

## **A Review: An Introspection on Culture in Beyoncé's *Black Is King***

Our culture reminds us of who we are: our arts, our customs and our achievements speak through us and for us, loudly. Our past and our histories journey side by side with our present, a reflection of our home and heritage, reminding us that we belong to something way bigger than ourselves. In Beyoncé's love letter to Africa, *Black is King*, each and every one of us are significant, descended from Kings and Queens. We belong. We are Bigger.

Beyoncé's commentary throughout *BIK* reflects on important themes such as identity loss and historical erasure, especially when viewed within the context of slavery and colonial supremacy during the last few centuries. It speaks to African nations whose cultures, languages and religions have been torn down throughout the reign of colonial powers.

In remembrance of this lost and fragmented culture, *BIK* is packed with mythological archetypes, culture icons and objects from the continent. Although this extraction of folklore and cultural heritage from various African countries is certainly encouraging, it begs the question of how one must understand and recognize one's African cultural legacy if one's way of life has been vilified, and whose religions, language, hair, and rituals have been gradually erased to adopt Eurocentric values. Though the audience of *BIK* is directed to the African audience, the audience itself would still need clarity on understanding the meaning and significance of the cultures presented inside this musical film.

Notwithstanding the album's artistic curation and ensemble of skillful performances, the lack of educational information virtually makes this artistic content inaccessible and illegible to the audience. There is little guiding information provided that aids the audience in understanding the value of what is put out there on the screen.

For instance, in the beginning of the track, "Bigger", Folajomi Akinmurele (Simba) is seen standing on the shore, receiving white markings from Beyoncé, both as an infant and as a young boy. In fact, Akinmurele is seen with white markings all over his body and face in other track sequences such as in "Don't Jealous Me" as well.

The use of white paint is used in several cultures throughout the continent as powerful references of African spiritualism. For the Luba people in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the use of white paint represented a spiritual connection to ancestors. For the Punu people in Central Africa, where a white clay substance called *Kaolin* was used, it was associated with healing and a spiritual existence. Likewise, in Cote d'Ivoire, *Kaolin* was used by sacred priestesses named *Komains* during purification ceremonies.



*Left: Beyoncé marking Simba (Folajomi Akinmurele) Right: The Luba people of DRC pictured with white clay markings*

All of these cultures used these markings in representing a spiritual connection with ancestral spirits. In this case, the use of these white markings appropriately coincides with the recurring storyline of *The Lion King*. However, the lack of any descriptions or cultural lessons reduces these important rituals to merely face and body markings that pass through the consciousness as what has been considered, “primitive rituals” which don’t have any degree of separation from the original 1940s depictions of Lion King.

The Dogon people of Mali are another cultural fixture represented in *BIK*. In “Find Your Way Back”. Beyoncé is featured alongside two dancers wearing masks known as *Kanaga* that symbolize the end of mourning and the passage of the soul to the land of ancestors. Not only are these individuals the spiritual messengers of the soul to the afterlife, but they were also pioneers

of Astronomy. Their presence in the album complements *The Lion King*'s storyline of Simba's connection to his past ancestors, however the historical legacy of these people is completely unmentioned. They appear in the Afrofuturistic landscape of Beyoncé's track to symbolize the connection between the cosmic afterlife and present reality. However, their service through the track as spiritual guides are only subjectively understood and the scene continues on to another track before their full significance is realized.



*The Dogon People of Mali in Black Is King*

As the narrative continues, it becomes difficult to fully absorb the assortment of ever-changing braiding styles, outfits worn (after all, Beyoncé switched between over 60 looks), aesthetic performances, and poses. Part of the reason why is due to the rapid pace in which a single shot lasts only a few seconds of screen time. According to a [New York Times article](#) featuring critic, Wesley Morris, this style of editing is in keeping with the “ancient music-video ideas of chaos, incoherence and looks”. As a result, it becomes even harder to digest the stream of symbolism and imagery presented in every shot, especially without the added assistance from descriptions or narrative commentary.

Still, throughout the film, Beyoncé draws on the commonality of traditions shared across the continent to illustrate a theme of regality, wealth, status and spirituality. For instance, the color

white is used in many African cultures such as Egypt, Democratic Republic of Congo, Gabon and many west African countries as a symbol of mourning, healing and connection to spiritual realms. The white chalk markings on Akinmurele in “Bigger” and “Don’t Jealous Me” and even the all-white funeral shot of Mufasa’s death all serve to show how white can represent important milestones in life. These important milestones can be at the moment of birth, passage to the ancestors in death or can be in the form receiving recognition by the ancestors as a leader.



*Top left: Simba lifting his baby up*

*Top right: Beyoncé symbolizing Mufasa's death as she is carried by men with white chalk markings*

*Bottom left: Beyoncé in the afterlife cradling a baby,*

*Bottom right: Beyoncé marking Simba (Folajomi Akinmurele) with white chalk*

Other displays of cultural commonality are also seen through the headwraps present in *BIK*. Headwraps can be a symbol of marriage, status or ethnicity and are present in many African countries with different names such as the *Gele* in southwestern Nigeria, the *Dukus* in Ghana and the *Doek* of South Africa and Namibia amongst many others.



*Beyoncé and a woman wearing the traditional Nigerian headwrap, Gele*

Beyoncé has incorporated other such numerous inspirations from African cultures by featuring the head-carrying tradition of women, as well as integrating the cowry shells which symbolize wealth in west Africa. Additionally, she also wears the horned head to represent the Egyptian goddess, Hathor as a symbolism of beauty, status and fertility and showcases several hairstyles which depict status and royalty. Through this, *BIK* also seems to be centering an important spotlight on finding common patterns in African cultures that collectively express the regality of black identity.



*Top left: Beyoncé carrying a water jug on her head,*

*Top right: Beyoncé and two dancers wearing cowry shells,*

*Bottom left: Beyoncé as Hathor,*

*Bottom right: Beyoncé with the Mangbetu braid crown of eastern Congo*

Although Beyoncé hasn't represented every African culture on the continent, which is not feasible to do anyways, what she did represent, she represented with integrity and the highest form of authenticity. The Himba people of Namibia, seen in *BIK* applying red clay on their braids and skin, are one of the most isolated tribes who work to keep their culture intact by limiting their contact with the outside world. In order to authentically honor their traditions in *BIK*, special permission was granted from the OvaHimba leaders and passports and birth certificates made for the women to fly out and demonstrate their customs.



*The Himba women in Namibia as seen in Black Is King*

Throughout *BIK*, Beyoncé has been hitting us with looks that definitely impress a certain lush and picturesque aesthetic of Africa. And certainly, offering the world a glimpse of the unique customs of different cultures is one of the best attributes of *BIK*. However, how can one appropriately garner an understanding of the complexity and interconnectivity of all of these cultural symbols without the proper descriptions or cultural lessons to complement them?

This is precisely why much of the cultural content could be inaccessible to not only the Afro Diasporic audience but the African audience as well. Much of the content of *Black is King* is inspired from or alludes to African folklore, spiritual mysticism, as well as tradition and customs from the variety of different ethnicities existing or previously existing on the continent. Considering that much of this past historical legacy has been fading with time and has been operating under the strain of neo-colonialism, it isn't unexpected to wonder whether or not much of the African audience will recognize their history or other African cultures' in *Black is King*. So, as *Black is King* is supposed to be Beyoncé's love letter to Africa, putting cultural lessons within this musical film would be to the benefit of African people so that they get to re-acquaint themselves to the cultures existing on the continent and revel in the feeling that they are a part of something way bigger.