Sozinho (Alone): The quest for intimacy (April 2014)

For those who have read my work, the search for intimacy within the black British community is a topic close to my heart. In my own writings and discussions, it's been obvious to me for some time that the roots to this struggle reside within the continued impact of slavery and the destruction of those ties that used to bind us together (Turner, 2009). It was therefore interesting to recently discover the documentary *Frustrated: Black men in Brazil* (Greeze, 2006) on YouTube which discussed this topic from a male perspective. Although not without some obvious flaws, which I will come to later, the two areas the documentary did highlight were that of relationship and the importance of family.

Regarding the idea of the relationship, and tying this to our past, we have to remember that during the time of slavery a truly intimate and lasting relationship with another was rarity. As Akbar (1984) discusses, men were often excluded from the family, instead being used to stud the slave women or to discipline them or the children, whilst mothers and their subsequent offspring were routinely separated, meaning that any already delicate intimate bonds were severed before having time to form. The idea of any family though was reserved for the slave owner as the slave was considered less than human. This had the effect of turning a whole generation of black men and women into object whose designated purpose was to serve and be used.

This is something I strongly believe to be prevalent within our cultural unconscious to this day, echoing colleagues who have even entitled this Post Traumatic Slavery Syndrome (DeGruy, 2005). In the constant search to feel safe, this is where we seek out non-intimate relationships with another, where, as per the documentary, we ask men to support us, or we ask women to respect us. Because these immature needs are unmet, we look to another to provide them for us, to give us what we think we should have from a relationship. Yet, how do we start to relate to each other and not use the other for our own need? One of the starting points is through intimacy.

To say something about intimacy, ultimately this is the mechanism via which we know who we are. Through intimacy with parents, partners, and our communities we are witnessed, responded to, and learn what it is to feel safe. Intimacy within an adult relationship though is an entirely different entity. A relationship is something two adults build together. Each person contributes to the relationship, and over time they build it together so that over time it grows, takes its own form and becomes stronger (Hendrix, 2005). Relationship is not something we can make a withdrawl upon instantly, like an overdraft. To input into this thing called a relationship takes courage, and an awareness of one's own fears around intimacy. It is from our input into this crucible that families are created, children are born into, communities emerge, and a legacy is formed.

Relationship and family are tied together by this thing called intimacy, revealing it to be an incredibly powerful force, but also an incredibly fragile one. This is why in times past it has been so easy, yet also so difficult, to fracture (for example, during slavery, colonial times and World War II) and why so many still seek it to this day.

Returning to the documentary, although the idea of relationship and family were present within the presentation, that of intimacy itself was absent, and this was its major flaw. This is

not to say there were not other problems with the documentary; a significant hint of sex tourism seemed to radiate throughout the programme as did the absence of any real voice from Brazil about the experiences in meeting black estrangerios. What this documentary did highlight though is that this struggle to recognise the other beyond our own needs, to find intimacy, and to building something lasting with another exists to this day.

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Copa de Monde Brazil: An Afrocentric perspective (June 2014)

In 1992 Jamie Silva Barretos the former mayor of a small town called Rio Paranaiba, located in the state of Minas Gerais some 5 hour's drive outside of Belo Horizonte, commissioned the building of the city's own Christo Redentor (Christ the Redeemer) (Pazza, 2013). At the same time this small city actively engages with its often more disadvantaged community of African descent in an ongoing dialogue as to its position in the wider community (Unknown, 2014). Standing at Christo's breezy summit one can see out at a city slowly growing upwards and outwards, from the valley and the rolling fields at one end to the new state university at the other. In all, this is a city that has transformed itself dramatically over the past thirty years, and like most of Brazil, has had to grow up a lot in the years since the end of the dictatorship.

Conversely, as the World Cup continues in Brazil, many of the images presented of this land will be of the stereotypical; that of the original Christ the Redeemer, towering high up over the city of Rio de Janeiro; to the parades of men and women in costume that often leave little to the imagination, to the goal, that goal, scored by Pele in the 1970 World Cup final against Italy in Mexico. All of these images serve to provide a certain image of Brazil that is common around the world today.

But these images, although quite real, are I will argue presented through a very post-colonial lens, one that often fails to acknowledge the historical importance of the African influence to the formation of Brazil. A perspective that can often lead to an emotional and cultural disconnect for most black European observers. For example, the repeats of Michael Palin's Brazil program (Hanly, 2012) or David Beckham's recent motorbike trip up the Amazon (Mandler, 2014) cast a Caucasian eye over these regular stereotypical images of Brazil

without straying too far from the this point of origin. These, alongside the regular projections of unrest in Brazil seen on the news, serve to enhance a sense of otherness and post-colonial superiority. The ideal presented being desirable, seductive and yet at the same time dangerous.

The problem here is not the images, but the lens they are seen through. To observe Brazil through a more Afrocentric lens though offers, I feel, an alternative vision of this complicated country. Take for example the historical fact that over 4 million slaves were bought to Brazil from Africa by the Spanish, more than transported to the United States of America, that Brazil was the last country to abolish slavery in 1888 (Bellos, 2003). That Capoeira, which is widely taught here in the UK, is actually a martial art that was practiced by Angolan slaves who told their owners it was a dance in order to gain permission to continue practicing (Kingsford-Smith, 2014). Or that there are now more people of African descent living in Brazil than in anywhere else in the world outside of Africa itself. All of these historical references collectively present the Afro-Centre that this country actually has.

Within Brazil itself, Freyre (1974) also recognised the importance of this African history in the formation of Brazilian identity, and although his work specifically leaves itself open to calls of racism and colonialist thinking today (Maranhão & Knijnik, 2011), there is the kernel of an idea here in the acknowledgment of a countries identity being located in its mixture of cultures.

The importance of the African to Brazilian history can even be seen in its growth as a footballing nation. In 1923, Vasco de Gama, who play in Rio de Janeiro, were the first team to admit black players to a league that had previously banned them, subsequently winning the league that same year (Bellos, 2003). This started a footballing cultural shift away from the very static European way of playing, to one with more originality, more passion, and more swagger. A shift culminating in the rise to national prominence of Leonidas do Silva, who, though his dazzling style of play, earned the nickname 'The Black Diamond' from the French during the 1938 World Cup.

An afro-centric perspective of Brazil during this World Cup offers more than just the carnival and the beautiful beaches of this complicated country. It also includes the knowledge of our African ancestors in the establishment of Candomble, the religion originally practices in West Africa that survives and thrives in Brazil today (Bellos, 2003; Van De Port, 2005). Or that those favelas seen so often on the British news as hotbeds for crime and drug dealing, were actually constructed by slaves returning from fighting for their country in the wars to the north of the country on land they were promised as payment (Temple, 2014). So as you watch the World Cup in Brazil, remember that an euro-centric lens offers just one perspective on this country. It also presents the importance of African spirit and style in the creative constructin of the style of football this nation is renowned for. So, a more afro-centric angle that takes in everything from Do Silva to Pele and beyond, and that acknowledges the African influence on a culture that often centres itself round its football, I feel offers a more accessible access point to this beautiful country for British observers of African descent; a perspective on a country that although not without its problems is growing up fast.

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Introduction

For the months of May, July and October I will be investigating the transpersonal through the lens of my own cultural background. This month therefore presents the first part of this trilogy:

Part One: Cosmospirituality

As a transpersonal psychotherapist, my own spiritual quest has followed many paths over the years, my reading occasionally being based around the western-centric understanding of eastern spirituality and how it impacts on one's personal identity.   For example, Wilbur (1986) offers his linear idea of how spirit merges with matter, notions often criticised by the likes of Washburn (1995) for their esoteric un-groundedness. Yet, besides the interesting work of the likes of Mazama (2003), who I will consider more in part 2, within the transpersonal movement I am often left asking where is the black, African or Caribbean perspective of our collective spiritual experience? And what does this mean for the formation of our own spiritual identity?

A criticism with this western-centric outlook on the spiritual, is that it offers another type of dualism that echoes many of those that have plagued western philosophical thought since the time of Plato. The cost of this is the silencing of the many alternative voices that have something different to say about relationship to the spiritual; for example the rich heritage of Maori spiritual thought, including the linking of mind body and spirit to the land (Van De Port, 2005); or the incredible relationship of God, spirits and humanity that is prevalent in many African religions (Mbiti, 1989).

This continued ignorance of other forms of spirituality threatens to coat the transpersonal in the type of neo-colonial cloak that, in places, it has worked hard to avoid. Also, this reductionist focus is a form of transpersonal narcissism, echoing the idea of Ferrer's (Hart, Nelson, & Puhakka, 2000), where the transpersonal is defined by an increasingly narrow set of criteria. This thereby creates what I would term a spiritual Other, where the numerous spiritual experiences revered by the many alternative world cultures would inform the spiritual whole. The inclusion of an African ontology is essential to this.

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

The main ideas within cosmopolitanism for this paper revolve around the interesting concept of the understanding and acknowledgement of cultural others, where we don't have to agree with them, be it their ideas or societal habits, but we do have to accept their right to their own point of view (Appiah, 2006). This is more than just a Perennialist search for commonality, but an acknowledgement that we are all the Other in some way or form, a necessary step on the path towards this search for this mythical universality (Pollock, Bhabha, Breckenridge, & Chakrabarty, 2000). But how does this relate to spirituality?

To introduce my own term, cosmospirituality, the title of this month's blog, I am therefore asking for an exploration of more than just the normal east-west spiritual dyad, and looking for a real investigation and understanding of the diverse other religions and spiritual approaches. Yet to do this will mean other voices, from outside the western-centric diaspora speaking up and offering their vision of the spiritual so it can sit within the ever increasingly impressive transpersonal cannon. As a black-British man of African origin this is why I am undertaking this three part research into black spirituality; to begin to fill the partial void within the Afro-Transpersonal, to consider just what is African spirituality, and to also importantly look at how identity is formed through an understanding of black spirituality.

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<u>Introduction</u>

For the month of July I am presenting the second of my trilogy on viewing the transpersonal through the lens of my own cultural background. The last part of this trilogy (for now!) will appear in September/October:

Part Two: Afro-Spirituality explored

To follow on from May's blog post on an exploration of African spirituality and its position within the transpersonal, any exploration has to begin with an understanding of just how this exclusion has come to pass. As Asante (1984) suggests, the flaw within the transpersonal its overreliance on the wisdom of the major religions, and thereby the exclusion of many other forms of spirituality. And as previously by stated myself, this threatens to create a type of spiritual Other where African spirituality, and the spiritual ways of many other cultures are not acknowledged as being part of this perennial whole, thereby creating an unconscious barrier towards the engagement within the transpersonal.

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

Another problem for the transpersonal is the sheer number of spiritual practices and religions on the continent of Africa. The reality of this means that there is no one religion that covers all of Africa, unlike say Catholicism across Europe, meaning that at best in any understanding of African spirituality what one must aim for is a perennialist perspective, where the main ways of worship are collected together.

Religion and spirituality sit as cornerstones within many African cultures. For example, within most traditions there is a strong belief in our connection not just to family and community, but also to our ancestors, the spirits that guide us, and then unto God itself. In selecting just a small cross section, Mbiti (1989) in his detailed text where he stresses that for Africans this is a religious universe, also outlines how 'for many peoples like the Bachwa, Bemba, Lugbara, Nuer and others, (they) refer to human beings (or special groups of them) as 'the children of God', or 'sons of God', or 'people of God' (Mbiti, 1989, p. 49). He also stresses how God appears through nature and in animals within many African traditions.

Next, spirits are often considered to be divinities that have been created by God and through whom God acts. For example, as Mbiti states 'the Ashanti have a pantheon of divinities through whom God manifests Himself. They are known as Abosom; are said to 'come from Him' and to act as His servants and intermediaries between Him and other creatures' (Mbiti, 1989, p. 75). And in an acknowledgment of the importance in African cultures of the role of the ancestors, or those who have departed, Kwame (2014) in a TED Talks discussion on religion, explores his own roots and the Ghanaian ritual of pouring a portion of his drink on

the ground and offering respect to the ancestors before a meal or event. Taken together, our identity is therefore formed by the recognition of who we are in the eyes and via our relationships with all these different conscious and metaphysical levels of being.

An afrocentric ontology is therefore one that is hugely communal, and although similar in ways to the ideas of social constructionism here in the West (Andrews, 2012), where identity is formed through the influence of culturally pre-determined social constructs upon the individual, there is a distinct variation in the ideas of just what metaphysically helps us to form this identity. There is also a major difference here regarding ideas rooted within the psychotherapeutic paradigm and the construction of identity, with much of the transpersonal discourse centring round the idea of the internal layers of becoming that an individual has to endure when forming an egoic sense of self. As Harris though states in returning us to our afrocentric perspective, 'consciousness determines being. Consciousness in this sense means the way an individual (or a people) things about relationship with self, others, with nature, and or with some superior idea or being' (Asante, 2008, p. 113). This interconnected idea of the spiritual therefore runs counter to the Wilburian (Wilber, 1986) idea of consciousness emerging only through disconnection and therefore reconnection with varying levels of unconscious selfhood.

Another interesting aspect of the transpersonal that perhaps clashes with the afrocentric is with its vision of time. Within the transpersonal, time is often confusingly presented as either a linear process where one moves through varying stages to get to an endpoint (Wilber, 1986, 1989), or as cyclical (Hamilton, 2014) where time is presented as often repeating itself. It is this example that resonates most of all within an African ontology, as there is a clear recognition here that events repeat themselves, that cycles, like the seasons, end and return. Where there is a considerable difference is in the immediacy of human time versus the distant past and future time of God itself. This is important as there is a sense of trying to bring the human back to the 'here and now' of the present, an idea present in various eastern religions (Lao & Mitchell, 1999; Thera, 1996), and even within the various paradigms within psychotherapy which discuss the need for the immediate alongside the relational (Anderson & Cissna, 1997). The point here is to notice the similarities and differences that exist when an African ontology is presented alongside that of the West and East.

These brief examples are not meant to reduce or simplify the African spiritual experience in any fashion as, as previously stated, it is almost impossible to truly understand the range and diversity of African spiritual traditions. The hope here is that by publishing this ongoing series of blogs it will encourage an exploration into the uniqueness and specialness of a heritage often overlooked by the 'major' religions. Coming back to a point raised in my May blog, a Cosmospiritual perspective on African traditions acknowledges that although there might be a clash of spiritual beliefs at times, these differences add to the breadth and depth of worldwide spiritual experience.

The next section will conclude this brief exploration of African spirituality and the Transpersonal by looking at the idea of identity formation through.

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<center>**Searching for Afrocentric Spirituality (September 2014)**</center>

<u>Introduction</u>

To conclude my trilogy, this month (September) I will be building upon some of the ideas presented in May and July to explore some of my own views about identity formation through an afrocentric lens.

<center>**Part Three: A post-colonial exploration of our Afrocentric identity**</center>

Over the past month, during my continuing investigation of this month's topic I've probably watched or listened to dozens of podcasts, YouTube clips, news reports, or online videos, but there were two that stood out for me especially during this period. The first was a TED talk of interest to this paper was given by Bloom (2014) asking if there are any positives to prejudice, where, in my view, although he has a point to make about how we all hold prejudices his presentation via the lens of racial profiling he fails to fully address the negatives to being on the receiving end of such an experience. The second, another TED Talk this time given by Gaskins (2014) on the continued influence of colonialism on creativity and identity in the Caribbean, offered perhaps the counterbalance I was looking for in my online exploration of difference and identity.

What both discussions did provide is continued indirect and direct evidence of how post-colonial black identity is still tied to that of the majority western cultures. Considering this from a social constructionist perspective, whereby as discussed in a previous blog identity is formed out of the social norms of the time (Andrews, 2012), with the added layer of difference our identity here is built around our being a minority, the outsider, the Other, or what the majority considers it is not.

Afrocentrists have long argued though that post-colonial black identity needs to be focused on a return to our ancestral past (Asante, n.d., 2008). The aim is to provide a route away from the conditioning of colonialism where the subjugation of a minority led to the suppression of its identity (Fanon, 1959), a cost of colonialism is still regularly explored today, hence the aim of Gaskins' lecture. Another interesting example of its continued impact arises out of a paper considering the Zimbabwean education system where aspects of African spirituality that have been marginalised by Eurocentrics as mere superstition are being reintegrated into the Zimbabwean educational system (Hapanyengwi-chemhuru, 2014).

These views though are nothing new. Out of the civil rights movement in the USA, Garvey (n.d.) regularly argued for the building of a religion whose God was black, to assist in the recovery of black African identity. His ideas recognised the importance of our connection to our own religious paths, and its role in the formation of our cultural identity. A man who endured much during his own lifetime, Garvey's return to Africa and the relative contentment of his later years bore testimony to the power of self repatriation during his time.

In the modern cosmopolitan arena though causes two problems: firstly, within today's world, a world far removed from that inhabited by Garvey, individuals fairly regularly travel thousands of miles at a time to visit differing parts of the planet, taken with them much of

where they come from and coming home with much of where they have been. Because of this more cosmopolitanistic way of life the Africa of Garvey's time is far different to that of today. From my own travels, for example, the sight of Didier Drogba Chelsea FC football shirts lining the streets of Dar Es Salaam in close proximity to the Askari Monument to the African men who fought in World War I are both stark reminders of the juxtaposition of Africa and the West. The second problem is in this externalised desire to 'return home' as it sets up a dynamic where 'home' is idealised in some fashion. It becomes a fantasy, something that is over there in the distance, and if one is not careful can turn into not much more than the projection of a stereotype one is trying to avoid being oneself.

It is my own view that although an understanding of our identity is essential for a grounding of who we are in the modern age, that it is more complicated now for those of dual nationality say than a simple return to a homeland that no longer exists. A return to a more afrocentric sense of self is therefore not just about a visit to the modern day homeland, a land so far removed from that several hundred years ago. It is about knowledge of the land within oneself, where knowledge of our spiritual self, both external and internal is hugely important, a point echoed by Kwane (2005) in his consideration of this topic from a more Cosmopolitan perspective. As a psychotherapist, I also believe an afrocentric sense of identity is held as deep within oneself as it is in the books, myths and movies of our homeland, and the oral tales of extended families etc. Myths, dreams and symbolism are as much a part of our afrocentric identity as they are a part of western psychology today (Okpewho, 1983). I therefore strongly believe that our afrocentric sense of self to be something that we carry within us at all times, even if it is hidden from us by the conditioning of our current place or time. It's when we decide to tune inwards especially and connect with it that we begin to learn on a far deeper level who we really are.

This is the last of my current blogs on afrocentric spirituality and identity. For the months of October and November I will be considering difference and our relationship to the Other.

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