



To Be African or Not to Be: ← | →
The Question of Identity or Authenticity - Some Preliminary Thoughts₁

by
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ABSTRACT

The ideas offered here are simply thoughts designed to suggest that our “theoretical” understanding of what it means to be African (Black) in a non-African (White supremacist) society requires “deep thought” about the psychology of [African people](#). It is in the tradition of “thinking deeply” about what it means to be African that I propose that the real understanding of Black identity and our resolute response to living in an anti-African society will be attainable. It is only when we first think deeply about what it means to be a human being and subsequently, therein, how that meaning shapes our responses and reactions to living, will we learn or know anything of value. Hence, I think the notion of “human authenticity” and its expression as the “person” are the constructs that could offer a new research agenda in which to explore the frontiers of “African theory development.”

“Where theory is founded on analogy between puzzling observations and familiar phenomena, it is generally only a limited aspect of such phenomena that is incorporated into the resulting model”₃

During the 1995 Association of African Psychologists’ annual convention’s pre-conference African Psychology Institute, Dr. Asa [Hilliard](#) was invited to address the issue of African Psychology. In the context of his remarks, Dr. Hilliard attempted to

paraphrase Shakespeare's often quoted, phrase, "To be or not to be, that is the question". In restating Shakespeare, Dr. Hilliard's intention, I think, was to say, "To be African or not to be African, that is the question." However, in attempting to restate the phrase, I believe Dr. Hilliard's tongue was captured by the ancestral spirits of Africa and what came forward was a divinely fundamental and spiritually essential question. Asa Hilliard stated, "To be African or not to Be, that is the Question." In making that simple pronouncement, the level of discourse was fundamentally clarified and simultaneously shifted. [next page](#)

1 Accepted for publication in Jones, Reginald (Ed), African American Identity Development: Theory, Research and Intervention. 1997

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3 Horton, Robin, [African Traditional](#) Thought and Western Science, Africa, Vol 37(1) Jan, 1967, p. 65

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The ancestors, through Dr. Hilliard's genius, had directed African Psychologists to deal with "the real deal." Can we Be and not be African? While this level of question frightened many of us and made most of us uncomfortable, I think it is the only place for us, as African Psychologists, to begin. Accordingly, I would like to address the question of African American identity development from the framework of what is fundamental to our "Be" ing.

This question *To be African or Not to Be* becomes even more complex when one factors in the context of African people living in a non-African and/or anti-African society. Given such a context, I have suggested that the understanding of what it means to be African must be informed by what I have defined as the Triangular Law of Knowing, Being and Doing for Africans living in an [anti-African reality](#). The three laws are (1) the law of (mis)knowing; (2) the law of (non)being; and (3) the law of (un)doing. These laws note that "if you don't understand White supremacy, then everything else you think you know will simply confuse you" - law of (mis)knowing; "If you don't exist according to your cultural essence (nature/spirit) then everything that you think you are will only be a diminishment" - law of (non)being; and "the experience of one generation becomes the history of the next generation and the

history of several generations will become the tradition of the people - law of (un)doing. Several scholars (Carruthers, 1972; Nobles, 1978; Akbar, 1984; Banks, 1992) have suggested, the psychological understanding of African people, must be informed by the extent to which we understand the impact of white supremacy, the retentions, residuals, and radiance of the African nature/spirit and the reverberating power to reinvent ourselves.

In discussing the falsification of African Consciousness as it relates to Psychiatry and the politics of [White Supremacy](#), Amos N. Wilson also noted specifically note that, “In the context of a racist social system, psychological diagnosis, labeling and treatment of the behavior of politically oppressed persons are political acts performed to attain political ends. For oppression begins as a psychological fact and is in good part a psychological state. If oppression is to operate with maximum efficiency, it must become and remain a psychological condition achieving self-perpetuating motion by its own internal dynamics and by its own inertial momentum” Wilson, 1993: 3)”. The Eurocentric mental health establishment, he rightly suggests, is a participant and beneficiary of the white domination of African peoples. Psychology and the mental health industry is a very important cog in the self-perpetuating machine of African dehumanization, mental disfunctioning, and dehumanization.

The discipline of Western Psychology's reason for being is, to a great extent, to nurture and sanction the imperialist and racist political regime which fathered it. In this regard, Wilson concludes that the explanatory systems and... [next page](#)

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treatment approaches of Western Psychology ultimately must be exposed as “political ideology and oppressive political governance parading as empirically validated principles of psychological and medical science, and 'objective' psychotherapeutic and psychiatric practices” (Wilson, 1993: 3). This is equally true with the act of theory development.

African peoples’ psychology is fundamentally derived from the nature of the African

spirit and determined by the African spirit's manifestation as a unique historical and cultural experience. This natural and instinctual psycho-behavioral imperative is coupled with a revolutionary drive to achieve physical, mental and spiritual liberation. Given this unique condition, Eurocentric Psychology and the mental health industrial establishment created by it as well as the African Psychologist who knowingly or unknowingly participates in it cannot provide adequate explanations, rationales, theories and therapeutic practices.

The position taken in this discussion is that what is needed is a theoretical and therapeutic practice that is centered in our own African essence and integrity. This position is in fact consistent with our *raison d'être*. The Association of African Psychologists was formed in part to utilize our skills to benefit the African community. Specifically the *raison d'être* of the Association was to address the significant social problems affecting the African community and to positively impact upon the mental health of the national African community through planning, programs, services, training and advocacy. It was clear then as it is now that the African community's mental health depended upon our ability to (1) resist and/or inoculate ourselves from the degradation and dehumanization resulting from the effects of White supremacy and (2) to advance and/or increase our human essence and vitalism resulting from the maintenance of our cultural integrity. What emerged from these two psychological imperatives is the ultimate recognition that if our practice, including theorizing, does not respect and reflect the African essence and integrity and if we do not exist and function personally and collectively according to our own African essence (nature), then everything we do or provide (teaching, service, treatment and theorizing) will only dis-serve and de-humanize ourselves and our people.

*Ofo Ase*₄ : *Toward a Different Discourse*₅

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4 "*Ofo Ase*" is a Yoruba term meaning the power of the word or the power of the word to evoke that which it represents. It is therefore implied that when the theories of African psychologists are guided by an African discourse, then new and more appropriate ideas, concepts, notions, etc. will become part of the scientific enterprise.

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“The quest for explanatory ‘theory’ is basically the quest for unity underlying apparent diversity; for implicity underlying apparent complexity; for order underlying apparent disorder and for regularity underlying apparent anomaly”

If we, as African Psychologists, are to be obedient to the imperative of respecting and reflecting the human essence of our people, then our work must be guided by a discourse that is radically different from those whose intent is to verify the invalidation of our humanity (Ani, 1994). Discourse is simply a formal, honest, and intelligent discussion relative to an idea or subject. The discourse is “formal” because it is systematic and rule governed via its alignment with a particular episteme and paradigm. It is “honest” in that it is an accurate representation of the “truth” as defined and experienced by the people who are “subject” and have “agency” with the lived experience of that truth. Finally, discourse is intelligent when there is a discernible connection between thoughts, ideas and domains of functioning (i.e., it is rational).

The criteria for discourse is further clarified when it is placed in the context of the idea of “intimacy.” To be “intimate” is to have “a close relationship (experience) with, detailed knowledge and deep understanding of the innermost and essential nature of a thing or another being.” In terms of human beings, I would further suggest that there are at least three important realms of intimacy. First there is sexual intimacy, which at its most fundamental basis is procreation wherein humans “re-invent” themselves. One could suggest that the coming together of the egg and sperm in fertilization can only occur when they have a detailed knowledge and deep understanding of each other’s innermost and essential nature. Secondly, there is eating, which at its most primitive utility is nurturance whereby humans “sustain” and “replenish” themselves. The processes of ingestion, digestion and transformation equally require knowledge and understanding. Finally, there is talking, which at its best expression, is “discourse” wherein humans define, perfect, educate, explain and give meaning to themselves. Not only is discourse important as a human intimacy, it is important as Karenga notes (1996) because through discourse humans are able to attain authenticity, obtain historical place, and establish engagement as human subject and agent.

What should be called for in this book, is a formal, honest and intelligent discussion (discourse) of “African American Identity Development”. Parenthetically, it should be noted that the historical shift in conceptual classification from the so-called “Negro self-concept” (i.e., Kardiner and Ovessey, 1951; Clark and Clark, 1952; Caplan, 1970; Cross, 1971) to “Black Identity” ((i.e., Thomas, 1971; Banks & Grambs, 1972; Jackson, 1975; Cross, [next page](#)

6 Ibid., p. 51



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1978; Semaj, 1981; Parham, 1989; Helms, 1990) to “African American Identity Development” should mean either the identification of new phenomena or the refinement of old theory. It is not clear which of these guide the contemporary discussion. Moreso, in terms of this discussion, when the subject of African American identity is submitted to the requirements of (1) epistemic and paradigmatic alignment (the condition of formal); (2) accuracy in its representation of our truth as human subject and agent (the condition of honesty); and (3) illustrating a discernible connection between thoughts, ideas and functioning (the condition of intelligence), then the demands of discourse (to define, perfect, explain and understand) require that we rethink the actual utility of the concept of identity.

While the constraints of this chapter limit a full explanation of this conclusion, I can briefly note that this position is driven, in part, by Dr. Hilliard’s axiom, “To be African or not to Be” and the need to utilize an African epistemology and paradigm for understanding things African. A paradigm, in this regard, is simply the formalized framework which guides the assessment and evaluation of reality. As is well known, the paradigm is, in effect, the perceptual, cognitive and affective achievement representing the organizational plan for thinking, feeling, understanding and doing. A people’s cultural essence (i.e., ontological, cosmological and axiological positions), worldview (i.e., most comprehensive ideas about order), normative assumptions (i.e., a priori truths) and philosophical perspectives (i.e., frame of reference) combine to form and inform the centrality or core of their paradigm. The episteme concerns itself with what is real (knowledge) and the study and understanding of how one knows. As such, epistemology concerns the study of (1) what is the nature of reality; (2) how truth is defined, (3) what is the relationship between the knower (intent), knowing (process) and the known (will), (4) what can be known, and (5) what should/could be done in response to the known.

There are several features or assumptions which distinguish an “African paradigm”. An African paradigm assumes that (1) the universe is cosmos; (2) the ultimate nature of reality is spiritual; (3) human beings are organically related to everything in the universe; (4) knowledge comes from participation with and experience in the universe

(reality); (5) human relatedness is the praxis of our humanity, and, (6) that the mode of our epistemological method is that of Participation (equilibrium- balance between knowing, knower and known), Relatedness (harmony) and Unicity (balance between rationality & intuition; analyses & synthesis; known & unknown and the visible & invisible).

In earlier works (Nobles, 1986a, 1986b) I attempted to understand the scientific treatment of Black Identity and more recently (Nobles, 1989) made an attempt to briefly critique one of the dominant theories of Black Identity development. However, given the requisites of an African paradigm and [next page](#)

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episteme, I am now convinced that the utility of the construct itself should be reviewed. While I will not at this time attempt to dismiss the whole notion of Black Identity, I will note that the construct of identity seems wanting when placed against the requirements of discourse and the demand for accuracy in assessing and evaluating “African” reality.

Therefore, in order to be rigorous and have scientific utility, the construct should be consistent with the abovementioned assumptions. For instance, the construct must appreciate the idea that the ultimate nature of reality is spirit. Similarly, it should illustrate the significance of participation, relatedness and unicity for the human condition and reveal the ultimate organic connection.

Ultimately the problem with Black Identity theory is that it represents only a limited (albeit damaged) aspect of what it means “to be African (or not to Be)”. Black Identity theory is, for the most part, founded upon an unwarranted acceptance of the Western (a.k.a. White supremacy) notions of human functioning with African people living in an anti-African reality. And like Horton’s precepts on theory suggest, these “puzzling observations” about African American identity range from the reactions to de-Africanization and the hegemonic domination of white esthetics/existence, to creative responses to re-Africanizing and reinventing African American culture and

traditions.

In order to engage a different discourse, one has to begin with a different question. The statement, To Be African or Not To Be, that is the Question, requires the thinker to examine the notion of human essence (the invisible) and expression (the visible). Hence, I propose that our concern should be with the notion of “authenticity” rather than the idea of identity
Atunwa : Human

Atunwa₇: Human Authenticity or Black Identity

While awesome, to address the question of human authenticity or human essence it is, indeed, timely, given the contemporary thrust of African reawakening occurring in the USA. This thrust is best represented by what in some areas is called the African centered movement. African centeredness in this context is not simply a call for Afrocentric curriculum in schools nor the inclusion of African contributions to world history and civilization. African centeredness represents a concept which categorizes a “quality of thought and practice” which is rooted in the cultural image and interest of people of [next page](#)

7 “Atunwa” is a Yoruba term representing the idea of rebirth of character or integrity. If in psychology we are concerned with the essential and deeper meaning, then the rebirth of the essential character of African people should be the intent and the consequent of these theoretical formulations

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African ancestry and which represents and reflects the life experiences, history and traditions of people of African ancestry as the center of analyses. It, in effect, represents the intellectual and philosophical foundations upon which people of African ancestry should create their own scientific and moral criteria for authenticating the reality of African human processes. It represents the core and fundamental quality of the “*Belonging*”, “*Being*” and “*Becoming*” of people of African ancestry. In essence, African centeredness represents the fact, that as human beings, people of African ancestry have the right and responsibility to “center” themselves in their own

subjective possibilities and potentialities and through the recentering process reproduce and refine the best of the human essence.

This notion essentially relocates the debate. In calling for the recognition of a different quality of thought and practice and in acknowledging the responsibility for creating one's own criteria for authenticating the reality of African human processes, the African centered notion represents a radical epistemological shift and paradigmatic change wherein new questions may be raised. The real meaning and significance of African centeredness is that its logical extension directs the thinker to explore the deeper meaning of human essence and the quest for human authenticity.

The boundaries for this exploration have indeed no limitations. In fact, I would make the argument, in this regard, that African American Identity should be informed by an appreciation of our truly "pan African" definition ." I would further argue that a full understanding of African American identity will only be attainable when the deeper meaning of our pan African definition or constitution is fully comprehended. In order to encourage such a conceptualization, I have suggested that African (Black people) in the United States should culturally view themselves as another (no less African than the Africans left behind in Africa and made victims of European colonialism and Christian and Islamic religious conversion) African group. I have recommended, in this regard, that as Blacks in the United States of America, we call ourselves the "BUSA People". It is, in fact, the case that the "BUSA people" have ancestral rights and spiritual connections to African peoples living in the Senegambia (Bantu, Wolof, Mandingo, Malinka, Bambara, Fulani, Papel, Limba, Bola, Balante, etc.); The Sierra Leone Coast (Temne, Mende, etc.); The Liberian Coast (Vai, De, Gola, Kisa, Bassa, Crabo, etc.); The Gold Coast (Yoruba, Nupe, Benin, Fon, Ewe, Ga, Pop, Edo-Bini, Asante-Fante, etc.); The Niger-Delta (Efik-Ibibio, Ijan, Ibani, Igbos, etc.) and Central Africa (Bakongo, Malimbo, Bambo, Ndungo, Balimbe, Badongo, Luba, Loango, Ovimbundu, etc.) and, of course, the ancient Nile valley. The question of identity must, therefore, explore the psychological [next page](#)

8 The reader is directed to *Africanisms in American Culture* edited by Joseph E. Holloway (1991) for an excellent discussion and defense of the heritage of new world Africans.

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Igbos, etc.) and Central Africa (Bakongo, Malimbo, Bambo, Ndungo, Balimbe, Badongo, Luba, Loango, Ovinbundu, etc.) and, of course, the ancient Nile valley. The question of identity must, therefore, explore the psychological residuals, retentions, and resonances of our pan African legacy across time, space and place.

Our ancestral rights and spiritual connections were not severed or destroyed by the circumstance of enslavement just, as the ancestral rights and spiritual connections of our brothers and sisters in Africa were not destroyed or severed by colonialism. We are all African people. Those of us living in the United States remain an African people and should, therefore, be rightfully referred to as the BUSA Tribe or Busa People (Blacks in the United States of America).

Hence, it is correct, I believe, to seek an appreciation of the implications ancient African thought and conceptualizations have for contemporary African conduct. Can the African discourse be informed by knowing that the scene of the "*Psychostasia* (Myer, 1900) " from the ancient African Hu-Nefer Papyrus depicts the Ka (human spirit) reciting from the PER-EM-HRU (Massey, 1970) (The Book of Coming Forth from Darkness to Light, misnamed the Book of the Dead) and that the Psychostasia symbolically represented the first conceptualization of human Psychology (circa 1370-1333 BCE) as the "*Illumination*" and "*Judgment*" of the Human Spirit? Through its symbolism, the "*Psychostasia*" perceived the central and mutual interdependent roles of intellect, emotion, spirit, conduct and judgment in the process of human functioning.

In our contemporary theorizing and discourse, what is the role of illumination and judgment? Should the illumination and judgment be criteria for guaranteeing epistemic and paradigmatic alignment? Does the absence of them call into question the accuracy of the construct's or theory's ability to represent our truth as human subject and agent. Finally, will the inclusion of illumination and judgment reveal the discernible connection between thoughts, ideas, and functioning?

In classical African (Kemetic) philosophy, the significance of the Human Being is found in the fact of "Being, Becoming and Belonging". The human being as well as human reality were all governed by divine law and the basic divine law was simply "To Be" and in being, one was the "creative cause" which made humans divine. This divine law was, in turn, translated into an enduring moral mandate which stated that "To Be" was permanently guaranteed by the human instinct "To Become". The moral mandate of African Humanity was, thusly, "to become and in becoming", humans revealed their "belongingness" to God(liness) (i.e., capacity to be the creative cause). [next page](#)



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During ancient times, the process of being and becoming was accomplished through what was later called “an alchemical process of transformation to perfectibility” (cf. Dawkins, 1988). In classic form, all African life is characterized as “Being, Becoming and Belonging”. In Being, life is characterized by three basic attributes: Desire, Thought and Action. These attributes are, in themselves, also subject to transformation and thereby “perfectible”. Hence, Desire when “perfected” (transformed) becomes pure love. Thought when “perfected” (transformed) becomes clear understanding and Action when “perfected” (transformed) becomes acts of sacrifice or service to benefit the whole (all). In becoming, one’s basic beingness was transformed to a more perfect being. Hence, through the experience of right living one is transformed from being a lesser material (animal) being into a greater spiritual (Godlike) being.

How should the discourse (to define, perfect, explain, and understand) on human attributes; i.e., identity, personality, esteem, etc., relate to the notion of “perfectibility”?

Hence, any theoretical model of African functioning should, at a minimum, (1) illustrate and explain how African Peoples (especially in the USA) reproduce themselves as “human beings” in a non-African and even anti-African reality, (2) show how the sense of human authenticity is related to the satisfaction of "Needs" and the realization of “Power;” (3) explain and provide an understanding of the grounding for being self-conscious of one's real “essence” in an alienating reality; and (4) illustrate and explain the relevance of African conceptualizations of human beingness for human growth and development.

Accordingly, I would like to end my preliminary thoughts on the idea of “*To Be African or not to Be - the Question of Identity or Authenticity*” with a brief discussion focused on (1) re-visiting the African meaning of human beingness and (2) re-examining the African meaning of the person.

Ori Ire₉: The Quest for Authenticity

THE QUESTION OF HUMAN AUTHENTICITY WOULD BE DIRECTLY RELATED TO THE QUESTION OF BEING AFRICAN OR NOT TO BE”. The term “authenticity” refers to the condition or quality of being “authentic” or “genuine”. To be “authentic” is to possess the condition of actually being what one claims to be. It is to be “real.” To be “authentic” is to have an

undisputed origin that is directly connected to the producer or creator. It is to be “genuine”, which, in turn, means to be original, [next page](#)

9 “*Ori Ire*” is a Yoruba concept representing the state when one’s consciousness is properly aligned with one’s destiny. In this regard it clarifies and gives deeper meaning for the quest for authenticity. It is human destiny for a people to be conscious (to find and establish) of their own sense of authenticity.

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“authentic” is to have an undisputed origin that is directly connected to the producer or creator. It is to be “genuine”, which, in turn, means to be original, unmutated or not a copy, variant or distortion. The “gen” in “genuine or generate means to produce, to bring into existence. Hence, the deeper meaning of “human authenticity” is to be indisputably connected to that which brought you into existence. “To be African or not to Be” suggests, thereby, that to be human, African people must realize (have a sense of) their indisputable connection to their African origin and that which brought the African into existence. This is the quest for human authenticity. In this regard, the search for human meaning is, in fact, the search for the “authentic core” which gives one a sense of essence and drives the proper response to the demands of experiencing life.

An analysis of classical and traditional African beliefs about the “authentic core,” will reveal, I believe, the importance of the construct, “human authenticity”. The African “authentic core” is found in the African belief about the meaning of human beingness and the concept of the person.

The African Meaning of Human Beingness:

The birth of a child is perceived by the Bantu-Kongo people as the rising of a “living sun” into the upper world (Fu-Kiau, 1991, 8) To be human is, therefore, to be a “being” who is a “living sun” possessing a “knowing” and knowable” spirit (energy) through which one has an enduring relationship with the total perceptible and ponderable universe. The person as energy, spirit or power is, therefore, a

phenomenon of “perpetual veneration”. The person is both the container and instrument of Divine energy and relationships. The human being is a “*power*,” a phenomena of “*perpetual veneration*.” Given this sense of human beingness, the observation regarding the spirituality of African people is somewhat of a misnomer. Spirituality pertains to having the quality of being spiritual. African people have more than the quality of being spiritual. In fact, for the African to be human is to be a spirit. Spirit is the energy, force or power that is both the inner essence and the outer envelope of human beingness. “Spiritness,” rather than spirituality, pertains to the condition of being a spirit. This “Spiritness” is often misconceived as spiritual or a religious quality. As energy, spirit becomes “Spiritness” and therein serves to ignite and enliven the human state of being. Human beings experience their “Spiritness” simultaneously as a metaphysical state and an ethereal extension or connection into and between the supra world of the Deities, the inter world of other beings and the inner world of the self.

At this point, I want to explain my use of traditional African languages to represent the scientific “concepts” that emerge from the recommended African paradigm and episteme. Not only is this consistent with the dictates of the proposed new discourse, it is appropriate as an act of authenticity or [next page](#)

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authority. The use of African language terminology is critical to the reclaiming of African centered discourse. In this regard, Dr. V. Nobles (1995) points out that “concepts can be misconstrued or not fully understood or developed when they are defined, interpreted or constructed using a language not specific to the particular culture” (3). Concepts reflect and/or represent phenomena within a particular culture. Every language reflects and represents some particular peoples culture. Given African peoples sensitivity to the “power” of the word, i.e., *Nommo*, we moreso than most people recognize that words have psychological transformative power in that they are capable of legitimizing the material manifestation of phenomena. Concepts, represented by words, can and do have the ability to reinforce or reject the cultural moorings or foundations of a cultural community. African American theorist, especially

should, therefore, be especially sensitive to the words used in constructing their theory.

When one uses a language that is hostile or irrelevant to the cultural system under examination, then the concepts, via the language, will severely limit the understanding of the phenomena within that culture (1995 7). I suspect that when the African theorists utilize non-African concepts (i.e., Latin, Greek, Roman, Anglo-Saxon) to represent the social phenomena of African life, they unknowingly incorporate the psychological energy (via subliminal meanings) associated with these concepts and thereby create “false positives” in the discoveries of African American conduct. The African researcher should, therefore, at every possibility, use African concepts to describe and give meaning to African phenomena.

Accordingly, for the Sonay people of Mali, the word for black is “bibi” (Maiga, 1996 17).” *“Bibi”* is actually a concept used to refer to the essential goodness of things. It is never used to refer to anything negative or inferior. The full significance of this concept is found in the expression, *“wayne bibi”* (black sun). Dr. Hassimi Maiga (1996 18) notes that the Gao people of Mali use the term *“wayne bibi”* to refer to the hottest part of the day when the sun is at its fullest. In effect, *“wayne bibi”* refers to the fullest expression of the sun. It is when the sun is the brightest, the most dazzling and the most radiant. The black sun (wayne bibi) symbolizes “luminosity”, the state of being unlimited and the condition that when a thing achieves its total expression. Similarly, the Sonay people use the term, *“Ay moo hari bibi”* (Give me Black water) to signify water that is from the deepest part of the river and the most clear and clean (1996 18). Bibi in this context represents the depth or essence, clarity and purity of a thing. Hence, the term, *“bibi,”* especially *“wayne bibi”* connotes a state wherein a thing is pure, clean, clear, limitless luminous, radiant and exuding its totality or fullest expression.

Accordingly, I am suggesting that the Sonay term *“wayne bibi”* be used to represent the notion of “Spiritness” in human beings. In the state of being a spirit, and in recognition of the idea that the birth of a human being [next page](#)

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symbolizes the rising of a living sun in the upper world, the Spiritness or “*wayne bibi*” (black sun) of our being represents the unlimited radiance, luminosity, and dazzle, and total expression of being human.

I believe that when the person and/or community experience congruity between the “supra,” “inter,” and “inner” realms of the “*wayne bibi*” (Spiritness), then the sense of human integrity is achieved. This is a critical formulation because, I believe, that for African people, particularly those who were colonized and enslaved, it is only when one has a sense of the “Black Sun,” the “*wayne bibi*” that one has the “instinct” to resist dehumanization or oppression as well as the capability to even contemplate human liberation and potential. It is also the awakening of the “*wayne bibi*” that allows us to contemplate and believe in the certainty of victory and human possibility.

At the metaphysical level, the “*wayne bibi*,” therefore, is the unlimited and total expression of energy and power that represents human possibility, probability and potential. At the physical level, the “*wayne bibi*” is experienced as a drive or human condition. Wayne bibi (black sun) is experienced as an urge and desire for what is excellent, good and right. As the fullest expression of goodness, it eventuates in the ever-expanding love and feeling of “good will” for all life. It is the “*wayne bibi*” that makes for ethical character and proper conduct. Being the “Black Sun”, the “*wayne bibi*”. the person has an ever-present urge to kindness, goodwill and fellowship. This is often experienced as the “felt need” to love and be loved for no particular reason at all. The “*wayne bibi*” gives the person the desire for order and the beautiful; i.e., that which is essential, pure, clean, clear, radiant. It is the “*wayne bibi*” that serves as the “impetus” for concern beyond self to other and the emotional “sense of the *Divine agency*” and relationship in human affairs (i.e., the compelling need to understand the nature of the Divine) and thereby life itself and our meaning and purpose in life. The human being as a living sun expresses one’s humanity as the magnetic pull away from mere animal/physical existence and toward that which is higher, nobler, better and more excellent (The Godness/Goodness). It is the “*wayne bibi*,” the Black Sun, the unlimited luminosity, the radiance, the totality or fullest expression of Divine energy that gives one the sense of inner “power” and dignity and makes one human.

The notion of being a “power” (“*wayne bibi*”) of perpetual veneration suggests precise meanings for the concepts of “being,” “becoming,” and “belonging” found in the African centered discourse. “Being” is the state of “*wayne bibi*”; i.e., having the quality of a living sun. It is to have an essence or substance that is an attribute of the Divine and is absolutely invariant and indestructible. “Becoming” is to fulfill one’s destiny. It is the continuous and constant (movement toward) achievement or realization of potential(s) to reach higher levels of actuality. “Belonging” is the condition wherein one is conscious of the state of being one with that which is whole.

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wherein one is integrally and essentially infused or blended with that which is greater.

The African Meaning of the Person

Kemetic beliefs about the person are well documented and upon review, one can see that the Kemetic meaning of the person is similar to the meaning of the person reflected throughout the major cultures of Africa. In “the Book of Knowing the Evolutions of Ra”, the creator God, Neb-er-tcher, states

“I am he who evolved himself under the form of the God Khepera. I, the evolver of the evolutions evolved myself, after many evolutions and developments which came forth from my mouth. No heavens existed, and no earth, and no terrestrial animals or reptiles had come into being. I formed them out of the inert mass of watery matter, I found no place whereupon to stand. I was alone. There existed none other who worked with me. I laid the foundations of all things by my will, and all things evolved themselves therefrom. I sent forth Shu and Tefnut out from myself. Shu and Tefnut gave birth to Nut and Seb, and Nut gave birth to Osiris, Horus-Khent-an-maa, Sut, Isis and Nephtys. At one birth, one after the other, and their many children multiply upon this earth¹⁰”

These Ancient Africans believed that the Neb-er-tcher evolved himself from the primordial substance and facilitated the evolution of forms into phenomena. The “creative principle” emerged out of the primordial substance; i.e., “Nu” and all phenomena were, in fact, extensions of “Nu.” The Kemites believed in the consubstantiality of all phenomena.

The key to understanding Ancient Kemetic Philosophy, is, in fact, the belief about the

meaning of the person. Because the person was a manifestation or expression of “Nu”, the primordial substance, the ancients regarded the “form” of the human being as destined to live forever. Hence, institutions were developed to enable the person to evolve in response to the challenges of nature. The human person, like other forms, has an “unchanging value” and evolves in response to the demands of that value. The ancients regarded the primordial substance, “Nu”, as infinite. The infinity operated, in terms, of its law, which was its will. As a manifestation of “Nu”, the person represents a manifestation of “the Law”.

The ancient Kemite word for the “primordial substance” is “*Nu*.” The ancients believed that all phenomena emerged from “*Nu*”. The person, it was believed, also evolved from “*Nu*,” the primordial substance. Ancient Kemetic mythology suggests that “Nu” manifested itself as a “person” so that it could “appear” in “glory” on earth.

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10 Allen, George Thomas, translator: *The Book of the Dead*, prepared for publication by Elizabeth Blaisdell Hauser; Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1974 Spells 63 and 64, p. 56, 59

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As the antecedent form, “Nu” produced variant words for the person that signify a common African meaning of the person. To recognize this, one can note that different African peoples developed variant forms of “Nu” (e.g., Du, Nho, Ntu, Nwo, Tu, Di, Ni, Ntfu, etc.), in their creation of words representing the person. For instance, the Hausa word for person is “*Mutum*”. The Ibo word is “*Nmadu*”. The Yoruba call the person, “*Eniya*” while the Xosha say “*Umntu*”. The Zulu and the Swazi use “*Umuntu* and “*Muntfu*” respectfully(1996 64).

The ancient Kemetic definition of the human being emphasized, at minimum, the consubstantiality of the primordial substance (and phenomenal expressions); the primacy of the person; perpetual evolution (perfectibility) and eternal life. The character of the person was continually challenged in response to the challenge of one’s destiny. For the Kemites the challenge was, through perfecting, to live throughout the millennia, to be forever “noble”, to be “the princes of eternity”.

As mentioned above, the Bantu-Kongo people believe that the person is an energy, spirit or power. And as a spirit, the person is a phenomenon of “perpetual veneration.” The person is both the container and instrument of Divine energy and relationships. Consistent with the Mali notion “*wayne bibi*,” to be human, for the Bantu-Kongo, is to be a “person” who is a living (Black) sun, possessing a “knowing and knowable” spirit (energy) through which one has an enduring relationship with the total perceptible and ponderable universe.

The Zulu speaking people of South Africa, like almost all African people, have an ancient text, the *Izaga*, in which they define the meaning of what it is to be a person (Ngubane, 1979 60). The text of “wise” sayings contain the Zulu interpretation of the teachings of the Sudic philosophy. Within these teachings, the Zulu say “Umuntu Ngumuntu,” meaning, “the person is human.” In this same regard, Dr. Marimba Ani teaches that the Bantu belief about the concept of the person is crystallized in the saying, “*Umuntu Ngu Muntu Nga Bantu*” which means “A person is a person because there are people.” In believing that the primordial substance was infinite, the Zulu believe that all phenomena was made of the primordial substance. The person was one such phenomenon. The ancient Zulu philosophers taught, in this regard, that through the “*Umuntu Ngumuntu*,” the human person was unique in that the person defined oneself and is essentially knowledgeable of [next page](#)

11 Dr. Ani introduced this notion to W. Nobles’ graduate seminar on “Theories and Concepts in Ethnic Studies” (Fall, 1994) at San Francisco State University. According to Dr. Ani, the significance of the African notion of the “person” is its equivalence to being a “human being” and that to be a “person” or “human being” requires both spiritual evolution and cultural maturation.

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ones own intrinsic value. For the Zulu to be human is to be able to say what and who one is and to be able to define oneself as a value.

Ngubane(1979 62) argues that the African understanding of the person is a “protein” evaluation of the human being which flowed into Nile Valley high culture of the Ancient Kemites and subsequently created clusters of similar conceptions all over

Africa. What, in fact, is recognized as African culture and civilization is the combined social conventions and inventions emerging from a common African meaning of the person.

Like the Kemites, the Zulu believed that all phenomena (“*Uluthu*”) had their origins in a “living consciousness (1976)”, which they called “*UQOBU*”. The person evolved from the “*UQOBU*” in response to “*Umthetho weMvelo*” (the law of appearing); the demands of “*Isimu*” (One’s nature) and “*Ukuma Njalu*” (perpetual evolution). According to Ngubane(1976 77) the central teachings of the Buntu is that all things originated from “*UQOBU*” and evolve in response to the challenge of their nature. The person, according to the Zulu, is a self-defining value and that life’s purpose for the person is perpetual evolution.

The Zulu ideal emphasized the primacy of the person and the creation of a society which equipped, enabled and ensured that the person would realize the promise of being or becoming human(1976 77) (“*Ukuba Ngumuntu*”). As a person, the components of realizing the promise of being human are a) the person by law is human (*Umntu Ngumuntu*) ; (b) the person has to evolve over the distance of being human (*Amabanga Okuba Ngumuntu*); and c) human compassion dictates that the person can not be “thrown” away (1976 93) (*Ukuba Ngumuntu*).

The Akan conception of the nature of being human also informs the concept of the person. The Akan people consider a human being to be comprised of three elements. The first element is the *Okra* which constitutes the innermost self, the essence of the person (Gyekye, 1987 9). The *Okra* is considered the living soul of the person and is sometimes referred to as the “*Okrateasafo*.” As the living soul, the *Okra* is identical with life. It is also the embodiment and transmitter of the individual’s *Nkrabea* (destiny). As the life force, the *Okra* is linked to “*Honhom*” (breath) (1987 95). The “*Honam*,” however, is the tangible and recognizable manifestation of the presence of the *Okra*.

The second element of the person is the “*Sunsum*.” The term “*Sunsum*” is used to refer to all unperceivable, mystical beings and forces. It is the activating principle in the person (1987 88). The “*Sunsum*” is what molds the child’s personality and disposition. It is that which determines the character. The *Okra*, in turn, manifests itself in the world of experience through the “*Sunsum*.” [next page](#)



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The final component is simply the “*Honam*” (the body), which is made up of *Ntoro* and *Mogya*. (1987) While the *Okra* and the *Sunsum* come from *Onyame* (God), the *Ntoro* and the *Mogya* are derived from other humans; i.e., one’s parents. In their conception of the nature of the person, the Akan believe that the *Ntoro* is derived from the father’s sperm and the *Mogya* is derived from the mother’s blood. The *Okra* and the *Sunsum* constitute a spiritual unity. Hence, the person is made up of two principal components, the immaterial/spiritual (*Okra & Sunsum*) and the material/physical (*Honam*). In terms of the relation between the soul and the body, Akan thinkers contend that not only does the body influence the soul, the soul also influences the body. The Akan believe that the relation between the soul (*Okra* and *Sunsum*) and the body (*Honam*) is so close that they comprise an indissoluble and indivisible unity. Hence, the person is a homogeneous entity or value.

Similarly, The Yoruba believe that the person is made up of a spirit and a body (Opoku, 1978 92). The body or “*Ara*” is formed by the divinity, *Orisha-nla*. It is through the “*Ara*” that man responds to his environment. It is the part of the person which can be touched and felt. It can be damaged and disintegrates after death. The spirit component of the person is the “*Emi*” (spirit). The “*Emi*” gives life to the person. The “*Emi*” is the divine element of the person and links the person directly to God. Upon the death of the person, the “*Emi*” returns to “*Elemi*” (the owner of the spirit, God) and continues to live. As a person, one also possesses an inner head or “*Ori Inu*”. The “*Ori Inu*” is given directly by *Oludumare*. It is the person’s personal spirit. The “*Ori Inu*” is the guardian of the self and the carrier of one’s destiny. It also influences the personality of the person. In addition to the “*Emi*” and the “*Ori Inu*”, the person has an “*Okan* (1978 93)”. The word “*Okan*” means heart, but as a constituent component of the person, it represents the immaterial element that is the seat of intelligence, thought and action. Hence, it is sometimes referred to as the “heart-soul” of the person. The “*Okan*” is believed to exist even before the person’s birth. It is the “*Okan*” of the ancestors which is reincarnated in the newborn child. To be a person, the Yoruba also believe that one must have “*Ori*.” and “*Eje*” The “*Ori*” rules, controls and guides the person’s life and actually activates the person.

The “*Ori*” is the bearer of one’s destiny and helps the person to fulfill what they came to earth to do. The “*Ori*” is simultaneously the “essence of the person” and the person’s “guardian and protector” (1978 93). The “*Ori*” is closely associated with the “*Emi*.” The “*Eje*” is the blood. It is the physical expression of an electro-chemical/magnetic energy that is the force which binds and animates life. The Yoruba, also believe that the “*Iye*” is a component of the person. The “*Iye*” is the immaterial element that is sometimes referred to as the mind (1978 93). The person also has “*Ojiji*” (shadow). The “*Ojiji*” is a constant companion throughout one’s life and ceases to exist when the “*Ara*” (body) dies. [next page](#)

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According to the Mende, the person is made up of the “*Ngafa*” (the spirit) and the “*Nduwai*” (the flesh) (1979 94). The “*Ngafa*” is immaterial and is provided by the mother. It leaves the body at death and goes into the land of the spirits. The “*Ngafa*” is the psychic constituent of the person. The “*Nduwai*” is the physical part of the person and is provided by the father. The “*Nduwai*” is, in part, contained in the seminal fluid. The “shadow” (*Nenei*) is also part of the person (Harris, 1968 88) and is believed to report the death of the body to God. The Mende believe that a healthy spirit (*Ngatha*) produces a state of “*Guhun*” (total well-being). The person’s name is closely associated with his “*Ngafa*”. The significance of the name is that the Mende believe that a person’s “*Ngafa*” can travel from the person during sleep or other state of unconsciousness. However, a person can be revived or awakened when one’s name is called repeatedly. The Mende, therefore, believe that the person’s name may be the component that wakes up the “*Ngafa*” or the human spirit.

In their discussion of African elements of human beingness, Grills and Rowe (1996) note that the Lebou people of Senegal believe that the person is, first and foremost, comprised of the “*Fit*” (vital energy or life force) which is what makes them human. “*Fit*” is referred to as the spiritual heart of the person. The part of the person that gives one physical life is called “*Roo*”. This is the breath of life which leaves the body

at death. The Lebou believe that each of us has a spiritual shadow that is always present and protects the person. This shadow is called the “*Takondeer*”. Additionally to be a person, one must possess and cultivate the qualities of “*Yel*” (intelligence) and “*Sago*” (reason). Finally to be a person is to have a “*Raab*”. “*Raabs*” are constellations of spiritual forces, like the Yoruba Orishas, that possess, guide and protect the person. They are, in fact, ancestral spirits that influence and shape the personality and behavior of the person.

With this review, it appears that the African “authentic core” is comprised of the belief that the person is human because there is an indisputable connection between the person and God. In fact, the person is really seen as an undeniable expression or manifestation of God. Included in the authentic core is also the belief that (1) the complexity (immaterial & material) of the person gives one an intrinsic human value and (2) that the person is, in fact, a “process” characterized by the divinely governed laws of appearing, perfecting and compassion which are revealed within or through ones destiny. The final common belief in the African authentic core is that harmony and balance between/within the supra, inter and intra worlds of the person are key to “human beingness.”

If one of the responsibilities of theory is to engage in the quest for understanding the (1) unity underlying apparent diversity; (2) implicit underlying apparent complexity; (3) order underlying apparent disorder and (4) regularity underlying apparent anomaly, then given these preliminary thoughts, it seems that the notion of “authenticity” is a better concept to [next page](#)

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represent the unity that underlies the diversity of African people. With the idea of human essence or originality justified by an indisputable connection to one’s origin, it better makes explicit the implicit underlying the complexity of contemporary African life. The sense of “authenticity, in the final analyses, gives the person, whether theorist

or subject, a sense of order where disorder seems to reign, while simultaneously preventing the person, as well as the research, from experiencing the sense of alienation and anomaly.

While preliminary, my thoughts on this matter should not in any way be construed to mean that I believe that racial identity, for people living in a racist and oppressive society, is irrelevant. In fact, it is just the opposite. African American identity development is a critical concern for defining self and determining one's meaning and value. This ability is, in fact, essential to African American well-being, especially for those Africans (a.k.a. all of us) living in a society characterized by racism and other forms of human alienation and exploitation.

Sakhu Sheti¹²: Deep Thought and Theory --Some Closing Suggestions

The ideas offered here are simply thoughts designed to suggest that our “theoretical” understanding of what it means to be African (Black) in a non-African (White supremacist) society requires “deep thought” about the psychology of African people (Carruthers, 1995 2). We can not, as Carruthers points out, spend a lifetime of scholarship and realize what E. Franklin Frazier (1973 60) identified as the “failure of the Negro intellectual”. Frazier, after a lifetime career as the premier Black scholar, recognized that the Black Intellectual had “failed to study the problems of ‘Negro’ life in America in a manner which would place the fate of the ‘Negro’ in the broad framework of man’s experience in this world (1973 60) The ‘Negro Scholar (sic) he concludes was virtually “useless,” in terms of providing “theoretical” guidance in overcoming white supremacy. Frazier (circa 1960’s) believed that the sterility and irrelevance of Black intellectual activity was due to the fact that the work of the Black Intellectual demonstrated that Black Intellectuals [next page](#)

¹² Sakhu Sheti are two terms from the Medu Netcher (Egyptian Hieroglyphs). The word “Sakhu” means “understanding, the illuminator, the eye and the soul of the being, that which inspires.” “Sheti” means “to go deeply into a subject; to study profoundly; to search magical books; to penetrate deeply.” Accordingly, I have suggested that the term, “Sakhu Sheti” be used to represent the deep, profound and penetrating search, study, understanding and mastery of the process of illuminating the human spirit. Hence, in closing I am suggesting that the Thought and theory of African Psychologists should be governed by deep, profound and penetrating search, study, understanding and mastery of the process of “illuminating” the human spirit in its full and complete authenticity.