

Kabbalah and the Spiritual Tradition of Africa: A Path of Integration

"The word! It is no more. It is past, and still it lives! So is God." Zaire

Kurt Browne

Kabbalah is a tradition of knowledge concerning God, the Universe and Humanity. The word means "to receive" and we, who are created in the image of God, can receive this wisdom and knowledge which was given at the beginning of time. This is the perennial teaching given to all humankind which has always been present on earth. It manifests through the ages in different forms and cultures, sometimes hidden and sometimes in the open, but always there for those who truly seek to know.



The Spiritual Tradition of Africa goes back to that time of creation. It recognises one God. Itongo for the Zulus, Olodumare for the Yoruba, Nyame for the Akan of Ghana and many other names. This Being brought forth existence and there are many creation stories which talk of a time when life was pleasant and good, but the bad choices of humans brought suffering and toil.

An example of this is the Bini story from Nigeria which tells of the sky being close to the earth in the beginning and nourishing all beings, but because of human greed and selfishness the sky rose up high above the earth beyond the reach of mankind.

Kabbalistic tradition tells us that when Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden, the Holy One sent the Archangel Razile to give them a Book of Secrets to enable them to regain Paradise. This is the Book that is ever present and in it are the answers to the ancient questions, "Who am I?", "Why am I here?" and "What is life about?". It is this constant yearning to know that enables us to find meaning and purpose in life through experiences on earth.

Kabbalah and the Black Diaspora

As we move into the new millennium what does it hold for us, the Black Diaspora? Confucius said, "In the wisdom of the past lies the hope of the future. The present comes from the past, the two must be in step." In Ghana, the Sankofa symbol is a bird that looks back in order to progress. Caroline Shola Arewa in her book "Opening to Spirit" says, "The concept of the Sankofa recognises the need to evaluate and build on the past in order to determine a prosperous future."

As a people, we may ask the question: "Where is the wisdom of our past?" We seek to know our heritage but are hindered in our search by events in the period of the late 18th and 19th centuries. Slavery cruelly cut us off from our past and we lost our roots, our culture and our languages; in short, we were stripped of our identity, ancestry and heritage. We were totally isolated.

In some countries, after transportation, the priests and initiates who survived were able to rekindle the ancient traditions and religious customs and some of them survive to this day in the New World, the Caribbean Islands, Brazil, Cuba and the USA. For most of us, our forebears were forced to abandon their cultural heritage and religion and adopt Christianity.

Today, many of us are still facing the same crisis of identity. A few years ago, while working on the Stonebridge Estate in London, I was at a community meeting for residents. There were over 50 black males there and I remember a middle-aged black man say, "Me, I can never trust the white man after what he do to me and my people." A round of applause echoed round the room at this statement. Many of the black diaspora are still caught up in this slave mentality. We say, "look what the white man has done to us," yet none of us have been slaves for the past 150 years. Racism and institutional racism in its many forms still exists, but how do attitudes change? First and foremost we must change ourselves. As Bob Marley sang on 'Redemption Song', "Emancipate yourself from mental slavery". We need to find our root, our confidence, our hidden tradition. It is only from the acknowledgement of our past that we can find a lineage which takes us into the future.

We need to examine that epoch in our history consciously in order to mourn and grieve. We have to acknowledge that deep within our psyches and our collective unconscious the scars of slavery exist and must be healed. We need to heal our Selves, our Souls, so we can move through our collective "Dark night of the Soul" and emerge stronger and wiser. We cannot expect European people to acknowledge their role in this evil crime against humanity if we first do not acknowledge and create the environment for ourselves to mourn the tragedy. It is for us, the diaspora, to create a day or a week, every year to accept, acknowledge and to mourn for that 150 year blight in our history which is known as slavery, and to honour our Ancestors.

Today, many of us are seeking to reconnect with our heritage, but we lack understanding of our African ancestry and our western education has failed to teach us the ways of the Spirit. John S. Mbiti in *African Religions and Philosophy* wrote, "Religion, in African societies is written, not on paper, but in people's hearts and minds, oral history, rituals and religious personages like the priests, rainmakers, officiating elders and even Kings. Everybody is a religious carrier." He goes on to say that there is no conversion from one traditional religion to another. Each society has its own religious system. Therefore a person has to be born into a particular society in order to assimilate the religious system of the society to which he belongs. He warns that an outsider cannot enter or appreciate fully the religion of another society.

How can we of the diaspora bridge this cultural gap? The most obvious tool to reconnect us is language, but as we look to mother Africa today we note that on that vast continent there are approximately 14,200 languages. Our lingua franca and that of the world today is English. How can we communicate with our African brethren? Would the priest/ess, shaman or witch doctor pass on their traditions and sacred knowledge to a foreigner or a stranger, for that is what we are, or do we seek an alternative method to understand the Creative/Universal principles which underlie all traditions and cultures? For in all traditions the Absolute - God is One.

Kabbalah is one form of sacred knowledge that is accessible to humanity and has not been lost. It is an ancient metaphysical system that illuminates the traditional African teachings concerning God, Creation and Humanity. According to tradition, King Solomon had this wisdom and it was brought by Balkis, Queen of Sheba and the first Negus Menelik back to their kingdom of Abyssinia (modern Ethiopia).

Kabbalah, which has at its core the Universality and the Oneness of God, is able to be adopted into any spiritual tradition in which God is One. It is one of many mystical traditions that gives us a key to understanding our root and heritage. It teaches about Universal Laws and Principles and shows that all humanity is from the One source.

We can use the Kabbalistic model to reconnect with our ancestral root to give us realisation that in the wisdom of our past lies the hope for our future. For in our past is Truth, the highest ideal. The key is to take responsibility for ourselves and destiny.

First principles of Kabbalistic teaching

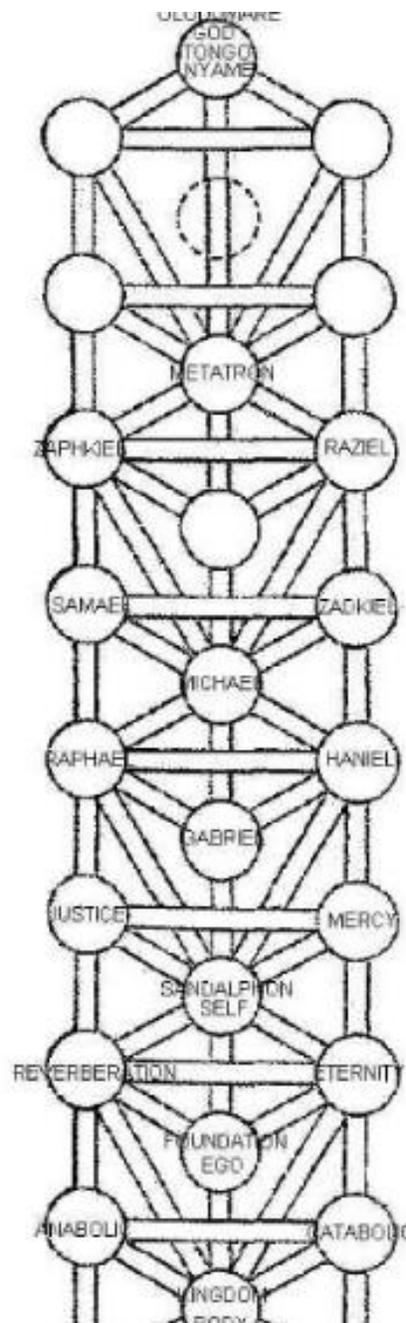
In the beginning, God wished to behold God, and so willed Existence to come into being. Existence unfolded from the first seed that contains everything that was, is and shall be and grew down into the trunk, branch, flowers and fruit of the Tree of Life.

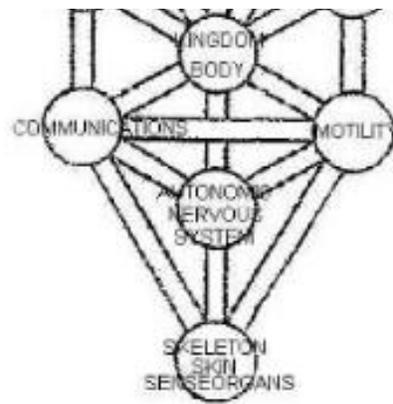
Within Existence, there are four worlds and each world corresponds to the four elements of earth, water, air and fire. The Divine world, from which everything emanates is a world of our consciousness and light; its element is fire. The Spiritual or Cosmic world is where creation begins; its element is air. The Psychological world contains all Forms and its element is water. The Physical world is where everything is made and comes into manifest existence; the element of earth.

As we read this we might ask, "where do we as humans fit into this scheme of existence?". In Kabbalistic teaching, we who are created in the image of God, have within us the Spark of the Divine from whence we came. This spark is clothed in a Spirit and then given a Soul and finally incarnates into the world in a Physical Body. In the book of Isaiah in the Bible, it is written, "Everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made." (Isaiah ch.43 vs 7). Here are the four levels of humanity in the image of God.

All humanity has the same origins from the first world of Divinity. In the next world of Spirit, male and female are not differentiated; this is the 'Created Adam'. Humanity is androgynous in that realm, then separated into a male and female soul in the Psychological world of Forms. The individual soul is finally given a "coat of skin". When they were cast out of Eden, "the Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them." (Genesis 3:21). Animal, physical bodies are made for a source that is Divine.

Let us examine four components of African Spiritual Traditions using Kabbalistic insights and knowledge.





Most African ethnic groups believe in One God, who created the Universe and all that is contained within it. (see diagram)

The Tree of Life is a map of the Universe and in it are all the laws and principles within existence. It starts with God and ends with God. I AM THAT I AM. The Mende call this Supreme Being Ngewo-Ngewo, the Yoruba: Oludumare, the Creator and Sustainer, and the Nuer of Sudan call him Kwoth. The Akan of Ghana know God as Nana Nyame, the Only Great One, who is sometimes regarded as a female and sometimes as a male.

In the world of Spirit there are parts of God which deal with the governing of the universe in general, and the affairs of humanity on earth, in particular. There are forces that build up, others that break down, and those in equilibrium. In African Traditions these forces are called Orishas, Divinities, Deities or Spirits.

To the Kabbalist they are Archangels whose job is to work in the world of Creation or Heaven, under the will and direction of the Holy One. Their work is transpersonal and cosmic.

In order to understand a cosmic principle, consider the principle of healing throughout all of creation, both seen and unseen, from the healing of a star, planet or solar system to the healing of a cell. Mother Earth needs healing and so do nations and communities. A cut finger heals, as does a wound on an animal or tree. That is the cosmic principle that comes through the powerful rituals of the Dagara people of Ghana, the Cote D'Ivoire and Burkina Faso and, indeed, all African Spiritual Traditions.

The souls of humans live on after death and can reincarnate back into humanity. The world of Formation is where most of us live for much of the time. It is the realm of psychology (psyche = soul in Greek), where our thoughts, feelings and deep emotions shape our lives. In our souls we have free will and through our choices we reap what we sow. At this level we develop a personality based on our past incarnation, our upbringing, tribe and culture. Our thoughts, feelings and actions are coloured by our parents, family, tribal customs and society. As we become adult "the choices we make dictate the life we lead" so our responsibility in the first instance is to ourselves, and then to the family and society as we grow and refine the soul through experiences, crises and pleasures of everyday life. The psychological world is the realm of the newly dead and

those waiting to be reborn. It is the place of the Ancestors; those who look after us and know and share the human experience. The more evolved Ancestors become the companions of the Light and they are there to guide the destiny of a people or nation. It is our interaction with them that brings about harmonious living for a family, people or nation.

In the physical world there are songs, dances and rituals concerning life experiences of birth, circumcision, initiation, marriage and death. These ceremonies of initiation mark the cycles and rhythms of life. They demonstrate the human condition on earth as we evolve and grow in consciousness.

Each time we are born our souls are clothed with a physical body as a vehicle in which to live and fully experience this world. In our bodies we can see, feel, touch, taste, smell and hear the world around us. Those who are awake recognise the unique positions of human beings who are bale to be conscious of being conscious. This, with the gift of free will, enables us to ascend to the highest heaven or descend to the lowest hell. Here in physical existence, the four worlds are present in the NOW. It is the place where God can hold God in the mirror of existence.

The choice is ours.

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