAL or the diasporic spiritual communities mentioned above. He desired to procure, in essence, a "real" Dagara ritual experience, taught by a teacher born and raised in rural Burkina Faso. However, Tarik's community and its pan-African ideals informed how he entered the space and, ultimately, how he chose to grieve. Resistant to the dominant white space inside, Tarik innovated a contrasting ritual outside. Though Somé had not instructed Tarik to leave the larger group, her broader teachings suggest that everyday ritual can be tailored and operationalized in the way that Tarik modeled. His community's teaching maintained that the economic, social, and political chasms between black and white American persons would, potentially, offend his ancestors' sensibilities and capacity to help him process his own grief. Tarik placed his own cultural commitments in conversation with Somé's teaching to innovate a relevant, if separatist, technology: an altar outside.

Tarik's "altar outside," coupled with an interest in "all our spiritual practices," stands within a longer creative legacy of spiritual eclecticism amongst African American women and men. In "Burning With a Flame in America: African American Women in African-Derived Traditions," religious historian Tracey Hucks argues:

African Americans have historically engaged in the negotiation of multiple religious worlds for accessing spiritual power and for obtaining alternative modes of healing and recovery. What might seemingly appear conflicting and contradictory phenomena in the practice of one spiritual tradition is readily reconciled in moments of African American empowerment and healing. This has especially been true of African American women.

³⁵ Interview with Amon Tarik, July 2015.

Throughout their history in the United States, African American women have sustained open and fluid boundaries regarding religion and have been creative agents in shaping their own religious meaning.... I contend that black women’s religious identities include complex dimensions of the supernatural world that often allow for multiple religious traditions to coexist with their lives.³⁶

Hucks documents the stories of women who engage in what she names “religious coexistence” and “multiple religious allegiance”; more often than not, African American women maintained African-derived practices while also participating in local Christian communities. Hucks’ evaluation resonates with that of religious historian Yvonne Chireau who, in mapping the African American Conjure, Hoodoo, and rootwork traditions, parses the parallel paths of religious devotion and Africa-inspired spiritual technologies that have long coexisted in African American communities. Chireau suggests that these traditions were complementary to professed religious worldviews, a perspective that Somé underscored. Somé’s teachings were often meant to be compatible with an already-existing religious identity, even as she, from time to time, critiqued what she perceived to be the limits of Christian belief.³⁷

Somé’s African American women students proudly possess “multiple religious alliances.” For example, Mae Troeger, an African American marriage and family therapist practicing in California who has been a Somé student for over twenty years, identifies as a student of Dagara and Mossi religious cultures, as well as Haitian Vodou, The Four Winds,³⁸ Buddhism, and Hinduism. She practices divination with shells, “yoga cards,” and the drum. Additionally, she sings in a local gospel choir because she “like[s] the way it feels,” even though she is “not interested in the church ... and their rules.” Troeger’s multiple spiritual lineages are about “all ways people connect to Source,” but her practices seek to access the most efficacious medium to solving her own and others’ problems.³⁹

Though Tarik is not a woman, I maintain that, in creating the altar outside, he mimicked this female-originated practice of pragmatic ritual renegotiation and, in this way, instantiated a multi-religious allegiance that was adjacent to, but not completely the same as, the Dagara grief ritual being conducted inside the ritual space. Though Somé’s grief-ritual rules privilege the gathered community to assist in grieving, Tarik modified the ritual to privilege the grief of his ancestors—thereby resorting to the pan-African religious strategies of his IAL spiritual community. As is the case for Troeger’s multiple lineages, the infrastructural constraints of ritual practice

³⁶ Hucks, “Burning with a Flame,” 90.

³⁷ For example, in *The Spirit of Intimacy: Ancient African Teachings in the Ways of Relationships*, Somé laments that churches do not “reaffirm that spirit is inside of [people] and everyone is directly connected to spirit. You won’t find a church where everyone gives out the Eucharist to each other” (42). Drawing from a primarily Catholic understanding of the Christian faith, Somé did not believe that church communities are an approximation of the ritual communities that she prescribed. Inasmuch as Somé would never discourage someone from practicing their existing faith tradition, she saw her ritual teachings as an essential part of a holistic existence.

³⁸ The Four Winds Society educational program, disseminated through its “Online Energy Medicine Training” and “Residential Energy Medicine Training,” describes itself as “offer[ing] the world’s most thorough training in Shamanic Energy Medicine combined with cutting edge practices in nutrition, biology, and neuroscience.” Mirroring the Africa/West discourse of the Somés, The Four Winds Society touts the “marriage of ancient wisdom and modern science ... to transform the world by bringing exceptional health and joy to everyone [it] work[s] with.” See “About Us,” *The Four Winds*, accessed May 23, 2017, <http://thefourwinds.com/about-us>.

³⁹ Interview with Mae Troeger (long-term Somé student), April 2015.

ultimately do not determine how they emplace Somé's teachings in their day-to-day lives. Instead, each practitioner makes ritual practice fit their stated objective, whether feeling good, connecting to "Source," or honoring their ancestors in sociopolitically appropriate ways.

Hucks argues that in the contemporary era, "multiple religious alliances" have coalesced to create teachers like Iyanla Vanzant, Luisah Teish, and, I would add, Queen Afua, who further iterate this longstanding practice.⁴⁰ These women have sustained an ongoing following that reflects the community of African Americans that Somé taught. African American women's practice of innovative folkways and resistive sociopolitical, spiritual alliances—all perceived vessels of "African" knowledge within the African American community—have enabled Somé's message to be disseminated with great resonance. So, while Somé can also be theorized as a knowledge producer in white communities, African Americans integrate Somé within a longstanding project of African recovery. Thus, African Americans' embrace of Somé emerges from an already-existing inheritance. Somé's accessibility to African Americans hinges on a highly personalized cultivation of Dagara epistemology outside of an institutionally endorsed structure—whether a church or Malidoma Somé's East Coast Village.⁴¹ Multiple religious allegiance, I argue, is the primary strand that enables these practices to cohere.⁴² Sobonfu Somé, then, indexes longer-standing histories of ritual knowledge within North America.

Conclusion

Jodi Sun, a long-term African American student of Somé, described a moment in the early nineties when Somé had the opportunity to be interviewed by Oprah Winfrey and declined in favor of a pre-scheduled ritual. Knowing the famed "Oprah effect," Sun wondered, "who would Sobonfu have been had she done that interview?"⁴³ Because Somé did not align herself with any one religious/spiritual movement—women's spirituality,⁴⁴ African American religious nationalist

⁴⁰ Hucks, "Burning with a Flame," 99–105.

⁴¹ Although both Somés successfully created temporary "villages" while they were still married in the nineties—most prominently their first class of Dagara initiates, "West Coast Village," which still meets regularly—Sobonfu Somé did not claim leadership in an ongoing, land-owning community like the Malidoma Somé-led East Coast Village. Interestingly, however, she regularly partnered with church communities and conducted rituals in their worship spaces, creating a loose, institutional juxtaposition between Christian and Dagara ritual.

⁴² In 2013, theologian Monica Coleman gave a public lecture at Vanderbilt University, "Black Women's Spirituality and the Oprah Effect." Building on Hucks's article "Burning with a Flame," Coleman expounded on the possibilities of theorizing religious multiplicity using the lived religious experiences of black women. Coleman uses "multiple religious belonging" as a descriptive category for black women's polyreligious identities. This conceptualization is yet another productive way to imagine how these polysemous religious orientations may be theorized. See Monica Coleman, "Black Women's Spirituality and the Oprah Effect," Vanderbilt University, March 22, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b8J9R44UYEU&t=3924s>.

⁴³ Interview with Jodi Sun, March 2015.

⁴⁴ A product of second-wave feminism, the women's spirituality movement—like its alternative spirituality predecessors—combed indigenous worldviews for alternative cosmological and theological paradigms. Central to this particular feminist search were "women-centered" motifs; adherents of the women's spirituality movement looked for female renderings of the divine, celebrations of women's reproductive capacity, and frequent gatherings in women-only ritual spaces in diverse traditions. Miriam Robbins Dexter, a historian of the women's spirituality movement, notes that while some proponents of this movement joined Wiccan and Neo-Pagan religious traditions, others worked within their existing religious communities to create anti-patriarchal spaces. Somé's emphases on women—particularly women's ritual, motherhood, and childbirth—cohered with the ideals of this movement and provided yet another encyclopedia for its practice. See Miriam Robbins Dexter, *Foremothers of the Women's Spirituality Movement: Elders and Visionaries* (Amherst, MA: Teneo Press, 2015).

movements, or the “church of Oprah” (where she would have joined the ranks of contemporary spiritual leaders like Deepak Chopra, Iyanla Vanzant, Brené Brown, and Elizabeth Gilbert)⁴⁵—she was able to remain a “friend” to all. An itinerant teacher, Somé had the capacity to assess, read, and cater to her audiences; her portability enabled her to shapeshift to the needs of the communities that sought her. While her public-facing community was “white,” she had a noteworthy cadre of African American students: readers and innovators of her do-it-yourself rituals, believers in the power of “African spirituality” to transform their lives. My conversations with Somé’s African American students informed my conviction that there are many more students with whom I did not have contact: persons for whom one book or one ritual has been a catalyst for their utilization of her “spiritual technologies” and posture of “multiple religious allegiance.” While Somé’s last publication was over a decade ago (2005), her ongoing pedagogical voice followed her written advice: adapt your ritual to your specific context. Her work with African Americans showed this capacity astutely. The accessibility of her books and attendant rituals enabled interested students to multiply her knowledges within African American communities.

Somé’s white students may place Somé’s teachings alongside other “indigenous” teachings, but rarely does their learning reflect a sustained political interest in the histories and cultures of African-descended persons. For non-black students, Somé had a localized “indigenous” knowledge that could be mobilized to understand indigeneity writ large, but, to my knowledge, Somé’s white students have not engaged in infrastructural or postcolonial analysis of the Dagara, Burkina Faso, or Africa. Somé’s African American students, however, forged a kinship with her because of a sense that what she was teaching “belongs” to them. Histories of perceived African American entitlement to Africa—from Americo-Liberians’ oppression of indigenous persons in the late nineteenth century to Alice Walker’s publication of *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992)—remind us that this assumption can lead to devastating sociopolitical outcomes for African continental communities and individuals. This notwithstanding, some African Americans have been interested in placing Somé’s knowledge—alongside that of other African-centered teachers—within a schema for better self-knowledge and, ultimately, self-betterment.⁴⁶ It appears that Somé’s indigenous reconaissance mission complements the ever-present African American cultural project of gaining more specific Africa-inspired knowledge, each new lesson fortifying a profound sense of spiritual recovery. The curative aims of this mission grounds African Americans’ acute quest as unique among Somé’s larger body of devoted students.

⁴⁵ While “the church of Oprah” has been a pejorative shorthand to reference multimedia mogul Oprah Winfrey’s prolific broadcasts and print media about spirituality, religious historian Kathryn Lofton analyzes Winfrey’s reach primarily through the lens of the self-betterment initiatives that Winfrey promotes. Teachers featured in the monthly *O Magazine* and on her popular “Super Soul Sundays” television show employ this strategy, often assuming listeners want to grow into better selves. While Somé shares this premise—and has shared platforms with Winfrey-endorsed spiritual teachers like Deepak Chopra—she did not align herself with this popular, commoditized spiritual industry. See Kathryn Lofton, *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

⁴⁶ I recently watched an online video in which the video’s creator displayed a slideshow of different altars and shrines from African-derived religious traditions (e.g., Haitian Vodou, Lucumí, etc.). The creator used a portion of Somé’s audiobook, *Women’s Wisdom from the Heart of Africa*, to narrate the video. While the video plays, Somé’s Dagara descriptions are juxtaposed with these Africana shrines. This video demonstrates that Somé’s black students place Somé’s books and rituals under a larger canopy of Africana thought. See Jabari Akhenamen, “Preparing Your Sacred Space: The Wisdom of Sobonfu Somé,” July 24, 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yb_F95eaiWc.

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