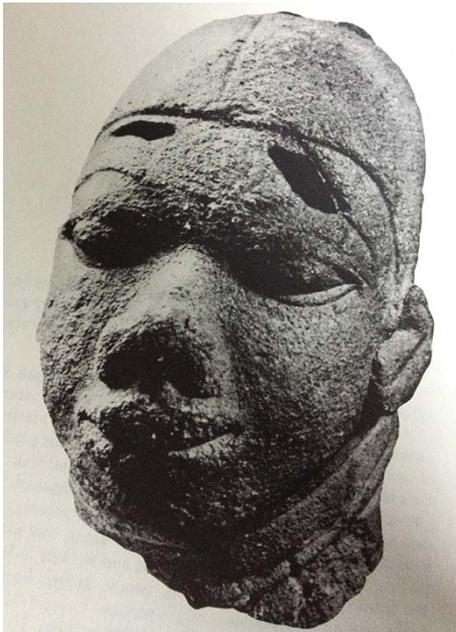


The Roots of Coolness: Ancient Yoruba Aesthetics in the New World

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Sculpted by an artist in the ancient Yoruba city of Ife-Ife (in south-western Nigeria about 135 miles northeast of modern day Lagos), the terra cotta head pictured below was created between the 10th and 12th Centuries, at a time when, according to Yale Art Historian and author Robert Farris Thompson, “nothing of comparable quality was being produced in Europe.”



Perhaps representing a person of status or an important spirit, this work gives us a portrait of calm modesty, dignity, and discretion that is perfectly aligned with the values of the Yoruba artist and culture that created it.

As Thompson notes in his remarkable book, “Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art and Philosophy,” (Random House, 1984):

“The Yoruba assess everything aesthetically – from the taste of a yam to the qualities of a dye, to the dress and deportment of a woman or a man.”

There are specific traceable ideas from the Yoruba that remain with us. It is surprising to find these Yoruba aesthetics, ideas, and terminology suffusing contemporary American music and culture today.

But they are here among us and we can learn a great deal about American history, culture, and tradition if we pay

attention to what has been retained and what has been lost as these Yoruba ideas slipped through the Middle Passage across the Atlantic into the Caribbean Basin, eventually migrated to America, and finally dispersed throughout the country.

There are three key components that inform the inseparable aesthetic and spiritual lives of the Yoruba and that have influenced Yoruba-based cultures here in the West: *Ashe*, *Iwa* and *Itutu*.

Ashe: Inspiration

Ashe is characterized in the spiritual and aesthetic language of the Yoruba as a morally neutral power: it can give or take away, it can bring life or death, according to the purpose and the nature of its bearer. Associated with the color red and often connoted by birds, as Thompson notes, *Ashe* is “associated with ‘the mothers,’ those most powerful of elderly women with a force capable of mystically annihilating the arrogant, the selfishly rich, or other targets deserving of punishment.”

Likely the best translation of *Ashe* is *inspiration*—in Yoruban terms literally having the Spirit come into you. Ritual contact with the Spirits is a formal goal of the Yoruba.

In Yoruba-based spiritual cultures scattered throughout the Caribbean Basin and South America, falling into a ritual trance is a formal goal in religious ceremonies. In order for the Spirits of the Ancestors to enter into this plane of existence (to help us, to warn us, to teach us and to protect us), they require a body: a mouth to speak through, eyes to see, ears to hear.

Far from being profane, in Yoruba terms, the body is a lynchpin that links the world of the Spirits with our daily world.

When in the course of ecstatic ceremonies someone successfully gives their body up to possession by the Spirit, others gather around them to protect them from harm and to witness what they will say or do. A possessed worshipper may foretell the future or explain the past, they may tell where something that is lost can be found. People pay attention to what transpires.

The benevolence of the Spirits of the Ancestors who have gone before us can be manifest when someone gives up volitional control over their body and allows the ancestor spirits to enter into this earthly plane.

When the Spirit comes into someone, they are said to see with the gods' eyes and hear with the gods' ears. This is the first critical step in understanding the aesthetic/spiritual values of the Yoruba.

Rather than being trapped in the more limited perspective of a mortal, one is literally inspired by a larger vision from a much broader vantage point both in terms of time and space.

In "Flash of the Spirit," Thompson quotes from Yoruba elders (p. 9):

"When a person comes under the influence of a spirit, his ordinary eyes swell to accommodate the inner eyes, the eyes of the god. He will then look very broadly across the whole of all the devotees..."

In this Yoruba worldview, developing a divinely *inspired* vision of who we are, what we can accomplish, and how we should carry ourselves is the critical first step in the spiritual and aesthetic development of a human being.

Iwa: Character

If one successfully cultivates a vision rooted in the Spirit and the ancestors, this is a good beginning. But it is not sufficient.

Bringing a dream into being in our shared reality is difficult. A vision inspired by a larger perspective on the world can present real problems.

Once one has been inspired (*Ashe*), then successfully bringing that vision into the community where it can be useful to us all, requires tremendous discipline, force of will, and personal power – something in the West we summarize as 'character.'

Like *Ashe*, good character and a spotless reputation (*Iwa*) originates with the gods.

And when the Yoruba recognize these qualities in a person, a work of art, natural beauty or forces at work in the world, they name it: *Itutu*. A beautiful sculpture, an inspired section of drumming or dancing, an act of generosity, kindness under duress might all be described as *Itutu*.

Itutu: Recognizing Inspired Goodness

When a person has successfully cultivated a greater vision of the world (*Ashe*), and if they have the inner will and strength of good character (*Iwa*) to bring that vision into being, their actions, their visage, their comportment and behavior will begin to express an immutable nobility. They will carry themselves with dignity and modesty. They will be honest and neither unnecessarily or excessively humble or proud. Holding to their greater, inspired vision, they will be untroubled by irritations, large or small. These are remarkable external qualities that can be observed by the community at large. They are described as *Itutu*.

We can name signature leaders and people throughout human history who have sacrificed for the good of their greater communities and operated out of an inspired vision of how the world around them – and how they, themselves – can be.

We might quibble over the names that might be on that list but Mohandas K. Gandhi, Mother Theresa, Nelson Mandela, and Dr. Martin Luther King come readily to mind. Perhaps Malcolm X. There are others. Some famous. Some not.

For the Yoruba, the experience of divine inspiration, the development of personal character, and the achievement of *Itutu* remain open to us all.

Itutu is literally translated by the Yoruba as *Coolness*.

The sense of certainty that *Iwa* (character) and *Ashe* (inspiration) confer finds its expression in the fashioning of that terra cotta head on page 1. Neither overly smiling nor overtly sad, the peaceful countenance and personally held counsel of the sealed lips, and the calm, wide eyes all transmit the spiritual accomplishments of the person portrayed.

The person has *Itutu*. He is *cool*.

And according to the Yoruba elders, beauty is a part of coolness (*Itutu*).

But of beauty and character, character is the greater. Beauty will fade – the young will become old, the bloom will fade – but character can remain a powerful force throughout one's life, if one cares for it.

“Coolness, then, is a part of character, and character objectifies proper custom. To the degree that we live generously and discreetly, exhibiting grace under pressure, our appearance and our actions gradually assume virtual royal power. As we become noble, fully realizing the spark of creative goodness God endowed us with...we find the confidence to cope with all kinds of situations. This is *Ashe*. This is character [*Iwa*, ed.]. This is mystic coolness. All one. Paradise is regained, for Yoruba art returns the idea of heaven to mankind wherever the ancient ideal attitudes are genuinely manifested.”
–Flash of the Spirit, p. 16

How Did “Coolness” Get To Harlem?

In every community in our nation now – rural or urban; rich or poor; white, latino, oriental, native or black – one can hear something referred to as either ‘*cool*’ or ‘*not cool*.’ In music, from Country

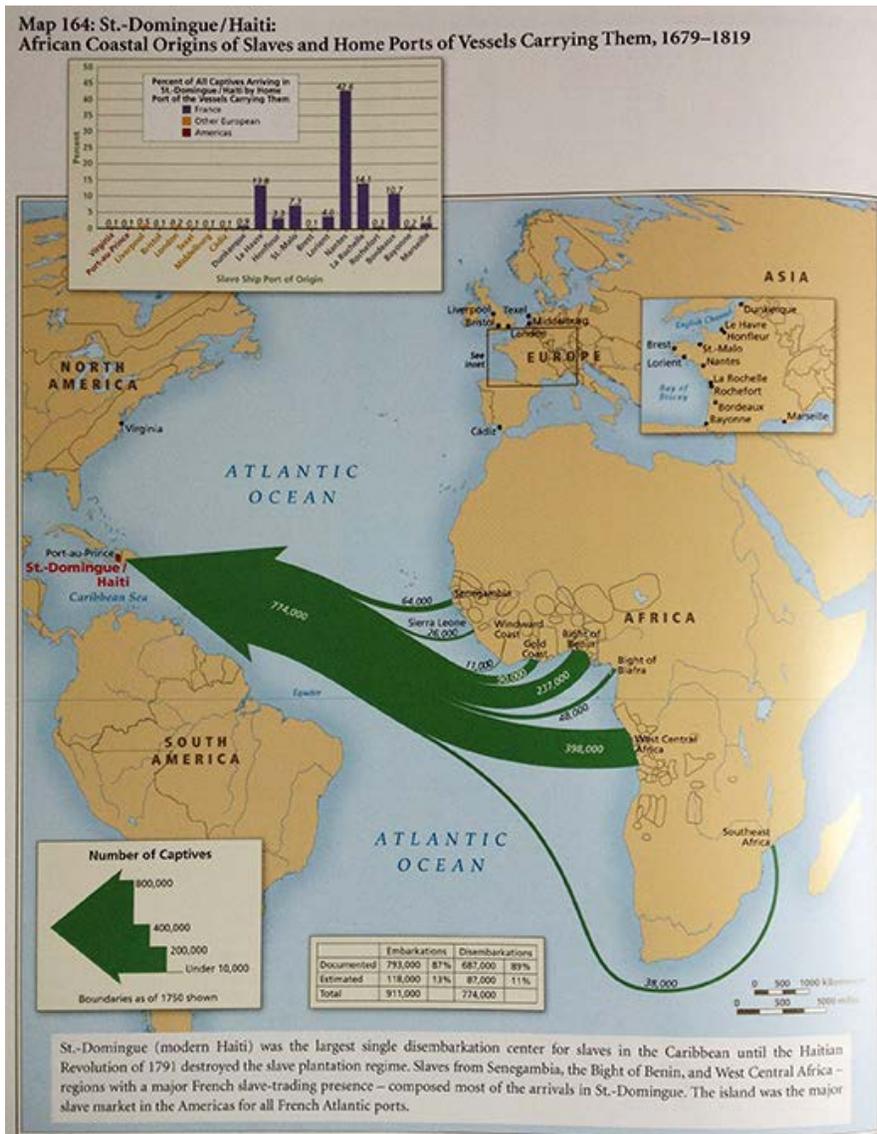
& Western to Hip Hop; from Folk to Blues and Jazz, from Classical to the Top 40, the term ‘cool’ is ubiquitous.

“Chill” and “Chill out,” are clichés.

How did this happen?

The New World Yoruba: Haiti, Trinidad, Cuba & Brazil

Yoruba religious rites, beliefs, music and myths are evident in these countries even today. In Haiti, the Yoruba's were generally called Anagos. Afro-Haitian religious activities give Yoruba rites and beliefs an honored place, and the pantheon includes numerous deities of Yoruba origin. In Brazil, Yoruba religious activities are called Anago or Shango, and in Cuba they are designated Lucumi.



Many of the sacred chants of Santeria persist in the Yoruba language, in much the same way Catholic masses were said in Latin, long after it ceased to be a common, spoken language.

The adaptability valued in the ideals of the Yoruba provided their aesthetic ideas and spiritual beliefs with a unique ability to find expression in new settings both in the Old World and in the New.

In the New World colonies, coerced or compelled to live under Catholicism, Yoruba often masked their gods in the identities of different Catholic saints.

This created not so much a fusion of religions, as a carefully hidden interpretation of persistent living and vibrant beliefs of the Yoruba tradition. Often they found ways of cross-linking Christian figures with ancient deities, interpreting revered traditions in new settings.

Outwardly abiding by the strictures of their Christian owners who surrounded, enslaved, and controlled them, the Yoruba protected and preserved their ancient beliefs secretly allowing them to enter the dominant cultures and find their ways into the modern world.

From Haiti to New Orleans: French Slavery vs. American Slavery

While the differences in the brutality of slavery in French and English colonies may have been slight, significant differences developed between the two systems.

Among the French slaveholders, if you had one drop of French blood in you, then you were French.

But for Americans slaverholders, if you had one drop of black blood in you, you were Black.

The French were also perfectly happy to exploit a wide range of talents in their slave population.

There were Black bookkeepers for the plantations, Black tutors for the children, there were Black marching bands and piano 'professors.' If a slave showed a particular talent, the French were perfectly happy to exploit it.

On American soil, over the course of the 18th Century, the range of occupations and training open to slaves dwindled from a more limited diversity on the coastal regions in the late 1600s through the 1700s, to almost nothing but brute fieldwork, as tobacco and cotton became the primary crops. With the successful slave rebellion in Haiti in the early 19th Century, Blacks were relegated to field work and brute labor. Educating a slave became unlawful. In Southern colonies and, later, states, simply endeavoring to learn to read could cost a slave his or her life.

Haiti: A Free Republic

In a revolution that took almost a dozen years, former slaves in Haiti took over the island, ejected their French masters and Haiti became an independent nation on January 1, 1804.

In some respects, America has been punishing this island nation for its impudence ever since.

The United States occupied Haiti, "to safeguard the interests of U.S. corporations," starting on July 28, 1915, when 330 US Marines landed at Port-au-Prince, on the authority of U.S. President Woodrow Wilson.

The American occupation ended on August 1, 1934 after Franklin D. Roosevelt reaffirmed an August 1933 disengagement agreement. The last contingent of U.S. Marines departed on August 15, 1934 after a formal transfer of authority to the Haitian Garde.

America meddled in the internal affairs of Haiti throughout the 20th Century, either supporting vicious family dynasties like the Duvaliers, or deposing democratically elected leaders like Aristide. It is difficult to dismiss the racial and self-serving economic elements that have gone into the American domination of this little Caribbean nation.

But, back in 1804, with the overthrow of the French, black musicians, who had been trained with European instruments – the piano tutors and 'professors,' brass band members, and the like – suddenly found themselves artists without patrons, and without jobs.

During the early years of the 19th Century many of these performers abandoned Haiti and headed to the northern-most Caribbean port. These French-trained musicians (many of them still influenced by the Yoruba religions and cultural ideas that survived in Haiti) encountered the more restrictive occupational limits and older musical forms of the slave cultures in North America.

And they began to fashion a new music in their new home: New Orleans.

The Birth of Jazz & Coolness

As the music we now call Jazz began to develop in New Orleans, Caribbean-Yoruba ideas flourished.

The Yoruba penchant for improvising; for determined practice and the development of uncanny skill; for restraining one's emotions; for carrying oneself with a certain quiet, regal bearing; and for describing all this as 'cool' was part and parcel of the Jazz culture that developed around New Orleans.

Over the course of the 20th Century, with the diaspora of Jazz musicians out of New Orleans and into other urban centers across the country – Kansas City; Detroit; Minneapolis/St. Paul; Chicago; Washington, DC; Baltimore; New York; St. Louis – expressions of *coolness* made their way into the popular culture, where we find them today.

Coolness Today: What's with us? What have we lost?

Recognizing that contemporary ideas of coolness actually have deep, traditional Yoruban roots can be a powerful way of opening up our culture.

Because today, in some ways, only the outer appearance of 'coolness' has survived in America.

Much of the spiritual and inspirational nature of the tradition has been lost, in favor of just the outer shell or appearance of '*coolness*' – as expressed in an unflappable, tight-lipped calm that seems to be entirely unattached to any moral, civil, spiritual, or personal development or personal nobility.

Sometimes in classroom settings, I will ask students to list things that are cool for us. Expensive cars, vacations, clothes, and jewelry all make the list. But so do skills. Being good at sports or the arts often make the list, too.

As the list develops, without outwardly acknowledging it, I quietly separate the items mentioned into two different lists of what I will later refer to as either "Internal" or "External" *cool*:

External Cool: Clothing, jewelry, things which can be bought for us or taken from us (and require money – often lots of it) all wind up on this side of the ledger;

Internal Cool: Skills, talents, personality and character traits that we personally cultivate and which can't be purchased or taken from us (that are available to all of us) wind up here.

Once the listing activity is winding down (as the frequency of the students' contributions begin to falter), I will point out that as they may have noticed, I have actually created two lists out of their suggestions. I ask them what the differences are between the lists.

Generally, those things that can be bought, broken, stolen, or lost, are all on what I call the External Cool List. While those things that are personally cultivated, open to all of us, regardless of our economic circumstances, our family backgrounds, ethnicity and creed, and dependent on our own individual or communal effort are all on what I call the Internal Cool List.

Then, we look as a class at the Yoruba background for this idea of 'coolness.' We explore *Ashe*, *Iwa*, and *Itutu* and look at their history, spiritual/aesthetic underpinnings, movement, and erosion.

Itutu/Coolness: Inspiration, Discipline, Generosity & Work

An inspired vision, a level of personal discipline and strength of character, a willingness to serve others and hard work have for thousands of years been the stuff out of which *Itutu* was defined. Turning away from a simplistic and materialistic definition of what is cool and finding a way to honor this venerable tradition by making a place in contemporary coolness for these more challenging, inner qualities may be a way of helping to redefine us as human beings, rather than simply as consumers of the work of others.

This Yoruba idea still has a toe-hold in our culture.

It may be possible to point to the heritage of *coolness* and reinvigorate it once again. In so doing we may help make the world we share a fairer, kinder, more compassionate, and more personally rewarding place.

“The Yoruba remain the Yoruba precisely because their culture provides them with ample philosophic means for comprehending, and ultimately transcending, the power that periodically threaten to dissolve them. That their religion and their art withstood the horrors of the Middle Passage and firmly established themselves in the Americas (New York City, Miami, Havana, Matanzas, Recife, Bahia, Rio de Janeiro, Port-au-Prince) as the slave trade effected a Yoruba diaspora—reflects the triumph of an inexorable communal will.”

– *Flash of the Spirit*, p. 16

Learning about this history has changed me. It may change you. It may change others. It is my personal hope that it will.

–*Scott Ainslie, June 11, 2013, Brattleboro, Vermont*

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<http://www.LoydArtists.com> <http://DeltaBluesPilgrimage.com> <http://CattailMusic.com>
<http://RobertJohnsonGuitarDVD.com>

Recommended Sources:

Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art and Philosophy
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Atlas of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade
©2010, David Eltis and David Richardson.

Other resources and readings available at <http://CattailMusic.com>.

