THE AFRICAN AMERICAN MODE OF TRANSCENDENCE

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There is an abiding dilemma in Western formulations of all areas of study: the problem of self-aggrandizing disciplines. Even in its reach for diversity a Western philosophy or science creates, *inter alia,* limitations. Therefore, one may tolerate the diversity of viewpoints and then establish a single set of criteria for what constitutes validity. This is a Western way of dealing with diversity. The world of transpersonal psychology may be similarly victimized by the same process. To illustrate, transcendence is not merely a phenomenon of the East and West. To claim this is not simply ignorance in the sense of ignoring the manner in which people in the cradle of humanity and civilization have dealt with transcendence; it is more seriously the continuation of the Western imposition of a view of the world. The problem is not in the expounding of the categories but in the absolute manner in which they are assumed to constitute the whole of human thought. This is unacceptable in any field on intellectual and cultural grounds.

transcendence is not merely a phenomena of East and West

A powerfully expressive system allows Westerners and increasingly Easterners to speak of the great religions and mean by such expression Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, [slam, and Judaism. Indeed the great religious thinkers become Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed, and Moses. I do not know what constitutes their greatness, that is, any more than the greatness of Oduduwa of the Yoruba, Okomfo Anokye of the Asante, or Charninuka of the Shona, As these "great" religions are religions of literature as opposed to orature, perhaps their greatness resides in the literature. They are also essentially one-god religions, and I can see how that fact might be uppermost in

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the mind of Westerners. And yet this is not enough to explain the few references to Africa in the discussion of transcendence (see Katz, 1973, 1982; Van Dusen, 1974), since some African religions also express a one-god ideology. When the way to transcendence is found in a people's life as they deify their own nationalism and history, that may become a sufficiency and greatness for them.

the key to African transcendence

Human civilization began in the Upper Nile Valley over 7,000 years ago with the gifts of Nubia. The temple of Karnak and Luxor held the splendid secrets of the mysteries which have been explored by Schwaller de Bubicz, Ben.lochannon, Budge, and others in great detail. The ancient mysteries contained in the book of the *Coming Forth By Day and the Going Forth By Night*, or as it was called in the West, *The Book of the Dead*, held the key to African transcendence 4,000 years before the Arab jihads swept out of Arabia and overran northern Africa, stamping out the indigenous Egyptian language and establishing Islam. The subsequent dispersal of the indigenous secret societies to various other places on the continent made it possible for the re-emergence of these secrets in the Yoruba Ifa divination poetry, the Shona Mbira, and the Asante Okyeame system. These traditions are mainly oral, yet they have demonstrated the integration of African medicine, theology, and agriculture. Jahn says in *Muntu* that no traditional African ever thinks of medicine apart from its connectedness to agriculture and theology (Jahn, 1961: 75-92). This wholism is uniform and unbroken within village life. On the other hand, it is easy for many of us in the West to believe in science and not believe in theology. Similarly, we can accept the growth of the corn but do not have to accept certain medical practices. This is impossible within the wholistic framework of African societies. Of course, such inconsistency places an enormous psychological burden on Westernized Africans.

African wholism

The African view is the Sudic Ideal; i.e., the totality of the indigenous African religions; it is the fundamental basis of all African wholism. The African American is to a degree a most Westernized African, yet has retained the Sudic Ideal of harmony, achieved by rhythm, and passed on to other cultures. There is a unique experience of transcendence among Africans in the West, whether they are Cubans, Brazilians, Haitians, Jamaicans, Ecuadorians, or citizens of the United States; they share forms of the same experience in *Samba* the Brazilian dance, *Sango* the Cuban folk religion, *Umbanda* the Brazilian folk religion, *Voodoo* the Haitian folk religion, or *Mya!* a Jamaican religion. At the center of all of these forms of human expression is the same source of energy, the rhythm or polyrhythms that drive the spirit towards transcendence.

COPING AND ADAPTING

During the moments of life crises, most of the world believes in the inexorable nature of adaptation; certain processes are embedded in our minds from birth to death and the set formulas for coping are repeated in every media. The advent of what Anthony Wilder calls the "digitalization" of the world, set in motion as it were, by the predecessors of the logical positivists, heightened by behaviorists, and made a religion by some Western scientists in the twentieth century, seeks to ignore, if not deny, the transcendent experience. The African American possesses, by virtue of the unique communion with the American nation, a way of dealing with life crises that should be carefully explored. The means to analoguing the digital, i.e, humanizing the numbers, to harmonizing the disharmonies, to holistifying the discrete are found in the individual's search for harmony in the midst of others.

analoguing the digital

CLASSIFICATION

Do you remember how the Romans believed in the existence of *numen,* the mystical power which the gods gave to some people and withheld from others? This power raised those so favored to the status of kings, noble people, most often men, and philosophers. Those so favored, those with the *numen,* were distinguished from those who did not have *numen.* In other words, the people of god received the grace which was distributed selectively. In that system, the person fulfilled himself in the perpetual conflict between the principles of good and evil. I like to call the product of this "the bias of categorization" which divides people into teachers and those taught, sinners and saved, black and white, superior and inferior, weak and strong. Out of this bias has developed much of the catastrophic disharmonies which we experience in the world. Cycles within cycles, wheels within wheels of contradictions were produced which no amount of what the servants of god called "mysteries" could resolve.

"the bias of categorization"

SUDICISM

The African American view of a wholistic personality is grounded in the African idea of Sudicism, the spiritual commitment to an ideological view of harmony. Puhl (1976) identifies maturity as a key concept in human personality theory and explores the concept as a construct of humanistic psychology. Her analysis places the major theorists and their theories within the proper context of Western psychology. But since they did

not deal with Sudicism or the African view of personality, the formulations are lacking in analytical value for anyone wanting to examine Afro-American spirituality or transcendence.

the quest for harmony

In the African American view the person must be harmonized because an undisciplined person creates disharmony within the society. Thus it is the quest for harmony that is at the source of all actions; the Sudic Ideal which emphasizes the primacy of the person can only function if the person seeks individual and collective harmony. But this is not all. One must understand that to become human, to realize the promise of becoming human is the only important task of the person. One only becomes human in the midst of others. The person is defined as human by her actions which lead to harmony; our attitude toward her gives the dynamism necessary to produce a harmonized personality.

To really understand this you must know that the African world does not recognize external forces that aid in producing this self-definition of a person. What I mean is that the person does not go outside himself for external powers; those powers inhere in him as an extension into the future of those who have gone before; he is a testament to his forebears in a different guise, living in a different period (Ngubane, 1979). When I summon these inherent powers, I know that I am not indebted to any power outside myself. In a transpersonal sense, the more I recognize and develop those powers, the more human I become. I am in tune with the rhythm of the universe.

there is no end to seeking harmony

Now here is the point. There is no end to this challenge, this challenge of becoming a person, because there is no end to seeking harmony. When one goes within oneself, that is, when we turn inward to explore the eternal reality that has the secrets of the person, we find that one may go on forever in this way; no one can give you these dimensions, these new dimensions, and nobody can take them away. You find them, we say, in your eternal quest for harmony, and by so doing you become more human as the master of your own powers, but always in the midst of others.

THREE MAJOR PARADIGMS

spiritual dimension paradigm

There are essentially three major paradigms, or ways, to look at transpersonal growth. In one way we assume that all that we see, all that we feel, all that exists as matter is an illusion, so we seek what many of us call the spiritual dimension of reality, of ourselves, of our lives, of our environment, truly, even of our

colleagues. We might say, it is not your body but your spirit that attracts me. Of course that is putting it at one particular level, nevertheless it is the same paradigm operating, the search for the answer beyond the material.

logical positivist paradigm

On the other hand there is a fundamental paradigm seen often in Western thought that is based on the logical positivist tradition which says, show me the "real" thing, the facts, the evidence, the "hard" data. Only if I can touch it, smell it, feel it or see it, is it real. So if I tell the person that a certain musician has "soul," he wants me to demonstrate it in the laboratory, to identify it statistically, to measure it. This paradigm sees everything that is not concrete, that is not material, as an illusion, a misplaced dream.

personalism paradigm

Then there is the paradigm that answers the questions of the most intense moments of crisis with the Sudic Ideal: personalism, which is itself an ideological commitment to harmony. Personalism finds its strength in the idea that anything we want to happen can happen if we are committed to following the lead of *nommo,* the generative quality of the spoken word (Jahn, 1961). Neither spiritualism nor materialism is anything without the person. The person is the marker, the tagger for what is real. Thus, the claim that the Zulu can cause their hearts to stop beating at will for a few minutes does not introduce any difficulty into the Sudic Ideal because what the Asante can do with their hearts the Zulu and the Yoruba can do with theirs and vice versa. Similarly, it is claimed that some can step on fire and not be burned, some have planted swords into the earth that cannot be pulled out by a human, and yet all of this is nothing. The only thing that *really matters* is the person. That is why the drummer goes to recite incantation to the trees before he cuts them down to make his drums; that is why the people of Niger stalk a lion always with words of praise and incantations before they shoot it, and that is why the lion after it is shot lies down and dies peacefully, according to the incantation. There is nothing to the spiritual, nor to the material, that is not activated by the person. So I can say that personalism, in the African and African American sense, is neither spiritualism nor materialism, but the activating energy contained in the person.

energies inhere in all of us

Releasing the energy in the person is done by various libations and rituals. Each person contains these energies, some cultivate them more than others, but they inhere in all of us. But how does one go about finding these energies, these essences of personalism? How can they be located? What pathway leads to the infinite ability to make of *the* material and spiritual what we desire them to be?

energy and life in the midst of persons

To find the answers to these questions requires understanding what is meant by "African American transcendence." The African finds energy and life in the midst of persons; she does not escape to the mountains, or the valleys, or the seashores in order to find the energy. There is no tradition, no great tradition of withdrawal with the African or African American tradition; ours is preeminently a tradition of remarkable encountering with others. Hermits rarely exist and all would-be Thoreaus are baptized in the fires of human excitement because it is only in the give and take of the *nommo* that we find energy, not in the lives of solitude. In this tradition there is some belief that hermiticism results from suspicion and distrust of persons other than one's self. Nothing is more beautiful to me than the ecstasy that occurs when a group of people have got on the same road to harmony at the same moment; that is the true manifestation of spirituality, the true materiality of life, which can only be determined by the person joining in the collective expression of power (Barrett, 1914, 5-29).

this moment of collective expression

This is one of our legacies to America itself. I am no longer myself, I am a transpersonal being at this moment of collective expression. I am *feeling* at that moment. It is not a left-brain moment, it is joy ineffable, because we are in tune with the feelings of others. I experience *nommo* and I know that nothing can save me except the spoken word in the moment of collapse, but beyond that I am one with the orality of *nommo;* I exist in it and it exists in me. In my experience, the printed page is silent compared to the spoken word. This is the message of both sacred and secular orators in the African American experience. The rhetoric of Malcolm X was meant to convey his audiences toward the ultimate goal of possession, that is, attaining of harmony through style and power.

our own transcendence and the help of others

We stand alone to hold back our personal crises; this is the most awesome knowledge confronting us. We handle this awesome knowledge by maturing in a collective sense. This is the secret of African American spirituality, that is, while we recognize the individuality of the responsibility, we know that it cannot be carried out without others. We can reach our *own* transcendence but never without the help of others. If I run to the sea alone, my solitude finds me searching for new ways to come together with others. I know myself only in relation to others, without whom I am a Piagetian egocentric. We say that we can never truly know ourselves without the knowledge of others, more precisely, in the productive engagement with the other we truly experience our own harmony. This is how the Sudic Ideal

seeks to analogue the digital, Richards (1984) expresses this idea as harmonious interaction.

When the black entertainers introduced the phrase "put your hands together" it was not for the purpose of applause, as in the European hand-clapping that is derived from the Germanic rattling of swords and spears in approval of a chief's speech. Rather what they meant to do was to call an audience to a collective generative experience. Since the traditional performers and audiences in Africa were one, it was not far fetched for the entertainers, especially singers, to call their audiences to these touching moments. Inherent in this rhythmic quality of touching hands together, of audiences caught up in collective expression, was the fundamental search for harmony.

"put your hands together"

POSSESSION

It is this *nommo* quality which leads directly, if the person seeks transcendence, to "possession." Now possession is not the same as Gurdjieff's self-remembering, or Krishnamurti's self-knowledge, or Sufi concentration, or Kabbalah concentration, or Raja Yoga concentration, although it is a way to enlightenment (Gurdjieff, 1976; Fouere, 1974). Possession is almost always accompanied by music and incantation, whether vocal or instrumental. But you cannot achieve it alone; it is collective and is the result of "perfect harmony" with self, nature, and the universe. It is sense experience, a response to feeling, not so much a response to thought as a following of the rhythms of nature. I would not even go as far as to call it consciousness, because consciousness is not an entity but a process of attention; one cannot have consciousness unless one is conscious of something. That is why I can only say that in possession there are no unshared edges, no hanging questions, no impossible dreams at the moment of feeling. At that moment the digital is analogued, numbers merge into spirit and we become transcendent. Clearly one may reach the state of transcendence by many roads *(see* Kaplan, 1982; Corbin, 1977). Once it is reached, we are no longer the same; we are compatriots with others who have crossed the chasm by various means.

possession as the result of perfect harmony

It is by no means given that all will reach possession in this generative, productive way; some may never know the experience. But this is so with all ways to transcendence. We must still search in order to find. And those who are not in the search mode will never find. This is also the Sudic truth.

not a/l reach possession

All transpersonal moments are times of energy. That is why we often hear people speak of the possession experience in terms of

work. They will say, "Boy, they worked themselves up," or "Girl, he worked himself into a frenzy." There is truth and error in these statements because work is involved in the first instance, that is, you cannot have the transpersonal state promised by the African American mode of spirituality without energy being expended. On the other hand, we cannot possibly speak of one working herself "up" or "into a frenzy." These terms have little significance and almost no meaning in the context of *nommo,* Possession is an individual state of harmony usually reached in a collective experience of a rhythmic nature. As such it is neither up nor down, perhaps it is all around; it is not even necessary to say, lest we walk into the Roman trap of *numen* again and start saying that up is better than down, north better than south and meditation better than possession. The experience matters. Harmony matters.

possession is not trance

Possession is not the result of a trance, although trance has been associated wrongly with possession. I have heard people say, "Well, she was in a trance," or "he fell into a trance," referring to someone who had experienced the complete harmony of possession in the African American mode. A trance has little growth potential and may be the result of an accident or illness; possession, on the contrary, must be sought. Sometimes people will refer to a "trance-like" state in an attempt to be more precise about what they cannot explain. Nevertheless "possession" is only explained in the sense of a person seeking to possess. A trance is basically a physiological state which may be caused by hypnotism or coma; possession is spiritual although it is usually accompanied by physiological changes. It is a cleansing of the spirit and as such produces euphoria for the individual and a sense of peace for the collective others who witness the possession (Bourguigon, 1973).

possession is not "being possessed"

Furthermore, it is a mistake to assume that possession in this context means that the person is "being possessed." When Europeans first saw the collective ceremonies and rituals of rhythm produce the state of possession in some people, they interpreted it as the people being possessed; even some African writers, particularly the Cubans and Brazilians, have written in this way about *candomble* and *umbanda.* To these observers the person is "possessed" by the gods of Africa, mainly Yoruba, Shango, Legba, Yemanja, Ogun, Obatala, etc.

But this is incorrect; it is not the person who is being possessed, but the gods and goddesses. Therefore, the act of possession always starts as an act of volition on the part of the person, not on the part of the gods. The person possesses the "gods"

through searching in the proper mode and finding harmony. Now to speak like this is not to speak wholly of what might be called a "church" experience, but rather to show that the person actively and creatively participates in his own experience.

What is more, *the* experience of "possession" has little to do with the church context, though it is most visible there. What I mean is that the church is only one venue for the African American experience of this harmony. To be certain about things, it is one of the best environments because so many ofthe necessary conditions are in the church, Yet the truth is that the feeling can be found wherever people are congregated and there is an ample amount of heavy rhythms. The work gangs in the southern U.S., during and after slavery, produced some of the most beautiful music in search of harmony with nature.

THE QUEST FOR HARMONY

The call and response mode is important also to our understanding of the experience, One can easily assume when one listens to the experience that it is the speaker calling and the audience responding. These roles, however, often shift but most of the time the audience calls and the speaker responds, going as deep or as high as he can. It is this direct search for harmony that is at the base of African American spirituality. We seek it everywhere and all of the time, and then there are those moments when it bursts full blown into our souls and we take wings and fly for a while.

the base of African American spirituality

The graceful basketball player who moves in tune to the rhythms of the game in just such a way as to bring his body in harmony with the particular moment of decision on the court is in search of the experience. The football player who eludes several other players in his quest to make a touchdown knows that to have done it well is not enough; one must do it in such a manner that harmony is served. You must make it look easy, fluid, natural, inevitable, In the end, the experience is made to seem predictable, This is the function of rhythm, this is the achievement of enlightenment. As with the old work songs, one learns how to make the load lighter. My great grandfather once told me, "Son, you know, only the gods know how to work work." It took me a long time to understand what he meant.

"how to work work"

The intense very special work songs that we sang on the railroads and in the cotton fields were meant to work work. If one did not understand how to work work, work would work her to death. This was the cruelty of slave labor. Now you see

the unique African American adaptation of rhythm in the search for harmony. Our sojourn here gave new meaning to the traditional African forms of the spiritual experience. Whether we hammer, or hoe, whoop or holler, as they say, slap five up high, down low, you're too slow, we do it with the rhythmic motif that leads to harmony. Possession is only the most complete form of the same rhythmic drive.

the incessant collective drive for harmony

In any good blues or jazz club you can get the same soulful sound as you get in the church. Christianity claims the experience but the motif, the rhythm, the feeling, the transcendence occurs anywhere the conditions present themselves. That is to say it does not depend upon icons of faith but the incessant collective drive of people for harmony with self. fellow earthlings, and nature. The lack of this incessant drive causes the breakdown of the traditional harmonies because rhythmic tension must be maintained to produce harmony. Jazz is our classical music precisely because it contains the riffs, the counterpoints, the polyrhythms, and syncopation essential to the experience.

Our orature, which is more important in many respects than our literature, is best served and serves best when it is influenced by jazz.

In this poetry, as in music. as in all the rhythms that lead us to the complete harmony from whence comes our transcendence, we are never alone. It is like prayer; we never quite understand praying alone. Since possession involves rhythm. we must understand that possession is always accompanied." Hilda Kuper, anthropologist, says that a female African dancer told her that the dance is neveralone. One must not dance alone; if one does dance alone, the villagers would cry "witch." Thus, we say if we want to dance, we go outside where the people are to dance. so powerful and predictable are the rhythms. Let me also say that "Dr. J,..the famous American basketball player, is called Poetry in Motion mainly because he is constantly seeking to attain harmony. One of the most interesting facts about this search for transcendence is that, although it is not calculated but rhythmic, that does not mean that the rhythm remains the same; it can change up on you. Many times sitting in a jazz club, listening to a musician, you might say, "Wow, how did he do that?" It is the same with athletes, who can switch up in terms of their movements but still be right in time with the rhythm. The way we learn to do that is to provide for the time what is not necessarily there; this is the essence of scatting, syncopation, possession. We analogue the digital by claiming the possession that is rightfully every person's and moving off to harmony through rhythm.

The contagion of popular music throughout the modern world is due to the heavy insistence of the incessant African rhythms which gave to the vocabulary the concept of "beat" as in beat on a drum. All the world is addicted to the music of "popular dance"; this is a major African contribution to the directed energies of the world. Furthermore, even in its watered down version it is a spiritual contribution without parallel. Since music and dance are never separated in the African context, the percussive beat which lifts dancers has become the mainstay of popular music of all varieties.

rhythm as a path of transcendence

Since rhythm is a principal path to transcendence for the African American, further exploration of this dimension could lead to a transcendental awakening where we seek to find harmony with nature and each other.

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