

# Shattered Consciousness, Fractured Identity: Black Psychology and the Restoration of the African Psyche Wade W. Nobles<sup>1</sup>

In the age of European violence, you whose work was the telling of our narrative were cut off from our future, suspended as in a sentence of death, and jokingly described as mere griots, praise singers to times now dead. And we who grew up in the patriarchal violence of the pillagers' tutelage, we were nurtured on the strangest narratives, rooted in blood, watered with lies. That odd narrative said only one story was human "the European story". It said that one narrow story would have to account for everything: the beginning of humanity, its progress, its destiny. . . . In the fields of triumphant power we left our minds for dead. And yet under the chaos of the slaughterhouse of souls, sometimes a mind here, another there, refused to die.  
—Ayi Kwei Armah (2002)

Ayi Kwei Armah cautions Africans about only seeing reality through the perspective of the European academy and how that alienating narrative seduces us to believe that one narrow story accounts for everything. In an earlier work, I introduced the concept of conceptual incarceration (Nobles, 1978) to equally caution about uncritically adopting European and American ideas to examine African and African American reality. Jamison (2008) has correctly noted that the placing of European American conceptions and formulas as the universal standard can conceptually incarcerate the examination of things African. More specifically, I explained that in the case of "conceptual incarceration," the knower is given a set of predetermined concepts and definitions to use in the process of knowing. This amounts to European hegemony. In this regard, alien or Eurocentric ideas inhibit us from fully understanding African reality. The African thinker is, in fact, conceptually incarcerated.

## **Black Psychology, Dehumanization, and African Development**

Black psychology has not only exposed Eurocentric hegemony of traditional psychological theories, it has also directly begun to focus its research on creating new paradigms and methodologies that stem from "an organic, authentically African epistemological and ontological base" (Harrell, 1999, p.45). It is more than the psychology of the so-called underprivileged peoples, more than the experience of living in ghettos or having been forced into the dehumanizing condition of slavery or colonization. It is more than

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the “darker dimension” of general psychology. Its unique status is derived not from the negative aspects of being “Black” people on the continent or anywhere in the diaspora but rather from the positive features of basic African philosophy that dictate the values, customs, attitudes, and behaviors of Africans in Africa and the New World (Nobles, 1980).

The psychological effect that the ideology of White supremacy and European imperialism, in the form of slavery and colonialism, has had on Africa and her people has never been fully addressed and understood. The development of the academic field of Black psychology has, however, ushered in a new respect for the legitimacy of various ethnic appreciations of psychological functioning. In fact, Black psychology has forced the overall field of psychology to recognize that there is no universal psychiatric reality and that, in terms of psychological knowledge and practice, the only valid perspective is one that reflects the culture of the people served. No longer do functionalist paradigms, reflecting ideologies of Western hegemonic healing methods and positivist social science, stand as the universal model for all human communities. Simply put, there is no universal psychiatric reality (Gaines, 1992). Whether modern (professional) or traditional (folk), every aspect of psychological knowledge and practice is a reflection of the constructed world of a particular people.

One constant imperative in Black psychology is the recognition of the damaging impact of colonialism and chattel slavery on the African mind and consciousness. This recognition is coupled with a profound understanding that the meaning of being African, for both continental and diasporic Africans, is prescribed in the visible and invisible realms of reality. Yet our understanding of what it means to be African depends only on conceptions of European material reality grounded in Greco-Roman, Judeo-Christian thought. In *Black Skins, White Masks*, the Black Martiniquean psychiatrist Frantz Fanon (1967) rightfully notes that colonialism was simply another stage or form of slavery. The colonizer-colonized and the master-slave relationship are identical. In effect, Africa’s colonization and diaspora chattel enslavement are the unaddressed twin evils infecting the modern world order. Chattel slavery had a destructive psychological impact on diasporic Africans, and colonialism had a similar destructive psychological impact on continental Africans. They, in tandem, were the dehumanizing instruments of the morphing and/or destruction of African ideas and human functioning. Dating back to prehistoric times, systems of human servitude, serfdom, slavery, and indentured labor were established. Slavery flourished in classical times and declined in Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire. Slavery in the United States had its origins with the first English colonization of North America in Virginia in 1607 and endured as a legal institution until the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution in 1865. Although

servitude existed in Africa, the status and relationship of African servants to their African masters were very different from that between chattel slaves and their masters.

Hegel's (1966) ideas on the dynamics of bondage have influenced almost all later formulations of human oppression. Essentially, Hegel argues that man becomes conscious of himself only through recognition by the other. The frustration of one's desire to be recognized is the source of human struggle and conflict. Hegel asserts that the one who attains recognition without reciprocating becomes the "master." The one who recognizes the other but is not reciprocally recognized becomes the "slave." Hegel further notes that not only does the "master" gain recognition from the "slave" but the "master" also reduces the slave to an instrument of the "master's" will. Basically, Hegel is suggesting that the one whose "humanity" is recognized but who does not recognize the "humanity" of the other becomes the master while the one who recognizes the "humanity" of the other while their own "humanity" is not recognized becomes the slave. When one's humanity is not recognized, the enslaved lacks both objective confirmation and subjective certainty of not just one's self and human worth but one's being human itself.

Bulhan (1985) further notes that Hegel's philosophical and intellectual language really obscures the psychological impact of the master-slave formulation. He notes that, in a series of lectures on Hegel, Alexander Kojève (1969) reviews Hegel's master-slave dialectic and attempts to articulate the psychological underpinnings of the master-slave relationship. Kojève notes that self-consciousness differentiates man from animal and that one is selfconscious to the extent that one is conscious of his identity, dignity, and human reality. Animals, he asserts, only have "sentiment" or an unthinking feeling about self. According to Kojève, desire determines behavior. In terms of human beings, desire determines human action and is bound to reality and the preservation of life. In terms of animals, sentiment, the unthinking feeling associated with living, gives birth to the animal desire to eat or procreate. However, both self-consciousness and sentiment have their origin in desire. Self-consciousness is, however, born from human desire to be recognized by another human being. Kojève suggests that "it is only by being recognized by another that a human being is really human" (p. 9). Accordingly, a people's humanity is validated because others recognize it and is invalidated because others do not acknowledge them.

One's self-consciousness, as reflected in the search for recognition, entails a perilous struggle between two opposing forces that require recognition from each other. The master/slave dynamic really involves a fight to the death for one's humanity. He further suggests that the psychological complexes of "inferiority" and "dependency" form two fundamentally and mutually exclusive axes on which personality and culture develop. The

“dependency complex,” Mannoni (1962) argued, engenders socioeconomic and technological stagnation and fosters submission and the “need to be ruled” while the “inferiority complex” engenders high development of personality and culture and fosters dominance and the “need to rule.” Not surprisingly, Mannoni asserts that the “dependency complex” is deeply entrenched in the collective consciousness of the African as represented by the Malagasy people. In this regard, he further concludes that the “noncivilized,” that is, the African man, is totally unfit for a pattern of life absent of complete subjugation and, in fact, needs colonial domination to satisfy his natural inferiority complex. Both Hegel and Mannoni posit particular psychological complexes associated with immutable group characteristics or inherent traits that distinguish the master and the slave.

Probably because he was a member of the “wretched of the earth,” Frantz Fanon is at his best in unraveling the psychology of the oppressed. Unlike Hegel or Mannoni, Fanon surgically points out that the problem of oppression is a problem of violence. Fanon helps us to see that while oppression requires the fear of physical death, the fear is created via the exercise and threat of violence. As an intellectual and psychological theorist, Fanon offered a deeper analysis of this question of violence. It is violence, as an integral part of the enslavement process, that is so pervasive and structured that it is often viewed as the natural order of life. Fanon makes the point that there are different forms of violence that are destructive to the spirit of African people. He notes, for instance, that there is violence that is simply raw vulgar violence, historical violence, and “violence beyond violence” or what some scholars (Perimbaum & Perimbaum, 1983) call “holy violence.” This holy violence, where Europe is seen as the universal standard or example of humanity, is key to understanding Africa’s destabilization, African peoples’ dehumanization, and the acidic erosion of African consciousness. In dominating these primary dimensions of the psyche, the enslavement and colonial experience created fissures and cracks in the African consciousness and identity. In effect, African consciousness and identity were shattered by an all-pervasive domination of the ancestors’ space, time, energy, mobility, bonding, and identity.

### **A Mental Barrier for African Development**

The complexity of psychological damage for African people can best be captured in the notion of derailment. Derailment is an important metaphor because like a train derailment, the train continues to be in motion just off its track. The cultural and psychological derailment of African people is hard to detect because African life and experience continues. The experience of human movement (or progress) continues and African people find it hard to

detect that they are off their own developmental trajectory.

Black Africa lost millions of souls to the slave trade. This human derailment was experienced at the personal level as psychic terror and physical torture. Human beings were chained together and then piled on top of each other, as cargo, where they had to lay and sleep on their own excrement as well as that of persons crowded next to them for weeks on end. A vicious cycle of disease ensued as African people huddled together crying, screaming, vomiting, and defecating uncontrollably. Along this human chain of misery, where some were dead and some alive, the wafting of rotting bodies added to the stench. There was no escape from disease. Life on the plantation simply continued the terror and torture. One can only imagine the state of mental health for those trapped in this living nightmare. Panic, anxiety, and hysteria must have prevailed. Pure rage alternated with a deep collective depression manifesting in mutinies, on-board rebellions, and constant and continuous slave revolts. At the collective or corporate level, Africa's human capital of intellect, insight, and imagination was depleted and/or derailed at the very moment in history when humanity was moving into a new age. The colonization of continental Africa resulted in similar psychological terror and torture. The avaricious and arbitrary dissection and shattering of Africa resulted in seemingly endless conflicts of situations due to torn loyalties and/or unhealthy ethnic pluralities, with different nations vying for Western-based governmental power. The legacy of colonization has become Africa's untreated cancer in the guise of development.

### **The Clash of Culture and Consciousness**

Europe's psychological domination of Africa's mind can be understood as a clash of culture and consciousness. This clash is centered on the meaning of being human and the question of human relations, both of which can be illuminated by the utilization of a "memetic analysis." Dawkins (1989) defines "memes" as a unit of cultural inheritance that is naturally selected by virtue of its phenotypic consequence on the particular culture's own survival and replication. The meme itself is a unit of information residing in the brain. I have also argued elsewhere (Nobles, 2012) that "memes" are "sensorial information structures" that are contagious information patterns that reproduce by symbiotically infecting human minds and altering their behavior, causing them to propagate certain patterns of behavior. Functionally, memes are any contagious information patterns, in the form of symbols, sounds, and/or movement, that are capable of being perceived by any of the senses and replicated by symbiotically entering the human being's "mind" and thus altering behavior in a way that propagates itself. Simplistically, therefore, a meme is an orienting idea that acts like a self-replicating nexus for the

propagation and legitimacy<sup>1</sup> of behavioral dispositions. “Contagious information pattern” can be summarized as or referred to as an orienting idea. A meme can be thought of as a unit of cultural discourse that, in influencing human consciousness, directs and determines meaning for the cultural agents who carry the meme (Piper-Mandy & Rowe, 2010). I have suggested (Nobles, 2012) that memes are “ideas which reflect the substance of behavior.” As sensorial information structures, “memes” need to be able to transmit to the next generation their core content or meaning and capacity to preserve the altered behavior. The more fundamental the orienting idea embedded in the sensorial information structure is, the more it serves as a process of germ and, in effect, functions to influence the very process of knowing itself. These fundamental or foundational memes, in turn, serve as “epistemic memetic nodes,” which shape and support a particular aesthetic, moral code, and set of human relations.

The process by which sensorial-informational structures symbiotically infect the mind or consciousness, so as to reinforce and/or propagate the sensorial, I call “memetic ideation.” Thus, one can classify types of consciousness or mentalities (e.g., slave/colonial mentality, Black consciousness, Franco/Anglophone, neo-colonialist, etc.) by the defining nature of the memetic cluster fundamental to its character. Memes or sensorial informational structures can be in the form of ideas, symbols, images, feelings, words, customs, sounds, practices, or any other knowable and perceptible item or substance. Religion, political dogma, social philosophy or movements, aesthetics and artistic styles, traditions, customs, and every component of culture coevolves and serves in symbiotic relationships as a meme complex. The integrated complex of culture can be seen as a “memetic ideation.”

The conceptual essence of a people’s psyche is distorted when we begin to think in a cognitive way based on other people’s schema. Rather than see ourselves in terms of the African tradition of the ontological principle of consubstantiation that says we are made equally, we begin to think that what makes us who we are, are those achieved attributes and characteristics. We think that because we have gained material wealth and status, we have also attained some higher level of being that requires that we separate ourselves from the common folk. For example, many can be heard to say, “I don’t have to live in a so-called urban ghetto anymore because I have money; therefore, I am better than the rest of “them;” or I have been to school in America or Europe and therefore I am better than these “natives.” Accordingly, both continental and diasporan consciousness reflect limitations in the African ability to think in a way that is congruent with the kaleidoscope and gumbo of an African epistemological world-view.

## **Toward and African Nosology: Strategies for Restoring African Consciousness and Identity**

When the human spirit is well, whole, and healthy, the human being is characterized by confidence, competence, and a sense of full possibility and unlimited potentiality. (Nobles, 2010, p. 13)

The most profound lingering psychological effect of slavery and colonialism for African people has been a sense of human alienation resulting from being infected with or assaulted by long-standing, ongoing sensorial information structures representing chattel enslavement and colonization, that is, thing-ification and dehumanization of African people. Human alienation for African people is the sense of being disconnected from one's spirit (even though one is highly spiritual) and having a sense of not being truly or completely human (and not knowing it). This I have classified as "spirit damage" or the "suffering of the spirit."

Spirit beings, housed in a physical container having a human experience, experience their "spiritness" simultaneously as a metaphysical state and as an ethereal extension or connection into and between the supra world of the Deities, the inter world with other beings, and the inner world of the self.

Consistent with these ideas are the need for a Spirit classification of Dis-at-Ease. Guided by the informative character of African deep thought, the development of an African-centered classification of disease, that is, nosology, should at a minimum (a) use African language and logic and (b) explore the application and relevance of these ideas and notions in illuminating (clarification and study of) the "suffering of the spirit." The "suffering of the spirit" (essentiality of being), I propose, can be evidenced in the experience of being human—the expression of being human and the essence of being human itself. These three domains or paths represent the arenas of spirit suffering and imbalance or disharmony reflected in our shattered consciousness and fractured identity.

In order to develop an authentic African-centered nosology, I would like to offer as a preliminary starting point the examination of the BaNtu notions of Kingongo, Tunda Milongo, Kizongo Zongo, Sumuna, Nsumununu a Nkisa/Kinkongo (Fu-kiau, 1991) and the Kemetic notion of Serudja Ta. Each of these notions or ideas should be vetted against the requirement that restorative (healing) relationships should represent a spirit-grounded and charged relationship between healer and the healed, establish a binding commitment between the healer and healed to actively activate the restoration (healing) process, and reflect a conceptual schema or story that provides a culturally congruent explanation for the dis-at-ease and procedure or ritual for its resolution including the recognition that the place or location for the healing be spirit driven/filled.

The ability to reveal or expose the truth of African reality will ultimately

determine the value and utility of Black psychology as a discipline and professional practice. In specific response to the shattering of African consciousness and the fracturing of black identity (Nobles, 2007), I have proposed a recovery process called “reciprocal srwd ta”<sup>2</sup> (Re-birthing) of African spiritness. The idea of “Re-birthing” requires a mutually interactive application of African wisdom traditions, history, culture, philosophy, and deep thought to illuminate, inform, and develop both the spiritness of (a) the person (personal character) and (b) the community (environmental character), by tapping into the most fundamental and essential core root and source for inspiring health and eliminating imbalance and discord and to reestablish and/or restore harmony and optimal human functioning. This by necessity will require an ongoing dialog with traditional (not necessarily Western educated) Nganga, Sangoma, and so on.

At the Association of Black Psychologists (ABPsi) convention in Philadelphia, I was elected president, and in my presidential address I asked, Do we heal the whole community or do we watch the final demise of our great people? The ancestral spirit demands that we heal. It is our destiny. When we meet this challenge, the name of the ABPsi will taste sweet in the mouths of our children’s children’s children forever and the day after forever. Together we must respond. No one else can do this but us. (Nobles, 1994, p. 5)

In partial answer to my own question, I now note that the fundamental measure of the moral quality of a society and the moral obligation is to constantly repair and heal the world, making it more beautiful than when we inherited it. As a professional practice and process, I believe that rescuing and reclaiming the African notions of Sakhu Sheti/Djaer and Serudja Ta will allow human beings to illuminate, heal, repair, and transform the world with the understanding that in the process we heal, repair, and transform ourselves.

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1. Regarding the act of legitimacy, the reader should examine Syed Khatib’s groundbreaking work on the “Concept of Legitimacy” in Black psychology.
2. Maulana Karenga defines Serudja Ta as “Srwd ta” a process to “make secure, set right (a wrong), provide, fulfill (a contract)”; “to restore, repair, to make new

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