

Research Proposal

Significance of Spirituality and Performance in African Diasporic Communities

There is a pressing need to advance historical information about diverse African sociopolitical experiences, which includes information on African descendants worldwide. Pop culture, language and religious traditions, among others, continue to be globally impacted by the forced and voluntary dispersal of people from various parts of the African continent around the world. One fundamental aspect of this narrative is how Africans have survived and continue to survive, sometimes in spaces that have been and continue to be hostile to them. While civil rights and armed struggle are typically recognized as methods used by Africans in the diaspora to fight for freedom, the significance of religion and spirituality in freedom struggles are not often acknowledged. However, African-based religious, spiritual and philosophical practices like vodun, Rastafarianism, Obeah, Candomblé and black Christian traditions in the Americas, have and still play important roles in self-determination, identity redefinitions, cultural celebrations and resistance. But even more overlooked are the powerful implications of performance (roleplaying, song, dance, music, possession) within these practices, not just in preserving inherent belief systems, but in defying and rejecting subjugation. Research into the significance of African-based religions in the diaspora would thus provide channels through which to have a greater understanding of and insight into specific African diasporic communities, especially since these communities continue to be economically, culturally and artistically significant worldwide. Ultimately, this study would not just be about religion, spirituality and philosophy (which cannot be studied in isolation). It would also explore the histories, lifestyles, art forms, theatrical forms and folk traditions of these communities, thus providing greater understanding of the transformation, progression, complexity and overall existence of Africans in the diaspora, as well as their continued impact locally and globally.

Focusing on the above subject, the early career researcher will be expected to start exploring specific Africa-influenced religions, particularly in the Caribbean. Based on their findings, which would include the historical significance of the religions, the continued dedication of adherents and the extent to which the religions have shaped performance and freedom struggles, the researcher will help narrow down and determine what the research should aim for in terms of location and religious emphasis.

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