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Thug Life: Call of the Ancestors

By Toya Groves

Nynah's body crawled from beneath the bellowing and howling mounds of sea waves. Waves that had once massaged her cold limbs into motion when her heart and lungs took their breaks. Each muscle and vein pulsated in a rhythmic harmony creating an orchestra of melodies that never outshined the other. It was as if each body part took its place under the sun singing solely at a time but only briefly touching each other's note dancing on the trail of a secret. A secret that refused to drown a young heart but instead rose from the waters and into the sky and was only seen by the breath of stars that inhaled it creating raindrop songs. And there it wept upon the land pushing up trees and sprouting flowery beds of grass. There it fed the rivers thus wetting the whistles of a traveling people. And on her songs they sang her secret upon tunes singing the melody of the tears that fall with laughter. Of smiles that sweeten sadness. Of giggles that hush harsh lullabies. And this is the way it went. There that secret slept within the wombs of People and nature. But there it also nourished and inspired stories that would transcend space and time. And as the words "your daughter will return" flowed within slave waters and twirled through her momma's hair, the daughter who allowed her body to sink into the

depths of sand and rain, allowed her spirit to resurrect links of a chain that would not confine or imprison or act as the shackles worn on the feet of slaves, but rather would lead a people blinded by hustlers and corruption back to their source of prosperity and truth.

The chains we would wear would keep us connected to the spirit of a land - Africa - that gave birth to humankind and the knowledge of life. Let these chains not imprison us but let them lead us instead. Let these chains once believed to be anchors be the umbilical cord to our higher selves. So as we begin to heal ourselves from the travesties of our long war on the North American continent we must remind ourselves that God Speaks in Signs whether it be the scrolls of letters, or the ingenuity of mathematics, or dancing motions or singing souls. Imagine if we believed the shackles on our feet were flying shoes or the prisons of our system were Meccas where our soldjahs would train and gather and love.

We must recognize and honor those of our children who have chosen to die in the streets to serve as our angels. This I say when we ask ourselves over and over why do we continue to choose a life in handcuffs. This I say when prisons with names such as Angola and Pelican Bay are overflowing with Black Boys. This I say as mommas and daddies sacrifice themselves to crack to show children the effects of its harms. Could these handcuffs be connecting us to something larger than police and the prison industrial complex? Could they actually be connecting us to each other and more so to our long lost mother and our genesis? Could gang warfare be a blood ritual misunderstood and forgotten that cleverly spills into the streets of our inner city black neighborhoods? Could

the stories of young deaths be the stories of resurrection found in the stories of Osiris and Isis?

As god and goddess who brought the civilizing arts, Osiris and Isis were greatly beloved by the people. But Osiris was killed by his enemy Seth who chopped him into pieces, scattered over the land of Egypt. Grieving, Isis went looking for him, and tried to gather his body together again. Pregnant, she gave birth to Horus, the promised one, the new young leader.

Being an African-American studies major at UC Berkeley, I inquisitively jumped into the major problems African Americans have endured in this country. And with an open mind and a wide third eye, I learned of economic deprivation, cultural destruction and loss and social moral decay. I studied the history of my people from Africa, through the Caribbean and into the Americas. Within that history from 1609 until the 1980s organized rebellion has occurred substantially. All sorts of rebellions most often associated with spirit occurred. At the beginning of slavery Africans jumped off of slave ships, poisoned slave masters, destroyed crops and otherwise refused to cooperate in the enslavement. Sometimes suicide and murder acted as martyrdom that inspired. Not to mention organized mass murders of white people lead by a slave who was often spoken to by spirit or god, like in the cases of Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey.

Like most people, the slaves' first taste of English reading and writing came by way of the Bible. The Procession of the Underground Railroad to help slaves escape to the north manifested itself in the back woods of Maryland lead by a woman called Moses singing forth fleeing slaves via songs about escapes to "Egyptland" by following the North Star, called "the drinking gourd." In the 1900s Marcus Garvey's rebellion urged

black people to return to their motherland. This call was more than just a speech given to an audience. Garvey's voice chanted and moved the largest following of Blacks in history – and out of the water rose up The Black Star Line, a vessel that would take some of us back to the motherland to found the country of Liberia in West Africa! Then in the 1950s processions of peace changed the flow of American racism as Rosa Parks stayed seated aboard a public bus and challenged segregation. Inspired by the Civil Rights mass movement (flow) the anti-war movement stood up against the shedding of blood in Vietnam. In the era of the heavenly seventies the cry of the ancient African Black Madonna emerged singing from Afro heads and leather coats: “I am Black and Beautiful.”

Then in the 1980s the forward flow stopped. Suddenly with major devastation of Black areas with drugs pouring in and destruction of Black organizations and leadership, the rebellion seemed subdued and controlled. Education and welfare cuts stopped forward motion. Righteous people decided that it was better to beat the oppressors by their own game. And this is where I thought my people sold out. I had always been taught not to play with cheaters and liars. I could not figure out why we had decided to join them rather than to beat them. So I sat in classes and listened on the radio as my people denigrated the ghetto life as gang warfare broke out in Los Angeles. C. DeLores Tucker campaigned against gangstah rap, saying that “gangster rap is drug-driven, race driven, and greed- driven” and another form of genocide. Meanwhile video of the vicious police beating of Rodney King repetitiously played over and over again on the television. Notice how that situation was called “the Rodney King trial” by the media but yet Rodney King was never on trial. I watched as hip hop and break dancing fought to act as a rebelling

force in the upliftment of Black people and cried when it crossed over into mainstream America, as if a secret had been told - and sold.

So in the new millennium, where is our rebellion? Where is the mustakine¹ and the spirited insurrection? Where is our flow? I say it must be where we have hastily refused to look. It must be where the government has its tanks pointed. It must be in our Black Ghettos. It must be in the ongoing controversy of gang wars.

In Judy Grahn's book, *Blood, Bread and Roses* she defines war as a metaform for blood rituals because it is just an extension of old warrior games, which are parallel menstrual practices.² For example, in the woman-centered creation stories menstrual ceremonies played a central role in the functionality of the tribe, and were empathetically paralleled by loving brothers, sons and fathers as they cut themselves to synch up with a cyclical flow of blood. Out of these ceremonies emerged tattooing, circumcision, scarification and other rites evoking blood to flow out of men's bodies. The act of pulling blood from within to without changed a boy to a man.

We can see how in urban gangs, these parallel menstrual practices could have evolved into the 'Jumping In' ritual. To be 'jumped in' to a gang involves the contestant, or initiate, to endure a beating from the other gang members. The rite begins with the members getting drunk off of Malt liquor or something of that nature. A libation is always poured on the ground before the gangstahs drink. And then with no warning at all the beating begins with fists punching and feet kicking. The contestant is not able to fight back but must endure and protect himself in a way that does not reveal pain or fear of the blood that spills on his clothes. The gang members will make sure to beat him hard

¹ Mustakine is a Muslim sacred journey.

² Grahn, Judy. *Blood, Bread and Roses: How Menstruation Created the World*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1993, 269.

enough to draw blood. With female gang members the ritual involves sexual penetration by a male gang member or a 'jumping in' ritual with all females. Following this ritual the contestant, if approved by the OG or Original Gangstah (an elder gangstah), he/she is given his/her flag (a colored bandanna), and a new name, and is embraced as a family member. Loyalty is very important to the gangstah and betrayal is often dealt with by death.

Ironically, or rather symbolically, the rise of the gangs of the 1980s and 1990s occurred right along with the rise in teenage births, as though to replenish what was being ravaged as the dishevelment of the 1980s, and the forgetting of the legacy of empowerment took hold. In the 80s along with Reaganomics, crack cocaine had pierced all black communities. Women and men who were once members of Black power groups found themselves numbed by the zombifying effects of crack cocaine. Most people had a stake in it whether through addiction or through money lines. Neighborhoods in Oakland, Los Angeles, and Berkeley were destroyed in months and then taken over by gentrification. Mothers and fathers were removed from their homes either to drug rehab locations or in handcuffs to prison. Many children were left to fend for themselves and raise themselves. Crack not only economically thieved the Black Community but the social stigma that was attached to this drug left families isolated in shame. Black Power had been subdued by the White Widow.

In *Blood, Bread and Roses*, Grahn points out that war is primarily for socializing young men.³ I would have to agree that in urban gangs socialization is a major force behind joining a gang. Being that the society as a whole had formed an attack resulting in exclusion, poverty, and neglect, shame then became a major aspect to retaliate against.

³ Ibid., 269.

The gangs then developed a strong counterattack on all things shameful and here began the strong insurgence for RESPECT. Ideas of respect moved from casual hellos to passers-by on the street to the elaborate system of flagging and representing for your gang.

It is with this need for respect we picked up the weapon of Patriarchy to use against each other . . . the gun.⁴ This is when the deracination between elders and the youth occurred because elders had always been believers in the eye for an eye theory coming out of the traditional African way of never running from a fight.⁵ But the picking up of the gun eliminated the need for physical contact warriorship. You no longer were required to wear the blood of your assailant home on your sleeve but could strategically shoot your enemy from afar. As easy as it seemed for the first gangstahs to do this, the outcome as this feat accelerated has proved challenging. Not only did shooting someone then bring such a huge onslaught of respect, the power and respect commanded became even greater as the gunmen moved large crowds to drop to their faces while the rhythmic drum-like sound of the shot echoed for miles banging across concrete walls. Shooting, even shooting into the air, was a smoke signal or warrior call for war, and respect.

As in jihad the gangstah soldiers are not afraid to die for their set or gang colors. Historically the first gangs to rise up were named the Bloods and the Crips, Bloods adopting the color red and Crips flagging blue. Blue and red are the two colors of blood. Blue as it travels within veins, red as it hits the air. Crips is short for crippling. So the gang names have meaning in the sense to draw Blood or to make Crippled.

⁴ Welsing, Frances Cress. *The Isis (Yssis) Papers*. Chicago: Third World Press, 1991, 103-111.

⁵ Ben-Jochannan, Yosef, and John Henrik Clarke. *New Dimensions in African History: The London Lectures of Dr. Yosef Ben-Jochannan and Dr. John Henrik Clarke*. Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1991.

The Bloods and the Crips are found in mostly southern California, where they began. But around the country gangs emerged from territory or land-based loyalty as in the Bay Area. For some reason the idea of dying for colors seemed absurd to the rest of the gang world, so territory domination took over colors, what gangs fought for. For example in Oakland gangs such as Ghost Town and the Lower Bottoms emerged. Often other territorial gangs were birthed, named for a street of the ghetto or parts of town like the Waterfront gang or Prince Street of Berkeley. Just as in flagging with colors, graffiti and name-tagging of the concrete walls of the ghetto marked different territories and often were calls of war. Tributes to soldiers gunned down and stories of their triumph are also left on the walls. Graffiti can be thought of as an extension of the hieroglyphs of ancient Egypt. In territory gangs it is where you were born or where you were raised that places you. But most territories are the sacred forbidden lands of the city hidden from the mainstream and the only outsiders are police patrols. Gangs, although seeming to act as ordinary consumers, have their own economic flow generated by the black market and the drug economy. They divvy up the antidotes.

The attribution of red and blue colors associated with gangs is a form of *cosmetikos*, as defined by Grahn - "ordering the cosmos through body arts."⁶ Not only does the gang member only dress in his/her own color but also it is forbidden for him/her to wear the color of their rival. In addition the refurbishing of the 'old school' car is tied to the color of the gang member. A gang member flag is a red or blue bandanna that would normally hang from the pocket of saggy pants or be tied as a kerchief around the head.

⁶ Grahn. *Blood, Bread and Roses*, 80.

The gangstahs also embody certain body movements that are similar to the mudras of Tantric yoga and dances of the Orixas, when the gods take over an entranced dancer, and Indians' shuffling circle dances. For example the 'crip walk is a foot shuffle that is done by quick foot motions moving the body forward. 'Going dumb' is a kind of trance dance.

It is also forbidden for gang members to say the name of their opposing gang. For example a Crip will never call anyone or himself 'blood' but will only use the term 'cuz' to recognize his brother. Sometimes even the use of words descriptive of the color is forbidden. A Crip will often say 'dead' instead of 'red.' They also would never eat food or even ride in cars associated with their opposing gang. Bloods will never dance the 'crip walk.' It is during the strip riding, or procession, on weekend nights when these major forms of cosmetikos are practiced.

Strip riding is a major part of gang life. It is during these processions that friends connect and meet. Girls saunter through the streets dressed in braided hair, manicured fake nails, and revealing clothes hoping to meet the soldier of their dreams. The strip normally takes place after midnight and follows a major party or show. Often women dance shaking their booties and gyrating their bodies in snake-like fashions as men turn 'doughnuts' in their cars. A doughnut is when a car turns in circular motions in a four-way intersection, stirring up smoke and grit, blaring music, and cheered on by rowdy excited audiences. It is similar to the idea of bull riding as the driver and passengers are swung around inside the raging Ford Taurus or fixed up 'old school' car. It is during this time that the major form of *shakti* emerges as the baby gangstahs on the street go wild swinging their dreadlocks, and 'going dumb.' 'Going dumb' is a wild dance with the

throwing around of the head as the body twists and hands ‘throw up their set’ or show their mudras representing their gang. Doughnuts also leave circular skid marks in the streets that mirror the symbol derived from the Egyptian spiral of life, the Ankh.⁷

The conclusion of the strip always ends with the police harassing the youth or gunshots being fired. Either way most people jump in their vehicles and make their way indoors. In the morning most definitely you will hear of somebody getting shot or arrested. Walking the streets you will see where the deceased’s point of departure is decorated with candles, balloons, and pictures. This is the sacrificial part of the ritual.

The gangstahs are not afraid of death or jail. The people do not obey laws or respect government agencies. Government agencies like school and welfare are prominent in the community but are not treated as important or integral to the gang communities. Children often are grinding or selling crack or marijuana all through the night so do not always make it to school the next day. In addition those agencies threaten the livelihood of the ‘hood.’

Adding to the sense of ceremonial sacrifice, the funeral rites are not the normal sad day of mourning but carry aspects of resurrection. At the funeral service, people walk around with t-shirts showing the face of the deceased. Attendees do weep, but they do so with rap music blaring from cars in the processions. People always ‘go dumb’ and throw their hand signs up. The deceased gang member is always dressed in his gang cosmetikos. The funeral attendees pass blunts rolled with marijuana and pour alcohol libations to the deceased.

⁷ Walker, Barbara G. *The Woman's Dictionary of Symbols and Sacred Objects*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988, 14.

This idea of death and rebirth echoes throughout the funeral, and throughout gangstah culture. Biggie Smalls, a popular rapper, has a song called “You’re Nobody ‘Till Somebody Kills You.”⁸ It is within this idea that the story of Osiris’ death and rebirth as guardian of the underworld is replayed. Making t-shirts and sharing stories is a means of making one who is mortal become immortal and everlasting.

Simultaneously as the death toll rises amongst gangstahs throughout the country so does the rebirth story of Isis; as the young soldiers die more are born, as young teenage women give birth to the children of the deceased. There are so many stories of young women being surprisingly pregnant following the death of a young man. It is with these sons and daughters that the everlasting battle between good and evil boils up, and the spiral of life and death.

Hovering in the distance is an army of angels waiting to emerge led by the god Osiris. As the people know the battle will not be won by those on earth alone but must be sanctioned by the ancestors. It is almost as if the ancestors of the urban ghetto family gain strength because our angels are taken as youthful bountiful warriors rather than decrepit old decaying used-up bodies.

I can only compare the funeral of gangstahs and strip riding to that of the Ghost dance of the Lakota, the dance of the Orixas, and the Voudoun ceremony. The circle dancing, the bodies shaking, the mudras, and the chanting with bass-blaring cars evokes spirit amongst the urban youth. It causes people to raise the *shakti* and move between the dimensions. And it does require a sacrifice subconsciously known to all who attend.

⁸ Notorious B.I.G., R. Kelly, Jay-Z, Angela Winbush, Mase, Diddy, Lil' Kim, Too Short, and DMC. *Life After Death*. New York, N.Y.: Bad Boy Records, 1997, “You’re Nobody (Til Somebody Kills You).”

I am sitting right now in the midst of the social implications of this type of ceremonial practice as I listen to the news proclaim the death of Stan Tookie Williams, the co-founder of the Crips, who later wrote books urging young people not to join gangs. I lay awake all night and watch as his spirit is given to the world of the ancestors. I mourn the loss of a soldjah whose only crime was the subconscious organization of blood rituals. If the world were in our hands, he would be a tribe leader or a Chief. The elders and the outsiders of our people ask and wonder where our leaders are. And the confused wonder as to why we are worshiping the gangstah or thug life.

White people call the police on people doing doughnuts in the street and are frightened by gunshots echoing throughout the city. Programs of anti-violence are imported into the schools, blood shedding is treated with the utmost contempt, and the police are always called when people get loud. With the police come the deterioration of the strip and the squashed assembly of our people. With the police come the suppression of the drum and the true call of Violence. With the police come the kidnapping and mass forced movement of a people into the prison industrial complex. My people are literally being plucked off the street and denied their chance of resurrection.

For my research I decided to go back into the ways of my youth and ride the strip of Oakland on Saturday night. To my utter surprise and heartbreak the streets were bare. All that walked were the soulless zombies of crack cocaine, the blue, red, and white lights of the police and decrepit prostitutes. I rode up and down MacArthur Ave in the East to the Lower Bottoms and Ghost Town of the West and seldom saw carloads of dreaded out teens pass. But nobody walked or marched or danced or chanted. Bass did not echo from souped-up cars. It was in fact a ghost town. What became very real for me was that as I

reflected back I began to see the first steps of take-over from Babylon. It began in Eastmont Mall, a sacred place, where cars used to line, music played, and doughnuts circled. People met and laughed and danced together under the twinkle of the stars. The first sign of colonization was the establishment of a jail and police station within Eastmont Mall. It was Mt. Rushmore imposed upon ancient lands all over again.

This type of colonialism is apparent at all levels around the ghetto and the ever-evolving life of the black community. However even as the system attacks, a new genre of culture emerges from this community and spreads itself into mainstream America. The reason for this is due to the high and strong connection of modern black America with ancient Africa.

Judy Grahn describes the movement of ancient menarche rituals evolving into modern social taboos like teenage cutting. Gang wars too are ancient blood rituals transcending space and time. Yet the choice of treating each misunderstood blood ritual is very different due to racial implications of the society into which we were born. Teenage cutting, which is primarily found in the white community, is considered a sickness and is dealt with in a healing matter. Where as gang wars are considered violent and handled with equally aggressive tactics imposing still more blood rituals like isolation (prison) and sacrifices (police and court-ordered executions). Why is this?

Historically speaking White America has always done acts which have tried to intentionally keep the African roots of our existence absent from our daily life, whether it has been the beating of the drum or the bass beating from our 'old school' cars. Or coming together in the back woods or coagulating on street corners. Or chanting our histories, or rapping our stories, or speaking in our tongue or talking Ebonics, an attack

by those that maintain the menstruation of patriarchy is guaranteed. If doughnuts in the night keep awake those who must wake every day to make money via the anti-cycles, anti-menstruation ways of the white men, it is therefore okay for people to call the police. Okay to imprison children because they are yearning for their lost rites of a passage and demonstrate this through modern blood rituals such as gang wars. Offering these young men as the sacrifice for this patriarchal world, may actually prove that what is going on in the ghetto is the call of revolution and solution.

Is the revolution fighting for our daughters to abort their babies or creating a world where they may have their babies in happiness. Is the revolution teaching reading and writing on paper or is it maintaining the oratorical tradition of our heritage. The ways of patriarchy have manipulated our menarche rituals and changed the intent of our sacredness. As women I believe we must therefore put our blood rites back on the earth. We must begin to practice the blood rituals that sustain cultural life and eliminate the need for our men to lose their lives. The powers that be have taken advantage of our innate knowledge of Isis and resurrection for we do not fear death, and in war and slavery, we will still have our babies.

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