

Subaltern Speaks Episode 5 Transcript

Yasamin 0:06

Hello, hello. Welcome to a new episode of Subaltern Speaks. I am your host Yasamin. Today we have Emilie as our special guest. She's here with us to share her thoughts and experiences as a Black woman with a Christian upbringing. Our conversation today will cover how some Black women are making up for the ways Christianity has failed them by returning and reinventing Indigenous spiritualities. Just a little bit more about Emily she is a researcher, dance artist and creative consultant and founder of emerge projects. She's working on her doctoral dissertation at Ryerson Universities, Black women organizers and journalists and early 20th century Canada. Emily is also a storyteller who explores social and cultural histories and expressions of African Diaspora for us.

Welcome to our podcasts. Emily, how are you doing today?

Emilie 1:18

I'm good. Thank you. How are you?

Yasamin 1:20

I'm good.

Spring is here. We're recording this and on March 22. So feeling optimistic. So let's just jump in with our conversation today. I wanted to start, you know, our talk today with a personal note about yourself. What are your experiences as a black Haitian woman growing up in a Catholic family? Or like in the confines of the church?

Emilie 1:59

Yeah. Well, okay, so I grew up in Canada, I'm raised by Haitian parents. And so they grew up in a Catholic setting. And Catholicism was very important to them I see also from a cultural perspective. So in the sense of like, growing up, we would eat fish on Fridays. And, you know, there were just certain traditions that we kept, that were definitely influenced from the Catholic church or from Catholicism. And, and I always really appreciated that, to be honest, um, you know, Easter was always my favorite, and still is my favorite time of the year, just in terms of like, its meaning in terms of the food we share. So I feel like my Catholic upbringing was actually very positive. I enjoyed going to actually, that's the thing is that I didn't particularly enjoy going to church every Sunday, because I was always really bored. But I always remember enjoying the stories, you know, even in elementary school so it's like, basically like, classes about Catholicism, I would enjoy those, I would enjoy the stories. And I think that when going to church on Sunday with my mom particularly became a little bit more interesting was when I

started thinking of church as a time when I would go and listen to stories. So that at that point, it started becoming interesting. But I think that there's a point in time when I just didn't really understand like, why I was going and why I was going if I didn't really understand or believe what was being practiced in the church. And I think that's when a separation happened. Probably more so around like maybe high school when, you know, late teens, somewhere around there. And I know that. Yeah, I know that I just had a lot of questions. And I didn't really understand like, you know, just I felt disconnected from the readings that were happening in church, I felt, but I also had started reading the New Testament on my own. So I was I was also aware of the fact that I was very fascinated by Jesus as a person, I want to see a story, character and innocence, but also as somebody who I didn't believe existed, and I was just very drawn to, you know what he was able to accomplish in terms of healing people in terms of His Word and His examples. So I was very attracted to that very interested in that. And so I think, where the disconnect also happened is when I started asking more questions or wanting to know more about who Jesus actually was as a person. So that's when yeah, I think that's when like, all of these questions started, started coming up. And I just didn't feel like the Catholic Church was really answering those questions for me. But, but I guess I could finish by saying that, however, there was something mysterious or mystical about the Catholic Church that I always did appreciate, because, as my listeners, as our listeners will come to understand is that I've actually explored many different ways in search of those answers. And when I did turn to Protestantism, there were other issues and other things that came up that also made me question a lot like why was I going to a Protestant church, for example? Yes, yeah,

Yasamin 6:20

You brought a very good point up about, you know, the Protestant and Catholic the differences and just for their listeners to know we're focusing more on Haiti, because Emily is of Haitian descent. So yeah, I'm very, I'm very interested in that difference, different approaches between the Protestants and the Catholics in Haiti and how they approached like, more indigenous, more grassroots, spiritualities of the Haitian people like Voodoo that came originally from the practices of African slaves that were brought by the French colonizers. So as you know, I was doing my research to prep for our interview, I was reading a whole lot about Voodoo, and Catholicism in Haiti, and obviously, Catholicism was brought in early on, on the island nation of Haiti. And it has been there, it has been a huge, it's the main church is the main power broker, the spiritual guide. And over the time, of course, it has adopted syncretic element from Voodoo and West African traditions have come blended in and, like, Haitians see both Catholicism and Voodoo on the same level, to my understanding. And that's why it's so hard to distinguish between who's a Voodoo and who's a Catholic. But what started happening in like the late 19th and early 20th century was that these Christian Protestant missionaries, particularly from like Anglo nations, like Canada, like the US started coming in, to convert people in Haiti. And they started being very hostile towards Voodoo practices, where they like just, it was thought it was like, completely against Christian teachings, and like, they couldn't be together. Mixed. So yeah, so that's, that's a huge point of contention. So I really wanted to get your views on that. Especially as you said that later on you started exploring Protestantism to search for answers and fill the gaps that you had in your original spiritual upbringing.

Emilie 8:59

Right. So, um, I mean, firstly, I'd like to acknowledge like, I think, you know, the research you've presented forward is really important. And thank you for you know, that contextualization, I also wanted to say that it is true that in for many Haitians I'd say, there is a syncretism in the sense that Catholicism and Voodoo has so many similar symbolisms that it is very easy to merge the two. However, that is not the experience, like my experience in my family. So in my family, it was always really clear that they did not grow up learning about Voodoo or having Voodoo as part of their reality. So that's interesting. Yeah. And I like I don't really know. I can't really say like, what is the percentage of that for for Haitian families, because I think that Voodoo is still very stigmatized. So you'll have people who maybe do very much embrace Voodoo as part of their spiritual practices and who will never tell you, or who will, you know, still think they're Christians still say they're Catholics. And we'll either ignore or willfully hide the fact that they also embrace Voodooism as part of their spiritual practices. Whereas There are families that have been completely disconnected from, from Voodoo practices, and who are very specifically Catholics. And so I would say that, in my case, that's my family's reality is that my parents, you know, when they've spoken to us about Voodoo, it was more in terms of folklore, or it was, you know, they'd always talk about it as something that they actually didn't know, like, they know of, you know, maybe some practices or certain things that people do. But it wasn't really something that was a reality for them. So that I feel that's important to say, because, yes, I felt that was important to say, because I'm coming from a place of having discovered Voodoo and the symbolism around Voodoo and the importance of Voodoo in relationship to, you know, even like, Haitian dance and Haitian culture on my own. So a lot of my spiritual explorations are self driven. But then when I went into the Protestant church, I also just was flabbergasted at how openly racist people were. And I think, for me, it was so strange, because it was strange, because I always knew Protestants as being people who were always looking to, to convert. So I didn't experience that so much with Catholics, I found Catholics weren't really the type of people who would, you know, talk to somebody and try to convince them or go door to door, you know, that's really more of a, you know, something that Protestants would do or maybe. So they would do that. So I was just very shocked at like, Okay, I'm now coming into the church, and I'm wanting to be a part of this community, but there are very clear instances of racism against Black people, and I just don't understand it. So I think for me, that was the break where I thought, okay, no, this is not working for me either. Because it just doesn't make any sense. And, so the reason I wanted to tell that story in relationship to Haiti is because that is also sort of how I understand Evangelists coming into Haiti, is that, in my experience, even when I've been in Haiti, and I've met these people there, I found that the discourse was one definitely of you know, demonizing blaming Haitian people for not being like proper Christians, you know, that sort of narrative. It was also very much a narrative of, you know, evangelists coming in and, and wanting to help or coming as a helping hand, but then it was almost like it seemed as though Okay, I come to help, but you have to now convert.

Yasamin 14:02

Wow, you, you brought in so many different cool points, that we can, you know, shift the conversation to. Well, one thing I totally relate to what you said about how some Westerners maybe Anglo Saxons, like Anglo people, particularly here like in Canada and the US, they tried to like distinguish what is like religion, like religion is supposed to be in your private realm in your home and like politics is something outside then these two like cannot mix all these Western democracies. It's based on that religion and the state should be completely separate. Which may seem like a good idea to those people that believe in it, but I feel like for a lot of colonized peoples people, you know that or even people that have like older traditions that go way back, like people in the East, eastern people of Asia, people from Africa, their politics and religion is heavily intertwined since ancient times since the time of Kings when the kings were rulers and they got their legitimacy from, you know, god or gods, depending where you're from. So I think, for a lot of cultures, this Western culture of secularism, especially for people like colonized people, subaltern peoples who were subject to these colonizing forces, in the 19th and 20th century for them, it's like trying to separate the two and say, Oh, no, religion is like, completely spiritual and completely like otherworldly than politics. Like, it's almost like an insult, because you're saying, Well, I mean, they're a bunch of these, like missionaries that tried to literally like abolish my culture, my existence, what I believe in, on the basis of, you know, conversion to another religion, and you're like, trying to tell me this is not about power and politics.

Emilie 16:18

Right. And also, I think there's a lot of like, in your, in what you're saying, there's also, you know, that connects back to what I was saying about, you know, this, this pretend neutrality, like even in you know, even in this idea of secularism, there is deeply rooted in that still a cultural and, and spiritual perspective. You know, and even the fact that there's so many different models, where state and religion are separate, where they're, they're not quite separate, you know, I mean, and I say this in the sense that, you know, in the United States, you will hear presidents, you know, always call on God, God bless America, right. But then, to my understanding, there are countries like Tunisia, I think, where actually the, like religion and state are actually separate. It doesn't mean that, you know, there aren't influences in politics, of course, because politics is not its own objective, separate thing that just popped out of a vacuum. It's, it's based in history, it's based on culture, it's based in you know, like it, everything that makes us who we are, goes into our institutions in the way that things function. So yeah, I absolutely agree. With your points.

Yasamin 17:50

Yeah, very good point. Um, I wanted to dive more specifically into, like, what you found insufficient about, you know, because you're, you're telling me about how you ventured out in seek of, like answers to some of the insufficiencies that you saw in your Catholic upbringing. I'm

just wondering if you could specifically refer to what were those lacks? What were those gaps, those that it made to venture out? And if you think other Black women, like yourself, also feel the same way as you do? If you could talk a little bit more about that, especially like your own lived experience, through your career through conversations you had with other Black women? Do you think your experiences also are in line with theirs?

Emilie 18:47

I noticed that a lot of my questioning at this point, and what led me to feel like Christianity particularly insufficiently gave me tools to live my life fully, is because it's mainly because of a lot of social justice questions that would come up. There isn't a substantial conversation about our relationship to our environment, and our responsibility not to destroy the planet, to care, to care for the land to, you know, be intentional with how we grow our food with how that food feeds us, with just being balanced. Like for me, it seemed like there was a sense of imbalance that was being taught through the Bible through Christianity. But I really felt like there is no clear guide as to how to be with the environment, like with nature. And I felt like that was something that I needed because I could see how, and this is maybe a bit complicated to explain, but I could see how I'm, you know, pollution, I'm not having access to quality food to clean water, I could see how this was more so impacting Indigenous and Black communities, for example, across Canada than it was other communities or like the white dominant population in Canada. And I do believe because of my own maybe spiritual journey that was connected to food that was connected to re-evaluating my relationship with the environment and the general world. I could see how, for example, destroying the environment or not having access to quality food, created more so of a disconnect and imbalance, spiritually. But like that, that sort of domination over nature, that destruction, that stress that exploitation of the land is connected to how, as a Black woman, I see, you know, that, for example, Black and Indigenous people are being exploited and stressed. And so that's what makes it so much more urgent, that we need to be connected to the land, we need to be autonomous over our food, we need to we need Yeah, we need that autonomy. And also, because a lot of Abrahamic religions, create a hierarchy, right? Like there is a hierarchy where we're human beings are almost like the only thing that matter. And then we are, you know, it's almost like we give ourselves the authority to do with nature, what we want. Whereas, you know, religion, like spiritual teachings in Voodoo, it's really about universality. And I think this is probably similar in Hinduism, as well, where my understanding is, you know, this, this whole idea of reincarnation is like, you actually don't know, you know, what happens to you when you pass on. And you could come back, as, you know, any living thing. And in the same way, the way that Voodoo operates is all about, like, universality, everything is connected, you know, you don't, you don't have those hierarchies you know, animal, human being, plant, there's a connectedness in that, and also the way that the culture is coded. The culture is coded in a way that explains how to understand life. So for example, there isn't that distinction, like good or bad, or there isn't a prioritization of light over dark, or of sun over moon, or life over death.

Yasamin 23:41

I understand it totally makes the question of, as you said, following the face of the colonizers introduced to you blindly complicated and also it makes you trying to reclaim as a Black woman trying to reclaim your ancestral spirituality complicated as well, because you're just trying to piece out all these questions and figure out their answers. So that brings me to the question I was going to ask you. Emilie, do you think nowadays, there is this like movement by a lot of Black women, Afro descendant women to move towards reclaiming their indigenous spiritualities and I'm asking this specifically given the context, the historical context we are in today, where there is this elevated awareness towards, you know, the harms and just atrocities brought by colonialism, especially like European colonialism in the past 100 years and how it just crushed and destroyed so many indigenous knowledge and cultures. You know, we have all these movements like indigenous movement. Here in Canada, also Black Lives Matter. So I'm just asking you, you being in this field interacting with other Black women, do you see this movement? Where they're trying to reclaim their indigenous spirituality?

Emilie 25:14

I think there definitely is a connection between struggles for liberation, and a spiritual questioning. And I. And I mean, even you know, when I think of the more typical civil rights moments that we might think of, in the 21st century, we tend to think of 1960s 1970s by power movement, that also was very much in conversation with the idea of, of Islam and Islam being an option and opportunity, right, in the Nation of Islam. And that being maybe a better alternative for Black people. And I think that with the Black Lives Matter movement, I think there is a similar turn towards the question of ancestry, the question of going back to roots, that is decolonized. And I also noticed that even with many conversations around the African continent, wanting you know, movements for economic autonomy, political autonomy, cultural autonomy, there's definitely that shift towards a lot of younger African people looking to what the question of ancestors regardless of if they have the answers or not, and regardless of if they are practicing Christians, Muslims, and so on and so forth. And I would think that, in general, however, I think there is a spiritual revival in the Black community or Black communities, regardless of whether that is towards indigenous spiritualities or not. So I have noticed that, you know, speaking to the many Black women there's a revival in their Christian faith, you know, or there's a revival in Islam, also, you know, people wanting to read more and know more, and to defend, maybe a better view of Islam that they grew up with, or that they believe in. So I think that there's a definite resurgence of a desire for a spiritual life, a spiritual journey for Black women. But I've also noticed how there's, there's that revival in the whole Black community and how it doesn't necessarily focus on indigenous spiritualities. But just on spirituality in general and wanting to decolonize and reclaim all forms of spiritual practices.

Yasamin 27:49

we're running out of time, but thank you so much, Emilie, for your time. This can go on and on for our next in the next episodes, upcoming episodes. But for now, thank you, Emilie, so much for your time, and have a great day.

Emilie 28:10

Thank you. Thank you for having me. Take care.

Yasamin 28:13

Bye bye.

Yasamin 28:16

This episode concludes the first season of Subaltern Speaks. We at the Multi-faith Center would like to thank you, the listener for showing your support to us so far in this new project. If you would like to support us further, please make sure to follow and like us on whichever podcast listening app you use, and share our content with your peers. We look further to bringing you season two of Subaltern Speaks in the Fall of 2021 with more fascinating guests and conversations on what it means to decolonize spirituality in the modern world. We hope to see you again soon.