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Searching for Afrocentric Spirituality within the Transpersonal

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to show, via the lens of a culturally specific dream, how the transpersonal could benefit from broadening its approach to spirituality to the extent that other ontologies are allowed their space alongside those already established. Discussing Perennial theory, whilst considering briefly some of the spiritual means essential to an African spirituality, this paper suggest that a more Cosmopolitan approach to the Transpersonal is needed to avoid the creation of a spiritual Other.

Introduction

As a transpersonal psychotherapist who has undertaken years of transpersonal psychotherapy, it seemed strange looking back at the lack of a cultural understanding of this dream in my previous work   It is a dream that could be explored from within the more traditional therapeutic angles of metaphor and the use of symbols so common to Jungian analysis (Jung, 1964; Stevens, 1990) where the metaphors are explored for meaning by the client and the analyst, and rooted in a Greek mythological paradigm.

A deeper consideration of the problem here left me with a real sense that such an Afrocentric cultural paradigm has had little to no real acknowledgement within the wider world of the traditional transpersonal. This revelation was especially surprising given the often clear, yet unacknowledged, influences that African ontologies have had on the transpersonal over the years. For example, Jung (Stevens, 1990) on his travels visited Africa and was clearly influenced by the numerous and diverse spiritual practices he encountered on his visits, whilst in the more modern era the works of the mystic Daskalos (Joseph, 2012), and the understanding the roles of spirits in our daily lives, have clear connections to those often experienced on the African continent. Yet, besides the interesting work of the likes of Mazama (2003), within the transpersonal movement I am often left asking where is the black, African or Caribbean voice when it comes to offering a perspective of our collective spiritual

experience? And does an afrocentric perspective on spirituality have a space within a global spiritual tapestry?

Another criticism with this western-centric outlook on the spiritual, is that it can appear as another type of dualism that echoes many of those that have plagued western philosophical thought since the time of Plato. The cost of this is the silencing of the many alternative voices that have something different to say about relationship to the spiritual; for example the rich heritage of Maori spiritual thought, including the linking of mind, body and spirit to the land (Van De Port, 2005); or the incredible relationship of God, spirits and humanity that is prevalent in many African religions (Mbiti, 1989). It is this continued ignorance of other forms of spirituality threatens to coat the transpersonal in the type of neo-colonial cloak that, in places, it has worked hard to avoid.

To emphasise this point, Asante (1984) suggests, the flaw within the traditional transpersonal its overreliance on the wisdom of the major religions, and thereby the exclusion of many other forms of spirituality. His idea brings into focus the idea of transpersonal narcissism, echoing the idea of Ferrer's (Hart, Nelson, & Puhakka, 2000), where the transpersonal, and spiritual experiences, are defined by an increasingly narrow set of criteria. This thereby creates what I would term a spiritual Other, where one is humanity increasingly makes judgements on what is spiritual and what is not for the rest of us. The numerous spiritual experiences revered by the many alternative world cultures should also be encouraged forward, as then they could inform such a spiritual whole. The inclusion of an African ontology is essential to this.

But how did this come to pass? One theory for this is the spread of the western religions during colonial times often led to the suppression, exclusion or the dilution of religions and religious practices judged by Western religions as 'unchristian'. For example, Candomble, a religion born in West African and transported to South American by slaves, only survived as a religion in Brazil by incorporating a number of Christian practices into its means of worship, and the influence of the merging of these practices is still seen within its ceremonies today (Van De Port, 2005).

Another problem for the transpersonal is the sheer number of spiritual practices and religions on the continent of Africa. As a continent where there are 53 nations (including the islands off the African coastlines but considered to be African) there will be numerous more tribes, and tribal groups spread across the continent. This therefore means there is no one religion

that covers all of Africa, unlike say Catholicism across parts Europe where even here there are differences, meaning that at best in any understanding of African spirituality what one must aim for is an understanding of the main ways of spiritual worship across Africa.

This though is more than reaching for a Perennialist understanding of the spiritual (Ferrer, 2000; Oldmeadow, 2010), where the similarities between religious paths are recognised in the quest for an understanding of the universal expression of spirituality. What I am questing for here is a recognition and acceptance of forms of spiritual expression that currently perhaps reside outside of the perennial norm. And this is where cosmopolitanism comes into view.

The main ideas within cosmopolitanism for this paper revolve around the interesting concept of the understanding and acknowledgement of cultural others, where we don't have to agree with them, be it their ideas or societal habits, but we do have to accept their right to their own point of view (Appiah, 2006; Pollock, Bhabha, Breckenridge, & Chakrabarty, 2000; Snee, 2013). This is more than just a Perennialist search for commonality, but an acknowledgement that we are all the Other in some way or form, a necessary step on the path towards this search for this mythical universality (Pollock et al., 2000). The taking of a more cosmopolitan consideration of spirituality therefore allows for a positioning of other forms of spirituality; Afrocentric, Maori, Aboriginal and many others, alongside the more established and understood spiritual beliefs of the East and the West.

To open the door to understanding, religion and spirituality sit as cornerstones within many African cultures. For example, within most traditions there is a strong belief in our connection not just to family and community, but also to our ancestors, the spirits that guide us, and then unto God itself. In selecting just a small cross section, Mbiti (1989) in his detailed text where he stresses that for Africans this is a religious universe, also outlines how 'for many peoples like the Bachwa, Bemba, Lugbara, Nuer and others, (they) refer to human beings (or special groups of them) as 'the children of God', or 'sons of God', or 'people of God' (Mbiti, 1989, p. 49). He also stresses how God appears through nature and in animals within many African traditions. Following on from this, there is a distinct link between the ideas of using myth and symbols within the world of psychotherapy (Jung, 1964) and the position of the same within African spirituality. For example, Imbo states 'there is an ethnophilosophy in the proverbs, myths, folk tales, sculptures and traditional cultures' (1998, p. xi). Okpewho (1983) also talks about the importance of myth to an African ontological sense of being, for example within the Ndembu of Zambia, where there are a 'forest of

symbols' in their ritual life. He then goes on to expand on his idea whilst stating 'the symbolic activities of a non-literate culture bear such a kinship with the kind of rational exercise found in literature culture, have we any right to judge the one any less scientific than the other…?' (1983, p. 30).

Next, spirits are often considered to be divinities that have been created by God and through whom God acts. For example, as Mbiti states 'the Ashanti have a pantheon of divinities through whom God manifests Himself. They are known as Abosom; are said to 'come from Him' and to act as His servants and intermediaries between Him and other creatures' (Mbiti, 1989, p. 75).

It is also important to acknowledge the importance in African cultures of the role of the ancestors and their continued influence over us. For example, Sangomas of South Africa, or traditional healers, are often charged with offering access to individuals to their ancestors. But as Thornton states, 'healers are not 'possessed' by spirits, but rather claim to 'possess ancestors' or to have ancestors. This is not simply a claim to special spiritual access, but is also a claim to an identity and a specific cultural and intellectual heritage' (2011, p. 26). This importance is also relevant across most of Africa. Another example comes from Kwame (2014), who during a TED Talks discussion on religion, explores his own roots and the Ghanaian ritual of pouring a portion of his drink on the ground and offering respect to the ancestors before a meal or event. Taken together, our identity is therefore formed by the recognition of who we are in the eyes and via our relationships with all these different conscious and metaphysical levels of being.

At this basic level, an afrocentric ontology is therefore one that is hugely communal, and although similar in ways to the ideas of social constructionism here in the West (Andrews, 2012), where identity is formed through the influence of culturally pre-determined social constructs upon the individual, there is a distinct variation in the ideas of just what metaphysically helps us to form this identity. There is also a major difference here regarding ideas rooted within the psychotherapeutic paradigm and the construction of identity, with much of the transpersonal discourse centring round the idea of the internal layers of becoming that an individual has to endure when forming an egoic sense of self. As Harris though states in returning us to our afrocentric perspective, 'consciousness determines being. Consciousness in this sense means the way an individual (or a people) thinks about relationship with self, others, with nature, and or with some superior idea or being' (Asante,

2008, p. 113). In my view, these more collective experience of spiritual illumination, experiences that sit alongside those of American Indian and Aboriginal traditions, have much in common with say the experience of a Christian Mass, the collective chanting of Buddhist priest or the whirling of Sufi Dervishes.

Finally though, the very brief examples of African spirituality are not meant to reduce or simplify the African spiritual experience in any fashion as, as previously stated, it is almost impossible to truly understand the range and diversity of African spiritual traditions. The hope here is to open the transpersonal to an exploration into the uniqueness of an African heritage often overlooked by the 'major' religions. An awareness of this heritage, for example when considered in connection with this author's dream, then allows clients from a more afro-centric background access to a deeper sense of themselves via their own aspect of the unconscious via the myths and stories located within their own collective unconscious heritage.

A modified version of the dream below appeared in an article I published several years ago which I would like to reprint here. The dream reads:

I'm standing at the top of Victoria Falls in the middle of the Zambezi River. I'm on a rock in the middle of this massive waterfall. To my left all I can see is water, tumbling over the edge and into the depths far below, and to my right the same. I look down. All I can see is billions of gallons of water racing away from me, further and further away from me, so I jump. Feet first I jump down, my back to this thunderous wall of water, and I fall, I keep falling, feeling nervous at first, but then gradually more relaxed with what I've done.

Then, suddenly, I land on a wooden platform imbedded into the waterfall.

As I look around I notice a waterwheel to my left turning slowly as the water tumbles past. I realise this is a house built into the wall of the waterfall, so I walk inside. Two naked people, one male one female, both white, spot me and run away in different diagonal directions as I walk towards them. I don't call out to them, I just let them go, before making my way back outside. Again I'm back on the platform, at its edge, the waterwheel to my side, and ready to jump.

So I do.

And again I fall feet first downwards, with my back to the waterfall, its raging noise tremendous, its torrent of water spraying me delicately. And even though I'm falling, even though I feel nervous, I know, somehow, that everything is going to be alright.

(Turner, 2007)

This is a dream that has followed me for a number of years, and been explored on a various occasions both by myself in solitude and within my own psychotherapeutic journey to varying affect. During this time, the meanings given to this dream have ranged from this author needing to connect with his deeper unconscious, to the attainment of one's natural power. For myself though, the most powerful aspect of this dream was its metaphorical premonition of my undertaking my own spiritual journey, with this author travelling from Dar Es Salaam, in Tanzania into Zambia on the TAZARA train line, before undertaking numerous bus rides down through Zambia. It's a dream that led to myself sitting at the edge of Victoria Falls itself, dangling my feet in its waters as I watched children swim and play in the waters nearby (the author was far too cowardly to jump).

For this author, accessing this dream via a more afrocentric ontology was especially important as it presented within its use of metaphor a journey full of self-discovery where some of his own unconscious colonial shackles fell away, and led to the undertaking of his own life changing spiritual journey to Mosi-ao-Tunya (otherwise known in the West as Victoria Falls).

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