



# Decolonising My Soul: My Journey to Reclaim African Spirituality

By Wangūi wa Kamonji



At 11 pm on Thursday, 20<sup>th</sup> October 2011, I turn the last page of *Coconut* by Kopano Matlwa, and I know that I'm not going back to church again. I don't know what that means at that moment, having been a staunch Catholic, but I know that I'm not going back.

That night was the beginning of my now seven-year quest to discover, recover and live African spirituality. The quest has involved many locations and people – many of them not in Africa – and has helped me to re-evaluate and reconstruct a world that had come crashing down that night. It was not a direct or easy journey. People had many questions, especially those who had known me as the person who would constantly invite others to Mass, or who would confess the mortal sin of having skipped Mass. I didn't have the answers, and I was making this journey far from home and without much (worldly) guidance. The crash that happened that night hadn't left a map of where to go, much less where to begin, so I had to make the way as I went.

After seven years of being on the journey, I can say that I have arrived at several shores of knowing and understanding. Even more, however, I have begun to wonder about the silence around African spirituality, and its persistent labelling as sorcery or devil worship. And as a researcher of the environment, I see the connection of these silences and the colonial enterprise, which forced a forgetting of an all-alive Earth, the ancestors and other un-embodied beings like nature spirits, and

rendered the Earth as a space for domination. We're all living with the ecological fall-out from this kind of worldview. I started asking myself: can we recover these ways of being, knowing and doing, and re-engage with the living Earth from a place beyond coloniality?

But back to the night of the crash. In the book I had just read, Fikile, a waitress living in a township, aspires to make it big and be white. She visits her grandmother, Gogo, and participates in her prayers that go on for several hours, a dramatic performance accompanied by wailing and sobs. Gogo moans the lot of black South Africans, the violence, the unemployment, the pain, the assault...The prayer was moving to read until I got to the end where Gogo inexplicably made peace with the God she was praying to, convinced that this God would resolve the issues and make a way. That jarred. This same God that she was praying to was brought by the same people whose coming caused the troubles she was praying about. And that was the end for me.

Walking into the uncertainty was not easy. For weeks and months after, I would scour the Internet trying to find apologies from the church for their hand in colonialism. There were none. Not even in that most progressive Vatican II Council where they finally decided that Africans singing in church and praying in their languages was okay. So I kept walking.

The questions propelling me were in the silences. Whereas Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and even Buddhism, had some form and reality for me, I wondered what African religion was; I had never been told about it or come across it. I had grown up in Nairobi, or more rightly, in Ongata Rongai (yes there are people who've lived here all their lives), and without grandparents - they had died before I was born or soon after. I did not have much contact with any "rural home". On both sides, family members had long been swirled into urban Nairobi pursuits. My brothers and I were third generation "uprooted" in a way. But I was sure that my people had had religious or spiritual practices of some sort. The question was how to find those out while I was studying in the United States. So I started with the one thing I knew I had: my grandmother. My grandmother died a year and seven days before I was born, and I feel she went to call me, the last of the granddaughters named after her. I began my quest by calling to her.

### *Soul Searching*

*I am...*

*Soul searching, seeking to find*

*Pieces of clay, mud and morning's breath,*

*Evening light, sounds and fire stones,*

*The human warmth that makes me, me.*

*The touch of my cūcū - and the others that I didn't know-*

*Her stories by firelight, the food we might have made together.*

*I wish she had taught me to weave,*

*To warp and weft and tie the knots of this life's kiondo.*

*My gogo's spittle in blessing...*

*I call on it on this journey I'm taking,*

*To sound the depths of my heart*

*And avoid treacherous waters.*

One of the ways I was calling her was through poetry. I had written poetry in high school but stopped when I got to university, so I began writing again. This time I was writing a different kind of poetry, one that was calling out to my ancestors, seeking a path, seeking clarity on where to go. I also began to do libations as a way of praying, without necessarily knowing the formula (there isn't really; ritual is more about spirit than form, though form can carry spirit). I would call on my grandmother, and as I poured libations I repeated the one line of Kikuyu prayer I knew: "*Thai thathaiya Ngai, thai*", a call for peace, in between my imploring: help me on this journey, I'm trying

to figure my way back, I'm trying to learn these things, open the way for me, show me, teach me.

On the path of sounding out the silences, I started reading more writing by African authors. Up to that point I had been an ardent consumer of the so-called classics - William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens and the like. I had not encountered much African literature besides the mandatory high school set-books and I was thirsty for anyone who could tell me anything about African traditions. So I began a self-guided course on reading African authors, going to the library to look for fiction by Africans, asking for recommendations from friends and devouring all that I could find in between my classes: Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Chimamanda Adichie, Ngwatilo Mawiyoo, Okot p'Bitek, anthologies of short stories... As I kept reading, ways of thinking and worldviews (on women's clothing, on prisons as justice, on men's beauty) that I had never questioned began to fall away. Histories of Kenya's colonial period, and of colonialism in the Americas, also helped me understand the world as it exists now was created and was not a matter of fact, unchangeable. Reading was a way of beginning to see with new eyes.

I also learnt how to cook, researching on indigenous African crops and trying out new things with traditional ingredients - a way of reimagining the old. Cooking was significant for me because I had always resisted learning at home; I was sure that I would then be expected to cook for my elder brothers. But away from my mother's kitchen, I made my own world by experimenting, baking with nduma and millet, learning to make pilau, mahamri and mukimo and so on. That was also the semester I enrolled in voice lessons and began to sing in an a cappella group. In high school I had been labelled tone-deaf and asked to stand in the back and mouth the words during the inter-house singing competitions. In subtle internal ways, singing rearranged me, opened me up, and helped me to regain a sense of self and voice in the new becoming.

The following year, I travelled on a programme studying cities in Brazil, South Africa and Vietnam, and I took the opportunity to learn from other traditions. I figured ancestry and indigenous spirituality are not only African, and I could learn from different systems of connecting to and venerating one's ancestors. In every place, I would ask people to tell me and show me how spirituality was done. In Brazil, my host-mum took us to an Umbanda temple, Umbanda is one of the major Afro-Brazilian religions syncretised from practices and beliefs of enslaved Africans taken to Brazil. I wasn't there as a tourist spectator; I was there to learn and practise alongside others. At the temple, one of the practitioners broke out of the circle of the initiated worshippers and approached me to pray with me, something that my host-mum later said never happens. I took this as a confirmation that I was on the right path even though I didn't have absolute clarity.

In South Africa I met an academic professor at the University of Cape Town who researched African traditional religions. Something he said helped me understand one of my difficulties with accessing indigenous spirituality in East Africa. He said that traditional religions in West Africa tend to be more public. There are shrines and priests and priestesses devoted to different gods and goddesses and you can go to them and learn. In East and Southern Africa, religions are more private and family-oriented. Even though sacred sites may exist, large community rituals are less common. So if you want to learn outside of family, there's no place you can say, "Let me go there".

Vietnam was fascinating because ancestral veneration is absolutely integrated in the culture. Houses have an ancestral shrine where family members place food and other items, food that we later consumed. Walking down the streets you are bound to see, and perhaps be shocked by, people burning money. Upon asking we found out that they were burning dollar bills (fake ones) to send to their ancestors in other realms. Seeing the seamlessness of these practices in daily life was useful and inspiring. In later years I have wondered what difference this holding on to indigenous philosophies and practices in East and South Asia makes compared to Africa's seeming rush to black out her own.

When I went back to campus for my last semester, a bit less uncertain, I joined a dance group whose main repertoire was dances from Haiti connected to vodu, another syncretised African religion created from the mix of traditions carried by enslaved Africans to the Caribbean. I began to learn the history of the Haitian revolution, and to dance for the gods and goddesses (Lwas) of a tradition that sparked and sustained the revolution that birthed what was the first black republic in 1804.

Later that year, I continued exploring spirituality through dance when I travelled back to Brazil and began dancing the Orixás of Candomblé, yet another syncretised African religion. My host-brother, Dimas, was an activist and practitioner of Candomblé. Observing his practice in song, drum, dance and prayer, having conversations despite my struggling Portuguese, was special. The Orixás, or Orişas, are a deity pantheon in Yoruba Ifa tradition that embody particular traits and are often connected to certain nature elements. To this day I feel a great affinity to and respect for these African-based religions as they exist in and have been preserved and added to over time in South America and the Caribbean, and I continue to dance and teach these dances.

Travelling to Mexico afterward, I joined weekly Aztec/Mexica dances at the invitation of my friend Lupita (not Nyong'o; the name is common in Mexico, here short for Guadalupe) that happened in a public square under moonlight. In this dance that would last two hours or more, we saluted all six sides (North, East, West, South, up and down), danced the stories of different animal gods, and ended by claiming the continued glory and fame of Mexico-Tenochtitlan whose roots had not and would not be decimated.



The scroll reads: “Destruyeron mis hojas, cortaron mis ramas, cortaron mi tronco...pero mis raices jamás podrán arrancarlas. Netzahualcoyotl” - They destroyed my leaves, cut my branches, cut my

trunk (some versions say burnt my trunk), but never will they be able to uproot my roots.

This declaration at the end of each dance never failed to bring tears to my eyes, as it explicitly recognised the violence of colonialism, and declared the continued resilience of a people's spiritualities and ways of being. The sense of community and welcoming amongst these dancers was also beautiful. After each dance we would gather and share food, gratitude and updates from the week. In participating in all of these dances I recognised that these were not my traditions, but were traditions that had similar tenets and elements as the tradition I was trying to get closer to. Dancing became a vehicle to reach my people. Vodou, Candomblé and danza Mexica-Chichimeca connected me to my body and my spirit, and then through that reconnection, to my ancestors, because my ancestors are in me and I am in them.

I went back to South Africa and this time had the opportunity to meet with a sangoma for a bone reading. He was recommended to me by a colleague who had struggled for years with debilitating depression that no doctor or medicine seemed to be helping with. She went to the sangoma as a last resort, figuring, "well nothing else has worked". I had just one question for my ancestors: am I on the right path? My ancestors said yes. They said keep going, keep asking and finding out.

Considering I was due to move back to Kenya, I had one question for the sangoma: who in Kenya can I speak to about this, where can I go to continue to deepen this journey? He gave me a four-part prescription to formally introduce myself to my ancestors and pilgrimage to their lands. He also gave me the name of a woman also on her indigenous spirituality path and who works with communities to revive their ecocultural practices for freedom and well-being. When I met Wanjiku she introduced me to a tens-of-thousands-year-old African cultural and spiritual tradition in the form of African rock art, a heritage that had been unknown to me up to that point. Meeting Wanjiku was also a relief because I now had living proof that it was possible to live one's African spirituality in East Africa.

  
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San\* rock painting in the Dâures Mountains, in what is today Namibia. Image source: Trust for African Rock Art/David Coulson

At home, I was met with the same barrage of questions that my friends had thrown at me when I first left the church. I came back without a job or money (a no-no if you're coming from abroad), having left the church, and having dropped the three English names my parents had given me at birth. None of this went down easy for them, and the pushback I experienced was so intense that at one point I wasn't speaking with one of my parents. My parents have never really come round to this new self that I am. They think I am lost, and they still try and get me to go back to church. But I am known for my stubbornness.

It's been seven years and I'm at the point now where I introduce myself as a practitioner of African indigenous spirituality, no longer afraid to show up in my fullness. Africa, ancestrality and the Earth are a core part of who I am. When the crash happened, I thought I would have to go through the rubble picking piece by piece, and evaluating what is useful to keep and what is not. Along the way I have done a lot of reconstruction and re-imagination, picking up and discarding. Much has been embodied, and has happened in doing: libations, writing, singing, dressing, dancing and cooking. My journey has also had lots of gifts along the way - of knowledge, instruments, conversations,

practices, movements, songs, rituals, food, and connections. All of these elements were researched, reconnected to, reimagined, reconstructed, and welcomed into, and form a part of my practice today.

I've also learned to engage with nature spirits and recover the ontology and practice of a living Earth that is integral to African cultures. Like sitting in a garden. Like speaking to whoever is around me - animal spirits, plant spirits, water, rocks, all allies in the journey to reconnect to self, to ancestors and to Earth. Paying attention to animal messengers. Giving thanks to and paying full attention to my food, to water, to air. I have learnt to salute new lands that I travel to and acknowledge the land as sovereign and alive. I have learnt to listen and sing songs and dance dances that are gifted through such interactions. And the journey continues.

For my Master's dissertation in African Studies last year, I researched what African ways of being, knowing and doing have to offer for healing and thriving past colonial wounds and today's continued coloniality. I wanted to think about ideas and practices that are beyond a governance centred on the colonial state, beyond justice practices that are restricted to a Western model retributive justice, and beyond a view of the Earth that only sees her as dead resources to be exploited.

Still, in reading and engaging with post-colonial academic African works, I kept having the feeling that we have not yet gone far enough. We have not yet taken the jump to imagine complete freedom, and the absence or transformation (not reform) of some of our shackles. We have been hard at work decolonising our minds for several decades, but I see less work to decolonise our bodies and even less to decolonise our spirits and restore a relational philosophy and practice in relation to our ecologies, societies and unembodied relations.

It takes some courage to step forward and declare certain things when all around you there is reluctance to hear that or see that, but that is the medicine required for these deeply troubled times and spaces we're in. My ancestors tell me that this is medicine necessary for Africa today, and that the Earth and all who make home with her require it.

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