Jung and the African Diaspora

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Abstract

Jung feared and yet echoed Africa. Despite detailed attention to mythology, C.G. Jung wrote little of African myth. However, ironic parallels exist between Jungian concepts and the mythology of the African Diaspora. These similarities are strongest within contemporary developments in Jungian thought. In archetypal psychology, James Hillman further relativizes the ego beyond Jung's original project, concluding that the ego is itself anachronistic. This paper suggests that archetypal psychology even further radicalizes contemporary myths of the Diaspora. In this perspective, Wole Soyinka has literalized the imagination; concretized the metaphor of Ogun – by covertly positing a singular meaning in the hero of the wounded artist. Soyinka's sentiment unwittingly retains the logic of the modern predicament; the deadly Cartesian split of objective onlooker.

... the dream may not be warning Jung to avoid 'going black' but inviting, encouraging or challenging him to do so. (Adams qtd. in Marlan, 1997, p. 184)

Jung feared and yet echoed Africa. In his famous 'barber' dream C.G. Jung feared 'going black' and literally panicked for his life while witnessing a Bantu *ngoma* ritual (Jung, 1989, p. 272; Hill, 1977, p. 129). Despite detailed attention to world mythologies, Jung had little actual contact with traditional peoples and wrote little of African mythology outside oversimplified reductions to an original primitive mind (Pelton, 1989, pp. 228, 233). However, ironic parallels exist between Jungian concepts and the mythology of Africa or the African Diaspora.* Diaspora mythologies are now widely understood as a unique living syncretism of response to centuries of African slave trade and the 'middle passage.' Jung imagined psychological wholeness as a corrective to collective imbalance. However, in *Sacred Possessions*, Olmos and Paravisini-Gerbert, offer Diaspora mythology as the world's first true multicultural experiment; a synthesis of traditional West African religions infused with New World Catholicism (Olmos, 2000, p. 1; Thompson, 1983, p. 163).

According to Jung (1979, vol. 18, p. 589), the fundamental predicament of the contemporary West was one of modern man in search of a soul. Cut off and dissociated from an inner sense of meaning based on a unified and embodied reality, modern Cartesian man was thus inherently neurotic – split from himself and from god. As a solution, Jung offered the psychological concept of 'individuation' as the movement of the center of consciousness from the ego to the Self. For Jung, the ego is understood as just one of many intrinsic personas in a rich psychological pantheon. In contrast, the ego naively believes itself the full master of destiny; the essence of 'will'. As a necessary part of

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human development, a person sacrifices the illusory and limiting ego while regaining contact with an inner, collective and divine nature – the Self.

To exemplify the many parallels in Jung and the Diaspora mythologies, they both tolerate multiplicity, ambiguity and a magical realism while sharing a distrust of concrete rationalism, transcendental paradises, proselytizing and messiahs (Barnet, 2000, p. 83; Dayan, 2000, p. 18; Metraux, 1959, p. 46; Murphy, 1993, p. 73). Both are secretive, understand the intrinsically mythopoetic nature of language and are open to a shamanic or oracular consciousness (Metraux, 1959, p. 194; Soyinka, 1976, p. 147; Wexler, 2000, p. 71). Both discourage a centralized hierarchy or 'priesthood' and prefer the numinous experience of 'lived' religious experiences over liturgy, dogma and institutions (Metraux, 1959, pp. 14, 19). Both are receptive to secret and hidden divine powers and fear catastrophic loss of psychological identity in lifeless and eternal servitude; respectively, egoism/zombification (Dayan, 2000, p. 33). The Vodou tradition holds that each human is made up of two souls – the *gros and petit bon age*, which echoes Jung's assertion that he had two inner personalities (Dayan, 2000, p. 29; Metraux, 1959, p. 120; Jung, 1979, vol. 9, p.126, vol. 1, p.136; Jung, 1989, pp. 44, 174).

Furthermore, both Jung and African/Diaspora mythologies appreciate the potential dangers of divine powers, but resist any simplistic reduction as inherently evil; Loa/Unconscious (Dayan, 2000, p. 28). Both warn strongly against the negative, compensatory implications of ignoring these unseen powers. Disrespected, Loa manifest themselves as physical symptoms and misfortunes, while for Jung the neglected gods now manifest themselves *via enatodromia* as disease (Murphy, 1993, p. 78; Metraux, 1959, p. 193). Reminiscent of a Jungian mandala, the four points of the Vodou cross are symbols for divine wholeness—"contact" between the physical world and the lwa (Wexler, 2000, p. 71). Yoruba mythology echoes Jung's Gnostic assertions of the gods' fallibility. For both, the gods need humans for their own development or *Bi o s'enia, imale o si* (if humanity were not, the gods would not be) (Giegerich, 1996, p. 234; Soyinka, 1976, p. 10).

In Diaspora mythology, ancestors are revered as spiritual beings, which bears odd resemblance to Jung's notion of parental imagos who continue to influence a person long after the absence of the physical parent (Metraux, 1959, p. 243). Pelton (1989, p. 150) notes the universalizing Jungian qualities of Ifa divination as *imago mundi* . Understood as an ongoing dialectical relationship between a profane consciousness and sacred collective unconscious, Jungian analysis is akin to ritual divination between visible and divine (Metraux, 1959, p. 120). Both the analytic hour and possession states intentionally foster an "atmosphere of moral and physical security" (Metraux, 1959, p. 122). Finally, the Vodouist seeks marriage with his divinity, while the analysand seeks a marriage of his anima and animus – *mysterium coniunctio* (Metraux, 1959, p. 212; Jung, 1979, vol. 16, p.469).

However, I want to suggest that the most significant similarity between Jung and Diaspora mythology is in the concept of 'sacrifice.' The relativization/sacrifice of the ego is a key difference between Jung and Freud; the latter seeking only to strengthen the ego by making unconscious contents conscious. In the Jungian perspective, only in sacrificing the ego's limited perspective does a person regain his soul and contact numinosity in the Self. Jung's central motivating metaphor – his myth—was this necessary human need for psychological and spiritual 'wholeness.' Likewise, in African Diaspora mythology, sacrifice is prioritized as a constant in the divination between humans and gods (Matibag, 2000, p. 156).

Wole Soyinka (1976) indicates that the tragic nature of man is to grieve his cosmic rejection and loss of eternal essence – "the anguish of this severance, the fragmentation of essence from self" (p. 145). Humans engage in ritual and sacrifice to diminish the gulf between humans and gods—as "symbolic transactions to recover his totality of being" (p. 144). At first appearance there appears to be great difference between this literal and symbolic sacrifice. Sacrifice for Diaspora is bludgeoned animals, but in the latter is a psychological metaphor of ego relativization (Hillman, 1995, p. 17). However, the former also understands the metaphorical component. This is exemplified by Metraux's (1959, p. 193) comment that ceremonial initiation is viewed as a metaphorical 'type' of death. Conversely, archetypal psychology intensely debates the role of 'killing' in Soul. While Hillman (1995, p. 6) outright rejects killing, Giegerich (2001, pp. 204, 234, 236) posits literal sacrificial reverence as necessary to the Soul.

Despite these strong analogies, differences remain. Ifa divination is generally etiological and practically – oriented towards luck and health, while Jungian notions are more teleological and psychological (Matibag, 2000, pp. 155, 156, 160; Metraux, 1959, p. 192). Ifa serves as a structuring force for an entire community, while Jungian concepts are largely privatized to the clinical consulting room (Matibag, 2000, p. 167). However, perhaps the clearest distinctions between classical

Jungian ideas and Diaspora mythology are seen in their approach to the phenomenon of possession. For the Loa, possession is highly prioritized—the only overt mechanism for manifestation to humans (Barnet, 2000, p. 82; Dayan, 2000, p. 24). This process, where a human body becomes a receptacle for the god, is compared to a rider on a horse; the devotee is 'mounted' or 'saddled' by a Loa (Metraux, 1959, p. 120). The person has no control over him or herself during this time, is not held responsible for his behavior and, later, has no memory of the events (Metraux, 1959, p. 133). In contrast, Jung feared possession, which he understood to be a critical mistake of consciousness – the denial of the psyche's inherent multiplicity (Hill, 1977, p. 133). For Jung, possession was an illusion of control by one of many personas rather than a necessary dialectical tension between multiple, autonomous, psychic agencies. Compared to Freud, Jung was much more hospitable to the powers of the unconscious. However, unlike the Diaspora mythologies, ultimately Jung sided with the ego, favoring a relationship to these powers instead of immersion via possession.

These differences regarding possession are less clear between Diaspora mythology and contemporary developments in Jungian thought. Archetypal psychology is a recent product of the post-Jungian project. Here, Hillman (1991, p. 32) further relativizes the ego beyond Jung's original position, concluding that the ego archetype is itself anachronistic. Here, the ego is more completely undermined, cause loses privilege, multiplicity is favored and language/image envelops authorship (Schenk, 2001, p. *xi*). This view is particularly critical of the Cartesian paradigm, which detaches the observer, splitting psyche and world, and foisting abstract categories onto experience (Schenk, 2001, p. 2). In archetypal psychology, the unconscious is not a positivized meta-psychological 'other' by which one develops a Jungian dialectical relationship. Rather, the unconscious is a method or style of 'imaginal' perception emphasizing metaphor, implication and multiplicity of meanings.

There is an important resonance between these post-Jungian notions and Diasporic myth. In both the function of the human is to learn to read the symbolism and metaphor in the language of the gods (Matibag, 2000, p. 151). For Hillman (1989, p. 8), consciousness is, paradoxically, the awareness of our constant immersion in the unconscious—the implicit metaphorical fantasies permeating all of everyday existence . Similarly, in Diaspora mythology the goal is to:

> . . . interlace correspondence and meaning—to interpret—to learn to read the ambiguities of the letters between the lines. In Ifa, one performs a discursive, inter-textual act in which myth and personal history are made to interact through the medium of language (Matibag, 2000, p. 151).

Compared to orthodox Jungian theory, archetypal psychology is more hospitable to the unconscious—and thus more closely approximates the Diaspora mythology attitude toward possession. In fact, by insisting that human consciousness is a form of continuous possession by varying archetypal powers, Hillman may go beyond the episodic 'mounting' of Diaspora mythology. For archetypal psychology, we are always 'mounted' – always possessed by an autonomous divine power.

There is similar resonance between archetypal psychology and Nobel Laureate Soyinka who brings world attention to the Yoruba forefathers of Diaspora mythology. Soyinka (1976, p. 34) criticizes Jung, alleging he mistook Psyche's images for a meaningless, psychotic, primal, inner world, instead of acknowledging their ultimate essence in a harmonious mythological tradition. This movement echoes Hillman's critique (1991, p. 56) of Jung's Kantian metaphysical prejudice —splitting the experienced-phenomenal archetypal image from the unknowable-noumenal archetype-in-itself. Soyinka responds to this modern problem of subjectivity—of humanity's distance from the gods by a return to mythology, invoking the power of Ogun. The 'will' of Ogun bridges the disintegrating gulf of the tragic human situation—manifested literally in the middle passage of slavery. In the face of annihilation, Ogun's will is the anguishing, paradoxical truth of creation and destruction, which appears only superficially as resignation but is actually the deepest insight into the human condition.

However, this concordance between archetypal psychology and Soyinka is ultimately limited. For Soyinka (1976, pp. 150, 160), it is only the artist who understands Ogun's 'will' and saves us with the celebration of the image. In contrast, for archetypal psychology, the 'will' is the *sine qua non* of the ego. Rather, than relativizing the ego and opening to the imagination as a third reality (Hillman, 1991, p. 6) between thought and sense, Soyinka posits a literary messiah; a monotheistic god to lead us heroically through the abyss of destructive-creative transitions. From the perspective of archetypal psychology, Soyinka has literalized the imagination; concretized the metaphor of Ogun—by covertly positing a singular meaning in the hero of the

wounded artist-hero. Soyinka asserts that Ogun is a combination of Dionysian, Apollonian and Promethean principles, but then makes a critical misstep – he frames Ogun as an aesthetic Hercules; a tragic figure who brings civilization rather than consciousness (Soyinka, 1976, p. 26). Like Hercules, in doing so, he invokes horrifying consequences.

In short, where lies the Dionysian dismemberment in Soyinka's own thinking? As an alternative to Ogun's tragic heroics, Pelton (1989) offers the sacred Trickster as an "agent of sovereign irony." The Trickster does not take the sins of the world upon himself but delightfully juggles them in a "metaphysics of delight," holding rather than transcending the ambiguity of our existence. Here, the Trickster is not an image but is 'image' itself; Hillman's multiple implications, transformational wit and implicit irony. For Pelton (1989, pp. 281-283), it is only this understanding of Freud's eros which truly rescues the world from Thanatos.

Like Soyinka, Hillman (1991, pp. 120, 41) advocates a return to a poetic and aesthetic sensibility. Here, an anima consciousness leads us to love and attachment rather than responsibility and morality. Most importantly, the goal for Hillman's post- oeuvre is not 'celebration,' but rather, 'immersion' in the image. Instead of the spiritualized escape of triumphant victory, archetypal psychology moves in the soulful, dark shadows of embodied phenomena. Soyinka poeticizes the tragedy with celebration, but Hillman enters the tragic poem for its implications. From this perspective, Soyinka's artistic sentiment and celebratory rites ultimately departs from Hillmans' post-Jungian ripening. Arguably, Soyinka's vision of Diasporic myth unwittingly retain the logic of the modern predicament; the deadly Cartesian split of objective onlooker.

> Unable or choosing not to see the tragic content of his painting, the 'Eurocentric gaze' instead 'commodifies, appropriates, and celebrates' in aesthetic and cultural terms images that might otherwise force the viewer to confront his or her own complicity in the death scripts written for black men in North America. (Basquiat *qtd.* in Wexler, 2000, p. 65).

Here, I must fault Soyinka for an imprudent betrayal of myth. His tragic heroism and "diabolized" Beauty conceals a too-familiar, disempowered Cartesian vision (Wexler, 2000, p. 65). His is a celebratory, ecstatic aesthetics born of observed tragedy rather than Hillman's immersing 'imaginal'—an amoral force that morally moves soul towards fate. Confronted with the modern predicament, Soyinka returns to myth, but ironically, like Jung himself, he fearfully steps back and keeps his distance.

In following Metraux (1959) and taking African/ Diaspora mythology, as well as archetypal psychology, seriously, but not literally—what do these analogies and differences say to the imagination of the West (140)? How do these comparisons move us beyond the limiting post-modern alternatives of fundamentalist literalism in *nostalgia* or the deconstructed aesthetics of beautiful ping-pong metaphors? How does this understanding move our Soul? Whatever personal anxieties Jung may have felt returning from his fear of 'going black,' he also echoed the collective anxiety of a culture standing at the edge of modernity (Marlan, 1997, p. 185).

Ultimately, I am compelled to return to the original theme of sacrifice that so strongly echoes between Diaspora mythology and Jungian psychology. Jung's immersive experience of Africa and blackness led him to misinterpret invitation as warning (Adams qtd in Marlan, 1997, p. 184). Perhaps they are both. In the end, where is the sacrificer sacrificed? In Diasporic myth, at the moment of death, the sacrificer is often possessed by the Loa to whom the animal is dedicated. Metraux (1959, p. 173) implies that the Loa thus cuts the throat of his own victim. For Hillman (1979, p. 142), the ultimate response to our post-modern predicament is an "animal" consciousness. Ironically, we in the West find the gods – uniting subject and object—in the image of death, killing and an animal identity (Giegerich, 2001, p. 238; Murphy, 1993, p. 44). When literal and metaphorical sacrifice merge, we moderns must listen closely and hear the gods choosing to possess us—reaching out to ourselves as human—and as animal.

Postscript: Sacrifice and Synchronicities—There are few times in life where body and spirit dance together in perfect unison. Upon my completing this paper, my pet dog of many years sat down and died. I have lost my companion. I am in speechless tears. There is dark, numinous irony in this culmination of sacrifice, animal consciousness and the embodied death of my friend. But perhaps that is precisely the movement of Soul—of Loa—to which I must listen. Listen. I will not forget her.

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