

BLACK HISTORY MONTH

THE SACRED WISDOM OF AFRICA

It Takes A Village

By SOBONFU SOMÉ

To create a community that will work for people here, there is a need to look carefully at some of the fundamentals of a healthy community—spirit, children, elders, responsibility, gift-giving, accountability, ancestors, and ritual.

People in the West can create a sense of community in their cities just as people in West Africa have. They can do this by providing one another with continuous support. Each of us needs something to hang on to. That's why you have all these small communities here and there—a group of women working on social issues, a group of men, and all these small groups pursuing a common goal. They are attempts to re-create a piece of that greater community that used to be and that has been destroyed.

The only difference is that most of these communities don't focus on spirit. They tend to leave the spirit outside of their activity, which is a mistake. It's another way of saying, "We are in control," when in fact a true community must be based on spirit. Spirit should be the leader and the guide for everybody in a community. Community is the spirit, the guiding light of the tribe, whereby people come together in order to fulfill a specific purpose, to help others fulfill their purpose, and to take care of one another. The goal of the community is to make sure that each member of the community is heard and is properly giving gifts he has brought to this world. Without this giving, the community dies. And without the community, the individual is left without a place where he can contribute. The community is that grounding place where people can and share their gifts and receive from others.

Intimacy, the natural attraction of two human beings to each other, is something that the elders say is actually prompted by spirit, and spirit brings people together in order to give them the opportunity to grow together. That growth is directly connected to the gifts that two people are capable of providing to the village. And this is why when a couple is in trouble, the whole village is in trouble.

People in the village will involve themselves in the problems of a couple and dissect them and make sure that they fix them because their interests are at risk. So community support is not entirely altruistic. People are not necessarily coming to help the couple. They are coming to help themselves. If a couple is in trouble, those around them may not get what they need. The absence of true community leaves a couple totally responsible for themselves and anything else around them. It narrows down their ways of getting needs met, so that their relationship

becomes their community. And if it is not able to fulfill this role, then the individuals begin to feel like a failure. It affects the psyche so dramatically that they feel that there's no place for them. What they thought was their support group, their partnership, is unable to satisfy their needs.

There are things that men do in order to nourish what they call their female self and things that women have to do in order to nourish their male self. In the village, once a year, men who have gone through initiation together meet at the same spot where they were initiated and have a ritual that looks something like mothering. Their behavior is a kind of strict male-to-male emotional exchange. There's something about it that breaks down the narcissistic feeling that comes with managing responsibilities.

Even though it's not a funeral (where men, women, and children can cry together), the men cry as much as they want. There's a need to reawaken the part of the self that is in touch with emotion, and this ritual allows them to do so without waiting until somebody dies. There is a caretaking, not prescribed, but a random caretaking, that goes on. Someone, because of inner pressure of some sort, will break down, and someone else will take care of him. And while taking care of him, the caretaker too is going to break down, and someone is going to come and join them. So it becomes a continuous support and nurturing ritual.

It makes it easier for some reason, when the men come back, for them to stop feeling that they have to invoke some kind of control within the ritual space of intimacy. In other words, when the sense of responsibility and of being a man in the community stops overwhelming someone who has participated in this ritual, the circle of intimacy they create with their partner becomes closer to what spirit wants. The belief is that the male tends to put on his warrior mode even in the ash circle of intimacy. When that warrior self has not been tamed by some kind of motherly energy, it is almost impossible for a man to engage in intimate relations with his partner.

In the village, in order for the feminine and the masculine energies to live harmoniously, women and men must commit themselves to work at balancing their sexual energies. When either energy dominates, it becomes overpowering and can threaten the stability of the village. For this reason women not only gather up on a yearly basis with their initiation sisters, but they also get together as often as they can and go to a cave or go to the bush. There we do a set of rituals in order to build our masculine energy by acting out our rage and anger and by taking on men's roles.

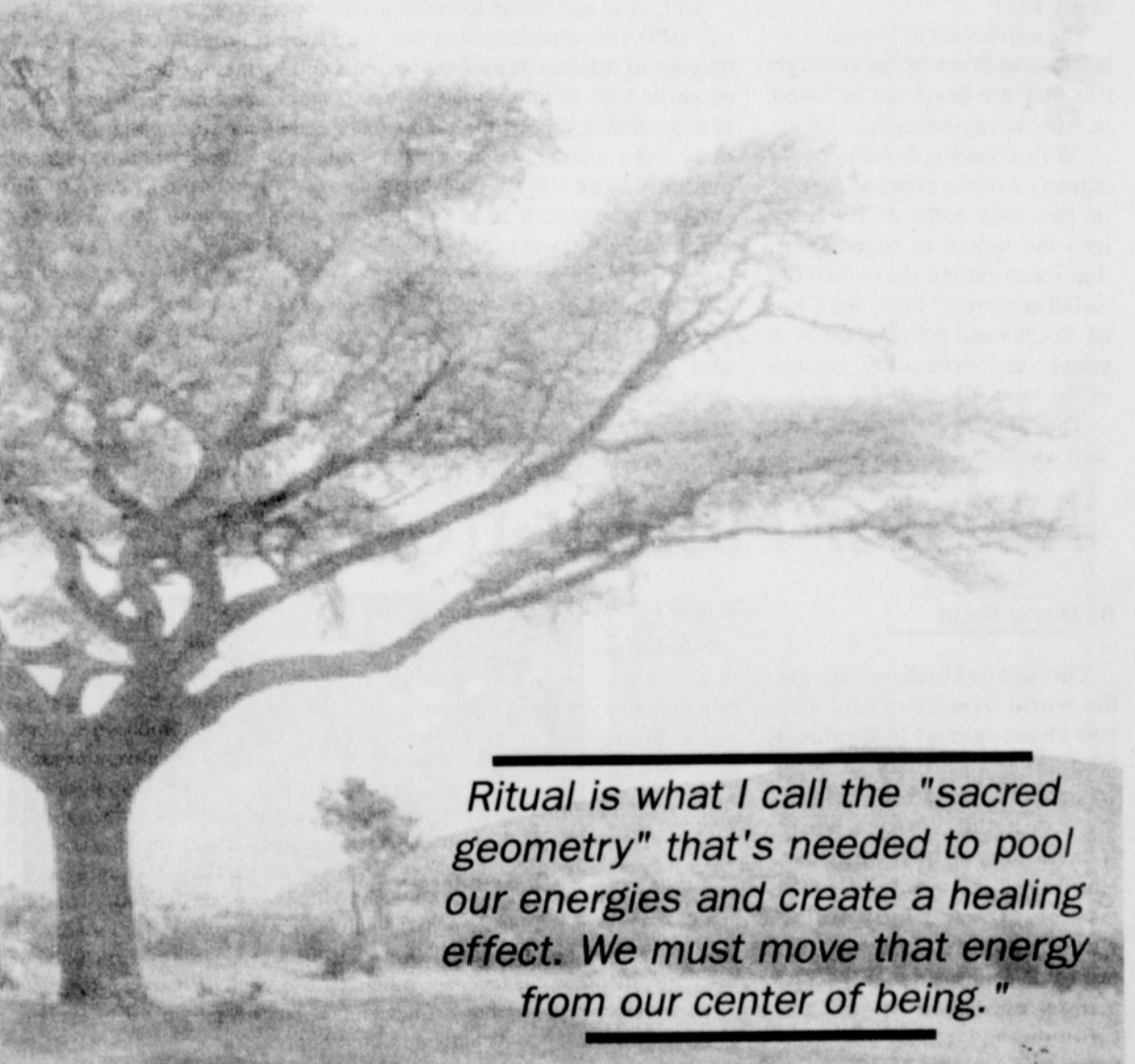


When we go home there is a small welcoming ritual. We are all received into our homes in such a way that we don't start to build upon our renewed masculine energy and become completely masculine, nor do we go back to being completely in the feminine energy.

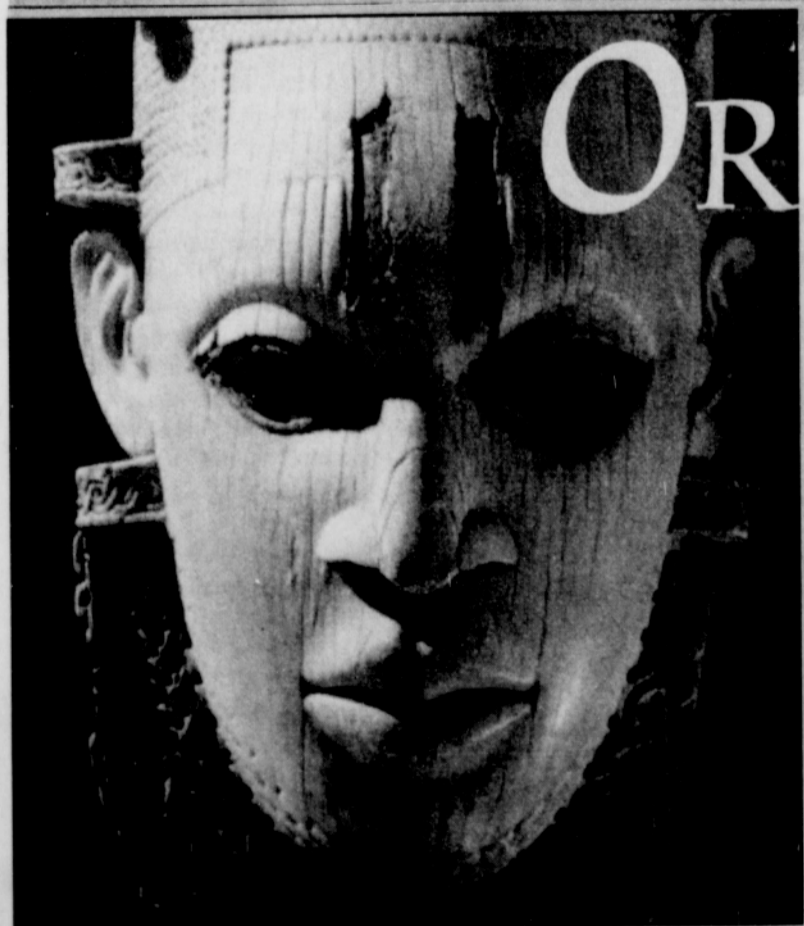
We accept the tradition that women must work with women in order to build a feminine identity and that men must work with men in order to build a masculine identity. This way, when a man and a woman come together, they are better able to relate to each other.

You may notice in many villages in Africa that during the days women are all together, men are all together also. This is not a sexist practice. It's just that for some reason there's a feeling that a clear sense of otherness is essential to a harmonious coming together with your mate.

Today we are called upon to wage war with the opposite gender. We need to embrace the new millennium with a brand-new eye, a new heart, one that allows for mutual respect. Women and men live their own mysteries, and neither gender will ever fully grasp the other. The model of the village is there to encourage sexism, not to make men and women the same, but to create an environment in which both genders appreciate and honor the other.



Ritual is what I call the "sacred geometry" that's needed to pool our energies and create a healing effect. We must move that energy from our center of being."



ORIGINS

"Yo"

"Yo," the word used on rap tunes and as a slang greeting is actually a sacred African mantra. The Bambara of Mali believe the Universe begins and ends in the sound of Yo. Yo is the first sound, but it is also the silence at the core of creation. And emanations from this void, through the root sound Yo, created the structure of the heavens, of the earth, and of all living and nonliving things. They proceed with the belief that everything, including human consciousness, emanates from the root sound Yo.

Negro

The word Negro poetically refers to the tribes people of the Niger River, meaning people of the "water flowing into sand." It specifically refers to the

Niger River, whose strange U-shaped course must have convinced early travelers that the river simply terminated in the desert sands.

Black

The original definition of 'black' bears little resemblance to the meaning of the word today. In African mythology, *black* has no intrinsically negative connotation. The phrase "black people" means People of the mountains of the west; people of the setting sun; people of the dream time; people of the seeded earth; people of the fertile womb; people on an underground journey toward God-realization; people of immeasurable radiance; people of infinite compassion.

The Cross

The Cross was known as a sacred symbol in Africa well before the advent of Christianity. Known as *yowa*, this cross, which predates the intrusion of Christianity into central Africa, is the centerpiece of oath taking and some ritual initiations. The Bambara of West Africa holds that the center of the cross is symbolically the *kuru* (God-point); here the Bambara say, life emerges from divinity through birth and merges back into divinity through death, and through this cyclical transformation, we achieve immortality.

Original Sin

African mythology dictates humanity was born not in Original Sin

but in Original Blessing. The Mbuti of the Congo region do not regard the separation of humanity from God as a fall from grace. The Mbuti honor a divinity that is everywhere felt, a sacred presence experienced not just the trees and stream, or the sky and soil, but from the totality, down to the last grain of sand.

Virgin And Child

The image of the Virgin and Child was an image borrowed from a much earlier Egyptian image of Isis holding Horus. The divine Goddess Mother, an image replicated in an Egyptian statue of the pharaoh Amun Ra sits on the stone throne of the Great Goddess Isis, as though a child on the lap of its mother.