

The SAGE Encyclopedia of African Cultural Heritage in North America

African Consciousness as Cultural Continuity

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From generation to generation across time and space, metaphoric memory and performance as well [p. 45 ↓] as African American customs and norms have served African American people especially well, given the contexts of racist hostility and anti-African reality in which African Americans live. Though often unrecognized, the cultural continuity of African consciousness expressed in many different forms has been and continues to be the key to African American survival and unfolding advancement.

The greatest falsehood promulgated by the European version of the history of the Americas is the notion that African people were thrust into the New World empty of any intrinsic beliefs, ideas, and culture worthy of human respect and recognition. A collectively held belief intentionally fostered by their enslavers was that Africans had no culture and were located slightly above the great apes in the “Great Chain of Being.”

The legacy of this thought makes it difficult to identify cultural continuities, let alone the continuity of African consciousness in and among African descendants in North America. Yet anthropology confirms that Africans, the first people to stand erect and to speak, were the first to be conscious of being conscious. And with the development of human language would come more complex forms of social organization, giving rise to music and dance, religion and philosophy, medicine, agriculture, and the domestication of animals—in short, the beginning of civilization.

Enslaved Africans were already grounded in beliefs that everything was an interconnected whole and that reality consisted of both visible and invisible realms, with the invisible being far greater than the visible. Clearly, there was, in addition to political domination and economic exploitation, a “clash of culture” between Africans and their captors. Remarkably, there remains a similar and more complex cultural clash between African Americans and the dominant European American society.

African Consciousness as a Construct

Consciousness relative to African people is, in effect, a construct that represents the ability of human beings to know, perceive, understand, and be aware of self in relation to self and all else. In the African worldview, all that is consciousness is, in fact,

revealed in and determined by relationships or “energy in motion.” An African-centered understanding of consciousness would recognize that, at the most fundamental level, consciousness is found in the “pulse” that gives human beings life. What is recognized on the physical level as the electromagnetic energy of the cells underlies the phenomenon of consciousness. From this perspective, then, consciousness is in effect the intelligent energy of the Divine.

Within the context of the African worldview, consciousness at the human level is always a collective experience and passes from one collective generation or one being to the next. Like the energy or vibration indicative of it, consciousness is never destroyed. In fact, it is the reincarnation of consciousness, as psyche, that constitutes the reincarnation of a person. A reincarnated person is a new person only in the physical sense. The collective consciousness or what some call “racial consciousness” is constantly renewed in each succeeding generation. The reincarnated are different from those in the generations that preceded them. The difference is evident only to the extent that the consciousness of the “next” generation vibrates at a new or “different” speed. African people, as a particular vibratory phenomenon, reincarnate consciousness from one generation to the next irrespective of geographical location.

Many of the great deep thinkers throughout the African world have spoken through this sense of consciousness, this force in motion, a consciousness that is inborn. Chester Higgins (1994) put it this way in *Feeling the Spirit* (1994): “We are Africans not because we are born in Africa, but because Africa is born in us.” The Africa that is born in African humanity is the inborn sense of consciousness, the vibratory fire force in motion that is complete in and of itself, yet continually emerging to become the source and the consequence of living.

In the African worldview, therefore, consciousness is the essence, energy, expression, and experience of spirit, or being, existing in the form of awareness, knowing, and comprehension. It allows African people to reflect, respond, project, and [p. 46 ↓] create from, before, and beyond the time of one’s experience. Hence, consciousness, existing as or driven by an eternal living spirit, is not bound by time, space, or place. It connects knowing, awareness, and comprehension to the universal and the Divine. Consciousness allows for the retention of ancestral sensibilities that interpret and give meaning to contemporary experience. It is consciousness, as awareness, knowing, and

comprehension, and its subsequent meaning that gives particular content, context, and contour to Black character and style.

Cultural Continuity as Retentive and Residual Knowing

As cultural continuity, consciousness functions as both retentive and residual knowing and awareness. In the form of retentive energy, consciousness allows for the “remembering” or retention of all previous information, experience, and ideas. As residual energy, consciousness provides a conduit or circuit for tapping into the residue of human knowing and awareness and thereby creates or inspires new knowing and awareness. Accordingly, consciousness is key to the question of cultural continuity, which must be informed by the abovementioned understanding of consciousness. However, the continuity of consciousness is, in fact, seen in various forms of cultural expressions that are essentially manifestations of spirit.

To fully understand contemporary African American consciousness as “cultural continuity,” it is helpful to examine African American culture as a psychocultural, geopolitically complex composite of African cultural retentions and American social inventions. In terms of culture, as noted above, the idea of African American culture being spirit defined and spirit driven requires a brief explanation. The overall phenomena of culture, however, are best understood as being grounded in a people’s ontological, cosmological, and axiological beliefs. These are informed as well as formed by a people’s understanding of what it means to be human. Among the major cultural and linguistic influences on African American people are those of the Bantu-Kongo of Central Africa.

Traditionally, the BaNtu believe that being human is to be spirit, energy, or power. To be human is to be one who lives and moves within and is inseparable from the ocean of waves/radiations of spirit, energy, or power. A human being is a “knowing and knowable” spirit energy or power through which one has an enduring relationship with the total perceptible and ponderable universe. To be human is to be a spirit in motion, unfolding. It is to exist as one spirit who affirms one’s humanity by recognizing the

humanity of others and on that basis establishes humane relations with them. Humans are the containers of and instruments of Divine spirit and relationships.

Despite the tremendous variety that exists among African American people, most African Americans continue to share elements of a common culture. This spirit-driven and -defined culture combines an undifferentiated consciousness, a cultural coloring, a particular “tone” and certain “feel” that becomes the signature of members of a cultural group. African Americans, as a group, are therefore culturally complex. African American life and living is grounded in both environmental conditions and a complex structure of cultural precepts, virtues, values, customs, themes, and prerequisites. The cultural coloring or tone of African American cultural continuity can be seen in metaphoric memory, customary traditions, and normative behavior.

The Generative Power of Metaphor

African American cultural continuity can be understood and revealed in the use of metaphor, which is defined here as “a figure of speech in which a word or phrase that designates one thing or idea really represents a deeper appreciation of the underlying values, beliefs and ethos of a people’s culture and sense of humanity.” Metaphor, as used in the African American community, is both an African cultural retention and a direct inventive outgrowth of an African American response to oppression and dehumanization that is grounded [p. 47 ↓] in White supremacy and racism. As cultural retention and invention, metaphoric discourse served well the function of deliberate ambiguity.

Metaphor has generative power. As an African dialectical process, metaphor conjoins thesis and antithesis to bring a new synthesis into the very process through which reality comes into being. Metaphor should, therefore, be seen as performance via belief, attitude, and/or behavior. As expressions of cultural continuity, metaphoric discourse serves to (a) advance/assert personhood, (b) clarify circumstances, and (c) establish situational control or illumination. Metaphors should therefore be understood as “sayings” that reflect consciousness in the form of belief, attitude, and/or behavior related to self in relationship to other people, places, and things, and, by which the reality or situation is controlled and/or clarified or illuminated.

Psychologically, for African American people, metaphoric performance is a presentation of self that reflects the value of personal being or personhood and collective being or “extended-self,” while metaphoric memory is the retentive power of the meaning of a saying as a trigger or stimuli for the “remembering” or activating or reactivating the sense of personhood, clarifying circumstances, and establishing situational control or illumination. As both performance and memory, metaphor is the doing and being to be performed on the stage of life and the creation and sharing of one’s personhood with others across time and space.

Because of the intentional ambiguity and situational fluidity of metaphorical sayings, the placement of metaphors into discreet categories is rather difficult. The inventiveness of metaphorical sayings is also subject to generational sensitivities. Each generation adds sayings to the collective corpus of African American metaphorical sayings. However, in order to guide this discussion of cultural continuity, a framework has been created to serve as a key to the identification of the metaphorical sayings’ deeper meanings and purposes relative to advancing or asserting personhood, clarifying circumstances, and establishing situational control or illumination.

As an aspect of consciousness, metaphoric performance and memory, as noted earlier, serve to advance or assert personhood, clarify circumstances, and establish situational control or illumination for African Americans living in a hostile and demeaning social environment. An example of the continuity of this reality is found in Bob Marley’s haunting *Buffalo Soldier* refrain, “Fighting on arrival, fighting for survival.” Through the cultural continuity of such consciousness, one becomes able to perceive the meaning and purpose of metaphoric expressions. For example, sayings such as “The blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice”; “Beauty is skin deep, but ugliness is to the bone”; “God don’t like ugly”; or “Mediocrity is a White man’s luxury” assert personhood in a reality that demeans the personhood of African American people.

Similarly, the sayings, “Once you go Black, you never go back”; “You think fat meat ain’t greasy”; or “Be who you is because to be who you ain’t is to be nobody” reflect an attitude of reaffirmation. Metaphors like “I brought you into the world and I can take you out” and “When you carry water for your mother, the load ain’t so heavy” all demonstrate and remind both the speaker and the listener of the interdependence necessary for collective survival and advancement.

In terms of clarifying one's living circumstance, the cultural continuity of African American consciousness can also be appreciated in sayings such as "All eyes closed ain't sleep"; "Don't cry over spilt milk"; and "You've got to work twice as hard to get half as much," which respectively support the interdependence of belief, attitude, and behaviors as collective experience from one collective generation or being to the next. As commentary on experience and the need for situational control and understanding metaphoric expressions such as these are self-evident: "A hard head makes a soft behind." "What is White ain't always right." "It takes a whole village to raise a child."

Essentially, African American consciousness has reflected the meaning of being self-affirming through metaphoric memory and performance. In effect, metaphoric memory and performance, as the [p. 48 ↓] cultural continuity of consciousness, have served as overt, objective, and visible expressions of the selfdefined meaning of African American people in the world. Metaphoric memory and performance also provide guidance for the African American community's encounters with the world as moments, movements, events, activities, and/or relationships. In a similar way, the cultural continuity of African American consciousness has been recorded in the customary traditions and normative behaviors of African American people.

African American customs are traditional and widely accepted ways of behaving or doing something that is specific to African American life and living in a particular place or time. These customs are also evidence of the continuity of culture and consciousness. African American customs can be found in at least seven critical life areas: health/healing, education, childrearing/socialization, cooking, worship/religion, work/productivity, and creativity/arts-aesthetics. Examples of health/healing, education, and cooking customs may be informative. Traditionally, in many African American families, once a year all the children had to line up and get a dose of castor oil. The purpose was to "clean you out" in order to keep you well. This practice, in effect, could be called an African American purification custom.

In a similar vein, at the beginning of the school year, on the first day of school, African American mothers would "polish up" their children with Vaseline or other creams and oils supposedly as a fight against "ashiness." The underlying belief was that if you shone on the outside, you would shine on the inside, referring metaphorically to one's mind or intelligence. The fight against ashiness was a mask for priming the pump of

educational excellence. This customary tradition should be thought of as an African American perfecting education custom. In terms of normative behaviors, the African American practice of smudging the forehead of a newborn infant and the wearing of an asafetida bag to ward off evil spirits or to protect the child from people who might give the child the “evil eye” are in fact “protection norms.” The practice of having young people to always address older people as Ms./Mr./Sir/Ma’am, Auntie or Uncle, is the transmission of wisdom and respect norms.

In conclusion, it should be noted that as African Americans assimilate Western ways of living and adopt Western cultural norms, these customary traditions and normative behaviors become less and less expressive of valuable ways of being. The retention and reinvention of African American metaphors, customs, and norms and the recognition that they are essential to the African American way of being should be, without question, understood as both historical and contemporary exemplars of the cultural continuity of African American consciousness.

See also [African Cultural Revivals](#); [African Cultural Survivals](#); [African Worldview](#); [Africana Sociocultural Heritage](#); [Afrocentricity](#); [Cultural Resistance to Psychic Terrorism](#); [Ebonics: The Retention of African Tongues](#); [Life Cycle, Concept of](#); [Oral Traditions as Communal Experience](#); [Re-Africanization](#); [Sankofa, Cultural Identity, and Education](#)

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Further Readings

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