CONCLUSION

The Continuing Quest to Map Secrecy, Concealment, and Revelatory Experiences in Africana Esoteric Discourse

“There Is a Mystery…”

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The earth beneath my feet is the great womb out of which the life upon which my body depends comes in utter abundance. There is a work in the soil a mystery by which the death of one seed is reborn a thousand-fold in newness of life.

Howard Thurman (1953, 210)

Subsequently, secrecy itself is embedded in African religious culture across the Diaspora. Among the Yoruba, for example, there is no exact word for “religion”; its closest concept is found in their word awo, [which means] secret…In Haiti, the konesanz resides in the mystery...

Yvonne Daniel (2005, 253)

The Mystery Unfolds

The epigraphs above consider the inexplicable nature of mystery, a theme that each of the preceding essays engages in some way. Theologian Howard Thurman contemplates the centrality of mystery in the cycle of life and death, while anthropologist Yvonne Daniel recognizes mystery and secrecy as important tropes in African Diasporic religions. In beginning this project several years ago, we were acutely aware of the importance of this trope. We were also mindful of several additional realities that would impact our work. We understood that secrecy, particularly the extent to which it has shaped, in whole or in part, the religious sensibilities of African Africans, was only beginning to be understood fully. We realized that the same could be said for mystical experience, the impact of which is far reaching among African Americans, but the critical examination of which—in historical and contemporary perspective—remained in its infancy.\(^1\) We also knew that neither methodological parameters

\(^1\) Work like that of Barbara Holmes (Holmes 2004) on the Black contemplative tradition has broken new ground in this area.
laying the groundwork for the integral and trans-disciplinary study of the aforementioned phenomena as part of the African American ethos, nor a rationale for a distinct sub-field dedicated to such work, had yet to be articulated. Addressing these lacunae, and situating African American notions of secrecy, concealment, mysticism, and enlightenment in relationship to the so-called Western Esoteric Tradition became, therefore, the overarching goals of this pioneering collection of essays.

Secrecy and the Embrace of Mystery in African American Esotericism

As many of the essays in this volume make clear, secrecy serves as a primary agent in the crystallization of African American religions. It gives definite form to the religious experiences of African Americans. Secrecy, here, represents “anything that is kept intentionally hidden...it also denotes the methods used to conceal, such as codes or disguises or camouflage, and the practices of concealment” (Bok 1982, 5–6). Varying degrees of hiddenness, therefore, characterize secrecy. More importantly, secrecy is not representative of a static form, but it is processual in that it involves utilizing multi-varied processes to conceal information, practices, and sources, which have been set apart and deemed candidates for hiddenness. With regard to African American religions, concealment affords not only the protection of secretive dimensions, but also allows for the transmission of foundational tenets that assures the overall preservation of religious tradition.

Instances of concealment, transmission, and preservation can be found operating within the complex terrain of African American religions. Material objects and symbols have been used to preserve elements of secrecy in these religions. For example, slaves used an iron pot to conceal religious activities occurring in hush harbor meetings. According to various interviews of former slaves, “the pot was usually placed in the middle of the cabin floor or at the doorstep, then propped up to hold the sound of praying and singing from escaping” (Raboteau 2004, 215). The ordinary ‘cooking’ pot as a concealing agent offered slaves a sense of safety from the prying eyes of the plantation overseer and preserved the sanctity of the meeting place where they freely practiced their unique expressions of Christianity. Like material objects, symbols were also employed to maintain secrecy in African Diasporic religions. For example, Muslim slaves (mainly taken from Senegambia) in Jamaica, South Carolina, and Georgia adapted Christianity to Islam. God was equated to Allah while Jesus Christ represented the prophet Muhammad. These slaves