

Beyoncé, Oshun, and the melting pot of American religion

The Black church isn't in the pot; it is the pot.

by [Johnathan C. Richardson](#) in the [September 23, 2020](#) issue



Beyoncé as Yoruba goddess Oshun. © Parkwood Entertainment / Courtesy of Disney+

Black Is King, Beyoncé's latest visual album, has received worldwide acclaim. One thing that makes this deeply spiritual album distinctive is Beyoncé's deployment of Oshun, the Yoruba goddess of water, fertility, love, and purity, as an alter ego. "I am Beyoncé Giselle Knowles-Carter," she sings on "Mood 4 Eva." "I am the Nala, sister of Naruba / Oshun, Queen Sheba, I am the mother."

Such artistic license would have less resonance if it came from any other artist but Beyoncé. Her influence on the hearts and minds of fans and admirers can hardly be overstated. She has cross-cultural appeal and political notoriety, the latter due in part to her and her husband Jay-Z's association with the Obamas. Her wardrobe has influenced fashion trends. Now, with her artistic channeling of Oshun, her reach has gone beyond the likes of the late King of Pop, Michael Jackson.

The little girl from Houston who joined Destiny's Child in 1990 grew into a pop culture icon and a political powerhouse—and a religious muse. Beyoncé even has a worship service named after her—the Beyoncé Mass, which has used the Kennedy Center as its sanctuary—although the service does not worship Beyoncé but instead evokes the power of the divine feminine to tell biblically oriented stories steeped in womanist theology (see “Not my grandmother's church,” June 17).

Beyoncé's influence transcends age and race. But with this growing cultural power has come controversy. Given her invocation of the goddess Oshun and the existence of a worship service named for her, some question whether her influence is ultimately for the good or if she may actually think she is, herself, a god. She has been accused of idolatry.

Black Is King's use of Oshun has provoked particular controversy in Christian circles. “Oshun and her orisha pals are not your friend,” one Nigerian Christian leader warned on Facebook. “I know your favorite artist makes them look cool, but do not be deceived.” For many Black Christians around the world, as well as for others, the Yoruba worldview is associated with the demonic, with evil, with a misguided past overcome by Christianity.

We might try to understand the uproar over Beyoncé's symbolic use of Oshun by looking at a difficult moment in Toni Morrison's work. In *Toni Morrison: The Pieces I Am*, a documentary about her life, she provides an analysis of the claim that America is a melting pot. She suggests that what is missing from that idea is an understanding that Black people are not in the pot; we are the pot. America cannot fully understand itself without understanding how it has been shaped by the lives and experiences of Black people.

Understanding this point reveals why Beyoncé's use of Oshun is controversial—and why it shouldn't be.

America is not only a cultural and ethnic melting pot; it is also a religious one. An account of American religion might begin with an appreciation for the idea that the Black church is the pot. It has continuously, from the moment of its inception, shaped American religious ideas and expression. If the religious histories of African Americans, let alone the history of the religious strivings of our indigenous African brothers and sisters, had not been rendered invisible, Beyoncé's use of a religious construct from West Africa would have a different kind of resonance and would not

cause so much concern.

People object to Beyoncé's Oshun references, but not out of Christian fidelity. Instead this objection relays an embarrassment about what we do not know. Perhaps her use of a Yoruba goddess exposes what we have in common with Christian missionaries who felt they had nothing to learn from the inhabitants of what they believed to be the Dark Continent.

We would be better off recognizing that the fertility goddess Oshun belongs to what's often called African traditional religion. Gayraud S. Wilmore, the eminent Black church historian and theologian who died this April, taught that ATR designates a social imaginary that is essentially monotheistic but operationally polytheistic. Within that social imaginary, there are many heterogeneous religions that stretch backward into the dim reaches of prehistory and forward into many localized forms and languages, into modern Africa and places where the African diaspora is strong, like the United States and Haiti. Wilmore explains that ATR is the worship of God but also gods, closely identified with primordial ancestors, tribal histories, and founders of ethnic groups and civilizations that exist in all parts of the continent and beyond.

As a pastor in Louisiana, I find this framework profoundly helpful. In New Orleans, where eclectic religious claims are in the cultural air we breathe, I am able to make sense of such spiritual entanglements without a hint of cognitive dissonance.

The spiritual arguments brought on by Beyoncé's work may not be about things essential to the faith but rather about expressions to which we are accustomed and expressions that we find strange. We are used to religion with sacred scriptures, a single founder, a central temple or sanctuary, schools of prophets and apostles, ecclesiastical organization, and sacerdotal officialdom. We are used to how religion, especially Christian religion, has made it itself known to us in the West. Beyoncé deploys a religion that is family- and clan-centered, pragmatic in its relation to daily existence, and firmly ecological and anthropocentric in its ontology; one that intrinsically relates God, natural phenomena, and the ancestors. This strikes us as odd at best and perhaps even threatening.

But Christians who understand the importance of the Black church for our own religious development should be comforted by Beyoncé's use of Oshun, not dismayed. She gives us a glimpse of how the Black Christian religious pot was

engineered. “Always Africa is giving us something new or some metempsychosis of a world-old thing,” writes W. E. B. Du Bois. He goes on to quote historian Theodor Mommsen: “It was through Africa that Christianity became the religion of the world.” Maybe the way to a deeper, more mature Christian discipleship and witness includes a more charitable consideration of ATR—since without it, according to Du Bois, none of us would be Christian anyway.

In his seminal book *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, Wilmore shows that there is an African substratum to the way Black religion developed in America. The Black church has remnants of ATR within its DNA. Wilmore gives our enslaved ancestors the theological sophistication that harsh responses to Beyoncé’s work may seek to deny. This is to say that an awareness of how Black Christianity developed in the West at the hands of free and enslaved Africans may be echoed in its most basic form in Beyoncé’s recognition of Oshun.

Morrison’s observation that Black people are the pot of the American melting pot has religious implications. The religious aspect of *Black Is King* should not anger or frighten Christians, especially not Black Christians. The album uses ATR as an artistic substratum, the same way free and enslaved Africans used it to create the Black church and Black theology. Beyoncé offers a welcome reminder that ATR is an essential ingredient of the African American contribution to Western Christianity. American Christianity was forged in the creative crucible of African religions.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Why Oshun?”