

Beyoncé's West African Influences Shouldn't Be Ignored or Downplayed

By Jacinta Howard February 15, 2017



Kevin Winer, Getty Images

There's little debate that **Beyoncé's** stunning visual album, *Lemonade*, was more than just a great body of work. It was a statement about blackness—specifically black womanhood—and what that means, how that feels and what it looks like in white spaces that have a long history of oppression and objectification.

Standing alongside outstanding contemporary musical works that in their own way have examined black life in the midst of oppression, including Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly*, D'Angelo's *Black Messiah* and her sister Solange's *A Seat At the Table*, *Lemonade's* importance as a glimpse into black femininity can't be overlooked. But as musically sharp and cohesive as the listening experience was, it was the visuals that tied the project together. That's why it's so important to acknowledge the influence for that imagery.

The film *Lemonade* has been the subject of much **discussion**, as have its influences—namely the heavy inspiration from the African Diaspora, specifically West African culture. Bey's homage to the regal Yoruba goddess of water, fertility and love, Oshun, has previously been **noted** by scholars and music critics, and it's clear that Beyoncé wanted to continue to invoke the film's themes of pride, progression, royalty, pain, spirituality and resiliency into her live performances. In short, she wanted to continue in her theme of blackness.

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Daring and provocative, the very-pregnant Bey's Grammy performance led some viewers to reference the Virgin Mary, others Lady Liberty, while still others thought she was visually channeling some aspects of a black Madonna. Yes, some of the aforementioned influences were there, but the imagery was chiefly West African in origin, and that is important to acknowledge, particularly as black people continue to press for recognition of our humanity in a society with a record of erasure.

We sat down with acclaimed visual artist and scholar, **Fahamu Pecou**, whose work, featured on hit TV shows like *black-ish* and *Empire*, is regularly informed by West African religions. Through his evocative art (acclaimed by artists including **Killer Mike**—with whom he recently **collaborated**), Pecou grapples with the importance and value of black bodies in an oppressive society. Whether you understood or even liked Bey's Grammy performance or *Lemonade*, it's important to understand and acknowledge the blackness in her inspiration. After all, Beyoncé is arguably the most recognizable figure in pop music (and on the planet) and her influences, and the projection of those influences, matter.

A lot of people didn't seem to immediately recognize who Beyoncé was paying homage to—it's been suggested Oshun and Mami Wata. Why do you think those connections aren't readily made by mainstream audiences?

There are obvious references to Ifa iconography in much of Beyoncé's recent work. Many scholars and critics have drawn parallels between the Ifa Orisha (deity) Oshun and Beyoncé. Oshun is a major figure in Yoruba/Ifa and comes to symbolize beauty, love, joy, sensuality as well as sexuality. Oshun is very powerful. As such her joy is contagious and her wrath can be treacherous. The video for "Hold Up" is a great example of this dichotomy.



The video features a smiling Beyoncé smashing up a car with a baseball bat. She wears the color gold (both the precious element and color are attributes of Oshun). The lyrics of the song along with the visuals tell the story of a scorned woman getting revenge. But Beyoncé's smile distracts from her rage... it is both beautiful and frightening. Similarly her performance at the Grammy's; pregnant form, draped in gold, baring flesh, oozing sensuality reeks of Oshun, the sacred and the sublime.

Many people remain ignorant to African spirituality and its visual vocabulary. In fact, most who do make some connections have a pedestrian relationship with it via society's portrayals of the Westernized versions of Ifa; Santeria, Vodoun, Candomble among others. Historically anything remotely considered "African spirituality" has been vilified and stigmatized as evil and devilish. But as more and more people become exposed to contradictions and frankly, the lies with which we've been socialized, we are awakening to thoughts, ideas, and expressions that were previously frowned upon. Even with this, most have barely scratched the surface. In many ways, Beyoncé's work with these ideas has spawned a renaissance of sorts, driving people to look into and question and engage with African spirituality. Its kinda nice actually.



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What connections did you see throughout *Lemonade*?

There are numerous threads in the *Lemonade* project. Aside from the references in terms of colors, the use of water (rivers, ocean), she incorporates the work of others in the project as well. Nigerian artist Laolu Sebanjo is well known for his "Sacred art of The Ori" which is rooted in Yoruba practice. In fact, one's *Ori* in Yoruba/Ifa practice refers to one's personal god or crown. Sebanjo describes this practice of **body-painting as performance**. A performance through which he uses a visual language to communicate and translate spiritual messages.



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There is an appearance by the French-Cuban duo **Ibeyi**. Ibeyi (or ibeji) in Yoruba/Ifa means “twins”. Not only is the duo actual twin sisters, but their father is Anga Diaz, a famous Cuban percussionist and a practitioner of Santeria (the Cuban iteration of Ifa). The sisters have gained acclaim for modernizing and popularizing traditional Yoruba chants/songs as the corpus of their work. The threads extend beyond the visuals and even into the poetry of **Warsan Shire**, who’s words frame the movements of *Lemonade* like chapter dividers. *Lemonade* also references Julie Dash’s acclaimed film ***Daughters of the Dust***, which also takes its cues from the the legacies of African spirituality as retained, practiced, and embodied in the Gullah peoples off the coasts of Georgia and South Carolina.

I don't know Beyoncé personally – though I should add, I truly hope to meet and perhaps work together someday – so I don't know her specific motivations behind employing Yoruba traditions and practices in her work. I do know however, that the Orisha and the ancestors are active, alive, and engaged. More often than not they choose us! So perhaps this is divine intervention. After all, what better way to get people to wake up to these ideas than to hear or see it expressed through the BIGGEST pop star in the world!



How does the Yoruba ideology specifically resonate, especially in this turbulent time for black folks? Given the themes of *Lemonade*, why do you think it was relevant for Beyoncé to incorporate those traditions?

I feel that reconnecting through our African spirituality provides language and context for Black people (around the world). These times are crucial for having working knowledge and understanding of who we are as well as our individual and collective purpose. In the past, we've been ill-equipped to confront the inequities of society due to the misinformation and deceptive practices used to marginalize and oppress Black populations.



In what ways has lfa and the studying of West African spirituality specifically informed your art as of late?

lfa study has influenced my work even before I knew what it was. In fact, back in the early 2000s, before I even knew lfa existed, I was making work with themes I couldn't quite explain. These works were (for me) loaded with spiritual intent and influence. But it wasn't until I was formally introduced to the lfa spiritual system in 2002 that I was able to really understand and describe what I was doing. Since then aspects of my understanding have colored the way I approach different projects. I was officially initiated in 2013 and in 2015 my exhibit "Imagining New Worlds" at the High Museum of Art offered me my first opportunity to fully immerse myself in the things I was learning. That exhibit saw me drawing parallels between lfa, Negritude (a french movement dedicated to Black excellence) and hip-hop. In 2016 my exhibit DO or DIE: Affect, Ritual, Resistance was a very direct and deliberate invitation for Black people to investigate lfa as a means of developing a more potent and liberating resistance strategy in the face of the incessant violence and racism that continues to impact us.



Fahamu Pecou, CBS

As black folks have entered this new era of activism and awareness and more and more music artists begin to speak on our experiences in this country, how important is it to understand traditional influences like those in Beyoncé's recent work?

There are a number of artists who practice, though they don't necessarily incorporate it into their work. And this is not new. Artists like Celia Cruz, Chaka Khan, and Sade are known lfa practitioners. D'angelo's **Voodoo** album may be the first in more recent times to be laced with lfa images and symbolism. I've seen pictures of **Usher** wearing his eleke (spiritual beads worn by practitioners), even rappers like **21 Savage** make **reference** to lfa. But this is just a few in the music industry. There are many visual artists like Marcia Jones, Sol Sax off the top of my head... as well as a host of people in various capacities from corporate america, to academia, to sports who are active practitioners, priests and priestesses. We're all around you... Beyoncé ain't the first or last.