

**The Sacred Impetus behind Creative Empowerment in Poetry: A Comparative
Study of Black Women Poets Catherine Acholonu and Lorna Goodison**

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Abstract

Examining poetry under the rubric of religion, geography, and gender provides a lens through which I read postcolonial literatures, thus positing new emphasis in literary studies, and suggesting for African women empowerment as opposed to weakness, articulation as opposed to silence. Religion and poetry among Black people in Africa and the Black diaspora are sacred because religion pervades values, beliefs, and socio-political life, and religion saturates the environment; as well, the role of a poet is connected to that of a seer or a sage. Comparing *Turn Thanks*, a collection by Jamaican-born Afro-Caribbean poet Lorna Goodison with *The Spring's Last Drop*, a collection by Nigerian poet Catherine Acholonu, reveals that African and Afro-Caribbean women's strong sense of community, spiritual sensitivity, holistic attitude of women's fight for liberation, the quest for healing and hope through the power of crafted words and rituals present an ideology of Africana womanhood as embedded in African cultural traditions. The two poets are rooted in their culture and being rooted empowers them as members of the community and speaking voice to build on values in their communities.

In terms of the structure and themes of their books, the diction of their poems and the titles of their works, the poets suggest that there is a spirit connected with the works that readers must discern and become attuned to in order to unravel the meaning and the significance of the works. Both poets go back to the primacy of the word in the spiritual and oral traditions.

The thesis argues that spirituality will continue to interest scholars because it represents a strong desire of twentieth-century humanity to maintain equilibrium in the face of socio-political upheavals through a discerned integration of both the spirit and

body for a holistic existence and survival of communities and to understand the potential of applying and realizing the power of the spirit in connecting rather than fragmenting individuals and communities. On the whole, African people in Africa and the diaspora have utilized their spirituality in order to survive, to maintain the sanctity of their culture, and to present communities that have the quality of constituting a complex unity. People from other cultures and vocations can apply the benefits that can be gained from spirituality in their communities and vocations, not only for creative empowerment but for wholeness in those communities and maximum benefits in their vocations.

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Dedication

To my mother, Mrs. Mercy Ogbonne Umeakanne (Nwunye Onyenkuzi), ideal help-meet, staunch advocate of spiritual values, my teacher for you believe in independence and empowerment through education and you taught me how to read and write in the mother tongue as a necessary literary appreciation of my heritage. Your generosity, strength, and courage in the face of conviction, and your discipline remain my example.

To the memory of my late father, Mr. Ezenwa I. Umeakanne (Ewere ihe ozo tinye na onodu ihe ozo, oma adaba), a believer in God, in people, and in possibilities and for his selfless service as a clergyman. You are fondly remembered for your transparent honesty, courage, and for giving your children a God-centered vision. You were different for you pursued the education of your daughters with equal zeal as that of your sons, even when it was unpopular to do so in the Nigerian 1960s.

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CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The Relationships among Community, Religion, Gender, Creative Empowerment and Literature

Rarely [...] have scholars sought to examine literature under the double rubric of the religious and the geographical.

—Jamie S. Scott xxiii

When the people defeat their religious arm they move in their secular troops, men good at confusing people by making up new words that would be palatable to the masses who confuse quackery with profundity. Exorcism becomes Psychoanalysis, Hex becomes Death Wish, Possession becomes Hysteria.

—Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* 213

I see a constant striving to be what we already are, but do not manifest fully—human beings in the image of God, truly human among humans.

—Mercy Oduyoye 16

Can *one* claim reasonable knowledge of modern African women writers without taking a measured walk in *their* mothers' gardens? Can African women writers suffer historical amnesia and still survive as writers, Africans, and WOMEN? [...] [W]omen, as speaking subjects, have been transformed into written objects through the collusion of the imperialistic subject and patriarchal subject and [...] these beleaguered written objects are reinscribing their relevance as speaking / writing subjects.

—Obioma Nnaemeka 137

The twentieth-century Black women poets in this study demonstrate their understanding of the place of spirituality in literature and the gains from such consciousness. Both in their subjects and their technique, the religious insight these Black women have becomes a vehicle for them to communicate their themes and offers them creative impetus, visibility, and strong connection to their community. Jamaican-born Afro-Caribbean poet Lorna Goodison in *Turn Thanks* and Nigerian poet Catherine Acholonu in *The Spring's Last Drop* demonstrate in their poetry a consciousness of the spiritual as a tool for creative empowerment, making spirituality both subject matter and source of diction so as to be relevant in their societies. Both poets demonstrate their indebtedness to their ancestral connections which have fed their poetic imagination. They reflect upon the values they share in traditional African religion and culture as powerful tools for liberation and independence for Black people. The connection among spirituality, creative writing and Black women, and the significance of such

connection in Black communities are the chief concerns in this study.

1.1 Lorna Goodison and Catherine Acholonu: A Brief Introduction

Lorna Gaye Goodison was born of a racially mixed ancestry in Kingston, Jamaica, on August 1, 1947. From her collection *Turn Thanks* we learn that her great-grandmother was a Black woman whom she refers to as “Guinea Woman” (20), while her great-grandfather, William, was a Whiteman (32). She refers to her mother, Doris, as “my dark mother” (6), while her father, Marcus, she describes as having a “burnished copper” complexion (28). Edward Baugh observes that despite being “of mixed African and European ancestry, Goodison wears her blackness easily” (88). Her ancestry is similar to that of Derek Walcott but she neither shows any evidence of ambivalence in relationship to Africa nor Walcott’s torturous sense of being “divided to the vein?” (“A Far Cry From Africa” 27). In her poetic self-fashioning, “she places herself in her family and in the wider culture and history” (*The Feminist Companion to Literature in English* 439). Her family includes not only her biological line of descent (mother, father, grandfather, grandmother, great-grandmother, and great-grandfather who was a Whiteman) but also her Jamaican and Afro-Caribbean community (Miss Mirry and Nana of the Maroons) and heritage from both literary and visual artists from around the world (William Wordsworth, Anna Akhmatova, Henry Daley, Vincent Van Gogh, and Max Ernest). According to Anne Walmsley, “Goodison’s poetry combines wide sympathies with a sense of her own specific placing. She speaks always as a Jamaican woman and as a person of the Third World” (231). In seeking for healing and recovery of Black people, she also appeals to the spiritual oneness of humans, claiming, “There is a spirit nation / under the ocean” (*Turn Thanks* 61).

Goodison is a poet, painter, short-story writer, and professor of creative writing at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor and also a faculty member of the University of Toronto’s English department. Goodison attended the University of Iowa. She is one of the

best known and most widely acclaimed poets of the Caribbean region. She is a very prolific poet and has published eight individual volumes of poetry. They are *Tamarind Season* (1980), *I Am Becoming My Mother* (1986, 1995), *Heartease* (1988), *Selected Poems* (1992), *To Us, All Flowers Are Roses* (1995), *Turn Thanks* (1999), *Guinea Woman* (2000), *Travelling Mercies* (2001), and *Controlling the Silver* (2005). Her other works include “By Love Possessed” (1988), “Bella Makes Life” (1989), and *Baby Mother and the King of Swords* (1990) to mention but these three. Anthologies that feature her poetry are *Jamaican Woman: An Anthology of Poems* (1980), *Creation Fire: A CAFRA Anthology of Caribbean Women’s Poetry* (1990) and the *Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces*. She has won a number of awards for her creative output. For her collection *To Us, All Flowers are Roses*, she was awarded a Gold Star by the Magazine Booklist. In 1986 she received the Commonwealth Poetry Prize for North and South America. She was Bunting Fellow at Redcliffe College. According to Baugh, “Her paintings have been exhibited in Jamaica, Guyana, Germany, and the United States, and her own paintings and drawings illustrate the covers of all her books” (86). She has made her mark in the world of creativity.

Goodison is fully integrated into the religion, rituals, and interpretation of omens in her community; in particular, she testifies through her poetry the potency of the word in bringing about healing and reconstruction of lives for individuals and the members of her community. Her concern for the community suggests her Africana womanhood instincts about involvement, organization, and active participation in building societies where the primary role of women is recognized. Hugh Hodges in “Start-Over: Possession Rites and Healing Rituals in the Poetry of Lorna Goodison” shows Goodison’s commitment to ritual healing and liberation for the members of her community. Discussing Goodison's poetry, he writes,

Drawing on the language and symbolism of Pocomania, Revivalism, Pentecostalism, and Rastafarianism, as well as Jamaican folk songs and stories, these poems explore Goodison's belief in the power of language to actually do things, to cleanse, heal, and

strengthen. [...] In her more recent collections, *Turn Thanks* and *Travelling Mercies*, she turns her attention to more private rituals—those daily rites and ceremonies that perform "local miracles" and give one the strength to endure and start over. (19)

Goodison, like other Black women writers, looks into the cultural values and past history of Black people in order to reconstruct a future with egalitarianism in African societies. The themes, structure, and diction of her work reflect her deep spiritual rootedness and her Africana womanhood.

The Nigerian-born Catherine Obianuju Acholonu was born on October 26, 1951, in Orlu, Imo State, as the eldest child in the family of Chief Lazarus Olumba. She also married Dr. Acholonu, son of the Orlu traditional ruler. Her position as the first daughter of a chief is significant because she plays the role of helping to organize her father's household even though she is married. She claims in the poem "the message" to be the reincarnation of the spirit of her dead father. She is a chronicler of tradition, and in her poems she sets out to restore order through expert crafting of words, and in continuation of her father's mission, as a chief in her village. Since in Igbo culture, politics is not separated from religion, Acholonu finds her father's role as the leader of her community tied to his religious role, which tie has the potential to produce a richer and more balanced life for the individual and the people. She attempts to show the spiritual and traditional roots of her poetry as a testimony of her cultural roots and privileges of a poet in her community. Her social positioning and role in her father's house testifies to her Africana womanhood in seeking for a more egalitarian society where women participate in the political, cultural, and religious life of their community by right.

Acholonu is a poet, short-story writer, children's story writer, and an associate professor in English and African Studies in Alvan Ikoku College of Education, Owerri. Acholonu is an alumnus of the University of Dusseldorf, Germany. She has published two individual poetry

collections, *Nigeria in the Year 1999* (1985) and *The Spring's Last Drop* (1985). She is not as prolific as Goodison in terms of publishing poetry; nevertheless, she continues to receive critical attention as one of Nigerian widely acknowledged woman poet. She is also an anthropologist and a politician, which may explain why she is not very prolific in poetry. Her fiction works include a short story, "Mother was a Great Man," three books of plays— *Into the Heart of Biafra* (1970, 1985), *Trial of the Beautiful Ones* (1985), and *The Deal and Who is the Head of State* (1986). Her works for children are *Abu Umu Praimari (Collection of Poems for Junior Primary)* (1985); *Children's Verses I (Poetry for Junior Primary)*, and *Children's Verses II or Recite and Learn (Poetry for Senior Primary)* (1985) She has made a significant contribution in the field of anthropology by publishing *The Igbo Roots of Olaudah Equiano: An Anthropological Research* (1989). She also published *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism* (1995). Her current research centers on locating the ancient port city Tilmun in the Nigeria-Cameroon axis on the Calabar seaport on the Atlantic Coast. She was a visiting professor at Manhattanville College, Purchase, New York (1990-91) and a writer-in residence at the Westchester Consortium for International Studies, New York. As a politician, in 1999, she contested for the Presidency of Nigeria even while her husband was still the deputy governor of Imo State. She has held several government positions and is well known for her leadership role, serving as her country's ambassador for the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (Forum of Arts and Culture) and also Africa Renaissance ambassador.

Acholonu belongs to the second generation of modern Nigerian poets, who are neither confronted with the task of fighting for independence as the pioneers poets were, nor experimenting with different poetic forms and individualistic romantic concerns as the first generation of modern Nigerian poets were. The vision of the poets in the second generation of modern Nigerian poets is to give poetry back to the masses (i.e. to make poetry the voice of the masses) and to use their art to correct the evils and corruption that swept the nation

after the Nigerian civil war (1967-70). The Nigerian civil war contributed to the erosion of traditional values, and marked the onset of armed robbery and other forms of violence, as common crimes. Acholonu attempts to use her art to reconnect the people to the traditional values they knew before. It is in her collection *The Spring's Last Drop* that she suggests that the solution to most societal problems lies in turning back to tradition, even to its mystic experience. Obi Maduakor in "Female Voices in Poetry: Catherine Acholonu and Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie as Poets" acknowledges Acholonu's commitment to traditional values and faith. Maduakor summarizes her themes and structure in the collection: "To a certain extent all her poems sum up to one supreme statement on the need to be rooted; to be anchored to tradition, to a faith or some kind of supernatural agency. The absence of anchorage she calls "Cultural loss," and the consequence of cultural loss is "Social death" (76). Even Acholonu's social criticism is guided by her commitment to traditional virtues; hence commenting on her role as a chronicler of the virtue of traditional life, Maduakor says "her poetry [. . .] has passion, for it flows from the heart and is conceived from within" (81). Her position in her family, training, and in the nation affirms her commitment to upholding spiritual, traditional, and Africana womanhood principles for liberation and restoration of the dignity of Black cultural values.

Goodison and Acholonu are rooted in both the tradition and spirituality of their communities, and they find such rooting inspiring to their creativity and in articulating themes relevant to their experiences as Black women and to that of their people. These women poets are examples of a larger community of Black women writers who are mining tradition and spirituality for creative empowerment, meaning, hope, and relevance in different African and diasporic communities.

1.2 Definition of Terms

At this juncture there is a need to define key terms that will be used in the study in

order to show their context and limitation in the study. The terms defined are *spirituality*, *religion*, *sacredness*, *patriarchy*, and concluded with a note on the creative empowerment that has a sacred impetus. *Spirituality* refers to the state of being sensitive to non-physical values and influence. Black women poets by being sensitive to non-physical or non-material values and influence have the ability to tap into the spiritual values in their communities and apply them to maintaining harmony in their communities. That a person or a subject is spiritual suggests the ability to merge the consciousness of non-material (spiritual) reality with that of physical reality without losing the essence in either of them. Spirituality does not imply the neglect of the body; rather it implies a discerned integration of both the spirit and the body for a holistic existence in the community. For this reason, faith in an outside and unseen agency is also a necessary aspect of spirituality so that one can have a full experience of life.

When spiritual insight informs literature, it provides members of a community with a viable model for achieving a fuller and richer life. Sandra M. Schneiders in “Spirituality in the Academy” attests to the interest in spirituality in the “contemporary imagination” (263). She writes: “[Spirituality] represents, on the whole, a profound and authentic desire of 20th - century humanity for wholeness in the midst of fragmentation, for community in the face of isolation and loneliness, for liberating transcendence, for meaning in life, for values that endure. Human beings are spirit in the world, and spirituality is the effort to understand and realize the potential of that extraordinary and paradoxical condition” (264). Spiritualizing life through literary creativity is not a futile exercise for Black women; rather, it serves as a process through which wholeness can be achieved for them and the members of their community. Spirituality is critical in understanding the cultural dynamics that influence twentieth-century Black women writers because they conceive spirituality in the form of the human spirit, which can perceive, tap, and articulate the realities that go beyond the physical, as being essential to creativity and for the holistic survival of the community. In this study

references to religion and spirituality are presented with the view that they are consubstantial so that even though they represent different aspects of transcendental influences, they are identical in substance and in essence so far as they surpass the natural plane of reality or knowledge. For instance, one can be spiritual without being religious in the sense that one may be open to transcendental communication without having any connection to a specific god or divinity. On November 12, 2005, a broadcast documentary, “tbsstoryline” that featured Aisha Richards and her family made clear one Black woman’s spirituality. According to the documentary, on September 16, 2004, Aisha’s family lost their home and everything they owned to house fire. Aisha confessed that herself, her two children, and husband would not have survived the fire if not for her spiritual sensitivity. The fire started at about 2.00 a.m., and she was woken up by a voice that spoke in her ears, “get up.” She quickly woke up, grabbed her two children, and with her husband they ran outside. Their house was reduced to ashes in less than twenty minutes of their waking up. Her testimony after the fire included the simple statement, “I am a spiritual person.”¹ There may also be some people who have transcendental experiences such as receiving information from dreams and practicing meditation, yet they do not worship any being. Nevertheless, spiritual consciousness is more common among religious people than among non-religious people.

Religion is the system of belief and worship of a supernatural agency. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*:

[Religion] describes action or conduct indicating a belief in, reverence for; and desire to please, a divine ruling power; the exercise or practice of rites or observances implying this particular system of faith and worship. [Religion] is the recognition on the part of [humans] of some higher unseen power as having control of [their] destiny, and as being entitled to obedience, reverence, and worship; [and it is both] the general mental and moral attitude resulting from this belief, with reference to its effect upon

the individual or the community; [and] personal or general acceptance of this feeling as a standard of spiritual and practical life.

Religion in traditional African societies is different from that in contemporary Western societies according to Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (108). He writes, "One of the marks of traditional life is the extent to which beliefs, activities, habits of mind, and behaviour in general are shot through with what Europeans and Americans would call 'religion'" (108). Religion in the traditional sense refers to beliefs in invisible spiritual forces, invocation of spiritual agents seen as being part of every sphere of life, symbols and rituals needed to maintain equilibrium because of "the plurality of invisible spiritual forces," connection to the ancestors, and identification with customs handed down from generation to generation (135). Most religious people are sensitive to unseen agency and respond to it, but spiritual people may only be interested in gaining the stability and balance they can achieve by understanding the world through not only their physical senses but also their spirit; yet they may not accept a conscious systematized body of belief in a supernatural being. Most religious people will do both—accept the benefits of being spiritually conscious and submit to a divine ruling power through worship and sacrifice. If my understanding of my culture in the light of traditional African beliefs is anything to go by, then I can say that African people are practically spiritual but theoretically religious.

Appiah presents the practicality of spirituality in relation to religion with reference to traditional African religion. His suggestion is that Africans' sense of communalism in sharing beliefs and relationships extends to their "belief in the plurality of invisible spiritual forces" (135) so that "theological issues" and "theoretical question[s]" are "unimportant when the practical issue is getting God on your side" (135). The set-up in the community with loose organization of people living in communities, having their own governing set of beliefs and norms, which may vary from community to community and yet not clash, reflects the internal

organic structure of most Black communities. A Yoruba proverb says that the sky is wide enough to allow every bird to fly without colliding. The title of Appiah's book—in my father's house—reflects the same theory. He writes: “the phrase ‘in my father's house [...]’ must be completed ‘there are many mansions,’ and the biblical understanding that, when Christ utters those words at the Last Supper, he means that there is room enough for all in heaven; *his* Father's house. [...] no one who knows these places could deny—that there are plenty of room in Africa, in Ghana, even in Asante, for all sorts and conditions of men and women; that at each level, Africa is various” (ix). It is hard for other cultures to appreciate how, despite patriarchy and the existence of certain practices that are anti-women, Black women can still find tools in spirituality and traditions to help them resist oppression and be empowered. However this study sanctions the possibility of their being able to do that.

The term *Sacredness* implies the setting apart of a person or thing for defined, special, or singular use as opposed to common or general use; or it refers to a vocation considered to be too important to be changed or interfered with. There are some Black women who have had experiences within some Black people's cultural values, and they write about them with a view that they are sacred to them and their communities so that they cannot permit alien ideologies to interfere with those. For instance, Goodison and Acholonu are both concerned about deliverance, healing, and restoration of their people from oppression, slavery and cultural imperialism; hence, they represent in their poetry enactable rituals that will restore dignity and hope to the members of their community. The experiences they describe are sacred to them and to their people and can assume meaning only in the context of Black culture. *Sacred* can also refer to a landscape where one's experience is realized. It is for this reason that the geographical location of Africa assumes a sacred status for Black women writers in Africa and the diaspora because many if not all have a spiritual connection to the land where their ancestors are buried (“The Gods of the Delta” 244). This idea is analogous to most Indigenous peoples' belief that their lands are sacred because they embody their

ancestors and provide a mystical interaction with the deities in their communities. Writers have need of a sacred space as a reference point from which they can assess, articulate, and make their subjects relevant to the needs of their societies. The twentieth-century Black women poets in this study consciously aware of the spiritual sensitivity and sacredness of poetry among their people determinedly show how their creative talents connect to their spiritual claims, thereby resisting any patriarchal limitations on their creativity.

Sacredness is not something that relates only to a place, person, or community, but it can become the basis of a psychological process whereby an individual maintains a degree of individualism in the midst of other seemingly favourable or even unfavourable options. Sacredness can be communal and, at the same time, individualistic, based on values that are both defined and contextualized in a particular society. For instance, the Bible's position about sacralization is that each person is the best judge of the sacredness of an issue or thing with regards to that person's choices (Rom.14:5). However, the criteria for evaluating sacredness are whether the choices made help to sharpen and advance an individual's holistic relationship within the community, and also whether, in the long run, the community can profit from such perceiving of something as sacred. This understanding of the sacred is succinctly stated by Jamie S. Scott, quoting Mircea Eliade: "'sacred space' [is] a phrase capturing the sense of spiritual significance associated with those concrete locations in which adherents to different religious traditions, past and present, maintain a ritual sense of the sanctity of life and its cycles" (xvi). In this study, poetry becomes a sacred ground for Black women to articulate the invisible and visible realities peculiar to their land and people—geographical Africa, the Caribbean or Blackness. Poets such as Lorna Goodison and Catherine Acholonu concentrate on the sacredness of their responsibilities as poets, conscious of the African ancestral pantheon. The union these poets try to achieve between the physical and spiritual is an example of sacralization in poetry. The same union reflects the flexible gendered power relations that marked pre-colonial Africa.

The term *Patriarchy* refers to “The predominance of men in positions of power and influence in society, with cultural values and norms being seen as favouring men” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Patriarchy is founded and thrives on the perception that men are more capable and important than women and therefore should hold political, economic, and social control in the society. It encourages the exclusion of women from decision making and marginalization of women in the sharing of resources. In patriarchal societies, not only is descent often traced through the male line but the men hold the reins of authority and women can only participate in making decisions by sufferance. Patriarchy describes the hegemony of men in most societies. Even in some societies where descent and relationship are reckoned through the male line variations may exist in the degree of male dominance on issues such as in making crucial decisions in homes, the economy, and land ownership (*Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* 14).

Functional forms of patriarchy vary across history and culture, and are further differentiated by such factors as class, age, race, and sexual orientation. For instance, among the Igbos, during pre-colonial times and part of the colonial period, the society was ruled by a group of elders, but women had their own line of leadership and participated fully in making vital decisions. The works of Kamene Okonjo and 'Zulu Sofola discuss such a dual political system not only among the Igbos but also among the Yorubas. Sofola makes reference to the Hausa Queen Amina of the Zazzau Kingdom. She was a brilliant military strategist who fought and won many battles in 1588 and 1589. She built the famous Zaria city wall, which is still there to this day. Ifi Amadiume in *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* shows how Igbo men and women shared power and roles because women had independent economic power, and the centrality of religion contributed to this sharing of power. Adelaide Maame Akua Boadi in “Engaging Patriarchy: Pentecostal Gender Ideology and Practices in Nigeria” acknowledges the fact that some proverbs, societal norms, and folklore enforce men’s dominance over women even when “African myths of creation do

not differentiate between human beings” (174). Societal norms are built on the expectation that women are to be compliant but the point here, with regards to the communities discussed in this study, is that there still exist provisions in communities that provide women with some alternatives or tools to resist patriarchy; the choice is women’s. Boadi writes,

While most Nigerian societies are patriarchal, women also have very strong informal roles and a whole spectrum of recognizable titles that run somewhat parallel to the male-dominated political structure. [...] These parallels may be viewed in the ways in which divinities are presented within most cultures in Africa. Ancestral spirits and the divinities of most societies can be male or female. However, the earth and water deities in Nigeria are mostly female. [...] Igbo women had their own socially accepted way of addressing pertinent societal issues. Igbo political institutions, according to Judith Van Allen, embraced every adult—female or male—who chose to be present at the village assembly. Since status was ascribed rather than achieved, there were virtually ‘no limits to women’s political power.’ (174-75)

Boadi reiterates the point that religion contributes to “some emancipation from the grips of patriarchy” (179). Patriarchy still operates in the Caribbean and Nigerian societies of the poets addressed in this study; it was escalated by colonialism, which weakened the previous traditional set-up that recognized women’s power. Nevertheless, the philosophy of life, belief systems, rituals, taboos, cooperation, and multiple relationships that are characteristics of communal societies can provide tools for women to resist patriarchy and exercise control over themselves and their creativity. Black women in Jamaica and in Nigeria continue to confront patriarchy but are increasingly recognizing and making use of the tools provided for them in traditional values, belief systems, and religious practices to enable them to live a more fulfilling life and to make more contributions to their society.

The empowerment to be creative as is seen in the work of these poets has a sacred impetus because the poets address themes that relate to Black people’s experiences and seek

for solutions and hope by mining their spiritual perception of realities. This sacred impetus is a very important form of resistance and a survival tool in a patriarchal society. For Black women, sacred impetus creates alternative models to a patriarchal monopoly on literary subjects because of the women's sensitivity to spiritual, historical, sociological, and cultural realities and values in their societies. The spiritual space provided in the community, which has also informed the creativity of these Black women poets, presents a promise of wholeness, co-operation, and literary growth in number and in quality in their societies.

Mapping and redefining African and Black diasporic women writers' engagement with spirituality as a vehicle for creative empowerment demands a focused engagement with gender issues within African cosmologies, societies, languages, and literature. Black women, in publicly reclaiming what has always belonged to them in terms of creative empowerment, present evidence that there exist relationships among creativity, religion, community, and gender. Going back to African roots and origins, Black women writers and theorists demonstrate that there is no traditional politic of an irrevocable nature that enshrines discrimination against or limitation of Black women in the physical realm; then how much less could there be in the spiritual realm, which is genderless? Black women's future in the African world has the potential for development and freedom despite the cultural ambiguities that on one hand uphold the importance of women in the society and on the other hand marginalize them. Nevertheless, there are loopholes in at least some African societies that provide the platform on which Black women can negotiate for their rights.

Studies carried out by Obioma Nnaemeka, Filomina Steady, and 'Zulu Sofola provide a secure basis to argue that most traditional African societies in pre-colonialism times were dynamic so that an average woman pragmatically manipulated her circumstances and potentials and achieved independence and visibility. The colonial intrusion that gave way to cultural alienation, capitalism, and class distinction compounded the problem of average modern Black women in their struggles to achieve the independence and visibility their

foremothers had. Florence Stratton in *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* describes the result of colonialism on Black women as being made “subject to interlocking forms of oppression: to the racism of colonialism and to indigenous and foreign structures of male domination” (7). Even though there were existing forms of patriarchy, colonialism heightened male superiority and did not leave room for other forms of governance “while the African traditional system in concept and actualization [had] room for many or more” (“Feminism and African Womanhood” 62). For instance, education that ought to empower Black women helps to divide them into socio-economic classes and makes it difficult for them to agree, organize, and believe to a woman that they can revoke any decision made by men that is contrary to women’s interests.² Sofola laments the loss of traditional egalitarian values and writes about the difference between the educated Black woman who lives in delusions of grandeur and speaks in a

demeaning manner about her illiterate, rural, ‘traditional’ counterpart. It never occurs to her that while she parrots the phrase, ‘What a man can do, a woman can do better,’ her illiterate counterpart asserts: ‘What a woman can do, a man cannot do.’ While she quotes the European saying, ‘Behind every successful man is a woman,’ her illiterate counterpart affirms: ‘The strength of a man is in his woman,’ or ‘A soldier with a mother does not die in a war front.’ While she conceives of herself as someone to be seen not heard; her illiterate counterpart says: ‘If the *Ada* (daughter) says that a day-old chick is a hen, so it is.’ (63)

The dynamism that marked the pre-colonial African societies is not completely destroyed but it needs to be rebuilt.

Cultural alienation has made familiar the once alien notion of the powerlessness of women; Black women seem therefore to be losing hold of their ability to organize and exert pressure on the patriarchal set-up in order to meet their needs.³ As well, instead of the society being run by decisions made by recognized socio-political groups and women’s lines

of authority, the instituted foreign male-centered system of governance completely eliminated women's leadership. 'Zulu Sofola in "Feminism and African Womanhood" writes about the political powerlessness of women as a result of imperialism: "Chaos set in and women were dislodged and made irrelevant, a fact that is now full-blown in today's European / Arab systems of governance in contemporary Africa where our women have been rendered irrelevant, ineffective, and completely *de-womanized*" (59). The greatest problem of modern African woman is herself because she lacks knowledge about how to effectively combine existing traditional egalitarian values with her Western education so as to recover the collective memory of African womanhood and so refuse to be "de-womanized," being backed by both the physical and spiritual mandates replete in African cosmologies. According to Sofola there is always available a "particular traditional power-line" under which Black women can mobilize themselves to overcome obstacles against the full expression of their humanity (61). By going back to the culture, especially to their spiritual heritage, Black women may be able to recover their ability to negotiate for their rights in patriarchal societies.

The sacred impetus behind the creativity of the Black poets in this study is also a way of empowering the whole society and affirming the dignity of African culture because in their works they emphasize the world-views, omens, rituals, and traditional values of their people. This study traces the traditional and spiritual spaces of two Black women poets in their communities and how these spaces have empowered them creatively and ensured their indispensability in their communities. When Christianity and traditional religion are contextualized in contemporary Black communities to create meaning and be relevant in those communities, Black women can then build on their spiritual perceptions to overcome patriarchal resistance to their empowerment. The rich expression of Black women's humanity through their spiritual creative empowerment is evident in the type of literature they write, and is complementary to the fact that their literary contribution through their spirituality

contributes to a more balanced representation of Black people's experience in literature than otherwise. The point in this study is that Black women can harness the potential power that lies in being culturally grounded and possessing spiritual sensitivity so as to be empowered creatively, as well as in other relevant areas of their lives.

This study suggests that twentieth-century Black women writers exhibit sensitivity to the question of the sacred in literature, and they easily discover spirituality even in ordinary life occupations. For instance, Hugh Hodges observes about Goodison's poetry, "The discovery of the universal in the most humble domestic activities, indeed uncovering the world-changing potential in any ritual act [...] is a recurring theme in Goodison's poetry (4). Elaine Lindsay in "Figuring the Sacred: Geography, Spirituality and Literature" demonstrates that women's spirituality is seen in common issues of life and is useful in meeting the needs of a society (60-61). Creativity of any sort, especially that of women, stems from life occupations and experiences and has the potential to release the soul to higher levels of perception and interpretation, a process which the poetry of the Black women in this study demonstrates. In twentieth-century Black women's writing there is a great literary and cultural enrichment to creativity in their society, which may be likened to Jonathan Swift's "sweetness and light."⁴ The term sweetness and light is relevant in this study in the sense that when the physical and spiritual, and men and women, find a way to coexist harmoniously, the result is analogous to Jonathan Swift's perception of the literary enrichment there will be when writers find a way to harmonize in literature and the benefits of spiritual sensitivity are applied to creativity.

Elaine Lindsay, using three Australian women fiction writers, Elizabeth Jolley, Thea Astley, and Barbara Hanrahan, demonstrates what difference women's spirituality can make in a nation's psyche and wholesomeness. For instance, she writes that women seem more drawn to a God who exhibits the attributes of Christ: "Hanrahan's God is the source of love and creativity. The divinity envisaged by these writers is the source of life, love, and goodness—in this it is true to the redemptive strand of Christianity, but it is foreign to

Australian Christianity as propounded in men's theological texts" (62-63). These Australian women writers demonstrate a practical connection between their spirituality and writing. As well, a Nigerian professor of theater arts, 'Zulu Sofola, unequivocally demonstrates a connection between her writing and her spirituality. In answer to the question as to what her Christian faith has got to do with the theatre, she claims that her spiritual illumination has greatly contributed to her effectiveness in her profession. She bases her argument on the Bible and the church, saying, "The book of Psalms is a Performing Arts section. And David used music to perform wonders [...] The set-up in the church is a replica of the set-up in the theatre. [...] God was the first Creative Artist because He created the universe. And we are only secondary artists because we are trying to simulate what He has created in an attempt to interpret life" (Kolawole 22). Therefore, spirituality need not be an isolated experience but can be made practical and relevant to one's occupation and physical existence.

Sofola's claim is further validated in the experiences of some Black women in different periods and locations. A prolific and successful London-based Black woman writer, Buchi Emecheta, who has at least eleven full-length novels to her credit, besides other writings, finds inspiration for her writing by reading the Bible. She says in an interview, "The Bible has influenced all my work. I like its simplicity. If I feel that I'm losing touch with my style, I always go back to The Bible, the King James edition" (Umeh xxx). As well, Stephen E. Henderson in his introduction to *Black Women Writers (1950-1980)* reports that Maya Angelou's preparation for writing includes praying and having a Bible on her desk as she arranges her "mind in writing order" (xxvi). The connection between the beliefs of these Black women and their writings suggests that faith is a recognizable force in creativity, just as a physician's access to the spiritual state of a patient provides for better healing than otherwise (Parker Palmer's "Teaching with Heart and Soul" 380).

This study therefore maintains that twentieth-century Black women writers' ability to navigate through cultural ambiguities, backed by spiritual sanction, helps them to present

their themes as viable sacred ideas, which the members of their societies may not easily ignore. Black women writers engage the spiritual while shaping and reinterpreting the physical to suit the realities in their communities and to meet their creative needs. However, since an identity is a crucial aspect for an individual or a community, to both name and theorize about Black women's concerns in the context of postcolonialism and their cultural and spiritual experiences in Black communities makes Black women recognizable both in their own rights and in their works.

Naming Black women's concerns is a crucial aspect in this study because Black women have often been shadowed by misconceptions, misnaming, and misrepresentation. Maya Angelou in her autobiography hints at the dangers of misnaming, especially for a Black person: "Every person I knew had a hellish horror of being 'called out of his name.' It was a dangerous practice to call [Negroes] anything that could be loosely construed as insulting because of the centuries of their having been called niggers, jigs, dinges, blackbirds, crows, boots, and spooks" (91). As well, the majority of African cosmologies show that name carries a deep significance; hence in Black Africa, more than in many other cultures, one's name has a significance that is sacred to the individual. Ruth Finnegan in *Oral Literature in Africa* observes that names have "greater literary interest than might at first appear" (470).⁵ Name holds a special place in most communities for people tend to assume the image conveyed by the meaning of their names. For instance, an Igbo proverb says, "*afa onye na achoga onye*" (the name a person bears defines the person). In the Bible also, God specializes in changing people's names to suit a particular intent and mission He might have.⁶ In "How Naming and Defining Shape Gender Relations," Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, Annelies Knoppers, Margaret Koch, Douglas Schuurman, and Helen Sterk single out naming as a crucial act in gender politics: "Naming and defining are two of the most powerful acts of human speech. When something is named, it takes on a fuller reality. It can be talked about. It has presence" (345). Therefore this study attempts to properly name Black women in Africa and the

diaspora in their own terms—occupation, struggles, and aspirations—to reflect their unequivocal personhood in the face of an imposed identity emanating from foreign theories and interpretations. Naming them properly will help us to appreciate the spiritual significance and relevance of their creative output. Therefore, Black women struggles will be reintegrated into African cultural contexts so as to destroy the false image given to them by patriarchal societies and, in the diaspora, by some Western scholars.

Black women's current challenges to building an egalitarian society are related to race, being a third-world person, which means coming from "a continent that has been subjected to nearly five hundred years of assault [and] battery [and exploitation] of various kinds. Then followed the period of political or structural integration within capitalism which was colonization" (*Re-creating Ourselves* 28), changes in socio-political arrangement of society and economy so that Black women were made redundant and relegated to a lower class in the new system; therefore their challenges and concerns are quite different from those of White women. Black women need then to develop their own ideology that will meet their present needs and not be assimilated into White women's ideology because their contemporary experience is still shaped by the legacies of slavery and by contemporary racism. Every literary work has a life of its own because it developed out of a particular history, and specific experiences and cultural practices, and every work will always resonate with the things that relate to the context of its development. Chinua Achebe in *Morning Yet on Creation Day* writes, "every literature must seek the things that belong unto its peace, it must, in other words, speak of a particular place, evolve out of the necessities of its history, past and current, and aspirations and destiny of its people" (7). Even though White women may not have been the original enslavers of Black females during slavery, they were direct oppressors in slaveholding societies. They were more of foes than sympathizers because they needed to preserve their own place as mistresses under the patriarchal provision. For instance, Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Elizabeth Keckley's *Behind the*

Scenes, or Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House give insight into the cold-blooded wars that existed between Black slave women and White slave mistresses. Therefore, historically, traditionally, and because of cultural values of Black people Black women's fight for equality with Black men cannot be subsumed under White women's feminism.

Notes

¹ The documentary is available on <www.tbsstoryline.com> 12 Nov. 2005.

² In 1984, in Okwu-umueze village in Uga, Anambra State, in the eastern part of Nigeria, all the married women fled the village as one woman one early morning because they opposed a certain decision their men took. They felt that the men should have consulted them in making crucial decisions. In order to negotiate with the women, the men in the village went to the village to which the women fled. They also paid a fine before the elders of the village allowed their wives to return with them. This kind of action is common in some other communities, where women have devised an alternative means of enforcing their demands (see Judith Van Allen's "Sitting on a Man"). The political power of women lies in their ability to organize and unite to fight for their interests.

³ Kamene Okonjo in "Women's Political Participation in Nigeria" dissents from the idea of the powerlessness of the Black woman. She quotes M.J. Herskovits, who, writing in 1962, states that, "psychologically and functionally the position of women in African societies has been high" (81). As well, P. Bohannan and P. Curtin in *Africa and Africans* confirm that "African women by and large have a high social position; [sic] legal rights, religious and political responsibility, economic independence. Women in Africa are not, in short, a deprived group as they were in the nineteenth century Western world" (82).

⁴ Jonathan Swift in *The Battle of the Books* gives an interesting analogy by contrasting the bee with the spider, representing the difference between the moderns and the ancients. He writes, in the words of the ancients, "As for Us, the Antients, We are content with the Bee, to pretend to Nothing of our own, beyond our Wings and our Voice: that is to say, our Flights and our Language; For the rest, whatever we have got, has been by infinite Labor, and search, and ranging thro's every Corner of Nature: The Difference is, that instead of Dirt and Poison, we have rather chose to till our Hives with Honey and Wax, thus furnishing Mankind with

the two Noblest of Things, which are Sweetness and Light.” I find this association relevant to the appeal to spirituality by women poets through their searching out for themselves models with which they can assist their community in cultivating enlightenment while still seeking to please through their writing.

⁵ Ruth Finnegan notes different interpretations that might be given to names, which “ranged from the psychological functions of names, in providing assurance or ‘working out’ tensions, to their connection with the structure of society, their social function in minimizing friction, or their usefulness either in expressing the self-image of their owner or in providing a means of indirect comment when a direct one is not feasible” (470). Naming is therefore of important consequence for individuals and community. To be misnamed is to be misrepresented, a condition which can be a threat to the full development of an individual.

⁶ See, for example, Gen. 17:5—Abram changed to Abraham; Gen. 17: 15—Sarai changed to Sarah; Gen. 32: 28—Jacob changed to Israel. In each of these cases, the name is changed to reflect a new status that the individual is going to assume. For instance, Abraham and Sarah refer to parenthood, while Israel refers to nationhood. One wonders if these individuals would not have become all these things without having their names changed. I suggest that names may then have an unseen spiritual power, which may urge things into existence, based on the power of spoken words.

CHAPTER TWO

Feminism, Womanism, Naming, and Misnaming: An Attempt to Inscribe the Black Woman's Struggles into African Cultural Contexts

Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name.

—Gen. 2:19

That little man in black there! He says woman can't have as much rights as men. If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back and get it right-side up again. And now that they are asking to do it the men better let them.

—Sojourner Truth

It is important to name the African women's fight for liberation so that Black women's ideologies can be differentiated from those of White women. In the Bible, Adam named all the living creatures at the time of creation and, as far as we can know, humans have always exhibited the power of naming. In the modern era, at least, the "strong" have always named the "weak." Black women have not only been named negatively, using some proverbs and myths from patriarchal society, but their White women counterparts have also tried to approximate their experiences by naming them. It is time for them to name themselves and their liberatory politics in description of their selfhood, experiences, and struggles. This section examines different theories in the process of arriving at an adequate name for Black women's struggles for fulfillment. The process of naming is carried out by some Black women writers, critics, and theorists in their attempts to describe Black women's involvement in liberation, as situated in postcolonial African and diasporic contexts. Attempts will be made in this section to arrive at a name that recognizes African women's cultural, social, and political challenges, and also the uniqueness of their experiences, especially as different from those of White women. An understanding of one's name according to the context and experience that give rise to the name spells out possibilities in making choices as the individual recognizes and masters human and cultural limitations.

Theories about women's liberation in Black African contexts are informed by the different myths about human origins, by world views, and by different cultural attitudes to gender relations. Speaking about gender relations in Africa, 'Zulu Sofola claims that, generally, the African worldview does not support any form of discrimination against the woman. She writes: "The African worldview underscores the idea that both genders have the same divine source even though each has its own distinctive roles to play in the life of the community. Consequently, the African sees the human society as an organic, holistic reality whose existence and survival can be achieved only through a positive, harmonious social organization in which all the members are relevant and effective" (52-53). She recounts a myth of the Yoruba people of southwest Nigeria and adjacent areas that explains that disaster struck the first human entourage on the earth because as revealed by "*Orunmila*, the *Ifa* oracular deity" women were being marginalized, Tranquility quickly returns to the community only when the abnormal discrimination is expunged from the system (53). These assertions give a glimpse into what some traditional African societies' views about gender might be. "Relatedness characterizes the African experience of the living person (54)"; there is, therefore, no denial that a distinguishing characteristic of most Black African societies is a sense of community. This sense of community has an impact on the way gender relations are perceived, defined, and pursued.

In theorizing and naming Black women's gender struggles, the word *women* and terms that derive from it are preferred to the word *females* and the terms that derive from it. The reason for the preference is that, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *woman* is defined as "An adult female *human* being. (The context may or may not have special reference to sex or to adult age.)," while *female* is described as "Belonging to the sex which bears offspring" whether human, animals, plants, or trees. These definitions suggest that the word *woman* implies a reference to a human individual instead of to a sexual role of reproductivity, while *female* may be used as an adjective or noun associated with

reproduction. In the Christian context Adam named Eve *woman* before she had a child. The initial act of naming her a woman shows that Eve's personality is more important than her later motherhood responsibility. Moreover, while we can talk about the femaleness of all kinds of creatures, we cannot talk of their womanness. For instance, Noah preserved in his ark all the male and female of every living creature, whose exact identity or personality remains unknown to us, because their importance is limited to their reproductive potentials. Therefore, in exploring the name by which we can describe Black women's struggles for equality, terms deriving from the noun *women* are preferred to the terms deriving from the noun and adjective *females*.

2.1 Naming and Misnaming: The Role of Women in Traditional African Societies

The ability to name oneself or one's group in the context of one's culture and experience is essential for psychological, spiritual, and physical empowerment. In the attempt to name Black women, in the context of their culture and in the realms of their experiences, many terms have emerged among Black writers and theorists. There are several nuances of meaning, applications, and engaging debate by women scholars and feminists from Africa and the diaspora that will be considered with reference to Black women, and a synthesis will then be given for the purposes of the study. Among the Black women theorists and exponents involved in naming Black women's struggles in gaining and maintaining visibility or empowerment in their different communities, whether for themselves or for their different communities, names overlap. For instance, *feminism* recurs in *Negofeminism*, *Black / African feminism*; alternative terms are *Womanism* and *Africana Womanism*, and from the first derives the term *De-womanization*. Examining some of these terms and how they are derived, and what each signifies, namely a common denominator of community-based resiliency in Black Africa, helps to distinguish the Black African women's gender fight.

Distinguishing characteristics such as “world-view rooted in a philosophy of holistic harmony [,] communalism” (Sofola 54), belief in collective and generational destiny, and centrality of religion provide a platform for theorizing about a suitable name for Black African women’s gender struggles. Despite the debate about the name that best describes Black women’s struggles, attempts are made here to crystallize the central ideologies into cultural pragmatism, relevant in a general way to denominate Black people’s Africanness and experience. Cultural pragmatism merges the practical strategies for survival gleaned from the experiences of some African foremothers with traditions that support the rights of women. For instance, Obioma Nnaemeka, who in her article “Feminism, Rebellious Women, and Cultural Boundaries,” advocates for what she calls “negofeminism” as a term suitable to describe Black women’s liberation struggles, inscribes her ideology of Black women’s personhood and movement into the primacy of communality located in the Igbo cultural philosophy about negotiation, partnership, and cooperation. In her exposition of the idea she quotes E.N. Njaka in *Igbo Political Culture*, “The Igbo believes he [sic] can negotiate anything”; an Igbo proverb says, “*Ife kwulu, ife akwudebie* (When something stands, something else stands beside it)”; and cites Martin Heidegger’s assertion in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, that “A boundary is not that at which something stops [. . .] the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing” (106). Nnaemeka then says, “It is not a paradox to exercise freedom within limits [. . .] within the context of [. . .] cultural boundaries” (107). Exercising freedom within the boundaries of limits she denotes *negofeminism*, a term which therefore indicates the negotiable positions of feminism in Black Africa. Katherine Frank concurs with the possibilities of negotiation within Black African’s women fight for their humanity by showing “how [. . .] the contemporary African woman [can] negotiate her way between the claims of tradition and modernization” (107). Women’s freedom can be neither constructive nor beneficial if there are no boundaries provided in the system where it functions, in the same way that men’s freedom becomes oppressive when

there are no checks and balances provided in the same system. The point here is that the African context is elastic enough to give the African woman possibilities and choices instead of her relying upon Western feminism that may alienate her culturally, determine her actions, and consequently obfuscate her horizon and space.

Black women's struggles in Africa embodies far more complex issues than the binary presentation of life as gendered opposites allows because there is a connection between women's struggles and men's concerns. The recognition of this connection will be more effectual in the fight for gender equality than the division into two mutually exclusive classes will allow. Obioma Nnaemeka in "Imag(in)ing Knowledge, Power, and Subversion in the Margins" claims that "issues in [Anglo-American] feminism—voice, victimhood, agency, subjectivity, sisterhood, etc.—are recast in different, complex, and interesting ways in African literature, in general, and works by African women writers, in particular" (1). In the introduction to the book *The Politics of M(othering): Womanhood, Identity and Resistance in African Literature*, Nnaemeka writes that the essays in the book call into question

some of the existing feminist studies of African literature that insist on straitjacketing the complex web of issues raised in the literary works into *oppositional* binaries, such as traditional / modern, male / female, agent / victim, when the works themselves and the reality from which they evolve disrupt such binaries; when the central arguments of the works and their appeal [. . .] rest on the authors' insistence on border crossings, gray areas and the ambiguous interstices of the binaries where woman is both benevolent *and* malevolent with powers that are healing *and* lethal [. . .], both traditional *and* modern [. . .], both victim *and* agent [. . .], both goddess *and* whore [. . .], "soft but stern" [. . .]; in short, just human. In my view, what much of the existing feminist analyses of African literatures designate as irreconcilable, "unfeminist," contradictions are actually the tensions of mutuality, not antagonism, (*complementary* not *oppositional*) that give life, vibrancy, and meaning to the African

environment. (2-3)

Black women need to articulate their ideologies and set the criteria for the appreciation of their lives, fights, and aspirations, processes which no outsider can do better. Their creed and ideologies must fit the historical, cultural, socio-political, and religious contexts of their community and not subscribe to any anticipatory antagonism between the genders.

Most Black women wield a degree of political, economic, and creative power and independence in traditional African and diasporic societies, and these help to distinguish them from other cultures. For instance, Kamene Okonjo claims from facts gathered in Africa in “Women’s Political Participation in Nigeria” that “a political system with bisexual¹ functional roles” fits better into African societies “[than] the unisexual political system which obtains in much of the Western world” (82). She explains that “in the bisexual political system, while specific roles in politics are assigned to men, others are given to women, and women participate fully in the political affairs of their communities by right rather than by sufferance” (82). In the Caribbean context, Olive Senior in *Working Miracles* writes, “Caribbean women have never been passive actors in the public and political arena. A strong thread of women’s active involvement in the struggle for justice runs throughout our history” (150). She cites as example “Nanny of the Maroons, who was not only her people’s leader but their military tactician and priestess, occupying a role similar to that of the Queen Mother in Asante culture” (150). Caribbean women’s involvement in the struggle for justice is not based only on their experience in the so-called New World but it is more likely to have been part of their very identity as Black women with particular cultural experiences and consciousness of the needs in their community.

Black women have always been involved in cultural, political, and creative issues in their societies. The present author in “Things Fall Apart: An International Perspective on Intra-Gender Misogyny” discusses the powerful social and political influences of *Umuada*² in the eastern part of Nigeria, which influences, in modern times, are being eroded and

corrupted by capitalism and cultural alienation. Ogbu Kalu elaborates, “At the formal level, *afo-umuada* in North-western Igboland is the most significant interweaving of power and religion because the *Umuada* constituted an important aspect to the political structure” (193). Judith Van Allen in “Sitting on a Man” writes about Igbo women’s pre-colonial political power: “Igbo women had a significant role in traditional political life. As individuals, they participated in village meetings with men. But their real political power was based on the solidarity of women, as expressed in their own political institutions—their ‘meetings’ (*mikiri* or *mitiri*), their market networks, their kinship groups, and their right to use strikes, boycotts and force to effect their decisions” (165). Allen goes on to show how political discourse is built on the ability to use proverbs, parables, and metaphor: “Influential speech was the creative and skillful use of tradition to assure others that a certain course of action was both a wise and right thing to do. The leaders of Igbo society were men and women who combined wealth and generosity with ‘mouth’—the ability to speak well” (167). Creativity is invested in the orality, politics, and spirituality of the society; hence, creativity is the effect of living and participating in social, political, and spiritual affairs in the society. In the same way that Black women wield some political powers, they also play an active role in creativity and can use their traditional and political influence to counter restrictions on their creativity.

Examining “Women in Literature,” Douglas Killam and Ruth Rowe in *The Companion to African Literatures* present an overview of African women, especially their centrality and influence in their different societies so as to destroy the stereotypical notion of the passive pre-colonial Black woman. Most Black women are not passive observers of issues in their societies but make their voices heard in different forms of creativity. About South Africa they claim that before colonialism “many black women participated in the oral traditions of the different ethnic groups. Contrary to conventional views about women’s total exclusion from the public space, recent research shows that women played active roles in producing and performing these oral forms, and their relation to oral traditions shapes their

status in contemporary literary practices” (302). About East Africa they show that women’s creativity enables them “to participate fully in the life of their societies” (302). Women writers in East Africa may not have needed to insist in their writing “that women’s issues are not separate from society’s issues” (301) were it not for the colonial replacement of the traditional ideas about interdependence of gender in Africa with the patriarchal Victorian English idea that women’s domain is the home and that public life in politics is exclusively men’s affair. With that replacement, women lost their traditional empowerment, and with capitalism, and lack of an early start in education, women became subordinates to men, who consequently dominate literary criticism as in other spheres. The writings of women in West Africa “argue for the liberated, self-reliant, and resourceful female person and for a complementarity of sex roles in a society where mutual obligations, multiple motherhood and kinship, and the centrality of children in a stable family form the cornerstone of inter-gender co-operation” (306). This brief review of women’s place in literature and culture does not deny that there is a degree of power imbalance between men and women but argues that women have the potential to resist men’s subjugation, going back to tradition, employing negotiation and, sometimes, outright defiance to assert their pre-colonial political and creative empowerment in their community. Black women’s concern in the fight for equality with men must be rooted in the cultural practices and beliefs of Black people, which rooting is evident from the studies carried out by Obioma Nnaemeka, ’Zulu Sofola, Filomina Steady, and Olive Senior, and must distinguish Black women’s chief concern from Western women’s feminism.

’Zulu Sofola’s study presents a catalogue of the valorous achievements of some Black women before the dawn of colonialism so as to corroborate the claim about the influential pre-colonial Black woman. She maintains that some diasporic Black women’s resourcefulness and valiancy are not the outcome of inter-play between slavery and the New World, resulting in “the so-called black matriarchy” (61). Rather, to fashion their lives

pragmatically is an indigenous characteristic of Black women because their history reveals that they were used to taking up arms and deposing tyrants, and in the present, some are moving to reclaim their traditional empowerment as full participants in every facet of society. As they continue to reclaim their traditional empowerment and rightly appropriate some of the gains from formal education, without destroying what they already have, they are more likely to achieve equal rights with men than not. Sofola presents as evidence the pre-colonial dual-sex power structure among the Igbos and Yorubas that created powerful women monarchs and the 1929 Igbo Women's War with the British Government. Her account includes women in other African nations such as Angola, Ghana, Zimbabwe, Egypt, and Ethiopia, and in the Benin and Borno Empires as well as the African-American Rosa Parks, whose fearless resistance to racism helped usher in Civil Rights revolution of the 1960s in the United States (59-61).

Olive Senior makes an interesting observation that may show a connection between African women's experience in Africa and their counterparts in the Caribbean. She refers to Walter Rodney's report on the Georgetown riots of 1905 that claims that women played the main role in the riot. She writes: "Governor Hodgson, who had formerly held office in West Africa, saw similarities between resistance of the women to colonial rule and what was happening in Guyana, and 'tried to persuade the men of Guyana that the women were the ones causing the trouble and that they should be kept quiet'" (150). Senior also refers to Swithin Wilmot's work in 1986 that claims Jamaican "women labourers could often be far less conciliatory and more militant than the men" (151-52). The consciousness of community helps Black woman to seek to contribute to the society by resisting oppression. Sofola submits: "We assert that the presence of strong, black women in the African diaspora was due to the African woman's healthy psyche and heritage that they carried over to the new world" (61). She laments the damage done to educated Black women's psyches because they have imbibed the "Western [. . .] philosophy of gender bias" (61). Even though formal education, to

a certain extent, brings empowerment to Black women, it also helps to divide them into classes and lessens their ability to organize across such differences and to resist patriarchy effectively.

Language also plays a role in the traditional empowerment of Black women in some African cultures. Sofola writes, “The female as an appendage is evident in the English language” (53) because the word *woman* and the collective gender word *human* seem to be derivations of the word *man*, while such derivations do not exist in many other African languages. The table below, using two African languages, Igbo and Yoruba, that inform Caribbean language usage, presents the import of Sofola’s claim that the words used to describe either male or female in many Black communities betray no patriarchal gender bias:

| | English | Igbo | Yoruba |
|-------------------|--------------|--------|---------|
| | child | Nwa | Rin |
| Specific Gender | female/woman | Nwanyi | Obirin |
| | Male | Nwoke | Okunrin |
| Collective Gender | Man/human | Madu | Enia |

The *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage* under the entry for “’e (e, ee)” notes an interesting connection between the Caribbean and African gender concept. The word ’e applies to the third-person singular pronoun serving for nominative, objective, and possessive cases for both male and female. Richard Allsopp points to such similarities in Yoruba, Igbo, and Efik (Nigerian) Languages where “*o*, *ya*, and *enye*” respectively serve as the third-person singular pronoun for both male and female and for all cases, in the three languages, as in some other African languages (211).³ Therefore, another distinguishing factor of Black women’s gender fight from that of White women is language.

The point is that some traditional African cultures offer liberational possibilities for women based upon Black cultures, religions, social structures, and languages. Supported by tradition, languages, cultural practices, and spiritual realities, Black women can negotiate

within the traditional boundary and social position for their right because of the overriding importance of community. Negotiation in this case is neither an armed struggle nor weakness; rather it constitutes the basis of political empowerment in African societies. It will also assist Black women in reflecting back on culturally-proven dynamics of organization as their political tool in resisting any form of patriarchy that attempts to undermine their position in society. Oyeronke Oyewumi in “African Models of Solidarity” writes, “Organizing— associating to attain a purpose— is the process by which traditional Africans wove the very fabric of their societies. Because of the strong sense of community and the fact that individual experience could best be realized in a group, formal organizations become a way of life” (16-17). Contemporary Black women then need to begin to organize themselves again according to traditionally ascribed status and their social position, both of which embrace four possible kinship realities any African woman may fit into, according to Sofola, namely: “her reality as a woman, the equal of a man in essence; her reality as a daughter; [...] her reality as a mother; [and] her reality as a wife” (61), the latter which ought not to be the most prominent. Any of these realities can overlap, but each is as authentic as any similar realities that may define men in the society. Any of those realities can constitute a political force in African societies. Mercy Oduyoye in *Daughters of Anowa* reiterates this understanding by directing attention to the ancient “folk etymology” of the Akans, that in “Most migration stories of the Akan,” women are at the “center [. . .] leading the community to freedom and prosperity” (8). Therefore any authentic view of the African woman must reflect the fact of her ancient empowerment attested to by tradition. This is what the Black women poets in this study seek to do by giving free rein to their spirituality and the traditional values in their communities as means of reclaiming the power they have always shared with men.

Although Nnaemaka roots her negofeminism in Black women’s traditional empowerment, the term *feminism* is still not widely acceptable among African women writers; therefore the debate as to whether African women’s fight for liberation should be

described as feminism or not will continue. While some may choose to qualify the term with “Black” or “African,” others may insist that it is an original concept among African women; some even claim that if anything the African woman is pre-feminist.⁴ Some argue that White women have only given a name to Black women’s ideologies, and so appropriated and popularized that name; yet others advocate for the invention of another term that will be more encompassing in defining what African and Black diasporic’s women’s concerns and struggles have been and still are. Buchi Emecheta warily describes her connection with feminism saying: “I write about the little happenings of everyday life. Being a woman, and African born, I see things through an African woman’s eyes. I chronicle the little happenings in the lives of the African women I know. I did not know that by doing so I was going to be called a feminist. But if I am now a feminist then I am an African feminist with a small ‘f’” (175). Nnaemeka in her article “Feminism, Rebellious Women, [. . .]” reports that Flora Nwapa, after listening to different Black women’s presentations on the issue during the 1992 Women in Africa and the African Diaspora (WAAD) Conference, avows that if feminism is about “possibilities” and “choices,” “I will go all out and say that I am a feminist with a big ‘f’” (83). However, Ama Ata Aidoo, who insists on using the term basically as indigenous to African women, absolutely free from foreignness, said, during the Second African Writers’ Conference (1986):

To try to remind ourselves and our brothers and lovers and husbands and colleagues that we also exist should not be taken as something foreign, as something bad. African women struggling both on behalf of themselves and on behalf of the wider community is very much a part of our heritage. It is not new and I really refuse to be told I am learning feminism from abroad, from Lapland. Africa has produced a much more concrete tradition of strong women fighters than most other societies. So when we say that, [sic] we are refusing to be overlooked [,] we are only acting today as daughters and grand-daughters of women who always refused to keep quiet. We

haven't learnt this from anybody abroad. (183)

Other Black women theorists and writers also concur with Aidoo that African women have always fought for their rights irrespective of White women's feminism.

Filomina Steady in "The Black Woman Cross-Culturally: An Overview," similarly perceiving feminism as being original to Africa, submits: "True feminism is an abnegation of male protection and a determination to be resourceful and self-reliant. The majority of the black women in Africa and in the diaspora have developed these characteristics. [Black women understand that Black men] "are also victims of oppression [...] It can, therefore, be stated with much justification that the black woman is to a large extent the original feminist" (35-36). In another article, "African Feminism: A World-wide Perspective," she reiterates how feminism is a lived experience of African women, and by describing that experience, she unequivocally states the tenets of womanism as presented by its exponents such as Alice Walker and Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi. The crux of the matter here is African culture in its emphasis on communalism and inter-dependence. Steady writes:

African patterns of feminism can be seen as having developed within a context that views human life from a total, rather than a dichotomous and exclusive, perspective. For women, the male is not "the other" but part of the human same. Each gender constitutes the critical half that makes the human whole. Neither sex is totally complete in itself to constitute a unit by itself. Each has and needs a complement, despite the possession of unique features of its own. (8)

The import of Steady's definition and description of African women's brand of feminism is to argue for unity and cooperation, inclusiveness, and complementariness between men and women, rather than dichotomy. The image of Black women and their concerns, from Steady's argument, demonstrate a striving towards unity between the men and women, lack of fragmentation, and a holistic view of society.

The African-American writer Alice Walker, in her book *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (1983), coined the term *womanism* to describe Black women's liberationist politics. This term is now commonly used by academic African-American women; however, other Black women have also independently used the term. For instance, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, who published an article on the subject in 1985, not only makes an independent use of the term, she goes further than Walker to make it distinct from *feminism*, stressing the fights against racism, sexism, and classism as important grounds for differentiation between womanism and feminism. Walker's use of the term "womanism" is drawn from folk wisdom associated with the word *womanish*. She defines it as

A black feminist or feminist of color [. . .] wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one [. . .] Responsible. In charge. *Serious* [. . .] Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, [. . .] Traditionally Universalist, [. . .] Traditionally capable, [. . .] Loves struggle. *Loves* the Folk. *Loves* herself. *Regardless*. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender. (xi-xii)

Walker's definition suggests that the two terms are not exclusive of each other and that they only betray a shade of difference such as between purple and lavender. However, Ogunyemi maintains that there are obvious differences between a White woman writer's concern, which she describes as feminism, and a Black woman writer's concern, which she describes as womanism. In her article "Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English," she delineates differences between the two terms, claiming that the Black woman writer "will recognize that, along with her consciousness of sexual issues, she must incorporate racial, cultural, national, economic, and political considerations into her philosophy" (64). The African woman writer, Ogunyemi suggests, chooses to deal with the complexities of the totality of liberation in her society because she operates in the context of a community. The worth of the individual is realized in the context of the community; hence,

issues that concern the community take precedence over the concerns of the individual. It is believed that when things go well with the community, the individual would benefit. Black women's choice to be concerned with everything that concerns their community makes them indispensable agents in the fight for the total liberation of both men and children. Anna Julia Cooper in *A Voice from the South* succinctly states the primary role of Black women in the liberation of Black people: "Only the BLACK WOMAN can say 'when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole *Negro* race enters with me'" (31). The term womanism has also become a popular and common term in theological studies by Black women.⁵ The general interest in advocating for a term to differentiate Black women's concerns from those of White women is based upon the understanding that feminism may be limited and narrow, in a way, for the full expression and accommodation of the historical experiences and concerns of Black women, and for the fact that White women have discriminated against Black women earlier in the feminist movement.⁶ Walker's subscription to only a shade of difference between Black women's fight and White women's fight is not acceptable because there are pragmatically weightier matters such as culture, history, usage, and language that may affect the understanding and application of feminism in the African context.

Clenora Hudson-Weems, who is the chief exponent of what she calls "Africana womanism," presented the terminology at the 1992 Women in Africa and Diaspora (WAAD) Conference and later published her book entitled *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves* (1993). She presents an interesting argument to show that there is definitely a need to rename African women's liberation movement, emphasizing that feminism is an unsuitable term for Black women's struggle in Africa and the diaspora. She makes a distinction between *womanist* as presented in Walker's thesis and *Africana womanist* and goes on to claim "that the major problem with the African feminist is that of naming" (156). Again she

diagnoses the problem with the term Black feminist by stating that “the black feminist is an Africana woman who has adopted the agenda of the feminist movement to some degree in that she, like the white feminist, perceives gender issues to be most critical in her quest for empowerment and selfhood” (156). She calls white feminism an “alien framework” because, from its primary design and practice, African women with their needs have never been part of its concern; moreover, Africana women have never seen Africana men as their primary antagonists. According to her remarks during the WAAD conference, as reported by Nnaemeka, Black women need “to create a more feasible, workable terminology, because when you buy the terminology, you necessarily buy the agenda” (“Feminism” 82). She then presents Africana womanism as the only fertile and suitable terminology to describe Black women’s movement because it “is an ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. It is grounded in *African* culture and, therefore, it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs, and desires of African women” (155). Being properly named is crucial in life as well as in this study; therefore this long review is undertaken to help us arrive at a suitable name that will reflect the humanity of Black women historically and in the context of African culture. *Womanhood* refers to women in general; therefore the term Africana womanhood is the derived term for this study because it embraces the personality, primary roles, and aspirations of Black women for survival and hopes for egalitarianism in African societies. Organizing is central and not incidental to Black women, and that is their political strength, which may lead to a far more egalitarian society in the future. It is important not to forget the context for a name because the context gives potency to the name in the day it comes into use.

Becoming conscious of one’s name and naming one’s self according to one’s dreams, hopes, and life involvement are effective fundamental principles, necessary for development and growth. In Black people’s experience, women are actively involved with the issues and challenges of the race, as both men and women were enslaved equally.⁷ Olive Senior refers to

women's role in resisting enslavement: "Women, like men, plotted, conspired, murdered and became runaways and guerrilla leaders. They were arrested, tortured, hanged, transported and imprisoned; in short they were subjected to the range of punishments laid down under West Indian slave laws" (150). It is not feminism but womanhood, defined culturally, spiritually, and meaningfully brought to bear on issues arising in the society that not only embodies the true image of Black women but also may lead to their total liberation. Black women writers in this study recognize that their spirituality can be both liberating and empowering and that their community, gender, lived experiences, and aspirations help in their creative endeavours.

2.2 Understanding Spirituality and Models of Black Women's Creative Endeavours as Source of Creative Empowerment

Lorna Goodison and Catherine Acholonu, despite their different backgrounds, show that tradition and spirituality offer them inspiration and empower them; therefore, these poets are examples of larger group of Black women who represent the centrality of spirituality in Black communities. In order to review the influence of the spiritual on the writings of other Black women and the meaning and relevance of the spiritual to their creative empowerment and choice and representation of literary subjects, I have created three analytical categories so as to examine closely the issues involved. The categories are the following: how inspiration is important in creativity, in empowering women, and in helping them articulate realities in their communities; how spiritual perceptions, based on traditional values, are employed as creative tools for resisting and surviving; and how religious women who have been creative as a result of their religious encounters have become models of emancipation for modern creative Black women. These categories delineate postcolonial contexts of women's spirituality in relationship to creativity.

Authority that comes from spiritual empowerment is related to creativity and articulation. Inspiration, which is usually considered a spiritual concept, provides new ideas

and a basis for creativity, and acts as a model for a particular piece of work and masterly handling of situations. John Coakley in “Introduction: Women’s Creativity in Religious Context” defines creativity as “people’s use of the materials available to them—the circumstances and opportunities of their lives and their culture’s repertory of ideas, assumptions, conflicts, and images—to express themselves in some new way” (1). He claims that women display such creativity especially in the religious sphere. There is a pattern that must be acknowledged about the boost spirituality gives to humans; this pattern has often been recognized and exploited by society. For instance, Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe, in *Things Fall Apart*, tells of Chielo, the priestess of the Oracle of the Hills and Caves, *Agbala*, who assumes a powerful position in her society once she is acting under the influence of *Agbala’s* spirit. Chielo creatively negotiates the different terrain of gendered power relations in the case of her interaction with the powerful male Okonkwo through giving herself over to possession by *Agbala*. In the same vein, the male elders of Umuofia assume the position of the ancestors in order boldly and authoritatively to settle thorny matters in the village.⁸ The elders of Umuofia gave a masterful performance in the way they handled the case between Uzowulu and his wife (80). Therefore, the possible connection between visibility through creativity (crafting order in the articulation of experiences) and spiritual authority can be exploited by men and women alike. Black women can also exploit the connection between poetic art and inspired utterances as part of their spirituality in order to nullify patriarchal surveillance and imposed powerlessness.

The role of a poet in the African context has a connection to that of a seer, being a mouthpiece for the gods or for the people. The function of the poet from the backdrop of culture shows that the poet can be associated with a degree of divinity—wielding supernatural powers, because the poet might have the fourth-dimensional eye that sees beyond what ordinary people see. Donatus Nwoga in *West African Verse* refers to the poet as a “sage,” a mouthpiece for the community (122); and Eldred Jones in “Editorial,” *African*

Literature Today, no. 15 points out that the poet in African societies is assumed to be a “prophet” or “a seer” (1). The poet is endowed with intelligence above that of the ordinary members of the community. The poet then assumes a public function in the society. Despite women’s contribution in that regard, men may still not easily accord such position to them.⁹ Some creative women resist them and for their poetry claim a spiritual authority, which is higher than the physical authority that men wield. Both men and women revere and submit to spiritual authority. The poet in this role becomes a prophetess: that is, she functions for the benefit of the community as somebody who foresees, interprets, shapes, crafts, patterns, unravels natural phenomena, and provides meaning relating to existential problems.

Since spirituality implies, as well, an unseen influence that produces an effectual result on the physical, some artists and philosophers have come to associate inspiration with desirable madness, especially when the creative artist functions under the influence of a god or deity. The association can make a case for the influence of the spiritual on creativity.¹⁰ To assume a public role in some traditional African societies demands that the person must have a connection with the supernatural and have an acute spirituality so that his or her function will both endure as well as become profitable to the community when he or she addresses issues connected to their situations. If the connection between spirituality and creativity is established, it may account for the sacredness of poetic art and at the same time mark off poets as having a special significance in the society, as Nwoga and Jones hinted above. Lorna Goodison in “How I Became a Writer” asserts “that there is still more truth and light to be revealed from the word [. . .] I think poets are the ones who should write about truth and light” (293). The suggested special position can make the vocation exclusionary and can also explain why in patriarchal societies there is often resistance to acknowledging women as poets. Nevertheless, if creativity has a relationship with spirituality, I affirm from my experience of spiritual devotion among my own Ibo people and interaction with Yoruba people that Africana women have the greatest chance to excel in the field since they are the

most numerous votaries of deities in the African pantheon. The implication of women's religious encounter is that of power, not weakness, articulation, not silence.

Although religion can be used negatively to subjugate people, it can also aid resistance. For instance, Mary Harvan in "The Gods of the Delta" discusses the struggle of Ogoni people against the exploitation of oil resources in their territory. She notes the positive "role of religion, both traditional and Christian, in a struggle heretofore considered primarily in secular terms. It demonstrates how one ethnic minority group [the Ogoni] has harmonized traditional and Christian religious beliefs and practices, employing them to oppose postcolonial forms of oppression" (242-43). Black women have often circumvented patriarchal censorship, and by employing the resistance sanctioned and given impetus by spirituality, overcome the limitations to their creativity.

Alice Walker's descriptive claim in her essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" for the existence of innate creative talent among Black women suggests both that such creativity is autochthonously connected to the African motherland and that spirituality is the basis of art. She writes: "For these grandmothers and mothers of ours were not Saints, but Artists; driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release. They were Creators, who lived lives of spiritual waste, because they were so rich in spirituality—which is the basis of Art" (233). Walker's idea here points to something of spiritual, creative efficacy resilient in Black women oppressed by slavery and racial prejudice because these women managed to be artists even from the position of limitation. The first published African-American writer is Phyllis Wheatley—a woman—so the African-American literary tradition has a matrilineal descent, a situation consonant with the large number of African women who are active in oral poetry in most African societies. There are also a significant number of Black women active in the writing tradition. Deirde LaPin in "Women in African Literature" presents the complementary role of Black women in both the written and oral traditions. She claims that "their work anticipates the renewed

sweetness that will come with a society shaped equally by men and women of all nations” (163). Modern Black women can only aspire to grasp that same spirituality that has fueled and sustained the creative talent of their foremothers. Walker says: “I went in search of the secret of what has fed that muzzled and often mutilated, but vibrant, creative spirit that the black woman has inherited, and that pops out in wild and unlikely places to this day” (239). Walker recognizes the significance of the creative spirit of the Black foremother despite the violations she has experienced: “For her so hindered and intruded upon in so many ways, being an artist has still been a daily part of her life. This ability to hold on, even in very simple ways, is work black women have done for a very long time” (242). Spirituality still has the potential, even in modern times, to lead Black women back to the helm of creativity because their claim of spiritual mandate is an agency of access in their society to make relevant contributions to issues.

Walker maintains that the creative spirit of Black women accommodates every-day affairs of life; they are not in the areas tagged “high” and distinguished but are to be found in the “low” and ordinary areas of life. She gives an instance by referring to the “anonymous” quilt made by a Black woman in Alabama, a hundred years before the time of Walker’s writing. She reports that the quilt, displayed in the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, “is considered rare, beyond price” (239). Walker writes: “Though it [the quilt] follows no known pattern of quilt-making, and though it is made of bits and pieces of worthless rags, it is obviously the work of a person of powerful imagination and deep spiritual feeling. [This anonymous Black woman must be] an artist who left her mark in the only materials she could afford, and in the only medium her position in society allowed her to use” (239). Walker’s claim about the spirituality of the anonymous Black woman is also analogous to what Virginia Woolf claims in *A Room of One’s Own* about the simultaneous existence of innate creativity and spirituality among women so that despite their restrictions in their society their creative talents still find a way of sustaining themselves. The real issue is the commitment of

the patriarchal society to keeping women silent and servile; nevertheless, the twentieth-century Black women poets in this study are exploring, sharpening, perceiving, and articulating their awareness of women's spiritual connections in view of the cultural realities in their societies.¹¹

Spirituality may breed inspiration and may fuel the imagination, so men may find women's attempt to establish a connection between their creativity and divine authority threatening because the divine is higher than men's. It will be harder for men to censor women's creativity when it is based on women's spiritual empowerment because of the centrality of religion in Africa. Religion infuses every aspect of life in Africa. According to Adelaide Maame Boadi in "Engaging Patriarchy," "The life of the African from cradle to grave, is infused with religion. This in-weaving of religion and culture produces societal norms and mores that define and guide human relations. One finds little dichotomy between religion and culture, between secular and the sacred" (172). She further claims that "women's appropriation of the [spiritual] charismata will not only create 'larger spaces' for them but also lead to some emancipation from the grips of patriarchy" (179). Therefore women backed by culture, social positioning, and spirituality can hope for true liberation that moves from within themselves to outward affirmation of what their society reveres and identifies with: religion.

Catherine Acholonu in one of her poems, "sehnsucht," stresses by paraphrasing the Bible the importance of the spiritual in liberation: "where the spirit is / there is liberty" (62). This idea attests to what Nnaemeka claims about negofeminism and Walker's "you cannot keep a good woman down."¹² If a woman truly builds on her spiritual sensitivity, her resilient spirit will buoy her up and provide her with the liberty to show that creativity is her forte. The fact is that women have contended bravely with patriarchy, venturing into fields that were forbidden them and making an impact. Spirituality provides for the Black women poets in this study the means and the subject matter for their writing. Black women can utilize the

insights gained from the spiritual and traditional realities in their different societies, such as their traditional solidarity and spiritual freedom that provide enough room for their political and creative enlargement, and that have become their creative survival strategies in literary endeavour. By reconnecting to the spiritual and traditional realities in their different societies, it becomes possible for them to actively resist patriarchal censorship of their creativity.

The second analytical category in reviewing the influence of the spiritual on the writings of other Black women and the meaning and relevance of the spiritual to their creative empowerment and choice and representation of literary subjects examines, with close attention to Black cultural contexts, how spiritual perceptions, based on traditional values, are employed as tools for resisting and surviving in creativity. Religion and its evolution in Africa relate to the development of literature. Douglas Killam and Ruth Rowe, editors of *The Companion to African Literatures* observe:

Although religion and literature are not necessarily consubstantial, it is hard to think of a culture in which religious activities do not involve poetry or parables and in which literary expression does not draw upon religious icons and idioms to enhance meaning. This contiguity is particularly pronounced in the case of Africa, where religion is an all-inclusive philosophy and cannot be separated from the political, the cultural, the social, or the creative realms of society. Any literary attempt to convey the character of the African society, therefore, will necessarily involve an acknowledgement of religion's central role. (239)

Consciousness of the spiritual or the supernatural reality is very strong in oral tradition, which has also helped to shape the creative output of Black people. For instance, music, rooted in religious ritual, played a very important role in the development of literary forms in the Caribbean (*Reggae International* 25-44). Musical movements that have spiritual connection, such as Myalism, Jonkonnu, Kumina, Pukkumina,¹³ Calypso, Dub, and Reggae embody part of the poetic development in the Caribbean because of the slaves' striving after

a “renewal of spirit even though up against impossible odds. [In such circumstances, Stephen Davis and Peter Simon explain,] drums and dances became part of the whole ritual of revolt” (28). The spiritual can be said to hold a central place in the creative output of Black people in the diaspora because they held on to values their human spirit preserved (such as dance, music, and religious rituals) to sustain their creativity, since their outward circumstances were highly circumscribed. By recognizing the essence of the spiritual as a creative agency, Black women overlook the physical male hegemony, but by means of the spiritual, they are engaging in resistance against all that denies their full humanity. Douglas Killam and Ruth Rowe maintain that traditional religion “has remained one of the inevitable subject matters in African literature” (239). Catherine Acholonu and Lorna Goodison, who subscribe to African traditional religion, understand the situation that Killam and Rowe describe: “African religion upholds the totality of existence as a religious phenomenon and the individual as existing within a universe governed by religious forces that can be placated, employed, and deployed in the service of humanity” (239). Black women, building on this understanding, confidently embrace spirituality because it is a familiar terrain on which to negotiate within patriarchal society for their creative benefit.

Some women writers have also articulated the liberatory force of the truth in contextualized Christianity in Africa, and some Black women poets are taking the lead in employing it for their own creative ends. Boadi, discussing “Pentecostalism and the Recreation of Enlarged Spaces” in Nigeria, maintains that “women’s appropriation of the Spirit [...], [their] belief in the power in the Spirit as active [advocate] in matters of ethics and legal and social justice has helped [them] to engage social and traditional patriarchal culture” (182-83). Spirituality complements the traditional political organizations of women by providing another basis for organization and another forum to address some issues that adversely affect women in the larger society; men are bound to hear them because neither sex has a monopoly on the spirit.

In the Caribbean, Althea Prince in “How Shall We Sing the Lord’s Song” attests to the centrality of religion in the Caribbean: “Religion is a part of the whole of the people—a part of what comes out of their belly. In essence, it is a large part of a Caribbean topology of B-E-I-N-G, a part of the universe in which Caribbean people abide” (26). She recounts the “states of siege” the Caribbean people have passed through—enslavement, indentureship, racism, and colonialism—and submits “they survived them with their soul intact. They survived them, with a firm commitment to and certainty about their connection with the Divine [. . .] The practice of religious traditions permeating and informing life tells us much of the Caribbean social construction of reality” (26, 27). The consciousness of life and being from the view of spiritual reality among Black people indicates one type of literature that will be meaningful in the society because it is a mode for conveying truth.

In Christianity as well, Black women are reinterpreting and reconstructing spirituality in a way that is meaningful and relevant in meeting the needs of individuals and communities. Nesha Haniff in *Blaze a Fire* writes about Reverend Judith G. Weekes, who is the pastor and administrator of the Church of the Christ Circle for Better Living. She is influenced by the New Thought Movement that radically changed the common interpretation of God and Christianity. Chief among the beliefs of the New Thought Movement are the right for the individual to rely upon his or her “spiritual discernment” and the recognition that “no man or woman is an authorized interpreter of that which can only be interpreted by one’s own soul” (109). Being conscious of the freedom that lies in the spiritual construction of life and culture in Black society will have a tremendous impact on the creative empowerment of Black women because it makes them soar above humanly-engineered hurdles to their creativity. The challenges of knowing the liberatory truth that is in Christ Jesus from which men have shut off women for centuries are being revisited.¹⁴ Women now have to pick up the gauntlet thrown down by men who purport to be the interpreters of the liberatory truth in Christ Jesus and yet have shut off women. Women writers do this by sifting, redefining, and applying the

formidable truth of spiritual equality with men, as well as prefiguring Christianity and traditional religion as grounds for creative empowerment and relevance in the society.

Black women need to harness the values in religion and in tradition coupled with their gains from modern society in order to retain their God-given rights as equals of men and recipients of the same charge of taking care of the earth. Teresa Okure in “Women in the Bible” writes: “In struggling for their God-given rights, women must reject all measures that contradict their divine vocation as agents of life or that give the impression they wish to lord it over men” (57). The rights of women need not diminish the rights of men because the universe is large enough for everybody, according to an Igbo proverb— *Egbe bere ugo bere, nke si ibe ya ebene, nku kwaa ya* (Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch, but let the one that hinders the other from perching lose its wings). The proverb emphasizes the recognition of the rights of individuals in a community. There is no need to sidetrack the argument for women’s equality by implying it takes away the rights of men; it is an issue of live and let live, but where such harmony is destroyed or subverted, tradition invokes a curse on the culprit. Mercy Amba Oduyoye in her book *Daughters of Anowa* maintains that Akan tradition and the contextualization of Christianity provide for a wholesome life in African societies. In the context of Christianity she writes: “All limitations to the fullness of life envisaged in the Christ Event ought to be completely uprooted. Jesus came that we might have life and have it more abundantly” (4). In the context of tradition in Akan society, she writes: “As a Christian African woman, I seek to understand what the ‘daughters of Anowa’¹⁵ are experiencing today and where they are going. I seek the quality of life that frees African women to respond to the fullness for which God created them” (9). It is hypocritical that women should still be discouraged from full humanity because both the cultural and spiritual milieus of their societies demonstrate their full humanity. In this study, the twentieth-century women poets see the possibilities for women based on tradition. Their works serve to expose the lame denials of men embedded in their lust for dominance, hidden fear, and misinterpretations and

misrepresentations of some crucial spiritual and cultural realities. Modern Black women have a model in traditional African cultures that can be inspiring, and it is on such a basis that Oduyoye founds her work—in the spirit of “Anowa, the mythical woman, prophet, and priest whose life of daring, suffering, and determination is reflected in the continent of Africa” (6).

Oduyoye argues also for a contextualized Christian practice for African women because the claim that God is a male— a big issue in the “global theological dialogue”— falls through in some African languages (178-79). She claims that “If anything, the African mind contains an image of a motherly Father or a fatherly Mother as the Source Being. So, calling God ‘Father’ or using a masculine pronoun in relation to God does not unsettle women in Africa” (179). [She goes on to explain,] “It is the English language (and gendered European languages) that has had adverse effects on the presence / absence of women. It would help if African Christian writers and preachers were more faithful to their African languages, ending any ambiguity in this area by translating what is intended to include both women and men with humanity” (181). Although the default image of God the Father is male, most African languages and spiritual consciousness make no room for God’s gender. Gender differentiation applies to humans and not to God because “He” is regarded as Spirit in most African languages. Black women can use the rich spiritual and traditional provisions of equality to resist patriarchy and to be empowered creatively.

The third analytical category in reviewing the influence of the spiritual on the writings of other Black women examines how by having a religious encounter and representing it in literature, some women have become creative models for other Black women. Having models in literature is very important for the development of literature; for instance, Walker writes that “The absence of models, in literature as in life, [. . .] is an occupational hazard for the artist, simply because models in art, in behavior, in growth of spirit and intellect—even if rejected—enrich and enlarge one’s view of existence” (4). As well, Nnaemeka, quoting Achebe in *A World of Ideas*, says “But you also have the storyteller who recounts the

events—and this is one who survives, who outlives all the others. It is the storyteller, in fact, who makes us what we are, who creates history. The storyteller creates the memory that the survivors must have—otherwise their surviving would have no meaning” (“Introduction: Imag(in)ing Knowledge” 7). Therefore, creating models for other people to follow is not only part of a legacy for personal and community survival but is also a very important aspect of resistance for Black women. Oftentimes, oppressors detest creative writing because it is one effective weapon in resistance; however, creativity can be irresistible when it is backed up by spirituality. Women’s consciousness of their need to write is significant because writing helps them to leave a legacy and to become models of emancipation for other women.

Spirituality feeds some women’s creativity as we can see by looking at the lives of some women writers whose astute engagement with creativity becomes the terrain of both resistance and defense, and an affirmation of their community. Examples abound of the women who have taken to spirituality as a tool of empowerment, leading them to creative writing and even to political visibility. For instance, the life of some Black women in the United States, such as Jereena Lee, Julia Foote, Zilpha Elaw, Rebecca Cox Jackson, and Maria Stewart prove this point.¹⁶ As well, some of these Black women became traveling preachers, a form of powerful resistance because of their claim of supernatural sanction. Mrs. Nancy Prince and Mary Prince, Caribbean Black women, wrote their autobiographies with the same aim of setting down their experiences, and they also utilized their spiritual enlightenment. Mrs. Nancy Prince used her travel as a form of independence and exploration of the world; as well, she enjoyed the freedom it offered her to help minister to other Black people’s needs. All these women began to be visible and became preachers, political activists, and writers just at the dawn of their religious encounter.¹⁷

In the Caribbean, Patrick Taylor in *Nation Dance* presents the speeches of Ms. Eva Fernandez Bravo, Queen Mother Bishop Yvonne B. Drakes, and Archbishop Doctor Deloris Seiveright in “Across the Waters: Practitioners Speak” to show “that the scholarly endeavor

is compatible with religious expression, though neither is reducible to the other” (8). That these three women are leaders of various religious groups from the Caribbean and Canada testifies to the empowerment that comes from spiritual enlightenment. Synthesizing spirituality with creativity is simply engaging “in a process of disalienation, a quest for meaning, and a work of reconciliation” (“Across the Waters” 8). Recognizing and contextualizing God in a people’s experience definitely diffuses into creativity, and the one who understands and appropriates the significance of spiritual dynamism in literature is most likely to be empowered creatively in Black communities. Among the African-Canadian writers, Afua Cooper in *Memories Have Tongue* subscribes to the importance of the spiritual and its empowerment in creativity. She writes: “One becomes intimate with one’s unconscious by paying attention to one’s dreams, by practicing meditation, by engaging in prayer. As this manuscript was being produced I started a dialogue with my unconscious and I received valuable gifts” (iv). The fact is that spiritual illumination can empower rather than weaken, depending on how the individual chooses to perceive and apply the principles of religion or spiritual consciousness.

Almost everyone has some spiritual experiences but the ability to articulate those experiences and name them according to their relevance to life is empowering and liberating because other people can learn from them. Alice Walker’s observation about the defiant act of reading and writing by Rebecca Cox Jackson is very relevant to how some Black women have taken charge of their destiny through creative empowerment at the dawn of their spiritual enlightenment. Rebecca Jackson could neither read nor write, but upon spiritual conversion, worked on acquiring those abilities and eventually wrote her autobiography entitled *Gifts of Power*. It is indeed essentially empowering for women to be able to write their own story as they conceive it. Walker shows the significance of Jackson’s attitude for Black women:

I simply feel that naming our own experience after our own fashion (as well as rejecting whatever does not seem to suit) is the least we can do—and in this society may well be our only tangible sign of personal freedom. It was her grasp of the importance of this that caused Rebecca Jackson to write down her spiritual “travels” that all might witness her individual path. This, that makes her original. This, that makes us thankful to receive her as a gift of power in herself. (82)

Writing the story of their lives seems to be a legacy for these women. For instance, Julia Foote who is charged with three great crimes, namely color, womanhood, and preaching, challenged sexism in Black churches, submitting “Man’s opinion weighed nothing with me, for my commission was from heaven, and my rewards were with the Most High” (208). According to Nellie Y. McKay, spiritual autobiographies were used by women writers “to express female identity through the religious faith that gave them direct access to God in the Self—the highest authority; this knowledge imbued them with pride, self-respect, and control over their intellectual lives” (152). Spiritual enlightenment proves to be a significant force in the works of notable Black women who lay claim to their spirituality, not only to assist them in living a full life but also to contribute to wholeness of experience in their community.

Patricia Hill Collins discloses a significant pattern in her work *Black Feminist Thought*, which may be a graphic representation that is essential for this study because it shows the connection of spirituality and creativity. Collins begins her discussion by quoting Maria Stewart, the first Black political speaker and concludes with her, asserting that “Stewart’s response [by becoming a speaker, political activist, and writer] speaks eloquently to the connections among knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment” (237). Knowledge comes to Stewart with her spiritual conversion, which not only makes her conscious of her self worth but also empowers her to take action towards liberation both for herself and for the members of her community. This idea is reminiscent of Oduyoye’s argument about African traditions and contextualized Christianity for the Black woman.

Oduyoye makes clear that empowerment comes from being daughters of Anowa, as well as from being conscious of God's provision for women's full humanity. The nature, role, and place of poetry in traditional and modern Africa and the diaspora are that poetry builds a sacred engagement that unifies the community. Poetry remains a sphere that demands spirituality and will always hold a promise of rich creative harvest for women.

It is important to understand the cultural context for a name just as it is important to understand the historical and cultural contexts for any work of literature so that both the name and the work will produce the desired effect for their users. This work straddles the borders of sociology, culture, politics, and theology, rather than being purely literary; therefore, chapters one and two served to clear the ground so that the fruit of the poets' creativity, that is born out of the discussed cultural contexts, that informed their works, will be enjoyed in chapter three. Chapters one and two have contributed to seeking for the things that belong to the peace of the poetry of Lorna Goodison and Catherine Acholonu because their poetry "speak of a particular place, evolve out of the necessities of its history, past and current, and aspirations and destiny of its people" (*Morning* 7).

Notes

¹ In speaking of bisexual functional roles, Okonjo is referring to the fact that men and women participate equally in political issues relating to their community, and that men do not dominate or usurp women's authority in making certain decisions. The idea behind the bisexual functional roles is that of a political dual power structure that gives equal recognition to the different roles men and women play.

² *Umuada* is one example of women's political association that runs parallel to that of men. According to Kamene Okonjo, "Umu-Ada [is] composed of the widowed, married, and unmarried daughters of a lineage, village, or a village group. They [...] took a keen interest in the local politics of their natal lineage, and village. When necessary, they took a common stand on an issue, forcing the political authorities of their village to implement their wishes or demands" (98).

³ Oyeronke Oyewumi, in her book *African Women & Feminism*, points out that "gender was not coded linguistically in [many African languages]. Indeed the kinship categories 'brother' and 'sister' do not exist in Yoruba, Igbo, Efik, Wolof, Songhoi, Benin, Manding [,] and Fulani"(10).

⁴ Clenora Hudson-Weems lists a catalogue of Africana (of African descent) women activists in America such as Sojourner Truth, "militant abolition spokesperson and universal suffragist"; Harriet Tubman, an "Underground Railroad conductor," and Ida B. Wells, "anti-lynching crusader" who fought with pen and voice against lynching. Hudson-Weems argues that Black women have always had their own genuine activities and "can be considered *prefeminists*, despite the fact that the activities of these Africana women did not focus exclusively on women's issues. In view of the activities of early Africana women such as those mentioned above and countless other unsung Africana heroines, what white feminists have done in reality was to take the life-style and techniques of Africana women activists and used them as models or blueprints for the framework of their theory, and then named,

defined, and legitimized it as the only real substantive movement for women. Hence, when they define a feminist and feminist activity, they are, in fact, identifying with independent Africana women, women they both emulated and envied” (153). Although Hudson-Weems’s thesis may be problematic because of lack of evidence that the White women feminists actually took the Africana women as models, it still relates to the importance of naming. One may be engaged in an activity without naming it, but that activity may only be recognized when it is named. Her thesis also bears out the importance of history in naming.

⁵ Mercy Oduyoye, discussing “Calling the Church to Account” in her book *Daughters of Anowa*, observes that “womanist is a term African-American feminist theologians use” (185). Mitchem Stephanie, a black woman theologian, in her book *Introducing the Womanist Theology*, describes the process of becoming a womanist as that which begins with a conscious analysis of self and community and asking questions about God and relationships. It involves “creating” and not “merely reacting.” She presents self-naming as a crucial part of womanist activity. Mitchem recounts another womanist theologian, JoAnne Marie Terrell’s assertion on the process of becoming womanists: “One does not get to be a womanist by virtue of her blackness and femininity. Nor does one become a womanist simply because one reads, understands and makes the appropriate adjustments in her life.[. . .] Black women entering the womanist enterprise commit to exploring further the contradictions that shape their collective and personal lives in the spirit of critical inquiry and in the spirit of hope” (23-24). Mitchem concludes, “These processes of growth become the marrow of womanist theology” (24).

Katie Cannon, another Black woman theologian, discussing “Womanist Perspectival Discourse and Canon Formation” in her book *Katie Canon*, finds the writings of Black women relevant for the formulation of “fresh ethical controversies relevant to [their] particular existential realities” (70). She writes, “I maintain that Black women writers stay intimately attuned to the social, cultural, and political environment in which Black life is

lived and that their writings enlarge our theopolitical consciousness and our concept of ethics altogether” (70).

These claims relate to what African women writers, in view of their history and experiences, are doing in their attempt to define themselves distinctly from white feminism. The attempt of the poets in this study to utilize spiritual consciousness as a means of getting through and staying relevant in their community makes them engage in analysis and evaluation of spiritual, cultural, and gender issues for the benefit of gaining fresh perspectives on existential problems.

⁶ In “Discrimination Against Afro-American Women,” Rosalyn Terborg-Penn writes: “Discrimination against black women in abolitionist societies organized by white women appears ironic when one considers that white women complained of discrimination by men. Abhorrence of slavery was no guarantee that white reformers would accept the Afro-American on equal terms. The black feminist movement in the United States during the mid-1970s is a continuation of a trend that began over 150 years ago. Institutionalized discrimination against black women by white women has traditionally led to the development of racially separate groups that address themselves to race-determined problems as well as to the common plight of women in America” (301-303, 315).

Anna Julia Cooper observed the discriminatory reactions of some white women against black women’s participation in “Wimodaughsis (which, being interpreted for the uninitiated, is a woman’s culture club which name is made up of the first few letters of the four words wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters).” She further writes of how the Kentucky secretary was “filled with grief and horror that any persons of Negro extraction should aspire to learn type-writing or languages or to enjoy any other advantages offered in the sacred halls of Wimodaughsis. Indeed, she had not calculated that there were any wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters, except white ones; and she is really convinced that *Wimodaughsis* [. . .] need mean just *white mothers, daughters, and sisters*” (81).

⁷ In 1851, during the Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, Sojourner Truth, a recently freed Black slave, based on Black woman's intense experience with slavery, racism, sexism, and classism, challenged the white nineteenth-century's restrictive attitude towards women and asserted the Black woman's right of equality with men because of her involvement in production. She says, "Look at me! Look at my arm [. . .] I have plowed, I have planted and I have gathered into barns. And no man could head me. *And ain't I a woman?*" (Bristow)

⁸ In Achebe's account of Chielo, the priestess of Agbala, it is interesting to note how Chielo shuns Okonkwo, the powerful patriarchal representative of his household and the village of Umuofia, when he makes an effort to protect his daughter, Ezinma, from being taken to the Oracle of the Hills and Caves when Agbala has demanded that Ezinma be brought to the Cave. Achebe writes, "The priestess suddenly screamed. 'Beware, Okonkwo! . . . Beware of exchanging words with Agbala. Does a man speak when a god speaks? Beware!'" (89). In chapter ten, Achebe tells of how the elders of the town, Umuofia, take the form of ancestral spirits in order to settle serious cases in the community. The leader, Evil Forest, addresses the humans as 'bodies.' Achebe explains that "spirits always addressed humans as 'bodies'" (80). Such accounts are not limited to traditional societies, but they suggest how humans can manipulate the spiritual, or exploit the superior authority of the spiritual over the physical for their own benefit.

⁹ Eldred Jones explains that the poet assumes a public role and that that might be part of the reason women may not have been easily acknowledged as poets. He writes that the position of a poet is "senior" in the traditional African society and that the society is slow in according to women that "public exposure." He says, "the fact remains, however, that in so far as Africa is concerned, the role of the poet also has always been public" (1). It is interesting to note that twentieth-century Black women poets employ their spirituality to gain the senior position.

¹⁰ Socrates, in the discussion he had with the title character of Plato's *Phaedrus*, identifies two kinds of madness. He explains, "And of madness there were two kinds; one produced by human infirmity, the other was a divine release of the soul from the yoke of custom and convention." The first he calls "manike" and the second he calls "mantike," that is "prophecy which foretells the future and is the noblest of arts." He goes on to identify what he calls "inspired madness." He writes, "The divine madness was subdivided into four kinds, prophetic, initiatory, poetic, erotic, having four gods presiding over them; the first was the inspiration of Apollo, the second that of Dionysus, the third that of the Muses, the fourth that of Aphrodite and Eros." The women poets in this study can be said to lay a claim to "mantike" in order to break the hold of patriarchy so that their poetic imagination will be guided by inspiration for the recreation of realities and order in their communities.

¹¹ On November 02, 2003, in the course of my preparation of the thesis proposal, I had a telephone conversation with Ogbu Kalu, Professor of World Christianity and Missions, at McCormick Theological Seminary, Chicago; he explained that spiritual awareness, alertness, and sensitivity are common occurrences with most women. Therefore their employing spirituality as empowerment possibilities is articulating and utilizing what has always been for their creative benefit.

¹² This statement reflects the title of one of Alice Walker's collection of stories, *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981).

¹³ Myalism refers to the cult that grew out of the rites for the dead. Since the death rate was high among the slaves, "funerals were the only events where slaves could associate with any degree of privacy" (28). Myalism is based on religion, dance, and ritual, just as Jonkonnu; "both transmitted aspects of their rituals, beliefs and dances to the surviving dances and version of folk religion that exist today" (28-29). Kumina is "on the more African side of the Afro-Christian continuum" while the Pukkumina is in the middle of the continuum between Afro-Christian and Christian. Kumina represents an ancestral worship cult where a person is

possessed by the ancestor, while Pukkumina involves the use of “ground spirits,” fallen angels and souls of the dead.

¹⁴ It is interesting to note that when women begin to read and interpret the Bible for themselves, formerly conceived limitations and passivity become freedom with responsibility. Sidney Cornelia Callahan crystallizes the unique position of women and men in Christianity, which does not support discrimination but offers opportunities for development. She writes, “I believe Christianity also encourages women to develop more initiative and responsibility. Both men and women are to be bride and son in the Christian community. This means, I think, that they are both to develop creative receptivity *and* aggressive initiative and responsibility” (41). Both men and women are given creative responsibilities and abilities.

¹⁵ Anowa is the ancestress of the Akan people of Ghana. Oduyoye presents “the fertile green fields of Anowaland where oppression is eliminated and reciprocity is the way” (9). Oduyoye refers to the women of Africa as daughters of Anowa who must determine which direction their lives and the lives of their community will go (10). She calls them to arise to her “vision of the New Woman in the New Africa” (11) by leading the people to hope and safety. They are to take over the destiny of their lives and lead both men and women to hope again.

¹⁶ The autobiographies of Jereena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, and Julia Foote were published separately and sold by each of them, but William Andrew’s *Sisters of the Spirit* brings together the works in one volume. In the preface to the book, Catherine L. Albanese shows the revolutionary significance of these women’s spiritual autobiographies by reiterating, “These women exemplify in their lives a feminism that challenged male leadership and prerogatives, that found in the Spirit an authority transcending the imposing presence of the ecclesiastical voice. Although this ‘spiritual feminism’ was still in its formative phases, Lee, Elaw, and Foote pointed the way along a path that other American religious women would tread.” Rebecca Cox Jackson and Maria Stewart are part of the crew of Black women who

were able to write because of their spiritual enlightenment. Jackson was a freed American slave, who started out as an illiterate, but she later wrote her autobiography *Gifts of Power*. According to Alice Walker, she later became a minister to black people in a black Shaker settlement, which she established in Philadelphia in the 1870s” (*In Search* 77). Maria W. Stewart, free-born and the nineteenth-century America’s first Black woman political speaker and writer “was a woman of profound religious faith, a pioneer black abolitionist, and a defiant champion of women’s rights. Her message was unsparing and controversial, intended as a goad to her people to organize against the tyranny of slavery in the South and to resist and defy the restrictions of bigotry in the North” (Richardson xiii). She worked to enlighten her people to take their destiny in their hands and to be liberated.

¹⁷ Frances Smith Foster in her book *Written By Herself* testifies to the significance of what she describes as “spiritual feminism” in the experience and account of Jerena Lee and Julia Foote as blazing a path in the resistance of Black women. Foster sees both writers as the contemporaries of “Maria W. Stewart, Zilpha Elaw, Rebecca Cox Jackson, and Nancy Prince, who also embraced a Christianity that moved them to literary activity [. . .] In a direct and faithful way, [. . .] [they] rendered the experiences and vision of a people, but it is an experience colored and shaped by [their] race and sex, and one which thereby enables us to create a fuller more vivid understanding of our literary and social past” (75).

CHAPTER THREE

“My Pot of Spring Water”: Traditional Religious Creative Empowerment in the Tenets of the African Pantheon

The past is not reclaimed for its own sake but because without a recognition of it, there can be no understanding of the present and no future.

Abena P.B. Busia (qtd. in Gay Wilentz)

Bila asili utumwa (Lack of tradition is tantamount to slavery).¹

Twentieth-century Black women poets of Africa and its diaspora are aware of their societies' unique history, tradition, and ethical values, especially the role their ancestors have played in sustaining their communities; therefore, their commitment to creating meaning leads them to use spiritual signifiers, such as are found in their ancestors and tradition. This awareness provides the backdrop for the study of the sacred as impetus for creative empowerment and also for the investigation of the relationship spirituality has in Black communities and in Black women poets' attempts to create meaning. Jamaican Lorna Goodison's *Turn Thanks* and Nigerian Catherine Acholonu's *The Spring's Last Drop* are examined to show the tenets of their poetry and the realities they represent, based upon the models these poets have found in the African pantheon and traditions.

The discussion in this chapter is divided into two main sub-divisions: themes that relate to the essence of ancestral models in creative empowerment, and realities and meanings embodied in their poetry because of the ancestral models. The first part examines the different models these women poets have found in their ancestors and the roles those models have played in the poets' creative empowerment. It also shows the benefits of using such models for African women's creative empowerment. Themes such as traditional foundations, roots, or origins, and the process of recognizing spiritual models in each poet's creative development are examined. The second part of the chapter examines the significance of the structure of their poetry collections, use of figurative language and diction suffused with

sacred imagery, and the effectiveness of such devices in creating meaning in and for their communities. Chapters one and two have already provided the historical, political, cultural, and religious background necessary in appreciating the poetry in this chapter and have shown how the poets' commitment to the ideology of Africana womanhood informs their attitude to their community.

These women poets demonstrate the fact that having a personhood and a creativity that are rooted in one's tradition provides a balance between the traditional and modern consciousness; furthermore, being rooted in this way also gives longevity and relevance to the meaning of a poet's work in the community. Spirituality has a connection to traditional practices because of the presence of the ancestors. Being spiritually inclined can gain for the creative artist fresh perspectives that are objective in the sense that ancestors are understood to be spirits; therefore, they are not physically limited and so can illuminate and inspire the poets, an idea to which the women poets studied here subscribe. The women poets suggest the possibility of actual spirit possession, where a spirit takes control of the mind of the individual, who now acts under the influence of the spirit. These women poets' spiritual connections to the ancestors also act as props of their communities' values, an affirmation and recognition of their heritage in different ways. For instance, Acholonu, speaking figuratively, calls her cultural and spiritual heritage "my pot of spring water" (26): cleaving to it she vows, "[. . .] I cannot lose it / this stem / this prop ("the spring's last drop" 16). Goodison, recognizing her Afro-Caribbean heritage and coming from a culture that is already saturated with creativity, rich figurative language, and stunning tales, writes:

[. . .] we hear tributaries
join and sing, water songs of nixies.

Dark tales of Maroon warriors,
fierce women and men
bush comrades of Cuchulain. ("Country, Sligoville" 47)

In that poem set in the country of W. B. Yeats, Goodison makes an allusion to Yeats's poem "Lake Isle of Innisfree"² in order to emphasize the theme of their common longing for their culture and oneness with nature; however, here, the poet is striving to achieve a spiritual unity with her ancestors. The poet acknowledges her vast poetic heritage in the form of ancestors, which include Yeats, countryman of her Irish maternal grandfather, and as important as her African ones. The poem presents a reunion between the poet-persona and her dead mother, in which she "washed off" her heart "with the amniotic water of a green coconut" (16-18), whereby she exclaims, "O to live, Inisfree[sic],³ in a house of wattle and daub" (22). She shows her longing for spiritual connections, for the simplicity of tradition and her repudiation of modern artificiality. Her recognition of and reconciliation with her creative heritage, as represented in tradition and in her ancestors, culminates in the last poem in the collection, when she writes:

When I gave up walking
 from door to door with my begging bowl
 I became conscious that my bowl
 had been always full of the fine gold wheat
 which only the prayerful can see and eat.
 And all the time I was living on leftovers. ("Close to You Now" 13-18)

The two collections of poetry treat themes that are general attempts to re-live the harmony between the naturalness of tradition and the transcendental wisdom of the ancestors with the liberation that is part of such a re-living; they attempt to utilize such harmony as both poetic illumination and empowerment in their writings.

The African pantheon entails the concept that there are some deified embodiments that are agents of God (Almighty).⁴ These agents enable humans to connect to God and may be referred to as "an assemblage of all the gods of a particular people or religion; the deities

of a culture collectively” (2.a. pantheon, *Oxford English Dictionary*). Those who share African traditional religious beliefs, at least in the Igbo worldview, subscribe somewhat to monotheism but, logistically, practice polytheism because of their perceived need for deified agencies to ensure their access to the supreme God.⁵ Douglas Killam and Ruth Rowe in *The Companion to African Literatures* corroborate this interesting fact about God and spiritual agents in the African worldview: “In the African world view, God is the originator, preserver, and sustainer of life; the divinities and spirits are charged with the task of overseeing life, especially human life, modulating human destiny, and interceding with God on humanity’s behalf” (239). These deified agencies can be as numerous as there are families or as there are willing and creative devotees who can deify them. Their abundance can be likened to “The Hindoo pantheon [which] now boasts of being able to muster 330,000,000 deities” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). These deities, in the African pantheon, exist in a hierarchy: at the bottom are the ancestors, who are all the dead relations of a particular lineage of people or a family.

The more local the ancestors and deities, the more familiar and accessible they become, a situation which implies that a devotee can gain access to them directly with or without intermediaries and elaborate rituals. Thus, in Goodison’s poem “After the Green Gown of My Mother Gone Down,” the poet-persona calls on the family’s ancestral pantheon to rise and welcome the spirit of the dead mother as a denizen of the ancestral world:

[We] summon her kin from the long-
lived line of David and Margaret.
Come Cleodine, Albertha,
Flavius, Edmund, Howard and Rose,
Marcus her husband gone before
come and walk Dear Doris home. (18-23)

The poet-persona calls each of the ancestors by name, showing the shared intimacy and localities of the ancestors. The lines represent what we might call a “pantheonization” of the poet-persona’s dead mother. The ancestors are easily invoked for they represent the most accessible of the collective pantheon to the people. Their restriction to the poet-persona’s family suggests that the foundational level of the pantheon is restricted to a people for their benefit.

The pantheon, on another level of the hierarchy, may further be defined as all the gods and goddesses of a people assembled at a place—whether a building or in human embodiments. For instance, when the poet Acholonu claims that she is possessed by the spirit of her dead father, she is subscribing to the idea that her body has become an accessible abode for familial spirit, her dead relatives (“the message” 55-56). As well, when Goodison writes on the theme of spiritual fellowship with the poet-persona’s dead father in the poem “This Is My Father’s Country,” she is also acknowledging the reformation the poet-persona’s vision has undergone, which has made her fellowship and communication with the dead possible. Therefore, the idea of pantheon and its influence requires a spiritual idea and a physical substratum for the achievement of any significant effect in the physical world. These poets present not only their minds but equally their bodies as the links that will enable them to tap into and utilize the hidden knowledge of these spirits. Their spiritual ties resonate with what Earl Rosebery in *S.P. Cromwell* says on November 14, 1899, “Everyone, I think [. . .] has, in their heart of hearts a pantheon of their historical demigods [. . .] a shrine in which they consecrate the memories of the deaths of the noblest and bravest men” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Even so do the poet-personae of Goodison and Acholonu consider their fathers noble and brave and go on to build them a shrine in their minds and bodies as a means of empowering themselves creatively.

Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* describes the connection between the ancestors and the living:

Now and again an ancestral spirit or *egwugwu* appeared from the underworld, speaking in a tremulous, unearthly voice and completely covered in raffia. The land of the living was not far removed from the domain of the ancestors. There was coming and going between them, especially at festivals [. . .] A man's life from birth to death was a series of transition rites which brought him nearer and nearer to his ancestors. (106-7)

Goodison and Acholonu manifest a creative heritage that is based on their conscious awareness of the gifts their ancestors purportedly give them—inspiration and sharpened creative perceptions—in relation to the needs in their respective communities. Their ancestors become their creative models through the process of spiritual interaction, which is not restricted to their foremothers but includes their forefathers too. The gender-inclusive characteristic of the ancestors is embedded in the African linguistic concept of gender in which God's gender is generic. Acholonu, aware of the possibility of inspiration from her ancestor, invokes the spirit of her dead father in the dedication of *The Spring's Last Drop*:

I have planted the spirit staff
 On the hard earth
 Listen now!
 Hear the rattle of the bronze bells.
 Go on, reap your harvest
 From the great beyond! (7)

The “spirit staff” is the symbolic connection between the living and the dead, which sets the stage for communication and revelations between the living and the dead. As the “bronze bells” rattle, the sound produces a dual effect by invoking the spirit of her dead father and opening the poet's mind to such a communication of information. The dedication is like pouring libations and performing a ritual that can expose mortals to actual spirit possessions.

The great beyond implies the land of the dead where the ancestors supposedly reside. The invocation and the pouring of alcoholic drinks are usually accompanied by special words in the form of prayers,⁶ and represent ancestral worship. Words are very important and act as significant connecting links in spiritual issues as well as in creativity; here, they signify the challenge for a creative artist who wrestles to find a voice and creates meaning by expert crafting of words. Both male and female poets make use of ancestral or spirit invocations in their poetry to ensure an adequate crafting of words. For instance, Christopher Okigbo's collection of poetry *Labyrinths* invokes his community's river goddess, "Idoto," for inspiration and enlightenment by waiting as "watchman for the watchword / at *Heavensgate*" (9-10).

The theme of the recognition or worship of ancestors is related to the poetic development of the Caribbean people, especially in their musical continuum. According to Stephen Davis and Peter Simon in *Reggae International*, music holds a special position in the development of Afro-Caribbean literary form; also, music is an interesting feature of African survival in the Caribbean, since African music is a "communal, functional expression" (26), in addition to giving pleasure. Some forms of African music and dancing, which later underwent "cultural blend[ing]" (27) and helped the slaves to keep alive their creative heritage, are examined below. A strong sense of the role of the ancestors exists in the simple musical act because the musical act is manifestly influenced and sustained by the interactions the slaves purport to have with the dead, as ancestors. *Reggae International* explains that the funeral rites or rites of the dead (Myalism) bring the slaves together for a form of communally shared creativity but much more for political unity. According to Garth White, "The Myal 'medicine man' [...] was doctor-psychologist, priest and ritual warrior-chief, all in one. The cult was driven underground, Wynter suggests, 'because the planters realized the danger of such a unifying dance, ritual and religion.' Laws enacted in 1774 prescribed the

sentence of death for anyone attempting these ceremonies” (qtd. in Davis 28). The prevalence of the religious elements in these developments is a strong indication of the sacred impetus in creative empowerment for the poets who lay claim to ancestral ritual connections.

There is an African side and a Christian side to this sacred creative continuum for the Afro-Caribbean, which has continued to the present. However, only the African side is being dealt with in this chapter. Apart from the African drumming, surviving in such forms as Myalism and Jokonnu, other aspects of the creative continuum associated with rituals are Kumina and Pukkumina (Pocomania). Kumina involves an ancestor possession cult, which is related to ancestral worship. “Kumina is from Akom-ana, an ancestor possession cult of the Ashanti people” while Pukkumina, on the other hand, involves the use of “ground-spirits,” “fallen angels,” and the souls of the dead in a version of religious syncretism. These musical forms built from religious rituals inform the creative consciousness of the Caribbean. It is a continuum that has given rise to other forms such as calypso, dub, and reggae, as great influences in Caribbean creative development (Davis and Simon 25-44). For instance, beliefs, music, and dances embody versions of folk religion and form an integral part of poetry as can be seen in Kamau Brathwaite’s poems “Caliban” and “Negus.” Reliance upon spiritual enlightenment for expert fashioning of words and for the creation of realities has been the preoccupation of many Black poets. It is then congruent that the two women poets studied here should seek to use such religious consciousness both to empower themselves creatively and also to resist any form of censorship, relying upon their spiritual consciousness and models already provided by their ancestral connections, in the same manner as their slave forebears.

Afua Cooper observes that these religious and cultural symbols or even the metaphysical connection among spirituality, words, and creativity may have a transcendental

motivation but nonetheless is effectually relevant for meeting the people's practical needs.

She writes:

In the areas of folk culture, religion, and metaphysics, Caribbean women spoke with a loud voice. Women were Kumina, Myal, and Pocomania leaders. In the area of metaphysics—Voudou, hoodoo, root doctoring, and obeah—women were in their element. These jobs required one to have an intimate relationship with the word, for a correct and crucial use of the word was required in order to have a successful outcome. (4)

The poets under study make definite connections to the spiritual ties in their communities and so point to the transcendental forms of models that function at physical and spiritual levels to create meaning. Cooper suggests that these poets vie for an “intimate relationship” with their spiritual models in order to have an effective command of the “word” for the purpose of shaping a wholesome reality (i.e. when the spiritual and physical truths mutually coexist). Goodison, in the poem “This Is My Father’s Country,” writes about the poet-persona’s receiving illumination through her dead father in the course of her on-going fellowship with him:

One Christmas I spent in New York alone
my father appeared to me on Dry Harbor Road.

He burst through the doors of the funeral home
and rapidly ascended the fire escape
then hovered as a bright ball of light
illuminating my solitary actions at evening. (113-18)

The theme of light and the spiritual illumination that comes from light constitute a leitmotif for the two poets. They often make reference to their spiritual quests and receiving of light. An instance in Acholonu’s work comes in a poem addressed to the being her persona calls “my maker”: “I brought myself / and you showed me / your light” (“the word” 36, 43-44).

Their spiritual quest and yearning lead them to receiving light and to forming poetic vision through the use of words.

The pantheon has gradations; hence, both poets begin with the ancestral model as their familial and local pantheon before proceeding to the collective pantheon in their community. For instance, Goodison begins with the deification of her parents, grandparents, and other males and females in her lineage; she goes on to include in her frame of reference the collective pantheon of the Caribbean people, and in a way consistent with Africana womanhood calls, for example, on Nana of the Maroons (“Nana Yah, Your Teacher” 38). In the same way, Acholonu begins her collection with the dedication page to her father by invoking his spirit; then, later in the collection, in the image of the market goddess, she involves the Igbo pantheon. These poets attempt to show the significant influence their pantheon can have on their creative empowerment. At the different levels in their pantheon the spiritual essence of their ancestors is harnessed by their spiritual sensitivity for the expert crafting of the word. They acknowledge the fact that their spiritual connections help to sharpen their poetic vision.

Nana of the Maroons, featured in Goodison’s collection, may be described as a spiritual essence in Jamaica for she is revered as a national hero. Cooper also names her as an important inspiration in the crafting of the word both as an instrument of resistance and for creating harmony in the community. She writes:

Specifically, one [...] foremother is the legendary Queen Nanny. An Akan Jamaican Maroon priestess leader, anti-slavery fighter, Black liberation warrior and strategist, and renowned sorceress, she often relied upon, and used words to beat down the British Babylonian slavery system that sought to destroy her and her people. Women dub poets see Nanny as an inspirator, and often invoke her in their poetic productions. (4)

Nana functions in the Caribbean by inspiring the poets through the intrinsic power in the expert use of words. The importance or the potency of spoken words is crucial to women dub poets; therefore the expert crafting of words is the bedrock of their poetic empowerment. Nana's function reveals that words, voice, and music are often presented as possessing a transcendent quality that is capable of soothing, unifying, directing, and of resisting tyranny, and affirming the selfhood of not only an individual but also the community. The Black women poets discussed in this chapter are committed to exploiting the cultural signifier of the essence and power of words. Houston Baker hints at the powerful essence of words and the equally meaningful moments of silence which Black women literary artists have discovered, especially the pragmatics of its liberatory power in their experience. He writes:

Combining the various meanings of “conjure,” black women creators have thrust oppressive kings from state, [. . .] and performed liberating “tricks” with words. Their acts, surely, have fanned a quintessentially African spirit down dark lanes of time.

And their reverberant pauses—their sonorous moments of locational value in this transport—have left us unique places of esteem as well as conjuring spaces. (306)

Black women poets seek for models from their ancestors so that they can grasp the totality of meaning in their culture, language, and worldview, and the essence of poetic endeavour; the essence lies in their ability to craft words and so recapture humans' primordially invested ability to articulate and name.

In the poem “Turn Thanks to Miss Mirry,” Goodison presents the comic character of “Miss Mirry” who used to work as a servant in the poet-persona's parents' house. Even though the servant is “ill-tempered,” “the repository of 400 years of resentment,” and hates the poet-persona, the latter tolerates and ultimately holds her dear because, Goodison says, she “Called me ‘Nana.’ Nanny's name I have come to love” (6). The poet reveres Nana

because of what she symbolizes in the Afro-Caribbean pantheon, the liberating spirit of Africana womanhood. According to the notes in Louise Bennett's *Selected Poems*, "Maroon Nanny[,] an eighteenth-century leader of the Maroons in Jamaica [. . .] never went into battle like the rest, but received the bullets of the enemy that were aimed at her, and returned them with fatal effect" (128). She was declared a national hero in 1975; in other words, she possesses not only physical but also spiritual strength, which have warranted her being acclaimed a national hero in Jamaica.

From the poem "Nana Yah, Your Teacher," the theme of sustenance based on spiritual connection is presented. The poem shows Nana's commitment to providing various kinds of survival tools—spiritual, physical, mental, and psychological—to the Caribbean community:

Grandy nanny would signal
with a tinnin mirror from the mountains
blinding your mind to dead knowledge.

She taught you the out-of-body trick.
Look interested, arrange a stare, fix it.
Gather yourself and exit though
the eye between your eyes. (6-12)

Nanny functions for the Caribbean people in the metaphorical role of maternal sustainment, which includes assisting them in their struggle for survival, for she teaches "life lessons / in stealth" (21-22). The theme of sustenance, embedded in the ideas about teaching and nurturing, especially nurturing as a maternal role, is also presented in Catherine Acholonu's poem "the market goddess," which addresses a figure in the Igbo pantheon:

market deity squats in readiness
immense thighs thrown
wide apart

come my children
 come to the one
 that brings life
 food
 your daily needs

 stream into my veins

 that you may drink
 I am the goddess
 of the market square. (27-34, 40, 42-4)

The provision of sustenance by the market goddess is seen in her maternal characteristics because she is presented as having “breasts resplendent with milk” (7) and is associated with the magical voice that compels the people irresistibly in response to her invitation:

beckoning with the magic
 of her voice
 pulling
 stirring the blood
 in her children’s veins (16-20)

She assumes a spiritual essence that fills the physical and the spiritual space for the community. She becomes an important image of unity, identity, and sustenance for the community. Most importantly, she fills them like a possessive spirit so that they have “eyes fixed towards the goddess / ears full of her buzzing” (25-26).

Nana of the Maroons not only provides physical sustenance but also, through her knowledge of defensive and survival tactics, works artfully, using her magical powers to achieve psychological and spiritual wholeness for the people. Her role is significant because she articulates their humanity, especially their peculiar experience with slavery, the nadir of their dehumanization and indignity. The market goddess in Acholonu’s poem is primarily concerned with daily sustenance and the unity of the community rather than with its

protection and dignity because the community does not face such a threat. Both deities, as presented by the poets, emphasize different aspects of womanhood, which can exude power in defense and sustenance of a community. The different emphasis in the represented roles of the pantheons for the two different communities suggests that the history, culture, and location of a people determine their spiritual awareness and the form and the role of their deities. In other words, geography and history shape the spiritual consciousness of a people and the role of their deities. Spirituality and poetry become another way of reading the history and culture of a people. I argued in a review of *Mapping the Sacred: Religion, Geography and Postcolonial Literatures* that “if religion is viewed as ethical codes, ritual practices, and doctrines governing the way of life of a particular people living in a particular area, invariably, their religion in part determines their culture and social habits, which contribute to the constitution of their landscape” (48). The religion of a people is determined by their history and is also tied to their destiny.

Beginning from Goodison’s poem “The Revival Song of the Wild Woman,” we begin to appreciate the theme of the role of spiritual models in creativity. Goodison’s poet-persona plays on the word *wild* with the semantic import of inspiring fear and loss of control, but one that leads ultimately to a disarming self-possession, clear-mindedness, and control necessary for the activities such as praying and testifying (25). The paradox is that the wild woman becomes wild in the European context, but controlled in the African context. According to Richard Allsopp, the word *maroon* has the synonym “wild” (371). The wild woman in the poem refers to Nana, who assumes the authoritative role of a teacher and a formidable leader: “She has you in her control,” (2) as she preaches “her don’t-care philosophy, ‘No matter what the people / of the world may say’” (3-4). The wild woman’s instruction is similar to the strategy adopted by the slaves in their use of music for the mitigation of the sufferings inherent in slavery. Music has become their weapon of resistance, transposed as a spiritual

language and symbol among them, which death and the whip failed to destroy. It becomes an invisible allurements and an anchor to the soul because it feeds the soul, and its speech cannot be physically censored. The wild woman in the poem instructs the poet-persona to go and make music and dance:

accompanied by tumbling tambourines and a funde drum and a kete drum and a silver horn to blow the bad-minded down. Yes, the wild woman is in ascendancy today, summoning the freed soul in you to testify and pray. (25-28)

The music and dance have mystical effects on both the poet-persona and on his or her adversary in the sense that they help the poet-persona gain freedom and defeat the adversary. The wild woman also functions in the area of soothing and comforting. She tells the poet-persona, "Peace and Love I leave with you, Peace and Love" (35). The wild woman stands for the essence of spiritual benefits for she offers the Caribbean people a survival strategy in the face of nearly insurmountable difficulties and existential problems. She is pragmatic about her maternal role and asserts the strong facts about survival that may demand that one goes beyond convention and roles to become one's authentic self. The poet-persona's struggle to find a voice demands that she go beyond the conventional to discover in her ancestors needed models.

The poem "Turn Thanks to Miss Mirry" gives insight into the poet-persona's search for voice. In the poet-persona's poetic development, Miss Mirry becomes the precursor of finding a voice and attaining creative liberation through her activities of giving a ritual bath and singing songs. Miss Mirry's songs are symbols of liberation because by singing them she finds "her true self" despite being

[. . .] the repository of 400 years of resentment
for being uprooted and transplanted, condemned
to being a stranger on this side of a world

where most words would not obey her tongue. (9-12)

Miss Mirry's life would have been very miserable had she not found her true self in music for the poet-persona tells us that it is only when she is singing that all the engraved fetters, restrictions, circumscriptions, and even bitterness are nullified. Her spirit takes over, and she is able to achieve wholeness. The essence of the spiritual in creativity is made obvious because it comes with freedom from biases of race, gender, and class. Similarly liberatory are Miss Mirry's songs, which go beyond the circumscriptions of language and class. The poet-persona describes the effect of the song:

she was speak-singing in a language
familiar to her tongue which rose unfettered
up and down in tumbling cadences, ululations
in time with the swift sopping motion of her hands,

becoming her true self
in that ritual bathing, that song. (41-6)

The poet-persona appreciates particularly the "calming bath" that Miss Mirry gives her, "which quelled effectively / the red itching measles prickling [her] skin" (37-38). The bath becomes a ritual and a process that initiates the poet-persona into finding her voice through the creative influence of Miss Mirry's song, especially in her subversion of the "English language." In the process the poet-persona experiences a relief, both physical and spiritual, and even psychological. The poem ends: "Turn thanks now to Miss Mirry / African bush healing woman" (47-48). The simultaneous actions of healing in Miss Mirry's songs and the relief from the symbolic bath are significant at two levels: on the first level, they signify "Nana" and the deliverance and comfort she physically brings to her community, and on the second level they signify the poet-persona's quest for a model and a voice, which quest has kept her uncomfortable like "itching measles" until Miss Mirry's healing bath and songs set to work on her to bring comfort and vision on the spiritual level. Miss Mirry and Nana are

metonymically related for they signify the model and essence of voice and liberation for the poet and for the community.

“Turn Thanks to Miss Mirry” provides the background for the poem “Bringing the Wild Woman Indoors,” because in spite of the crudity of Miss Mirry, she represents a model of empowerment, creativity, and personhood for the poet-persona. Nana assumes a position of permanency and self-definition that cannot be shut out among the Caribbeans. She has assumed a life that goes beyond the physical and becomes a metaphor for the Caribbean tradition in its cultural clash with the Western ways of life. In the poem “Bringing the Wild Woman Indoors” the poet-persona expands on the significance and influence of Nana in the Afro-Caribbean pantheon. The education Nana offers is pragmatic and her voice reverberates with authority and strength. Nana, like a colossus, assumes a presence that is dominant and invincible. Her indomitable spirit is presented in its resiliency so that despite the ways in which modernity has tried to make her irrelevant, she re-emerges with greater determination to assert her primacy in the lives of the people and her role, as Cooper earlier stated, as “an inspirator, [. . .] often invoked in [. . .] poetic productions” (4). Nana’s resiliency manifests itself in the spirit behind music and dance for the Black slaves, who despite punishment refused to let go of their indestructible ancestral spiritual connection.

Nana has become the primary, the natural, and the primordial that is intimate with the soul and blood of the Caribbean people. Nana’s ancestral indispensability is reminiscent of what Toni Morrison in “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation” writes about the significance of ancestors when she evaluates Black literature on the basis of what the writer does with the presence of an ancestor. She identifies some characters that function as ancestors in the work of Ralph Ellison, Toni Cade Bambara, and Henry Dumas, claiming, “these ancestors are not just parents; they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the [other] characters [in the works] are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they

provide a certain kind of wisdom. [...] but actually it is if we don't keep in touch with the ancestor that we are, in fact, lost. When you kill the ancestor you kill yourself" (343-44).

Nana's closeness to the life of the people is also similar to Chinua Achebe's claim that "The land of the living was not far removed from the domain of the ancestors" (106). In "Bringing the Wild Woman Indoors" the poet-persona is presented as having wanted to do away with Nana, who signifies a tradition, because she is cultivating her voice to be heard in the Western culture; consequently, she is forced to abandon her Africaribbean identity and voice in order to take on the European voice. Suddenly Nana confronts her by presenting her role in the poet-persona's poetic development:

Me, the one who stood sentinel outside your doorway
while you cultured the new voice, the new poetry.

Who was it ripped the face off the devil when
he tried to petrify you down in the stone gardens?' (11-14)

There is an interaction via spiritual transmutation that takes place so that Nana's voice assumes the power that aids the poet-persona to come to the moment of recognition, "And as she spoke you saw yourself in her, the wild woman, / your true sister. . . . / And that's when you brought her to live inside with you forever" (21-22, 24). Nana shapes the past for the Caribbean woman and insists that there can be no future without the past and that the present is meaningful because of the past. Her presence (which is the embodiment and meaning of the past, present, and future) and the recognition of the transforming power in her voice represent the sanctity and dignity of the community. The power in her voice and the content of her song are discussed in the poem "The Revival Song of the Wild Woman" later in this chapter.

In the poem "surviving" Acholonu presents the theme of spiritual models in creativity by showing the dignity that comes from one's awareness of one's origin, mission, and relationship with both the ancestors and / or the pantheon in one's community. The poem

recaptures a similar sacrifice and service to those that Nana performs in the Afro-Caribbean community. In this poem, the poet-persona appreciates her dead father, alluding to the pervading presence of her ancestor, whom she describes as “absent presence / . . . all-seeing / frozen eye” (11-13). In the same manner that Nana assumes a transcendental presence because of her service to the people, the poet-persona’s ancestor is deified here. He used to be renowned among mortal men but in the present the poet-persona addresses him, saying “you eat and drink / with gods” (17-18). He is named according to the role he plays and his significance in the community:

what shall we call you?

 then it must be
nwoke na-etoribe
 god of service (19, 24-26)

The naming of the ancestor denotes a recognizable presence, especially in the role he plays in the life of the people. The name, according to the footnote to the poem, means “man is his brother’s keeper” (28),⁷ which explains the service and sacrifice he undertakes on behalf of his community. After his decease, his influence on the community is still very much felt: “the fire of your love / still warms our land” (45-46). The process of “pantheonization” was completed when the people gathered and “made [him] a deity” (50) and an “ancestor,” (54) as well. The poet-persona shows her significant role and identity in the community by claiming that she has been appointed by the community to bear the “sacred staff” (footnote 28), which invests in her the impetus to act for the benefit of her community. Her claim is significant, undermining any form of patriarchal resistance towards her creativity because she lays claim to a higher spiritual authority. She experiences unification with her father’s spirit by substituting for the father in his role in the community. Goodison’s poem “This Is My Father’s Country,” discussed later, also contains a similar idea of an empowering paternal-ancestral communication that inspires creative responsibility in the poet-persona.

Through finding models in their ancestors, these women poets show they take their traditional responsibilities as African poets very seriously. In “the spring’s last drop,” the title poem of Acholonu’s collection, the Nigerian poet presents her responsibility and commitment to keep close and true to the natural and pure way of life as is signaled through the ancestral connection, which has stirred up her consciousness about her creative responsibility. The poem presents the difficulty of holding onto the pure ways of tradition and refusing to give heed to the lure of modern life and ways, despite the difficulty of such a decision. The responsible decision and difficulty in holding to the path of tradition are conveyed in the following lines:

[. . .] so, cautiously,
 I choose my steps
 but from the bushes
 a sweet melody
 streams forth
 and fills my ears
 disarming
 tantalizing (5,6, 11-16)

The rarity and the challenge of keeping the dying traditions alive and pure are conveyed in such word, phrases, and lines as “*scarcity*,” “steep hill,” “spring’s very last drop,” “straight path,” and “laboured up this hill / through toil and sweat” (41-42). The task of preserving tradition is suffused with risk and delicacy as is represented by the clay pot image. The clay pot with the semantic import of fragility and the consequent need for extreme care imbues the task with anxiety and suggests the need to make a deliberate choice, a conscious effort towards taking decisive actions.

The sanctity of traditions is configured in the imagery of water, described as pure and clear, sweet, and very precious, as “the dying spring’s last drop” (44-46). Tradition presented in the metaphor of water conveys a strong sense of its indispensability to life. Modernity is

configured not as “the spring” but as “the sea” (55), which is already contaminated. Sea connotes something impure, dangerous, and undependable because of its vastness, when compared to a spring. The poet-persona, presenting herself as having received the mandate to represent and to be responsible for the continuance of the labours of her ancestors, vows not to lose the traditional “stem” or “prop”:

I Obianuju
 I shall provide my children
 with plenty
 I shall multiply this drop
 shall multiply this drop
 (shall multi . . . pl . . . p . . .)
 they will never taste
 of the wasting fluid
 of the sea. (47-55)

The poet gives a structural characteristic to the idea of multiplying both to emphasize the struggle involved with such an endeavour in the face of imperial onslaught and to suggest a collective voice of resistance in the repetition of the rhythm. The full word multiply suggests the richness and the multiplicity of spirituality among members of this Ibo community; nevertheless, reducing the word to single letter ‘p’ suggests that these richness and multiplicity have been reduced by the operation of colonialism. The single letter ‘p,’ which is the encoded reduction of tradition and spirituality, acts as a stem or prop and the basis for reviving and rebuilding spiritual wholeness and power. The poet-persona’s vow “I cannot lose it / this stem / this prop /” (38-40) gives validity and strength to the ancestral institution that feeds the tradition and spirituality of the people. Her pronounced decision also means that she will continue in the old path of tradition and live up to the responsibility she has received through her ancestors for the benefit of her community. This is unlike the attitude of the poet-persona in “Bringing the Wild Woman Indoors,” where the poet-persona is forced to

sway from the ancient path in the bid to cultivate the new voice, but Nana arrests and rebukes the madness. The poet-persona then takes her into the house of self so that she is the internalized inspiriter / inspiration of the Caribbean poet.

The ancestors are models for these poets, and the writing of these poets suggests that serious consequences result for the community from recalcitrance to the authority of the ancestors. In the poem “the dying godhead,” Acholonu presents the danger of abandoning the ancestors, an act which results in loss of vision and shiftlessness in life. The poem presents a contrast between the traditional way of life and modern civilization, claiming that, in order to gratify the lust and greed concomitant with the modern tendency to acquisition, the people have abandoned the traditional restraint and committed murder. They desecrate the land and everything becomes bizarre and grotesque. The period the poet-persona is referring to is after the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) and it is marked by unusual events:⁸

[. . .] these days
 [. . .] women grow beards
 and children’s bones stir
 the soup of the gods (5-8)

Part of the abomination is the desecration of “the sacred *udala* tree” (12) by plucking its seed. Traditionally, it is a taboo to climb the tree and pluck its fruit. Usually, one has to wait for the ripe fruit to drop of its own accord. However, with modernity and the lust to make money, people can hardly be patient; they would rather climb the tree and “[pluck] ripe seeds / from unwilling stalks” (14-15). Acholonu’s juxtaposing bearded women with the grotesque notion of child-sacrifice gives the former a negative connotation which is traditionally inconsistent. Some Igbo folklore represented women as having beards at one time, but when they began to use their beards for dishonest purposes, they lost the power to grow them. However, the juxtaposition here might suggest the consistent view that bearded women are the ones who support child-sacrifice; hence, they are abnormal because they perpetuate evil, possibly

goaded to it by the perverse power in their beards. The gods are enraged, and the repercussion is that they retaliate against the community by setting it into turmoil. Nature is disrupted because of the lack of order and harmony between the spiritual / traditional values and physical / modern desires. The result of the desecration of the land is that

deserted gods steal
 into abandoned huts at night
 then disappointed they ravage our homes
 and raid our purses
 angry gods stripped of amulets
 dry up in the cold
 but will they let you be

a thousand heads go down the grave
 with every dying godhead (30-38)

The lines resonate with Morrison's claims that killing ancestors is self-destruction. The situation is more disastrous because the abandonment of the gods and the ancestors by the community is total, unlike the gradual process presented in Goodison's "Bringing the Wild Woman Indoors." The point is that the models signified by the ancestors have become integral to the life of the community and any negligence of that fact on the part of the community results in confusion and loss of voice. The poem "the dying godhead" is the last poem in part two "Anger of the Gods" and the title of the third part is "A Celebration of Silence." The people kill their gods and they lose their voice and become silent as a result. It is against this background that one can appreciate why Black women poets show their commitment towards recapturing the spiritual in their poetry because that alone, they conceive, will allow them to achieve wholeness in all aspects of life and help them to maintain their voice and to effectively counter patriarchal restrictions in the community.

Finally, one can say that the models provided by the pantheon and the ancestors of the community also form an essential part of creativity. They provide the prop that the poet can always fall back on in order to gain fresh insight into his or her creation of realities. To gain fresh insight is possible because of the poet's reliance on the ancestors; hence, the poet may be assured of continuity, freshness, and balance of perspectives in the handling of subjects through the spiritual support of the ancestors. Goodison's poems "This Is My Father's Country" and some other poems discussed below demonstrate the theme of creative empowerment that comes through the ancestral models. In "This Is My Father's Country," the poet-persona, by reflecting on the creative actions of her father in the service of other people, is moved into service through poetry:

My sweet-foot father could dance you see,
 my nightingale-throat father could sing,
 wind and string instruments obeyed him.
 Compose now a song for my father (83-85, 94)

The poet-persona's feeling compelled to compose a song in honour of her father suggests that she is stirred to respond with a form of creativity so that the dream about her dead father's creativity will be immortalized in a song. The relationship between the father's creativity and that of the poet-persona is made clear in the poem "The Mango of Poetry." In this poem the creative act of the father—planting a mango tree—becomes the rock on which the poet-persona builds her creativity because the mango assumes a force that pulls her to the inevitable—creativity. The poet-persona eats from the mango and the assimilable nutrient blends with the creative hereditary blood already coursing through the poet's veins and the result is "powerful and overflowing / and a fitting definition / of what is poetry" (38-40). The poet-persona's assertion, "I'm still not sure what poetry is[.]" (8) suggests an on-going struggle with finding a voice or giving form to that voice. Gradually the poet comes to realize poetry in the metaphor of "a ripe mango" (9). The poet-persona resolves "to eat one from the

tree / planted by [her] father” (13-14). The slow process of eating the fruit resonates with the slow and steady process of food-digestion to produce energy, which is likened to the distillation of ideas either in the production or appreciation of a poem:

I would not peel it all back
to reveal its golden entirety,
but I would soften it by rolling
it slowly between my palms.

Then I'd nibble a neat hole
at the top of the skin pouch
and then pull the pulp
up slowly into my mouth. (25-32)

The mango represents the poet-persona's physical and spiritual connections to her ancestors, and how through that connection she is able to be creative.

In the poem “To Mr. William Wordsworth, Distributor of Stamps for Westmoreland,” the poet-persona openly acknowledges the creative empowerment she has gained through her maternal ancestral heritage and her personal spiritual alertness. She experiences an inner illumination and only then does she begin to realize what she has always possessed but has not consciously utilized.⁹ She goes on to acknowledge how commonplace objects can be transformed into remarkable things of beauty through spiritual insight:

Still, it was a remarkable show of sorts
Which opened my eye, the inward one,
Which once opened enables me to see
The overflowing bounty of my people's poverty. (1-8)

The poet-persona's spiritual insight reveals that buried in the physical deprivation and everyday existence of the people is an overflowing spiritual beauty and creativity. Such

recognition leads the poet-persona to acknowledge the poetic talent of her great-grandmother, when she writes:

But great-grandmother was a poet
 who wrote her lyrical ballads on air,
 scripted them with her tongue
 then summoned them to return to her book of memory.

She never did arrange them
 the exact same way twice
 but they were her powerful overflow
 recollected in tranquility, sir, what she chanted was poetry. (13-20)

The creative talent of her great-grandmother now stirs the poet into using her own talent to rescue her ancestral creative tradition because her “eye, the inward one” (6) has been opened.

Her great-grandmother’s practice is essentially oral because she uses the traditional processes of performance, composition, and transmission that are characteristic of oral poetry for “[she] wrote her lyrical ballads on air, / scripted them with her tongue / then summoned them to return to her book of memory” (14-16). Even though her work bears the characteristics of orality, the poet presents her as not inferior to an accomplished poet such as Wordsworth. She addresses Wordsworth: “She is a denizen of the spirit world like you” (35), which means that not only is her great-grandmother a poet during her lifetime, just as Wordsworth was, but that in the spirit world, where there is no class distinction, or privileging of written over oral, both Wordsworth and her great-grandmother will be seen on equal terms as poets. The Wordsworthian definition of poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings [that] takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility” (168) subsumed in the poetry created by her great-grandmother¹⁰ and tantamount to the poetic knowledge gained by eating the mango fruit from the tree planted by her father show three significant connections and qualities of the poems in the collection—Wordsworthian, her

great-grandmother's, and her father's. These three connections are metamorphosed in the poet-persona's creative endeavours, which will continue to be powerful and overflowing because of their deep ancestral roots. For the purpose of tradition and continuity, she writes not just her poems but also those of her great-grandmother, Wordsworth, and her father. She claims:

And I've written them down for her,
 summoned them to stand, black-face type
 against a light background, Mr. Wordsworth.
 Please tell Miss Leanna her poems are now written down. (45-48)

Acholonu, in her longest poem in the collection, "the message," celebrates the traditional experience of re-incarnation which she has presented in the dedication and has alluded to in other poems. The poem resonates with Goodison's poem "This Is My Father's Country," which is also the latter's longest poem in the collection. Acholonu's "the message" recounts the process through which the poet-persona comes to recognize the spirit of her father as continuing its work through her. The oracular deity, *afa*, divined the poet-persona and her father as "twin nuts / of a twin kernel" (8-9). The poem emphasizes a strong belief among traditionally religious Igbo people that whenever a child is born, it means that one of the ancestors has come back to life and a diviner must be consulted to find out which of the ancestors has come back. The poem deals chiefly with the message of the oracular deity which foretells the life of the poet-persona. At birth, she is immediately connected to her dead father and they both offer themselves in continuance of service to the members of their community (10-11). There is a mysterious vital connection between the birth of the poet-persona and the decline in years ("ebbing life") of her father as is presented in the following lines:

you shrank as I ripened
 but as I sprang

out of my shell
 as I broke out of my clasp
 I was no longer alone
 there was another—you (18-23)

The poet-persona, by celebrating the connection between her birth and the decline of her father, emphasizes the perpetual quality of life in the traditional sense of Achebe's "coming and going" between the living and the ancestors. Equating death with life is a cross-cultural attitude, as we can see from John Donne's poem "Death be Not Proud."¹¹ Acholonu's conceit about death being life is clearly presented in the first poem in the collection entitled "life's head." In the poem she presents death as "*chukwu's* [God's] blessing to life" (1), claiming that it is as natural as "eating and defecating" (4). She ends that poem with the instructive warning and a paradoxical submission that "death is life" (13) and should be accepted joyfully as a "blessing" received from God (11-12). Christopher Okigbo, another Black African poet, also describes such tendencies as "an attempt to reconcile the universal opposites of life and death in a live-die proposition: one is the other and either is both" (xi). Okigbo shares Acholonu's view about reincarnation that ensures the cyclic quality of life, which is different from Donne's view where the individual continues to live but in a celestial realm.

Treating death as a blessing is not only a way to attenuate its pain but also to make prominent the significance of death in the development of the poet-persona, whose birth, along with the message of the oracular deity, demonstrates that the death of her father results in her birth and becomes her basis for claiming creative empowerment and relevance in her community. In the poem "the message," the poet elaborates on the theme of benefits obtained from death by virtue of reincarnation—the dead may have "a chance to do service" (43). The idea is that the dead, being released from the body, roam the universe (32-33) seeking for fertile grounds to lay ripe eggs; that is, they look for talented individuals who will be able to

carry on “the message.” The poem embodies many aspects of Igbo world view, folk beliefs, and sacred symbols. For instance, the poet-persona metonymically relates the ancestral spirit of her father to the “*udala* tree” (87) because it is believed that “the souls of the dead / dwelt on [its] branches / [. . .] awaiting their turns” (94-95, 100) to incarnate as children; also, the fruits from the tree are metaphorically referred to as children. The fruits from the tree are allowed to drop naturally and, sometimes, women who desire to have children gather under the tree to pray to the gods. It is believed that the gods rather than humans planted the tree, mostly near people’s homes rather than in the forest. Now, by presenting the tree in the poem with all of its associated sacred significance, the poet concretizes the idea that death and life, in the image of the *udala* tree, reside together; hence, they form an unbroken cycle. The poem is replete with the imagery of *eggs* and the *young*. These images foreground the idea of new beginning, freshness, renewal, and hope, which ideas the poet wants to emphasize in order to counter the negative attitude towards death. She is striving to achieve the same effect as Donne was when he showed the defeat and powerlessness of death because of the hope of resurrection; however, Acholonu’s claims and argument are based on the traditional concept of reincarnation, at least in a Nigerian context.

The poet imbues with solemnity and sacredness the theme of the recognition and acceptance of reincarnation as though it were an epiphany of mysterious reality by the oracular deity:

and behold the word

Nwoke na-etoro ibe

look

smoke rises from my pot

I hear the voice of a man

I think I know this voice

father is it you

you have given our message
 my daughter
 my twin seed
 in twin kernel
 when they blasted
 the rock
 and nipped me in the bud
 I lived the rest of my
 life through you (188-203)

The poem ends with blessings and instructions from the poet-persona's dead father.

It is intrinsic to some artists to insist on models for the purpose of continuity and relevance in their community. The fact that Black women poets, for creative purposes, find relevant spiritual models in their ancestors underscores the essence of the physical and the spiritual factors in creativity. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, quoting C. Day Lewis on the issue of ancestors, "The profound desire for a feeling of continuity [is that to which] some of us young poets have applied the expression 'ancestor-worship.'" Therefore, Black women poets, in their bid to achieve continuity, relevance, and creative empowerment in their community, have claimed their ancestral models provide them with the requisite spiritual and physical essences for their creative works. For instance, Goodison and Acholonu's presentation of the importance of the physical and spiritual models in their poetry demonstrates a strong sense of purpose, continuity, empowerment, unique poetic voice, and presentation of relevant messages.

Acholonu's familial ancestry and traditional pantheon include paternal ancestry and a female goddess, presided over by a conscious awareness of "the big *chi* who has no name / the One who has no name" ("thus says afa" 7, 24), even though the descriptive name "big *chi*" (literally Chukwu) is God. Goodison's presiding spirits include maternal and paternal

ancestors and the “pantheonized” Nana of the Maroons. Goodison’s inclusion of maternal and paternal lineage epitomizes the Caribbean sense of communality in a way that brings richness, wholeness, confidence, and empowerment for the individual as part of a community. This sense of communality is rooted in African values. Inclusion of various individuals, particularly the female forebears of Goodison’s poetry, is lacking in Acholonu’s, especially in the latter’s failure to provide different maternal ancestors. Acholonu compensates for the failure both by maintaining a strong sense of the presence of God, who is without gender, and by further claiming a cross-gender reincarnation, which will counter any patriarchal restrictions against her creativity. She claims to be her dead father incarnate so as to strengthen the argument that if there is no gender distinction in spiritual terms, then spiritual creative empowerment will not suffer any gender restrictions. Goodison’s presentation, lacking in the pervading presence of God as gleaned from the Bible, is compensated for by the use of Biblical imagery and diction; however, the use of Biblical imagery and diction is prevalent in both poets’ works.

Spiritual impetus in the poetry of Goodison and Acholonu is immanent both in structure and diction, and can be likened to what Karla Holloway claims in “The Emergent Voice” in discussing Zora Neale Hurston’s four novels. Her valid observation that the titles of the four—*Jonah’s Gourd Vine*; *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; *Moses, Man of the Mountain*; and *Seraph on the Suwanee*—reveal that “the texts are in a state of creation through their structural relationship to a spirit” (67) is applicable to the poetry of these Black women. These collections of poetry share in the spirit of Black communal celebrations, warnings, and instructions that have ancestral origins; hence, the realities they convey have greater force than they might otherwise have. From the titles of the collections, the spirit and the message of the poets’ work assume the embodiment of historical and spiritual realities for the people in the form of bonds that hold the community together. The title of Goodison’s

collection *Turn Thanks* resonates with the African praise poem tradition in all its gaiety and freedom and the affirmation of a community's humanity. Song in the context of Black Caribbean and North American cultures also signals the resilient spirit of the Black slaves that helped to keep their hopes and identity alive through the middle passage and in the so-called New World. Dennis Osadebey's description of Black people as a singing race presents a significant connection to their ancestral origins because singing was one of the tools the slaves used to rarefy the pain of the chattel form of slavery and to keep their culture alive. He writes: "We sing when we fight, we sing when we work, we sing when we love, we sing when we hate, we sing when a child is born, we sing when death takes a toll" (qtd. in Miruka 87). According to Paula Burnett, "to the enslaved, exiled and abused blacks it was an important tool for survival: to sing of suffering and sorrow was to commute their pain" (xxxiv). The title *Turn Thanks* suggests praise singing as the poet celebrates the lives of the men and women who contribute to her poetic development; at the same time, the title is a celebration of victory because Black people survived slavery by singing. Through the colossal figure of Nana, towering over the poet as a guide, the structure of the collection testifies to Nana's continual spiritual presence, for Nana continues to frustrate and to rout all enemies and to lead back the traditional renegades even in modern times. Nana insists that modernity must not destroy the bonds or values that hold the people together.

In the poem "The Revival Song of the Wild Woman" Goodison writes about Nana who "has you in control" (2) and "tells you now to go with her to where our music is buried, / and sing loud revival songs that will waken the dead" (5-6). *You*, in the poem, refers loosely to the Jamaican people, who are still being guided and instructed by Nana, and in particular to the poet-persona, who represents the people in the poem. Music is a signifier for the people and a precursor of their liberation, so is something they must not allow to die. Acholonu in her title poem "the spring's last drop" insists that with the mandate she has received as the

bearer of the message from her ancestor her metaphorical children “will never taste / of the wasting fluid / of the sea” (53-55). The title of the collection, *The Spring’s Last Drop*, suggests the naturalness of tradition gleaned from the idea of a “spring.” From the fact that the water is the very last drop of the spring, the collection becomes a warning and a call to take action so as to prevent a disastrous situation attendant upon loss of traditional values. There is a spirit connected with the works that readers must discern and become attuned to in order to unravel their meaning and the significance.

Holloway further claims that in discussing Hurston’s four novels she takes the cue from Ellison’s suggestion to “consult the text.” She describes her practice of consulting the text as seeking “*nommo*—the creative potential of the word” (68). Seeking the creative potential of the word is applicable to the examination of the structure and diction used by the poets here. The latent power and importance of the word are similar to those of naming and being. From the title of the collections to the structural organization of the text, it is obvious that the poets are going back to the primacy of the word in the spiritual and oral traditions. The Jamaican Creole formulation of the title of Goodison’s collection is obvious because she calls the book “*Turn Thanks*” as opposed to the Standard English “Give Thanks.” From the title, the text begins to signify through that non-standard coding that it subscribes to the ancestral roots of Caribbean language. The title of Acholonu’s work bespeaks a natural source of refreshment by drinking the precious last drop from a spring as opposed to refreshment from modern artificiality and the mundane act of drinking treated water from the faucet.

The poems in *Turn Thanks* are mostly structured on the benefits that come from being rooted in a tradition. The collection is in four interconnected parts that allude to the spiritual heritage that inspires the poet’s creative output. The first is entitled “My Mother’s Sea Chanty,” the second “This is My Father’s Country,” the third “The Mango of Poetry,” and the

fourth “God a Me.” The first part in the collection celebrates by turning thanks first to the cohorts of the poet-persona’s maternal lineage, which include her mother, aunties, grandmother, great-grandmother, and the ill-tempered house servant Miss Mirry, who calls the poet-persona Nana. Calling the poet-persona Nana connects the poet to the Jamaican communally shared heritage in their ancestress Nana, and the significance of this ancestral connection is fully treated in the last part of the book. The second part in the collection is an appreciation of the cohorts of her paternal lineage that include father, uncle, and great-grandfather, and completes her familial, ancestral entourage as far as we can know from her Caribbean history. In each of the title poems that constitute the first two parts she observes and concentrates on the creativity of her parents but especially on their creative spiritual quality, which will ensure that her own creativity will be unaffected by gender bias and the clash with, or onslaughts of, modernity on her Afro-Caribbean creative psyche. These two parts set the stage for part three, “The Mango of Poetry,” where her creativity, symbolically nourished by eating mango, is beginning to be manifested as she makes reference to her creative act of rescue in relation to her great-grandmother’s oral poetry and her connection to the world of other creative artists. She connects to Anna Akhmatova, and, being a visual artist also, she thus connects to visually creative ancestors like Henry Daley, Vincent Van Gogh, and Max Ernest, to mention but three artists to whom poems in this collection are addressed.

Her creative models, then, move out from the familial to encompass the world’s creative heritage. Alluding to the spiritual oneness of the human race, the poet observes in “To Become Green Again and Young” that “There is a spirit nation / under the ocean” (19-20) since “our ancestors drowned” (18) in “Arctic, Antarctic, Atlantic, Indian, Pacific / Caribbean Sea, Atlantic Ocean” (16-17). Gradually she sets the stage that presents her unique Caribbean, Black African, and world heritage with the title poem in this part of the collection: “God a Me.” “God a Me” is a fish that can live both on land for a short time and in water, and its

“name itself [is] a prayer” (19). Therefore the last part of the collection with this title poem, that is “God a Me,” suggests that the ability to connect spiritually ensures the ability to shape physical challenges and limitations into a flexible and surmountable form.

The structure of Acholonu’s collection follows a mythological organic structure of three parts: The first part is entitled “Cultural loss,” which naturally brings in the “Anger of the gods” as the second part, and after the ravages as a result of the anger of the gods, comes “a celebration of silence” as the third part. The first part celebrates culture and the gains from its values so as to make the loss of it significant. The second part catalogues the gods’ repercussive execration on the community as a result of the loss of culture. The last part, consisting of three poems, introduces hope. The first poem in the third part is “the message.” The message deals with the birth and the solemn process of the incarnation of her father in the poet. The second poem in this part is entitled “the word” and deals with the potency and sacredness of the word well-crafted because of its spiritual roots. Acholonu surrenders to syncretism in this poem for she freely mixes Christian ideas with traditional African religion’s ideas of reincarnation. Her attitude in this regard shows the saturation of the environment by different forms of spirituality to the extent that the different forms are inseparable; therefore, the poet uses syncretism as a device to exude the abundance of her spiritual heritage. The dualism suggested by Acholonu’s syncretism is akin to that in Goodison’s poem “God a Me,” where the fish can survive comfortably in different habitats because its name is essentially spiritual—a prayer.

Goodison’s poetry is replete with religious images and diction, especially those taken from the Bible or Christian worship. The poems examined below show that the use of religious imagery and diction grounds the poem in the culture and gives solemnity and relevance to the message. They also show the synergy of physical and spiritual agencies in creating wholeness in Black communities. In the poem “The Domestic Science of Sunday

Dinner,” she ritualizes the making of a Sunday dinner into an initiation into a mysterious union or a participation in the Christian Holy Communion Service. The achievements of this use of ritual language are significant at three levels: first to emphasize the sustaining effect of food, on the physical level; second, to suggest the sensuousness and emotional gratification gained by eating food, on the psychological level, and; finally, to achieve a release in order to gain knowledge, illumination, and empowerment on the spiritual level. These three levels of language significance suggest the fact that a human being, as a tripartite being, has a spirit that knows, which possesses a soul as the seat of his or her emotion and intellect, and that both are housed in a body as their terrestrial outlet. Words and phrases such as “Advent season,” “redeemed and rescued,” “summoned,” “ritual,” “chalice,” “tender holy,” “high domestic ceremony,” and “libation” convey the idea of rituals. In the poem “Turn Thanks to Grandmother Hannah,” Goodison turns again to sacred diction in connection to laundering so as to foreground the cleansing effect that comes with spirituality. She proceeds from describing with religious diction the physical act of washing to equating the physical act of laundering with spiritual cleansing. She uses the following sacred words and phrases: “sanctity,” “clergy,” “immaculate and unearthly brightness,” “road to heaven,” “parish,” “cleansing service,” “holy gift,” and the following lines:

Wine-stained altar cloths, once-chaste white albs
 would rejoice, spotless, transfigured
 to stand, redeemed under the resurrecting
 power of grandmother Hannah’s hands.

To my grandmother with the cleansing power
 in her hands, my intention is to give thanks
 on behalf of any who have experienced within
 something like the redemption in her washing. (13-16, 21-24)

The last line foreshadows the conclusion that there is no demarcation between the spiritual and everyday living. It is the great gift of Black women to perceive spirituality even in quotidian existence as a buffer against the forces of slavery and imperialism antagonistic to Black peoples' lives.

The title of Goodison's poem "Domestic Incense" reiterates the idea of the natural connection between the spiritual and the physical. The purpose of the juxtaposition may be to lift the body out of the physical drudgery and limitations which are its bane and to imbue it with spiritual sensibility, vision, and progressiveness. The poet demonstrates that also in the poem "The Revival Song of the Wild Woman," by making obvious allusions to Biblical stories and events. For instance, the Wild Woman instructs the poet-persona "to throw stones in Hope River and trouble / the water" (17-18), which alludes to the recurrent stirring of the pool of Bethesda when the Angel of God used to come down and trouble the water so that anyone who got in first, after the troubling of the water, got an instant healing from whatever malady he or she might have had.¹² The poet-persona, through this allusion, is being made to assume the classic role of being an agent of spiritual healing for her community, by troubling the water to elicit healing. Finally, the poem ends with the blessings from the Wild Woman which resonate with Jesus' encouragement to His disciples when He is to leave them: "Peace and Love I leave with you, Peace and Love" (35).¹³ The essence of the use of Biblical language here is to give the poems a sense of sacredness and solemnity and to show that the landscape and culturescape of the community are essentially spiritual.

Acholonu in her collection concentrates on traditional religious rituals and their attendant taboos and significance. She makes use of folk beliefs and omens such as incarnation and the significance of the market and *udala* tree to ground her poetry in the Igbo culture. Being a recorder of tradition, she celebrates her rootedness in that tradition and goes further to appropriate Biblical diction and doctrines into her poetry in a way that is syncretic.

In the poem “the word,” the poet presents the idea of a universal divinity, implying that God is in everyone and in everything, as the meaning of the word given to her by “[her] maker”

(2):

. . . you took me
by the hand
and you showed me
your light
and you said

h-OM-e
it is the All
it is the yoU
it is the Me
 the first
 the equilibrium
 the measure of all things
it is the beginning of the beginning
and the final end of the end (41-54)

that is the meaning
of the Word (59-60)

The capitals in the poem “*OM, A, U, and M*” signify a Hindu mantra with regards to a void that has a magical significance. According to a Hindu student, Bala Ramanadhan, the capitals represent a pervasive primordial sound with a magical note and significance; the sound is pronounced the same way (with parted lips) from generation to generation in every ritual or prayer, affirming that the sound existed before the universe.¹⁴ According to Svami Mukhyananda in *OM GAYATRI AND SANDHYA* “OM or AUM is the most comprehensive universal, non-personal, holy sound-symbol (Logos) and signifier (Vacaka) of the Supreme Infinite Divine Reality” (1). The idea presented here makes a connection to God, as the Supreme Being, who is represented by His word, thereby merging God into an overall

universal nature, which is attuned to creation but separated from God as a being. The poet, in her attempt to ensure a compromise between the Christian doctrine of personal liberation and the traditional religious belief about the universality of gods, lays emphasis on the creative power of the word, which is common to both Christianity and Indigenous traditional religion. She writes:

in the beginning
there was the Word
and the Word
was with God
and the Word was God
and the Word became flesh
and was translated into a name (61-67)¹⁵

The above lines are close to literal quotations from the Bible and their incorporation into the poem emphasizes the power and essence of the spoken word and its relationship to spirituality and creativity. The title of the last poem in Acholonu's collection is "sehnsucht," which is a German word that means "longing and yearning" (Footnote to the poem 64), and it shows Acholonu's ambulation between traditional African religion and Christianity. The poem speaks of longing and yearning for a spiritual peace, rest, "love," "joy," and "the eternal home" (61-66). She presents the Christian doctrine of personal liberation based upon an encounter and union with the Holy Spirit because "where the spirit is / there is liberty (38-42).¹⁶ The poet goes as far as suggesting the repudiation of the limitations in tradition: "take off / the strings of coral / these *odu*"(47-49). The poet finds the "anklets" encumbering, and it is not until they are taken away that she promises, "the peace / that passeth / all understanding" ((68-70).¹⁷ These lines resonate with what the wild woman in Goodison's poem promises to give to the poet-persona—peace. Both poets end their collections with a longing and yearning for something that is beyond the physical, a something whose gain will

complement their lives and that of their communities. They single-mindedly and relentlessly emphasize that spirituality is essential to wholeness of life in their community and cannot be divorced from poetry.

The two poets, through the detailed presentation of their spiritual models, ground themselves in the historical, religious, and social milieu of their community. Their attempts ensure the untrammelled benefit from spirituality for the purpose of ensuring empowerment, continuity, and richness in their creativity. Their awareness of ethical values in their societies drives them to make strong religious claims in their writings and to quest for liberation from every manner of patriarchal censorship. Their attitude of being grounded in tradition has a hope of sustaining oneness between men and women, which is a goal of African womanhood and their emphasis on spirituality may further foster the consciousness of the oneness of humans.

Notes

¹ Swahili proverb, translated with the help of Josiah Obiero.

² See William Butler Yeats's poem "The Lake Isle of Innisfree." Goodison's poet-persona makes direct allusions to the poem, especially to the rustic imagery of the river and Sligoville country.

³ Susan Gingell suggests that "Goodison changed the spelling [of Innisfree to Inisfree] deliberately in order to make readers consider the idea of having a house in which to be is [to be] free."

⁴ Arguments arise about the formulation "God Almighty" as being Christian and not being indigenously African. The fact is that some African peoples in different times and locations have some understanding about the spiritual terrain and clearly recognize that the cosmos was put together by a Deity who is above every other. The problem with the formulation "God Almighty" is that the practice of African traditional religion has not existed in systematically organized statements through writing; it has been a fixed body of spiritual knowledge that is mostly oral. The concept of the Almighty God was already known in Ethiopia before the dawn of Christianity through the tradition established by the queen of Sheba, who visited King Solomon (see I Kings 10). According to Finis Dake, "It has been held by the Abyssinians that this queen of Sheba, [. . .] not only was taught Solomon's religion, but also established it in her realm on her return home; that she had a son by Solomon named Menilek, who succeeded her in the kingdom; and that her people have preserved the Jewish religion from that time until now" (132). Apart from the contact of the Queen of Sheba with King Solomon, ample examples show that even though Africans did not worship the Almighty God through Jesus Christ, they at least have the understanding that there is a supreme being who created all things. Geoffrey Parrinder in *West African Religion: A Study of the Beliefs and*

Practices of Akan, Ewe, Yoruba, Ibo, and Kindred Peoples maintains that “The peoples we are now studying all believe in a supreme Deity, yet different attitudes are taken towards his worship” (14). He quotes William Bosman who in 1705 in *A New and Accurate Description of the Coasts of Guinea* “observed that West Africans believed in a high God, though they did not worship him. ‘They [. . .] ascribe to Him the attributes of Almighty and Omnipresent; they believe He created the Universe, and therefore vastly prefer Him before their idol-gods’” (14). Other sources of information on this topic include E. Bolaji Idowu’s *African Traditional Religion* (1973) and John S. Mbiti’s *Introduction to African Religion* (1991). Mbiti lists the names used to describe God and His works from twenty-eight African countries. He writes, “All African peoples believe in God. They take this belief for granted. It is at the centre of African Religion and dominates all its other beliefs” (45).

⁵ Even though the concept of supreme God exists in African traditional religions, all Africans do not actively worship or really know God. Just as in the present day, many people can talk about God but do not know or worship Him. Some scholars explain the function of other deities with reference to God. For instance, George Mulrain, in “African Religiosity in the Diaspora: Caribbean Experience,” maintains that “In contrast to the view that Africans are worshipping the spirits is the idea that God is worshipped through the spirits” (2). John S. Mbiti in *Introduction to African Religion* affirms, “Although African peoples use these intermediaries in performing some of their acts of worship, they do not worship the intermediaries themselves as such. They simply use them as conveyor belts, as helpers or assistants. By speaking through intermediaries they feel that they show more respect, esteem, honour and courtesy towards God, who must be approached with reverence and humility” (69). The idea of a supreme God pervades the Igbo worldview, even if involvement with Him was not widely known. Some scholars, such as Donatus Nwoga and Christopher Azuonye will still argue that the concept of God Almighty is foreign in Igbo traditional religion, using

as argument that God did not have any shrine erected for Him like other gods before Christianity came. That He has no shrine erected for Him does not remove the consciousness among the people that He exists. It is like arguing that because many people in Canada do not believe in God or worship Him, therefore there is no residual knowledge of Him in the majority of Canadians. The African people regard God as very far away from them, so they can only access Him through their lesser gods. The Igbo people believe so much in negotiation; hence, they use the lesser gods in negotiating with God because they believe that He is very far removed from them. The concept of God Almighty is certainly present in African traditional religion.

⁶ Ruth Finnegan in *Oral Literature in Africa* discusses prayers as “a kind of literary mode; they may be characterized by a conventional form, perhaps marked by greater rhythm or allusiveness than everyday speech, within which an individual may cast his thoughts” (457). In all, she sees prayers as having “some literary aspects” (465). Emefie Ikenga-Metuh in “Context, Content, and Spirituality of Igbo Prayers” describes prayer as “the outpouring of one’s mind and soul to God, ‘a going out of one’s self,’ a pilgrimage of the ‘spirit in the presence of God’” (319). Further, he writes, “Generally, Igbo prayers express their beliefs that the whole universe is a spiritual realm with which man must be continually in communion” (345). We see prayers then as essentially a spiritual activity that involves the use of appropriate words for the purpose of achieving a desired result.

⁷ The poet-persona reverses Cain’s Biblical question “Am I my brother’s keeper” (Gen. 4: 9) to show a progressive relationship among members of her community, where one is responsible for another’s safety.

⁸ Acholonu in *Nigeria in the Year 1999* gives a fuller treatment of the corruption that pervaded the traditional society after the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970).

⁹ See, for example, Mercy Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women & Patriarchy*.

Oduyoye shows the ever-constant presence of traditional and spiritual empowerment for Black women, which they only need to recognize and utilize (9, 16).

¹⁰ According to *The Norton Anthology of English Literature vol. 2*, Wordsworth in 1831 was appointed Stamp Distributor (that is revenue collector) for Westmoreland. This appointment is seen as a “concrete evidence of his recognition as a national poet” (143). So Goodison, in appropriating his definition of poetry, is affirming her great-grandmother’s position as a national poet in the Caribbean creative continuum.

¹¹ Donne’s challenge to death is informed by the Christian doctrine of resurrection, which takes away the pain from the sting of death because those whom death thinks it has vanquished are not indeed destroyed. At the end of Donne’s sonnet, he writes: “One short sleep past, we wake eternally / And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die (13-14). *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Sixth edition*, 611.

¹² The allusion to the troubling of the waters may be found in John. 5: 2-4 about the Bethesda pool in Jerusalem. Relevant verses from the passage read: “In these lay a multitude of those who were sick, blind, lame, and withered, waiting for the moving of the waters; for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool and stirred up the water; whoever then first, after the stirring up of the water, stepped in was made well from whatever disease with which he was afflicted.” The poet-persona begins to assume the role of being the contact person for the healing of the people.

¹³ In John. 14, Jesus spends time comforting His disciples, who were almost very discouraged because He tells them that He is going to leave them and go back to God the Father. He encourages them saying, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you.” (John.14: 27). Paul in his final greetings to the church in Corinth writes, “And the God of love and peace will be with you” (2 Corinth. 13: 11). These words, peace and love, provide for a healthy

development and growth for any people; the words signify for the Caribbean people what the wild woman gives to them—peace, and what she expects them to give to each other—love.

¹⁴ Interview with Bala Ramanadhan, a graduate student in the University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon on April 05, 2005.

¹⁵ See, for example John. 1:1-2, 14.

¹⁶ See, for example 2 Corinth. 3:17.

¹⁷ The reference to peace is to several passages from the Bible, which include John. 14: 27, most especially to Philipp. 4: 6-7, where peace is promised to a Christian as part of his or her dividend from praying.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion: Spirituality as a Tool of Empowerment

[Spirituality is] the eternal human yearning to be connected with something larger than our egos. Despite our cultural bias that all power resides in the outward, visible world, history offers ample evidence that the inward and invisible powers of the human spirit can have at least equal impact on our individual and collective lives.

--Parker J. Palmer (377- 78)

Jamie Scott in “Mapping the Sacred across Postcolonial Literatures” claims “Rarely [...] have scholars sought to examine literature under the double rubric of the religious and the geographical” (xxiii); how much less have scholars made attempts to examine postcolonial literatures in terms of spirituality and gender as this study does. Goodison and Acholonu, the Black women poets in this study demonstrate that spirituality empowers them to resist patriarchy and to become creative as well as make their work socially, culturally, and politically relevant in their communities. The use of the spiritual as a form of resistance to different forms of literary and political suppression and oppression is yet to be appreciated in literary studies. These two twentieth-century Black women poets demonstrate that in two Black societies spirituality, emanating from traditional African religion or Christianity, can be empowering, depending on perception and application of its benefits (as religion has been used as a form of oppression of some people). Through the poets’ spiritual sensitivity, they empower themselves creatively both in terms of the themes they present with spiritually charged diction and in their commitment to addressing relevant issues in their societies. By so doing they both demonstrate their deep roots in the highly esteemed spiritual beliefs and world-views of their societies, and present to literary studies some benefits of spirituality, capable of connecting rather than fragmenting members of communities.

The creative empowerment of the Black women poets, based on their spirituality and the significance of their contributions to the literature of their societies, provides a model that can be utilized by other poets and societies to help achieve wholeness that is both spiritual and physical. This kind of wholeness allows for harmonious relations among genders. Gay Wilentz in *Binding Cultures* studies six women writers in Africa and the diaspora. She extrapolates from the study that “The African women writers’ aims are directed toward building societies which function by constantly renewed cultural traditions to (re)-acknowledge women’s place as full citizens within the context of these new societies” (118). In this process of building new societies, the Black women poets in my study look back in order to meaningfully go forward; they go back to traditional African religion and sometimes syncretize it with indigenized Christianity. They re-interpret religion as a tool of creative empowerment for themselves and of meaningful existence for the members of their community. The work of these writers suggests that focusing critical investigation on spirituality will be an important dimension to literary studies in the twenty-first century because of its emphasis on empowering and harmonizing spiritual and traditional values, and a re-interpretation of the place of Black women in relation to those values.

Gender issues in Africa are different from those elsewhere in the sense that while male domination is part of African societies, there are indigenous cultural practices that provide support for women in their fights for equal rights with men different from those Western practices allow. Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie in *Sew the Old Days* presents this view in the poem “When Father Experience Hits With His Hammer (Song for the Middle Class African Woman).” She writes:

More truly we seek the space

Our mothers had, the space within
 and space without,
 spaces emotional and spaces economic
 not confoundable with charades... (32)

Ogundipe suggests that because of “Westernization of African families” in the aftermath of colonialism, African women may be losing the protection they enjoyed as a result of “African kinship systems” (*Re-Creating Ourselves* 16). Florence Stratton in *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* discussing colonialism calls it “a patriarchal order, sexist as well as racist in its ideology and practices [...] Under colonialism, [...] African women were subject to interlocking forms of oppression: to the racism of colonialism and to indigenous and foreign structures of male domination” (7). Differently naming Black women’s struggles for equality with their men helps to appreciate Black women’s place and role in the context of their experience and culture and serves the needs of Black women, so they can make progress in the fight for gender equality. Ien Ang in “I’m a feminist but . . . ‘Other’ Women and Postcolonial Feminism” shows that feminism represents Western working class women’s interests and that it cannot be used to represent those of every woman. She writes:

Feminism must stop conceiving itself as a nation, a ‘natural’ political destination for all women, no matter how multicultural. Rather than adopting a politics of inclusion (which is always ultimately based on a notion of commonality and community), it will have to develop a self-consciousness politics of partiality, and imagine itself as a *limited* political home, which does not absorb difference within a pre-given and predefined space but leaves room for ambivalence and ambiguity. In the uneven, conjectural terrain so

created, white/Western feminists too will have to detotalize their feminist identities and be compelled to say: “I’m a feminist, but. . . .” (394)

The term “Africana womanhood” takes into account the communal concern of Black women not only for their liberation but for freedom for their community from other forms of oppression. Africana womanhood embodies a holistic attitude towards liberation. The term also takes into account the religious practices, beliefs, taboos, and omens that govern daily life in Black societies, in a way that recognizes the empowerment of women, especially with their spiritual claims.

Black women have powers that are realized in the context of tradition and religion, so these dimensions of Black cultures are important to the goals of Africana womanhood. Anthonia Kalu in *Women, Literature and Development in Africa* asserts, “before the African woman’s voice was silenced, it was heard within societal frameworks that assumed women’s participation was normal. [Woman’s] power was based on certain socio-political, religious, and / or other norms” (18). For instance, Catherine Acholonu in *The Spring’s Last Drop* shows that her being incarnated by the spirit of her dead father traditionally entrenches her in the community and makes the messages of her poetry relevant in addressing the needs of the people. She draws strength from her cultural, social, and spiritual positioning as an Igbo woman. Lorna Goodison also claims that she finds her voice by being spiritually connected to her ancestors, especially to Nana of the Maroons. Goodison chooses to be heard in her community through spiritual and creative ancestors. Being connected and relevant to the needs in their communities by sharing in their communities’ spiritual values empowers the poets because the spiritual authority in their poetry is higher than the physical authority of men, who may attempt to censor women. This study contributes to the model of indigenous communities’ employing spiritual illumination in

resisting physical oppression and of Black women's effectual resistance to patriarchy through their spiritual sensitivity. Black women poets in this study resist patriarchy by emphasizing the religious beliefs and rituals in their communities. They become agents of the supernatural, with a consequently higher and more respectable mandate as poets in their different communities. This study, by extension, presents to world literature and to other cultures such alternative forms of resistance and literary enrichment based on spiritual perception.

Goodison and Acholonu show in their work that spiritual perception, whether in the form of traditional African religion or indigenized Christianity, results not only in creative empowerment and liberation for them but also aids in social, cultural, and political wholeness for the members of their communities. They are able to do so because Africa and the Black diaspora constitute religiously rich communities. Spirituality empowers the community and affirms the people's freedom, despite their social and political deprivations, because the spirit has the capacity to rise above difficulties and to perceive ideas about an alternate mode of resistance. Goodison and Acholonu claim to receive creative illumination or inspiration through intermediaries that are localized deities, and go further to connect to higher communal deities in their societies and, at some points, to God through direct Biblical quotations.

Lorna Goodison perceives her Afro-Caribbean pantheon as a creative hierarchy that begins with her familial ancestors and extends to the Nana of the Jamaican Maroons. Her creative power and the social, cultural, and political relevance of the themes she presents lie in her being connected to the spiritual community of her ancestors, which spiritual community is indispensable for the survival of the members of her Jamaican community. Goodison's revelation that the source of her creative power lies in the spiritual community is telling about how meaning is created transcendentally in the Caribbean context and in the spiritual

experiences of the people. According to Patrick Taylor in “Dancing the Nation,” “If God is a guarantor of meaning, meaning is contextualized and experienced in a multiplicity of evolving divine, ancestral, and spiritual forces” (2). Catherine Acholonu draws from the traditional Igbo belief in reincarnation and connects to the spiritual communal identity of her community with the image of the market goddess. In “the word,” she further syncretizes her themes about spiritual empowerment based on the traditional Igbo beliefs and practices with the Hindu mantra, especially the belief in the creative power of the spoken word, which belief is common in traditional African religion, Hinduism, and Christianity. Acholonu brings these religions together to show a possible common religious belief that can empower and create liberation for all peoples, for she claims that “where the spirit is / there is liberty” (*The Spring’s Last Drop* 62). More than Goodison, she ambulates between traditional African religion and Christianity; she repudiates the limitations and encumbrances of traditional African religion but does not fully surrender to Christian doctrines. The spiritual perceptions of Goodison and Acholonu appear in the form of folk beliefs, omens, and direct Biblical quotations to show the rich spiritual heritage that empowers them.

The spiritual has always been a significant influence in both the works of Jamaican and Nigerian women poets. Consciousness of collective spiritual heritage pervades the social and political lives of the people in the different communities, and this tradition is expressed in poetry. Gordon Collier, discussing West Indian poetry, in “At the Gate of Cultures” claims that, “Religious and proto-religious belief-systems (including mythology, superstition and legend) find poetic expression primarily as confirmation of the social collective and its folkways” (227). Because of the communally shared spiritual values in many religious rituals and traditional folk beliefs in many Black communities, many Black women poets in Jamaica and Nigeria are using

spiritual models in their poetry. For instance Pamela Mordecai in *de Man* devotes herself to the enactment of the passion of the Christ in Jamaican dialect, and shows its relevance to modern society. She democratizes Christianity so that Black people become active participants in the Christian faith and help create new meanings that are relevant to their experiences. Jamaican-born Afro-Canadian poet Afua Cooper in her book *Memories Have Tongue* acknowledges the gifts of illumination she receives in the form of “valuable gifts” (vi) during the process of producing her work. She mined the spiritual through dreams, meditation, and prayers in order to acquire meaning and relevance, and her work becomes a valuable gift itself to the members of her community. In Nigeria, Ifi Amadiume in *Passion Waves* turns to Moslem Sufism as a means of gaining illumination that is spiritual so that her “thoughts flow out in waves / sending shivers though [her] veins” (10). Ebele Eko in *Bridges of Gold* builds on the fact that the basis for peace, love, and harmony is spiritual. In her poetry she celebrates the benefits from the sacrifice of Christ. Some of the benefits are peace, harmony, love, and progress that brings about changes that improve the conditions of life among individuals and the community. These poets convey these themes by using spiritually-charged diction and by direct invocation of some relevant religious rituals, omens, and beliefs of their people. The significance of these spiritual dimensions in the works of these poets is that it is a step towards recovery of the dignity of the Black people’s cultural values and Black women’s traditional empowerment, as a distinction and an affirmation of their unique humanity and communality.

The poets are not strictly adhering to traditionalism but acknowledge that knowledge and enlightenment have a spiritual origin and saturate the world views in their communities and meaningfully permeate into themes addressed in poetry; as well, the poets suggest the community can deploy such knowledge in meeting their social, cultural, and political needs.

Spirituality is a deep and powerful force that can meaningfully influence creativity. Collier's observation about the pervasiveness and validity of spiritual consciousness in the Caribbean is telling with regards to how the poetry of Black people should be perceived and read:

Such a multiplicity of syncretising or cohabitational expressions of belief, shifting easily between the highest expression of human linkage with the transcendent and the most domestic manifestations of fragmentary folk-belief, legend and superstition, reveals that West Indian poetry, no matter how culturally 'marginal' its function may seem, is engaging at the deepest levels with an active and far from marginalized force within West Indian societal consciousness. (247)

Religion as a subject matter in Nigerian poetry is inevitable and its benefits in creating larger spaces for women's creativity are evident; Douglas Killam and Ruth Rowe acknowledge that "poetry and religion have always been intricately intertwined in Africa" (240). The centrality of religion in the work of these poets might be misconstrued as the opium of colonized people, but contextually, in Africa and in the Caribbean, religion's central place is the soul of Black communities and always produced meaning, identity, and empowerment for both men and women before colonialism. Issues such as religion, patriarchy, sacredness, women's struggle for liberation, and the role of the poet in the community carry different cultural implications for Black people than they would ordinarily signify in some societies.

The forms of resistance the Black women poets in this study employ are built the undeniable powers that lie in focusing on the spirit so as to bring enlightenment, strength, inspiration, and creative insight for their benefit and for that of their communities. Palmer discussing the power of the heart and soul in bringing about revolution and change in lives as well as revolution in communities asserts that "powerless people managed to foment deep-

reaching social change in so many parts of the globe [...] by drawing upon and deploying the only power that cannot be taken from us: the power of the human soul, the human spirit, the human heart. Far from being socially and politically regressive, ‘heart and soul’ language, rightly understood, is one of the most radical rhetorics we have” (378). Against this background we can appreciate why the slave masters were not able to destroy the African drumming and dances that connected the slaves to their ancestral and spiritual domain of geographical Africa, despite the threat of death and other tortures. The conglomeration of different cultures in the Caribbean produces a dance, a creativity which is spiritual and is at the heart of the people’s identity as a community. About the dance, Taylor claims that “It is about the spirit as it manifests itself in the individual in community; and it is about the relations between living communities in a modern globalized world. Religious symbols, rituals, and practices provide inner meaning and define who we are as persons in relation to other persons. But they also commemorate collective history and consolidate group identity” (12). Thus the Black women poets in this study as a result of their traditional empowerment and the spiritual bonds in their communities produce works that speak actively, effectively, and undeniably to their communities. The resilience of the spiritual will also explain why despite systematic imperialism and male hegemony, Black women poets of the twentieth century subscribe to their spiritual perceptions in order to resist patriarchy and be empowered creatively in a way that is most relevant to their societies, thus seeking to recreate their traditional empowerment in their communities.

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