

**Healing in the Name of Spirit: Conjuring Women in Maryse Conde's *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*.**

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**Abstract**

Colonialism Utilizing the Ifa Paradigm, Georgene Bess Montgomery examines the various manifestations of Ifa embedded in Maryse Conde's *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*." In her analysis, Bess Montgomery contextualizes the references to the Aje—the Sacred Mothers, Orishas Oya, Oshun, Yemonja, and Elegba, and the Ancestors—as she asserts the novel's dramatization of the African spiritual practice of conjuring.

**KEY WORDS:** *African, conjuring, Elegba, Mama Yaya, Oshun, Yemonja, Oya, spirits, and spirituality,*

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## Conjuring Women in Maryse Conde's *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*

A conversation between Judah and Tituba in Maryse Conde's *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* captures the profound essence of conjuring women, women who heal, perform magic, and provide balm for wounded s: "What would the world be like without us? Eh? What would it be like? Men hate us and yet without us their lives would be sad and narrow. Thanks to us they can hope. Tituba, we are the salt of the earth" (Conde 52). Like salt, which is a preserver and a seasoning, conjuring women have preserved African cultural and spiritual traditions and made life bearable for displaced Africans living throughout the diaspora. In writing *I, Tituba*, Conde herself becomes one of these women in that she dredges up a history for Tituba and allows her to tell her story from the grave. In writing back to "memory a Tituba who had been completely forgotten, crossed out history" (Jalalzai 414), Conde presents a story that can serve as metaphor for traditional African spiritual traditions that have been lost from memory and practice. Further, Conde transports traditional African spirituality to a foreign land that is cold and spiritually-barren. In the story, we meet Tituba's ancestors, the trickster god Eleggba, through both Conde herself and Tituba's husband John Indian, and we are allowed to bear witness to acts of conjuring that heal and repair. By employing historical agency Conde is able to create and simultaneously excavate the past. As she unequivocally states, "But we [Caribbeans] can write history. It is not only the Europeans who can write. We can do it, too. . . . the task of the writer is to forget about this kind of superstructure which is imposed upon us by education, tradition, and going to the university. We have to listen to another voice. We can write just like the whites. But we must use another method" (qtd in Jalalzai 441). While Conde seems to have taken creative license in her narrative of Tituba, her story evinces the African notion of complementary opposites, which posits that history and myth are two sides of the same coin. Therefore, although there is not much historical evidence to support Conde's version of the story, her telling is not invalid because it offers Tituba a voice and a context: "Conde's telling thus suggests that an alternative history would not lose sight of indigenous forms and content or individual stories. . . ." (415). Conde,

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then, “listens to this other voice and negotiates between imagined memories of events and the information available through official history” (415). Therefore, Conde’s narrative is not intended to read “straight,” as scholar Michelle Smith notes. Instead, it should be read in circles, an appropriate way of reading a text that is an ancestral narrative: “Tituba’s (hi)story is written in circles. Scenes are played out only to the recalled, re-enacted, and—most importantly for the novel—rewritten. Tituba and her mother function almost as doubles in the text” (602).

*I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* is a fictive recounting of the life of Tituba, a conjure woman from Barbados by way of Ghana, West Africa, who, because of her conjuring, was one of the first persons formally accused of witchcraft in Salem, Massachusetts. According to Conde, “race, gender, and Tituba’s native spirituality contributed” (Jalazai 413) to the charges of witchcraft against her. As part of Tituba’s story we also learn the story of her mother, Abena, who, like Conde and Tituba, recreates Africa through her own stories. Abena’s stories evidence the power of the spoken word to heal and vanquish evil. In order to alleviate the pain and terror of her new life as a slave, Abena recounted stories “that her mother had told her in the village of Akwapim, where she had been born. She would conjure up all the forces of nature at their bedside in order to appease the darkness and to prevent the vampires from draining them before dawn” (Conde 3-4). During such conjuring, we learn that Abena is raped by an English sailor during her forced journey from Africa to Barbados and that, consequently, she becomes pregnant. Cast away by her enslaver upon the discovery of her pregnancy, Abena is united with Yao, a man from her village, who acknowledges their linguistic and spiritual kinship, as a way to calm and allay her fears: “I won’t harm you. We speak the same language don’t we? We worship the same gods” (4).

Africa continues to be front and center in the lives of Abena and Yao. While Abena wished for a boy child— “it seemed to her that a woman’s fate was even more painful than a man’s” (6)—Yao was delighted. Recalling African traditions yet creating

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new ones in a new world, Yao takes newborn Tituba in his “big bony hands and anointed my forehead with the blood of a chicken after having buried my mother’s placenta under a silk-cotton tree. Then, holding me up by the feet, he presented me to the four corners of horizon. It was he who gave me my name: Titubu. TI-TU-BA. It’s not an Ashanti name. Yao probably invented it to prove that I was the daughter of his will and imagination. Daughter of his love” (6). Deeply instilling a love for Africa into Tituba, Yao turns her “face toward the open sea and whispered in [her] ears: ‘One day we shall be free and we shall fly back to the country we came from’” (6). Despite being forbidden to do so, the “men would mount their tall drums and the women would lift their rags up on their glistening legs and dance!” (7) Through practices like these, they brought with them to this new world their own gods, rituals, and belief systems. That this occurs in Barbados, a country which views itself as “Little England,” is indeed significant.

Although Tituba is not nurtured by Abena because she constantly reminds Abena of her rape on the ship *Christ the King* in front of “a circle of obscene voyeurs” (6) and would therefore push Tituba away rather than cuddle her, Yao understands this reluctance and encourages her to nurture Tituba: “Sit her on your lap. Kiss her! Fondle her!” (7). This absence of mother nurturing is not unusual in Conde’s stories. Contrasting the familiar mother figures in literature, Conde presents the mother-daughter relationship as “a traumatic one. Mothers are seldom shown in a caring, protective role, cushioning their children’s worlds to keep them from being hurt” (Smith 382). This constant theme of “absence, death, desertion, ambiguity” is symbolic of the broken and traumatic relationship diasporic Africans have with Mother Africa, after being brutally sundered from her womb and her bosom.

Blossomed by Yao’s love and motherhood, Abena is transformed and becomes “lithe and purple as the sugarcane flower” (7). This transformation and color echo the energy of Oya, deity of change and transformation, whose color is purple. Also the guardian of the cemetery, Oya is appropriately referenced at this point because it as

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this point that Abena incurs her own death. Enchanted by Abena's transformed beauty, Darnell, her former owner, expressed his intent to rape her: "At the sight of my mother, his expression changed radically and flickered between surprise and delight. . . . Come over here" (7). However, having been raped once, Abena declared war and instigated her own death: "My mother struck two blows [with her cane-cutting cutlass]. The white linen shirt slowly turned scarlet" (8). Hanged, Abena dies, and Yao, finally successful on his third attempt, commits suicide by swallowing his tongue.

The events following Abena's death are steeped in African lore and history. Despite her death, her spirit hovers around Tituba, offering her the love and nurturing Abena was unable to give while alive. She returns in spirit and implores and assures Tituba: "Forgive me for thinking I didn't love you. Now I know I will never leave you" (9). Deprived of her mother—but as the beneficiary of "an almost sacred tradition of solidarity among slaves" (8)—Tituba is taken in by an old woman who lived constantly in the company of spirits: "She had cultivated to a fine art the ability to communicate with the invisible. She was not an Ashanti like my mother and Yao, but a Nago from the coast, whose name, Yetunde, had been creolized into Mama Yaya. People were afraid of her, but they came from far and wide because of her powers" (9). Seeming to manifest the energy of Yemonya, the African deity of all-encompassing motherhood, Mama Yaya serves as the loving and nurturing mother Tituba did not have.

And it is with Mama Yaya that Tituba's conjuring lessons begin. These lessons reflect traditional African spiritual beliefs—ancestor reverence, the universal connection between all living things and the omnipresence of Spirit—and taught her "the sea, the mountains, and the hills . . . everything [that] lives, has a soul, and breathes . . . that everything has to be respected" (9). More significantly, Mama Yaya initiates Tituba "into the upper spheres of knowledge. The dead only die if they die in our hearts. They live on if we cherish them and honor their memory, if we place their favorite delicacies in life on their graves, and if we kneel down regularly to commune

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with them” (10). Thus Tituba learns to commune with her deceased relatives even in a foreign and hostile land.

On her way to becoming a conjure woman, Tituba learns “the prayers, rites, and the propitiatory gestures . . . . How to change myself into a bird on a branch . . . . And then she taught me the sacrifices. Blood and milk, the essential liquids” (10). Additionally, with the invisible spirits of Abena and Mama Yaya around her, Tituba’s lessons continue. Under their guidance, she learns about “herbs. Bold hybrids. . . . I devised drugs and potions whose powers I strengthened with incantations” (11); for she believed that without the spoken word activating her magic, the drugs and potions would lose their strength and power.

With these lessons, Tituba is well on her way to being the healer. However, it is only at the crossroads, which evokes the energy of Elegba, who, as deity of the crossroads, choices and decisions, challenges us, that Tituba fully embraces her role as healer. Encountering slaves at the crossroads, Tituba is startled by their frightened response to her. Determined to earn their love and not their fear, Tituba emphatically embraces her destiny: “I was born to heal, not to frighten” (12). Thus she draws closer to the plantations, acquainting herself with the slaves, who gradually “got used to seeing me and came up to me . . . . I visited the cabins and comforted the sick and dying” (12).

Not only does a conjurer heal, she can also see, reading people’s pasts and futures. Gifted with this sight, Mama Yaya sees that Tituba’s life would be filled with suffering. In an effort to provide some protection, she bathes Tituba in a bath of “foul-smelling roots. Then she had me drink a portion of her own concoction” (9). Invoking the protection of Shango, deity of divine truth, justice, and retribution, who is identified with the color red, Mama Yaya ties “a string of little red stones around [Tituba’s] neck” (9). That Tituba is hanged bears witness to the truth of Mama Yaya’s reading. This tragedy is also informed by Tituba’s unquenchable desire for Elegba incarnate John

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Indian, a slave for whom Tituba gives up her freedom, becoming a “slave” for his mistress, eventually even leaving her beloved Barbados for cold Maine, a decision that again bears the truth of both Abena’s and Mama Yaya’s prophesy.

Tituba’s desires for John Indian are reflected in her words to Mama Yaya: “I want this man to love me” (14). Appearing to Tituba and appropriately wearing an orange blossom, which is a flower of Oshun—who is the deity of love, sexuality, and mirrored self-reflection and whose colors are orange, yellow, and gold—Mama Yaya communicates her reading of John as a “shallow nigger, full of hot air and bravado” (15). Despite her mother’s warning and Mama Yaya’s admonition, Tituba is unable to control her desire for John. She is literally enslaved by it. Her situation was unlike that of the enslaved Africans, who “had not chosen their chains. They had not walked of their own accord toward a raging, awe-inspiring sea to give themselves up to the slave dealers and bend their backs to the branding iron.” (25), Because of her love for John, Tituba, on the other hand, does precisely what the enslaved Africans did not do.

While John Indian is, in fact, shallow, he fully understands how to survive, a lesson he tries to teach Tituba. As he wears the mask, he performs the role of Elegba, the trickster. He pretends to be an obsequious servant, throwing himself to the ground and kissing his mistress’ hand. Although he is slapped for his efforts, for him, this is a teachable moment: “The duty of the slave is to survive. Do you understand? To survive!” (22). And this is not the only teachable moment for John. When Tituba, for example, seeking to remain true to her spiritual truths, finds it difficult to embrace the religious beliefs of her new mistress, even to repeat her mistress’s mantra— “I believe in God, the Father almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth, and in Jesus Christ, his only son, Our Lord” (25)—John instructs: “Repeat, my love. What matters for the slave is to survive. You don’t think I believe in their story? But it doesn’t matter. You just need to pretend” (25).

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Countering the Othering that occurs at the expense of diasporic Africans, Conde challenges the European-centered definition and perception of witches with one that reflects African beliefs and traditions. For Tituba, witching is the “ability to communicate with the invisible world, to keep constant links with the dead, to care for others and heal, a superior gift of nature that inspires respect, admiration, and gratitude” (17). Further, Tituba challenges John’s disapproval of witches: “... shouldn’t the witch (if that’s what the person who has this gift is to be called) be cherished and revered rather than feared?” (17). Tituba’s definition of “witches” reflects her profound understanding and awareness of the Aje, the Sacred Mothers—Oshun, Oya, and Yemonya—who are revered as the primordial mothers and divine feminine energy and who have the ability to make happen. We witness the Aje not only through the various manifestations of Oshun, Oya, and Yemonya throughout the text, but also through the literal and spiritual presence of Abena and Mama Yaya in Tituba’s life.

It is when Tituba subscribes to using “witchcraft” as an agency for revenge that she truly sets in motion her fatal destiny. Angered at her mistress Susanna Endicott because she wants to take John away from her, Tituba wants “her to die slowly, suffering horribly, knowing it’s because of me” (29). Full of her power and herself, she ignores Mama Yaya’s admonition: “Don’t let yourself be eaten up by revenge. Use your powers to serve your own people and heal them” (29). She forgets that her nature is to heal, not destroy. Consequently, Susanna Endicott suddenly falls ill: “a malodorous liquid streamed down the mistress’s legs and formed a frothy puddle on the floor” (31). Further, Tituba dismisses Mama Yaya’s prophecy that she will lose him anyway—as she does. (John escapes the witch trials and is rumored to have taken up with a white woman; ever the trickster, he has internalized the art of mask wearing to save himself and to survive.)

When Susanah Endicot, in an act of revenge, sells Tituba and John to a new master, Samuel Parris, who takes them to Boston—fulfilling Mama Yaya’s prophecy that Tituba would go across waters—it becomes even more apparent that I, Tituba is

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conceptually anchored to African ancestral traditions. Signaling this impending change, Oya arrives on the winds of a hurricane which serves as the natural backdrop to the chaos that will be Tituba's life in Boston. It is in this new land that we witness the true migration of Spirit: It traveled from Ghana to Barbados and then to Boston, a strange and cold land devoid of the natural landscape that had provided the herbs and sacrifices needed for potions and drugs used for healing. Boston clearly lacks certain natural items that Tituba needs to demonstrate her power, the art of healing: the trees in which the invisible spirits repose, the condiments for their favorite dishes, and the plants and roots for healing" (45). She is, therefore, forced to make substitutions: "a maple tree whose foliage was turning red would do for a silk-cotton tree. Glossy, spiny holly leaves would replace the Guinea grass. Yellow, odorless flower would do for the salapertuis, the panacea for all the body's ills, which only grows in the foothills back home. Prayers did the rest" (45). Even in this limited environment, Tituba's African impulses assert themselves. For example, Tituba recognizes the cats she meets in Boston as the "spirits of the place" greeting her, whereas the whites saw them as manifestations of the power of witches. But, ever the African, Tituba intuits that the most noble symbol of her powers is the animal of a nobler breed, the snake, "a magnificent reptile with dark rings" (58). Significantly, the snake, with its rings and ability to make a circle with its body, symbolizes the power of the ancestral spirits. Furthermore, Tituba accepts that the spoken word activates the magic in her herbs and potions. As Abena had done in a strange land, Tituba tells stories too. That her stories ultimately lead to charges of witchcraft is the result of a clash of spiritual values in Boston and further proof of Mama Yaya's prophetic powers.

Physically separated by the crossing from Mama Yaya and Abena, Tituba engages in Fetching, "the act of retrieving 'old' or indigenous community practices to change one's current reality." She realizes the need to have them with her and determines to spend three nights in prayer, "calling to the spirits with all my strength: 'Cross the waters, O my mothers, I'm so alone in this distant land! Cross the waters!'"

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(69). Perhaps in response to her prayer, Tituba meets Judah White, a friend of Mama Yaya, who teaches her the “names and properties of each herb,” and Tituba makes “mental note of some of the remedies whose secrets she revealed to [her]” (51). In essence, Judah White continues Mama Yaya’s lessons in conjuring. From him Tituba learns how to cleanse a space spiritually and, most importantly, how to “prepare your garden and plant all the required medicinal herbs. Failing this, have them grow in earth-filled boxes. Don’t forget to spit on them four times when waking” (53-54).

There is further evidence that Tituba continues to be in contact with those conjuring mothers (Abena and Mama Yaya, who had traveled the water with her) in Spirit and through their teachings. When her charge Betsy becomes more absent-minded, Tituba gives her a “magic bath,” plunging her “up to her neck in a liquid to which I had given all the properties of amniotic fluid ....” (63) The fact that she throws the water away at the crossroads—an act that teems with spiritual significance—recalls a moment when, at her own crossroads, Tituba chose the wrong direction by seeking revenge on her mistress. Perhaps in remembrance of the result of her revenge, Tituba conveys Mama Yaya’s message to a fellow servant who requests her help in exacting revenge: “The woman who revealed to me her science taught me to heal and console rather than to do evil. Once, when, like yourself, I dreamed of doing my worst, she warned: ‘Don’t become like them, knowing only how to do evil’” (68).

Jailed upon the accusation of witchcraft, Tituba is, however, not hanged. She escapes the noose and is healed by the sea, her connection to home: “Her great wet hand pressed against my forehead. Her salts filled my nostrils. Her bitter potion moistened my lips” (119). Officially pardoned, Tituba is saved by a Jewish man, a merchant, for whom she works her magic by conjuring up the image of his deceased wife. In healing his spirit, Tituba engenders his appreciation and dependency. He arranges for her to return to her Barbados, where she reconnects with her ancestral past: “The invisible trio was there among the crowd of slaves, sailors, and idlers come to welcome me. Spirits have that particularity of never getting old and keeping their

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youthful features forever. Mama Yaya, the tall Nago Negress with sparkling teeth. Abena my mother, the Ashanti princess with her jet-black skin and ritual scarifications. Yao, the silk-cotton tree with large, powerful feet” (141). Once more Tituba realizes the all-pervasive presence of Spirit: “A feeling of lightness drove out her previous thoughts. . . . the whole island was there for me to behold lovingly” (143); and it is there that Tituba becomes more cognizant of her power and is recognized for that power: “Honor us, mother, with your presence” (142). The island itself is alive with “a soft murmur. ‘She is back. She is here, the daughter of Abena, the daughter of Mama Yaya. She will never leave us again’” (147).

Completing the circle of three generations of women—from Barbados to Maine and back to Barbados—and carrying Africa with and within her—Tituba becomes the embodiment of African ancestral power. While voyaging home on the ship *Bless the Lord*, she commanded the elements to settle the winds. The circle now complete, Tituba devotes her time to experimenting and expanding her powers, roaming the countryside “armed with a large bag and a small knife for digging up herbs. Likewise, I endeavored to strike up a new conversation with the rivers and the wind, in order to discover their secrets. . . . I increased the number of sacrifices of fresh fruit, food, and live animals that I laid at the crossroads, in the tangled roots of certain trees, and in the natural grottoes where spirits like to hide” (148).

In telling Tituba’s story, Conde rescues her from being a mere footnote in the written history of the Salem witch trials. She allows Tituba to express her mortification at being such an inconsequential figure: “I had already regretted having played only a minor role in the whole affair and having had a fate that no one could remember. Tituba, a slave originating from the West Indies and probably practicing ‘hoodoo’” (149). Thus Tituba determines to take a more active role in the revolution for freedom: “I needed to practice my art, boldly descending into the wildest, most secluded valleys. . . . I discovered how to treat those illnesses. I also discovered how to treat yaws and to heal those wounds that slaves got day after day. I managed to mend open, festering

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wounds, to put pieces of bone back together again, and to tie up limbs. All that, of course, with the help of my invisible spirits, who hardly ever left me” (156). Tituba prays against the fatalism expressed by Yao and Mama Yaya, who tells her the revolution will end in a “a bloodbath as it always does! The time is not ripe for our freedom! Our memory will have to be covered in blood” (165) because there is “no end to the misfortunes of black folks” (165). Beseeching all the elements, Tituba prays: “‘Lord of the Air, the Night, and the Waters, You who make the child move in its mother’s womb, You who make the sugar-cane grow, And fill it with sticky juice. Lord of the Air, the Sun, and the Stars . . .’ I had never prayed so hard. ‘Lord of the Present, the Past, and the Future, without whom the earth would not bear fruit, neither coco plum nor jujube nor passion fruit, nor pomme cythere, nor Congo peas . . . ‘I lost myself in prayer’” (165).

Having agreed to participate in the revolution—because “the future belongs to those who know how to shape it and, believe me, you won’t get anywhere with recantations and animal sacrifices. Only through actions” (164)—Tituba meets her ultimate fate, the death she escaped in Maine. Her relationship with the maroon Christopher, like her relationship with John Indian, leads to her death. Her death is a consequence of her weakness for men, a weakness she is never able to overcome despite her mother’s entreaty that she learn to live without a man. Having dreamed of an imminent act of betrayal, Tituba awakens her “adopted” son Iphigene so that they could both escape, but it is too late. Their cabin was surrounded by soldiers aiming their guns at them, and Tituba is thereby reminded of her inescapable fate: “Well, witch, what they should have done to you in Boston, we’re going to do to you here! And you’ll meet up with your sisters who left you before you did” (171). Thus even Tituba’s death is ensconced in African ideology of ancestral reunion as she cries out to her Iphigene, “Don’t be afraid! Above all, don’t be afraid. We’ll soon be together again!” (172).

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Telling her tale from the other side, Tituba recounts, “I was the last to be led to the gallows, for I was to be given special treatment. . .” (172). She decides against defending her truth with the truth, “for what was the point? Soon she knows she would reach a kingdom where the light of truth burns bright and unrelenting” (172) and where Mama Yaya, Abena, and Yao are waiting to take her by the hand.

In writing *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*, Maryse Conde becomes conjurer as she excavates and re-historicizes the story of Tituba, exhuming her from the grave and giving her the power to voice her own narrative, silent nevermore of her truth as she was during the trials, choosing instead to proclaim herself a witch, having learned John Indian’s lesson that the slave must learn to survive. In the end, Tituba proclaims her truth to us, her listening and believing audience, while choosing not to tell her truth to those who labeled her witch and thus believed she was deserving of her fate.

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