MAKING THE CONNECTION: J.B. MURRAY AND THE
SCRIPTS AND SPIRIT FORMS OF AFRICA

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MAKING THE CONNECTIONS: J.B. MURRAY AND THE
SCRIPTS AND SPIRIT FORMS OF AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation focuses on the artwork of J.B. Murray, an African American artist from Mitchell, Georgia. The goal of this dissertation is to explore J.B. Murray’s production of protective scripts and spirit figures. Murray created art works that served as the conduit for spiritual healing or protection between his God, his ancestral energies and the recipients or viewers of his work.

Protection through writing is both an Islamic and indigenous African tradition. Art Historians, after seeing Murray’s work, called it masterful art. It is my contention that Murray possessed knowledge that, unbeknownst to him or his ancestors, was passed along to him by his African ancestors. This knowledge is also seen in the work of other African and African American artists in this dissertation, which shows continuity across a wider group as opposed to just one artist.

Finally, a parallel is draw with African protector and healer, Serigne Bousso, from Touba, Senegal. Murray’s experience of visions and protective and healing work parallels the experience of Serigne Bousso within the last 30 years. This parallel is significant in making the connection between Murray, in Georgia, and the possible West African source for his knowledge of visions and protective signs.
The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the School of Graduate Studies, have examined a thesis titled “Making the Connection: J.B. Murray and the Scripts and Forms of Africa” presented by Licia E. Clifton-James, candidate for the Doctor of Philosophy degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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Anonymous figure found in the back storeroom of a barbershop in New Orleans, Louisiana, artist unknown, ca. 1920, carved and painted sequoia and black ash, painted metal, wire, and metal hardware, 32-5/8 x 13-3/8 x 9 in. Photo from Smithsonian American Art Museum. Gift of Herbert Waide Hemphill, Jr. and museum purchase made possible by Ralph Cross Johnson.

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3-1. J.B. Murray, Untitled, Early 1980s, Marker and paint on paper. 19” x 24”. From Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South, Volume One: Once That River Starts to Flow, edited by Paul Arnett, William Arnett, Maude Southwell Wahlman, and Theophus Smith, 2000, 475. Murray represents the cells of his prostate gland in healthy Caribbean blue, being invaded by evil red energy from the right. Note the one solid white form with red ‘eyes’ and red base, perhaps his cancerous tumor. He has placed two +s within this form, perhaps requesting God to take it away. While the script and +s in the other blue forms request the cells remain healthy or heal, if invaded.

3-2. (Untitled) by J.B. Murray. Early 1980s. Ballpoint pens, marker, and paint, on paper. 24” x 18”. Image from Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South, Volume One: Once That River Starts to Flow, edited by Paul Arnett, William Arnett, Maude Southwell Wahlman, and Theophus Smith, 2000, 472. Murray’s depiction of his house or home filled with his family, has colors to show that the house is blessed because it is gold, and each individual within the

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3.5. Trouble-Making Ladies. By J.B. Murray, mid-1980s. Marker and paint on paper, 19-1/2” x 25-1/2”. From Souls Grown Deep, Vol. 2, 2000. 477. As stated by William Arnett, “Pink paper, a red figure, and black designs indicate trouble in store for Murray. Lines of pink dots represent a necklace worn by a woman who, according to Murray, “turned [Murray] in to the FBI. In this painting, Murray identifies the various women he had known and been involved with, some reasonably good, some not. The white smears likely indicate that some of the women were dead when the painting was made.” (479) .................................................................182


3.8. Untitled. By J.B. Murray, 1978-1988, pink paper, paint, marker, and pen. From Mary Padgelek’s Hands of the Spirit website: http://www.handsofthespirit.com/2010/05/05/the-visionary-art-of-j-b-murray-3/. Murray tightly packed figures on either side of what Mary Padgelek calls a ‘stream of writing.’ In addition, Murray lines the four edges of his work with protective writing, essentially enveloping the problem and request for help in a
script frame with a generous amount of Xs or +s imbuing the request with God’s power


4-2. From right to left, Serigne Bousso, Bousso’s wife, Marième Diagne, and Licia Clifton-James. Photo taken by Amadou Laity Bodian, at the Mbour Bousso compound, March 27, 2016.


5-3. From right to left, Serigne Bousso, Bousso’s wife Marième Diagne and Licia Clifton-James. Photo taken by Amadou Laity Bodian, at the Mbour Bousso compound, March 27, 2016.

5-4. Two Pages of Protective Writing by Serigne Bousso, Touba, Senegal, March 26, 2016, ink on paper, each measuring approximately 6” x 8”. These papers were given to Licia Clifton-James on March 26, 2016 by Serigne Bousso. He prepared these papers at the request for protection by Clifton-James. These pages are to be placed in one liter of water and allowed to soak until the ink has dissolved from the paper. Then she is to take a small amount of the water with dissolved ink and rub it on her face and hands each morning for active protection.

5-5. (Untitled – Six Blue Spirit Forms) by J.B. Murray. 1970s. Tempera on paper. 19-1/2 x 25-1/2 in. From Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Chuck and Jan Rosenak and museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment 1997.124.122. Murray’s spirit forms are displayed in Caribbean blue, a Kongo symbol for the watery world of the ancestors and ancestral protection. The spirit forms are created in a vertical style like the vertical element of the Kongo Cosmogram and Kongo conjuring canes, connecting life at the top to ancestral energy at the bottom.

5-7. Ethiopian Kitabe Amulet Brown Leather Pendant with Scroll. Photos by L. Clifton-James, April 8, 2016. A scroll such as this usually made to the height of a person who ordered it was used to provide protection and healing. Often, the scroll would be ordered by a dabtara, healer, who would prescribe the sacrifice of a specific animal, and its skin would be used to prepare one or more scrolls. The scrolls have christian images and prayers. The subjects of these "Bibles" are always Christian, but actual content varies. Prayers are written in Ethiopic (Ge'ez), a Semitic language that is no longer spoken, but is still used for liturgical and other religious purposes by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Prayers sometime associated with images intend to protect the owner from the invisible. Scrolls like this are usual hung on the wall. The patient would look at the scroll and would recite prayers and the healing process would begin. Sometimes, scrolls are hung in the entrance of the home in order to scare off evil spirits and prevent bad spirits to penetrate the house. They could also be wore as a necklace during the day or laid on the bed or under the pillow in the bedtime. This description is taken from the information listed on Ebay with a similar kitabe. In collection of L. Clifton-James. .........................................................194


6-1. Mama Zogbé, in Mami shrine in Augusta, Georgia, where Mami Wata Healers Society was founded. From Sacred Waters: Arts for Mami Wata and Other Divinities in Africa and the Diaspora, ed. Henry John Drewal. Indiana University Press, 2008, 578. Getting the diaspora and academia to take us seriously was very difficult, because no one had ever heard of Mami Wata priestesses in America. ©Mama Zogbé (Mamaissii Vivian Hunter-Hindrew). ..........................................................196


6-5. Figure 6-5. J.B. Murray, Untitled, Early 1980s, Marker and paint on paper. 19” x 24” Image courtesy of William Arnett in Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South, Volume One: Once That River Starts to Flow, edited by Paul Arnett, William Arnett, Maude Southwell Wahlman, and Theophus Smith, 2000, 475. In this painting Murray has illustrated his diagnosis of prostate cancer. The left side shows still healthy body parts, while the right side, inundated with red, is the invaded areas of his body. The addition of protective script is a request for relief from this invasion. The boxed image is the only figure that is entirely white with red eyes and a red beard. For Murray, red is torment and evil. This is Murray’s version of a baka, the evil spirit that has entered his body.


8-12. Mineral Springs Baptist Church, Mitchell, Georgia. Photo by Licia Clifton-James, 03/28/10. 212

8-13. Marker on adding machine tape, 1978, J.B. Murray. Photo by Fred Padgelek at the home of William Rawlings, Sandersville, Georgia. In the yellow box one can see a multitude of dots, dashes, and other marks Murray has placed above, below and all around his script. 213

script is representative of torment and God. He stated, “The red means torment and them lines lean into torment and the torment is a dead end for the souls and that red lines leads into torment on the fire of torment, evil folks, bad folks, mean folks don’t serve God and they come against God and the dry tongue they can say Amen, but they don’t mean it from the heart.”

Murray appears to have written something that was tormenting in the center of this piece, and then encircled it with requests for protection and “souls” or spirit figures to either be healed or to help the cause. Additionally, he has asked God to intercede by drawing red lines throughout the piece, encircling different portions of the script and different figures as well.


9-3. *Song of Mami Wata* by Victor Ekpuk, from his Manuscript Series, 1995-2007. Acrylic paint, pastels, poster markers on walaha, wooden Islamic prayer board. “My continuous search for indigenous codes and forms to tell visual stories led me to the discovery of Islamic prayer boards (walaha). The first idea to use walaha as an art medium first struck me in 1995, at a market in Jos, Nigeria, where I saw unused boards on display for sale. I was attracted to their unique shapes, I was also fascinated by the ingenuity of African aesthetics and how it added meaning to Arabic scripts; I began to see how these boards could tell other stories and bear other meanings. My vision of the potential of the board as a bearer of two important elements of African spirituality and literacy was so strong that, I could not get it out of my head until it was realized. Works in this series are called "Manuscript Series" “Manuscript Series”, though executed on walaha do not make statements about Islam; rather they are an intercultural marriage of form and script. Instead of Arabic scripts, I employ Nsibidi signs and my own script-like drawings to make compositions with themes that center on the human conditions of joy, pain and hope. I try to manipulate the materials so the mystical essence of the board and that of Nsibidi signs are retained. The goal being to create contemporary sacred tablets whose verses tell our stories, hold our prayers and perhaps provide healing and inspiration to us.” -Victor Ekpuk, from

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9-4. Elimane Fall stands before one of his painted papers. These serve as visual aids when he offers sermons to youth seeking spiritual direction in the philosophy and teachings of Sheikh Amadou Bamba. Mr. Fall practices a form of urban healing, which draws upon traditional techniques and writing practices while addressing the pressing contemporary needs of inner-city people. Photograph by Doran H. Ross, Pikine, 2001. From A Saint in the City: Sufi Arts of Urban Senegal, by Allan F. Roberts and Mary Nooter Roberts with Gassia Armenian and Ousmane Gueye. UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, Los Angeles, 2003. 186. 

9-5. Both Untitled, (Nativity and First Nativity, right and left) by David Butler, 1960s, Photo: Richard Gaspari. “[Butler] may have learned from relatives how to work with metal, or he may have seen examples as a child. He cut, folded, or bent tin to achieve three-dimensional sculptures, then perforated the “snipped-tin” sculptural shapes with precise patterns painted with red, white, black, silver, green, and blue house paints. He frequently decorated the works with buttons, pieces of plastic toys, bicycle reflectors, tinfoil, marbles, light bulbs, and other found objects, all attached with wire.” Maude Southwell Wahlman. Souls Grown Deep Foundation, http://soulsgrowndeep.org/artist/david-butler. Viewed 3/11/2016. 


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9-12. *Untitled*, by J.B. Murray, mid-1980s, marker and paint on paper, 25” x 19”. Photo from *Souls Grown Deep*, Vol. 2, 2001. 478. Murray gives pairs of eyes to his figures. Black eyes if the figure represents good and red eyes if the figure represents evil or torment. Yellow splotched throughout the painting is Murray’s representation of God’s energy assisting in the matter. .................................................................226


South, Volume One: Once That River Starts to Flow, edited by Paul Arnett, William Arnett, Maude Southwell Wahlman, and Theophus Smith, 2000, 296. ...229

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9-18. Tree-of-the-Forest-Seven-Bells-Turns-the-World-Round-the-Midnight-Cemetery, Cuba, 19th century. “One of the most celebrated and feared of all the minkisi of Cuba was inherited by J.S. Baró, a black ritual expert who live in Maria-nao, a suburb of Havana. It was an nkisi-kettle ... , probably originally made by his ancestors in the second half of the nineteenth century and replenished several times in the twentieth.\(^3\) Baró’s nkisi bears a deliberately long and impressive name: Tree-of-the-Forest-Seven-Bells-Turns-the-World-Round-the-Midnight-Cemetery—a name replete with cosmological allusion. Its ascending structural sequence—round container, encircling sash, luxurious spray of plumes—mirrors that of minkisi forms still seen today in Kongo.”\(^4\)

9-19. Untitled. By J.B. Murray. c. 1978–88, tempera and ink on paper, 8-1/2 × 5-1/2 in. Photo from Cavin-Morris Gallery, New York and family of J.B. Murray. Murray placed three +s or Xs across the top of this piece, along with several within the body of the text as well ...

9-20. (Left) Vévé for Damballah. Image from http://www.ekiria.org/content/vudu-africano-veves---trazos-magicos Damballah is the serpent god of Dahomean and Dahomean-influenced religions which occur in Haiti. Grey Dundaker in Signs of Diaspora Diaspora of Signs, Oxford University Press, 1998, 51. “Damballah was a Vodoun god, in serpent form, who is credited with creating the world and the gods, and is therefore the oldest of the gods.” (Right) Vévé for Baron Samedi. Image from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:VeveBaronSamedi.svg. “Baron Samedi is a member of the Gede family of Haitian Loa who are often considered to be spirits of the dead. He presides over cemeteries and crossroads and the spirits of the dead. His typical iconography includes a black top hat and long black coat, his face painted like a skull, glasses or sunglasses, and a cane often adorned with [a watery world reptile, such as an alligator].” In both images,


\(^4\) Ibid., 123.
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9-25. Bill Traylor’s Preacher and His Congregation, c. 1939-42, Pencil and colored pencil on cardboard, 16-1/2” x 16-1/2 Photo courtesy of Collection of Gael Mendelsohn, from Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South, Volume One: Once That River Starts to Flow, edited by Paul Arnett, William Arnett, Maude Southwell Wahlman, and Theophus Smith, 2000, 277. In Souls Grown Deep, Maude Wahlman states, “[Traylor’s] subjects range from a camel based on a package of cigarettes to depictions of “ring shouts,”—a traditional religious practice derived from African rituals. Traylor probably drew as he told stories to anyone who would listen. Storytelling may have been his preferred art, with his illustrations providing an income.” (278)................................. 238

9-27. *Trouble-Making Ladies*. By J.B. Murray, mid-1980s, marker and paint on pink paper, 19-1/2” x 25-1/2”. “Pink paper, a red figure, and black designs indicate trouble in store for Murray. Lines of pink dots represent a necklace worn by a woman who, according to Murray, “turned [Murray] in to the FBI.” In this painting, Murray identifies the various women he had known and been involved with, some reasonably good, some not. The white smears likely indicate that some of the women were dead when the painting was made.” Arnett, *Souls Grown Deep*, Vol. 2, 2001, 477 and 479. ........................................................................................................240


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10-5. *Al-Khushani, Book of the Judges of Cordoba*, in Maghribi script, the Arabic script characteristic of Spain and North Africa (Spain, 1296).  
[http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/bodley/whats-on/online/crossing-borders/scripts](http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/bodley/whats-on/online/crossing-borders/scripts), Hebrew Scripts, viewed 12 Jan 2016 ................................................246

10-6. Sahräwâ De Gironcourt collection ms. 2405(2)/I. Pamphlet in support of Ahamd


10-9. *The Spirit of African Art*, by Ndidi Dike Nnadiekwe, carved wood panels, 85 x 250 cm, 1994, private collection. From *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa*, London: Whitechapel Art Gallery 27, 1995. Okeke states of Dike’s work, “With Dike, as I Onobrakpeya’s mixed media installations, objects from Akan, Fulani and Igbo material cultures fuse together to create something tellingly African, dispassionately contemporary (there is also an unmistakable presence of uli, nsibidi and akwete motifs and designs in her work). Dike pays fleeting attention to the indigenous art traditions of Africa, as though leafing through a vast volume of African cultural history: images do not stay long enough to make any lasting impression. She is drawn to the culture and art of Africa, yet she is distanced from the vast resources as her spirit wills. Consequently, her sculptures merely suggest their cultural provenance, making no definite claim to particulars.” .........................................250


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That River Starts to Flow, edited by Paul Arnett, William Arnett, Maude Southwell Wahlman, and Theophus Smith, 2000, 464.................................255


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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

J.B. Murray has been described as a folk, outsider, vernacular, and visionary artist in the 28 years since his death from cancer. The reasoning behind the use of many labels comes from interdisciplinary perspectives, and a lack of defining information regarding some characteristics of Murray’s art work. Interviews of Murray conducted by Mary Padgelek, Judith McWillie, Andy Nasisse, William Arnett, and others, have explored the religious and African American vernacular aspects of his work. With his Southern dialect, Murray answered their many questions, giving explanations to be best of his ability. This research was groundbreaking at the time and provided an excellent foundation for my research for Making the Connection: J.B. Murray and the Scripts and Spirit Figures of Africa. Please note it may be beneficial to refer to Appendix A: J.B. Murray Timeline as you proceed through this dissertation.

Expanded research of Murray’s work encourages new labels, such as: African American spiritual healer, African American traditional healer or doctor, protector, and shaman. Traditional medicine is known around the world. “The World Health Organization, estimates that between 65 to 80 percent of the world's population (about 3 billion people) rely on naturopathic or homeopathic medicine [or traditional medicine] as their primary form of health care.”

According to the World Health Organization’s publication on Global Traditional Medicine Strategy 2002-2005, “80% of Africans resort to traditional medicine to address

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their health needs.” In addition, the reports of Elialilia Okello and Seggane Musisi contend that Africans practicing traditional healing display a “particularly keen insight into the social and psychological causes of illness.” Okello and Musisi state that when a healer first displays their work or abilities, it can bring on struggles within the family regarding social recognition. Africans typically look for help from traditional healers, with whom rituals may be performed to re-establish social harmony within the family and the community as well.

In Murray’s case, this occurred when Murray’s family and congregation responded negatively to Murray’s visions. Had Murray been in the African community a traditional healer may have been able to re-establish social harmony and avoid Murray’s hospitalization. From Murray’s statements at the time, it is evident that although he did not know exactly what was happening, he was comfortable with it and knew he was not mentally ill.

Murray’s work was probably influenced by his African ancestors. Therefore an examination of the history of African and African American scripts, African ancestral traditions, and spirit figures, explains more about Murray’s art, as protection and healing devices. Art historian George Kubler put forth that ideas programmed in things sometimes last for a longer period of time than those programmed in words. As he stated:

The artist is not a free agent obeying only his own will. His situation is rigidly bound by a chain of prior events. The chain is invisible to him and it limits his motion. He is

2 Ibid.
3 Okello, Elialilia and Seggane Musisi, “The Role of Traditional Healers in Mental Health Care in Africa,” in The Culture of Mental Illness and Psychiatric Practice in Africa, ed. Akyeampong, Emmanuel, Allan G. Hill, and Arthur Kleinman (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2015), 250. “In a study of traditional healers in Kampala, Uganda, Catherine Abbo (2003) found that they often dealt with social problems, including family problems related to children, a spouse or cowives, or other relatives; problems related to school, work, or finances; problems with neighbors; spiritual or cultural problems; psychosexual problems, including those having to do with relationships, sexual potency, love, and infertility; chronic illnesses that were sometimes not well defined; and epilepsy and madness. The healers’ effectiveness, however, was most evident in the first three categories of problems. Abbo also noted that traditional healers used a broad range of practices, including herbalism and spiritualism, and included individuals who called themselves diviners, priests, and faith healers.”
not aware of it as a chain but only as a *vis a tergo*, as the force of events behind him. The conditions imposed by these prior events require of him either that he follow obediently in the path of tradition, or that he rebel against the tradition. In either case, his decision is not a free one; it is dictated by prior events of which he senses only dimly and indirectly the overpowering urgency, and by his own congenital peculiarities of temperament . . . the individual is driven in every action by forces of an intensity absent from other lives; he is possessed by his vision of the possible, and he is obsessed by the urgency of its realization, in a solitary posture of intense effort, traditionally represented by the figures of the poet or the muse.\(^4\)

Kubler’s theory takes shape in African American consciousness, as in African American quilter Mozell Benson’s observation in the 1990s that: “Black families inherited this tradition [quilting and encoding messages]. We forgot where it came from because nobody continues to teach us. I think we hold to that even though we’re not aware of it.”\(^5\) I acknowledge statements by both Kubler and Benson, and will show that through the work of present-day African American artists we see a reinterpretation of ancient African traditions of signs and spirit figures.

Kubler’s wrote, “Just because the Western view of art limited these objects to certain categories, did not mean that in non-Western areas these items could not be considered art.”\(^6\) An examination of African storytelling and characteristics of the African *griot*, show that they are verbal arts remembered by African Americans, and seen in African and African American religious leaders and literati, such as Zora Neale Hurston. I will compare the arts of African griots, Zora Neale Hurston and J.B. Murray.

An examination of the different perspectives towards mental health in Africa and the United States explains why Murray’s abilities, thought to be given to him from God, and his

\(^6\) Kubler, *The Shape of Time*, 55-77.
community and family’s reaction to that gift, lead to his commitment in a mental hospital. Elialilia Okello and Seggane Musisi’s work entitled, “The Role of Traditional Healers in Mental Health Care in Africa,” focus on “traditional healers in Africa; traditional definitions and causes of mental illness and traditional healing practices in Africa; the reasons for use of traditional medicine; evidence on the role of traditional healers in health care; challenges and opportunities for traditional healing systems in Africa; and the legal environment.”7

The work of Malidome Patrice Somé will be examined, as it brings insights from a traditional practitioner regarding experiences like that of J.B. Murray and his connection to his God. Somé is from the Dagara culture of Burkina Faso, formerly Upper Volta in West Africa. His name, “Malidoma,” in his native language, means “be friend with the stranger.” Somé is an initiated, gifted diviner and medicine man and holds three master’s degrees and two doctorates from the Sorbonne and Brandeis University. He is the author of Of Water and the Spirit: Magic and Initiation in The Life of An African Shaman, published in 1994. Since Murray was institutionalized because his community and/or family believed him to be mentally ill, this examination of mental health is important.

African ancestral connections or ‘connections to God,’ can be seen in an examination of the life and careers of Serigner Bousso, who today lives and works as a healer in Touba, Senegal. His relatives and ancestors continually impressed upon him that he would not be fulfilled until he was doing the work which he was intended to do: healing and protecting. This came to fruition in the last 5 years, when Bousso ended up in a hospital, after the end of his 20-year, western-type business career in Dakar, and another career in Mbour dissolved. Finally listening to his relatives and ancestors, Bousso came back to health and moved to

7 Okello and Musisi, “The Role of Traditional Healers,” 249-261.
Touba to practice the profession for which he was intended, healing and protecting. His story parallels that of J.B. Murray and helps to explain why Murray received his calling when closer to death, and closer to God and his departed ancestors.

Murray lived a relatively isolated life, having contact only with his immediate community and his doctor from a neighboring town in Georgia. In his younger days, he moved about as an itinerate farmer, but never left Georgia. Africans brought as slaves to Georgia kept their African traditions as continuous parts of their lives, so too these traditions surrounded Murray’s life throughout the state of Georgia, and impacted his artistic expressions. These traditions also influenced other African American artists in Virginia, North and South Carolina, Florida, New York and Washington, D.C. Any influence on Murray by other people moving through his environment would have supported the impact that living in Georgia had on him.

An integral part of Murray’s work was his use of specific water to ‘read’ the script he says God gave him to write. That water came from the well on his property and creates an interesting area of research. Murray had connections with water through Christianity, but many more connections to Murray and water are explored from the Kongo ‘watery-world of the ancestors’ to Mami Wata in both Africa and Haiti. Murray required water to receive meaning from his script. Without water, Murray’s script is simply illegible marks on paper. The intent behind Murray’s script comes into existence only with the addition of water.

Additionally, Jacques Derrida’s idea that expressions, either in art or in written language, change and develop with the life experiences of the artist, will help the examination of J.B. Murray’s art as compared with the art of other African Americans, such
as David Butler, Thornton Dial, James Hampton, Bessie Harvey, Gertrude Morgan, and Nellie Mae Rowe. Each of these artists uses various combinations of signs, writing, and/or figures in their work. Most of these artists unconsciously filled the backgrounds of their work with signs, writing or figures. Since this also is what Murray did, this characteristic is thoroughly explored in reviews of specific artworks. This examination will also bring to light that of which Clovis E. Semmes\(^8\) spoke, the African American’s life experiences that were almost all influenced by the overbearing hand of Caucasians surrounding him. Additionally, it will bring to light the “vernacular expression of culture”\(^9\) that is spoken of in *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South*.

Contemporary African artists, such as Ndidi Dike, Victor Ekpuk, Elimane Fall and many more, incorporate aspects of traditional African writing systems in their arts. By including contemporary African artists in this dissertation, the extent to which African syllabaries are continuing to be remembered and incorporated into the arts of Africans, will support evidence the continuation of African traditions and customs across the Atlantic.

While scholars have explored Murray’s art and script from several perspectives, the need to expand research into the areas of traditional healing and protection is necessary to understand the full extent of what Murray was trying to communicate. He did not consider himself an artist when the “Holy Spirit” first began moving his hand to create his script. He still did not consider himself an artist when he said God gave him the figures to add to his art.

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What then was J.B. Murray’s intent? In each piece he created, his intention was to give warning to those who were not living their lives the way his God intended, to give protection to him and others by imbuing his work with his God’s power, and to relay important messages from his God to the people on earth. Murray’s intention was not to be an artist; his intention was to be a healer and protector. The intention of this dissertation is to inform others regarding the characteristics of Murray’s art that helped to define him as the healer and protector he wanted to be.
CHAPTER 2
HISTORY OF AFRICAN AND AFRICAN AMERICAN WRITING SYSTEMS,
SIGNS AND SPIRIT FIGURES

History of Writing Systems, Signs and Spirit Figures in Africa

It is my contention that J.B. Murray possessed the knowledge that, unbeknownst to him or his ancestors, was passed throughout the African Diaspora, including North America. The passage of ancestral signs to Murray began in Africa. Even though we are not yet sure of Murray’s lineage in Africa, scholars have accepted the cultural use of writing systems, signs and spirit figures as means of guidance and protection supplied by ancestors within many of Africa’s cultures. Murray’s use of personal signs is connected to African scripts and spirit figures through his ancestors who were brought to the United States. Murray was born and raised in Georgia, a state where slaves arrived on the coast and were put to work on nearby plantations or dispersed to other southern plantation states. This influx of Africans from many different cultures in West Africa is the base on which I build my thesis, J.B. Murray’s personal signs and figures within his artwork are West African traditions and customs unconsciously transmitted from his ancestors and their use of African writing systems, signs and spirit figures.

In 1981, in *The Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art in Two Worlds*, Robert Farris Thompson stated,

This is a world of objects bearing humanistic messages of spirit and vindication, objects full of communal comment and aspiration, pointing to the perennial Kongo concerns with balance between worlds, the healing of minds disturbed by social

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disequilibrium, and the rediscovery of the ideal city, Mbanza Kongo, where wisdom and ecstatic sharing, justice and compassion, once were given perfect visage. Let us turn, then, towards the fullness of these reflected worlds.  

This reference is to signs from the Kongo culture, however I believe Thompson’s statement applies to many West African cultures. A Westerner’s closest comparison would be that of the alphabet, but in African syllabries the figures hold much more information than simple signs to form a word or idea. The signs in African syllabaries hold entire thoughts, notions, and in some cases proverbs.

J.K. Macgregor wrote a 1909 article entitled “Some Notes on Nsibidi,” in which he gave many examples of symbols and their definitions. Here is one series of symbols and the definitions attached to them, given to Macgregor by a woman and two boys in Abiriba, in southeastern Nigeria:

29. In war it is a common practice for enemies of a town to hide near the place where the women bathe, and shoot them. It is a great disgrace for a man to lose his wife in this way, and men “curse” him by writing this sign on the ground, or by saying, “Where were you when you killed your wife?” (a) is a woman who goes to bathe in the river at a ford (b), while her husband (c) watches to see that no one shoots her.

Nsibidi symbols were kept and maintained by Ejagham men’s and women’s secret societies, in particular the traveling blacksmiths. However, some signs were more widely known.

Nsibidi was shared with the people depending on their level of status in society. There was a general level for the public and everyday use. This general level of Nsibidi would have been seen in public ceremonies, arts, announcements, body painting, etc. The middle level was for

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5 Maude Southwell Wahlman, personal communication with L. Clifton-James, University of Missouri-Kansas City, February 20, 2013.
members of the societies and more secretive use, such as private society initiation ceremonies. Finally, the third level, for those holding the highest power or status was known by very few and used only among themselves.\(^6\) Today, Nsibidi continues to be placed on cloth by women of the Ejagham \textit{Nimm} Secret Women’s Society.

The Ejagham Leopard Society of Nigeria, a men’s secret society, uses the connection of power and strength in connection with the symbol, \[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{\textbullet} \\
\text{\textbullet} \\
\text{\textbullet}
\end{array}
\] for leopard spots. From 1904 on, amid the Ejagham and their relatives, scholars have examined nsibidi ideographic models on masks and other Leopard Society belongings.\(^7\) Robert Farris Thompson maintains that nsibidi forms were an agent through which the Ejagham Leopard Society “promulgat[ed] [leopard society] values of nobility and government and remember[ed] the master metaphor of masculine accomplishment, the leopard, who moves with perfect elegance and strength,” and brought it to the Americas (Cuba) in the late 1800s.\(^8\) The secrecy of this organization was largely responsible for the movement of the institution in its entirety across the Atlantic, and for its continued existence in its new location.\(^9\)

Although Ejagham secret societies were for men and women, it was believed that women possibly made the first symbols and were in charge of passing the symbols on to the men and future generations.\(^10\) Women, of the Ejagham women’s secret society called \textit{Nimm},

\(^6\) Ibid.
\(^8\) Thompson, \textit{Flash of the Spirit}, p. 227-229.
\(^9\) Ibid.
\(^10\) Thompson, \textit{Flash of the Spirit}, note 37, p. 301. “Ekwe Ejagham informants recited terse, simple myths of Ngbe origin, most of which coincided with the essential structure of the material published by Cabrera, e.g., ‘Our people say woman discovered Ekpe, but could not keep secret . . . men took over’ (Otu village, Cameroon, June 1969).”
placed the symbols on their buildings and bodies, and on cloth (Figure 2-1) using the resist dye method. The cloth was used by men in the Secret Leopard Society.\footnote{Maude Southwell Wahlman, personal communication with L. Clifton-James, University of Missouri-Kansas City, February 20, 2013.}

Nsibidi was not the only syllabary used in Africa. Other systems of signs were used in other regions of Africa. A group of indigenous scripts discovered in Liberia, Mali and Sierra Leone has been called the Mande Syllabaries by author Saki Mafundikwa\footnote{Saki Mafundikwa, \textit{Afrikan Alphabets: The Story of Writing in Afrika} (New York: Mark Batty Publisher, 2004), 63.}. The five syllabaries include the Vai, the Loma, and the Kpelle from Liberia, the Mende from Sierra Leone, and the Bambara from southern Mali. The Mande group of Niger-Congo languages is spoken by about 490,000 people in Liberia and around 300,000 people in Guinea. Mafundikwa believed signs were graphically inspired by traditional symbols and secret scripts used to transcribe Arabic in the Hodh region of Mauritania during from 1830 to 1930.\footnote{Ibid.}

The Vai coast was a prime location for slave trading. By 1807, slave trading was officially outlawed and the use of the Vai writing system by the traders made negotiations, required for the secret procurement, containment and exchange of large numbers of Africans easier. Traders used signs from the Mande syllabaries, and slaves continued being traded.

Another sign system exists in central Africa, among Bantu speaking people. An example found on a reliquary mannequin (Figures 2-2 and 2-3) in a Bwende village, appears similar to script found on the pews of the ‘Slave Gallery’ (Figure 2-18) of the First African Baptist Church (Figure 2-19), in Savannah, Georgia, and is also similar to Murray’s script (Figure 2-44). The script found on the Bwende Cloth Mannequin Reliquary (Figures 2-2 and...
shown in *The Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art in Two Worlds* by Robert Farris Thompson and Joseph Cornet, is described:

In a letter dated 5 May 1934, A.P. Karlman, the Swedish missionary, wrote of this piece to what is now the Musee Royal de l’Afrique Centrale in Tervuren: “I have purchased a miniature *niombo* [measuring] 70 x 70 cm.” He had written the letter from Kingoyi, the very Bwende village where this image had been made. He purchased it from Makoza, its maker. The *niombo* arrived at Tervuren on 30 August 1934. With signs rendered in chalk or ingeniously embroidered in cord upon the belly and chest of the image, it represents one of Makoza’s great late works, remarkable for its wealth of ideographic comments on the return of the spirit. The signs include a spiraling emblem of return, uncoiling from the right nipple; a navel-to-heart emblem of the python, symbolizing, among many things, longevity; and a square shield of paper, criss-crossed with the Kongo sign of cosmos on the heart. An upper portion of this “shield” is written over with an apparent fragment of “spirit writing,” a form of visual glossolalia such as surfaces today in different forms among some of the prophetic churches which abound in Kongo. Photograph is taken in Kingoyi by Karlman. R.F.T.

The signs on this reliquary piece were associated with the Bwende people from the Kongo. These various African signs and associations were remembered by slaves throughout the African diaspora. Many took memories of secret society symbols with them to the Americas. African symbols were combined with each other and with Masonic symbols throughout the Americas. In my opinion, there are strong connections between Murray’s form of script and the script within the Kpelle Syllabary (Figure 8-2). The Vai Syllabary (Figure 10-4) is the oldest member of the Mande group and may have connection with Murray’s form of script, as well. Due to the formation of Murray’s script and some highlighted characters see in Figure 8-2.

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The first Africans to convert to Islam were “Sudanese merchants, followed by a few rulers and courtiers in the (Ghana [Kingdom in Mali] in the eleventh century and Mali in the thirteenth century).” As Islam spread throughout the African continent, the spread was neither synchronized nor consistent. With conversion to Islam, came the written word of the Qur’an and the Prophet Muhammad’s teachings, most often in Arabic. Islam also brought the introduction of colleges of higher learning or madrases to Northern Africa to produce scholars well-versed in the Sacred Law or shari’a. This specialized education during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is best explained by Ross E. Dunn:

The purpose of education in the Islamic Middle Period, it should be understood, was not to teach students to think critically about their human or natural environment or to push the frontiers of knowledge beyond the limits of their elders. Rather it was to transmit to the coming generation the spiritual truths, moral values, and social rules of the past which, after all, Muslims had found valid by the astonishing success of their faith and civilization. Education was in every sense conservative.

Memorization was of the utmost importance, and students were expected to be both well-versed and to write in Arabic. As many Africans transported to the Americas were Muslim; an argument can be made that they remembered Arabic script and language.

In Africa, new versions of the Arabic alphabet (Figure 2-4) developed to accommodate the language of a particular people, collectively are called Ajami. Arabic

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17 Tom Verde, “From African in Ajami,” Aramco World: Arab and Islamic Cultures and Connections 62, no. 5 (September/October 2011), accessed April 27, 2016, http://archive.aramecoworld.com/issue/201105/from.africa.in.ajami.htm. ‘‘Ajami’’ derives from the Arabic a'jamiy, which means “foreigner” or, more specifically, “non-Arab.” Historically, Arabs used the word to refer to all things Persian or non-Arab, a usage they borrowed from the ancient Greeks. Yet over the last few centuries, across Islamic Africa, “Ajami” came to mean an African language written in Arabic script that was
alphabets are used in the following African scripts: Afrikaans, Ajami, Berber, Fula, Sorabe, Swahili, Wadaad, and Wolof.¹⁸

Hebrew Script

Just as Arabic spread with Islam into North and West Africa, so did Hebrew spread with Jewish populations. Until the 1400s, Islamic control extended to the Iberian Peninsula, North Africa and the Middle East. During this time Jews were permitted free movement throughout the region, as well as the practice of their religion. Under this compassionate rule Sephardic Judaism developed, mixing local lifestyles with the religious traditions of Jews.

However, in 1492 the Catholic Monarch mandate known as The Alhambra Decree expelled Jews from Spain, forcing many to join existing Mizrachi groups in North Africa and the Middle East. Sephardic Jews brought Sephardic Hebrew cursive script (Figure 2-5) to North and West Africa. Sephardic Jews populated the Maghreb region of North Africa, encompassing Morocco, Algeria, Libya, and Tunisia, as well as Sudan and Egypt.

Sephardic Jews became specialists at linking both cultures and religions, doing business in an Islamic culture that encouraged multicultural business interactions.¹⁹ As a direct result, Sephardic traders, as foreigners, learned to negotiate, giving them a unique advantage in the even more unknown transatlantic and colonial trading locations in Africa and the Americas.²⁰ Murray’s ancestors, and those who decorated the church pews, may have been familiar with Sephardic Hebrew cursive.

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¹⁸ Ibid.
²⁰ Ibid.
The production of sugar originally developed in the Portuguese Atlantic islands off the West coast of Africa and also spread to Sao Tomé (Figure 2-6), another African island group under Portugal colonial control on the equator, near Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea and Gabon. In the 1550s, the trade of sugar, as well as slaves, increased on a much larger scale, across the Atlantic to Brazil.

With this trade, the Sephardic language and Hebrew cursive script was transported as well. Mark Avrum Ehrlich explains:

In Mali, several thousand people in Timbuktu claim some form of Jewish ancestry. Moors and Jews, fleeing persecution in Spain, migrated south in the 14th century to Timbuktu (part of the Songhai empire). Among them was the Kehath (Ka’ti) family who founded three villages that still exist near Timbuktu. Askia Muhammed came to power in 1492 and forced Jews to convert to Islam or leave. After this, Judaism became illegal in Mali.

Still other countries have people who claim Jewish heritage as well, from the Kushite of Ethiopia, to the Igbo (Ibo) and some Yoruba of Nigeria, to people in western Ghana and most recently, people from the Ivory Coast.

History of Writing Systems, Signs and Spirit Figures in the Caribbean and Latin Americas

Various African writing systems were remembered in the Americas, and often adapted to Christianity. This is seen in the protective work of Murray, even though he relates his calling to Christianity. Christian religions such as Baptist and Methodist were based on a personal connection with God and a means by which African Americans could express their

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21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
African spiritual traditions, such as praising, singing, and being overcome by the Holy Spirit. This adaptation is seen in African cultures in Brazil, Suriname, Haiti, Cuba, and the United States who drew upon the religions in these new environments and adapted their existing religious traditions and customs to appear to accept new religious values. African signs and traditions were hidden within Christianity’s signs and traditions, thus to protecting Africans from persecution for using remembered traditions.

New scripts were formed from the fusion of West African scripts such as Vai, Adinkra, Fon, Yoruba, Nsibidi, Hebrew, Arabic, and the Kongo cosmogram. In the Americas, both captive and free Africans established creolized religions such as Candomble in Brazil, Santeria in Cuba and Puerto Rico, and Vodun in Haiti. Along with these religious models, new writing systems were developed as well, taking the form of Points in Brazil, Anaforuana in Cuba, and Veve in Haiti.\(^{25}\)

Signs from these African American scripts are seen in various African-American folk arts, such as ceramics, painting, sculpture, and textiles, as well as in protective measures taken for personal safety.

Africans were transported for about 300 years, from 1550 through 1850, from Central and West Africa to Brazil by the Portuguese. These Africans were used to work the sugar plantations and Bahia, Brazil, became a central location for Yoruba peoples from Nigeria. There, their religious traditions were fused with Catholicism to create a variety of creolized religions still practiced today. To communicate and celebrate their religious deities, the African Brazilian writing system referred to as ‘pontos riscados’ or ‘points drawn’ can be

\(^{25}\) Maude Southwell Wahlman, Lectures on the art and cultures of Brazil, Haiti, and Cuba, University of Missouri-Kansas City, 2007.
found in ground paintings (Figure 2-7), ceremonial textiles (Figure 2-8), as well as metalwork (Figure 2-9).

In Cuba, the religion Santeria retains strong properties from Fon and Yoruba religions. Central and West African cultures are seen in the art forms of these cultures and in particular the Abakua religious sect has a sacred script called Anaforuana that continues the sign of four eyes from the Ejagham. Cuban Mayombe retains Kongo funerary concepts, and Abakua is an obvious derivation from Ejagham religion. Anaforuana and the reference to four eyes can be seen in the Abakua Altars (Figure 2-10), Abakua Ireme costumes (Figure 2-11), and banners (Figure 2-12) in Cuba. Jesus Nasako understands the term *ireme* as “manifested, materialized, or represented spirit . . . When a man dons the suit of the *ireme*, he is representing a spirit of the other world [mas alla].”

Africans were taken to Haiti, beginning in 1517, for well over 300 years. They, too, combined their African religions and traditions with the Catholic religion and developed the religion of Vodun. Their script takes the form of Veve which is a derivation of Fon, Yoruba, and Ejagham signs from West Africa and the Central African Kongo. The term Veve is derived from the Fon term for palm oil which is used in making ground paintings (Figure 2-13) for Fon gods.

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26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
29 Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 125-222.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
A combination of the Central African Kongo cosmogram, and both Fon and Nsibidi signs, create the Veve signs seen on items such as drums (Figure 2-14). An additional example of the continuation of African traditions in the Americas is seen in the Fon god of iron, Gu (Figure 2-15), which may be represented in Haiti as Baron Samedi, protector of spirits associated with cemeteries, where he more often wears a top hat. As will be shown later in this dissertation, this figure also appears in the art of the Southern United States at the turn of the twentieth century.

**History of Writing Systems, Signs and Spirit Figures in the United States**

In J.B. Murray’s Home State of Georgia

African religions and script forms were perpetuated in the Caribbean, and continued in the United States. Signs from these African scripts are seen in various African American folk arts, such as cemeteries, ceramics, painting, sculpture, and textiles, as well as in protective measures taken for personal safety. In J.B. Murray’s home state of Georgia, this continuity is seen in a grave dated to 1912 in Athens, Georgia, which has quartz stones embedded in a form resembling the Kongo cosmogram (Figure 2-16). In Maude Southwell Wahlman’s book, *Mojo Working*, another example is given:

In Sunbury, Georgia, Siras Bowen’s family burial ground (Figure 2-17) included wooden images of a sign, a snake, a male figure, and a clay marker painted yellow. The wooden sculptures were crafted from found wood specially selected for features which still have symbolic value in the Kongo culture. One piece in particular has been adapted to create a circle and a cross, reminiscent of the Kongo cosmogram. In the United States it is called by conjuremen and women, “the four corners of the sheet

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33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
of paper and put a cross in there . . . that’s the four corners of the earth . . . put that seal on the ground (the cross drawn within a circle) . . .”\textsuperscript{35}

Wahlman informs us in \textit{Mojo Working} that in Zaire, the conjuring cane symbolizes the vertical element of the cosmogram, that very important connection between living and ancestral powers. Conjuring canes were also used in Haiti to call on ancestral powers to make things happen. After Haitian independence in 1803, Haitian Africans brought the conjuring cane into the United States, where it was adapted into many forms, such as protective broomsticks, batons twirled by innocent majorettes, and the carved conjuring canes and walking canes of African-Americans. These items were carved, just as in Central Africa, with animals from the water, each a symbolic messenger of Kongo ancestral powers.\textsuperscript{36}

In Savannah, Georgia, prior to 1830, \textit{The First Baptist Church} had a white congregation, some of whom were slave owners. The decision was made by the congregation to bring in slaves to observe, and then learn Christianity. To accommodate the slaves during services, the church installed balcony seating (\textit{Figure 2-18}) called “the Slave Gallery”.\textsuperscript{37} The pews in the Slave Gallery were built by the slaves and painted with signs.

After being purchased by the local African American congregation in 1830, the church was renamed \textit{First African Baptist Church} (\textit{Figure 2-19}). The present-day church historian, Karen Wortham, states, “It is the agreement of the members and leadership of the church, both past and present, that this [pew] script is most likely ancient Hebrew. Brought

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{37} George Freeman Bragg, \textit{History of the Afro-American Group of the Episcopal Church} (Baltimore, MD: Church’s Advocate Press, 1968), 30.
with the slaves from the continent of Africa, they believe the script could be read as, ‘To secure a desired harvest, to enter a pathway into a household.’”

An additional origin of this script is made possible when one takes into account Philip Curtin’s proposal that while about 29,695 African Muslims entered in the United States, their impact many times exceeded these numbers. Numerous enslaved, African-American Muslims were known to have memorized the Koran, in its entirety, in an attempt to maintain their Islamic faith and pass it on, especially to their children. Ibn Khaldun, a fourteenth century historian and distinguished philosopher, noted that memory training was even more meticulously practiced in the schools of Morocco than in other areas of the Muslim world. The signs adorning the pews of the Slave Gallery could possibly be Arabic.

In 1830, when the original building was considered dilapidated, it was sold to a black congregation and renamed The First African Baptist Church (Figure 2-19). The congregation renovated the dilapidated building and constructed the church auditorium ceiling (Figure 2-20) in the pattern of a 9-patch quilt (Figure 2-21), which was a symbol of a safe place on the Underground Railroad. This same congregation toiled after plantation work hours ended,

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42 Jacqueline L. Tobin and Raymond G. Dobard, Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), 68-109. Explanation from Ozella McDaniel Williams regarding the significance of the 9-patch quilt and the encoding in it for the Underground Railroad, including the mnemonic device: “There are five square knots on the quilt every two inches apart. They escaped on the fifth knot on the tenth pattern and went to Ontario, Canada.”
into the early morning hours, making and carrying bricks made from the soil of the banks of the Savannah River to renovate the building.

While making bricks at the river’s edge and carrying them up the long hill to the location of the church, an underground tunnel was discovered and eventually completed to lead to the church’s basement. The basement was constructed with a four-foot space underneath it to house slaves escaping to freedom in the North. To allow ventilation so the slaves could have fresh air to breathe, holes (Figure 2-22) were bored into the wood flooring. The African slaves drilled these holes in the shape of a diamond, a possible reference to the Kongo cosmogram, with its reference to life, birth, death and rebirth at each of the points and its ever important connection with the African ancestors. In doing so, they were able to provide ventilation for the secret hiding space beneath the floor, while incorporating yet another African tradition from their lives, and the lives of their ancestors, whether they remembered the true symbolic meaning from Africa or simply knew the diamond shape to be protective.

Mary Padgelek stated in her religious studies dissertation entitled, In the Hand of the Holy Spirit: The Visionary Art of J.B. Murray, “Conjure and hoodoo constituted the spiritual entities he fearfully respected, but did not practice himself. Murray often called on Jesus to protect him from the conjure of those he believed wished him harm.” And she quoted Murray, in his own words, “Jesus is stronger than hoodoo.”

Padgelek goes on to say of Murray’s script that its creation might be a result of an African Islamic way of understanding the written word. In spite of the fact that he was a

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member of a Baptist church, the Bible does not mention the spiritual gift of a person writing in an esoteric script literally produced by the Holy Spirit moving the person’s hand, as was the case with Murray.

Muslim influence in middle Georgia historically connects the execution of certain scripts with religious devotion, prayer, and empowerment from God.\textsuperscript{44} For slaves who were African-American Muslims, the actual action of writing in Arabic was closely akin to believing and worshiping.\textsuperscript{45} Through this production of prayerful script both in Africa, and later in America, a person is set apart from those in his community, as a spiritual counselor.

In Islam, the act of writing is believed to endow a person with authority given by Allah.\textsuperscript{46} A possible example of this script was already mentioned in the signs on the Slave Gallery pews in the First African Baptist Church in Savannah, Georgia, and continues to be seen across Georgia. Surrounding communities echoed Murray’s traditions of protective script as evidenced by images found on tombstones (Figure 2-25) from the Gospel Pilgrim Cemetery in Athens, Georgia, and throughout Georgia and other southern states (Figure 2-27). The tradition of protective measures is also seen in yard art such as the rock pile (Figure 2-28) that protects Dilmus Hall’s yard near Athens, Georgia, or the yard art (Figure 2-29) that protects J.B. Murray’s land and home in Mitchell, Georgia.

Other supporting evidence of the traditions of Africa in the Southern United States is found in the Gospel Pilgrim Cemetery (Figure 2-30, left), an African-American cemetery founded in 1882, in Athens, Georgia. Numerous gravesites display the African tradition of

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\end{thebibliography}
placing shells on graves (Figure 2-30, right and Figure 2-31, left). Those placing the shells on the graves don’t always know the shells connection to Kongo ancestors. 47

Another African custom was to place pottery, ceramic or glass household objects on the graves to honor the ancestor and make the connection between the two worlds. 48 The items “were broken before being placed on the grave, not so much to prevent them from being stolen as to accentuate the belief that the act of breaking and rendering useless was part of the ritual itself, symbolizing the ending of things of this world.” 49 This way the ancestor will not want to return and cause havoc in this world. In the case of one grave (Figure 2-31, right), this is illustrated with the glass bowl that has had a hole punched through the base and then placed to decorate a grave.

In the same cemetery, the Georgia Historical Society and East Athens Development Corporation, Inc. claim (Figure 2-30, left) the grave of Harriet Powers has been identified. 50 Though not privy to the exact location, many tombstones in the Gospel Pilgrim Cemetery (Figure 2-25) are adorned with Masonic symbols and could mark her gravesite.

Additionally, Harriet Powers’ appliquéd quilts (Figure 2-23) and aprons (Figure 2-24), show the continuation of African symbols and traditions. Evidenced by the Masonic symbols on her apron, Powers was believed to be a member of the Eastern Star division of

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48 Ibid.
the Masons, group formed for African-American Women in 1874, after Prince Hall paved their way with his induction as a Master Mason on March 6, 1775.\textsuperscript{51}

Nellie Mae Rowe (Figure 2-32) was born in Fayetteville, Georgia, and lived most of her life in Vinings, Georgia. She included script in her paintings. Rowe was a dedicated Christian with memories of being taught “fancy writing drawings,” (probably derived from the Haitian script, Vévé). This is reflected in the writing she placed within and around the borders of her works of art (Figure 2-33).

J.B. Murray’s work (Figure 2-34) included spirit figures and his own script, which was meant to be read by him through a jar of well-water, a Kongo tradition. Many of Murray’s creations (Figure 2-35) included four eyes, reminiscent of Ejagham and African Cuban traditions. Additionally, Murray saw his pieces as protective measures for both himself and the intended recipient of his pieces.\textsuperscript{52}

As has been demonstrated throughout the state of Georgia, Africans retained traditions and customs from West Africa and passed them onto their descendants. Murray’s belief in God and the Holy Spirit that guided his hand was a means by which his West African ancestors and God connected with him. What takes this connection beyond Christianity, is the fact that Murray used water, a Kongo idea, through which to read his

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{51} William H. Harris, “The Grand Boulé at the Dawn of a New Century: Sigma Pi Phi Fraternity,” in \textit{African American Fraternities and Sororities: The Legacy and the Vision}, ed. Tamara L. Brown, Gregory S. Parks, and Clarenda M. Phillips (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2012), Chapter 4. “Interest in the Order of the Eastern Stars became widespread among blacks and on December 1, 1874, the Prince Hall Free and Accepted Masons established the Eastern Stars, an affiliated group primarily for women, although the brothers could earn Eastern Star degrees as well.”
\item \textsuperscript{52} Paul Arnett et al., eds., \textit{Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South}, vol. 1, \textit{The Tree Gave the Dove a Leaf} (Atlanta, GA: Tinwood Books, 2000), 474. “Murray’s writing gave him a power he believed could be used for the benediction and protection of himself and others. The inscriptions seem to have had specific meanings to him when he wrote them.”
\end{itemize}
artwork. The Kongo idea that ancestors reside in the watery world and are available for assistance, appears nowhere in the Bible.

The Gullah and Others from South Carolina, Georgia and Florida

In South Carolina, Georgia, and northern Florida, the Gullah people have inhabited the coastline since the 1500s with a large influx during the early 1800s slave trade. They were thought to have been taken from the Congo, Angola or Sierra Leone areas of Africa. Wahlman, in *Mojo Working*, presents supportive scenarios collected from several sources. She states that the Gullah people believed in evil spirits “capable of enslaving a person by controlling his will.” Remembering West African charms which enclose writing, they sometimes paper the walls of their houses with newsprint, to keep away evil spirits. The practice is seen all over the South, where newsprint was placed on the walls of Southern homes (Figure 2-26) for protection against the weather. But in African American homes, where newsprint was put into shoes as well, printed materials protected against both weather and evil enslaving spirits, in the belief that “evil spirits would have to stop and read the words of each chopped up column” before they could do any harm. Additionally, this recalls the African American practice of leaving a Bible open at night so that the power of religious words would protect a family against nighttime evils.

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54 Charles Joyner, *Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois, 1984).
North Carolina

The use of conjuring canes and symbolic messengers was carried through the African diaspora and into the United States. In 1799 at the Bennehan-Cameron plantation near Durham, North Carolina, a conjuring cane was hidden inside the wall when the new addition was connected to the primary house. In 1850 near Durham, North Carolina, two forked branches were secretly placed between the walls. In interviews with African Americans around 1930, it was recorded that forked branches were used “in various ways to ward off witches.” This echoes the Central Kongo belief that swollen, twisted, or phallus-shaped roots represent Funza, an nkisi that is the embodiment of power and masculinity. Nsemi Isaki, himself a Mu-Kongo, wrote c. 1900:

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\ldots [nkisi \text{ is}] \text{ the name of the thing we use to help a person when that person is sick and from which we obtain health; the name refers to leaves and medicines combined together. } \ldots \text{ It is also called nkisi because there is one to protect the human soul and guard it against illness for whoever is sick and wishes to be healed. Thus an nkisi is also something which hunts down illness and chases it away from the body.}\]

Each of these examples is evidence that some African customs and traditions came to the Southern United States with the Africans transported there.

The use of cloth as a means of remembering, reproducing, and passing on signs can be seen in the United States as well. Maude Southwell Wahlman, in her 1993 book entitled *Signs and Symbols: African Images in African-American Quilts*, states that the traditions of

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that in many literate cultures, one put a Bible under a pillow to have a wish fulfilled or to protect a child; the practice of endorsing magical holy words to increase their power is found widely in early literate cultures. He noted that the Bible is used not only as an amulet but as a divining tool as well; a person looking for guidance would open the Bible and read the first verse he encountered, and it would contain a sign indicating what action to take.”

58 Ibid., 174-5.
60 Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 117.
geometric patterns, abstract designs, strip piecing, bold colors and distinctive stitches are symbols and techniques that stem indirectly from the symbols and techniques in Africa.\textsuperscript{61} She proposed that African textile patterns (Figure 2-1) are similar to patterns in African American quilts (Figure 2-20).\textsuperscript{62} Nsibidi, a Nigerian writing system encoded in textiles made for the Ekpe Leopard Society (Figure 2-1), was again encoded in African American quilts (Figure 2-21). Though not directly obvious, even the use of symbols is passed through generations as a means of secret communication.

In the 2000 book, Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad, Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond Dobard wrote that African American quilts were also used to communicate actions that could have been taken at any given time, in the Underground Railroad resistance movement in the United States. Tobin gives credit to Ozella McDaniel Williams for passing the knowledge of the ten known quilt square designs used to communicate with other African Americans to give instruction for escape and to give directions on the Underground Railroad.\textsuperscript{63} The Monkey Wrench\textsuperscript{64}, is said to be a sign to gather tools and necessities together in preparation for departure.\textsuperscript{65} The Wagon Wheel is said to represent the means of transport for many on the escape route, that being a wagon providing transportation for the escapees.\textsuperscript{66} It is also worth noting how similar the Wagon Wheel symbol is to that of the Nsibidi symbol for Congress, \includegraphics[width=0.05\textwidth]{congress.png}, from the Ejagham

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{61} Wahlman, Signs and Symbols, 25-60.
\item \textsuperscript{62} Tobin and Dobard, Hidden in Plain View, 9.
\item \textsuperscript{63} Tobin and Dobard, Hidden in Plain View, 15-23.
\item \textsuperscript{64} Kris Driessen, Putting It in Perspective: The Symbolism of Underground Railroad Quilts, accessed September 2013, \url{http://www.quilthistory.com/ugrrquilts.htm}. "Many of the quilt blocks named in the book were not given their names until the early 1900s. The monkey wrench, for example, was not [recorded as] invented until 1858 and so [may] not have been the name of a block used as a mnemonic device." 1.
\item \textsuperscript{65} Tobin and Dobard, Hidden in Plain View, 83.
\item \textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 88.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
people in Africa. Though the meaning is not necessarily the same, in both cases the reference is to people and is pictorial. When it was time to escape, the Tumbling Boxes\textsuperscript{67}, \begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{tumbling_boxes.png}
\caption{Pattern with its vision of movement could be displayed draped over a fence.\textsuperscript{68}}
\end{figure}

New Orleans, Louisiana

Found in New Orleans, Louisiana, is yet another example of script being used as a form of worship, or a call for help from ancestors. In 2005, in her book entitled, \textit{The Birth of New Orleans’ Voodoo Queen: A Long-Held Mystery Resolved}, Ina J. Fandrich introduces her subject, Marie Laveau, New Orleans’ famous Voodoo Queen, the central leader and the heart and soul of New Orleans’ nineteenth-century Voodoo tradition. She is still generally regarded as the most important figure among Louisiana’s Voodoo practitioners. Her medicinal and magical knowledge must have been phenomenal. According to the 1881 obituaries, she healed thousands of fellow New Orleanians from deadly diseases such as malaria and yellow fever. She was also known for powerful spells and charms that assisted her numerous clients in matters of the heart (attracting a desired lover, turning an unfaithful spouse into a devoted partner, or making him/her disappear altogether), in court cases (granting a favorable outcome in legal matters, at times overruling death sentences), and in job-related situations (protecting from abuse or advancing a promotion).

Everybody in trouble of any sort seems to have sought her help, women and men, black and white, enslaved and free, the rich and famous, and the poor and unknown alike.\textsuperscript{69}

\textsuperscript{67} Driessen, \textit{Putting It in Perspective}, 1.
\textsuperscript{68} Ann Malaspina. \textit{The Underground Railroad: The Journey to Freedom} (New York: Chelsea House, 2010), 114.
Once Marie Laveau had passed away, to request her continued help, people to this day make their desired wish and mark an X on the exterior of her tomb (Figures 2-36 and 2-37) to seal the wish and request her help. Some people decorate her tomb and honor her periodically with gifts and additional markings.\textsuperscript{70}

Maude Wahlman, in her textbook entitled, \textit{Mojo Working}, writes, “African-American folk sculpture and painting include references to the Haitian Vodun figure, \textit{Baron Samedi}, symbolized by a top hat, and sometimes a cane and a cape.” A most striking example is an anonymous sculpture (Figure 2-38) made about 1930,\textsuperscript{71} presently in the Smithsonian American Art Museum as a gift from the Bert Hemphill, Jr. Collection. It was found covered with chicken feathers, in a back room of an African-American barber shop in New Orleans.\textsuperscript{72}

It is remarkably similar to the Fon figure representing \textit{Gu} (Figure 2-15), their god of iron, and the previously mentioned Haitian figure, Baron Samedi. The New Orleans figure has designs [or signs] painted on a metal plate on the chest, possible adaptations from Haitian Veve.\textsuperscript{73} This script present on the chest of Baron Samedi is yet another example of the use of protective script in the African American communities within the United States.

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid, 148.
With James Hampton in Washington, D.C.

Protective script was also something one could produce if inspired by God. J.B. Murray has not been the only person to create script and use it in reference to a higher calling. James Hampton produced script, even if in a much more organized manner.

James Hampton, born in 1909 in Elloree, South Carolina, was the son of a traveling gospel singer and self-ordained Baptist preacher who left his family to follow a personal calling for him to spread the word of God. Just before turning 20, Hampton moved to Washington, D.C., and struggled to find jobs during the Depression. In 1942, he was drafted into the Army, where he remained until his discharge in 1945. The remainder of his life he was employed by the General Services Administration in Washington, D.C., as a janitor. He passed away from stomach cancer in 1964, at the age of 53.

Upon his discharge from the Army in 1945, Hampton returned to Washington, D.C., where he began the project that he would work on for the remainder of his life, The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly (Figure 2-39). This assemblage was created with objects chosen specifically by Hampton. These items, such as furniture, burned out light bulbs, and jelly jars, were covered with both silver and gold foil,

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75 Ibid.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
and incorporated into his assemblage. These similar to objects found on graves in Elloree, South Carolina.

Hampton had persistent visions throughout his life, many of which he wrote on tablets that accent his assemblage. These tablet writings were written in English, unlike Hampton’s several books filled with Hamptonese script which he wrote in conjunction with the creation of his assemblage. Occasionally, within this script he would make some designations in English. One in particular was: “Jesus” in the center and “Diagnosis of the Ten Commandments” at the bottom of the piece. Hampton often referred to himself as “St. James,” and anointed himself with the title "Director, Special Projects for the State of Eternity.” Many of these references contain Biblical terminology and therefore it is thought that Christianity was the religious base for his art. To date, these books of script have not been deciphered. Many times his script is written on loose leaf pages (Figure 2-40). However, the form of his script and the tablets also suggest that he may have been influenced by Islam, as well.

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81 Ibid.
82 Thompson. Flash of the Spirit, 147.
83 Perry, Free within Ourselves.
84 Wijesuriya P. Dayawansa, Anders Lindquist, and Yishao Zhou, New Directions and Applications in Control Theory (New York: Springer Science & Business Media, 2005), 367. Mark Stamp and Ethan Le, Department of Computer Science, San Jose State University, stated, “Hampton’s script, or Hamptonese, bears no significant resemblance to any known written language. … This analysis shows that Hamptonese is not a simple substitution for English and provides some evidence that Hamptonese may be the written equivalent of ‘speaking in tongues.’”
85 Perry, Free within Ourselves.
86 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
When we compare the script of Murray and Hampton, there are some dissimilar aspects. Hampton’s script is very detailed and precise, with each character painstakingly rendered in primarily level lines across the page. Murray took a free-formed approach in his scripts, often going back and forth on the page, only to continue going down the side of the page, across the bottom and back up the other side. He would then go back and add marks here and there, making for a greater improvisation of his work. Hampton’s script was very private and not shared with many people, whereas Murray distributed his script widely and translated it for those to whom he gave it.

In addition, Hampton included words in English, even though sporadic, thus informing us that he was definitely literate, whereas Murray was illiterate\(^89\), unable to write English. Both men were inspired by religion and their artworks show characteristics connected not only with Christianity, but with Islam as well. When it comes to comparison of their scripts to the syllabaries of Africa, secret scripts are used, as in the Ekpe Secret Leopards Society where the many meanings of the script are revealed only to the oldest members, by Murray and Hampton.

On Harp found in New York Auction by Jonathan Holstein

Pictograms telling a story were found in 2008 on a harp in central New York. Though Murray is known more for his script, some of his figural pieces have pictogram characteristics. This harp will be examined with the intent of finding connections with African pictograms as another means of inherited African traditions.

\(^{89}\)William Rawlings, M.D., conversation with Mary Padgelek, Sandersville, GA, May 1, 1993. “…he had on his own developed his own form of writing, as it were that J.B. was unlettered.”
Jonathan Holstein, collector, author, curator and dealer of American material culture, purchased the “African American Harp of the Clark Collection” (Figure 2-41) in 2008 at an auction in central New York, of the Clark family estate. The Clark Music Company was founded in 1859 and was in the business of selling musical instruments in Syracuse, New York. From where the Clark family acquired the harp has not been documented.

The harp was created in solid pieces and panels of wood identified as a type of elm that grows in the Southern United States. It has been repaired with metal plates and screws that date to the early 1800s. Holstein states, “Our harp is a unique amalgam of two types, the African bow harp with a human head finial and a sounding box base, but made in the size of a Western floor harp. If would appear to have been a remembered African form combined with a newly confronted Western form.” The finial head is decorated with corn-rowed hair as is seen in many African cultures, as well as African American culture. The foot is formed to obviously represent a human foot, including incising to represent toes and toenails. Due to the type of wood and these African characteristics, the harp is presumed to have been made in the Southern United States.

Regarding markings seen on the harp, Holstein states,

There is a remarkable linked and complete narrative rendered in pictograms that begins on one side of the instrument and continues and finishes on the other. … [The] sequence is very carefully plotted; their author shows us where to start by designating

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91 Ibid., 33.
92 Ibid., Introduction.
93 Ibid., 15, 39.
94 Ibid., 16-21.
95 Ibid., 21-2.
96 Ibid.
the first panel “No 1” in script. I believe it is a narrative of life, death and the resurrection of the soul based loosely on a Christian/African narrative.\(^97\)

The use of pictograms (Figure 2-42) on this harp is another indication of the continued presence of African sign traditions in the United States. The pictograms on the Clark Harp appear to be similar in style and form to Nsibidi signs (Figure 2-43) documented by Eliphistone Dayrell in 1911 and J.K. Macgregor in 1909.\(^98\) This harp, though it shows signs similar to the African ones, does not appear to have direct similarities with the work of J.B. Murray. While the harp signs have a very strict formatting, such as a series of straight distinct lines put together to create a recognizable form, Murray’s script and spirit figures are loosely put together, sometimes with one continuous line or a series of flowing lines, dots, and dashes. One must fully concentrate on the images Murray put to paper to grasp his intended meaning. In addition, Murray’s use of color as a distinction between forms within his drawings and paintings is not found in the harp pictograms.

**Conclusions**

African scripts and forms were definitely remembered in the United States where Africans and African Americans lived. Many examples from Murray’s home state of Georgia have been presented and demonstrate an ancestral continuation of African traditions and customs. These traditions and customs thrived in other states, such as North Carolina, South Carolina and Louisiana, to name only a few of the states to which African Americans were

\(^97\) Ibid. 23-33.  
taken or migrated. Additionally, it has been shown that with the transport of African and African American culture to the Northern areas of Washington, D.C. and New York, African customs and traditions survived and thrived there also. This demonstrates the strength of these African customs and traditions.

Having seen the continuation of African traditions and customs throughout the Southern United States and in particular in the state in which he lived, Murray was definitely influenced by his surroundings, which included strong West African traditions. Christian religions such as Baptist and Methodist were based on a personal connection with God and a means by which African Americans could express their African spiritual traditions, such as praising, singing, and being overcome by the Holy Spirit. West African traditions were adapted into the lives of Africans in Brazil, Suriname, Haiti and Cuba, particularly seen in the religious writing forms of Vévé from Haiti and Anaforuana in Cuba. These scripts and some spirit figures are then seen in Georgia and New Orleans in works such as the “fancy writing drawings” of which Nellie Mae Rowe spoke and Vévé-type script on the metal chest plate of an anonymous sculpture found in the back room of an African American barbershop in New Orleans.

The presence of Kongo traditions are prevalent in Georgia, Murray’s home state, such as the Kongo Cosmogram seen in a ventilation form drilled in the shape of a diamond at the First African Baptist Church in Savannah and in graveyard traditions seen in Athens and Sunbury. Murray’s use of water to read his script is a Kongo tradition as well. Evidence has been presented in the script that marks the pews of the Slave Gallery in the First African Baptist Church in Savannah, that points to a connection with Islam and Arabic script, the
closest connection to Murray’s form of script. We saw a more in-depth look at Arabic script and saw similar formations by Murray’s hand. All of the evidence presented from the Caribbean, to the southern states of North and South Carolina, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee, to the Northern state of New York and Washington, D.C., demonstrate and support the fact that Murray came by his script and figurative abilities from his West African ancestors.
CHAPTER 3

J.B. MURRAY AND THE HISTORY OF STORYTELLING AND THE AFRICAN ‘GRIOIT’

Storytelling and African ‘griot’ characteristics have been examined in the African and African American oral and literary traditions, and just as these traditions used words to form historical accounts and descriptions, Murray used his own script and (ancestral) spirit figures to create his communications.

In oral and literary traditions, there is a story within a story or the narrative proverb.\(^1\) Where African and African Americans used words to create these narrative proverbs for their readers, Murray used pictorial images to create these narrative proverbs for his viewers. It is through his narrative proverbs that Murray portrayed for his viewers a perceived problem (such as his prostate cancer in Figure 3-1), and with the addition of his script, presented the solution to the problem – his request for God’s help.

Where orators and writers used metaphors as a means to vividly describe characteristics of people, places, or things, Murray used his pictorial images as metaphors to vividly describe characteristics of people, places, or things. For example in his painting of “his family and home”\(^2\) (Figure 3-2), Murray used his pictorial images to vividly describe his family members and the house in which they lived; within each ‘description’ painted within

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1 Emmanuel Obiechina, “Narrative Proverbs in the African Novel,” *Oral Tradition* 7, no. 2 (1992), 197-230. “One major aspect of [the] interplay of the oral and literary traditions in the African novel is the phenomenon of the-story-within-the-story, or the narrative proverb . . . Reflecting a habit of orality in life and literature, the novelists introduce oral stories—myths, folktales, fairy tales, animal fables, anecdotes, ballads, song-tales, and so on—within the narrative matrices of their works, in the development of their plots and themes, and in the formulation of their artistic and formal principles. These embedded stories are referred to as narrative proverbs because they perform organic and structural functions of proverbs in oral speech and in creative literature.”

the house is the portrayal of each family member’s characteristics and personality. William Arnett gives this description:

[It] appears to be a family portrait inside a house, with Murray in the center, his wife on the right, and their eleven children arranged throughout the drawing. The roof is yellow (i.e., God bless this house), but the house is filled with conflict (red/blue) and impurity (black). Murray’s wife is red and black with touches of blue – Murray does not have a favorable opinion of her but acknowledges that she had good qualities. The children – each has a distinct personality and character, a separate mix of the five “charged” colors – are portrayed in color combinations indicating that the artist’s attitude toward them ranged from very positive to very negative. Murray colors himself and one of the children entirely blue. Another figure, possibly a favored child who died, is blue and white, while still another child is almost all red – certainly not the apple of Murray’s eye. (About this same time Murray created a last will and testament that he gave to Dr. Rawlings. It is filled with both red and blue figures, and no doubt in the accompanying script Murray explains why he wants some of his children to be rewarded more than others.)

Orators and writers use symbols to help progress the meanings and formal qualities of their literary works. Murray used his own symbols, in the form of his own script and (ancestral) spirit figures, to help progress the meanings and formal qualities of his pictorial works. An example of this can be seen in Figure 3-3, where Murray created (ancestral) spirit figures – vertical figures with sets of eyes and occasionally some other facial features – and used them, along with his script, to help progress the meanings and formal qualities within the work, and to call on ancestral figures’ energies for protection and guidance. It is my conclusion that Murray displayed his own characteristics of African griots.

J.B. Murray art expressed messages given to him by God, to the people of his community and others who came to meet him. In order to understand these characteristics within Murray’s art, an understanding of African griot is necessary.

In *Griots and Griottes: Masters of Words and Music (African Expressive Culture)*, Thomas A. Hale writes:

On July 28, 1352, a North African traveler from Fez, Morocco, arrived in the capital of the Mali empire, in the region known today as the border between Guinea and southwestern Mali. There, at the court of Mansa Sulayman (reigned 1341-60), he encountered griots.

After returning home, the traveler narrated a description that includes the first written portrait of griots, the West African artisans of the word (see Hamdun and King, 1975, pp. 34-35). Although his brief sketch was only a small part of Ibn Battuta’s narrative about people of the Mali empire, the picture of the fourteenth century griots is especially important today because it provides evidence that the oral tradition maintained by these bards is at least seven centuries old. In fact, their verbal art quite likely is as old as the most ancient cities of West Africa, such as Jenne-Jeno⁴, which archeologists now tell us antedates the time of Christ.⁵

African history began being recorded in European languages in the late 1800s with their introduction through colonialism. Tom Hale⁶ stated that “Griots, a uniquely African profession, fulfill a variety of roles as genealogists, historians, spokespersons, diplomats, musicians, teachers, praise singers, and advisors.”⁷ Hale gave to these masters of word and music the French terms *Griots*⁸ and *Griottes* (male and female respectively).

As old as many African civilizations, storytelling has been an integral part of most African communities. West Africans in the Sahel and Savanna regions kept their own oral traditions of the past through the griots.

⁴ David C. Conrad, *Empires of Medieval West Africa: Ghana, Mali, and Songhay* (New York: Shoreline Publishing Group, 2005), 8. “Along the fringes of the Sahara Desert, nomadic herders followed their livestock in annual migrations to seasonal grazing lands. … Archaeological work has uncovered evidence that by 250 c.e. an urban populations developed in Jenne-Jeno in the floodplain between the Niger and Bani Rivers. As an urban center, Jenne-Jeno became one of the earliest cities of the Western Sudan, probably about the time that Kumbi Saleh was becoming the center of activity for the Soninke people of the Ghana Empire far to the west. For some time at least, Jenne-Jeno would have been flourishing in the Inland Delta when the emperors of Ghana were ruling from their capital at Kumbi Saleh. But after 1200 c.e., the people of Jenne-Jeno began to move away and in the 13th century that ancient city was abandoned.”
⁶ Tom Hale holds the Liberal Arts professorship in African, French, and Comparative Literature, and is the head of the French department at Pennsylvania State University.
⁷ Hale, *Griots and Griottes*, back cover.
history in their own languages. This oral history appeared in the form of epic verbal accounts which included storytelling, poetry, and theatrical and musical performances.

As early as the 8th century, African history was also being written in Arabic by Muslims living in North Africa. These Muslims were trading with Africans from the Western part of the continent, as well as Central Africa.\(^9\) The West African city of Timbuktu was part of trade routes going north and south across the Sahara desert, and therefore a center of profitable trade well-known for learning and culture.\(^10\) It was a crossroads of West Africa, where many groups of people exchanged ideas, including traditions and customs.

It is in locations such as Timbuktu, that some groups began incorporating customs such as education and writing into their indigenous traditions. Professor Babacar Fall\(^11\) explains:

> With the shift from orality to writing, when literate Muslims began using the alphabet in Arabic, Pulaar, Wolof, and Mandinka, oral tradition in the Senegambia underwent a considerable evolution. The Tarikh Es Sudaan and the Tarikh El Fettach, the oldest chronicles that shed light on the history of the 15th- to 17th-century states of the Western Sudan, are the first transcriptions of traditions by Muslim scholars who were not griots by birth. With the Tarikhs [or histories] began the coexistence of the griots and Muslim scholars, who stand out by their ability to write and interpret the history of Sudanese societies.\(^12\)

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\(^10\) Nehemia Levtzion and Randall Pouwels, eds, *The History of Islam in Africa* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2000), 426. “The city of Timbuktu, already touched by Ibn Battuta in 1353, came to absorb many of the scholarly traditions of the surrounding lands and of different ethnic groups. It also inherited Ja’s older status as an inviolable center of learning and commerce and became a largely autonomous City of Scholars under Malian and Songhay rule, governed by its own patriciate of scholar families.”

\(^11\) Professor Babacar Fall is the Humanities and International Studies Fellow at Stanford University and teaches at the FASTEF - School of Education of the University Cheikh Anta Diop of Dakar, Sénégal. He is the author of many publications on education and social history as well as the Coordinator of GEEP (www.geep.org) and Chair of SchoolnetAfrica (www.schoolnetaf rica.org). Professor Fall's project draws on the life histories of social and political activists to highlight the role of unions in Senegal's history from 1945 to 1968. While much of the emphasis has been on political parties, the evolution of the labor market and the role of salaried workers and unions remains understated.

With this new emphasis on knowledge and writing, many griots kept their indigenous oral profession and incorporated writing into their repertoire. While the indigenous griots were revered for their ability to memorize historical transactions, the ability to memorize and write history was admired with Islam. The merging of indigenous and Islamic traditions in the African griot took place largely in the urban communities.

In small rural communities, storytelling as a method of recording and relaying history still remained prominent. As Patricia and Frederick McKissack stated regarding the Mandinka culture, “Stories were used to entertain, to instruct, or to explain an occurrence.”

Storytelling to achieve these same ideas is prominent in the United States, as well.

Murray first began writing a multitude of protective instructions or messages (Figure 3-4) to the people of his community. Mary Padgelek explains:

Through continuing visions and/or auditory messages he believed were from God, Murray understood that God was calling him to move his hand as the Holy Spirit led him. Initially, Murray had no idea in what direction these visions would lead him. However, through continual visions he came to believe that the figures in his work were people who lived without God. Murray believed that God wanted him to warn people to turn back and seek salvation. He talked about God giving him the writing and that he was “not to add to or take away, but do what the Spirit said to do.” He also equated the different kinds of writing and the different letters with “the different folks who don’t respect God. God gives me these different letters for these folks.”

Murray who had been shy and reserved for most of his life became the disseminator of God’s messages and protection. He did not hesitate to give the messages to those who were intended to receive them.

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African Migrations to the Americas
and Memories of African Oral Traditions

Murray’s acquisition of African griot characteristics may have been inherited from his ancestors. Many warring cultures gathered slaves from different cultures they conquered, and obtained slaves through barter and trade. These slaves were then shipped from Gorée Island directly off the coast of Dakar, Senegal, and many other ports in West Africa. Africans from multiple cultures were found in the Americas, particularly in Virginia and Georgia. Many of these cultural groups have been documented throughout the Americas, such as the Yoruba in Brazil and Cuba, as well as Africans from Senegal, Gambia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, the Gold Coast, Togo, Dahomey, Nigeria, Congo and Angola in South Carolina. Even though Murray’s cultural identity is not positively identified, since griots were present in many West African countries these characteristics would have been remembered.

15 Karen Bell, “Atlantic Slave Trade to Savannah,” New Georgia Encyclopedia, accessed August 5, 2015, http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/atlantic-slave-trade-savannah. “During the early period of Savannah’s involvement in the trade, from 1755 to 1767, 63 percent of slaves imported into Savannah originated from the Caribbean, and 24 percent came directly from Africa’s rice and grain coast. During the intermediate period from 1768 to 1771, 86 percent of slaves imported into Savannah originated from Africa.” [and] “Throughout their involvement in the Atlantic slave trade, merchants and planters in Savannah imported slaves from St. James and Goree Island, two of Britain's significant slave supply zones. Other supply zones for the Savannah market included the British colony Sierra Leone, located along the Windward Coast of West Africa. After the Revolutionary War the slave trade to Savannah resumed. Between 1784 and 1798, West African slaves accounted for 78 percent of slaves imported to Savannah.”
16 Bell, “Atlantic Slave Trade.”
17 Toyin Falola and Matt D. Childs, eds., The Yoruba Diaspora in the Atlantic World (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004), 4.
African and African American Writers, Slave Narratives,

Religious Leaders, Preachers, and Activists

Beginning in the 1740s, the Great Awakening’s evangelical revivals set the stage for enslaved African Americans to convert to Christianity.\(^{19}\) Christian conversion presented theological foundations for the development of African American Christianity.\(^{20}\) This evangelical base put emphasis on the spiritual transformation of the individual, removing the group mentality of religion. It also rejected the Catholic notion of a required intermediary, such as a priest, between God and the individual, and the memorization of church doctrine.\(^{21}\) Since the evangelical base held that there was a direct connection between the individual and God, African Americans joined the evangelical churches, such as Baptist and Methodist (evangelical religions), in large numbers.\(^{22}\) They enthusiastically joined the revival worship and in some instances were able to include worship of African indigenous religions without anyone knowing.\(^{23}\) For instance, spirit possession could occur and one could attribute it to being overcome by the Holy Spirit or by an African deity. In both instances, the individual might be in a trance-like state and possibly ‘speaking in tongues.’\(^{24}\)

The congregations of the African American evangelical Baptists and Methodists multiplied, and, motivated by a commitment to spiritual equality, some white congregates

\(^{20}\) Ibid.
\(^{21}\) Ibid.
\(^{22}\) Ibid.
\(^{24}\) David Christie-Murray, *Voices from the Gods: Speaking with Tongues* (Abingdon: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 12. Martin explains speaking in tongues in “Testimony from Motherwell,” 12-13. This practice which has been given the technical designation *xenolalia*, has been succinctly defined as a phenomenon whereby individuals “speak and understand languages of which they have no normal knowledge.”
began to question the morality of slavery.\textsuperscript{25} However with the backlash that came from the white southern Christian slaveholders and their heated resistance to the abolition of slavery, the southern Baptists and Methodists cooled their antislavery movements.\textsuperscript{26} Despite this reversal, these denominations supported the advancement of African American Christian leaders, licensing men to preach and assist with recruitment of congregations.\textsuperscript{27} Through the Second Great Awakening’s revivals during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the growth of African American Christianity and evangelicalism expanded not only in the South, but in new northern and western areas of the country as well.\textsuperscript{28}

J.B. Murray was a devout Baptist, looking at the evolution of African American religion in the United States is pertinent. Murray’s “calling” may be rooted in this evangelical movement. Parallels can be made with his religion, and religions and traditions from West Africa.

Most African Americans were forced to adopt Christian religious traditions. One goal of this religious indoctrination was to encourage African Americans to agree with their lesser position in life, as slaves.\textsuperscript{29} Many enslaved Africans merged their African religious observances and profound spirituality with Christianity. The role of a “good and dutiful servant”\textsuperscript{30} may have played a part in Murray’s denigration at the hands of his family and church congregation. The White-based religion may have subversively\textsuperscript{31} guided their

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{27} Weisenfeld, “Religion in African American History.”
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{31} Clovis E. Semmes, \textit{Cultural Hegemony & African American Development} (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1992), xi. “... that cultural hegemony has become the metaproblem out of which epistemological, conceptual, theoretical, and critical issues emerge in African American studies. Cultural hegemony, the systemic negation
decisions out of fear of being rejected by their church and community, if they believed in Murray’s calling. This may also be the reason for Murray’s ability to accept the mystical properties of his calling, such as God coming to him through the sun and telling him to write glossolalia. He was able to attribute this mysticism to God, and make it acceptable to his religion and community.

**African Literary Connections and Slave Narratives**

Religious Leaders, Preachers and Activists

Just because Murray was illiterate (in English) does not mean his ancestors were. Some Africans did make the journey knowing written languages. Literate Muslims were included in the slave trade. In the early 1800s one notable African Muslim, brought first to the Bahamas and then to Georgia, was Sahil Bilali (1765-late 1850s). James Hamilton Couper, owned a St. Simon’s Island plantation with many slaves. He wrote, in an article to the American Ethnological Society, regarding Salih Bilali, one of his Muslim slaves, otherwise known as Tom:

> He is a strict Mahometan; abstains from spirituous liquors, and keeps the various fasts, particularly that of Rhamadan. He is singularly exempt from all feeling of superstition; and holds in great contempt the African belief in fetishes and evil spirits. He reads Arabic and has a Koran . . . in that language but does not write it . . . . Mr. Spaulding of Sapelo has, among his Negroes, one named Bul-Ali who writes Arabic and speaks the Fonlah language. Tom and himself are intimate friends. He is now old and feeble. Tom informs me that he is from Timboo [probably Timbuktu].

Couper was not the only person with an opinion of Salih Bilali.

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of one culture by another, constitutes the major paradigmatic, historical, and structural phenomenon that has threatened African American institutional development and that has profoundly shaped this group’s cultural strivings.”

Richard Brent Turner, scholar of African American Islam, wrote that Salih Bilali was born in Massina, located in today’s Mali, in 1765 and was probably part of an important Mandingo Fulbe clerical family. As a pre-teen, Bilali was sold into slavery after being kidnapped on his way home from Jenne, one of the chief African Muslim academic centers of West Africa. Bilali probably remembered the racial and cultural differences between the African Muslims in Massina, and the lighter-skinned Arab Muslim merchants who sold them supplies in the commercial markets of Jenne, Timbuktu, Kouna, and Sego.

Turner reports that Salih Bilali’s forced travels took him to the Americas, first landing in the Bahamas, where he was sold to James Hamilton Couper around 1800. By 1816, he was an overseer of Couper’s St. Simon’s plantation, in Georgia, supervising more than four hundred slaves. Turner emphatically states, “By all accounts, Salih Bilali was an impressive figure in the Georgia Sea Islands. His steadfast religiosity may have been the result of Islamic training under Bilali Mohamed in the Bahamas and Georgia. Together, these two men formed the nucleus of a small Muslim community. The members are only suggested by the interviews with Salih Bilali’s grandchildren, conducted by the Georgia’s Writer’s Project on the Georgia Sea Islands in the 1930s.”

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34 Ibid.
35 Charles Spaulding Wyly. *The Seed That Was Sown in Georgia* (New York: Neale, 1930). Bilali, who was also known as Belali Mahomet, Bu Allah, and Ben Ali, was a Muslim slave on the Thomas Spaulding plantation on Sapelo Island, Georgia, from the early to the mid-1800s. His great grandchildren told his story to Works Progress Administration writers in Georgia in the 1930s. Bilali maintained his identity by giving his nineteen children Muslim names and teaching them Muslim traditions. When he died, he left an Arabic manuscript he had composed, and had his prayer rug and Qur’an placed in his coffin. Wyly, the grandson of Thomas Spaulding, recalled that his grandfather owned slaves of “Moorish or Arabian descent, devout Mussulmans, who prayed to Allah . . . morning, noon, and evening.”
36 Murphy, *Down by the Riverside*, 72.
38 Murphy, *Down by the Riverside*, 72.
Murray’s script appears to have greater connections to Arabic than to English, as will be discussed later in this dissertation. Murray’s ancestors could have been part of the Muslim population in Georgia, or the surrounding states, retaining indigenous African traditions and customs, including their own language and Islamic signs. Murray’s family had exposure to African traditions brought to the United States by others, as well as those linguistic and written traditions of the Europeans and Americans enslaving them.

It is during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries’ evangelical conversion, that development of preachers and activists can be seen within linguistic and written traditions recorded in various slave narratives. Salih Bilali, from St. Simon’s Island, remained in captivity until the Emancipation Proclamation took effect. Even though he did conduct Muslim worship for the other slaves on the plantation, nothing is mentioned of activism against slavery.

The strength of Murray’s attachment to the evangelical Mineral Springs Baptist Church can be understood. “The dance of spirit possession, the cadence of the black preacher, and the melancholy of the slave spiritual,”39 certainly asserted its influence on Murray’s ancestors and by extension on him. The idea of God coming to Murray may have been a surprise to him, but his ancestral memories40 allowed him to accept his place as God’s “tool,” and the fervor with which he received messages in trance-like states, and expressed God’s messages in his script and art, demonstrates his connection to African spirituality, and griot traditions.

39 Ibid.
40 Darold Treffert, “Genetic Memory: How We Know Things We Never Learned,” Scientific American (Guest blog), January 28, 2015, accessed April 2016, http://blogs.scientificamerican.com/guest-blog/genetic-memory-how-we-know-things-we-never-learned/. “Genetic memory, simply put, is complex abilities and actual sophisticated knowledge inherited along with other more typical and commonly accepted physical and behavioral characteristics. In savants the music, art or mathematical “chip” comes factory installed.”
J.B. Murray and Zora Neale Hurston

The ability to illustrate their surroundings and its impact on their lives can be seen in the work of both J.B. Murray and Zora Neale Hurston. In Figure 3-5, Murray created one of his very few titled pieces, *Trouble-Making Ladies*. William Arnett describes this piece,

Pink paper, a red figure, and black designs indicate trouble in store for Murray. Lines of pink dots represent a necklace worn by a woman who, according to Murray, “turned [Murray] in to the FBI.” In this painting, Murray identifies the various women he had known and been involved with, some reasonably good, some not. The white smears likely indicate that some of the women were dead when the painting was made.

One of Murray’s most illustrative pieces, he has used paper color (pink, to Murray associated with red), his own color coding41, and descriptive objects to get across his message regarding each woman represented.

Best known for her 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, African American author Zora Neale Hurston was an accomplished novelist, short story and folklore writer, and anthropologist.42 Born in 1891 in Notasulga, Alabama, Hurston moved with her family to Eatonville, Florida at the age of 3.43 She graduated from Barnard College in 1928.44 During

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41 Paul Arnett et al., eds., *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South*, vol. 2, *Once that River Starts to Flow* (Atlanta, GA: Tinwood Books, 2000), 474. “Three primary colors—yellow, blue, and red—had specific symbolic duties: red represented torment or evil—evil people, evil spirits, evil forces; conversely, blue represented positive strength or good; yellow indicated a divine presence, an energy emanating from or embodied in the sun. White (often) and black (occasionally) were added to his three basic colors. White connoted a spiritual purity related to death or the afterlife. White as a representation of otherworldliness is traditional in many places—as close to Murray as the white tombstones in a nearby graveyard and as far away as ritual funerary sculpture in Nigeria and Congo, two areas that were principal sources of Africans brought to the South Georgia coast. … Black, when introduced into, onto, and around white, blue, and yellow forms, denotes imperfection or impurity—a transitional state between the thoroughly opposed red and blue energies. When Murray was later supplied with paper and pigments that did not conform to his system of colors, he introduced them into his code, locating the closest, readiest substitute for each elemental color. When the combination available to him seemed too distantly removed from his symbology, he strayed from his schematic narratives and created abstractions, some of them neatly ordered, most of them heavy with calligraphic notation.”


43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.
the 1920s and the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston was friends with major artists of the time, like Langston Hughes and Ethyl Waters.\textsuperscript{45}

Her masterwork, \textit{Their Eyes Were Watching God}, was published in 1937, one of many noteworthy publications.\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Mules and Men}, one of these noteworthy publications, was published in 1935. This work shows African griot methodology. While reviewing a critique of Hurston’s work, \textit{Conflict and Resistance in Zora Neale Hurston’s Mules and Men} by Susan Meisenhelder, I found some of the humor that comes with the African griot proverbs.

Meisenhelder reports that Hurston struggled with Franz Boas, her college mentor, regarding her research and writing of \textit{Mules and Men}. His attempts to control her research in the Black communities was just as invasive as that of Charlotte Osgood Mason\textsuperscript{47}, who felt she owned Hurston’s research materials and always pushed her to write only the “primitivism” that she found in Black culture.\textsuperscript{48}

Confronted with the problem of how to convey her research in a manner that would allow the censoring eye of her mentors and unsympathetic white readers to pass over the material, strategically Hurston took on method of disguising “social conflict and critical

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{47} Nancy Kuhl, \textit{Intimate Circles: American Women in the Arts} (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2007). “A wealthy patron of the arts, Charlotte Osgood Mason contributed more than $100,000 to African-American writers and artists during the Harlem Renaissance, the equivalent of more than $1,000,000 in 2003. Over the course of the 1920s, “Godmother,” as she insisted on being called, sponsored Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, Aaron Douglas, Zora Neale Hurston, and others. Though her financial support gave her protégés considerable freedom to write and make art, travel, and study, Mason also tried to control the kinds of art they made and the ways they represented African Americans in their work. In spite of this, she developed deep personal relationships with some of the artists she supported, including Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston. Because she was both manipulative and overbearing, her relationships with African-American artists were rarely without conflict and often ended badly.”
The guise she created was critical to her work. Meisenhelder writes:

By presenting herself as a lovable “darky,” one who thanks white folks for “allowing” her to collect folklore and who praises the magnanimity of her patron Mrs. Mason, she appears a narrator with no racial complaints or even awareness. Pouring on the “charm of a lovable personality” commented on by Boas in his preface (Hurston, 1935:x) and by reviewers, Hurston paints herself as an Uncle Remus figure pleased to entertain the white world with her tale. Making no controversial statements and, in fact, offering little explicit analysis, she plays an extremely nonthreatening role: lovable, entertaining, and intellectually mute.

In the conclusion of a letter to Boas attempting to convince him to write the introduction for *Mules and Men*, Hurston ‘turns on the charm’ stating,

> So please consider all this and do not refuse Mr. Lippincott’s request to write the introduction to *Mules and Men*. And then in addition, I feel that the persons who have the most information on a subject should teach the public. Who knows more about folk-lore than you and Dr. Benedict? Therefore the stuff published in America should pass under your eye. You see some of the preposterous stuff put out by various persons on various folk-subjects. This is not said merely to get you to write the introduction to my book. [August 20, 1934]

Hurston’s plan of reverent humbleness, of course, achieved her desired outcome. Her work was published with the critical contextual information disguised with humor and she got Boas’ (although short and rather patronizing) endorsement in the introduction.

Hurston’s power of persuasion is part of the African griot methodology. Her writing on the surface showed a simple request or statement, but that simple wording which was

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49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
52 R. Bruce Bickley, “Uncle Remus Tales,” *New Georgia Encyclopedia*, October 3, 2002, [http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/arts-culture/uncle-remus-tales](http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/arts-culture/uncle-remus-tales). “The Uncle Remus tales are African American trickster stories about the exploits of Brer Rabbit, Brer Fox, and other “creeturs” that were recreated in black regional dialect by Joel Chandler Harris. Harris, a native of Eatonton, was a literary comedian, New South journalist, amateur folklorist, southern local-color writer, and children's author.”
54 Correspondence between Hurston and Franz Boas housed in the archives of the American Philosophical Society and printed in Meisenhelder article, “Conflict and Resistance in Zora Neale Hurston’s Mules and Men.”
supplying the reader with statements in their own comfort zone, was really coded wording, like Murray’s pink pearls, extolling the true meaning to those in her community. In both instances, the words produced her desired results, just as Murray’s portrayal of Trouble-Making Ladies (Figure 3-5) identified an issue and sought relief from it. He used pearls, a relatively benign decoration, normally white and symbolizing a classy woman, but here he created them in pink to illustrate the ‘evil and torment’ he felt in one or more of the women. Interestingly, with this piece Murray has relied more on the figural construction of the problem (the women) and less on the script to provide relief. However, what little script he used was created with red, Murray’s color of torment and evil, drawing the ultimate conclusion regarding his perception of evil in the women he portrayed.

In Hurston’s situation with Boas, she demonstrates the African quality of storytelling and more specifically, the creation of proverbs. Neal Norrick, in How Proverbs Mean, gives this definition of the proverb, a “self-contained, pithy, traditional expressions with didactic content and fixed, poetic form”\textsuperscript{56}. However from an African point of view, Nkusi Nnam, in Colonial Mentality in Africa, states,

To the Igbos of South Eastern Nigeria, there is a saying that proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten. To speak figuratively and using proverbs is a proof of great eloquence and wisdom. For an adult to speak literally, on the other hand, is like an African without a foofoo\textsuperscript{57}, a Chicago winter without wind, a Pope without Latin.

\textsuperscript{57} Elizabeth A. Udenta, Ikemefuna C. Obizoba, and Oluwafemi O. Oguntibeju, “Anti-Diabetic Effects of Nigerian Indigenous Plant Foods/Diets,” in Antioxidant-Antidiabetic Agents and Human Health, ed. Oluwafemi Oguntibeju (InTech, 2014). DOI: 10.5772/57240, 59-93. “Each of these staples irrespective of the preparation methods produces a thick paste known as “foofoo” eaten with soups/sauces. These dishes are highly cherished and consumed daily in all parts of Nigeria [39]. These starchy staples are also used to produce complementary foods and local snacks as roasted/fried/baked products or drinks. Some like yam, cocoyam, ‘okoho’ (Cissus pulponea root) are also used to thicken traditional soups.”
It is very didactic and always full of meaning. Proverbs are thought provoking, subject to a variety of interpretations and most suitable for a critical thinker.\textsuperscript{58}

Nnam adds considerably more to the definition and exemplifies its connection to the individual. Given this definition, when one examines Hurston’s handling of Boas, the purpose with which she writes can be seen as the creation of an acceptance by Boas not just a statement of request by Hurston. This shows the element of the proverb Nnam spoke of that is “thought provoking, subject to a variety of interpretations and most suitable to the critical thinker.”\textsuperscript{59}

Looking closer at an applicable griot proverb, “Until lions start writing down their own stories, the hunters will always be the heroes,”\textsuperscript{60} from Kenya and Zimbabwe, the meaning is until you write your own history, it will be told from someone else’s point of view. The worth of lions to the proverb author is acknowledged, while realizing that the hunter’s version is not always accurate. Hurston wrote her own history by penning her request with the intention of getting Boas’ acceptance, not just of making the request. Her ‘plan of reverent humbleness’ achieved its intention of getting acceptance from Boas, but in addition when looked at from the point of view of those within her community it is seen as a condescending put-down of Boas. In other words, she ‘got over on him.’ The worth of Hurston’s request is seen with her proverb, while realizing that the outward perception of Boas is not always correct. This is also seen in Murray’s \textit{Trouble-Making Women} (\textbf{Figure 3-5}), where his use of pearls begins a statement regarding classy women, but the fact that they

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{58} Nkusi Nnam. \textit{Colonial Mentality in Africa} (Falls Village, CT: Hamilton Books, 2007), 171.
\item \textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
are created in pink gives the alternate reality, that they represent torment and evil in these women.

“A good word produces the best kola nut,” 61 from Sierre Leone, means if you are wise, intelligent and nice you will receive the best outcomes, which is exactly what was done by Hurston. She devised a means by which she kept her integrity and still got the introduction written by Boas. In reference to Murray, he devised a way to still say women can be or are classy, while also with the use of pink getting his intended message across.

In *Mules and Men*, Hurston writes many folk tales about “John” 62 or “Jack”, a character used by many African American storytellers during and directly after slavery. As Meisenhelder says of Hurston in these references, “Often focusing on the trickster figure John, [the Conqueror], these tales depict the slave’s strategies for dealing with apparent powerlessness. Many of them graphically demonstrate the impossibility of open defiance and the need for indirection in battling oppressive whites.

While the African American man, or ‘trickster John,’ may pray in private for God “to kill all de white folks” 63, a different approach is required in their presence. 64 The trickster John may derive from memories of the Yoruba god Esu, known as the trickster god. This contention is supported by Teresa N. Washington, who stated, “Legba, known to the Yoruba as Èṣù Èlègbàra, is the well-known Divine Linguist and mediator, polyglot, and trickster who

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62 Richard M. Dorson, *American Negro Folktales* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2015), 215. “Folk tale interpreters who see the Rabbit as the psychic symbol of Negro resentment against the white man cannot know of the crafty slave named John. Seldom printed, the spate of stories involving John and his Old Marster provides the most engaging theme in American Negro lore. . . . Yet trickster John directly expressed and illuminates the plantation Negro character. No allegoric or symbolic creation, he is a generic figure representing the ante-bellum slave who enjoyed some measure of favoritism and familiarity with his owner.”
64 Meisenhelder, “Conflict and Resistance,” 272.
translates the divine texts into human language and vice versa.”⁶⁵ She states, “Zora Neale Hurston’s *Mules and Men* reveals that African Americans were able to revise, restructure, and reformulate African orature to fit their social, political, and spiritual needs.”⁶⁶ This same revision, restructuring, and reformulating was accomplished by J.B. Murray as well; where Hurston did this with words and descriptions, Murray did it with color of paper, choice of color for ink or paint, and choice of layout and design of his works created to depict his ‘social, political, and spiritual needs.’⁶⁷

For instance in *God Bless This Little Babe, God Protect This Little Babe* (Figure 3-6), Murray wanted to give a gift of blessing and protection to an eleven-year-old boy who visited him at his house. In his humble makeshift house, he created himself basically in the image of God, with a yellow figure outlined in Gold. Murray chose to create a drawing where he depicted himself in yellow ([which] indicates a divine presence, an energy emanating from or embodied in the sun⁶⁸) with his hands raised in a praise position. He also depicted the table by his bed with a container of well-water for reading in the lower left-hand corner of the drawing. He added his “Holy Spirit” script in black to relate the message God was telling him, then added red script as well, perhaps touting the evils and torments here on earth. Finally, Murray adds gold script. Gold is reserved for God; these must be words directly from God. He then proceeded to encircle in gold the figure of himself and his table with well-water, indicating these things have been touched by the sun and the power of God. On the reverse side of the paper, Murray “scripted a blessing, and raising his bottle of water, spoke

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⁶⁶ Ibid.
⁶⁷ Ibid.
these words as he wrote them: “God bless this little babe, God protect this little babe.” Each time he intoned the word “God,” he drew several crosses around the edges of the inscription.”

J.B. Murray was one of those “African Americans [who] were able to revise, restructure, and reformulate African orature to fit their social, political, and spiritual needs.” Just as Hurston portrayed John the Conqueror as lowly and dim-witted yet able to “get over” on the boss, J.B. Murray in his humble make-shift home portrayed himself in the likeness of God. This African orature that allows one to create a situation with two different effects, one effect seeming to degrade the person and the other lifting that person up to great heights, comes from the designation of African griot. Zora Neale Hurston and J.B. Murray are both authentic African griots.

Conclusions

Tom Hale informed on the griot, “Griots, a uniquely African profession, fulfill a variety of roles as genealogists, historians, spokespersons, diplomats, musicians, teachers, praise singers, and advisors.” Murray falls into the classification of a griot in the areas of genealogist (with his family portrait), spokesperson (with his Trouble-Making Ladies (Figure 3-5)), diplomat (with his God Bless This Little Babe, God Protect This Little Babe (Figure 3-6)), teacher (with his pieces on good versus evil (Figure 3-8), and advisor (with his initial script sealed in envelopes as warnings and guidance for members of his community (Figure 3-4)).

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69 Ibid., 479.
70 Hale, Griots and Griottes, back cover.
Discussed at the beginning of this chapter was the narrative proverb or ‘the phenomenon of the-story-within-the-story,’\(^{71}\) which is a major characteristic of the relationship of oral and literary customs within the African story. Narrative proverbs are important “because they perform organic and structural functions of proverbs in oral speech and in creative literature.”\(^{72}\) Emmanuel Obiechina explains, “Reflecting a habit of orality in life and literature, the novelists introduce oral stories—myths, folktales, fairy tales, animal fables, anecdotes, ballads, song-tales, and so on—within the narrative matrices of their works, in the development of their plots and themes, and in the formulation of their artistic and formal principles.” This same reflection of orality is seen in the United States, as well.

Zora Neale Hurston and J.B. Murray both used the narrative proverb in their works. Hurston in her stories created from interviews for the WPA’s Federal Writers’ Project, put to use the narrative proverb, largely as a way to thwart the heavy hand of the overseers of her books. The use of the narrative proverb allowed her to achieve her goals, while still ‘getting over on the boss.’

Similarly, J.B. Murray used the narrative proverb in his depictions of life events, health issues, and his self image. For instance, he might choose pink paper for a depiction having to do with evil forces. He might also add additional red to that paper to exemplify the evil that he thought was taking place. In addition, he might use the color blue for good souls, to demonstrate that God’s people were present in the depiction. And, he might add a great

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\(^{71}\) Emmanuel Obiechina, “Narrative Proverbs in the African Novel,” 230. “One major aspect of [the] interplay of the oral and literary traditions in the African novel is the phenomenon of the-story-within-the-story, or the narrative proverb . . . Reflecting a habit of orality in life and literature, the novelists introduce oral stories—myths, folktales, fairy tales, animal fables, anecdotes, ballads, song-tales, and so on—within the narrative matrices of their works, in the development of their plots and themes, and in the formulation of their artistic and formal principles. These embedded stories are referred to as narrative proverbs because they perform organic and structural functions of proverbs in oral speech and in creative literature.”

\(^{72}\) Ibid.
deal of his “Holy Spirit” script to implore God to help with the situation. These factors, paper colors, paint or ink color, figures portrayed, and script, were Murray’s elements of the narrative proverb in his work, just as words were the elements within Hurston’s narrative proverb.

African proverbs, such as “A good word produces the best kola nut,” 73 from Sierre Leone, means if you are wise, intelligent and nice you will receive the best outcomes, were compared with the works of Hurston and Murray. Hurston’s request to Boas was formatted in the style of this proverb, allowing her to be humble and overly nice to Boas with the intent of having him accept her request, while also playing the role of John the Conqueror and getting over on Boas in the eyes of African Americans who understood her situation. Murray also achieved the same format by depicting himself in the image of God (Figure 3-6) while he was creating the work in his humble make-shift home.

CHAPTER 4
AFRICAN PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHIATRY
REGARDING COMMUNICATIONS WITH THE SPIRIT WORLD

Murray and a Review of African Mental Health

J.B. Murray received messages from God and accepted these as his spiritual calling. Murray’s belief that his God requested he be a conduit for messages to the people on earth, and his belief in the Holy Spirit to guide his hand to create these messages in script, led him to create his own “Holy Script” that he was unable to read. Murray believed his God instructed him to go to the well on his property and get well-water to put in a clear bottle; Murray believed this bottle of well-water would allow him to understand the script and be able to verbally relay messages to recipients. As Murray believed he was instructed by his God, he hand delivered these messages in sealed envelopes to members of his church congregation and the community and verbally informed them of the message contained inside from God. The reaction to Murray’s calling and script varied. Some congregates believed he had become psychologically unbalanced.1 Others were anxious that an evil spirit was tricking him, and still others held that God had definitely called him.2 With these mixed reactions, Murray was put in jail by the Sheriff for about one week prior to being institutionalized at Central State Mental Hospital.3 Murray recounts being in jail,

I was feeling alright. I was feeling like the Lord was with me and that Sunday night I had another nervous breakdown and they carried me out to the hospital. I stayed in Milledgeville about 3 or 4, about 6 weeks. I stayed in the jail about a week. [In Milledgeville] I was in there, I wasn’t in where they have crime. I wasn’t sick for

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2 Ibid.
that. I wasn’t sick at all. I was alright and the doctor say I wasn’t crazy. The doctor said I have one round skull on my head and when checked, he looked in my eye and he saw an eagle cross the sun. I believe this was the Lord I was talking to. … I heared him, that’s as a voice he spoke to me, with me in mind to ask him let me see my mother. As asked he showed her coming to me out of the grave as a shadow.4

After approximately six weeks, Murray was found to be of no harm to hisself or others and released from the mental hospital.5 Then according to Murray God told him to gather great bundles of his script and deliver them to Dr. William Rawlings, his medical doctor in nearby Sandersville, Georgia, which he did.

Dr. Rawlings described Murray and their relationship, “The thing I recall about the encounter was [that] I treated him with some modicum of respect that which perhaps he wasn’t used to, being an elderly black sharecropper from one of the most rural areas in this part of the world … He decided I made him better whatever I did for him, but he decided that I had been sent from God to promulgate his message to the world.”6 Though admittedly Rawlings tried and tried to discern some message from Murray’s script, he was never able to decipher even a single word.7 However this did not stop Rawlings from accepting the writings from Murray.

According to Rawlings, Murray had been having visions, hearing voices and communicating with a higher spirit. To express these experiences, Rawlings said, “[Murray] had developed his own form of writing, as it were that J.B. was unlettered and I recall that he used to come and bring me … tons [of] written on scraps of paper … and he would say,

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5 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
‘here, these things are for you, you will understand them.’” Rawlings equated the writings with “talking in tongues, I like to refer to it as writing in tongues. [H]e gave this to me and felt like I could read it … J.B. knew absolutely well what was going on with this communication, [and] he would illustrate it with anthropomorphic [figures].” Rawlings believed Murray produced his script and illustrations because he had something to say, stating that “towards the end when [Murray] had cancer and wasn’t doing well, he furiously wrote in his spirit script … It was like ‘I [Murray] have to complete this work before I die.’ Murray did as God requested taking the script to Dr. Rawlings with a message from God, “you will know what to do with these.” Dr. Rawlings apparently did not know what to do with them and simply stowed them away in his closets. However, with the script in Rawlings’ possession it was introduced to Professor Andy Nasisse at the University of Georgia-Athens. This was Murray’s work’s introduction into the academic and art world. It is from here that Murray’s work was eventually shown in exhibitions in Georgia, beginning the introduction of Murray’s work around the globe. A believer in the power of the spiritual realm, perhaps Dr. Rawlings’ purpose was not to read and translate the script, but to disseminate Murray’s work to the world.

Around September 2, 1978, Murray was committed to Central State Mental Hospital. He spent six weeks in this hospital simply for observation. After these weeks of observation, Murray was released, found not to be of harm to himself or his community.

Regarding his institutionalization, Murray explained, “[I]t was that mean woman what got’s the children’s [to] send me for meanness [to Milledgeville]. Before I went I

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8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
couldn’t realize what it was that there was, a layout. There was a swinging elevator and one was on a cross swinging from the right and they sent me to Milledgeville … and the Lord was with me, not gonna let me be punished up. He knowed I was alright with Him and they claim that I told on the children. It was cruel the way the children treated me for that evil woman had their minds that away.”

According to Dr. Rawlings, Murray was released from Central [Milledgeville] State Hospital November 11, 1978. In December 1978, about a month after his release, Dr. Rawlings saw Murray with complaints of weakness. “He had a belief that his son-in-law, aided by his daughter, was trying to kill him by spraying an unknown type of material around his house and truck. I felt this thinking was delusional and I put him on Thorazine, he improved significantly with therapy of this medicine and apparently took it for a short term.”

Though medicated for a short period of time, Murray’s work continued.

Murray was asked when he began using water to read his work. Murray explained, “Well, when I came back [from Milledgeville]… [Judith McWillie (interviewer) interjected, “Were you put in the hospital because you had a vision?”] Kinda, they didn’t understand my torment. They thought I was crazy because they weren’t living the life that they all want to live by me. They thought I was crazy for that, but I was not. I saw them, the Lord saw them, you saw them.”

Regarding well water and his script, Murray explained, “I can’t read it, to know what this is. I have to ask the water what is this? That’s what it tells me. And they [the pages of

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script] have gone to a doctor here in Sandersville." He continued, "The faith is in the water. [It will] do you, like it does me, its faith is right in God. ... You need to remember Christ walked on the water and he was saved. He leaped from the boat and went down to Jesus and was saved." Murray said that God told him to get water from the well on his property, put it in a bottle and the water would tell him what the script said through the well water. Murray again complied with this request and the water told the messages to Murray from the script. Initially he would put the written messages into envelopes, seal them and give them to the person for whom they were intended, verbally giving the person the message from the sealed script in the envelope. These messages were often warnings about how they were living their lives which upset the recipients. These people were often members of his community or church congregation. His newly acquired gift of script did not him personal anguish, however members of his family and community did cause him anguish when they decided he needed to be institutionalized.

Murray’s experiences must be examined from an African mental health point of view. One African mental health point of view has been given by Dr. Malidoma Patrice Somé (Figure 4-1), a Western-educated doctor, born in 1956 and currently living in Oakland, California. Dr. Somé is as well an initiated elder of the Dagara people of Burkina Faso.

13 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
Somé and Stephanie Marohn, co-authors of “What a Shaman Sees in A Mental Hospital,” explain the difference between the Western and African (Dagara) treatments of mental illness. They write: “When energies from the spiritual world emerge in a Western psyche, that individual is completely unequipped to integrate them or even recognize what is happening. The result can be terrifying.”\(^{20}\) When Murray received his initial vision, he did not express being terrified. Instead Murray appeared ecstatic that he had been chosen by God as a messenger.\(^{21}\)

Somé and Marohn continued, “Without the proper context for and assistance in dealing with the breakthrough from another level of reality, for all practical purposes, the person is insane. Heavy dosing with anti-psychotic drugs compounds the problem and prevents the integration that could lead to soul development and growth in the individual who has received these energies.”\(^{22}\) Murray’s medication was short-term and did not appear to affect his calling.

According to Somé and Marohn, “In the Dagara tradition, the community helps the person reconcile the energies of both worlds—“the world of the spirit that he or she is merged with, and the village and community.”\(^{23}\) That person is able then to serve as a bridge between the worlds and help the living with information and healing they need. Thus, the crisis ends with the birth of another healer.”\(^{24}\) “The other world’s relationship with our world is one of sponsorship,” Dr. Somé explains, “More often than not, the knowledge and skills that arise from this kind of merger are a knowledge or a skill that is provided directly from

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\(^{22}\) Marohn and Somé, “What a Shaman Sees.”

\(^{23}\) Ibid.

\(^{24}\) Ibid.
the other world … The Western culture has consistently ignored the birth of the healer.” 25

Somé concludes, “Consequently, there will be a tendency from the other world to keep trying as many people as possible in an attempt to get somebody’s attention. They have to try harder.” 26

Murray’s experience did not appear to terrify him, however it did appear to cause havoc with some of his family members, to the point having him committed. Murray seemed to accept the request of his God to use him as a way for the Holy Spirit to write or ‘speak.’ Had Murray been in an African Dagara village, his experience may have been entirely different. He may have been aided by his family and community therefore allowing the spirit to use him to bridge communication between the two worlds. Murray may have easily experienced what Somé called, “the birth of another healer.” 27

Further evidentiary material can be found in “The Role of Traditional Healers in Mental Health Care in Africa,” 28 where Elialilia Okello and Seggane Musisi state,

Traditional healers use the prevailing knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs in the community about physical, mental, and social well-being and the causes of disease and disability. Traditional healers share the history, culture, and environment of those who consult them.

[T]hey acquire their healing knowledge, methods, and skills from the spirits of deceased family healers. In some cases they are chosen by an ancestral spirit (muzimu, in Uganda). A study cited by Ann Beck 29 (1985) noted that 74 percent of the sample of traditional healers claimed to have been possessed by a spirit, while 13 percent claimed to have learned the profession through being apprenticed to other

25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
healers. Traditional healing is a well-guarded family possession, with its knowledge and skills handed down through the generations.

If the calling is manifested in adulthood, its signs include a prolonged illness characterized by symptoms such as dreams, visions, hallucinations, socially unusual or nonconformist behavior, and the inability to concentrate or stick to one subject.30

The dreams, visions, hallucinations, and socially unusual or nonconformist behavior spoken of by Okello and Musisi, appear to have been present in Murray. Judith McWillie, author, artist, and retired art professor from University of Georgia, Athens, described a time she went to visit Murray:

One time I went down to see him and he was asleep. He was sleeping on a couch on the right side of the house. I knocked on the door and there was no answer. I went around the house and looked in, and I saw him. He was having a dream. Whatever it was, it was a nightmare. He was saying, “Oh Lord, oh Lord,” and tossing and turning. I thought ‘What should I do?’ The window didn’t have a screen on it – it was just open, and I thought ‘I wonder if I should wake him up?’ I came all the way down here – but I wonder if I should? But he look[ed] like he [was] having a really bad dream. … He was talking about the evil people who were dry-tongued. But he was definitely asleep. Then he woke-up. … He just seemed like somebody who had an open pipeline to the other side.31

Murray readily explained his visions or dreams, unlike the odd dreams of the common person, who does not know what their dreams mean. Murray knew the complete messages imparted to him through his visions and dreams. He did not question the information in his dreams; he knew their meanings.

Okello and Musisi also have provided definitions and causes of mental illness in African traditional healing. They state:

Many traditional healers show particularly keen insight into the social and psychological causes of illness. For example, when tension arises from the struggles of family members to achieve social recognition and assert their inherent right, Africans usually seek help from traditional healers, who may perform rituals to

30 Okello and Musisi, “The Role of Traditional Healers,” 250.
restore social harmony. Thus, the traditional healer occupies an important place in social systems in Africa.\textsuperscript{32}

Having heard of Murray’s troubles with his family members, as well as neighbors, a conclusion might be drawn that Murray’s social surroundings were unharmonious and therefore could have led to his diseased body finally taking his life.

Interestingly, Murray did seek help from the person he considered his ‘traditional healer,’ Dr. William Rawlings. Rawlings could treat the physical ailments, and surprisingly was able to provide some of the connection that Murray needed from his ‘traditional healer,’ like shared Southern history, culture, and environment. In all contact with Dr. Rawlings, Murray was treated with respect.

Dr. Rawlings had lived in the same general vicinity as Murray and had empathy for his position as an elderly African American man in the south. However, Dr. Rawlings could not truly understand the life of an African American man in the south, due to the fact that he was not African or African American. He could sympathize and empathize, but he could neither recognize nor relate. Additionally, Dr. Rawlings was not equipped to deal with Murray’s troubles with his family and community. He could not intercede like a traditional healer in Africa would have been able to do.

Author George Ndege provides valuable information within the work of Okello and Musisi previously referenced:

\textsuperscript{32} Okello and Musisi, “The Role of Traditional Healers,” 252. (Continuing) “In a study of traditional healers in Kampala, Uganda, Catherine Abbo (2003) found that they often dealt with social problems, including family problems related to children, a spouse or cowives, or other relatives; problems related to school, work, or finances; problems with neighbors; spiritual or cultural problems; psychosexual problems, including those having to do with relationships, sexual potency, love, and infertility; chronic illnesses that were sometimes not well defined; and epilepsy and madness. The healers’ effectiveness, however, was most evident in the first three categories of problems. Abbo also noted that traditional healers used a broad range of practices, including herbalism and spiritualism, and included individuals who called themselves diviners, priests, and faith healers.”
[His] framework of health and disease includes the role of the traditional healer and the following three underlying principles that he or she brings to health care delivery. First, the healer ensures that the patient and his or her symptoms are taken seriously and fears are abated. Second, the healer considers the whole individual, dealing with the mind and body together instead of separately. Finally, the healer never considers the individual in isolation but as a member of the family and the community. Accordingly, “the etiology and symptomology of disease is rarely, if ever, characterized as simply the result of a malfunctioning organ or bodily lesion, whether spontaneous or initiated by some physical cause. Instead, disease is … a rupture of life’s harmony.”

Even though Dr. Rawlings did the best he could. He could not fully fulfill the role of traditional healer. It is apparent that J.B. Murray had ‘a rupture of life’s harmony,’ possibly leading to the physical disease of his body, and to his eventual death.

Many studies like those referenced here point out that traditional medicine is not only the most widespread and available health care provided throughout the world, but in addition, that taken in its entirety, it is made up of a huge body of information passed down through the centuries, from which scientists have discovered almost half of our contemporary drugs.

For instance, herbs found helpful with mental health issues include “St. John’s wort for depression, kava for anxiety, ginkgo biloba for dementia, and rauwolfia for psychosis.”

This inclusion of the traditional healer is also seen in the work of Serigne Bousso (Figure 4-2) from Touba, Senegal. Bousso is a perfect example of a healer who received his ability as an inheritance from generations of ancestors who were healers. He is also a perfect example of the “rupture of life’s harmony,” of which Okello and Musisi spoke. Bousso did not

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35 Okello and Musisi, “The Role of Traditional Healers,” 258.
36 Ibid.
37 Serigne Bousso, email message to author, September 27, 2015. Biographical information provided to Licia Clifton-James through translator, Waly Faye, Director of the West African Research Center, Dakar, Senegal.
immediately accept his calling and was institutionalized with mental issues. When he still did not accept his calling, he found his legs immovable with no apparent reason. Only after he sought the help of another healer, was he able to come to terms with and accept his calling, repairing the “rupture of life’s harmony”\textsuperscript{38} and restoring his health. Bousso’s story will be more fully explored and compared with that of J.B. Murray in Chapter 5.

\textsuperscript{38} Ndege, \textit{Health, State, and Society in Kenya}. 
CHAPTER 5

THE ART OF PROTECTIVE WRITING AND HEALING

A Comparison of the Work of African American Artist,

Protector and Healer, J.B. Murray, and

Senegalese Protector and Healer, Serigne Bousso

Murray believed he came by his protective writing and spirit figures from his ancestors and his God. In addition, Murray sought protection and healing for himself through figurative works of art he imbued with the power of the written word while asking for God’s protection and healing. An example of this is seen in Figure 5-1, an untitled, large, early work, in which Murray showed concern with the harm that had come to his body once diagnosed with prostate cancer in 1984. Extensive markings, included in the work, along with an enormous amount of script on the reverse side (Figure 5-2), are perhaps a warning about the dangers of prostate cancer and a request for protection from it. In this painting, the figures from the center out to the right, enveloped in red, represent invaded body parts, the genitals and perhaps bones. The picture is inundated with positive colors of white and blue. Murray fashioned a complex diagram of his negative condition and a method for bringing about its healing and/or additional protection.¹

In comparison with Murray from Africa is Serigne Bousso (Figure 5-3), born January 15, 1960, in Keur Ndiogou Ndiaye (Region of Thiès, department of Mbour), Senegal. Bousso shares very similar experiences regarding the acquisition of his protective and healing

abilities with Murray. Rather than African American, Bousso is a Wolof and Pulaar, and is associated with the Islamic Murid brotherhood, Sufi branch. He currently lives in Touba, Senegal, and provides protection and healing to the underprivileged in his region, with additional clients throughout the world.

Unlike Murray who was illiterate in English or any other written language, Bousso was well-educated at Cheikh Anta Diop University, School of Library, Archives, and Documentation, with additional training at: the Centre Régional Africain de Technologie (CRAT), in Dakar; Kenyan Industrial Development Research Institute (KIRDI), in Nairobi; and, Ecole Internationale de Bordeaux, in France. Serigne Bousso explained, “I used to work at [the] Institut de Technologie Alimentaire (ITA)—Foof Technology Institute, Dakar, at the Department of Information, Communication and Training. [This was] when I was interested in herbal and animal biology, chemistry, and microbiology.” In the late 1990s, having worked in the business sector for over 20 years, Bousso was making a good living and by all indications should have been happy.

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3 National African Language Resource Center (NALRC), University of Wisconsin-Madison, accessed April 2016, http://www.nalrc.indiana.edu/brochures/pulaar.pdf. Pulaar has the status of a national language in such countries as Senegal, Guinea, Mali, etc. Pulaar culture centers on the family and places a heavy emphasis on family ties. The individual is part and parcel of the family, which is strongly tied to the community. The individual is defined from within his/her family and community, each of which has a very strong influence upon him/her.

4 Allen F. Roberts and Mary Nooter Roberts, A Saint in the City: Sufi Arts of Urban Senegal (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 2003), 247. “Mouride is from the Arabic term Murid, referring to a disciple, follower, or “one who desires, (Ernst 1997, 124); Mouride is the French spelling and refers specifically to the Sufi movement centered on the life and lessons of Amadou Bamba.”

5 Serigne Bousso, email message to author, September 27, 2015. Biographical information provided to Licia Clifton-James through translator, Waly Faye, Director of the West African Research Center, Dakar, Senegal.

6 Ibid.

7 Clifton-James interview with Serigne Bousso in his residence in Touba, Senegal, March 26, 2016.
From the time he was very young, Bousso had been encouraged by his father and other relatives to continue in his father’s footsteps. 8 “I belong to a long [line] of descendant[s] of erudite 9 of [Qur’anic] science from my father and 59 of his ancestors. The 59th is Imam Ali, cousin of the prophet Mohamed and husband of Fatima, the Mohamed’s daughter. So for us the [Qur’an] is a family affair,” 10 explained Bousso. As many young people do, Bousso delayed the acceptance of his inheritance 11 in lieu of education, worldly exploration, and the pursuit of happiness through success and monetary gains. 12 Each time he would see his father or a relative they would remind him of his ‘true calling,’ ensuring it would remain in the forefront of his mind. 13

Bousso’s father passed away on October 7, 1984. Two weeks later, Bousso returned to his grave. He recalls, “When I returned back home, I heard voices all around my room who were commanding me or asking me to work in this field. And I was repeating the same answer, ‘How can I do it? I [do] not know anything about it.’ Bousso again delayed the calling and shortly thereafter required mental hospitalization. 14 He recalls:

So when I went to the hospital, […] I had found a doctor who was very knowing, not just in medicine, but in something else. And what he told me [was] ‘you will never cure this in a hospital, go find something else.’ So when I got out [of the hospital], I met a person with leprosy and I passed him after giving him some money. He called me and I came back. And he said, ‘Accept what you are asked to do.’ I did not try to understand what he was saying.

8 Ibid.
10 Bousso, email message to author, September 27, 2015.
11 Ibid.
12 Clifton-James conversation with Waly Faye in Dakar, Senegal, June 9, 2015.
13 Ibid.
14 Clifton-James interview with Serigne Bousso in his residence in Touba, Senegal, March 26, 2016.
[A few weeks later,] I spent the whole day reciting Koran. And at night I received, like my father appeared to me, and said, ‘I was the person with leprosy you saw.’

And when I woke up the next day, I was shown the way to heal a lot of illness or problems. I was also told to pay more attention to a lot of objects, and [then] someday [as] you keep receiving the messages, all the messages will mean something.\(^{15}\)

It would take another 10 years for Bousso to fulfill those two requests by the spirit of his father.

Just as Murray had a vision with the voice of God speaking while Jesus came down from the sun and later a dark hazy image of his mother asking God to protect her son, we also see the visions of Serigne Bousso where his father delivered messages to him. Even though Bousso was familiar with visions and the spirit world from his ‘family affair with Qur’anic science,’ it was nonetheless disconcerting and worrisome.\(^{16}\) Imagine Murray encountering his vision without the familiarity that Bousso had. Something that could have been extremely frightening for Murray was instead joyous and readily accepted.

Was Bousso’s calling less important because his father appeared instead of Allah, as God appeared to Murray? The vision that is given is what is going to be most recognizable and acceptable to the individual.\(^{17}\) For Bousso that would be his father, since his father was in the profession. Bousso could accept a message from his father and therefore did not need the impact of God appearing, and in Bousso’s case it would have been Allah appearing since he is Muslim. For Murray, the most significant entity for his vision was God, whom Murray worshiped devoutly in his Baptist faith. In fact, if there is script, its appearance doesn’t

\(^{15}\) Ibid.

\(^{16}\) Clifton-James interview with Serigne Bousso in his residence in Touba, Senegal, March 26, 2016.

\(^{17}\) Ibid.
matter. For Bousso, it would be the Arabic alphabet. For Licia Clifton-James, it would be the English alphabet. For Murray, it was his own script. Theoretically, the form does not matter because the Supreme Being, whether Allah or God, or whomever, knows all and will know the writing and its intention. Regarding Murray’s script and spirit figures, Bousso explains, “That is the manifestation of God’s will. You don’t even have to have any doubt. He did not learn it from anyone. He was just chosen to fix some problems. So he is in the right, in the truth.”

Still delaying his calling, Bousso returned to Dakar and continued his work in the business sector. He lived with inner turmoil and would often leave his place of business to spend time in a park meditating, attempting to calm his thoughts, and contemplating his life. Eventually, a change was in store. As Bousso recounts,

It [was on the] 11th anniversary of my father’s death, October 7, 1995, that I started to feel a lack of interest in my work. I decided voluntarily to leave the job on August 31, 1996, and to go back to Mbour, [my home village], to start a unit for agriculture products processing. Everything worked very well until 1998. Without any alarm and very fast, the unit went bankrupt, losing its providers and customers.

This is when I started to question the unexplainable events that happened in my life and their relationship with the visions I had about my late father. So I decided to go and consult one of the most prominent erudite[s] in Senegal who told me the following, “If you keep refusing your mission, you will face very serious situations.” One month later, at the eve of my father’s 15th anniversary [of death], I got a mysterious disease that prevented me from using my legs. So I went to see a great Gambian erudite and there I used for the first time plant molecules to heal the erudite’s wife. I received the recipe in my dreams. At the beginning, it was just for pleasure for me, but seeing the incredible results, I decided to dedicate my life to it.

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18 Ibid.  
19 Ibid.  
20 Ibid.  
21 Ibid.  
22 Bousso, email message to author, September 27, 2015.
Bousso moved to Touba to begin protecting and healing those who are poverty-stricken. This is where he felt he could have the greatest impact, since Senegal’s medical program is very lacking, especially for the poor. His family was very happy to see the inheritance from his father, the healing and protection profession, live on with Bousso.

Today, Bousso uses geo localization astronomy, astrology, microbiology, herbal biology, chemistry and dietetics to heal and protect. He learned how to use the trance from the Seereer culture, an interesting parallel with Murray’s use of trance during his script writing and reading. Bousso works with Listixar, a set of verses and names of Allah you use before sleeping and the information needed will come as a vision or dream. This is also known as divination by dreams.

Murray’s communications with God came in the form of visions, dreams and messages through the water from his Holy Spirit-led script. In addition, he constantly recited verses from the Bible, with the Lord’s Prayer being one of his favorite recitations. This parallels Bousso use of Listixar, a recitation of verses and names of Allah before sleeping allowing a message to come through during this time of reprieve from the noise of the world.

Bousso also works with: Xalwa, a spiritual retreat that is very demanding and sometimes very dangerous, during which you call a spirit; and Rawaan, where you assign a

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23 Clifton-James interview with Serigne Bousso in his residence in Touba, Senegal, March 26, 2016.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
28 Bousso, email message to author, September 27, 2015.
mission to a jinn which is done in 3 minutes, 3 hours, 3 days or 7 days (maximum). It is doubtful that Murray’s work paralleled these two aspects of Bousso’s. These two methods would have required an intimate knowledge of methods of healing and protection, and Murray displayed only the ability to allow his self to be a conduit for the Holy Spirit and God. He did not employ other methods to access additional information or impact situations.

Regarding protective writing, Bousso says there are two versions: “Indian-Pakistani and Negro-African.” However, he says, “The principle is the same and the difference comes from the plants, perfumes, and incense that goes with the principles.”

Regarding the appearance of Murray and Bousso’s protective writing, a comparison is in order. In Figure 5-4, Murray has fashioned a request for help with a problem illustrated with two opposing sets of figures, separated and by a column of Holy Spirit script. He then enclosed the resulting image and script with additional protective script on the outside edges. Murray went further placing three Xs or +s across the top and bottom of this work imbuing it with God’s power and help. In Figure 5-5, Bousso has prepared protective script for me with the instructions to place it in a liter of water until the ink has dissolved from the paper into the water. Once the ink has dissolved into the water, I am supposed to rub a small amount of this water into my face and hands each morning for protection each day.

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29 Umar Sulaiman Ashqar, The World of the Jinn and Devils (Baltimore, MD: Al-Basheer Publications, 1998), 5-7. “The Jinn are a world of their own, different from that of the humans or the angels. They do, however, possess some characteristics in common with humans, such as the ability to think and reflect. Similarly, they also have the ability to choose between the path of good and the path of evil in the same manner as humans. They, though, differ from humans in other characteristics, including one very important characteristic: their origin. They are called jinn because they are obscured from human sight. … They are intelligent and understanding creatures: they are not philosophical accidents or germs and are not like microorganisms. They are responsible for their actions and have been ordered by Allah to perform some deeds and to abstain from others. According to the word of Allah, they were created from fire before mankind.”

30 Bousso, email message to author, September 27, 2015.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.
According to Bousso, the appearance of the script used does not matter. It is unique to the individual and dependent upon the script the protector and healer is trained to use. For Bousso that script is Arabic, and for Murray that script was his own, since he was not trained in a formal script. According to Bousso, the script’s appearance is only for communication of the protector with the intermediary and your intermediary will use the same script you do. The intermediary will take the message to God or Allah, who knows all already. Since in some cases Murray’s method of protection is more pictorial with script added, does this mean it is any better or worse than Bousso’s? According to Bousso, no it is simply a different method or form of representing the protection. What is worse is if a protector has not come by his ability as a gift from Allah or God. If he has simply learned it from another person without the ordainment from the higher power, then his work will be harmful and negative, working against those he is trying to protect or heal. An exception would be the handing down of the ability or gift through generations of ancestors with its initial protector or healer ordained by Allah or God, as in the case of Serigne Bousso. When asked about the authenticity of Murray’s protective script and spirit figures, seen in Figure 5-6 and 5-7, Bousso replied, “[This] is the manifestation of God’s will. You don’t even have to have any doubt, he did not learn it from anyone. He was just chosen to fix some problems. So he is in the right, in the truth.”

Almost immediately after seeing Figures 5-6 and 5-7, Bousso spoke of the possibility of Murray having a South African father and an Ethiopian mother. Perhaps after a dream that night, Bousso arrived the next day confirming this ethnic designation of Murray’s parents. Supporting evidence of Bousso’s claim of Murray’s possible Ethiopian heritage can be seen

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33 Clifton-James interview with Serigne Bousso in his residence in Touba, Senegal, March 26, 2016.
in Figure 5-8, where an angel is pictured at the top of the scroll from an Ethiopian *kitabe* amulet. The *kitabe* is worn or hung as a protective device, and was specifically made for one individual and their particular situation. Murray had many pieces that he was guided to produce that were applicable to particular individuals. To a large extent these came in the form of his pages of script, containing messages and warnings for particular members of his community. Interestingly, Figure 5-9 is a work of Murray’s from that takes to form of that which is seen in the Ethiopian *kitabe* amulet scroll. The intention of each work appears to be the same. While the *kitabe* only has one figure, an angel\textsuperscript{34}, at its top, Murray has chosen to place many figures throughout the nearly 45-inch completed strip. The *kitabe* script is “written in Ethiopic (Ge'ez), a Semitic language that is no longer spoken, but is still used for liturgical and other religious purposes by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church,”\textsuperscript{35} while Murray’s are God’s messages, written in his “Holy Spirit” script. The *kitabe* is created as a “Bible,” containing prayers for the devout. When images are seen with prayers in *kitabes*, they are usually associated with protection of the devotee from an unseen danger.\textsuperscript{36} Murray’s work was created either to protect or request help with a certain situation. Given the number of images (10-12) held within his 45-inch scroll, it is apparent he had a great deal for which to request protection and/or help.

\textsuperscript{34} It is interesting that this angel, while Christian in subject matter, may have developed through the cult of the *zar* spirits that were known to possess humans, coming from Ethiopian Wisdom, otherwise known as the *tehab*. The scrolls have Christian images and prayers. The subjects of these "Bibles" are always Christian, but actual content varies. Prayers are written in Ethiopic (Ge'ez), a Semitic language that is no longer spoken, but is still used for liturgical and other religious purposes by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Prayers sometime associated with images intend to protect the owner from the invisible. Scrolls like this are usually hung on the wall. The patient would look at the scroll and would recite prayers and the healing process would begin. Sometimes, scrolls are hung in the entrance of the home in order to scare off evil spirits and prevent bad spirits from penetrating the house. They could also be worn as a necklace during the day or laid on the bed or under the pillow in the bedtime. This description is taken from the information listed on Ebay for a similar *kitabe*. Copyright Africa Direct Inc., 2006.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
J.B. Murray had a vision later in life regarding the protective and healing work he was intended to accomplish. Perhaps, like Serigne Bousso, Murray received notices earlier in life but chose to delay or reject them at the time. Serigne Bousso, informed at an early age of his inherent protective and healing abilities, was reminded of this gift during mid-life through visions of his deceased father. Both men accepted their gifts or inheritances and used them to help people after their visions. In both cases, spiritual contact came first in the form of visions and later in the form of dreams. Many indigenous religions throughout Africa include vision or dream divination to receive advice and assistance from the ancestors and gods.\(^{37}\) Given that Murray was of African descent, this is the case regarding his ability to connect to the spirit world and/or God through visions and dreams. It came from his African heritage.

CHAPTER 6
MAMI WATA AND KONGO TRADITIONS

Murray and Mami Wata

J.B. Murray’s use of water to receive the meaning from his script is a factor that can’t be ignored. Since water essentially gave meaning to his script, it is an integral part of Murray’s art and if left out would leave the viewer with simply illegible marks on paper. The intent behind Murray’s script comes into existence only with the addition of water. The addition of reading the script through his well-water came only after his release from the mental institution.1 Some thought Murray began using well-water to get the messages from his Holy Spirit script only to lend credence to his belief that they were messages from God. As Murray explained, “Well you know Jesus walked on water and he spoke to water.”

Around the world the myth of the mermaid or Mami Wata, Mother Water, has been repeatedly seen.3 Henry Drewal, editor of 2008 book Sacred Waters: Arts for Mami Wata and Other Divinities in Africa and the Diaspora, tells us “I use the term Mami Wata to refer to all variants—capitalized to indicate the name of a specific deity, yet italicized to indicate a generic (and generative) term for a vast pantheon (or “school”) of indigenous localized water

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3 Henry John Drewal, “Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and Its Diasporas,” African Arts 41 no. 2 (2008), 60-83. “Mermaids, and to a lesser extent mermen, have populated the human imagination for millennia. Some of the earliest have their origins in the fertile river valleys of Mesopotamia (e.g., the merman spirit of River Urat, circa 900 bce, in the Museum of Ethnology, Berlin-Dahlem), Africa’s Nile Valley, and later the Mediterranean world of the Phoenicians, Minoans, Greeks, and Romans. For the Greeks and Romans, mermaids—like the part-bird, part-human sirens—symbolized danger. In Christian Europe of the Middle Ages, the mermaid entered bestiaries and other arts in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, where she usually appeared in a strongly moralizing context as a symbol of vanity, immorality, seduction, and danger.”
spirits with specific names and identities.”⁴ J.B. Murray’s use of water to give meaning to his signs and figures may demonstrate a connection with this pantheon of water spirits.

Henry Drewal included in his book, *Sacred Waters*, a final essay regarding the United States’ history of slavery and continuing inheritance of racism, and the journey embarked on by Vivian Hunter-Hindrew who would change her name to *Mama Zogbé*, and finally spiritually settle her soul.⁵ He describes for the reader:

“Mami Wata: ‘It’s in the Blood’: A Personal Journal of Ancestral Resurrection in the Aftermath of Slavery,” by Hunter-Hindrew, is an edited excerpt from her two-volume book *Mami Wata: Africa’s Ancient God/dess Unveiled*. She explains that *Mami Wata’s* divine relationship with the diaspora is matrilineal, multi-dimensional, and cosmogenetically linked to the diaspora’s ancient, biological African ancestors. She believes that many African-Americans suffer profound mental, emotional, and existential crises that cannot be addressed through conventional Western medicinal or religious modalities. This spiritual malaise remains untreated and is due to the West’s ignorance of *Mami Wata’s* manifestations and the inability to understand the esoteric meaning of her complex, subtle, and symbolic language. Hunter-Hindrew feels that the diaspora is often left out of credible field studies on *Mami Wata* because most Western researchers fail to recognize that two centuries of slavery, miscegenation, and acculturation have not removed *Mami Wata’s* divine link from the diaspora’s biological essence.⁶

Drewal goes on to explain that throughout the diaspora some families are descendant from long ancestral lines of priests and priestesses of *Mami Wata*, and their mental and emotional issues will only be successfully resolved by giving the ‘African-based ritual and theological traditions re-emerging in America’ their due respect.⁷

*Mama Zogbé* (Figure 6-1) (Vivian Hunter-Hindrew, who grew up in Chicago, Illinois) received her full induction as *Amengansie* or the special, matrilineally inherited role

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⁵ Ibid., 18.
⁶ Drewal, ed., *Sacred Waters*, 18.
⁷ Ibid.
of Mami, in November of 2004. During her lengthy indoctrination she founded Mami Wata Healers Society of North America Inc. (MWHS) in Augusta, Georgia, in 1995. The MWHS has “grown to define itself as an ancestral, spiritual organization, committed to the resurrection, establishment, dissemination and maintenance of the Mami Wata and Yeveh Vodoun spiritual and ritual traditions, brought to the North American shores by enslaved Africans and their descendants.” Mama Zogbé states, “Like my mother, and her great-grandmother and fathers, I had been born carrying the deities and lineage of the Mami and Her vodou. I grew up in the windy city of Chicago, and in our home there were constant “visitations,” manifestations, and other “phenomena”; after awhile these became routine for my family.”

Mama Zogbé’s great-grandfather, Henry Hunter (Figure 6-2), was born around 1857 and was a master priest and elder of their family. He was one of many priests in Natchitoches Parish, Louisiana, who took care of the spiritual needs in that area. She explains:

He kept his Vodou tucked underneath the house in special bottles, dirt mounds, and ceramic pots. These containers were hidden away from the peering and persecuting eyes of Christian zealots and their converted black spies, who would run to report on such “heathen practices. … We were told that [he] met his untimely death at the hands of a derelict group of Christians who forbade the traditional African practices and had been “watching” and intimidating him for some time.”

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8 Drewal, ed., Sacred Waters, 591.
10 Mama Zogbé (Vivian Hunter-Hindrew), “Impetus behind Organization.”
11 Drewal, ed., Sacred Waters, 581.
12 Ibid, 582.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
In the photo (Figure 6-2), Henry Hunter is seen wearing a modified *batakari* (protective) jacket. This jacket is another example of the protective measures of Africa found in the United States, similar to J.B. Murray’s protective devices such as creative formations on the corners of his land or his protective signs and figures within his art.

Additionally, backing up Drewal’s point regarding the mental health of African Americans, Hunter-Hindrew explains, “Far too many black men are suffering mental disorders especially schizophrenia, starting as young as 13-yrs., because the source of their problem is Mami.” It is not just an interesting coincidence that J.B. Murray was institutionalized due to the negative perceptions of his “calling” and production of his art. Murray was not diagnosed with a mental illness while in the institution because he accepted his calling. He did not display the mental suffering of those who do not know how to accept or get relief from such a calling.

Regarding writing and reading with Mami Wati or Water Spirit veneration, Osa D. Egonwa, in Chapter 16 entitled “The Mami-Wata Phenomenon: “Old Wine in New Skin,” from the *Sacred Waters* book, states:

> Through divine inspiration Onoku devotees embark on elaborate hieroglyphic form of script, the iconography of which has attracted the scholarly attention of two researchers, Ben-Amos (1986: 60) and Rosen (1989). The former refers to the writers as “chalk markers for the god of the waters,” probably because the script defies any attempt at standardization, as is possible with known foreign writings. Even though

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15 Ibid., 583.
17 Osa D. Egonwa, “The Mami-Wata Phenomenon: Old Wine in New Skin,” in *Sacred Water: Arts for Mami Wata and Other Divinities in Africa and the Diaspora* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), 222. “There are two ways in which Mami Wata is perceived in the Ethiope River Basin. First, she is regarded as a modern translation for water spirits. In this sense, she is either considered conterminous with (a male spirit) Onoku or as a manifestation of him. In the other sense, because of her currency, she becomes a promotional device: she is treated as an external modern “thing,” and those who profess to work with her make efforts to use new devotional approaches, images, and symbols.”
she could recognize a few objects, such as the snub-nosed crocodile (*eghuhu*), river leaves (*ebe amen*), ceremonial swords (*ada and Eben*), and the ladder to Olokun’s storehouse of wealth (*egbelaka Olokun*), one structural arrangement can have several meanings depending on the message conveyed to a particular devotee, Rosen found that the designs she studied were a transitory medium of communication between priest and deity, and as such constituted a language shared by human and spirits (*Figure 6-3*).

The emergent script, as it were, is not bound to any “specific (human controlled) styles or method of illustration nor to a particular combination of designs” (Rosen 1989). This notwithstanding, it was and still is effectively used in the ritual acts of Onoku priests. We must therefore trace the current use of writing by occupational water spirit devotees also to these ancient practices. Adoption of new popular writings such as Hindu practices or Western writing tradition are only parts of the new encounters.\(^19\)

Therefore it is not surprising that Murray chose to create script and figural forms, and to use water to bring their messages to the forefront.

**Murray and Kongo Water Traditions**

Murray’s use of well water (*Figure 6-4*) for the reading of his script has significant implications. The fact that well water comes from deep within the earth, having filtered through the earth’s layer, makes it one of the purest forms of water available. Since purity is an ideal of any Supreme Being, the request for well water from God is equal to telling Murray that the messages received through the water are from the Divine or the highest and purest realm. It is also interesting that Murray chose the words, “That’s right you need to remember Christ walked on the water and he was saved. He leaped from the boat and went down to Jesus and was saved.” How often does one hear the word ‘down’ used in conjunction with Jesus? This was a message of purity, Jesus going down into the water and

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arising with purity from the water. This is a Christian thought, of course, denoting baptisms and the sprinkling of Holy Water. However it has a Kongo aspect as well. Kongo people believe that water holds the place between life and death. The Kongo term Nzadi places water at the threshold of the living and their ancestors. Murray used the purest form of water to make that connection between himself and God, as the initial ancestor.

Kongo aspects are not all centered around water. Where there is good there also must be evil. According to Melville J. Herskovitz, Baka is “an evil spirit actuated by a loa” which commonly takes the form of some animal when carrying misfortune to the one against whom it has been directed … There are several types of baka. Some go about “devouring” men—the term mangé moun, in Haiti as in Africa, is idiomatic for sending fatal illness or bringing about an accidental death— … Baka appear as small bearded human-like figures with flaming eyes …” In Figure 6-5, Murray illustrated his diagnosis of prostate cancer. The left side shows still healthy body parts in mostly blue, while the right side, inundated with additional black and red, illustrates the invaded areas of his body. The addition of protective

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20 Wyatt MacGaffey, *Kongo Political Culture: The Conceptual Challenge of the Particular* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), 27. “In Kongo thought to this day, the universe is divided into the two worlds of the living and the dead, separated by water. Africans who did travel to the land of the dead, where they change their skins and become white. Except in the case of the very old, such transfers (deaths) are believed to be cause by witches, who profit by selling the souls of their victims or are able to put them to work and profit by their labor. The slave trade is understood in this way, and modern industrial accidents, as when a worker is killed by a crane in the port of Matadi, are believed to be the visible results of contracts between European and individual BaKongo who seek to better themselves by becoming white (MacGaffey 1968; MacGaffey 1986a, 62).

The land of the dead (nsi a bafwa) is variously underground, in the forest, in the cemetery, across the river, across the Atlantic, and under the water. It is called Mpemba, which is the same word as mpemba, chalk or white kaolin clay. White, besides being the color of the dead, is also the color of innocence, purity, and enlightenment. The color of movement between the worlds is red, like sunrise and sunset, or like blood.”

21 Alisa LaGamma, *Kongo: Power and Majesty* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art Publications, 2015), 294. “Nzadi large expanse of water (e.g., river, lake, sea, or ocean); a great river; the Congo River. Also conceived as the threshold between the realms of the living and the ancestors.”


23 Ibid., 340, 239-44.
script is a request for relief from this invasion. The boxed image is the only figure that is entirely white with red eyes and a red beard. For Murray, red is torment and evil, and white is for purity and/or death. This is Murray’s version of a baka, the evil spirit with red eyes and a red beard that has entered his body (Figure 6-5).
CHAPTER 7

REVIEW OF THEORETICAL METHODS FOR EXAMINING MURRAY’S ART

Cultural Relativism\(^1\) is the first and foremost theoretical method applicable to Murray and his art. A necessary goal for understanding the relevance of an act or event is to distinguish the cultural representations\(^2\) from the point of view of the native of the culture (emic) and the cultural representations from the point of view of an outside observer of the culture (etic).\(^3\) Murray was an African American male in rural Georgia, living in a community that most often kept races separated. He attended an African American church and otherwise kept to himself and his own family. One of the few relationships outside of the African American community that Murray did have was with his Caucasian physician of internal medicine, Dr. William Rawlings. Given this description of Murray’s cultural surroundings, his art work should be examined from an emic point of view. It must be stated that I am a Caucasian, which will make my examination of Murray technically from an etic point of view. However, I have endeavored to address this condition by researching and

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\(^1\) Melville Herskovits, *Cultural Relativism: Perspectives in Cultural Pluralism* (New York: Random House, 1972), 97. In 1958 Melville Herskovits opened his essay entitled, “A Cross-Cultural View of Bias and Values,” with the following statement: “We are not the most ethnocentrically oriented society the world has known, but we certainly possess one of the most powerful ethnocentrisms in the experience of mankind … Even today, it is difficult for us not to do what I term “thinking colonially” by applying to peoples whose ways of life differ from our own the dreary vocabulary of inferiority. … We must recognize that the pluralistic nature of the value systems of the world’s cultures . . . cannot be judged on the basis of a single system . . . Unless we realize that perhaps we do not have the only answers to questions of common concern, and that our biases, though they seem natural enough for us, cannot be universally accepted, we will be in for some very difficult times.”


\(^3\) Kenneth L. Pike, *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior* (Dallas, TX: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1954), accessed March 12, 2016, [http://psycnet.apa.org/index.cfm?fa=buy.optionToBuy&id=2015-21052-002](http://psycnet.apa.org/index.cfm?fa=buy.optionToBuy&id=2015-21052-002), xv, 255. Abstract: Linguistic theory is extended to embrace all those areas of human behavior which are learned and in greater or less degree culturally patterned. “Etic” and “emic” approaches (on the analogy of phonetic and phonemic) investigate, respectively, generalized phenomena of culturally patterned behavior, and phenomena peculiar to one language or culture system. Various units, such as the behavioreme and the grameme, are proposed. Part II considers further the behavioreme and the uttereme.
understanding the traditions and customs of the African and African American cultures, and applying those to the examination of Murray’s art.

Cultural relativism played a part in the view of James Clifford when he looked at orientalism.\(^4\) Clifford’s support of multiple comparisons and contradictions is an appropriate approach with J.B. Murray and his art. We can appreciate art and artifacts in relationship to their culture, society, and place in their world, not just in relationship to our own culture, society, and place in our world.

Mary Padgelek used the premise of Cultural Relativism in her dissertation, *In the Hand of the Holy Spirit*, as did Judith McWillie in multiple articles and books in which she has included Murray, and also the editors of *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South*. These scholars intentionally went into Murray’s community, interviewing him and many in his African American community. However, those who have researched Murray: William Arnett, Judith McWillie, Mary Padgelek, and Maude Wahlman are all Caucasian. These scholars were aware of the emic and etic points of view and approached research on Murray as much from an emic point of view as much as possible,

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\(^4\) James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 53. One point of view that upholds emic methodology is offered by James Clifford, in *The Predicament of Culture*, where Clifford looks at the use of the word affinity chosen for the *Primitivism in 20\(^{th}\) Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1984. He contends that practically any point can be argued and supporting evidence retrieved to aid in the defense of that point, but better conclusions can only be drawn when a wide variety of comparisons and contradictions have been made. He believes that the Museum of Modern Art’s curator, William Stanley Rubins, guided their viewers’ informative path by its selection of artifacts, to the exclusion of others, and “the maintenance of a specific angle of vision.”\(^4\) He has several points that are quite relevant about drawing conclusions from apparent visual similarities. In the end, he suggested that MOMA could have presented other areas of interest and taken the presentation in varied directions and perhaps a more conclusive end.

For instance, Clifford looks into the description of tribal or primitive as a “vanishing past or an ahistorical, conceptual present.” He believes MOMA failed to realize that the tribal art has continued to evolve and is presently being created with the updated visions of today’s people and their experiences in conjunction with the experiences of their ancestors. This is not an area like the prehistoric dinosaur that is extinct, but rather a continuing and constantly changing society, just like our own. Clifford implies that we should look at different societies and their social and cultural ways, even though different from our own, as equally relevant as our own.
however they still represented the etic point of view since they are Caucasian scholars looking at an African American artist. The same is true in my case, as I am Caucasian researching an African American artist. In my research however I have approached Murray and his art from an emic point of view in that I have applied the customs and traditions of the African and African American culture to Murray’s art. It must be said that my application of African customs and traditions to Murray’s art has been in speculation. I began with the assumption that his work held these customs and traditions and found many connections.

In 1991, David Freedberg said the researcher must take into account not only the reason the art was made, but the cultural and societal beliefs of the person(s) creating or viewing the piece of art.\(^5\) When Friedberg’s view is applied to the case of Murray, we know Murray’s reason for making the art was to deliver messages from God about the good and evil in the world and how people are supposed to dealing with that good and evil. To fully understand the basis of his work, all influences on Murray must be examined (rural Southern United States, being an African American male born in 1908, Christianity, African influences from slavery such as traditions and customs, Islamic and indigenous African religious practices, etc.). This is accomplished within the chapters of this dissertation.

Another influence to examine is that of the art and academic worlds once Murray was discovered artistically. Of this outside influence, Mary Padgelek said, “As more and more people visited Murray from outside his community to see his work, he addressed and

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\(^5\) David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History of Theory of Response* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991). Many societies held within their beliefs that the form, in a work of art, of a diety or loved one could hold their spirit or soul. In addition, the artwork could affect a living person’s life. Freedberg goes on to attach to these works of art the viewer’s response in the form of talking to the object or adjusting one’s behavior when in the presence of the work of art. In the end, he believes that one must fully understand the basis on which the object was created, the beliefs the people around this object imbue in it, and the response of the viewers in the form of their own behavior toward the work of art, in order to grasp the entirety of the significance of the work of art.
communicated his message to people he did not know and who were unlike him in many ways. […] the ritualistic aspect likely became accentuated as more people came to see him.”

Dr. Rawlings stated, “J.B. was totally real. There’s nothing that has been created, no one told him to draw pictures because they might sell and make money and no one told him to say this or say that because he had important visitors that’s not the way it [was]. [He was] totally sincere and very naïve in his sincerity.” The viewer’s response to his work is also important to the examination of influences on Murray’s work. The first person Murray told of his calling was his neighbor and sister-in-law Sara Murray Pinkston. Each time a new vision came to Murray, he would go to her and tell her about it. At the beginning, she was concerned that Murray might be losing his mind and worried about him. However after seeing the joy it brought him she decided his calling was a good thing. Murray’s artwork attracted the attention of local art scholars and soon his work was being shown not only in Georgia, but around the world.

However, not all response was good. When Dr. Rawlings took Murray to the Piedmont Park Art Festival to see an exhibition of Murray’s art, they stood for a while listening to comments from those viewing his art. Murray finally turned to Rawlings and said, “They don’t understand, do they?” indicating the negative responses that were being said. Somewhat kinder was the response of Larry Tucker who lived in Murray’s hometown

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8 Mary Shaw Graham Padgelek, interview with Sara Murray Pinkston, Sandersville, Georgia, July 20, 1993.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
of Mitchell said, “He got a little out of his mind. But I reckon he was ‘called’. …”¹⁴ Neither positive nor negative responses had any effect on the work Murray continued to produce.

J.B. Murray’s art presents several problems with respect to historical research of certain art forms. For example, when speaking with Murray’s internist Dr. Rawlings, he posed several interesting questions to me. The first was, “Do you know much about the ways of the South?” This made me reexamine the extent to which I knew and understood the setting in which Murray was born and lived. With respect to J.B. Murray, this question brings to light the fact that the work of art must first be understood from Murray’s point of view regarding the reason he felt compelled to create it. He had very strong religious beliefs about every piece he produced. The response he received, or the reaction of the recipient regarding the piece, is also important. This will highlight the acceptance or rejection of the piece and its intent. Finally, one needs to look at changes in the behavior of the people who were exposed to Murray’s work in his community.

The approaches toward and analyses of Murray’s pieces can presuppose a non-Western art historical point-of-view, along with an anthropological view of culture, as Nochlin did with *orientalism*.¹⁵ From both a non-Western art historical and anthropological

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¹⁵ Linda Nochlin, *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society* (United Kingdom: Westview Press, 1989). In *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society*, Linda Nochlin first gave, as a critical definition in Western literature, the words of Edward Said, “as a mode for defining the presumed cultural inferiority of the Islamic Orient … part of the vast control mechanism of colonialism, designed to justify and perpetuate European dominance.”¹⁵ Nochlin then puts forth the notion that in the absence of certain elements in the artwork from Orientalism, the lack of those elements turns around and acts as a distinct presence. For example, in Jean-Léon Gérôme’s *Snake Charmer* from the late 1860s, with its lack of realism from the Eastern point of view, Nochlin says, “Our gaze is meant to include both the spectacle and its spectators as objects of picturesque delectation.”¹⁵ Nochlin notes that the painting is so Western-ized that it should have been titled “*The Snake Charmer and His Audience.*”¹⁵ In other words, those elements of a painting that would have declared it of Eastern construction were sorely lacking like, “a world without change, a world of timeless, atemporal customs and rituals, untouched by the historical processes that were “afflicting” or “improving” but, at any rate, drastically altering Western societies at the time.”¹⁵ When these elements are left
view of culture, research on Murray’s work has been largely viewed from the eye of Christianity since he was a member of the Mineral Springs Baptist Church. Even though this church was an African American church, it still has its foundation in Evangelical Enlightenment where, for African Americans, the intent was to indoctrinate them into a religion that would help them accept their position in life. This indoctrination is in large part an example of cultural hegemony, the systemic negation of one culture by another or the negation of the African or African American culture by the Anglo-Saxon culture of North America. This is exactly what Nochlin refers to when she uses the words “as a mode for defining the presumed cultural inferiority.” The idea that Christianity needs to train the Africans in the correct religious traditions, assumes their cultural inferiority. This dissertation has broadened this view to include Islamic and indigenous African influences, in an attempt to counteract the systemic negation of the African and African American culture. In addition, Murray and his community would not have had been given scholarly information regarding aspects of African culture in their environment. As Mary Padgelek stated in her 1995 dissertation entitled In the Hand of the Holy Spirit, “Starting in 1978, when Murray experienced his first vision and began creating his art, a number of members within his Baptist church questioned the origins of his vision. According to their understanding, Murray’s experience could be from God, or from Murray’s own delusions, or from the satanic realm of false prophecy.” Murray and his community may have been more out, Nochlin says they are there regardless because they are immediately brought to the viewer’s mind, with their physical presence unnecessary. In addition, she goes on to discuss that the portrayal of the peoples of the orient in negative light, either barbaric or unsophisticated, was for the viewing pleasure of the Westerner. Ibid. Padgelek, In the Hand of the Holy Spirit, 38.
accepting of African influence on his abilities had they known the traditions and customs of Africa and felt they could acknowledge these traditions and customs.

In 1958 Melville Herskovits opened his essay entitled, *A Cross-Cultural View of Bias and Values*, with a statement warning of difficult times ahead and proceeds in the remainder of the essay, included in his 1972 book *Cultural Relativism: Perspectives in Cultural Pluralism*, to correct the misguided paths of our “colonial thinking” minds. In the case of J.B. Murray’s art, Herskovits would have encouraged his audience to inspect, critique, and absorb not only the work as it appears to the viewer, but the view it provides us into Murray’s world and that of his ancestors. Robert Farris Thompson began the use of this view with his scholarship on African and African American. In his introduction, he states, “This book begins the project of identifying specifically Yoruba, Kongo Dahomean, Mande, and Ejagham influences on the art and philosophies of black people throughout the Americas.” Thompson continues his examination of other cultural perspectives and their influences on the development of African American art, music, dance, and choreography within the New World and particularly the United States. Thompson’s scholarship is integral when examining the art of J.B. Murray. An examination of African and African American perspectives makes up a large portion of my research completed in Murray’s home state of Georgia and in West Africa, namely Senegal.

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18 Herskovits, *Cultural Relativism*, 97. “We are not the most ethnocentrically oriented society the world has known, but we certainly possess one of the most powerful ethnocentrisms in the experience of mankind … Even today, it is difficult for us not to do what I term “thinking colonially” by applying to peoples whose ways of life differ from our own the dreary vocabulary of inferiority. … We must recognize that the pluralistic nature of the value systems of the world’s cultures . . . cannot be judged on the basis of a single system . . . Unless we realize that perhaps we do not have the only answers to questions of common concern, and that our biases, though they seem natural enough for us, cannot be universally accepted, we will be in for some very difficult times.”


20 Ibid.
To aid in the argument of my thesis, that J.B. Murray possessed the knowledge that, unbeknownst to him or his ancestors, was passed throughout the African Diaspora, including North America, an analysis of Murray’s art including his Holy Spirit script and his spirit figures is necessary. Throughout this analysis several syllabaries and alphabets will be examined, although a definitive conclusion can’t be drawn connecting Murray’s script to any of these symbol groups. Similarities will be shown and differences discussed, but Murray’s Holy Spirit script is written in such a manner that character analysis is nearly impossible. As with each individual, you develop a style that is your own when writing your native language. As an example, when I write in English it may look quite different from that of another American. Most of the time we are able to read other people’s writing in our same language due to the lifetime spent examining that text. However with Murray, this is not the case. The script Murray writes has never been seen before. It has not been defined as a syllabary or alphabet and others have not written in the same script. Murray can’t read his own script; he receives message through his well-water that inform him of the scripts meaning. Therefore, no known connections have been made with the script that would allow a character count to be accomplished. Murray’s script is an integral part of the connections between Murray and Africa. This discussion will address these connections.

Much of Murray’s first writings were produced on adding machine paper as seen in Figure 8-1. Murray enclosed these writings in sealed envelopes and giving them to various
people, stated they were warnings or messages. His actions were similar to protective writings, a well-known practice throughout West Africa and Islam.

In addition to protective messages, Murray developed a written group of symbols similar to the African Syllabaries. In a closer look at Figure 8-1, encased in a square is one of Murray’s symbols created with a downward line looping to the left and angling back up to the right, then, again looping this time to the right and finishing with a downward curling tail to the right. This symbol is then accented with small marks to the upper right. Murray’s symbol here is similar to the symbols of le/ne or ngi from Figure 8-2, in the Kpelle Syllabary.

In addition, Murray’s symbol to the right of the one in the square has the same characteristics as the symbols be/me, yeh/weh, yah/nyah, and ngeh from Figure 8-2, the Kpelle Syllabary. It uses the same vertical mark with the same curving line that begins high left and dips down, crosses the vertical mark and continues back up to the right, giving a symbol of a vertical line bisected with the form of a “u”. Though there may be some resemblance in characters of Kpelle and Murray’s script, the connection of the Kpelle script is not as compelling as the Arabic script of Islam and its presence in Georgia during and after slavery.

African modes of communication are not just oral or written. As seen with Nsibidi, pictogram or symbol communication, as well as body language and auditory communication exists. In 1986, Murray created a small drawing (Figure 8-3) specifically for an eleven-year-old visitor, Tom Arnett, son of the co-author of the volumes, Souls Grown Deep, William Arnett. Murray drew himself in yellow, touched by God, with arms raised up in a traditional
praise position. In the left foreground, he placed a small bedside table with a bottle of water on top. This was apparently the way his bedroom appeared and was where he held his spiritual readings. He embellished his drawing with gold (a color most ancient cultures associated with the sun and power), which Murray chose to use quite often. On the reverse side seen in Figure 8-4, Murray wrote a sign while he raised a bottle of water and spoke his blessing, “God bless this little babe, God protect this little babe.” Each time he intoned the word “God,” he drew several crosses around the edges of the inscription. This work for Tom Arnett was not just a painting with script handed to a boy. It was a choreographed performance piece that included the giving of a message from God to Murray with a spiritual and creative interpretation of that message by Murray, and finally, a call or incantation to imbue the work with God’s protective powers.

Visual communication in Africa encompasses many different modes of communication, from body movements to auditory sequencing. For body movements, something as simple as the hands raised to the sky, commonly used with images of Christ, is considered the praise position. For auditory sequencing, a simple repetitive drum beat can send numerous messages. Murray’s work reflects these visual methods of communication. They are described by Barbaro Martinez-Ruiz in his article entitled Kongo Atlantic Body Language. Martinez-Ruiz argues that many types of body language can be flawlessly incorporated into visual and auditory communicative methods, or “graphic writing systems.”

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2 Ibid., 479.
Included in these systems are “proverbs, mambos\(^3\), syncopated rhythms, a large variety of written symbols and oral traditions that are incredibly rich sources of cultural and social histories, religious beliefs, myths, and other expressions of the shared Bakongo worldview.”\(^4\)

His work integrated significant instances procured during fieldwork with Kongo people residing in northern Angola and the southern portion of Democratic Republic of Congo, and, in North America and the Caribbean. Martinez-Ruiz states that for the Bakongo in Africa, as well as their descendants in Cuba, the word for God is *Nzambi a Mpungu*\(^5\) and the meaning of X or + is *Yowa* or *Dikenga*, ‘a cosmogram considered crucial to Kongo cosmology in that it represents the conception of all living beings in the universe.’\(^6\) Martinez-Ruiz adds, “it is believed and understood to be the energy of the universe, the force of all existence and creation.”\(^7\) Both of these explanations directly tie the X or + to the word God or *Nzambi a Mpungu*, since the ‘conception of all living beings’ is with God, ‘the energy of the universe’ is considered God, and the ‘force of all existence and creation’ is considered God.

In Figures 8-3 and 8-4, Murray’s incantations of the word *God* and the marking of the X fall within the graphic writing system Martinez-Ruiz discussed. In addition, in this gift to Tom Arnett, Murray draws himself into the praise position at the center of the piece. This praise position is seen in Kongo art as well. One instance is evidenced in “Hands Across the

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\(^3\) Barbaro Martinez-Ruiz, *Kongo Graphic Writing and Other Narratives of the Sign* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2013), 183. “Mambo: Writing Out Load Musical performance and the utterance of chants form an integral part of graphic communication systems. Like firms and prendas, songs and chants are used in ritual performances in Central Africa and in Palo Monte practice in Cuba to invoke powerful spiritual forces. Coded sounds attract these forces through verbal systems known as *mambo*. Known more widely as a popular form of Cuban music, mambos, with their ancestry in Central Africa, are actually sacred communications between human beings and natural cosmic forces.”


\(^7\) Martinez-Ruiz, *Kongo Graphic Writing*, 68.
Water: Kongo Connection,” when Paul Richard while covering the exhibition opening of *Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art in Two Worlds* at the National Gallery of Art in his 1981, stated in his Washington Post article, “One terracotta marker here shows a figure, head upraised, hands held aloft with fingers spread, in a sign of praise and blessing. That joyous gesture, [Robert Farris] Thompson notes, is repeated daily in Afro-American churches by celebrants in song.” J.B. Murray is one of those celebrants and he has transferred this gesture to his art as well.

Furthermore, Murray’s choice of material provides evidence for the (unconscious) continuation of ancestral traditions and customs as the foundation of his art. In Figure 8-6, he chose a stovetop with four round holes previously containing burners as the base for a protective piece that adorned the interior of his home. Murray painted this piece with blue and yellow and adorned it with script and figures. This protective work is reminiscent of the *Kongo Cosmograms* shown in Figure 8-7. Though not the traditional diamond configuration, Murray’s piece still has the vertical element of the cosmogram--the line that runs up and down between the holes, as well as the horizontal element of the cosmogram--the line that runs left to right between the holes. In a similar manner, Kongo Religious Cosmograms are divided by vertical and horizontal elements and each of the four points represent birth, life, death, and rebirth. Throughout the Kongo area in Africa, cosmograms are seen displayed as protective symbols. 

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Another interpretation of Murray’s stovetop piece could be the Ejagham *Nsibidi* sign for physical and spiritual vision from Nigeria (Figure 8-5). The comparison is in shape and form of the piece, and in the meaning of physical and spiritual vision associated with both the *Nsibidi* sign and Murray’s art. *Nsibidi* was transported to Cuba by slaves taken from Calabar, Nigeria, and then melded with other Cuban forms to become *Anaforuana*. Murray’s pieces can also be compared with Figure 8-8, a sample of *Anaforuana* by Alexis Gelabert of Havana, Cuba, 1992. Murray’s use of the stovetop is similar to the physical and spiritual vision symbol seen in Nigeria and seen in Anaforuana in Cuba. Many, if not all, of his pieces contain Xs or +s which are seen extensively in the Anaforuana, as in Figure 8-8.

A comparison can also be made between signs in Murray’s artwork and Islamic Arabic script. African Muslims were brought to Georgia during the slave trade, and their influence could be evident in Murray’s work. When we compare Murray’s *Untitled* piece (Figure 8-9) from the Smithsonian American Art Museum with *Talismanic Textile* (Figure 8-10), most likely from Senegal, we find similar constructions in the form of a checkered, text or script layout. Each artist chose to create squares, and in Murray’s case squares and some rectangles of script are repetitive in nature. Regarding *Talismanic Textile*, Kathleen Bickford Berzock, in a review for the Art Institute of Chicago Museum, informs us:

In Sufism, a form of Islamic mysticism that is widely practiced in Senegal, the repetition of verses from the Qu’ran and even of individual letters or words is a powerful and transcendent form of devotion. Most overtly, [a textile] is covered with Qu’ranic verses […] in tightly composed Arabic script, thereby forging a link between the written word and its sound. The calligraphy is arranged in a fluid checkerboard pattern and organized around a series of painted shapes and the extended figure of a quadruped. These shapes, also checkered, evoke magic squares, arrangements of numbers […] The elongated figure may be read in multiple ways, including as a lizard, a spirit, and a stylized rendering of the name Muhammad. […]
Across Senegal, learned Sufi practitioners apply their esoteric knowledge of sacred writing to the therapeutic practices of divination, healing, and spiritual protection. Berzock’s description here can be applied to Murray’s work in a modified way. Murray did not write or speak Arabic. His script was written in his original characters, given him by the Holy Spirit and God, and Murray’s spoken language is English. However, when Berzock characterizes “forging a link between the written word and its sound,” this concept can be effectively extrapolated, positing a similar link forged between Murray’s script and his voice while creating the script. Murray often recited scripture or mumbled as he wrote the script in his trance-like state. Berzock’s point that “repetition of verses … individual letters or words is a powerful and transcendent form of devotion,” also can illuminate Murray’s probable intent. Seen in the left hand side of Murray’s Untitled piece about halfway down is a series of ‘O’ forms, repetitively placed in a square format. His repetition can be seen throughout this piece and reaffirms the “powerful and transcendent form of devotion” Murray indicates he experienced while making these forms.

Interestingly, Murray’s Untitled piece (Figure 8-11) from 1987 merits comparison to the Bible (Figure 8-12). Murray was a devout Baptist and referenced the Bible a multitude of times. He created Untitled, 1987, in a columnar format, including both script and figures in vertical fashion. His columns echo the copy of the Bible seen many times at his church, Mineral Springs Baptist Church (Figure 8-13). Much like the Qu’ran copied in the Talismanic Textile, Murray appears to have replicated Bible pages seen at church in his

divinely inspired piece here, adding the holy spirit script given him by God and illustrating it with spiritual figures.

Due to its form and extra markings, such as dots placed around the script, Islamic script is most comparable to Murray’s script. Islamic script or Arabic script has extra marks, similar to the dots English puts above with the letters i and j. The marks in Arabic are called diacritics and include “‘i’jam (i’jām, consonant pointing), and tashkil (tashkīl, supplementary diacritics). The latter [tashkil] include the ḥarakāt (vowel marks; singular: ḥarakah).”¹² Like in these Arabic words, Murray chose to put multiple marks both above and below his script, as seen in Figure 8-14. Additionally, there are similar characters such as the English letter A in Arabic, ʿ, and one of Murray’s characters with marks, ٌ, as seen in his Untitled (Figure 8-15).

In analyzing Murray’s script, it is clear that it was first and foremost a method of protection for both Murray and the recipients of his writings sealed in envelopes. By sealing the pages of script in envelopes, Murray created a protective device called an amulet, called a taviz in Islamic terms, or nkisi in Kongo terms. Additionally, Murray’s script has similarities (Figure 8-1) with the Kpelle syllabary, evident in the Guinea coast, Liberia, Ivory Coast and Sierra Leone. A comparison of the form of Murray’s figures (Figure 8-3) with an Nsibidi figure in the shape of a man with upstretched arms (Figure 8-5), thus connecting his work to Kongo Atlantic body language. Barbaro Martinez-Ruiz ties these forms to the ways in which Africans visually communicate. Finally, Murray created art reminiscent of the Kongo

Cosmogram (Figure 8-7), when he embellished a discarded stovetop (Figure 8-6) as a protective device in his home.

Yet what is perhaps most significant is the visual link between Islam and Murray’s use of geometric formatting (Figure 8-9) similar to that seen in Talismanic Textile (Figure 8-10). These two cultural forms of expressive privilege, tight squares with repetitive script, verbally re-present these written forms, thus connecting metaphysically script and words. Murray’s script evidences similarities to the Arabic script of Islam and similarities with the multi-column layout seen in the Bible. However with Murray’s numerous single pen point strikes and both horizontal and vertical dash marks, the closer connection of his script is definitely with Arabic and its diacritic markings. Through such examples of Murray’s signs and figures a convincing argument can be made for comparing characteristics seen in his work with the signs and figures seen in Africa. While it would be nice to pinpoint Murray to a particular culture, it is sufficient enough to say Murray’s connections with Africa through his script and spirit figures demonstrate the continuation of African traditions and customs. He may have learned them from relatives without realizing, received them from contact with spiritual ancestors or God, or been predisposed with genetic memory to produce his particular Holy Spirit script and spirit figures in the particular manner in which he did. Whatever the mode of acquisition, Murray was living proof of the continuation of Africa in America. This combined with the commonalities of his protective and healing work and that of Serigne Bousso of Touba, Senegal, lead me to believe his ancestral location may well be this same geographic area.
African Artists

J.B. Murray did not know about African signs and syllabaries, and therefore could not deliberately discover their meanings and use them in his art. To add foundation to our discussion on this matter, an investigation of some of Africa’s syllabaries and how they were and are used will be pertinent. The history of the use of African syllabaries in artwork would not be complete without mentioning that some artists of African descent, born in other countries or born in Africa and raised in other countries, returned to Africa for formal training and used African syllabaries to enhance their work and its message. In these instances the artist makes a concerted effort to learn the syllabaries, know their meanings, and use them in their work. This is the case with Ndidi Dike Nnadiekwwe, born in Nigeria in 1960, raised in London, and a 1984 graduate of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

Dike uses Nsibidi, Uli and Akwete motifs and designs in her artwork. Her wood panel (Figure 9-1) is presented as a successful combination of signs and objects from Akan, Fulani and Igbo cultures which together create something obviously African, but contemporary. Her use of these African motifs and designs haven’t always brought her praise. About Dike’s pieces in a London exhibition, Professor Chika Okeke in the exhibition catalogue for Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa, states:

Dike pays fleeting attention to the indigenous art traditions of Africa, as though leafing through a vast volume of African cultural history: images do not stay long enough to make any lasting impression. She is drawn to the culture and art of Africa,
yet she is distanced from it to the extent that she enjoys her freedom to take as much from the vast resources as her spirit wills. Consequently her sculptures merely suggest their cultural provenance, making no claim to particulars.¹

In this case, Dike’s use of the motifs and designs are questioned, which leads to the point: how relevant is it for an artist to use syllabaries learned specifically in her research as an adult and not directly passed down through generations of ancestors? Murray’s African ancestral knowledge appeared to be limited due to the lack of information given in his interviews. In addition, his inability to read and write in English limited research of his African heritage.

A comparison can also be made between J.B. Murray and Victor Ekpuk. Ekpuk, born in 1964 and raised in Uyo, Nigeria, is a 1989 graduate of the University of Ife, Nigeria. Ekpuk creates art with a combination of personal and contemporary symbols. Murray employed that same strategy. Victor Ekpuk presently lives and works in Washington, D.C. In his artists’ statement for the Slosberg Music Center Gallery at Brandeis University, states:

> I love expressing myself with these ancient forms, particularly those of Nsibidi, an indigenous African system of communication that employs graphic signs, as well as, pantomime and the placement of objects, to convey concepts. Nsibidi is still used for sacred communication among members of male secret societies of the Ejagham, Efik, Ibibio and southern Igbo peoples of southeastern Nigeria. By reducing shapes and forms to basic lines, I arrived at a style that gives the impression of written scripts. When combined with Nsibidi signs, these “scripts” provide the background narrative for my compositions.²

In his 1997 acrylic painting, entitled *True Story of Our Love Is Our Secret* (Figure 9-2), the use of the Ejagham symbol for love and marriage, combined with a background of various

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symbols including the symbol for Trek, perhaps representing ‘love and marriage’ as a couple goes through life together. Regarding his combination (Figure 9-3) of the walaha, normally a Muslim prayer board, and signs, Ekpuk also states:

I employ Nsibidi signs and my own invested ‘scripts’ to make compositions with themes that center mostly on the human conditions of joy, pain and hope. The goal of bringing these two disparate cultural and religious symbols together in my work is to create personal and contemporary sacred objects that convey the sacredness and awe that both the Walaha and Nsibidi signs inspire.

Murray believed from the beginning that the script he produced was sacred, as he thought it had been given to him by God. He then added figures to his work. These figures were his own personal objects, such as family, cancer cells, and himself, as well as good and “evil people.” These become sacred objects in his art, accented with script to empower the figures with the word of God.

Ekpuk states the objects he creates convey sacredness and awe. I believe this was the intent of Murray, as well. He was not concerned about the awe his work would bring from an artistic point of view, but rather he was concerned with their spiritual sacredness and awe.

One African artist whose path appears to have paralleled both J.B. Murray and Serigne Bousso is Elimane Fall (Figure 9-4), a captivating social advocate in Pikine, Senegal,

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5 Ibid.
6 Judith McWillie, interview with J.B. Murray, Mitchell, GA, May 1986. Judith McWillie explains that these words were sung by Murray: “[God] show me evil folks … That’s why all these different pictures, all the pictures done before the evil folks on judgment day. … Evil folks, bad folks, mean folks don’t serve God and they come against God. And the dry tongue they can say ‘Amen’ but they don’t mean it from the heart.”
a city that lies to the east of Dakar by about 7.5 miles. Like Bousso’s profitable business career, Fall was successful using his skills in mechanical drawing and design. However, “he left a professional path to seek fulfillment in Mouridism, [and] he became a most prolific graphic artist directing his talents to the needs of young people.” Fall created a series of intricately styled paintings called *Etapes de l’Ame* (States of the Soul). These opulently designed teaching pieces illustrate Amadou Bamba’s *khassaïds* on large brown paper sheets or in oil paintings. Fall uses these pieces to instruct youth on how drug abuser, prostitutes, and those living extravagantly can be rehabilitated through learning the ways of life and lessons of Amadou Bamba. Fall is adamant that his instructional art pieces have the active power to help those in need, because they transmit the *baraka* of Amadou Bamba. I would suggest that the art of J.B. Murray has the active power to help those in need, because it transmits the *baraka* (or power) of God.

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8 Ibid., 187.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Amadou Bamba: The Senegalese religious leader Amadou Bamba (1850-1927) was the founder of the Mourides, the strongest and most influential African Islamic brotherhood in black Africa. Amadou Bamba was born in M’Backe, Senegal, into a Wolof family of Toucouleur origins, the son of a minor Islamic holy man and teacher. A charismatic personality, Bamba aided in the mass conversion of the Wolof peoples from tribal paganism to Islam at the end of the 19th century, becoming the founder and marabout of the Mouride sect of Islam. Read more at http://biography.yourdictionary.com/amadou-bamba#E14K0je5LceAZm4b.99.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid., 187.
14 Cyril Glassé and Huston Smith, *The New Encyclopedia of Islam* (New York: Altamira, 2003), 77. Baraka: The primary meaning of Baraka, is “grace”—in the sense of a blessing or a spiritual influence which God sends down. Baraka may be found in persons, places, and things. Certain actions and circumstances may also be a vehicle for blessing, as other actions and circumstances can dispel grace.
15 Ibid.
African American Artists

David Butler

Since it has been shown that Murray is connected to Africa through the characteristics within his art and the methods of its production, he and that connection must now be connected to the African American communities in the United States, and to other African American artists. A great deal of African American “art” initially began as protective measures for the artist or those around him/her. The pieces then developed into what the West calls art. For instance, J.B. Murray was not making his pieces as products to be sold. He did not see himself as an artist. He was creating script and spirit figures as a delivery system for messages from God, and in some cases as protective and healing measures for the benefit of himself and other recipients.

Murray’s work can be better understood when seen in relation to other African American script artists. One of those artists, David Butler (1898–1997), worked in a different medium than Murray, but presented figures that were protective. As Maude Southwell Wahlman explains:

The window covers [Figure 9-5] and awnings sheltered his house from both the hot Louisiana weather and, he claimed, from spirits. Butler felt compelled to make these "spirit shields" during a period of anxiety after his wife's death in 1968. Daylight passing through these screens would cast moving luminescent images across the floors and walls of the house's rooms.

David Butler selected a problem within his life and his home and fashioned a method to fix the problem by using “spirit shields” to protect his home and dreams from antagonism. In

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16 Maude Southwell Wahlman, personal communication with L. Clifton-James, University of Missouri-Kansas City, February 20, 2013. “Ancestor worship,” as it has been called, in African cultures is a system used by descendants to attract ancestral powers, or spiritual energy, for protection and help. Neglected “spirits” are believed capable of causing problems for the living.

this same manner, Murray saw a problem in his community or his own life and fashioned a method of correcting it with the use his script and spirit figures.

Thornton Dial

For Thornton Dial (1928–2016), the medium of choice was assemblage of found objects, unlike Murray’s pen and ink, markers, paint on paper. However, Murray worked on found objects as well, such as television screens and stovetops (Figure 9-6). The idea of using found objects is a Kongo idea which acknowledges the energies that still reside in those objects.

Thornton Dial remembered his childhood when his mother would tie “sassafras roots around her children’s necks and using an assortment of medicinal herbs and roots,”18 to take care of them. As William Arnett explains, “Roots and found wood became significant elements in Dial’s work, with their symbolism becoming more complicated over time. They are the encompassing emblem for the past (cultural heritage and tradition, secrecy and concealment) that provides support for the present, just as the roots of a tree support its growth.”19 “Roots symbolize the oldest things, all those things that come to be part of a man’s life,” stated Thornton Dial.20 It is with found roots that Thornton Dial is able to make his connection, which appears to be very Kongo in its form, with the ancestral spirit world. In Kongo culture, roots are considered a connection to the ancestral world and it appears that Dial had a feeling about this also. In Untitled Assemblage (Figure 9-7) from 1987, Dial has assembled a multitude of roots and given them eyes like Murray has done, as well as full

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18 Ibid., 177.
19 Ibid.
faces, arms and legs, and clothing, as seen in the first assemblage at the top of Figure 9-7. In the next assemblage, he depicts only facial images, tightly placed throughout the work. This tight use of “spiritual figures,” is seen in Murray’s work (Figure 9-8) as well. Another similarity between Murray and Dial is the use of color to define good and evil. In Figure 9-8, the division between good (on the right) and evil (on the left) is made with ‘a stream of writing.’ Blue and white (good) entities tightly fill the right side of the stream, while mostly black and some blue and white (evil) entities tightly fill the left side.

James Hampton

James Hampton (1909-1964) and his use of script parallels that of J.B. Murray, but in a more organized manner. Born in 1909 in South Carolina, Hampton was the son of a traveling gospel singer and self-ordained Baptist preacher who left his family to follow a personal calling to spread the word of God. Just before turning 20, Hampton moved to Washington, D.C., and struggled with being gainfully employed during the Depression. In 1942, he was drafted into the Army, where he remained until his discharge in 1945. Until his death from stomach cancer in 1964 at age 55, Hampton was employed as a janitor at the General Services Administration in Washington, D.C.

After Hampton’s return to Washington, D.C., he began the project that he would work on for the remainder of his life, The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations’ Millennium General Assembly (Figure 9-9). This assemblage was created with specifically chosen pieces of discarded objects. These items, such as furniture, burned out light bulbs, and jelly jars, were covered with both silver and gold foil, and incorporated into his assemblage.

The objects are similar to those found on African American graves in Eloree, South Carolina.\textsuperscript{22}

Hampton had persistent visions throughout his life and filled several books with his own unique script he wrote in conjunction with the creation of his assemblage. To date, these books of script have not been deciphered. In many instances Hampton created tablets that embellish his assemblage. On these tablets Hampton used both English and his own undecipherable script. One particular tablet (Figure 9-10) contains the word “Jesus” in the center and “Diagnosis of the Ten Commandments” at the bottom. Christianity appears to be the religious basis of his work since many of his pieces contain Biblical terminology and in some instances quoted scripture. However, the form of his script and the tablets also suggest that Hampton may have had an Islamic influence as well.

When we compare the script of Murray and Hampton, there are many dissimilar aspects. Hampton’s script is very detailed and precise, with each character painstakingly rendered in primarily level lines across the page. On the other hand, with his script, Murray took a more spontaneous approach, often times going back and forth on the page, only to continue going down the side of the page, across the bottom and back up the other side. He would then go back and add dots and slashes here and there, making for greater improvisation in his work. Hampton’s script was very private and not shared with many people, whereas Murray distributed his script widely and translated it for those to whom it

\begin{quote}
22 Robert Farris Thompson, \textit{Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art & Philosophy} (New York: Random House, 1984), 146-7. “Revelation did not tell James Hampton \textit{how} to impact glitter to his sacred home. For that he relied on Kongo-American modes of decoration covering curved or spherical forms, light bulbs and jars of glass, and cast-off furniture with gold and silver foil. The selection of tinfoil as the covering of the sacred, strikingly recalls the foil-wrapped flowerpots, glass jars, and coffee tins on graves in Louisiana, Carolina, and Florida; the metallic cloth on \textit{pacquet congo} in Haiti; the insertion of tinfoil to attract spirit into a charm; and many other sources.”
\end{quote}
was intended. In addition, Hampton included words in English, even though sporadic, thus informing us that he was definitely literate, whereas Murray we know was illiterate and unable to write English. Both men seem to have been inspired by religion and both men’s work show characteristics which might have been connected with not only Christianity, but with Arabic of Islam as well. When it comes to comparison of their scripts to the syllabaries of Africa, again, we see the use of secret scripts, as in the Ekpe Secret Leopards Society, where the meaning of the script is given only to the very privileged chosen by God. In the Ekpe society, secret script is gradually given over a lifetime with the most important and most secret given only to elders with wisdom. This is the case with J.B. Murray. He was only given his ability and script from God at age 70, performing God’s work until his death at 80.

Bessie Harvey

Another artist working with found objects like J.B. Murray is Bessie Harvey (1929-1994) was born in Dallas, Georgia, but lived her life in Alcoa, Tennessee. Harvey explained her work:

But even when I began to do the sculptures, to me they were my dolls, they were my freedom from this world, that I could go into them, and I could talk to God, and that the spirit would release me from all of the hurt, and I could hear him speak and talk to me. I could see in the eyes of the dolls I could love, sometimes confusion, but I knew that they were there for the purpose of me sharing what I felt with them. And I began to even seen them [eyes of the dolls] in the walls, in the paneling, and they were all reaching out to me in love, and I began to make more and more and more.  

In 1972 after recovering from diabetes, Harvey opted to do “spiritual work,” due to the fact that she felt God had healed her and she wanted to help him heal others.\textsuperscript{24} In her creative methods, she found the “soul” in every form she uncovered in pieces of wood. To these souls, she gave two names each. The first name to be used while in public, and the second name to be used in private.\textsuperscript{25}

In her 1988 piece entitled \textit{Jezebel} (Figure 9-11), Harvey located the “soul” of Jezebel in a found root, and then added other found objects to create her version of Jezebel’s story from the Bible. Just as Murray identified the spirit figures within his art with telltale eyes (Figure 9-12), Harvey identifies at least four spirit figures with eyes in this piece. Jezebel, at the top of the assemblage, is identified on the reverse side with two eyes and a red mouth. Satan, revealed in the form of a snake with two eyes, is hanging down beneath Jezebel. Another figure is seen below and to the left of the snake, depicted as a black face with two eyes peering down. Finally, at the bottom emerging from a number of white pieces with black dots is another black face with menacing orange-red eyes. Harvey took great care in creating not just Jezebel the Queen, but other entities to complete the story.

In Murray’s untitled piece (Figure 9-12) his figures have pairs of eyes placed either in black or in red. Murray designates evil or tormented figures with red eyes, outlined in red as well, while good figures have black eyes, outlined in black. The presence of yellow more than likely designates God assisting the figures, even those that are evil or tormented. Just as Bessie Harvey portrayed many figures within her work, so too does Murray, requesting help for both good and evil figures.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
Sister Gertrude Morgan

Another African American who used script in her work was Gertrude Morgan (Figure 9-13) (1900-1980), who wrote in English in her paintings and then used them in her preachings (Figure 9-14). According to Joel Rose from the National Public Radio website, “Sister Gertrude Morgan was born in 1900 in Alabama and died in 1980. At age 39, she decided to carry God's message to New Orleans, what she called the "headquarters of sin." It was there she preached, painted — and recorded an album.”26 Curator William A. Fagaly, New Orleans Museum of Art's Françoise Billion Richardson curator of African art and former assistant director for art, who knew Sister Gertrude during the last 10 years of her life, commented on her purpose and the absence of dates on her work, "[Sister Gertrude] Morgan did not conceive of the paintings she was making as 'art' but as tools of her ministry, so it is likely that it simply did not occur to her to date them - it was not important to the message."27

Like Murray, Gertrude Morgan felt she was visited by God and asked to do his work. Her work took on script in English, since she was obviously able to read and write, whereas, due to the fact that he was illiterate, Murray’s took the form of glossolalia or secret script, unintelligible to the normal person. Both artists appear to have been inspired by religion.

In comparing their signs with African scripts, again we see the use of secrecy. In the Ekpe Secret Leopards Society, the deep meaning of some signs is revealed only to the oldest members who have guarded the knowledge over a lifetime. In both instances, the script within their work is used to draw on power of God within pieces.

For Morgan, writing was yet another tool in her ministry to the “headquarters of sin,” in New Orleans. And for Murray, his glossalalia was a means by which he transported the word to those who God intended to receive the messages. Murray attempted to affect their lives in positive ways, either by redirecting wayward souls or by calling on God to guide or heal them.

Nellie Mae Rowe

Just about two hours to the East of Murray’s hometown of Mitchell, Georgia, was the hometown of Nellie Mae Rowe (1900-1982) (Figure -15). Rowe was born in Fayette County, Georgia, and lived most of her life in Vinings, Georgia. She included writing (English) in her paintings, as well as what is recognized as Haitian Vévé signs for protection28, an asterisk-like sign, used to accent the border of her photo collage (Figure 9-16). Just as Murray had his spirit figures and script, so too did Nellie Mae Rowe.

Rowe was a dedicated Christian with memories of being taught “fancy writing drawings,” probably derived from the Haitian script Vévé (Figure 9-17). J.B. Murray’s work also included spirit forms and his own script, which was meant to be read by him through a jar of well-water. Many of Murray’s creations included references reminiscent of Ejagham, African Cuban, and African Haitian traditions. Murray’s stovetop (Figure 9-6) piece is reminiscent of the Ejagham symbol for physical and spiritual vision (Figure 9-24 Left). The Xs that mark the Cuban piece Tree-of-the-Forest-Seven-Bells-Turns-the-World-Round-the-Midnight-Cemetery (Figure 9-18) appears in Murray’s work many times over (Figure 9-19).

In addition, in Haiti, Xs or +s can be seen in Vévé for Damballah (Figure 9-20 Left) and Baron Samedi (Figure 9-20 Right).

Emmer Ree Sewell

In the yard of Emmer Ree Sewell (1934-) in Marion, Alabama, is an old rusted car resting on tireless wheel rims on cinder blocks and a very old rusted icebox (Figure 9-21). Both of these items are purposely spray painted with Xs and dots to protect Sewell and her property.30 Sewell’s Xs are similar to the protective Xs marked by J.B. Murray as he intoned the words “God Protect this Little Babe,” on the back of a drawing (Figure 9-22) created for eleven-year-old Tom Arnett in 1986. Both Sewell and Murray used the X to call for protection from a higher power.

Additionally, Sewell created an untitled assemblage (Figure 9-23), on which can be seen a combination of her Xs and dots that are similar to the Ejagham Nsibidi sign (Figure 9-24 Left) for physical and spiritual vision from Nigeria, and the Cuban Anaforuana sign (Figure 9-24 Right) adapted from the Ejagham sign for physical and spiritual vision.

30 Souls Grown Deep Foundation, accessed May 21, 2016, http://soulsgrowndeep.org/artist/emmer-sewell. Emmer Sewell: “That cross is nothing to make a fuss about. You can see the same thing in a lot of places. It’s not nothing for nobody to be alarmed about. It’s not dangerous. I put it on refrigerators and those things—symbols of God. You’d be proud to be as what it is. I put it out on the car, you know, so if they ever sell the car they know whose care they sell to a person. It’s kind of like a Roman number that you had in your schooling days. That is a sign of history. That sign is a great symbol of things. It’s not mean thing to it, nothing devilish in it. It is not. I is a symbol to recognize by. It is a symbol of recognized ways.

You watch Oprah Winfrey when she be running her show; watch her picture sometimes, when she come on at four o’clock. She got that same X on her place. It mean ‘important work.’ ‘You could be somebody.’ It mean ‘reaching for the stars.’ If you ain’t got no common knowledge, and don’t carry yourself in the right way, and learn nothing, you can never be a star; reach the star’s. Never, if you got filthy ways and stupid ways.”
Bill Traylor

Murray created a small drawing (Figure 9-22) as a gift to an 11-year-old boy in which Murray portrayed himself in the praise position, hands and arms stretched toward heaven and God. Many artists have used this type of character positioning. We see it in the art of Bill Traylor, an African American artist who lived from 1854 to 1948. In Traylor’s piece entitled Preacher and His Congregation (Figure 9-25), c. 1939-42, he has used the same form for the preacher located inside a circle with members of his congregation located on the outside of the circle. This was Bill Traylor’s interpretation of a ring shout, a traditional religious practice derived from African rituals.31 Within both drawings, the person with ‘praising’ upstretched hands is the centered, focus of attention. Traylor’s drawings often illustrated a story he would tell and did not call on God to help with a problem. Traylor certainly had the storyteller characteristics of a griot.

Murray’s drawing for an 11-year-old boy does include the upstretched hands, but in addition it includes script relaying the issue from which Murray felt the boy needed protection and a solution and request to God for the boy’s protection. Murray was illustrating a story regarding his religious ritual to aid in another’s protection. However, he also called on God with the drawing by placing both script, Xs, and verbal words, “God bless this little babe, God protect this little babe,”32 to imbue the drawing with God’s protecting energy.

32 Ibid., 479.
Conclusions

Much evidence has been presented that demonstrates the use of scripts and spirit figures in the art of both African and African American artists. From the work of Ndidi Dike Nnadiekwe, Victor Ekpuk born and educated in Nigeria, and Elimane Fall from Senegal, to the varying work of nine African American artists, including J.B. Murray, the tradition of script and spirit figures has continued. Whether seen in the indigenous script form of Nsibidi or in Arabic as used in Islam, the proliferation of scripts, signs, symbols, along with spirit figures was seen as forms of protection and healing throughout West Africa. Once in the United States, these forms of protection and healing continue, as seen in the metalwork of David Butler, the root work of Thornton Dial and Bessie Harvey, the fancy writing of Nellie Mae Rowe, the spirited Biblical writing of James Hampton and Sister Gertrude Morgan, the praise positioning and illustrations of Bill Traylor, and the use of signs or symbols that we know are from the Congo by Emmer Ree Sewell and J.B. Murray. With the wide range of art forms exhibited the continuation of African traditions and customs through art is confirmed.

Each piece of Murray’s art displays qualities that place him in the role of African griot, protector and healer. In a piece created in the mid-1980s, *Ladies, Don’t Kill Your Babies* (Figure 9-26), Murray created a remarkable anatomical portrayal where “fallopian tubes and embryos are drawn in blue and washed with pink;” Murray said, “this is telling ladies not to kill they babies before they born.” Murray evidently thought his message was straightforward due to the few red calligraphic signs giving information or making requests. These red signs were a request to God for protection of the babies, and the drawing and signs

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33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
together were warnings to the ladies who were carrying babies. Murray had created his own anti-abortion campaign and worked as a protector and prophesier.

In *Trouble-Making Ladies* (Figure 9-27), also from the mid-1980s, Murray chose pink paper on which to begin this work. Arnett states, “Pink paper, a red figure, and black designs indicate trouble in store for Murray.”\(^{35}\) This is due to fact that Murray’s color codification cited red or any variation of red, such as pink, as representing evil and torment,\(^ {36}\) and black, when brought “into, onto, and around white, blue and yellow forms, denotes imperfection or impurity—a transitional state between the thoroughly opposed red and blue energies.”\(^ {37}\)

A necklace of pink pearls weaves throughout the right side of *Trouble-Making Ladies*. Murray explained that this necklace represents a woman who “turned [Murray] in to the FBI.”\(^ {38}\) On this pink paper, Murray illustrates a variety of women that were acquaintances with which he had been involved. Indicated by the color of the figure, three were blue or good, while most were red or evil. Two evil (red) women were most likely dead when he created this painting due to the fact that white paint was smeared around them. Murray has presented the situation pictorially and made his request of God for protection with the rust-red signs he wrote on and between the figures. Murray is the protector and storyteller.

In the early 1980s Murray was given several sheets of color paper, some of the first color paper he would use. One of those sheets was a small red sheet of paper that forced Murray to make adjustments when creating his evil forces, normally created in red pigment.

\(^{35}\) Ibid.
\(^{36}\) Ibid., 474.
\(^{37}\) Ibid.
This sheet was full of torment and evil since it was already red, so Murray opted to create the war between good and evil (Figure 9-28)—African Americans (in black) against the Ku Klux Klansmen (in white). As William Arnett explains, “The Klan had been an active threat to blacks in central Georgia during Murray’s lifetime.” Murray broke with his normal color codification, representing the African Americans in black (before denoting imperfection and impurity) now representing him and other African Americans. He represented the Klan members in white (before denoting spiritual purity related to death or the afterlife) now representing an evil force bringing torment, harm and death to African Americans. Given the fact that the foundation of this piece was tormenting red already, Murray purposely chose black and white to represent good and evil respectively, in the opposite manner Americans had seen these colors used previously. As Arnett describes, “A small cross, circumferential patches of yellow, and a vertical arrangement of blue dots all serve to provide protection for the endangered black figures.” In this work, Murray is a griot by recording history, telling a story, and providing warnings and requests for protection.

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40 Ibid.
CHAPTER 10

CONCLUSION

What happens when a person produces art and script that he believes was *given* to him “by God” with the intent of helping others? J.B. Murray (Figure 10-1) believed this to be his situation. It has been shown that Murray had unacknowledged influences such as African customs and traditions that were bought with his ancestors when they first arrived in the United States. Evidence has been presented that shows possible connections between signs and spirit forms in the Americas with the scripts and forms found in Nsibidi (Figure 10-2) from Nigeria; Kpella script (Figure 10-3) from Liberia and Guinea; Vai Syllabary (Figure 10-4) from Liberia and Sierra Leone; Hebraic from North, East and West Africa (Figure 10-5); Arabic from North, East and West Africa (Figure 10-6); Anaforuana (Figure 10-7 and 10-8) from Cuba; or various other forms of signs or imagery originating in Africa.

To demonstrate the continuation of these scripts and forms from Africa to the Americas, an examination of contemporary artists in Africa has taken place to show that the scripts and forms continued on that continent. Many contemporary African artists, including Ndidi Dike Nnadiekwe (Figure 10-9) and Victor Ekpuk (Figure 10-10), from Nigeria, have chosen to include elements of Nsibidi and other African and Afro-Caribbean scripts in their works of art. The study of African syllabaries and imagery and the encoded messages held within them is wide and varied. 

Therefore, this dissertation began with an explanation of applicable West African syllabaries, moved on to an introduction and overview of J.B. Murray’s art, and then proceeded to possible connections of his work to West African syllabaries and imagery.

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Having seen the continuation of the use of scripts and forms in Africa, an examination of this continuation into the Americas was necessary. It was after a vision when 80 years old that Murray began using paint, brushes, pens, scrap paper and most anything in his house to create his first script and painted marks. Murray believed he was directed to put the water from the well on his property into a clear bottle and use it to read the script to the intended recipient (Figure 10-11).\(^2\) When engaged in the creation of his works, Murray would appear to be in a trance-like state. He explained the script was for him was like speaking in tongues.\(^3\) This vision and resulting script work was out of the ordinary for Murray who was relatively secluded in rural Georgia.

This seclusion began when John Bunion Murray was born in Warren County, Georgia, on March 5, 1908. He attended public school there at the age of six, however, only for one month. From then until the late 1970s, Murray was a general farm worker until he retired in the late 1970s. In 1929, Murray married Cleo Kitchens and together they had eleven children, five of whom died before Murray. When Murray passed away in 1988, he had sixteen grandchildren, thirteen great grandchildren and three great, great grandchildren. In about 1977, Murray’s wife became ill and went to live with one of their children, where she remained until her death in 1987. Murray lived with his son, Ray and a woman who was a friend of Ray’s, in a small wooden house in Mitchell, Georgia. Murray had only been retired for about a year when he had his vision.\(^4\)

\(^2\) Ibid.
\(^3\) Ibid.
On a warm May afternoon in 1978, Murray was in his garden when a miraculous event occurred. He stated: “Well, I was out in the yard working on the potato patch and the sun came right to me. Had different colors, even around my hands turned kinda yellow, like different color ground. Well, I prayed and I took up a water hose, hosed up the sun and the rainbow come to me.”

Murray went on to describe Jesus coming down in the clouds. As he looked up at the sky, he also saw an eagle fly before his eyes. He connected this with being able to, in his words, “see things other folks can’t see.” He also described hearing the voice of his dead mother asking Jesus to “take care of my child,” referring to Murray. From this vision he received the ability to write in tongues, as others have spoken in tongues.

Murray’s experience was not the first of this kind. A similar phenomena was expressed by John Chrysostem on 1 Corinthians 14:1-2 as early as 344 A.D.:

And as in the time of building the tower [of Babel] the one tongue was divided into many; so then the many tongues frequently met in one man, and the same person used to discourse both in the Persian, and Roman, and the Indian, and many other tongues, the Spirit sounding within him: and the gift was called the gift of tongues because he could all at once speak diverse languages.

Apparently, speaking in tongues from the early days of the Christian church was thought to be speaking in unknown languages, foreign to the common person. Murray did not think he was speaking a foreign language, however he did state that each time this script was given to him he

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7 Ibid.
was in essence speaking or writing a message from God, or “speaking in tongues,” a term commonly heard in his Southern Baptist church.\(^8\)

In her 2000 dissertation entitled *In the Hand of the Holy Spirit: The Visionary Art of J.B. Murray*, Mary G. Padgelek, Ph.D., passed along this account of the after affects of his vision:

Approximately six months after he had his first vision at age seventy, Murray’s vision turned dark when he was put in jail for a week and after that committed to Central State Mental Hospital for six weeks. He was released on 11 November 1978. The facts of his incarceration and commitment are unclear and exact information is not available because of patient confidentiality. However, an employee of Central State Mental Hospital, who wished to remain anonymous, stated that in 1978 it was possible for a family member to commit someone who was a burden to take care of.\(^9\)

Murray was a member of the Second Mineral Springs Baptist Church (**Figure 10-12**) in Mitchell, Georgia. He was believed by some in his family and his church congregation to be insane, and by others to be deceived by Satan, and so he was involuntarily committed to Central State Mental in Milledgeville, Georgia.

After six weeks, he was cleared of any harm to himself or others and released. Ernest Ingram, a contemporary and a member of Murray’s church, talked also about Murray’s showing people “this unusual writing that you couldn’t understand.”\(^10\) Ingram mentioned that there was debate within the church he and Murray attended concerning the nature of Murray’s experience.\(^11\)

Nathaniel and Larry Tucker, who lived in Mitchell and were the age of some of Murray’s children, talked about how Murray came up to them around town or outside the hardware store on several occasions and started “reading” in English from a page that contained his script.

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10 Mary Padgelek’s transcripts of telephone conversation with Ernest Ingram, July 20, 1993.
11 Ibid.
Nathaniel Tucker could not remember the content of what Murray said, but it did not pertain to him (Nathaniel) personally. Concerning this “reading,” Larry Tucker remarked, “He couldn’t read or write yet he could read off that paper like a high school graduate.” Ernest Ingram also stated that toward the end of his life Murray was invited to lead prayer in his church, which displays a degree of acceptance by the church leadership.

After his release in November, 1978, Murray suspected his commitment was the plan of the woman living in his son’s house; therefore, he built a separate house on a portion of that same land where he lived alone and did his work by the light of a kerosene lamp. Murray’s small home (Figure 10-13) was little more than a shed, with no indoor plumbing, until his art brought in enough money to fund it. He took protective measures to protect the land and his home from those who wished him harm (Figures 10-14 through 10-17). Similar protective yard arts have been seen throughout Africa and the diaspora in the Caribbean and the Southern United States. William Arnett gives this account of Murray’s protective measures in Volume Two of the 2000 book, entitled, *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South, Volume Two: Once That River Starts to Flow*:

His first works were probably the small mysterious piles of rocks and stones, concrete blocks, and other found materials (one pile included an old toilet bowl and empty beer cans) that Murray built around his house. While these constructions appear highly idiosyncratic, they closely resemble similar small structures (not necessarily rural and not

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14 Mary Padgelek’s transcripts of telephone conversation with Ernest Ingram, July 20, 1993.
15 Paul Arnett et al., eds., *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South*, vol. 2, *Once That River Starts to Flow* (Atlanta, GA: Tinwood Books, 2000), 471. “Similar sculptures were part of the yard architectures of Eldren M. Bailey, Dilmus Hall, and Ralph Griffin (African American artists who, along with Murray, lived in the Northern half of the state of Georgia), as well as Howard Finster (of the same region but not African American). Like Murray, each was unwilling to reveal his intention in building the sculptures, sometimes apparently out of fear of being perceived to be engaged in supernatural or superstitious practices. Many African American artists express apprehension, distaste, or resentment at being branded with such pejorative terms as “hoodoo” or “voodoo,” not only by misinformed white observers but by members of their African American communities.”
always African American) found in yards across the South. Murray declined to discuss their significance, yet their purposes seem to be protective and (additionally) related to burial traditions, because purposeful stacks of rocks are also often used as grave markers in African American cemeteries throughout the region. In a formal sense, Murray’s piles of rocks anticipate some of his later protective drawings and paintings, compartmentalized combinations of rectangular and rounded forms with vertical and horizontal elements.\(^{16}\)

Arnett writes that Murray was unwilling to reveal his intention in building the sculptures, apparently out of fear of being perceived to be engaged in supernatural or superstitious practices.\(^{17}\) Can a connection be made between the continuation of these African traditions seen throughout the Southern United States, including in Murray’s home state of Georgia and the artwork of an illiterate, share-cropper, who did not remember being taught these traditions?

The connection can be made in the methods Murray used to produce and give his God’s messages to individuals. Some of Murray’s first writings were produced on adding machine paper, like the 1978 piece (Figure 10-18) photographed at the home of William Rawlings, M.D., in Sandersville, Georgia. Murray enclosed these writings in sealed envelopes and stated they were warnings or messages for various people; this is similar to protective writings, a well-known aspect of African scripts, as well as a demonstration of the continuation of these traditions and customs.

His other early paintings were created on found objects, which included old television sets and an automotive windshield (Figure 10-19). According to Murray these were chosen because of their protective properties. The glass was chosen because of its penetrable nature by light rays, sounds and harmful, evil energies. He painted the entire glass area with vertical forms he believed to be guardian figures, both human and spiritual. Significantly, these vertical forms

\(^{16}\) Arnett et al., eds., *Souls Grown Deep*, vol. 2, 471.

\(^{17}\) Ibid.
also have been found in protective works throughout the African Diaspora. The continuation of African traditions and customs is demonstrated in Murray’s choice of found objects and their protective qualities, as well as in the vertical forms he placed in these works of art.

One example of a vertical form in Africa is in the Kongo Cosmogram where the vertical axis connects the world of the living (Life), to the watery world of the ancestors (Rebirth), creating a direct connection for ancestral protection and support. Murray’s vertical figures were enclosed by his script, presumably to state a warning or provide protection to the owner and/or viewer. Murray also covered the makeshift, paneled walls of his house with these decorative protective figures to keep away the evil that he thought some people were wishing on him (Figure 10-20). African American “evil” derives from the African idea that ancestral energies which are neglected or have no descendants are unhappy because they can’t cure, heal, or protect, so they cause trouble instead. These unhappy energies are called “Haints.” As Murray decorated his home to protect against “evil,” he was demonstrating the continuation of African traditions and customs.

When protecting against evil, color codification was an integral part of Murray’s pieces. Three primary colors – yellow, blue and red – have specific symbolic references: red represents torment or evil, as in evil people, evil spirits or evil forces; blue represents positive strength or good; and, yellow indicates a divine presence, an energy emanating from or embodied in the sun. White represents a spiritual purity related to death or the afterlife, which is very common

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18 Maude Southwell Wahlman, *Signs and Symbols: African Images in African-American Quilts* (New York: Penguin Group, 1993). “The Kongo cosmogram represents birth, life, death, and rebirth in the underwater world of the ancestors. Also referred to as the four moments of the sun, it symbolizes the four stations in the cycle of life. Souls of ancestors are believed to reside under water until reborn into the bodies of descendants. Simple and calligraphic versions of the cosmogram are found in ground paintings, graveyard arts, and on masks, sculpture, and textiles.”

in ritual funerary sculpture in Nigeria and Congo.\textsuperscript{20} Black, when introduced into, onto and around white, blue and yellow forms, denotes imperfection or impurity – a transitional state between the thoroughly opposed red and blue energies.\textsuperscript{21} Murray chose the subject of his art and the colors that would best to portray the situation.

For example in December of 1978, Murray came under the care of Dr. William Rawlings whom he considered “more than just a physical doctor.”\textsuperscript{22} In an untitled, large, early work (Figure 10-21), Murray showed concern with the harm that had come to his body when diagnosed with prostate cancer in 1984. Extensive markings, included in the work, along with an enormous amount of script on the reverse side (Figure 10-22), are perhaps a warning about the dangers of prostate cancer and a request for protection from it. In this painting, the figures from the center out to the right, enveloped in red, represent invaded body parts, the genitals and perhaps bones. The picture is inundated with positive colors of white and blue. Murray fashioned a complex, color coded diagram of his negative condition, and a method for bringing about its healing or protection from it.\textsuperscript{23}

Another example is shown in his family portrait from the early 1980s (Figure 10-23). Murray featured himself in the center inside a house, his wife on the right and their eleven children are arranged throughout the drawing.\textsuperscript{24} The yellow roof represents God’s blessing on the house, however, the house is filled with turmoil (in red) and impurity (in black).\textsuperscript{25} Red and black represent Murray’s wife with bits of white to acknowledge her positive qualities. The

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{22} Mary Shaw Graham Padgelek, interview with Andy Nasisse, Athens, GA, June 30, 1993.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid, 477.
\textsuperscript{25} Arnett et al., eds., \textit{Souls Grown Deep}, vol. 2, 478.
children are portrayed in different combinations of colors, showing Murray’s feelings about each one, ranging from positive to negative.\textsuperscript{26} Murray chose entirely blue for himself and one of his children. Another child, possibly one who died, is colored blue and white, with another child represented almost entirely in red – certainly not Murray’s favorite.\textsuperscript{27} With Murray’s choice of colors for each member of his family, he demonstrated the dynamics within his family situation. Murray clearly designated through color choice those who had negative characteristics and were in need of help from his God, and those with positive characteristics who were deserving of his God’s blessing.

Murray’s color codification was further substantiated when Susan Crawley, the curator of Folk Art at the High Museum in Atlanta, Georgia, wrote the museum label for Murray’s Untitled works from 1985 (Figures 10-24 and 10-25),

> The battle between good and evil rages among the abstracted forms of J.B. Murray’s drawings. The artist developed a distinctive visual vocabulary of symbolic colors and forms, which he employed in drawings meant to capture or repel harmful forces or to illustrate struggles between good and evil. Many of his drawings also feature his own system of glossographia, or spiritual writing, intelligible only to him.

Additionally, it reinforces the thought that Murray used various methods to obtain protection against evil. Murray sought protection from God in the forms of color, signs, and the use of water to imbue his works of art with protection.

In 1986, Murray created a small piece (Figure 10-26) specifically for an eleven-year-old visitor, Tom Arnett, son of William Arnett, one of the authors of the volumes, \textit{Souls Grown Deep}. Murray drew his self-portrait in yellow, touched by God, with arms raised up in a traditional praise position. In the left foreground, he drew a small bedside table with a bottle of

\textsuperscript{26}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{27}Ibid.
water on top. This was apparently the way his bedroom appeared and was where he held his spiritual readings. He embellished the creation with gold, a color many ancient cultures associated with the sun and power. Gold was a color Murray chose to use quite often.

On the reverse side (Figure 10-27), Murray wrote his script while he raised the bottle of water and he spoke this blessing, “God bless this little babe, God protect this little babe.” Each time he intoned the word “God,” he drew several Xs around the edges of the glossolalia he had written.28 These Xs appear to be his tool for calling forth the power of God to imbue the work of art and the script with His protective powers. This ritual action was first recorded by Wyatt MacGaffey, a scholar of Kongo civilization and religion, as follows:

The simplest ritual space is a Greek cross [+ ] marked on the ground, as for oath-taking. One line represents the boundary; the other is ambivalently both the path leading across the boundary, as to the cemetery; and the vertical path of power linking “the above” with “the below.” This relationship, in turn, is polyvalent, since it refers to God and man, God and the dead, and the living and the dead. The person taking the oath stands upon the cross, situating himself between life and death, and invokes the judgement of God and the dead upon himself.29

X or cross-like patterns as a protective symbol also occurred frequently in African American quilts.30 Maude Southwell Wahlman noted in 1993, “Although now interpreted as Christian crosses, they could once have been adopted because of a resemblance to the Kongo symbol for the four points of the sun.”31

As Murray’s work progressed, his work showed the influences that Christianity and the Baptist Church had on him. In an untitled piece from 1987 (Figure 10-28), Murray showed his

31 Ibid.
move toward producing works that appeared to imitate the Bible. The multiple columns on each page of figures and text are narrow and vertical, as in the Bible (Figure 10-29). Though Murray never mentioned duplicating the Bible in any form, his choice to format his works in this manner is a direct reflection of his ability to discern at least the written form of the Bible, as the word of God, even if he could not read it.

After Murray was released from the Central State Mental Hospital in December 1978, he began to bring his scripts and illustrations to his internist, William Rawlings, M.D. Rawlings eventually gave Murray five dollars to buy some poster board, paint, and markers. In 1982, Dr. Rawlings’ wife at the time, Krista Lamar, took some of Murray’s pieces to show Andy Nasisse, an art professor at the University of Georgia, where she was taking his art class. Immediately Nasisse became interested in Murray’s artwork and contacted the Phyllis Kind Gallery in New York City.

Murray’s work was exhibited as far away as Toyko, Japan, in the Alpha Cubic Gallery, and in the United States, it was exhibited in the Judith Alexander’s Folk Gallery and the Nexus Gallery in Atlanta, the Ricco Johnson Gallery in New York, the San Francisco Museum of Folk Art, and many more. In 1996, as part of an exhibit for the Olympic games in Atlanta, Georgia, collector William Arnett included about 20 of Murray’s works and scripts in an exhibition called *Souls Grown Deep*.

In the later years of his life, Murray became aware of the appreciation of his work as art. Dr. Rawlings explained that Murray created his script more feverishly with the advancement of his prostate cancer. “It was like he had to complete this work before he died,” Rawlings stated.32

Judith McWillie\textsuperscript{33} observed that Murray was also conscious of the disagreements regarding the validity of his work as an artist and messenger of God, and was upset regarding this.

According to McWillie, Murray was troubled that some people were doubtful of his abilities. She went on to say, “I don’t know if it had just all run its course or if he felt sick while that was happening, but there was definitely a closure.”\textsuperscript{34} By closure, McWillie means that since Murray was already ill with prostate cancer, this negative attention could have been a source that propelled his health more quickly on a downward spiral.

Even though some negative attention came his way from those doubting his abilities, Murray always was most happy and content when doing God’s work through the gifts he had been given. Padgelek reported in \textit{In the Hand of the Holy Spirit}, that “Rawlings, McWillie, [Andy] Nasisse, and [Sarah Murray] Pinkston (Murray’s sister-in-law) commented that the work Murray did was a source of joy and happiness for him, although the experience was not without pain as a consequence of being misunderstood. Pinkston recounted the joy Murray would express as he told her about the art and what God had told him to do and say.”\textsuperscript{35} Murray expressed it in his own way, “I can’t need nothing else from God, like a mirror, and I’m happy. The work I’m

\textsuperscript{33} Judith McWillie Papers, 1984-2011, Collection Number: 20455, UNC University Libraries, The Southern Folklife Collection at the Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, Chapel Hill, NC. Judith McWillie is an artist, author of numerous essays on art and culture, and professor emeritus of drawing and painting at the Lamar Dodd School of Art in Athens, Ga. Much of her work centers on African American artists. Her book \textit{No Space Hidden: The Spirit of African American Yard Work} (2005), co-written with Grey Gundaker, won the Southern Anthropological Society’s James Mooney Award. The Judith McWillie collection at the University of North Carolina Libraries consists of videotapes and DVDs recorded by Judith McWillie of persons and events relating to southern vernacular art and her field work in Cuba. Subjects include individual southern artists, especially those in Memphis, Tenn.; yard workers; and clubs and street life. There is also footage of El Vez, the Mexican Elvis, and Clarence Giddens, the Black Elvis, performing at the Georgia Theater in Athens, Ga. Notable folk artists documented in the collection include Howard Finster, Lonnie Holley, Joni Mabe, and J.B. Murray.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.

doing, I’m happy because it’s come from Him. Man couldn’t do it . . . This well is deep and never go dry.’’

The Christian influences on Murray’s art were examined by Mary Padgelek in In the Hand of the Holy Spirit and further examined in my Master’s Thesis, Making the Connection: J.B. Murray and the Scripts and Forms of Africa. However, to provide evidence of an Islamic or Hebraic connection, I examined these areas and found a wealth of Hebraic and Islamic information.

Church historian, Karen Wortham, referencing the script in the slave gallery (Figure 10-30) of the First African Baptist Church in Savannah, Georgia, stated, “It is the agreement of the members and leadership of the church, both past and present, that this script is most likely ancient Hebrew. Brought with the slaves from the continent of Africa, they believe the script could be read as, ‘To secure a desired harvest, to enter a pathway into a household.’”

Wortham’s contention offered a possible Hebraic link in Georgia. In my opinion, the script may be Hebrew as its form is similar to Hebraic letters, however I will give my final opinion when I hear from Dr. Jacques Habib Sy, a professor in Senegal working on indigenous scripts and the Mali manuscripts. I believe there are also similarities of form relating to Arabic as well.

Also, while Allan D. Austin maintained that approximately 10 percent of West African slaves transported to North America between the years 1711 and 1808 were Muslims, and following the prohibition of importing slaves in 1808, approximately 29,695 African Muslims

were smuggled into the United States, Michael Gomez speculated that out of 481,000 Africans who arrived in North America from West Africa, 230,000 slaves came from regions with Muslim populations. Gomez reminds the reader, “It is therefore reasonable to conclude that Muslims may have come to America by the thousands, if not tens of thousands. A more precise assessment is difficult to achieve.” Numerous enslaved, African-American Muslims were known to have memorized the Koran, in its entirety, in an attempt to maintain their Islamic faith and pass it on, especially to the children. With Austin and Gomez’s predictions of Muslim numbers in the importation of slaves, we saw the existence of Muslim connections in the state of Georgia where Murray spent his life.

One of these connections was shown in the method Murray used to create his script. Similar to the African Sufis in West Africa, Murray would slip into a trance-like state when creating his script. In addition, his script has greater similarities with African-Arabic and its extra markings, such as dots placed around other script. Islamic or Arabic script has extra marks, similar to the dots English puts above with the letters i and j. The marks in Arabic are called diacritics and include “i’jam (i’jām, consonant pointing), and tashkil (tashkīl, supplementary diacritics). Given these similarities and Murray’s griot characteristics, I believed Murray had an unacknowledged knowledge of aspects of Islam and therefore Arabic.

After his death in September, 1988, Murray’s funeral (Figures 10-31 and 10-32) was held at Second Mineral Springs Baptist Church, in Mitchell, Georgia, and he was buried in the

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40 Ibid.
cemetery in front of the building, along with other Murray and Kitchens family members. On March 21, 2010, J.B. Murray’s son, Ray passed away in Mitchell, Georgia. His funeral was held at Mineral Springs Baptist Church just as his father’s funeral had been held in 1988. The cemetery worker, shown here in red (Figure 10-33), stated that he believed J.B.’s grave was directly to the left of Ray’s, whose grave was adorned with flowers after his burial on March 28, 2010 (Figure 10-34). Murray’s well still did not go dry, since many people including art historians have continued to view and analyze his creations.

That sunny day in 1978 when Murray had his vision while his watering potatoes in his backyard, he did not know the extent to which his obedience to what he believed was God’s wish would go. Having never created art nor been able to read or write, he was unaware of the art world that would eventually be his chief spectators and therefore the recipient of the message he was so feverishly distributing. He was a singular individual who believed God had come to him in the form of the sun to illuminate the ground around him and the new course for the remainder of his life. Murray explained, “Lord, I didn’t know I was close enough to You for You to bless me with this gift.”

Murray’s much appreciated gift of the ability to create protective art and signs, was also remembered by other African Americans in South and Central Americas, the Caribbean, and the United States. Once in the destination country, whether it was Brazil, Haiti, Cuba, or the United States, Africans adapted their memories of secret protective scripts to avoid persecution. This adaptation was influenced by their new cultures and environments. After centuries of adaptations, secret protective signs have been retained even though those retaining them may not understand the origins. These connections have been presented giving important and credible

evidence that J.B. Murray came by his signs and figures, not only as a gift from God, but also as an inheritance from his African ancestors.
Figure 2-1. Female headpiece of Etan Mbembe, a men’s dance association. The mask, perceived to be male, mounts up “as high as the top of the palm trees.” Ekwe Ejagham, Cameroon, 1988. Photo: Ute M. Roschenthaler. Note the symbols for Leopard spots on the cloth of the costume.

Figure 2-2. Makoza of Kingoyi with two of his miniature niombo. Photo courtesy of Swedish missionary, Karlman, approx. 1934, from *The Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art in Two Worlds*, by Robert Ferris Thompson and Joseph Cornet, 60.
Figure 2-3. Detail of chest of miniature *niombo* on which Makoza of Kingoyi has his hand. Photo courtesy of Swedish missionary, Karlman, approx. 1934, from *The Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art in Two Worlds*, by Robert Ferris Thompson and Joseph Cornet, 69. An example of spirit writing.
Figure 2-4. Timbuktu Manuscript pages. c. 13\textsuperscript{th} to 19\textsuperscript{th} centuries. Africanized Arabic. Image from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timbuktu_Manuscripts.
Figure 2-7. Pontos riscados using pemba (consecrated chalk). Photo by Marcelo S. Mercante
Images of Healing: Spontaneous Mental Imagery and Healing Process of the Barquinha, A
Brazilian Ayahuasca Religious System. Dissertation from Saybrook Graduate School and
Figure 2-9. Male and Female Exu Figures With Detachable Trident. 1960. South America, Brazil, Bahia, Salvador. Mingei International Museum. This shows the European addition of a pitchfork, as the Portuguese did not understand the trickster nature of the Yoruba god, Eshu.
Figure 2-10. Palo Mayombe working altar with Anaforuana. Cuba. Photo by Osvaldo Sesti, 2010. Anaforuana is derived from Nsibidi and other African signs.
Figure 2-11. (Left) Ireme Costume from Cuba. Anaforuana. (Right) Detail with of Ireme Costume. Photos by Maude Southwell, 1988, Washington, D.C. This costume shows the cross from the Yoruba crossroad for Eshu, and the cross from the Kongo cosmogram.
Figure 2-12. Anaforuana banner by Yuppi Pratt, Cuba, 1989, 35-1/2" x 37-1/2". Photo by Judith Bettelheim, 1988. Collected and Documented by Judith Bettelheim, Private Collection. This shows how a graphic designer incorporates Anaforuana signs into his graphic design.
Figure 2-13. Haitian Veve Ground Paintings. Photo by Robert Farris Thompson. 1977-1978. Here one sees both the cross, derived from both a Yoruba crossroads for Eshu, and from the Kongo cosmogram, and the star, for speech in Nsibidi, and for Simbi in Kongo religion, a nature spirit too good to be reborn.
Figure 2-15. Akati Akpele Kendo, Warrior Figure (Gu), from the palace of King Glele, Abomey, Fon, Republic of Benin, 1858-1859, Iron, 5’ 5” high, Musée du quai Branly, Paris. This bocio, or empowerment figure, probably representing the war god Gu, was the centerpiece of a circle of iron swords. The Fon believed it protected them, and they set it up on the battlefield. Bocio is adorned with crown, cape, two important implements of the society: the sword representing the blacksmith and an agricultural implement representing prosperity.
KONGO COSMOGRAMS

Figure 2-16. Kongo Cosmograms. Image courtesy of Maude Southwell Wahlman, Ph.D. Signs and Symbols: Africans Images in African-American Quilts. 1993. 80.
Figure 2-17. Graveyard sculptures by Cyrus Bowens (ca. 1900-1961), ca. 1920, Sunbury, Georgia. (Photographed in 1939.) From *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts*, by John Michael Vlach, Cleveland Museum of Art, 1978. 146.
Figure 2-18. A selection of the ends of the balcony pews of The First African Baptist Church. Photos by L. Clifton-James 04/01/10. The designs could have been influenced by Sephardic Hebrew cursive and/or Islamic writing.
Figure 2-19. *First African Baptist Church* in Savannah, Ga. Photo by L. Clifton-James 04/01/10.
Figure 2-20. Interior of First African Baptist Church in Savannah, Georgia, with 9-patch “quilt” ceiling. Photos by L. Clifton-James 04/01/10.
Figure 2-22. Basement floor of *First African Baptist Church* with diamond shaped Congo Cosmogram for ventilation of the space beneath. ca. 1830s. Photo by L. Clifton-James 04/01/10. Possibly derived from a memory of the Kongo cosmogram.
Harriet Power’s Bible Quilt (1885-1886). Powers lived in Clarke County, Georgia, and exhibited at the ‘Cotton Fair’ in Athens, Georgia. Not for sale at the fair, Powers agreed to sell the quilt four years later to Jenny Smith for $5, but only when times became hard and money was needed. From the National Museum of American History, a Smithsonian Institution, Kenneth E. Behring Center, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. H.M. Heckman.
Figure 2-24. Harriet Powers (1837-1911), Athens, Georgia, c. 1897. Harriet Powers was photographed in a fancy dress and wearing a ceremonial apron decorated with appliquéd symbols also seen in Fon, Kongo, and Masonic secret societies. The photograph may have been taken to commemorate her installation in a new rank in an African-American secret society. (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston). Taken from Signs and Symbol: African Images in African-American Quilts by Maude Southwell Wahlman, Studio Books in association with Museum of American Folk Art: NY, 1993. 65.
Figure 2-25. Tombstones in *Gospel Pilgrim Cemetery*, Athens, Ga. Photo by L. Clifton-James 03/31/10.
Putting newsprint on walls probably derives from the West African belief that writing is protective because it incorporates knowledge. Thus writing or vestiges of writing are seen in West African textiles and religious costumes. In African-American homes, putting newsprint or magazines on the walls keep out the cold and it also keeps evil spirits (unhappy ancestral energies called *haint*) busy, for it is believed that they must read everything before they can do any harm. Taken from *Signs and Symbols: Africans Images in African-American Quilts*, by Maude Southwell Wahlman, Studio Books in association with Museum of American Folk Art: NY, 1993. 86.
Figure 2-27. Rachel Bowens’ marker has a hand imprinted on it with a mirror set in the palm; while Aaron Bowens’ headstone carries an embedded automobile headlight. First Baptist Church Cemetery, Sunbury, Georgia. (Left) Rachel Bowens’ marker, Photo by Robert/Live from the Surface of the Moon Blog, 2009. (Right) Aaron Bowen’s marker, Photo by JohnShepardPhotos, 1979. “. . . an automobile headlight has been embedded in the headstone. This is reminiscent of Kongo visions of the flash of the spirit in shining motion. It also compares with the placement of lamp chimneys or small lamps with wicks on Carolina graves today and, in Yombe country in Bas-Zaire in 1976, with the insertion of mirrors in headstones and the deposit of hurricane lamps over tombs. The headlight illumines the way to the other world. Its sparkle is a sign of spirit.” From Robert Farris Thompson’s “Siras Bowens of Sunbury, Georgia: A Tidewater Artist in the Afro-American Visual Tradition,” in *The Massachusetts Review*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Autumn, 1977), 497.
Figure 2-30. (Left) Cemetery sign for *Gospel Pilgrim Cemetery*, Athens, GA. Photo by L. Clifton-James, 03/31/10. (Right) Shells adorn grave at *Gospel Pilgrim Cemetery*, Athens, GA. Photo by L. Clifton-James, 03/31/10.

Figure 2-31. (Left) Shells adorned grave at *Gospel Pilgrim Cemetery*, Athens, GA. Photo by L. Clifton-James, 03/31/10. (Right) Glass bowl with hole through base on grave at *Gospel Pilgrim Cemetery*, Athens, GA. Photo by L. Clifton-James, 03/31/10.
Figure 2-34. (Untitled – Six Blue Spirit Forms) by J.B. Murray. 1970s. Tempera on paper. 19-1/2 x 25-1/2 in. From Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Chuck and Jan Rosenak and museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment 1997.124.122. The six blue spirit forms are created with Caribbean blue, a color associated with positive ancestral figures in Kongo religion.
Figure 2-36. Marie Laveaux Tomb in New Orleans, Louisiana. Photo courtesy of Daniel Lombard. July 8, 2002.
Figure 2-37. Plaque from the Tomb of Marie Laveau with X markings. Photo by Daniel Lombard. July 8, 2002.
Figure 2-38. Anonymous figure found in the back storeroom of a barbershop in New Orleans, Louisiana, artist unknown, ca. 1920, carved and painted sequoia and black ash, painted metal, wire, and metal hardware, 32-5/8 x 13-3/8 x 9 in. Photo from Smithsonian American Art Museum. Gift of Herbert Waide Hemphill, Jr. and museum purchase made possible by Ralph Cross Johnson.
Figure 2-39. James Hampton with his assemblage entitled, *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly*. Photos from *Naives and Visionaries*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 1974). The total altar-like construction, a symmetrical arrangement of shrines, pulpits, lecturns and wall tablets covered or wrapped in gold and tin foil, was assembled in a Washington, D.C. garage, 1950-1964.
Figure 2-40. James Hampton’s tablet of the Diagnosis of the Ten Commandments from his *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations’ Millennium General Assembly* (Images courtesy of the Smithsonian Museum, 1974). The total altar-like construction, a symmetrical arrangement of shrines, pulpits, lecterns and wall tablets covered or wrapped in gold and tin foil, was assembled in a Washington, D.C. garage, 1950-1964.
Figure 2-44. *Untitled*, J.B.Murray, c. 1978-1988, marker ink on paper, 14” x 10.25”. From *Two Transcend: Drawings by J.B. Murray and Melvin Edward Nelson*, catalog by Cavin-Morris Gallery. Jan. 24-Apr. 6, 2013. 58. In Murray’s work, “red represented torment or evil – evil people, evil spirits, evil forces.” Here he has created energies, some of which he has encircled in red that he considers evil. These energies are connected to their evil speech, seen in his red script.

Figure 3-1. J.B. Murray, Untitled, Early 1980s, Marker and paint on paper. 19” x 24”. From *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South, Volume One: Once That River Starts to Flow*, edited by Paul Arnett, William Arnett, Maude Southwell Wahlman, and Theophus Smith, 2000, 475. Murray represents the cells of his prostate gland in healthy Caribbean blue, being invaded by evil red energy from the right. Note the one solid white form with red ‘eyes’ and red base, perhaps his cancerous tumor. He has placed two +s within this form, perhaps requesting God to take it away. While the script and +s in the other blue forms request the cells remain healthy or heal, if invaded.
Figure 3-2. (Untitled) by J.B. Murray. Early 1980s. Ballpoint pens, marker, and paint, on paper. 24” x 18”. Image from Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South, Volume One: Once That River Starts to Flow, edited by Paul Arnett, William Arnett, Maude Southwell Wahlman, and Theophus Smith, 2000, 472. Murray’s depiction of his house or home filled with his family, has colors to show that the house is blessed because it is gold, and each individual within the house is depicted in specific colors dependent upon how Murray feels about the individual.
Figure 3-3. (Untitled – Six Blue Spirit Forms) by J.B. Murray. 1970s. Tempera on paper. 19-1/2 x 25-1/2 in. From Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Chuck and Jan Rosenak and museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment 1997.124.122. Murray’s spirit forms are displayed in Caribbean blue, a Kongo symbol for the watery world of the ancestors and ancestral protection. The spirit forms are created in a vertical style like the vertical element of the Kongo Cosmogram and Kongo conjuring canes, connecting life at the top to ancestral energy at the bottom.
Figure 3-4. (Untitled) by J.B. Murray. 1978. Marker on adding machine tape. Photo by Fred Padgelek at the home of William Rawlings, Sandersville, Georgia. Murray’s script, seen in this photo, has greater similarities with Arabic script than with the English alphabet.
Figure 3-5. *Trouble-Making Ladies*. By J.B. Murray, mid-1980s. Marker and paint on paper, 19-1/2” x 25-1/2”. From *Souls Grown Deep*, Vol. 2, 2000. 477. As stated by William Arnett, “Pink paper, a red figure, and black designs indicate trouble in store for Murray. Lines of pink dots represent a necklace worn by a woman who, according to Murray, “turned [Murray] in to the FBI. In this painting, Murray identifies the various women he had known and been involved with, some reasonably good, some not. The white smears likely indicate that some of the women were dead when the painting was made.” (479)
Figure 3-6. J.B. Murray, *God Bless This Little Babe, God Protect This Little Babe*, 1986, Ballpoint pen and marker on paper, 5-3/4” x 4”. From *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South, Volume One: Once That River Starts to Flow*, edited by Paul Arnett, William Arnett, Maude Southwell Wahlman, and Theophus Smith, 2000, 481.
Figure 3-7. J.B. Murray, reverse of *God Bless This Little Babe, God Protect This Little Babe*, 1986 Marker on Paper. From *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South, Volume One: Once That River Starts to Flow*, edited by Paul Arnett, William Arnett, Maude Southwell Wahlman, and Theophus Smith, 2000, 481.
Figure 3-8. Untitled. By J.B. Murray, 1978-1988, pink paper, paint, marker, and pen. From Mary Padgelek’s *Hands of the Spirit* website: [http://www.handsofthespirit.com/2010/05/05/the-visionary-art-of-j-b-murray-3/](http://www.handsofthespirit.com/2010/05/05/the-visionary-art-of-j-b-murray-3/). Murray tightly packed figures on either side of what Mary Padgelek calls a ‘stream of writing.’ In addition, Murray lines the four edges of his work with protective writing, essentially enveloping the problem and request for help in a script frame with a generous amount of Xs or +s imbuing the request with God’s power.
Figure 4-2. From right to left, Serigne Bousso, Bousso’s wife and Licia Clifton-James. Photo taken by Amadou Laity Bodian, at the Mbour Bousso compound, March 27, 2016.
Figure 5-1. J.B. Murray, Untitled, Early 1980s, Marker and paint on paper. 19” x 24” Image courtesy of William Arnett in Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South, Volume One: Once That River Starts to Flow, edited by Paul Arnett, William Arnett, Maude Southwell Wahlman, and Theophsus Smith, 2000, 475.
Figure 5-2. J.B. Murray, (Reverse of Fig. 42) Marker on Paper, 19” x 24”. Image Courtesy of William Arnett in Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South, Volume One: Once That River Starts to Flow, edited by Paul Arnett, William Arnett, Maude Southwell Wahlman, and Theophus Smith, 2000, 475.
Figure 5-3. From right to left, Serigne Bousso, Bousso’s wife Marième Diagne and Licia Clifton-James. Photo taken by Amadou Laity Bodian, at the Mbour Bousso compound, March 27, 2016.
Figure 5-4. Two Pages of Protective Writing by Serigne Bousso, Touba, Senegal, March 26, 2016, ink on paper, each measuring approximately 6” x 8”. Images scanned April 8, 2016. These papers were given to Licia Clifton-James on March 26, 2016 by Serigne Bousso. He prepared these papers at the request for protection by Clifton-James. These pages are to be placed in one liter of water and allowed to soak until the ink has dissolved from the paper. Then she is to take a small amount of the water with dissolved ink and rub it on her face and hands each morning for active protection.
Figure 5-5. (Untitled – Six Blue Spirit Forms) by J.B. Murray. 1970s. Tempera on paper. 19-1/2 x 25-1/2 in. From Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Chuck and Jan Rosenak and museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment 1997.124.122. Murray’s spirit forms are displayed in Caribbean blue, a Kongo symbol for the watery world of the ancestors and ancestral protection. The spirit forms are created in a vertical style like the vertical element of the Kongo Cosmogram and Kongo conjuring canes, connecting life at the top to ancestral energy at the bottom.
Figure 5-7. Ethiopian *Kitabe* Amulet Brown Leather Pendant with Scroll. Photos by L. Clifton-James, April 8, 2016. A scroll such as this usually made to the height of a person who ordered it was used to provide protection and healing. Often, the scroll would be ordered by a dabtara, healer, who would prescribe the sacrifice of a specific animal, and its skin would be used to prepare one or more scrolls. The scrolls have Christian images and prayers. The subjects of these "Bibles" are always Christian, but actual content varies. Prayers are written in Ethiopic (Ge'ez), a Semitic language that is no longer spoken, but is still used for liturgical and other religious purposes by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Prayers sometime associated with images intend to protect the owner from the invisible. Scrolls like this are usual hung on the wall. The patient would look at the scroll and would recite prayers and the healing process would begin. Sometimes, scrolls are hung in the entrance of the home in order to scare off evil spirits and prevent bad spirits to penetrate the house. They could also be wore as a necklace during the day or laid on the bed or under the pillow in the bedtime. This description is taken from the information listed on Ebay with a similar *kitabe*. In collection of L. Clifton-James.
Figure 6-1. Mama Zogbé, in Mami shrine in Augusta, Georgia, where Mami Wata Healers Society was founded. From Sacred Waters: Arts for Mami Wata and Other Divinities in Africa and the Diaspora, ed. Henry John Drewal. Indiana University Press, 2008, 578. Getting the diaspora and academia to take us seriously was very difficult, because no one had ever heard of Mami Wata priestesses in America. ©Mama Zogbé (Mamaissii Vivian Hunter-Hindrew).
Figure 6-4. (Left) J.B. Murray drawing water from his well near his home, c. 1985. Photo by Andy Nasisse. From *Baking in the Sun: Visionary Images from the South*, University Art Museum, University of Southwestern Louisiana, Lafayette, 1987. 17. (Right) J.B. Murray reading his script on adding machine paper through a bottle of well water drawn near his home, c. 1985. Photo by Judith McWillie, 1985.
Figure 6-5. J.B. Murray, Untitled, Early 1980s, Marker and paint on paper. 19” x 24” Image courtesy of William Arnett in Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South, Volume One: Once That River Starts to Flow, edited by Paul Arnett, William Arnett, Maude Southwell Wahlman, and Theophus Smith, 2000, 475. In this painting Murray has illustrated his diagnosis of prostate cancer. The left side shows still healthy body parts, while the right side, inundated with red, is the invaded areas of his body. The addition of protective script is a request for relief from this invasion. The boxed image is the only figure that is entirely white with red eyes and a red beard. For Murray, red is torment and evil, and white is for purity and/or death. This is Murray’s version of a baka, the evil spirit that has entered his body.
Figure 8-1. Marker on adding machine tape, 1978, by J.B. Murray. Photo by Fred Padgelek at the home of William Rawlings, Sandersville, Georgia. 1982.
Figure 8-2. Kpelle Syllabary. From Afrikan alphabets: the story of writing in Afrika by Saki Mafundikwa.
Figure 8-3. J.B. Murray, *God Bless This Little Babe, God Protect This Little Babe*, 1986, Ballpoint pen and marker on paper, 5-3/4” x 4”. From *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South, Volume One: Once That River Starts to Flow*, edited by Paul Arnett, William Arnett, Maude Southwell Wahlman, and Theophus Smith, 2000, 481.
Figure 8-4. J.B. Murray, reverse of *God Bless This Little Babe, God Protect This Little Babe*, 1986 Marker on Paper. From *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South, Volume One: Once That River Starts to Flow*, edited by Paul Arnett, William Arnett, Maude Southwell Wahlman, and Theophus Smith, 2000, 481.
Figure 8-5. Nsibidi chart. From *Signs and Symbols: African Images in African-American Quilts*, by Maude Southwell Wahlman.
Figure 8-6. Photo of J.B. Murray and the interior of his home. Photo by Andy Nasisse, 1984. From Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South, Volume One: Once That River Starts to Flow, edited by Paul Arnett, William Arnett, Maude Southwell Wahlman, and Theophus Smith, 2000, 464. Scholars compare the four eyes of the stovetop with the *Nsibidi* idea of four eyes, for physical and spiritual vision, from Nigeria, and the Kongo religious sign for the four moments of the soul.
Figure 8-8. Anaforuana. From Afrikan Alphabets: The story of writing in Afrika by Saki Mafundikwa, 2004, 115.
Figure 8-12. Mineral Springs Baptist Church, Mitchell, Georgia. Photo by Licia Clifton-James, 03/28/10.
Figure 8-13. Marker on adding machine tape, 1978, J.B. Murray. Photo by Fred Padgelek at the home of William Rawlings, Sandersville, Georgia. In the yellow box one can see a multitude of dots, dashes, and other marks Murray has placed above, below and all around his script.
Figure 8-14. *Untitled*, J.B.Murray, c. 1978-1988, marker ink on paper, 14” x 10.25”. From *Two Transcend: Drawings by J.B. Murray and Melvin Edward Nelson*, catalog by Cavin-Morris Gallery. Jan. 24-Apr. 6, 2013. 58. In the yellow box a character with additional marks is similar to ٣, Arabic for the English letter A. To Murray script is representative of torment and God. He stated, “The red means torment and them lines lean into torment and the torment is a dead end for the souls and that red lines leads into torment on the fire of torment, evil folks, bad folks, mean folks don’t serve God and they come against God and the dry tongue they can say Amen, but they don’t mean it from the heart.” Murray appears to have written something that was tormenting in the center of this piece, and then encircled it with requests for protection and “souls” or spirit figures to either be healed or to help the cause. Additionally, he has asked God to intercede by drawing red lines throughout the piece, encircling different portions of the script and different figures as well.

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Figure 9-3. *Song of Mami Wata* by Victor Ekpuk, from his Manuscript Series, 1995-2007. Acrylic paint, pastels, poster markers on *walaha*, wooden Islamic prayer board. “My continuous search for indigenous codes and forms to tell visual stories led me to the discovery of Islamic prayer boards (*walaha*). The first idea to use *walaha* as an art medium first struck me in 1995, at a market in Jos, Nigeria, where I saw unused boards on display for sale.

I was attracted to their unique shapes, I was also fascinated by the ingenuity of African aesthetics and how it added meaning to Arabic scripts; I began to see how these boards could tell other stories and bear other meanings. My vision of the potential of the board as a bearer of two important elements of African spirituality and literacy was so strong that, I could not get it out of my head until it was realized. Works in this series are called "Manuscript Series"

“Manuscript Series”, though executed on *walaha* do not make statements about Islam; rather they are an intercultural marriage of form and script. Instead of Arabic scripts, I employ Nsibidi signs and my own script-like drawings to make compositions with themes that center on the human conditions of joy, pain and hope.

I try to manipulate the materials so the mystical essence of the board and that of Nsibidi signs are retained. The goal being to create contemporary sacred tablets whose verses tell our stories, hold our prayers and perhaps provide healing and inspiration to us.” -Victor Ekpuk, from

[http://www.victorekpuk.com/victorekpuk.com/gallery/Pages/Manuscript_Series.html](http://www.victorekpuk.com/victorekpuk.com/gallery/Pages/Manuscript_Series.html)
Figure 9-4. Elimane Fall stands before one of his painted papers. These serve as visual aids when he offers sermons to youth seeking spiritual direction in the philosophy and teachings of Sheikh Amadou Bamba. Mr. Fall practices a form of urban healing, which draws upon traditional techniques and writing practices while addressing the pressing contemporary needs of inner-city people. Photograph by Doran H. Ross, Pikine, 2001. From A Saint in the City: Sufi Arts of Urban Senegal, by Allan F. Roberts and Mary Nooter Roberts with Gassia Armenian and Ousmane Gueye. UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, Los Angeles, 2003. 186.
Figure 9-5. Both *Untitled, (Nativity and First Nativity, right and left)* by David Butler, 1960s, Photo: Richard Gaspari. “[Butler] may have learned from relatives how to work with metal, or he may have seen examples as a child. He cut, folded, or bent tin to achieve three-dimensional sculptures, then perforated the "snipped-tin" sculptural shapes with precise patterns painted with red, white, black, silver, green, and blue house paints. He frequently decorated the works with buttons, pieces of plastic toys, bicycle reflectors, tinfoil, marbles, light bulbs, and other found objects, all attached with wire.”

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come to be part of a man’s life,” stated Thornton Dial.  

Figure 9-8. *Untitled.* By J.B. Murray, 1978-1988, pink paper, paint, marker, and pen. From Mary Padgelek’s *Hands of the Spirit* website: http://www.handsofthespirit.com/2010/05/05/the-

Murray tightly packed figures on either side of what Mary Padgelek calls a ‘stream of writing.’

Figure 9-9. James Hampton with his assemblage entitled, *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations’ Millennium General Assembly*. Images courtesy of the Smithsonian Museum, 1974. The total altar-like construction, a symmetrical arrangement of shrines, pulpits, lecturns and wall tablets covered or wrapped in gold and tin foil, was assembled in a Washington, D.C. garage, 1950-1964.
Figure 9-10. James Hampton’s tablet of the Diagnosis of the Ten Commandments from his *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations’ Millennium General Assembly* (Images courtesy of the Smithsonian Museum, 1974. The total altar-like construction, a symmetrical arrangement of shrines, pulpits, lecterns and wall tablets covered or wrapped in gold and tin foil, was assembled in a Washington, D.C. garage, 1950-1964.)
Figure 9-11. Jezebel. (Left) By Bessie Harvey. Glass jewels and glitter adorn the veiled crown of Jezebel and twisted branches speckled with paint form the queen’s body in this sculpture. Photo by Ron Lee, The Silver Factory/The Arnett Collection, Atlanta, GA. (Right) Detail view the reverse side of veiled crown of Jezebel. Photo by Ron Lee, The Silver Factory/The Arnett Collection, Atlanta, GA.
Figure 9-12. *Untitled*, by J.B. Murray, mid-1980s, marker and paint on paper, 25” x 19”. Photo from *Souls Grown Deep*, Vol. 2, 2001. 478. Murray gives pairs of eyes to his figures. Black eyes if the figure represents good and red eyes if the figure represents evil or torment. Yellow splotched throughout the painting is Murray’s representation of God’s energy assisting in the matter.

Figure 9-16. Nellie Mae Rowe’s *Trying on Earrings*, 1979, Crayon, felt-tip pen, jewelry, found materials, on Styrofoam 13” x 20”. From the collection of Judith Alexander in *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South, Volume One: Once That River Starts to Flow*, edited by Paul Arnett, William Arnett, Maude Southwell Wahlman, and Theophus Smith, 2000, 296. Rowe used what appears to be the Haitian Vévé symbol *Simbi* (life) seen here in the yellow boxes.
Figure 9-17. Haitian Veve.
http://38.media.tumblr.com/f468d98a2539039d2b4e85388ed2bf66/tumblr_inline_n92tc21EQ11srodb7.png. Note the Simbi signs which appears in the form of the asterick, *.
Figure 9-18. *Tree-of-the-Forest-Seven-Bells-Turns-the-World-Round-the-Midnight-Cemetery*, Cuba, 19th century. “One of the most celebrated and feared of all the *minkisi* of Cuba was inherited by J.S. Baró, a black ritual expert who live in Maria-nao, a suburb of Havana. It was an *nkisi*-kettle …, probably originally made by his ancestors in the second half of the nineteenth century and replenished several times in the twentieth.” Baró’s *nkisi* bears a deliberately long and impressive name: *Tree-of-the-Forest-Seven-Bells-Turns-the-World-Round-the-Midnight-Cemetery*—a name replete with cosmological allusion. Its ascending structural sequence—round container, encircling sash, luxurious spray of plumes—mirrors that of *minkisi* forms still seen today in Kongo.”

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48 Note 51 in Chapter 2 of *Flash of the Spirit*. By R.F. Thompson. “Information given me by Lydia Cabrera, telephone interview, winter 1979.”

Figure 9-19. *Untitled*. By J.B. Murray. c. 1978–88, tempera and ink on paper, 8-1/2 × 5-1/2 in. Photo from Cavin-Morris Gallery, New York and family of J.B. Murray. Murray placed three +s or Xs across the top of this piece, along with several within the body of the text as well.
Figure 9-20 (Left) Vévé for Damballah. Image from http://www.ekiria.org/content/vudu-africano-veves---trazos-magicos Damballah is the serpent god of Dahomean and Dahomean-influenced religions which occur in Haiti. Grey Dundaker in Signs of Diaspora Diaspora of Signs, Oxford University Press, 1998. 51. “Damballah was a Vodoun god, in serpent form, who is credited with creating the world and the gods, and is therefore the oldest of the gods.”

(Right) Vévé for Baron Samedi. Image from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:VeveBaronSamedi.svg. “Baron Samedi is a member of the Gede family of Haitian Loa who are often considered to be spirits of the dead. He presides over cemeteries and crossroads and the spirits of the dead. His typical iconography includes a black top hat and long black coat, his face painted like a skull, glasses or sunglasses, and a cane often adorned with [a watery world reptile, such as an alligator].” In both images, +s can be seen showing God’s presence, by the M (Virgin Mary) in the left image and around the cross in the second image.

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50 Damballah is the serpent god of Dahomean and Dahomean-influenced religions which occur in Haiti. Grey Dundaker in Signs of Diaspora Diaspora of Signs, Oxford University Press, 1998. 51.

These demonstrate Sewell’s requests for protection. Emmer Sewell: “That cross is nothing to make a fuss about. You can see the same thing in a lot of places. It’s not nothing for nobody to be alarmed about. It’s not dangerous. I put it on refrigerators and those things—symbols of God. You’d be proud to be as what it is. I put it out on the car, you know, so if they ever sell the car they know whose care they sell to a person. It’s kind of like a Roman number that you had in your schooling days. That is a sign of history. That sign is a great symbol of things. It’s no mean thing to it, nothing devilish in it. It is not. I is a symbol to recognize by. It is a symbol of recognized ways.

You watch Oprah Winfrey when she be running her show; watch her picture sometimes, when she come on at four o’clock. She got that same X on her place. It mean ‘important work.’ ‘You could be somebody.’ It mean ‘reaching for the stars.’ If you ain’t got no common knowledge, and don’t carry yourself in the right way, and learn nothing, you can never be a star; reach the star’s. Never, if you got filthy ways and stupid ways.” From *Souls Grown Deep* website at http://soulgrowndeep.org/artist/emmer-sewell.
Figure 9-22. (Left) J.B. Murray, *God Bless This Little Babe, God Protect This Little Babe*, 1986, Ballpoint pen and marker on paper, 5-3/4” x 4”. From *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South, Volume One: Once That River Starts to Flow*, edited by Paul Arnett, William Arnett, Maude Southwell Wahlman, and Theophus Smith, 2000, 481.

Figure 9-23. *Untitled.* By Emmer Ree Sewell. Photos by William Arnett from *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art, Vol. 2,* Tinwood Books: Georgia, 2001. 181. http://soulsgrowndeep.org/artist/emmer-sewell. Sewell’s assemblage requesting protection. Emmer Sewell: “That cross is nothing to make a fuss about. You can see the same thing in a lot of places. It’s not nothing for nobody to be alarmed about. It’s not dangerous. I put it on refrigerators and those things—symbols of God. You’d be proud to be as what it is. I put it out on the car, you know, so if they ever sell the car they know whose care they sell to a person. It’s kind of like a Roman number that you had in your schooling days. That is a sign of history. That sign is a great symbol of things. It’s no mean thing to it, nothing devilish in it. It is not. I is a symbol to recognize by. It is a symbol of recognized ways.

You watch Oprah Winfrey when she be running her show; watch her picture sometimes, when she come on at four o’clock. She got that same X on her place. It mean ‘important work.’ ‘You could be somebody.’ It mean ‘reaching for the stars.’ If you ain’t got no common knowledge, and don’t carry yourself in the right way, and learn nothing, you can never be a star; reach the star’s. Never, if you got filthy ways and stupid ways.” From *Souls Grown Deep* website at http://soulsgrowndeep.org/artist/emmer-sewell.

(Right) Anaforuana. From *Afrikan Alphabets: The story of writing in Afrika* by Saki Mafundikwa, 2004, 114. This shows the continuation of physical and spiritual vision in Cuba.
In Souls Grown Deep, Maude Wahlman states, “[Traylor’s] subjects range from a camel based on a package of cigarettes to depictions of “ring shouts,”—a traditional religious practice derived from African rituals. Traylor probably drew as he told stories to anyone who would listen. Storytelling may have been his preferred art, with his illustrations providing an income.” (278)
Figure 9-26. *Ladies, Don’t Kill Your Babies.* By J.B. Murray, mid-1980s, marker and paint on paper, 19” x 24”. Amazing anatomical drawing of fallopian tubes and embryos, about which Murray said, “[T]his is telling ladies not to kill they babies before they born.” A few red signs or symbols request protection for the babies from God.
Figure 9-27. *Trouble-Making Ladies.* By J.B. Murray, mid-1980s, marker and paint on pink paper, 19-1/2” x 25-1/2”. “Pink paper, a red figure, and black designs indicate trouble in store for Murray. Lines of pink dots represent a necklace worn by a woman who, according to Murray, “turned [Murray] in to the FBI.” In this painting, Murray identifies the various women he had known and been involved with, some reasonably good, some not. The white smears likely indicate that some of the women were dead when the painting was made.” Arnett, *Souls Grown Deep*, Vol. 2, 2001, 477 and 479.
Figure 9-28. *Untitled*. By J.B. Murray, early 1980s, mixed media on paper, 18” x 12”. From *Souls Grown Deep*, Vol. 2. 465. The fight against good and evil, African Americans (black figures) against the Ku Klux Klan (white figures). “A small cross, circumferential patches of yellow, and a vertical arrangement of blue dots all serve to provide protection for the endangered black figures,” described William Arnett. (478)
Figure 10-1. John Bunion Murray (1908-1988). Photo by Andy Nasisse.
Figure 10-2. Nsibidi chart. From *Signs and Symbols: African Images in African-American Quilts*, by Maude Southwell Wahlman.
Figure 10-3. Kpelle Script. From Afrikan alphabets: the story of writing in Afrika by Saki Mafundikwa.
Figure 10-4. The Vai Syllabary. From *Afrikan alphabets: the story of writing in Afrika* by Saki Mafundikwa.
Figure 10-5. Al-Khushani, *Book of the Judges of Cordoba*, in Maghribi script, the Arabic script characteristic of Spain and North Africa (Spain, 1296). [http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/bodley/whats-on/online/crossing-borders/scripts](http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/bodley/whats-on/online/crossing-borders/scripts), Hebrew Scripts, viewed 12 Jan 2016.
Figure 10-7. Anaforuana. From *Afrikan Alphabets: The story of writing in Afrika* by Saki Mafundikwa, 2004, 114.
Figure 10-9. *The Spirit of African Art*, by Ndidi Dike Nnadiekwe, carved wood panels, 85 x 250 cm, 1994, private collection. From Chika Okeke’s *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa*, London: Whitechapel Art Gallery 27, 1995. Okeke states of Dike’s work, “With Dike, as I Onobrakpeya’s mixed media installations, objects from Akan, Fulani and Igbo material cultures fuse together to create something tellingly African, dispassionately contemporary (there is also an unmistakable presence of *uli*, *nsibidi* and *akwete* motifs and designs in her work). Dike pays fleeting attention to the indigenous art traditions of Africa, as though leafing through a vast volume of African cultural history: images do not stay long enough to make any lasting impression. She is drawn to the culture and art of Africa, yet she is distanced from the vast resources as her spirit wills. Consequently, her sculptures merely suggest their cultural provenance, making no definite claim to particulars.”
Figure 10-11. Photo of J. B. Murray, with a bottle of his well water, reading script from adding machine tape. ©Judith McWillie, 1985.
Figure 10-12. Mineral Springs Baptist Church, Mitchell, Georgia. Photo by Licia Clifton-James, 03/28/10.
Figure 10-18. Marker on adding machine tape, 1978, by J.B. Murray. Photo by Fred Padgelek at the home of William Rawlings, Sandersville, Georgia. 1982.
Figure 10-19. J.B. Murray, Untitled, c. 1980, Paint and marker on car windshield, 18” x 40”.
Figure 10-20. Interior of J.B. Murray “studio”. 1985. Photo by Judith McWillie.

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Figure 10-22. J.B. Murray, (Reverse of Figure 42) Marker on Paper, 19” x 24”. From *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South, Volume One: Once That River Starts to Flow*, edited by Paul Arnett, William Arnett, Maude Southwell Wahlman, and Theophas Smith, 2000, 475.
Figure 10-24. Untitled. J.B. Murray, *Untitled*, 1985, marker, acrylic, watercolor and crayon on paper. At the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA. Photo by Licia Clifton-James 04/01/2010.
Figure 10-25. J.B. Murray, *Untitled*, undated, paint stick on paper. At High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA. Photo by Licia Clifton-James, 04/01/2010.
Figure 10-27. J.B. Murray, reverse of *God Bless This Little Babe, God Protect This Little Babe*, 1986 Marker on Paper. From *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South, Volume One: Once That River Starts to Flow*, edited by Paul Arnett, William Arnett, Maude Southwell Wahlman, and Theophus Smith, 2000, 481.
Figure 10-30. A selection of the ends of the balcony pews of *The First African Baptist Church*. Photos by L. Clifton-James 04/01/10. Possible ancient Hebraic script or Arabic script on the ends of pews made by slaves.
Figure 10-31. (Top Image) Outside of J.B. Murray’s Funeral Pamphlet. From Judith McWillie. (Bottom Image) Inside of J.B. Murray’s Funeral Pamphlet. From Judith McWillie.
Figure 10-32. J.B. Murray’s Funeral, September 25, 1988. Photo by Judith McWillie.
Figure 10-33. Cemetery worker at site marked for Ray Murray’s burial on March 28, 2010. Photo by L. Clifton-James.
Obituary

Ray Murray was born August 10, 1947 in Washington County, Georgia to the late J.B. and Amanda Cleo Murray. He departed this life on March 21, 2010 at his residence in Mitchell, Georgia.

At an early age, Ray accepted Christ joining Second Mineral Spring Baptist Church where he served on the usher board. He received his education in Glascock County School System.


He leaves to cherish his memories, like a son Tawwam Lindsey, three devoted sisters Ellen Lindsey, Annie Bort Brown of Mitchell, Georgia, Mary Elizabeth (Dollie) Rivera (Beach, Florida); a devoted nephew Ronnie Lindsey, Thomson, Georgia, Betty Lindsey and nieces Gwanda (Cindy) Harris, Belinda (Freye) Lindsey Mitchell, Ga. One Aunt Mattie Mae Warthen Sparta, Ga., one Uncle Robert (Fogin) Glenn Kithers of Sparta Ga. Three sisters in laws Eva Murray Bell Warrenton, Ga., Gladys Murray Sandersville, Ga. Lula Murray, Atlanta, Ga.; twelve nieces, ten nephews thirteen great nieces, seven great nephew, five great-great nephews, fourteen great great nieces, devoted cousins Quinton and Carol Edwards, Edward, Evelyn Hazel, Charles, Linda Don, Bill Bell. Dedicated friends James Clark, Ed Flicklin, Gladys Modock, a host of cousins and friends.

Homegoing Celebration of Life
For
Brother Ray Murray

Sunrise
August 10, 1947
Sunset
March 21, 2010
1:00 p.m.

Second Mineral Spring Baptist Church
Washington County
Reverend Robert L. Smith, Pastor
Officiating


Good, C.M. “A Comparison of Rural and Urban Ethnomedicine among the Kamba in Kenya.” In *Traditional Health Care Delivery in Contemporary Africa,* edited by P.R. Ulin, M.H.


http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/bodley/whats-on/online/crossing-borders/scripts.

Herskovits, Melville. Cultural Relativism: Perspectives in Cultural Pluralism. New York:


April 2013. http://www.lat34north.com/historicmarkers/MarkerDetail.cfm?KeyID=029-
HS6A&MarkerTitle=Gospel%20Pilgram%20Cemetry.


States Origin.” Unpublished manuscript.


Issitt, Micah, and Carlyn Main. Hidden Religion: The Greatest Mysteries and Symbols of the

J.B. Murray: Writing in Unknown Tongues: Reading through the Water. Directed by Judith

Joyner, Charles. Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community. Champaign, IL:


Marohn, Stephanie and Malidoma Patrice Somé. “What a Shaman Sees in A Mental Hospital.”


http://edan.si.edu/saam/id/ontologies/PE_has_note_artistbio.


muse.jha.edu.


http://archive.aramcoworld.com/article/201105/from.africa.in.ajami.htm


VITA

Licia E. Clifton-James is a candidate for a Doctor of Philosophy, Art History and the Humanities Consortium, with a specialization in African and African American art and theory. Her qualifying dissertation is entitled *Making the Connection: J.B. Murray and the Scripts and Ancestral Figures of Africa*. In her graduate studies, she attained a grade point average of 3.909 on a 4.0 scale. She received her Bachelor of Liberal Arts degree from the University of Missouri-Kansas City in December of 2007, with a grade point average of 3.625 on a 4.0 scale, and her Master of Arts, Art and Art History, degree from the University of Missouri-Kansas City in May of 2013, with a grade point average of 3.808.

Ms. Clifton-James has provided graduate teaching assistance to Dr. Maude Southwell Wahlman during various semesters during 2010 through 2016. She was a graduate teaching assistant for Dr. Marcella Sirhandi during the Spring semester of 2013. In addition, she assisted Dr. Wahlman in the production of her most recent book, *Mojo Working*.

Ms. Clifton-James has been active in community service. Most recently she was curator for the *Art of the Americas* exhibition brought from the Art Museum of the Americas/OAS in Washington, D.C. The exhibition, running from April 8 through August 6, 2016, is a collaboration between the Belger Arts Center and the Pan American Association of Kansas City, of which Clifton-James is vice-president of the Board of Directors, and a member of the board since 2014. She presently serves on the Board of Directors for the Kansas City Friends of Alvin Ailey, serves on the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art’s Trustee’s Education Programming Committee since 2012, been a judge for the 20/20 Leadership Competition among metropolitan high school students since 2011, and was a board member of the Interdisciplinary Doctor Student Council for 2015 and 2016. In March 2016, Clifton-James was an Honorary Co-Chair for the UMKC Pride: A Breakfast Fundraiser to Benefit LGBTQIA Students, at UMKC.

Additionally, Ms. Clifton-James is a member of the following organizations: West African Research Association, National Association of African American Studies, College Art Association, ArtsKC, Missouri Citizens for the Arts, Association of Historians of American Art, Midwest Art History Society, and the Association for the Study of African American Life and History.

To complete her dissertation, Clifton-James took two research trips to Senegal, Africa. These trips were instrumental in gathering key information connecting her African American research within the United States to its foundations on the continent of Africa. The first trip in May of 2015 was funded by a grant from the Community of Scholars Program in the School of Graduate Studies at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. Additional research funding was
received from the Art and Art History Department and Women and Genders Studies Department at UMKC. She will be forever grateful to Laity Bodian (Guide in Senegal), Waly Faye (Director of the West African Research Center), and Serigne Bousso (Traditional Medicine Healer in Senegal), for their wealth of knowledge and willingness to share that knowledge.

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