

CYBER SPIRITS, DIGITAL GHOSTS

African and Diasporic Religions in the Age of Collaborative Consumption

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The Internet,” says Jeff Zaleski in his book *The Soul of Cyberspace*, “is like fire to the world’s...religions. It can warm souls to acceptance of the sacred but it can burn them too.”¹ While there have certainly been some “burns” along the way, by and large, the Internet has served as a warming force for African and Diasporic religions (ADR), as it has assisted practitioners in connecting with each other across spatial and linguistic boundaries, disseminating decentralized information, and—perhaps counterintuitively—helping to revive and reinvent indigenous mouth-to-ear means of knowledge transmission.

As the use of the Internet has assisted practitioners in reclaiming knowledge, it has also given rise to another old-but-new concept known as collaborative consumption. As Rachel Botsman and Roo Rogers outline in their book *What’s Mine is Yours: The Rise of Collaborative Consumption*, collaborative consumption is a simple phenomenon in which people come together either by pooling resources or using one another’s influence to consume goods or services. If you have ever read an Amazon review before purchasing an item, looked at Yelp reviews before deciding where to eat, looked at the color of someone’s star before purchasing an item from them on eBay, rented a room on AirBnB, utilized a Zipcar, or engaged in any of a number of other activities online, you’ve participated in collaborative consumption. As Botsman and Rogers note, the concept is not new as people have been coming together, pooling resources, using word of mouth advertisement, and sharing things among their

communities and networks for as long as there have been communities. The difference now, however, is that thanks to the Internet and social networking websites and apps like Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram, and others, our local communities have extended to encompass the world and our personal networks have grown from the few hundred people in our immediate physical vicinity to thousands of “friends” and “followers”—many of whom we may never have met and may never meet.

Botsman and Rogers define three varieties of collaborative consumption enterprises: product service systems, redistribution markets, and collaborative lifestyles. Further, they outline four interrelated qualities that contribute to a venture’s success: critical mass, idling capacity, belief in the commons, and trust between strangers.² While the first two of these four qualities—critical mass and idling capacity—are extant in any type of business, it is the latter two—belief in the commons and trust between strangers—that set the practice of collaborative consumption apart from other types of business ventures. Likewise, while product service systems and redistribution markets are a more ordinary type of business model, collaborative lifestyles cross out of the business realm and into the arena of personal relationships. As such, as Botsman and Rogers posit, the most difficult to achieve of the four qualities—trust between strangers—rises paramount importance.

So, what *does* it take to build between strangers online? How does one construct and convey a “cyber spirit” or online personality, and how congruent is it with their offline self? What happens when one is or becomes a “digital ghost,” or a person who either never had an online presence or—more curiously—whose online presence vanishes? In a world where, in Botsman’s words, “reputation is the new currency,” how do practitioners build reputations, form communities of practice, and develop relationships and—particularly when these relationships are complicated by notions of spiritual power, cultural authenticity, romantic connections, transnational politics and, perhaps the messiest of all, economic factors?

In recent years and months, these questions have risen to the forefront and online representation has become a hot topic in many ADR communities within the United States and around the world because, for as many souls have been warmed, some have indeed been burned by the

Internet's flame. Some of the traditions that have recently been under this type of discussion are various branches of Yoruba Ifa-Orisa tradition—my own area of specialty—as practiced in communities in Nigeria, the United States and Venezuela, Haitian Vodou, the Akan tradition out of Ghana, and the Kemetic tradition which is rooted in the religions of ancient Egypt. As these traditions are largely decentralized, involve home-based practice, and for some are still shrouded in veils of secrecy, the Internet has provided an important vehicle through which those who are interested in these religions and who do not have immediate personal connections to a community of practitioners may begin their spiritual journeys. Whereas, in the past, knowledge of these traditions was heavily dependent on either having been born into a family of practitioners or living in cities such as New York, Miami, Havana, Bahia, or other areas with large populations of practitioners—and, subsequently, on personal, real time connections with well-versed spiritual elders—the Internet has changed the proverbial game. Much to the chagrin of some, by way of email list serves, message boards, and social networking website groups, would-be practitioners now have access to information in a way that does not rely on face-to-face relationships. The obvious problem that can arise in this situation is that whereas with person-to-person interactions within a given community there exists the possibility of immediate checks and balances, those all but disappear online where the community is many times larger and may cross national, cultural, and linguistic boundaries. This is particularly true as the Internet—and associated technologies like mobile phones, voice over Internet protocol (VOIP), email, text messaging, and, of course, social networking—has helped facilitate increased connections between countries in the Diaspora and on the African continent.

African traditions came into the Americas during the Transatlantic slave trade and as Albert Raboteau notes, were not “merely preserved as static ‘Africanisms’ [but have] continued to develop as living traditions” to become unique religions of American and Caribbean origin.³ Of high importance to the current discussion is that these African-rooted Diasporic traditions have been essentially autonomous in the Americas since the ending of the slave trade, having had little to no contact with continental Africa until relatively recently. Renewed connections between Africa and the Diaspora, coupled with participation in collaborative

lifestyles, are affecting African Diasporic religious identity formation in somewhat unanticipated ways.

“My historical and social situation is the raw material. . .wherein I begin my project of self-creation,” says philosopher Arnold Farr, noting that the processing of this raw material results in many possible ways of being and responding to situations, which phenomenologists refer to as horizons of being. Due to the negative essentialization of Blackness that many African descended peoples have contended with over time, Farr argues that people of African descent are susceptible to falsely narrowing these horizons and re-essentializing their Blackness or Africanity in ways that are potentially unproductive.⁴ In light of the recent reconnection with the African continent, for example, some practitioners of ADR have come to couch this re-essentialization in the language of “authenticity,” leading them to seek identities that register as “authentically African” regardless of their immediate ancestry. Others have, conversely, rejected this notion and sought to cast themselves as explicitly non-African and, therefore, more modern and more aligned with Western paradigms and methods.

For both of these groups, particularly those who are touted by themselves and/or their communities as spiritual leaders, the aim in forming these identities is often motivated—and perhaps complicated—by the desire to attract new clients or to attract subordinates or apprentices, often referred to as “children” or “godchildren.” Whereas many Christian priests, for example, have seminary degrees on their walls and the church in which they work to help legitimate them to would-be congregants, for many contemporary ADR practitioners, websites or Facebook pages illustrating and delineating their spiritual pedigree serve as the “degrees on the wall” and assist these practitioners with constructing the “cyber spirits” that will stand in their stead online working to instill trust in potential collaborators. Having a site with intelligent-sounding text, an impressive sounding spiritual genealogy and “authentic” looking photos is often enough for a person or community to be perceived as legitimate and authoritative.

As with other clergy, many ADR religious leaders at least partially rely on their spiritual work for their livelihood. This is, arguably, even more true for religious leaders within ADR communities as much of the divination, healing work, and sale of spiritual paraphernalia in which



many of these practitioners engage is directly transactional in nature. As such, online identity formation serves an important economic purpose as well; establishing oneself as more legitimate, powerful, or prestigious than other practitioners can mean the difference between earning a living and not. This creates a conundrum in which individuals seeking to participate in these religious communities sometimes find themselves. In the absence of a nearby physical community, these seekers are driven to seek elders and collaborative partners online which leaves them, at least temporarily, reliant on an individual or community's "cyber spirit" and reputation to forge an initial connection. As the following case study will illustrate, tensions have arisen when individuals' online personae have been found incongruent with offline reality.

The screen shot above is captured from the website of an Ifa-Orisa temple located in Caracas, Venezuela. The temple is called Egbe Orisa Oko⁵ and the chief priest's name is Jose Hidalgo. It is immediately clear that Hidalgo, who is also known as Ifatokun Itanyi, has aimed to present himself and the temple as "authentically African" in contrast to amalgamated Latin American practices like *Santería* and *Candomblé*. First, the site uses the image of the Head of Olokun in its masthead which is one of the most iconic images in African religious art and African art more broadly. Secondly, Hidalgo has adopted a name in Yoruba language and he uses pictures of Nigeria and Nigerians and makes use of Yorùbá language throughout the site, though most of the site's text is in Spanish.

Finally, the name of the temple itself—Egbe Orisa Oko—is indicative of the temple’s desire to register as African as it uses the Yoruba word *egbe*, meaning group or association, rather than the more common practice in Spanish-speaking territories of calling temples “Casa de” (meaning “house of”) whereby the name might be *Case de Orisa Oko*.

Another significant observation of the site is that the temple boasts having initiated 600 plus men as *Babalawo* (priests of Ifa, lit: “Father of hidden knowledge”) and 400 plus women as *Iyanifa* (priestesses of Ifa, lit: “Woman who has Ifa”) since the temple’s inception in 2004.⁶ There are a few noteworthy points to make about this assertion. First, the use of the female title *Iyanifa* and the claim of having initiated women to this station immediately casts the *Egbe* as “traditionalists” (those who practice in a more distinctly “African” rather than diasporic manner) and, again, contrasts with *Santería* which traditionally does not recognize or initiate women to this title. As well, having initiated over 1,000 people in total in a little over 10 years would be quite a feat, even for a very well-established and long-standing orisa house, so the idea that this *Egbe* accomplished such a task adds to its perceived credibility, particularly to the uninitiated who may not understand all that goes into performing initiations.

Also of note is that the page from which the screenshot above is taken is about the spiritual family of the temple. While composed, ostensibly, of Venezuelans like Hidalgo—who appears to be primarily of Indigenous American and Spanish descent—rather than using pictures of the Venezuelan members of the *Egbe*, the creator has chosen to use pictures of Nigerian priests to illustrate the “Babalawo” link. These images could be of priests that the creator studied with or is somehow sanctioned by or connected to, but given “the magic of the Internet” he could also have simply typed “Yoruba priests” into Google images and *voilà*.

An interesting turn of events took place in 2010—and continues into the present—mostly orchestrated via email and Facebook in which Hidalgo has been accused doing just that: using the images and likeness of an individual with whom he actually has no relationship in order to garner authority within the global orisa community. The email, which was crafted by representatives of the individual in question, whose name is Baba Owolabi Awodotun Aworeni, was sent to various practitioners in the global community whose addresses are available online—including

my own spiritual mentor—and also posted publicly online.⁷ It asserts Hidalgo falsified the date of his initiations and misrepresented his relationship with Aworeni, accuses Hidalgo of various types of legal infringement, and threatens legal action if Hidalgo refused to cease and desist. An excerpt of the email reads as follows:

Dear Jose Hildago aka Ifatokun Itaniyi Edibere

This letter is regarding the unauthorized use of the name, photographic and artistic likeness of Mr. Owolabi Awodotun Aworeni and organizations related to him. It has come to our attention that you have used our name in professional, religious and social settings to gain notoriety, earn income, and create or sustain important relationships. This is unacceptable. We demand that you immediately cease and desist from any use of Mr. Aworeni's name, voice, and likeness, including but not limited to (1) Professional Settings, where it might be necessary to convey who you know in order to garner trust or solicit payments (2) Religious Settings, where implying a relationship with him that might cause others to trust you or confide in you or religious organizations with whom you have contact. You may only characterize your relationship with Mr. Aworeni by issuing the following statement:

“Mr. Aworeni has no social, professional or religious relationship with [me] and would strongly discourage any party from having professional, business or social communications with [me]. Mr. Aworeni has serious questions regarding [my] moral character... [and] as such strictly forbid[s me] from implying, suggesting or stating that [he] sanctions or approves of any of [my] activities.”

The penning and posting of this letter is illustrative of another component that is central to the working of collaborative consumption: feedback and evaluation. Just as users of AirBnB, eBay, and other collaborative platforms leave reviews about their experiences that are intended to influence future users, practitioners of ADR also employ various means of sharing and commenting on their experiences. As practitioners use the Internet to establish themselves, the community is also able to police itself, speak back to, and—if it comes to it—sanction those practitioners who are perceived to be attempting to deceive their clients or parishioners. Although there are surely some established hierarchies

within ADRs, because there is no official, universally recognized leader of most African and Diasporic traditions—particularly on the global scale—it may stand to reason that these traditions, aided by the Internet, would become a free-for-all enabling people to represent themselves any way they choose. Due to the relatively open and democratic nature of the Internet, however, the same tool that allows for possible misrepresentation or misconduct also allows for public sanctioning of the same. Once an individual forms a “cyber spirit” and uses it to assert authority, he or she becomes available for public scrutiny and evaluation and, like a bad Yelp review can hurt a business, a negative reputation in the community can really hurt an individual. In this way, the community is able to patrol its borders and practitioners, in turn, have a public platform through which to answer allegations of misdoing or spiritual inefficacy.

This is but one example of many that could have been cited, and several of the questions posed still beg answers. The potential for research on the impact of technology on the practice of ADR is ripe for exploration and it will surely continue to ripen as technological horizons continue to expand. As it doesn't appear that the Internet's religious flame will be extinguished any time soon, seeking to create more formal checks and balances for online interactions seems one means to help ensure more warmth than burns for practitioners.

Notes

1. Jeffrey P. Zaleski, 1997, *The Soul of Cyberspace: How New Technology Is Changing Our Spiritual Lives*, Scranton, PA: HarperCollins, 55.
2. Botsman, Rachel and Roo Rogers, 2010, *What's Mine is Yours: The Rise of Collaborative Consumption*, Scranton, PA: HarperBusiness, xvi.
3. Albert J. Robeteau, 1978, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South*, New York: Oxford University Press, 4.
4. Arnold. Farr, 2002, “Racism, Historical Ruins, and the Task of Identity Formation,” in *The Quest for Community and Identity: Critical Essays in Africana Social Philosophy* ed. Robert E. Birt , Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 21.
5. Orisa Oko is the name of an Orisa (deity) within the Ifa-Orisa religion. The temple's name loosely translates to “Orisa Oko Association.”
6. Numbers are derived from the “Familia Tokun” page of Egbe Orisa Oko's website which lists all the people initiated as Babalawo and Iyanifa through the temple. The “Babalawo” link features 38 pages of entries with 18 entries per page and the “Iyanifa” link features 23 pages of entries with 18 entries per page.

7. Full text of the letter and public comments may be viewed at <http://orishada.com/wordpress/?p=745>. The site and letter were still online as of September 6, 2015. There was never, as far as I could find, a one hundred percent definitive admission of guilt or resolution, but based on comments from the public, the general consensus seems to be in Mr. Aworeni's favor. As well, Hidalgo has apparently ceased using the name and likeness of Mr. Aworeni on his site and has, himself, become somewhat of a "digital ghost" having faded into the background a bit as he is not as prominently featured on the site as he once was.