The sacred in traditional African spirituality

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Creating synergies with social work practice

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Introduction

African spirituality embraces not only the whole and unbridled humanity of all Africans, but
of humankind the world over. This notion is cradled within the ancient Akan proverb Nnipa
nyinaa ye Onyame mma, obi nye asase ba, which means that all human beings are the children of
God (Nkulu-N’Sengha 2009: 143). The African spiritual heritage stands, unequivocally salient
amid the landscape of other global spiritual traditions. Despite the intrusiveness of colonisa-
tion and the imposition of capitalism, traditional African spirituality has remained unfettered
(Serequeberhan 1999) and faithfully resilient, through a deep desire to maintain its tradition
(Mazrui 1986). The richness of this heritage has withstood the fractures of a myriad other
cultural and spiritual invasions with solemn resilience (Asante and Mazama 2009), giving
Africentric scholars a much needed voice amid the scholarly discourse on other world religions.

It is in this context that the African contribution as a truewellspring of African identity is
deserving of a scholarly space within the literature on spiritually sensitive social work practice.
African transcendent expression is unitary and has evolved over the centuries through the
legacies of the African heritage. Conceived through the accumulated experiences and sagacious
reflections of the ancestors, it is understood as a meaningful experience, rather than a toilsome
journey through life (Asante and Mazama 2009). This chapter presents a deeper understand-
ing of the African worldview and spirituality while advancing its implications for social work
practice. The emphasis on righteous living, search for the eternal, reverence for ancestors, the
deep appreciation for family and communal wellbeing and the unique healing methodologies
underpinning its philosophy, grounds the need to advance further intellectual inquiry in this
area, particularly in relation to its implications for social work intervention. This chapter forms
a starting point for a journey into this inquiry and attempts to interweave some of the core
characteristics of its philosophy and relatedness to social work practice.

The traditional African worldview

African spirituality is deeply embedded in the psyche of African people. It remains aloof from
Western notions of polytheism, as African people believe in a Supreme God, who created the
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University (Lugira 2009b). Despite this monolithic view of African religion, rich variations to its characteristics, rituals and ceremonies, colour the African continent. ‘God’, ‘The Great Spirit’ and the ‘Creator and Sustainer of the Universe’, is referred to as the ‘Originator’ (Borebore), ‘The Beginner’ (Ebangala), ‘the One who Bears the World’ (Mebee) and ‘the Very Source of Being’ (Orise) (Nkulu-N’Sengha 2009: 290). The most salient attributes of this Supreme God or Deity has been described as one who brings rain, who gives life, who gives and destroys, who humbles the great, who you meet everywhere, who brings sunshine, who is the father of little babies and the Universal Father-Mother. Undeniable, however, is the notion of this Almighty as one who brings justice to the earth and ensures morality, social order and fertility (Asante and Mazama 2009).

The African spiritual legacy was born from the teachings of the ancestors who have provided spiritual guidance embodied in the Creator, the giver of life, harmony, balance, cosmic order, peace and healing (Solomon and Wane 2005). It continues faithfully to be handed down through the oral repository of African mythology, legends tales, songs from which its people have drawn their construction of spirituality and their healing methodologies for peace, wellbeing and balance (Thabede 2008). Religious consciousness then is transmitted in African society ubiquitously from heart to heart, rather than through the written word (Cook and Wiley 2000). In the absence of a formal sacred narrative or texts it is the forefathers, then, who have served as the generators of societies and civilisations (Asante and Mazama 2009).

In African spirituality there are no temples or shrines for the worship of the Supreme Being; instead there exists a boundless space for connecting with this Being (Asante and Mazama 2009). Mbili (1969) reiterated that religious practices are not confined to sacred buildings or to one holy day of the week, and religious and spiritual expression and experiences can occur at any time.

Humankind is linked to the Supreme Being through an eternal divine connection, hence the belief in the enduring presence of the ancestors, collective existence and collective responsibility for uplifting each other (Ntseane 2011). Most Afrocentric scholars include spirituality in their definition of healthy psychological functioning throughout life (Ani 1997; Asante 2007; Nobles 1978; Schiele 1994; Welsing 1991). Collectively they define spirituality as a vital life force that animates humankind and propels them towards the rhythms of the universe, nature, ancestors and the community (Bujo 1992; Setiloane 1986). Spirituality in an African context is also described as participation in the metaphysical world and a duty to take care of one’s ancestors, extended family and community (Ntseane 2011). These conceptualisations shed light on the pathways that need to be embraced for psycho-spiritual healing, growth and transformation.

African spirituality exemplifies an interdependent cosmological view and all elements whether animate or inanimate have a spiritual base (Schiele 1994). A typical traditional African cosmology, then, is a non-fragmented universe wherein humankind, plants, animals, ancestors, the earth, sky and the universe co-exist in varying states of balance between order and disorder, harmony and chaos. This interconnectedness and interdependency is predicated on the belief that there is a universal link that flows from the Creator (Akbar 1984; Schiele 1994). Hence, there is no fragmentation between the living and non-living, natural and supernatural, material and immaterial, conscious and unconscious. All natural phenomena such as the rivers and mountains represent powerful aspects of the Supreme and all living things have the potential to be consecrated as sacred. These unified entities remain in dynamic interrelationships, with the past, present and future harmoniously inter-weaving into one another. Reciprocity, circularity and continuity permeate this flow and at the core of this is the belief that ancestors remain active in the community of the living (Asante and Mazama 2009). Cook and Wiley (2000) have
asserted that the Supreme God is approached through worship, prayers, sacrificial offerings, singing and dancing, rituals, and human and spiritual intermediaries.

African cosmology is influenced by the ontological principle of 'Human-Nature Unity', or 'Harmony with Nature' (Baldwin 1986: 243). Dixon (1976) described this humanity as inseparable from nature, which creates a communal phenomenology (Baldwin 1986). The African worldview, therefore, has a deep interconnectedness with all things and its spiritual philosophy makes no distinction between the sacred and mundane. The divide then between the secular and the sacred, which afflicts the Western world, dissipates within the realm of African spirituality (Asante and Mazama 2009), grounding a deep need for its consideration of the spiritual in therapeutic work with African clients. To ignore the cultural rituals and rites and healing methodologies at its core will only further distance it from spiritually sensitive practice. The sections that follow relate to community, the ancestors, traditional healing and rituals. This is followed by a discussion on their relatedness to and forming synergies with social work intervention.

Community

The essence of being human in African religious tradition, termed 'Bumuntu', relates to the capacity to ‘express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, harmony and humanity in the interests of building and maintaining community’ (Nussbaum 2009: 100). Bumuntu is the African vision for a person with good character, who respects all life in the Universe and is in a tripartite relationship with the transcendent beings (God, ancestors, spirits), humankind and the natural world (Nkulu-N’Sengha 2009). It is believed that all people are born whole and are endowed with the potential for right and wrong, and good character relates to an inner orientation towards doing good for others (Bhagwan 2002).

People are seen as part of a larger community and it is this community that facilitates psychological growth and transformation (Akbar 1984; Setiloane 1986; Theron et al. 2012). Psychological development and change is thus not an individual journey, but occurs with a community of other people (Mkhize 2004). African people value a good moral life and its laws, customs, behaviour are held sacred. Violation of the acceptable social order is thus seen punishable by both the Supreme God and ancestors (Ekeopara and Ekeke 2011).

African people call this collective way of living ‘Ubuntu’ (Mokwena 2007), which translates into ‘I am because we exist’ (De Liefde 2007: 52). The community then forms the realm for the manifestation of Ubuntu or humaneness and is imbued with a deep level of social consciousness. It inculcates respect for the inherent dignity of all humankind and a deep reverence for human interdependence (Mnyaka and Motlhabi 2005). The dissolution of the individual, through an emphasis on practical service to humanity, creates a ‘family community’, wherein prayer, rituals and harmonious living are valued (Mkhize 2006).

It is this humanness to care for the disadvantaged, the sick, poor and the bereaved (Mnyaka and Motlhabi 2005) that makes people and their communities a huge spiritual resource to those facing difficulty. Even child rearing and caring for the elderly are collective responsibilities of the extended family system and community (Mkhize 2004). Ross (2010) emphasised the importance of the extended kinship networks in providing moral support in times of trouble and a space for belonging and security. Apart from traditional healers, the elders in African kinship networks are considered spiritually strong and are consulted for wisdom and guidance when people experience difficulties. These then are important spiritual systems that must be considered when developing a social work intervention plan.
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Ancestral spirits

The traditional African worldview thus upholds that the world is animated by a multitude of invisible spiritual entities, particularly the ancestral spirits (Bojuwoye 2005; Mbiti 1969). When someone dies it is believed that they are transformed into an ancestral spirit and death does not preclude a person from being part of his or her social unit, family, clan tribe or village.

These ancestors are then actively involved in the lives of their descendants and are seen as the custodians of the social and moral world, ensuring that group solidarity is maintained (Breidlid 2009; Mokwena 2004). All good deeds, fertility both in the abundance of the harvest, the productivity of women and joy of family are related to the ancestors. In this vein, misfortunes and other life challenges can be attributed to unhappy ancestors and affliction can be traced to a lack of ritual and sacrifice. The ancestors are seen to be able to intercede in most aspects of life, including marital and interpersonal relationship conflicts, health issues, and can avert natural disasters (Ngubane 1977) and should not be excluded when considering the context of the presenting problem and developing the therapeutic plan.

Rituals

The African propensity to seek and maintain balance and reciprocity is grounded within rituals that strengthen individual family and community life. In fact, African spirituality marks through ceremony and ritual, salient moments related to birth, death, marriage, initiation and it is the traditional rituals that facilitate this process (Wheeler et al. 2002). African rites of passage are practices, customs and ceremonies that help African people move smoothly through the stages of life from birth, childhood, puberty, initiation, marriage, aging and death, last funeral rites and finally, the processes of reincarnation (Lugira 2009a).

Often, African people assimilate rituals held by families and carry these down through time and space. Traditional healers may also prescribe rituals to help with personal and family difficulties and restore harmony in families and communities (Bojuwoye 2005).

A ritual ceremony brings people and all elements (living and non-living) of the universe together. It serves as a means by which people are united together and creates opportunities for mediating relationship behaviours, so as to influence the way individuals and families treat each other (Bojuwoye 2005). Traditional African religion is underpinned by a belief that harmony in nature is not self-generated but is gained through personal community with other people. Most African spiritual rituals involve rhythmic drumming, dancing and use of trance as catharsis and call-response that encourages active participation in worship (Wheeler et al. 2002). It is believed that personal growth and development occurs through ritual ceremonies, where people are helped to break their isolation and find support through their experiences as they eat, dance and rejoice together. In this way people share their burdens, communalise their problems and find a way to de-stress and get support (Bojuwoye 2005).

Traditional healing in the African world

African healing and its relatedness with social work practice

Despite Western influence, African people continue to honour their ancient traditions as a source of healing (Bojuwoye 2005; Moodley and West 2005; Solomon and Wane 2005). These ancient traditions continue to permeate contemporary sacred teachings, ceremonies and healing methodologies. In times of crisis, African spirituality is paramount (Mbiti 1969).
Africans conceive of psycho-social problems and illness in a holistic manner and of having a deep spiritual and metaphysical nature and causation (Ogungbile 2009). In most African cosmologies, illness and personal and family difficulties are related to super sensible origins, such as the wrath of divinities and neglected ancestral spirits. Traditional healing is holistic and encompasses biopsychosocial and spiritual aspects, which results in wellbeing and wholeness. Healing is a sustained ritual process of correcting the disequilibrium generated by spiritual, natural, psychological and social factors that manifest through illness and other psychological difficulties (Adogame 2009).

This mirrors the biopsychosocial and spiritual paradigm in social work that posits that these facets are interweaved, thereby necessitating a holistic approach to intervention (Bhagwan 2002). Similarly, African psychotherapy is conceptualised as holistic and views the individual as a total system with biopsychosocial and spiritual facets (Awanbor 1982).

Traditional healers and their methodologies

African people who are experiencing individual or family-related difficulties will consult first with a healer who diagnoses the problem and sets in place a treatment plan. This mirrors the social work process of assessment followed by therapeutic intervention. Each healing ritual is unique to the person requiring healing and to the healer (Solomon and Wane 2005). Traditional or spiritual healers are those who intercede on behalf of those needing help, to bring healing, peace and harmony (Solomon and Wane 2005). Even in contemporary times these healers are called herbalists (iyanga); diviners (commonly known by their Zulu name as Sangomas) and faith healers (umthandazis) (Gurung 2013; King 2012; Washington 2010), who are consulted first in times of crisis. Herbalists use various herbs to treat physical and psychological problems, by preparing a mixture of roots, leaves, barks, fruits and animal parts. The healer invokes the appropriate deity to give power to the mixture, before it is given to clients, by using certain expressions and invocations that embody spiritual references (Ogungbile 2009). Sangomas, on the other hand, are reputed for their clairvoyance, their abilities to read a person’s mind and to use cosmic energy to ensure health and wellbeing (Sodi et al. 2011). They also have a closer relationship with the ancestral spirits, and can act as a conduit between the ancestral spirits and a person in the healing process.

The process of assessment within the African milieu begins with the healer going into an altered state of consciousness, by entering into a trance and meditating. The healer then communicates with the ancestral spirits through divination. Pieces of stones, shells, bones and tree barks are the divination instruments that are cast and the position of the falling objects provides clues related to the difficulty being experienced. These are seen as messages from the ancestors with regards to a person’s problems. The diviner then communicates with the ancestors by dancing and singing their praise, so as to appease them for any wrong doing and by securing help with the problem (Bojuwoye 2005). In some instances rituals and sacrifices are undertaken for the spirit to sustain the immutability of this power (Adogame 2009).

Healing itself follows a comprehensive approach, which includes psychotherapy, somotherapy, metaphysicotherapy and hydrotherapy in an African context (Ogungbile 2009). *Soma-therapy* focuses on the application of a physical measure such as tying a consecrated thread or chain on a person’s wrists, neck or waist, which symbolically counters bad energies and brings harmony. *Hydrotherapy* in contrast uses water for healing due to the belief in its power and efficacy within African ethno-cosmology (Ogungbile 2009). *Metaphysicotherapy* utilises the traditional leader, as discussed, to actively engage with the Spiritual Being, to effect healing.
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African healing in a social work context

African people and those of the African diaspora ‘harbour a tenacious distrust of scientific theory,’ as colonialism is perceived to be synonymous with the West (Wheeler et al. 2002: 74). Western social work theories advocate autonomy and independence, which is antithetical to the type of interdependency that African-centred psychology is predicated upon. The latter embraces the extended network system, family and community that must be considered as a source of strength during crises (Wheeler et al. 2002).

African spirituality ultimately is ‘what healing is all about’ (Idowu 1992: 193). This allows for a natural conception with spiritually-based social work interventions. African spirituality influences African people’s thinking, sense of security, life challenges, identity development, behaviour, decision making and problem solving (Idowu 1992). Spiritual interventions may therefore only be conceived within the context of African families and communities, and when practitioners engage their clients with sensitivity, awareness and ethical wisdom. Clients from the African spiritual tradition may view history taking as intrusive and hence it is important to demonstrate genuine caring from the onset (Cook and Wiley 2000). In fact, their deep personal spirituality may prevent them from engaging with social workers in the first instance, as even in contemporary times they will first seek the help of traditional healers, spiritual leaders and family elders for problems related to interpersonal conflict, emotional trauma or family disputes (Ross 2010). Even those who seek social work services for material help or who seek counselling will engage African spiritual healing methodologies first.

Psychotherapy within an African context refers to the use of symbolic elements, actions and words that could enable equanimity and provide wellbeing. From birth Africans are socialised into rituals, songs, proverbs, fables and religious ceremonies as part of daily life. These may easily be infused into spiritually-based social work intervention.

A spiritual assessment is crucial to illuminating their personal spiritual world view, the African spiritual resources, rituals and practices, and the healing methodologies that they use, to support ethical spiritual interventions. Spiritual systems that can be included in assessment and intervention include transpersonal encounters with the Supreme Being as well as elders, community leaders and traditional healers. It is always helpful to explore what the clients’ conception of their Supreme Being is, as meditative imagery can be used as part of therapeutic intervention. There are also ancient stories or narratives passed down through the generations from the elders that can also offer wisdom, guidance, strength and support, and point to enabling ways of coping with adversity (Bhagwan 2002).

Narratives and stories are important ways that social workers can get clients to share about their lives, family and community. This is salient to the African community where history and meaning is passed down through an oral tradition (Bhagwan 2002). While storytelling provides a way to learn about their spiritual history, their spiritual rituals and ceremonies, it is also through the telling of the story that therapeutic benefits can be achieved. Other African forms of expression include poetry, dance, music and song (Shorter 1996), which can be synchronised with contemporary social work intervention.

Collaboration with traditional healers, and referrals to spiritual support systems – be it healers or elders groups – are important sources of strength for clients and valuable resources for practitioners. Awanbor (1982) referred to the community as a therapeutic milieu, because African spirituality is communal (Nobles 1972). Both emotional and material resources can be provided through informal family and community-based networks, where sharing is dictated by the concept of Ubuntu.

Often interpersonal difficulties and other forms of distress are attributed to the inscrutable
acts of the spirits, violations of taboos or rituals, or disrespect towards the ancestors (Bojuwoye 2005). It is therefore important to consider this as significant in therapeutic work and support referrals to traditional healers to venerate the ancestors and perform worship and prayers that may ease their difficulties.

Ancestors are believed to bestow protection and guidance and are seen as the guardians of the family and community’s traditions, ethics and affairs (Bhagwan 2002). It is thus crucial that they be invoked or venerated through ritual and prayer. Rituals are ‘codified spiritual practices’ (Hodge and Williams 2002: 588) and form an important part of enabling the therapeutic plan. Through libation and the offering of food, those in distress seek their help and blessings through diverse rituals and rites. These rituals are believed to bring strength, equanimity, blessings, and good health and fortune (Asante and Mazama 2009).

Rituals and prayers are often undertaken with music, which is viewed as a sacred pathway for African people to connect with the supernatural world, where God or the spirits live (Ross 2010). Most African musicians understand and play certain rhythms for God and the spirits, as it is believed that this extends an invitation to them and also directs the flow of the supernatural. Drumming is used extensively, as it is believed to serve as the conduit for communication between humans and ancestral spirits and has significant healing qualities (Harrison 2009). In fact, there is a wealth of empirical evidence that attests to the wide benefits of engaging in community rituals with the intent of relieving loneliness and isolation, easing anxiety, enabling feelings of belonging and feeling loved, and providing comfort, reassurance and security (Pargament 1997; Worthington et al. 1996).

Conclusion

This chapter has drawn attention to the rich opportunities presented by the African worldview, for a natural integration of its wisdom with social work interventions. Despite the historical reluctance of social work to engage with traditional therapies, it is crucial that practitioners give consideration to the full integration of traditional healing practices where appropriate. The synergies created with modern social work interventions will inevitably lead to a more holistic approach that harmonises the biopsychosocial and spiritual paradigm to enable healing and transformation with clients from the African community. Therapeutic success, however, lies with a welcoming and respectful approach to acknowledging African spiritual histories and to utilising its knowledge, beliefs and rituals as a powerful resource within the milieu of social work practice.

References


