

it became an element in Euroamerican society. In Chinua Achebe's famous novel, *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo, the hero in the novel who is a strong African warrior and whose greatest weakness in life was that he was afraid he would be called a "woman," is told by his kinsmen in his motherland when he is down in life, that the feminine principle is very important, that is why "mother is called 'supreme.'" The American Indian ritual also clearly demonstrates this principle and it will do us a world of good to take this journey back into time to learn as Kofi Awoonor, a Ghanaian poet, once said, "by reaching for the stars, we stop at the house of the moon."

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Critique

After a lengthy description of the various facets of Haudosaunee ritual, Kristin Herzog makes some interesting statements on the parallels between our modern day social arguments and those which plagued them centuries ago. The unique feature of Haudosaunee social organization is its systematic balance of power between the sexes. Although it is doubtful that American women who are currently engaged in a struggle for political and social power will achieve quite the same degree of equity, just studying a society in which such a balance was achieved is helpful for those in the process of defining women's goals and objectives.

Herzog's description of the way in which the epic of Dekanawida has survived culturally among the Haudosaunee in spite of assimilation attempts brings to mind a similar phenomenon among Afroamericans. In 1943, the editor of the *American Mercury Magazine* asked the anthropologist and novelist Zora Neale Hurston to write an essay which would give Americans hope during the dark days of World War II. In fulfilling the assignment Hurston chose to discuss one aspect of Afroamerican folklore that had been the secret to black survival since the early days of slavery. The essay, entitled "High John De Conqueror," became part of Hurston's larger mission to alleviate white America's ignorance about Afroamericans, and their myths and rituals.

According to Hurston, High John De Conqueror originated in Africa as "a whisper, a will to hope, a wish to find something worthy of

laughter and a song,"¹ and he crossed the Atlantic with the slaves not on the ship itself but by "walking the very winds that filled its sails . . . He followed over them like the albatross" (p. 94). Upon arrival in the New World, High John took on flesh and walked the plantations like a "natural man" whispering comforting words to their spirituals and who told them almost one hundred years before it happened that their freedom would one day come. After emancipation High John is believed to have returned to Africa but not without leaving some of his power in America in the root of a certain plant. During the early years of the twentieth century when thousands of Afroamericans migrated north to seek jobs, housing, and education, the High John root rode with some of them in the bottom of suitcases and boxes. As Hurston explains it, this root helped many of them confront the harsh realities of urban living such as being evicted or losing one's job:

The thousands upon thousands of humble people who still believe in him, that is, in the power of love and laughter to win by their subtle power, do John reverence by getting the root of the plant in which he has taken up his secret dwelling, and "dressing" it with perfume, and keeping it on their person, or in their houses in a secret place. It is there to help them overcome things they feel that they could not beat otherwise and to bring them the laugh of the day (p. 102).

High John appears as a recurring motif in Afroamerican literature. In his novel *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison's protagonist sees a black woman in the north who has been evicted from her apartment sitting on the sidewalk next to her furniture. She had hidden her High John root in one of her bureau drawers and at the moment when he sees her she is holding it.² Herzog's description of Hayonwatha meditating over a string of wampum shells and Dekanawida's using those same shells to speak words of comfort which restore the sanity of mind to the bereaved man is similar to the function of the High John root both in Afroamerican literature and among Afroamerican folk (those humble people), who believe in the power of the supernatural. In both instances the individual is fortified by rubbing, holding, and meditating over a physical object which restores a level of sanity and permits them to function in spite of the trying circumstances.

What Hurston in 1943 and Herzog in 1983 are both advocating is that there can be a fair exchange between the folk cultures of America and mass urban cultures. In return for an opportunity to advance economically and politically in this country, American minorities, especially those with a mythic orientation, make contributions to the

spiritual health of the whole society. In the case of the Haudenosaunee as Herzog indicates, they can also offer help in settling issues related to women and to peace.

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Notes

1. Zora Neale Hurston. "High John De Conqueror." *American Mercury Magazine*. No. 57 (October, 1943). 450-458. For this critique I have used Hurston's essay as it is reprinted in the *Book of Negro Folklore*. Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps, eds. (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1958) 93-102. Subsequent references to this essay are from this reprint and page numbers appear in the text.
2. Another Afroamerican work in which the belief in the power of roots and herbs is used to help a character endure is Anne Petry's novel *The Street* (1946).

Critique

The value of Herzog's study, in addition to the factual information presented, is a tragic reminder of two interrelated truths: 1) by studying history we could learn how to make a better world in which to live; and, 2) we do not learn from history. The women's movement of recent years has two aspects which do not, for all times, go together. One moving force in its genesis is the demand that physical and emotional abuse and misuse of women by men cease. The other, not necessarily related to the first, is that of equal status, which includes equal access to employment, legal protection, compensation and, less tangibly, human dignity. Herzog presents us in this study with a society which, in its idealized form, represents an "attempt to balance the powers between the sexes." What men and women did was not deemed the same, but men and women had parallel significant voices.

In the European-American pre-industrial days, the rural family divided the tasks. Again, in an idealized form, men had certain duties, women others, but each could feel as important as the other. The industrial revolution changed all that; men "worked" while women "stayed home."

Herzog's study brings to the reader a society (under the Haudenosaunee Confederation) which, had it been successful, would have been a model to be studied. But, as I pointed out initially, we do not learn