

Da Mojo: A Users Guide

Michael Ortiz Hill

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(“*Mojo* is an Ebonic form of the Bantu word *kimoyo*, meaning ‘[language] of the Spirit.’ writes Malaika Mutere. Among Western Bantu, *mojo* was *nkisi*, a medicine bundle, a gathering of ancestor spirits that had incarnated in this herb or that stone. Here I gather a few stories and ethical reflections that are the *mojo* that took me into the African world.)

Introduction to Mojo

In the 90s there was a season of radical transition between epistemologies: “ways of knowing.” To wit – I was finishing up a deep psychoanalysis with Dr. John Seeley, on the couch paring away layer after layer of childhood trauma to my infancy in intensive care, to birth trauma and enwombment to ... the unnameable.

Those who know what it is to submit to this modern rite of passage know what epistemological breakdown is about. The healing process involves recognizing the unconscious as a “real place” and that unconscious traumas shape and inform ones day to day life. One remembers the story beneath the story of who you think you are.

My analysis was classical – my “mother” was the sacred keeper of the threshold – which is to say I had to pass by Mom as the wicked witch of the west as I proceeded to the deeper traumas of life and death struggle. Getting born, getting a staph infection in my navel, treated with sulfa drugs that I proved to be deathly allergic, receiving the last rites of the Catholic Church so I wouldn’t spend eternity in limbo.

Thoroughly rescued it was apparently mine to spend a brief space in the hell called earth that “I might learn to bear the beams of love,” as William Blake wrote.

But enough of backstory.

Now da *mojo*.

At that time I was living in Santa Cruz and in a most passionate young marriage with my wife Deena Metzger, four hundred miles to the south. I did not want to break up my kids childhood so the first ten years of my marriage were spent in airplanes and making love a few days a month.

Da *mojo* came to me when I was in Topanga for the last two months of my analysis. I was walking a broad circle around our rural spread, leaving offerings in the four directions and singing to the orisha in Yoruba.

(The Orisha are the multiple faces of God in the Yoruba tribal tradition. I was writing a book that involved the African origins of Black American culture – long since published as *The Village of the Water Spirits, The Dreams of African-Americans*. Spring Publications, 2005. I’d learned a handful of sacred songs and was being prepared to be initiated in Nigeria. When

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So I called on the spirit of the setting sun in the west, layed out raw beef heart and poured wine and sang to Shango, the Orisha of fire and lightening, known for passion and the tempering of passion for the sake of the tribe.

As I was pouring wine and singing, lightening -- actual lightening -- cracked not far from me.

And the thunder still resounds.

Just as the descent into the unconscious introduced me to a way of knowing (and undid an *other* that didn't know the unconscious) so did my passage into the inspirited world of African medicine.

In the psychological frame we take for granted, only the inner world of humans is inspirited. What is unconscious is made conscious and rendered as a more truthful and complete story of who one is. In this way the self is made whole.

This self is a cultural and historical artifact, a product of the individualism that has taken European culture. It is a self without deep context, without community, and thus a trick done with mirrors.

What resonates from that moment when Shango came that is that the world is inspirited. I did not, thank God, indulge the fantasy that "I" caused "it" but *we* are profoundly and tacitly in dialogue with the elementals.

There is reciprocal communication.

If the “inner life” is the sole place of depth and human subjectivity the lone domain of sentient intelligence then the demons of narcissism are not far. Other animals are “dumb beasts” and the earth is just a repository of natural “resources.”

(As I was typing this last paragraph, Deena called me out, “Michael come out. There is a rainbow!” She called me to the field where Shango came two decades ago and sure enough there was a rainbow, unheard of in a dry summer day.

The *mojo*.)

A Circle of Elk

During the time that opened up with Shango, lots of other extraordinary things happened. Lightening came not once but several times and I came to know a little of his temperament. In the Yoruba the spirit of fire is young and at times impetuous. For the Huichol of Mexico he is Grandfather Tatewari.

As my old way of seeing broke down, I went in the forest in the mountains of central Arizona where Deena and I once had a writing retreat. I brought offerings for Eshu Elegba – the spirit of the crossroads – and chanted a Lucumi prayer to him. (Lucumi is the Yoruba/Spanish idiom of Afro-Cubans)

“Please tell me what this draw to Africa is about. I’m confused.

I was suddenly overwhelmed with nausea and on my knees dry heaving. As I was gagging I heard the cracking of twigs nearby me.

O my!

Hunting season.

I pulled myself together, trying to piece together a plausible persona of a man not in the midst of a tribal rite and lifted my head to greet the hunter but what I saw was half a dozen elk gathered around me, browsing. For a half hour I sat still, breathing lightly, and watched them. A few feet away, a large stag with a massive rack of horns would look up into my eyes and linger unafraid, then continue browsing. There was a gun shot from afar, they momentarily startled and then continued browsing. Eventually there was another gunshot and they all scattered.

I knew then my call to Africa was about initiation into the way of *mojo* and the kinship of all living beings.

The Shadow of Mojo: Witchcraft

Ritual hexing and protection from the hex is Afro-European *mojo*: amulets, herbs, the Holy Bible, garlic over the doorway, a cross around one's neck or over the bed, the Jewish hamsa to defend against the evil eye, the name of Jesus (or other magical words, "hocus pocus" being a peasant adaptation of the Latin Mass -- hoc est corpus meum) and on and on. When the world falls apart, one will reach for anything for protection, and so close are the African and European ways of going about it that students of Southern folklore used to engage in lively debates about where exactly any given ritual gesture originated.

African-American culture went through a vast epistemological shift from 1930 to 1960 with the Great Migration from the rural south to the urban north. Previous to 1930 “Africanisms” pervaded the south – root doctors, ‘hands’ also known as *mojo*, full immersion baptism like the *ngoma* of the water spirits, etc. These old ways, profound and wise, began to be diabolicized.

Matters African became “*hoodoo*”—hexing.

When a culture is under assault, witchcraft accusation proliferates and the ones who honor the way of the ancestors are especially endangered. I’ve seen this with the Navajo in Arizona, the Garifuna in Belize and the Maya in Guatamala, This is the success of Christianized imperialism. It sets up traditional ways to autocannibalize themselves. The witches – in Zimbabwe they are called *varozi* – are said to gather secretly in the forest to eat people souls. Witchcraft accusation effectively eats the souls of very old traditions.

In Zimbabwe there is a 30% HIV rate. The life expectancy when I was first initiated in 1996 was 59 years. Now its 29 years. Moreover AIDS has a symptomatology very much like witchcraft disease and *varozi* accusation is common and lethal.

Salem was small potatoes.

I know what it is to be hexed – it is real – but here I’ll tell a couple of stories about hexing.

But first a story of untempered *mojo* of which hexing is a variety.

It was a moment of desperation and heartbreak when I called on Ogun to do whatever he could to save the life of my friend B.

B. had a complete psychotic break and had barricaded himself in a trailer on our land. I knew him to be suicidal and for a week his paranoia had locked the door separating us.

Ogun, the spirit of iron it is said is the fiercest of warriors. In the old days, it is said, that we down here in the human village could not possibly understand the infinite nature of God, so the Divine refracted into the hundreds of Orisha such as Shango or Yemaya the spirit of the ocean and Ogun took his blade and cut the path between heaven and earth so the Orisha could dance among their children. I was intimidated by Ogun but also quite helpless.

It was the evening of January 16, 1994.

“Whatever you can do, please do!” I said, blowing cigar smoke on my altar.

At 4:30 am the Northridge earthquake happened and B. rushed from his trailer and huddled naked in a doorjamb of our house. He began in earnest the long passage out of psychosis.

Did I become infatuated with MY power?

Unfortunately, yes.

When my mother was struggling with her brother Frank Ortiz (Reagans’ favorite ambassador to Latin America) over my grandfathers estate, Frank hired a rich mans lawyers to ensure my mother would be impoverished in her old age.

I invoked Ogun – and a lawyer on Franks legal team had a heart attack. Not lethal but it was sufficient to begin instructing me in matters of ego and *mojo*.

I also called on Ogun to undo the presidency of George W. Bush who I saw and see as altogether evil. As it turned out GWB's second Saturn return coincided with his debate with John Kerry, October 12, 2004. I was more cautious this time, merely calling on Bush to hex himself.

I sang to Ogun and offered and fed Ogun with a dash of rum on my alter.

“May he undo himself”

This he did.

This exchange between Linda Grabel --no doubt an astrologically savvy plant at the debate

Grabel: President Bush, during the last four years, you have made thousands of decisions that have affected millions of lives. Please give three instances in which you came to realize you had made a wrong decision, and what you did to correct it. Thank you.

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Laughing , as they say, all the way to the grave.

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LAUGHTER

Laughing , as they say, all the way to the grave.

As my friend and publisher, the astrologer Stephan Hewitt, wrote me:

“The Saturn return is a time of radical changes in life, the passage from one life cycle to another. The first is from child to

adult, and the second Saturn return is a doorway that separates the adult from the elder. Major life changes come to pass at the second Saturn return that will be the result of either preparing for a life of wisdom, or encountering circumstances that will compel you to make the necessary shifts in awareness“

Saturn return should be is a time of profound self-reflection.

I confess shadenfreud as I watched Bushs' reputation unravel after that debate from his refusal to face what destruction he had wrought, And ... by way of self-hexing, this effort to undo Bush seemed to provoke an exacerbation of multiple sclerosis

Tempering, Initiation and the Etiquette of having Mojo

Ah! The wisdom of reterospect

I look back on these stories as gonzo shamanizing – at times radiantly benevolent, at others dangerous or self-destructive. They represent a passage of four years when I was being prepared for my first initiation in Zimbabwe.

The evening Mandaza Kandemwa began initiating me into the *ngoma* of the water spirits, he asked me who sent me.

“Spider,” I replied. “”She makes the connections.”

On reflecting now on my initiations into tribal medicine I see how true that remains.

A Hopi story says it precisely.

It seems that the first winter solstice was upon the old ones and they were frightened of no light, endless cold, the death of all beings.

The animals held council.

Bear said, "I can bring back the sun," and he tossed his lasso and pulled and pulled to no effect.

"Let me try," said Wolf and he tossed lasso and pulled and pulled and pulled without success.

Then little grandmother spider said quietly, "I can do this" and all the animals laughed at the thought. She spun a thread and tenderly pulled the sun back with little effort.

This story speaks of initiation and tempering .. not brute spiritual strength but making the connection.

When I do a healing ceremonial on our land I finish the first evening singing to spider to bring a dream to the one who is healing. She unweaves the pattern of dis-ease and re-weaves a new life. After I "gave over" multiple sclerosis I had her tattooed on my coccsyx with the long line of her thread moving up my spine to my brain stem: the "trail of tears" passing through where my lesions were. Spider re-wove my neurosystem.

The first night of my first initiation in Zimbabwe I dreamt there were two full moons and I was in a Bushman cave on the second. It was mine to read the message in the cave paintings,

I could not.

I told Mandaza this dream in the morning..

“Before your initiation is over, you will be able to read what the Bushman spirits want to tell you,” he said.

A couple of weeks later at the culmination of initiation at the Zambezi river, I had another dream in the Bushman cave. I could read it fluently.

“This one now has two mothers.”

My second mother is the one my people call Mambokadzi, the queen. She is the full moon (the stars are her children), the female elephant (Mandlovu – the spirit of kinship) and, in the syncretic poetry of African people, my Zulu clan sings to her as Maria, the mother of God.

She is also the mother of the water spirits, the spirits of healing and peacemaking.

Initiation (which is perpetual) is initiation into the web of interconnection that is the village of the living, the dead and the unborn. The young gonzo shaman couldn't see this, couldn't see the context of relationship that every ritual gesture takes place in and draws from.

He was famished for power.

Mitakuye Oyasin, say the Lakota. “All my relations.”

One thing I have seen initiating North Americans into the ngoma tradition alongside Mandaza is how spiritually HUNGRY we are. I remember one group we were initiating were getting

very publically trance possessed one after another and were such a sight that a Zulu member of our clan rushed off to get her father to behold the spectacle of a bunch of white people taken by spirits.

“Its not true,” he laughed. “White people don’t have ancestors.”

“Come! Come!”

And so he did and was astonished.

It is with a kind sadness that I tell initiates before they return to America that *now* things begin.

From bitterly, blessed experience I call return my est training – eat shit and thrive. The necessary ordeal of transforming humiliation into humility. With initiation its easy the delusion that one has been made ‘special’ and ‘precious,’ that ones fate is so much larger than life.

“Of belonging to another, or to others, or to God,”

writes T. S, Elliot,

“The only wisdom we can hope to acquire

Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless.”

In the ngoma tradition one is initiated by the spirit of sacred illness. Water spirit disease includes an incapacitating empathy. Initiation involves making an alliance with the spirits that afflict so you can heal others.

My good fortune was that my initiations in Africa were completed by apprenticeship to the diagnosis of multiple sclerosis. Humility *is* endless and to walk the way pf traditional medicine, the primary spiritual path is humility.

The est curriculum is about honoring the full gamut of being human – the sweetness of light and abject despair.

Its also about *getting out of the way* so Spirit can come through and minister to a suffering world.

And so it is.

When Percival came to the holy grail it was his to answer the essential question: what is the grail for?

The grail is for love.

Likewise those who would be initiated must ask: what is the *mojo* for?

The *mojo* is for healing.

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