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# African-Centered Transpersonal Self in Diaspora and Psychospiritual Wellness: A *Sankofa* Perspective

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The West African concepts of *àṣẹ* and *sankofa* have distinctive transpersonal value that should be explored in greater depth by the transpersonal field, particularly for their relational and participatory aspects. Transpersonal psychology is a Western psychology with philosophical roots in transcendentalism and perennialist traditions that may include theism and non-dualism. Officially established in 1968, transpersonal psychology has gone through a number of shifts, including the participatory turn in the early 2000s. The Association of Black Psychologists (ABPsi), also founded in 1968, has built a substantial body of research on a variety of African epistemology, cosmology, and philosophy to create the field of African-centered psychology. The transpersonal West African concepts discussed here may serve as a bridge to begin greater dialogue between the fields of Black psychology and transpersonal psychology.

**Keywords:** *Black psychology, transpersonal self, sankofa, àṣẹ*

*As human beings reconnect with their heart, their body, and the vital energies that enliven them, the sacred is no longer experienced as a transpersonal “hierophany”—an irruption of the sacred in a profane self or world—but as a fundamental dimension of both personhood and reality. (Ferrer, 2002, p. xviii)*

**A***ṣẹ* . *Sankofa*. What do these words mean and how do they relate to transpersonal psychology and the notion of the transpersonal self? Both are concepts from West Africa and the African diaspora which speak to what Ferrer has referred to as reconnection (*sankofa*) and vital energies (*àṣẹ*). *Sankofa* is of particular importance, as it means to look back and fetch that which has been forgotten—including African-centered philosophical concepts in transpersonal notions of self and personhood. Through an overview of the history of transpersonal psychology, including the transpersonal participatory turn (Ferrer, 2002) and relational spirituality (Lahood, 2010a), this article will emphasize the conspicuous absence of the African voice in transpersonal discourse (Ferrer, 2002; Lahood, 2010a). To frame this exploration of the African-centered transpersonal self and psycho-spiritual wellness, it utilizes the West African philosophical concept *sankofa* from the Akan<sup>1</sup> *adinkra* cosmology. In addition to *sankofa*, this paper touches on two other African constructs: the

*Maafa*, which is commonly referred to as the middle passage, and the psycho-spiritual power of *àṣẹ*, or life-force, and how these notions interact in the diaspora to create what might as well be called participatory transpersonal experiences, healing, and wellness.

These West African concepts are valuable in their own right as traditional constructs that speak to the whole person in relationship to community and a living world, and they also contribute to transpersonal theory from an African cultural location. The transpersonal field, while offering the impression that it is epistemologically inclusive because it borrows extensively from a variety of non-Western cultures (Davis, 2003), is primarily rooted in a Western interpretation of Eastern philosophy. Currently transpersonal psychology includes only minimal consideration of non-Eastern spiritual traditions, such as those from Africa. There is accordingly an ongoing need for greater inclusion of non-Western interpretations and understandings in a field that potentially has worldwide implication (e.g., Ferrer, 2002; Grof, 2008; Sutich, 1980).

Transpersonal psychology's philosophical roots can be found in part in the transcendentalism of the 1820s and 30s, which influenced the writings of one of its seminal figures, William James (Ryan, 2008). James' work, including his 1902 (2009) work *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, is frequently referenced in transpersonal literature, and James has been credited with the first use of the term *transpersonal*. It was decades later in 1968 that Maslow, Sutich, Grof, and other transpersonal founders recognized that the three forces of psychoanalytic, behavioral and humanistic psychologies lacked the ability to fully explore peak and transcendent experiences (Sutich, 1976). Believing that the potentials of self-actualization are a natural dimension of all people, they chose the word transpersonal to signify a study of experiences, development, and identity that go beyond or transcend the ordinary personality. In doing so, they laid the foundation for what some have perhaps optimistically identified as the fourth force in the development of Western psychology (Hastings, 1999).

To deepen the understanding of transpersonal psychology, Hartelius, Caplan, and Rardin (2007) conducted a thematic analysis of one hundred sixty published definitions of the field dating from 1968 through 2002 (p. 2). This resulted in their identification of three themes of transpersonal psychology (TP): TP-I beyond-ego psychology (transpersonal as content); TP-II integrative / holistic psychology (transpersonal as context) for a psychology of the whole person; and TP-III transformative psychology (transpersonal as catalyst; pp. 9-10). Based on this research a definition of transpersonal psychology was developed: "A transformative psychology of the whole person in intimate relationship with a diverse, interconnected, and evolving world" (Hartelius, Rothe, & Roy, 2015, p. 14). These same authors also noted and documented the transpersonal field's lack of inclusion of African perspectives and voices (Hartelius et al., 2007; Hartelius et al., 2015).

#### **ABPsi:**

#### **Founding of African-Centered Psychology**

Contemporary to the founding of transpersonal psychology, 1968 also marked the formation of the Association of Black Psychologists (ABPsi). During the intervening decades the ABPsi has built a substantial body of research focused on the liberation of the African mind and the reclamation and restoration of the African epistemology, cosmology, and philosophy. Two of the

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significant contributions of the ABPsi are the *Journal of Black Psychology* and the development of African-centered psychology. As part of the restoration of spirit, African-centered psychology was developed through a deep examination of a variety of African cultural traditions that inform what it means to be human. African-centered psychology is a testament to the enduring legacy of African ontology and cosmology.

African-centered psychology is a broad theoretical framework developed initially by the members of the ABPsi, an organization of Black students and professional psychologists formed in response to pervasive racism within the American Psychological Association (Williams, 2008). In 1999, the Association of Black Psychologists adopted the following definition of African-centered psychology to guide theory, research, practice and action:

Black/African Centered psychology is a dynamic manifestation of unifying African principles, values, and traditions that are reflected within broader Pan-African or transcultural communities. It is the self-conscious "centering of psychological analyses and applications in African realities, cultures, and epistemologies. African centered psychology, as a system of thought and action, examines the processes that allow for the illumination and liberation of the Spirit. Relying on the principles of harmony within the universe as a natural order of existence, African centered psychology recognizes: the Spirit that permeates everything that is; the notion that everything in the universe is interconnected; the value that the collective is the most salient element of existence; and the idea that communal self knowledge is the key to mental health. African psychology is ultimately concerned with understanding the systems of meaning of human Beingness, the features of human functioning, and the restoration of normal/natural order to human development. As such, it is used to resolve personal and social problems and to promote optimal functioning. (Myers & Speight, 2010, p. 77)

This definition highlights many of the themes of this discussion, including the effect of African philosophical ideals as unifying principles, how African-centered psychology views spirituality, the importance of relational knowledge for the development of the self, and how these factors come together for psycho-spiritual wellness and restoration.

This definition of Black psychology also exhibits more than a little alignment with the definitions of transpersonal psychology as analyzed by Hartelius et al. (2007). For example, the examination of "processes that allow for the illumination and liberation of the Spirit" and the recognition that "the Spirit ... permeates everything that is" both resonate with the notion of transpersonal psychology as a beyond ego psychology; "the notion that everything in the universe is connected" and "the idea that communal self knowledge is the key to mental health" also underlie the integrative / holistic lens of the transpersonal field, and "the restoration of normal / natural order to human development" holds much in common with transpersonal as a transformative psychology in which transformative process is understood as the nature of the cosmos (Hartelius et al., 2015). There are important differences in the ways in which these concepts are developed within the two fields, which is what suggests possibilities for rich dialogue.

### **Spirituality from Transpersonal Psychology**

To lay the foundation for the topic of self/spirituality/psycho-spiritual wellness, it is important to understand how spirituality is generally viewed from a transpersonal psychology perspective. While this varies among scholars, Corrington (1997) has stated that one of the fundamental assumptions in transpersonal psychology is that the true human identity is that of a spiritual being. Sutich and Vich (1969) asserted that transpersonal theory holds spirituality as central in its understanding of human nature and the cosmos. Hartelius and Harrahy (2010) noted that for more than thirty years, transpersonal psychology has placed an emphasis on individual spiritual development, with New Age perennialism as its philosophical foundation. While the field should not be considered a spiritual psychology (Hartelius, Friedman, & Pappas, 2015), human spirituality is clearly a recurrent theme—as well as consideration of ways in which philosophical frames may serve to reaffirm the value of this spirituality as something more than socially constructed imaginings.

Ferrer (2002) has provided an extensive critique of the perennialist roots of transpersonal psychology and offered an alternative in the form of participatory thought. He has asserted that "transpersonal theory lacked an adequate epistemology, and the consequences were disastrous" (p. 10). He also added that "some

contextually oriented authors accuse the perennialist program of being essentialist, ideological, authoritarian, patriarchal, and overlooking the spirituality of women, indigenous people, and other marginal groups" (Ferrer, 2002, pp. 137-138). Over the last decade, transpersonal psychology has begun an expansion beyond its foundational emphasis on experientialism towards a call for a relational rebirth "which draws more on Buber's I-Thou than on the New Age's I AM" (Hartelius & Harrahy, 2010, p. 18). The authors noted that transpersonal phenomena are no longer to be viewed as just individual inner experiences, but as epistemic events. As Ferrer (2002) described, "this is the shift from a Cartesian ego that experiences the sacred as 'other' to a complete human being that naturally and spontaneously participates in the deeper, sacred dimensions of life" (p. 12). Ferrer elaborated, stating:

I am suggesting that what has been commonly called a transpersonal experience can be better conceived as the emergence of a transpersonal participatory event. The basic idea underline the participatory turn, then, is not that an expansion of individual consciousness allows access to transpersonal contents, but rather that the emergence of a transpersonal event precipitates in the individual what has been called transpersonal experience. Thus understood, the ontological dimension of transpersonal phenomena is primary and results in the experiential one. (p. 116)

In his ten-year retrospective on the participatory turn, Ferrer (2011) observed, "the participatory approach holds that human spirituality emerges from our co-creative participation in a dynamic and undetermined mystery or generative power of life, the cosmos, and/or the spirit" (p. 2). As noted in the introduction, this parallels a phenomena known as *àşę* in African ontology which will be explored in more detail later in the paper. Additionally, Lahood (2010b) proposed "that co-active-relationship-based spiritual inquiry" (p. 67) offers an opportunity to let go of spiritual narcissism by stating, "Relational spirituality is about exploring and liberating that encounter from past wounds, everyday narcissism, and present fears. It then has the potential to become a practice in which we abide in sacred relationship" (p. 72). This abiding then shifts the transpersonal event into ongoing spiritual expression; abiding becomes an ongoing lived experience.

### **Transpersonal Self and an Invitation for African Inclusion**

Louchakova and Lucas (2007) argued that it is time for transpersonal psychology to explore gender, ethnicity, and culture, noting that to do so would require transpersonal psychology to develop a concept of the transpersonal self. They asked, “Are we [transpersonal psychologists] afraid, like Rilke, to examine the self, because being too person-centered will damage our work?” (p. 111). Louchakova and Lucas (2007) asserted that for the field to explore the self would require transpersonal psychology to move away from universalism and toward relativism and cultural construction. The discipline of transpersonal psychology would need to acknowledge that spiritual universalism is not invincible; as such, universalism would be significantly eroded by the cultural construction argument. Acknowledging that the Eurocentric convention of seeing itself as the universal standard is flawed, they stated, “What it means to be a human being is not the same ‘wherever we go’” (p. 116). As recently noted in Washington (2010), “The assertion has been, within the European context, that what Europeans do is the norm for all people. They are universal and thus the prototype of all people” (p. 30). Spiritual universalism is the antithesis of diversity and thus the application of spiritual universalism in transpersonal psychology impacts its ability to be inclusive of non-Western worldviews.

When it comes to the transpersonal understanding of spirituality, a number of authors have noted that shamanistic and indigenous approaches take a distinctive participatory and relational orientation (Friedman, Krippner, Riebel, & Johnson, 2010; Lahood, 2010b; Louchakova & Lucas, 2007). Unfortunately, when shamanistic and indigenous approaches are examined, African-rooted traditions are often overlooked; the African worldview is typically missing in the transpersonal discussion. More broadly, transpersonal literature continues to have large gaps in its inclusion of the Africological<sup>2</sup> worldview. A cursory review of transpersonal literature has found few references to contemporary African-centered indigenous psycho-spiritual practices, let alone their application to African diaspora peoples. Unfortunately, this gap is not unique to the transpersonal field, but is prevalent in all Western-based psychology. To this point, Hartelius, Caplan, and Rardin (2007) noted,

There is as yet only minor participation from Asia, Africa, or South America; even when such voices exist, they have at times been overlooked (see, for example, an Afro-centric approach to multicultural psychology: Bame, 1997; Mphande & Myers, 1993; Myers, 1985, 1994, 2005; Myers, Kindaichi, & Moore, 2004, Spight [sic], Myers, Cox, & Highlen, 1991. (p. 17)

Hartelius et al. (2007) emphasized the importance of honoring these cultural traditions, suggesting that “transpersonal psychology itself may grow and shift, perhaps in profound ways, as other members of the human community bring their gifts and contributions” (pp. 17, 18).

The need for inclusion of an African-centered perspective has been called for by transpersonal psychologists, and this represents just a portion of the deficit observed by Louchakova and Lucas (2007), who also observed that transpersonal psychology continues to put forth primarily Western “male-centered versions of the world’s spirituality” (p. 118). The heterogeneous biases go unquestioned with “rare exceptions, when the representatives of indigenous spiritual systems talk for themselves, thus decreasing the heterogeneous bias” (Asante, 1984, p. 118). Asante (1984), Myers (1985), and Bynum (1992), continue to be the nearly-lone and now somewhat dated African-centered voices in transpersonal literature. Asante (1984) critiqued the near absence of the African worldview in transpersonal psychology, and Myers (1985) noted that based on a survey of articles in the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* from approximately 1974 to 1984, the exploration of traditional African culture and worldview was conspicuously missing. Her review confirmed that the transpersonal paradigm mostly focused on “Oriental philosophy and modern physics” (Myers, 1985, p. 32). Transpersonal psychology’s narrow focus on the East constitutes a missed opportunity to learn from African concepts of holism and consciousness. Myers (1985) pointed out that the transpersonal paradigm goal of unity and integration of knowledge or a “system of interconnection” (p. 33) is already extant in the African worldview. Myers, like Bynum and Asante, called for researchers to use an Afrocentric paradigm as a method to structure concepts of consciousness.

Particularly in light of recent interest in participatory thought (e.g., Ferrer, 2002) and relational

spirituality (Hartelius & Harrahy, 2010), there is opportunity for transpersonal psychology to increase its inclusion of African wisdom. There are several central concepts from the African worldview including the notion of transcendence through the eternal cycle that life holds, spiritual integration, and what Mariette (2013) has referred to as harmonious interrelationship and authentic organicity. In Ferrer's (2011) retrospective on the participatory turn, he referenced Daniels (2009) who sees within the participatory perspective in transpersonal psychology "a third vector (which he calls 'extending') in transpersonal development beyond the standard 'ascending' (i.e., geared to other-worldly transcendence) and 'descending' (i.e., geared to this-worldly immanence)" (Ferrer, 2011, p. 14). Each of these—extending, ascending, and descending—are primary concepts found in African-centered spirituality. As both Ferrer and Daniels pointed out, relational and participatory thinking tends to be exemplified "in indigenous spiritualities, feminist spirituality (e.g., the connected self), transpersonal ecology (ecocentrism), [and] relational spiritualities" (Ferrer, 2011, p. 14). Ferrer (2002) continued, "In a participatory cosmos, human intentional participation creatively channels and modulates the self-disclosing of Spirit through the bringing forth of visionary worlds and spiritual realities" (Ferrer, 2002, p. 157). Here again there is resonance with the African construct *àṣẹ*.

#### **African Ontology: *Àṣẹ* and *Sankofa***

A key construct that runs throughout African-centered relational spirituality is the cultivation of *àṣẹ*, which refers to the "life force, spiritual power or energy that binds people with the natural and Divine worlds" (Vega, 1999, p. 45). This African psycho-spiritual concept was and is an "essential element of spiritual life in the material world, particularly in enduring traumatic conditions" (p. 45). As such, *àṣẹ* plays a central role in the transmission of African-rooted spirituality, healing, and wellness.

Vega (1999) defined *àṣẹ* as a culturally and spiritually endowed impulse of a sacred life force that provides "collective consciousness that is referred to by historian Roger Bastide (1978, 49) as the shared aesthetic vision for Africans in the Diaspora that "renewed the vitality of their symbols, values and their meanings" (p. 45). She noted the expansion of these traditions by tracing the disbursement of African people in the New World. *Àṣẹ* is found in a number of African diaspora

religions, including "*Espiritismo, Santería, Vodoun, Candomblé, Shangó, Palo Monte*, among others that share a common aesthetic vision and iconographic narrative that is traceable to origins in traditional West African cultures" (p. 45).

Vega (1999) framed the historical overview of the global reach of the philosophy and cosmology that Africans brought with them, particularly the Yorubas of West Africa, in part because their worldview is similar to that of other ethnic groups who were brought to the Americas, and because their psycho-spiritual traditions still play a dominant role today. Vega stated, "The more than thirteen million Africans who survived the Middle Passage carried with them the creative impulse that continues to weave through the aesthetic vision and expressions of African descendants" (p. 46).

The religio-aesthetic significance of the Yoruba is that they successfully transplanted their traditional culture to new environments, thereby creating a call and response of the Yoruba in the diaspora with their ascendants, with *àṣẹ* being the connective energy. The life force that "manifested in the *orishas* and *luas* were revitalized because of the continued infusion of Africans from the continent over more than four centuries of the slave trade" (Vega, 1999, p. 46). A number of the African-rooted cosmologies such as *Eguns* (ancestral spirits) and African deities (*orishas, nkisis, and luas*) were brought to the Americas. The manifestation of *àṣẹ* can still be seen and experienced today in Cuba's *Santería*, Brazil's *Candomblé*, in Haitian *Vodun*, and the *Shango* of Trinidad. Here too, in the United States, African-Americans practice a more implicit expression of *àṣẹ* in the Christian Black church through the invoking of the holy ghost and "the spirit" (p. 48). Vega summarized the historical transfer of *àṣẹ* stating,

Herskovits, Metraux, Fernandez Olmos and Paravisini-Gevert, Jahn, Bastide, Abiodun, and Thompson concur that common to each group that came into the new world are music, songs, dances, and legends that have the power to attract, convey, dispel, honor, and celebrate the sacred energies of nature and the spirit world... They are embodied in the elusive but omnipresent divine essence – *àṣẹ*. (Vega, 1999, p. 49)

Yoruba-based belief systems, like other African religions, incorporate a complex aesthetically-based spiritual framework that is creatively expressed through

“particular principles, colors, numbers, foods, music, dance posture, and symbols of each divinity and reflect and define their particular *àşę*” (Vega, 1999, p. 50).

In addition to *àşę* another key concept in the reclamation of African-centered healing and wellness in the diaspora is the West African concept of *sankofa*. Temple (2009) explored the Akan precept of *sankofa* which is an *Adinkra* expression and its emergence in the United States among African Americans. She provided a general overview of the Akan communication system, a system expressed through symbols and proverbs, noting that there are hundreds of *Adinkra* precepts, a few examples include *dwanimen*—humility and strength; *gye nyame*—except for God / supremacy of God; and, *funtunfunefu denkyemfunefu*—siamese crocodiles / democracy, unity in diversity. The concept of *Sankofa* is visualized through the image of a bird walking forward with its head / beak turned backward upon its tail; it is also shown as an adorned heart. The related proverb, “*Se wo were fin a wo Sankofa a yenkyi*” is typically translated, “It is not a taboo to return and fetch it when you forget” (Temple, 2009, p. 1).

The African conceptual notion of *Sankofa* is used in a variety of ways to define and characterize African life in a contemporary era. From a social-political liberation framework, *Sankofa* is an African Diaspora practice developed in response to the *Maafa*—a Kiswahili term which means enslavement and its psycho-spiritual aftermath. As a psycho-spiritual practice, Temple (2009) noted the impact of *sankofa* practices on African consciousness development as, (a) a legacy of natural cultural behaviors, (b) resistance to Eurocentric language and worldview and, (c) as a symbolic gesture toward Africanness. In this context, African consciousness development refers to the notion of African-oriented psycho-spiritual, cultural, and political awareness.

Temple (2009) asserted that the *Adinkra* system is often incorrectly referred to as symbols or designs, rather than as communicators of philosophical and cultural values. She emphasized the need for both academic and community use of the concept of *sankofa* to expand beyond its symbolic use, by calling for the systematic study of “the history, culture, values, and philosophies of the *Akan* culture from which the *Adinkra* system and *Sankofa* emanate” (p. 3). African-centered scholar Karenga (2001) described *sankofa* as an “Afrocentric methodological practice of historical

recovery” (p. 14). Both Karenga (2001) and Temple (2009) called for a renewed practice of “deep structural engagement of *Sankofa*” (Temple, 2009, p. 22) from an Akan philosophical context and its complementary *Adinkra* philosophies to assist African-American scholars in the reinvigoration of African-centered cultural cognizance. Two such practicing scholars are Grills and Ajei (2002) and their exploration of self / personhood from an Akan cosmological perspective.

### Continental and Diasporic Notions of Personhood and Spirituality

It is important to note that African epistemology tends not to use the term *self*. Instead, the term *personhood* is used because personhood implies the notion of community instead of individuality, emphasizing the relational nature of selfhood. Before delving into the African epistemological notion of personhood, it is important to first define the concept of knowing. Transpersonal, spiritual, authentic, and participatory knowing are central concepts in transpersonal psychology (Ferrer & Sherman, 2008; Hart, Nelson, & Puhakka, 2000). Ferrer defined participatory knowing as a “creative and multidimensional human access to reality” (Ferrer, 2002, p. 184).

Grills and Ajei (2002) pointed out that African epistemology emphasizes an affective-cognitive synthesis as a way of knowing reality, thus African inquiry and understanding of reality extends beyond the rational and the five senses. They outline three levels of knowing in Akan Philosophy: *Nea Wohu*, *Nea Etra Adwene*, and *Nea Wonhu*. Grills and Ajei (2002) described *Nea Wohu* as the observable or perceivable—knowledge derived from ordinary sense experience and rational thought. This type of knowledge is the Akan equivalent of both rational and empirical knowledge in Western epistemology. To know beyond the rational is *Nea Etra Adwene*—consciousness that transcends thought. The third aspect, *Nea Wonhu*, although not directly a dimension of knowledge it is described as the imperceptible or unobservable which suggests a level of reality.

In the African-centered model, prerational spiritual processes are a necessary building block in the construction of any model of consciousness. These spiritual aspects of self are central to the essence and expression of all forms and stages of consciousness and human psychological functioning (Grills & Ajei, 2002, p. 95).

The Akan model of the self is comprised of three components: self as essence, self as object, and self as process. The first component, self as essence is defined as “self as an extension of ultimate reality” (Grills & Ajei, 2002, p. 79). This aspect is comprised of the “ontological belief among African people that the fundamental basis of human beingness is spirit. What makes one a human being is the presences of spirit-based essence” (p. 79). Self as object is the incorporated elements and organization of self. Lastly, self as process is “influenced by a culture’s epistemological system a process by which we come to know ourselves and the world around us” (p. 79).

Each of these components is congruent with a participatory vision. Ferrer and Sherman (2008) referred to something similar as *multidimensional cognition*, stating that “the potential epistemic significance of multidimensional cognition can be illustrated by reference to the widely transcultural contemplative insight into the existence of a micro-macro homology between human nature, the cosmos, and the divine” (p. 40). In other words, psycho-spiritual well-being is a process of “co-active relationship based spirituality” (Lahood, 2010b, p. 67).

Health exists when a person experiences Self as an integrated whole that encompasses the body, the emotions, the mind and the spirit. This state of health experienced as a pervasive sense of well-being can only occur through connection with other Selves—“without you there can be no me.” To become whole the Self needs to be experienced and expressed from the inside and recognized from the outside. Hence the critical context for both health and healing is the interpersonal (Self-Other) relationship. (Fewster, 2000, pp. 1-2, as cited in Lahood, 2010b, p. 67).

The notion of “*I am because you are*” is an essential African concept. This phrase has its roots in the South African concept *Ubuntu*.

Two central scholars in study of the *Ubuntu* are Washington (2010) and Brooke (2008). Washington (an African-American scholar) takes a distinctly Afrocentric approach by framing *Ubuntu* as an African system of healing that is part of African/Black Psychology. Brooke, a White South African scholar, views *Ubuntu* through a Jungian lens of individuation, and sees it as part of a multicultural analytical psychology. *Ubuntu* derives from the Zulu people of South Africa where the oft used phrase, I am, because we are, is an African construct that defines

what it is to be a person. *Ubuntu* is a person’s internalized sense of community, their sense of responsibility toward others, both living and dead, and toward the wider world at large (Brooke, 2008). Being a person is then both particular, and a task of self-realization (Brooke, 2008, p. 49).

Washington (2010) described the self from *Ubuntu* psychological perspective “as being an expression of the Divine and is thus divine. All humans come from one divine Source and are at the same time an expression of that divine Source” (p. 35). He continued, “Relative to this notion that self is divine is the idea that *Ubuntu* psychology adheres to the notion of universal consciousness or Soul” (p. 35). This universal consciousness of the divine human spirit “is always in connection with a Divine source within the universe. One then is able to connect with multiple dimensions of the universe because the universe is all and is multi-dimensional” (p. 35).

Brooke (2008) offered a nuanced view of *Ubuntu* via a Jungian lens and his concept of individuation “with its emphasis on separateness and the withdrawal of projections, is essentially modern and Western” (p. 36). Jung’s psychoanalytic model, serving as perhaps the first transpersonal psychology, is important especially in light of Jung’s travels and studies in Africa (Cortright, 1997). By way a of critique of Jung’s colonized perspective of the African psyche, Brooke noted, “With regard to individuation, for instance, Jung’s concept is so thoroughly [Western] cultural that it all but forecloses the possibility of individuation for people of color, especially in Africa” (p. 39). Brooke bridged Jung and *Ubuntu* by exploring the concept of African consciousness called *Negritude* from the philosopher, poet, writer Leopold Senghor, the former President of Senegal. Paraphrasing Senghor, Brooke wrote, “[Negritude consciousness] is the whole network of civilized values...which characterize the Black peoples, or, more precisely, the Black African world. All these values are informed by an intuitive reason – consciousness – that involves the whole person” (p. 48). Brooke noted the Jungian undertones in Senghor’s work, and saw the concept of *Ubuntu* as an “important counterpoint to Jung’s view of the social world” (p. 48). Brooke defined *Ubuntu* as something that was given to all “because we are human, but its realization is a spiritual task that requires personal resoluteness, moral courage, and the support of others who treat us as persons” (p. 49), thus reemphasizing the connection between self, spirituality and community—the indexical



self. Regardless of which lens through which *Ubuntu* is viewed, be it African-centered or Jungian, it could serve as a valuable transpersonal model of the self.

Models of African-centered psycho-spiritual wellness survived the European slave trade and the resulting trauma known as the *Maafa*<sup>3</sup>. DeLoach and Petersen (2010) conducted a research study as part of an ongoing discussion on the traumas of the *Maafa* including the continuing strain of living under neocolonial conditions—“even in the ‘age of Obama’” (p. 41). Stating, “The healing of African people throughout the Diaspora is a necessity as Africans continue to resist the thriving cultural genocide of contemporary colonial conditions” (p. 41), DeLoach and Petersen (2010) noted that although there is increased attention given to specific traumatic events (e.g., school and community violence) there has been little empirical literature on indigenous approaches to trauma interventions and African spiritual pathways to healing even within African-centered psychological discourse.

In an effort to avoid privileging the experiences of Africans in the United States, their study focused on Afro-Brazilian communities “employment of a traditional African spiritual system—*Candomblé*—to individually and collectively heal from and resist colonization” (p. 41). They provided the following description of *Candomblé*,

*Candomblé* is an Afro-Brazilian religion brought to Brazil by enslaved Africans primarily from West and West Central Africa (i.e., Yoruba, Aja Fon, and Bantu) and was largely influenced by the chattel slavery and mercantilistic context from which it emerged during the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries. (DeLoach & Petersen, 2010, p. 42)

The authors noted some of the qualities of Portuguese/Brazilian enslavement. First, enslaved Africans were denied the right to religious autonomy. Therefore, they concealed their continued practice of African indigenous beliefs through syncretism with their enslavers’ Catholic saints. Second, because African societies are largely matrilineal, most of the *Candomblé* temples were established by women and “its leadership remains largely female particularly in the oldest *terreiros* (sacred ritual grounds/place of worship)” (p. 42). DeLoach and Petersen (2010) inferred the *sankofa* process of “re-membering, and (re) creating an identity of value and connectedness - to Spirit” (p. 42). Additionally, the *terreiro* provided a physical space – a refuge, a place where African people had spiritual power and agency.

### **African-Centered Transpersonal Self**

*Candomblé* serves as a conductor of cultural norms, continuity, and individual and “collective healing, transformation, and resistance” (DeLoach & Petersen, 2010, p. 43). One example of continuity is the integration of the Yoruba language in the prayers, rituals and songs. The use of ritual is essential to healing and transcendence in *Candomblé*. It provides spiritual and psychological intervention and restoration to its participants as well as a model and means of physical health. “The similar terrain in northeastern Brazil allowed continued access to the same plant based herbs and medicines utilized in Africa which assisted healers in continuing indigenous health care” (DeLoach & Petersen, 2010, p. 44).

Recently the ABPsi’s principle publication, the *Journal of Black Psychology* created a special issue focused on the African diaspora with the theme “Pan-African Discussion of African Psychology.” Cokley (2013) noted in the preface that this special issue was a way to demonstrate that “there is a global conception of African psychology that transcends national boundaries” (p. 205). Mariette (2013) provided an overview of the contributions of the Association of Black Psychologists’ work in Haiti. She stated, “The Association of Black Psychologists’ (ABPsi) efforts in Haiti offer a template for bridging Pan-African discussion and African psychology” (p. 261). Mariette (2013) asserted that it is “through a thorough examination and interrogation of antecedents, symptomology, etiology, treatment, remediation, and prevention from [the] lingering effects of slavery, colonialism, and trauma, [which] serves as the vehicle for restoring and illuminating the Haitian/African Spirit to optimal health” (p. 262).

Mariette (2013) offered three examples of re-conceptualizing, reinterpreting, and advanced healing praxis (p. 262), citing the African cosmological conceptualizations and paradigms conveyed by Obenga (1990/2004), the Kongo<sup>4</sup> cross-facilitate synthesizing theories from Fu-Kiau (2001; 2003; 2007), and the Cycle of Life from Gbodossou (2011, as cited in Mariette, 2013). Obenga is a Congolese scholar whose primary area of research is in African Philosophy – specifically ancient Egyptian (Kemetic) philosophy. Fu-Kiau, also Congolese, has made a number of visits to Oakland, California and conducted workshops and healing circles called an *Mbôngi* (K. K. B. Fu-Kiau, 2007) in the West Oakland community. Fu-Kiau’s research on the *Ki-Kôngo* Cosmogram and their related Kôngo cosmology have been a seminal contribution to African philosophy and cosmology.

Like Grills and Ajei (2002), Mariette (2013) also provided an overview of Haitian epistemology and the self. She outlined these concepts as Ways of Being (worldview); Concept of the Person, Health, Illness; Classification of Illness, Death; and Experience of Illness. In the first of these concepts, Ways of Being (worldview), she stated that the primary concern of human beingness is to “achieve and maintain harmonious synergy with the universal energy” (Mariette, 2013, p. 263), and that there is consubstantiation interdependence among all beings. These African-centered cultural precepts are fundamental concepts that lie beneath all societies within Africa.

Mariette (2013) remarked that from an African-centered perspective, “The tribal self (ancestral component of one’s being) is a transpersonal self and has a level of consciousness shared by everyone of a particular ‘tribal’ experience” (p. 263). Mariette directly noted the participatory transpersonal and relational spiritual experience and she asserts that the concept of the person as self is multidimensional, emphasizing that the self includes the tribal, social, personal, and physical body. Mariette defined the concept of health from an African-centered Haitian perspective as a state of well-being in connectedness – to environment (natural and human) and the spiritual (ancestors/invisible spirits). Health and well-being are demonstrated through the experience of “harmonious integration with the environment (‘ontology’)” (p. 264). In contrast, illness is the result of disharmony. Here too the continued imbalances of the *Maafa* and European enslavement reverberate.

### **African-Centered Meta-theory: Optimal Psychology**

Linda James Myers, as mentioned earlier, is one of the few African American scholars who has been included in the transpersonal discourse (Hartelius et al., 2007; Myers, 1985). Myers has brought together concepts from both transpersonal and African-centered psychology in her meta-theory, optimal psychology. She opened her latest essay with a quote from African essayist Ayi Kwei Armah (2006) that asks, “So the way we live now, what draws our spirits forward, if our souls are not energized by the urge to attain projections of our own best selves?” (as cited in, 2013, p. 257). Myers proposed that a meta-theory is required for the restorative process of the African self and consciousness. Myers has offered *optimal psychology* as a theory that holds the capacity to:

acknowledge, position, and respond appropriately to [the negative] historical reality” while also being able to “embrace the cosmology, ontology, axiology, epistemology, teleology, and the meaning of being human associated with the African cultural tradition of wisdom and deep thought from classical civilization to the present day (Myers, 2013, p. 257).

Specifically, optimal psychology embraces an All-is-Spirit ontological premise, thus producing an “episteme in which self-knowledge is assumed as the basis of all knowledge and the sense of self endorsed is multidimensional, inclusive of those having gone before or ancestors, future generations, community, and all of nature” (Myers, 2013, p. 258). Myers (2013) demonstrated how her concept of optimal psychology relates to the restoration of the spirit, stating that optimal psychology is “shaped and driven as the extension of the wisdom tradition of African deep thought” and “informs and develops a culturally authentic, African-centered quality of life through all its cycles” (p. 259). Myers proposed optimal psychology as a way to offer cultural realignment. She stated that optimal psychology seeks to accomplish this “through cogno-affective restructuring, soul illumination, and character refinement, as power to wield the relationship between the word, the person, and the world is mastered” (p. 259). Optimal psychology brings together transpersonal psychology and African-centered psychology, and is a fitting construct with which to close the exploration of African-centered transpersonal self and psycho-spiritual wellness.

### **Notes**

1. The Akan are an ethnic group found in Ghana, West Africa. Comprised of Ashanti and Fante people as well as other ethnicities. The main Akan language is Kwa and their cosmology is comprised in system called Adinkra.
2. Africology is the academic discipline which encompasses Afrocentricity and African-centered approaches (Conyers, 2004).
3. *Maafa* is a KiSwahili word that means great disaster; terrible occurrence. A term used by Marimbi Ani in the book “Let the Circle Be Unbroken” (Ani, 1997) to describe the trauma of the European Slave Trade of African peoples.
4. Kongo is intentionally spelled with a ‘K’ as part of

a spelling convention that used to denote the difference between an Anglo-Eurocentric construction of history and culture and an African centered construction. This convention is also often used in the spelling of Africa i.e., Afrika.

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