

# Re-imagining Psychology: An Africanist Perspective

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## Abstract

African nations suffered enslavement, genocide, oppression, colonialism and exploitation. The suffering that African people endured as a result of this affected various aspects of their lives such as their knowledge systems, how they relate to the environment, their spirituality, their history and their overall sense of being. This multidimensional violence was entrenched through the colonial education system, among other things. The university as an institution functions as a site for such violence. At universities, disciplines such as psychology have been used to pathologise people and have contributed to black people being seen as ‘less than’ human. Psychological and intellectual attacks on black people from disciplines such as psychology have played a part in constructing a narrative about African thought and intellect through the use of psychological research that demeaned, undermined and marginalised African ways of living and thinking. In this paper, we argue that for psychological healing to take place, we need to draw from African spirituality, in particular, and African knowledge systems, in general. We draw from a number of Africanist scholars to situate our work, and focus on works of scholars who have been contemplating ways in which African knowledge can assist in dealing with challenges that black people are confronted with at universities and in their communities.

**Keywords:** Afrocentricity, African spirituality, political self, Africanist, *bophelo*.

## **Ukubheka Isifundongqondo Isibili: Indlelakubuka YomAfrika**

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### **Iqoqa**

Izizwe zase-Afrika zahlukunyezwa wubugqila, ukubulalana, ingcindezelo, ukuqonela kanye nokuxhashazwa. Ukuhlukumezeka abantu base-Afrika ababuzwa njengomphumela walokhu kwaba nomthelela ezinhlakeni ezahlukene zezimpilo zabo okubalwa kuko izindlela zokwazi, indlela yokuhlobana nemvelo, inkolo yabo, umlando wabo kanye nempilo yabo yonke nje jikelele. Lolu dlame olunhlangothizingi lwagxiliswa kakhulu kusetshenziswa indlela yemfundo yobukoloni, phakathi kwezinye izinto. Inyuvesi njengesikhungo isebenza njengenkundla yalolu dlame. Emanyuvesi, iminyango efana neyesifundongqondo isetshenzisiwe ukuguqula abantu bazibone bengaphili ngendlela efanele yaphinde yaba nomthelela ekutheni abantu abamnyama babonakale bengabantu ‘abangaphansi’ kwabanye. Ukuhlaselwa kwesimo somqondo kanye nesokuhlakanipha kubantu abamnyama eminyangweni efana neyesifundongqondo sekudlale indima ekwakheni ingxoxo ngomcabango kanye nobuhlakani ngendlela yase-Afrika kusetshenziswa ucwaningo lwesifundongqondo olwehlisa, lwabukela phansi, futhi lwabandlulula izindlela zama-Afrika zokuphila kanye nokucabanga. Kuleli phepha, siqakulisa ukuthi ukuze kwenzeke ukwelulama kwesimo sokucabanga, sidinga ukuthatha enkolweni yase-Afrika, ikakhulukazi, kanye nasezindleleni zokwazi zase-Afrika, jikelele. Sithathela ezifundisweni eziningi ezingama-Afrika ukuzikisa umsebenzi wethu, futhi sigxile emisebenzini yezipfundiswa esezizibukile izindlela ukuthi ulwazi lwase-Afrika lungelekelela kanjani ukubhekana nalezi zingqinamba abantu abamnyama ababhekana nazo emanyuvesi kanye nasemiphakathini yabo.

**Amagama Asemqoka:** indlela yokwenza yase-Afrika, inkolo yase-Afrika, ubuwena ngokwezopolitiki, ubu-Afrika, *ibophelo*.

### **The Dark History of Psychology: Psychology and Colonialism**

The expansion of European rule in Africa and other parts of the world brought unspeakable pain and underdevelopment in respect of multiple aspects of African functioning. Colonisation was, and still is, responsible for the oppression of Africans through their subjugation in the form of slavery, genocide, oppression, marginalisation, as well as social and political oppression. The system of colonisation functions with imperialism, which emphasises the domination and superiority of Europeans over Africans and other non-Europeans. This system of imperialism and colonisation is important to consider when we speak of psychology, or rather the psychological functioning of Africans. Whether Africans were subjugated through economic exploitation, political oppression or slavery, all these forms of oppression disrupted their psychological functioning.

When white settlers arrived in South Africa, they were preoccupied with African people's way of being in relation to their behaviours and ways of living (Dubow 1995: 197). The introduction of Christian missionaries in the 1800s was marked by an attack on African epistemologies and ontologies, and a preoccupation with the behaviour of Africans with a view to converting them to Christianity. Disciplines such as psychology and anthropology continued to further expand on what missionary Christian education had accomplished. The description of what Christianity meant as an epistemology and an ontology touches on the very nature of behaviour and psychology. It is therefore critical to know the genesis of religion and culture, and the influence they have on how we come to know and understand psychologies or psychology (Nwoye 2017: 335). These aspects of history and how things came to be are critical for us to engage with if we are to reimagine what psychology is and what its role is in Africa.

Psychology as a discipline in an African context has exhibited three stages, which show the ways in which the discipline and its practices mimic colonisation encounters and acts of colonisation. Firstly, psychology in Africa came as a continuation of European and American psychology (Nsamenang 2007: 2). This arrival of the discipline enforced the subjugation of psychological knowledge of black people by undermining African knowledge

systems through its use of Western theories to understand black people. In addition, white psychologists continued to use research that was being conducted on marginalised groups such as black Americans and native Americans to expand their understanding of marginalised groups in other parts of the world (Dubow 1995: 202). This was an important stage in building up a colonial mentality and maintaining the superiority of white people. What this meant for the colonial system was that there was an increased emphasis on the legitimisation and adoption of Western epistemologies (e.g. Christianity) in Africa. This was the beginning of the transference of behaviours or psychologies that symbolised colonial existence.

Secondly, psychology in Africa, like any Euro-Western system and knowledge, was preoccupied with African thoughts, behaviours, and personalities. This was followed by a fixation of scientists in Europe and America with supporting colonisation and establishing hierarchies of races/being. The eugenics movement popularised racist research, which normalised the brutal inquiry into African bodies and minds to suit white supremacist, capitalistic and imperial agendas. Its core aim was to push the notion of Western civilisation and to ensure that black bodies are in line with this ideal. (Dubow 1995: 121). This was followed by Darwinism/social Darwinism (1859), where the phrase *survival of the fittest* became popular. This phrase suggested that the colonisation of non-Europeans was necessary since black people could not survive by themselves, or govern themselves. Following social Darwinism, psychological scholarship (especially in Africa) was mostly centred on studying and understanding black people's personalities, cognitive abilities, intelligence and physical abilities. However, its main aim was to prove that whites are superior to blacks. This was achieved mainly because an European epistemology and ontology about being and existence was used. The continued silencing of African knowledge and psychologies by Western scholars made it easy for them to obtain results that suited their psychological and cognitive hypotheses. Not only did psychological scholarship silence African knowledge and psychologies, it assumed that Africans are blank slates who do not have a psychological knowing.

Psychologists such as Simon Biesheuvel, Jan Smuts, Ernst Gideon Malherbe, and Raymond William Wilcocks conducted demeaning studies on black people on the basis of their theories and concluded that they were savages, mired in childlike stages of development, unintelligent, and so forth (Fick 1929: 914; Dubow 1995: 215). The implications of such results were

critical to the colonial project and served to impose the advancement of colonisation and assertions that Africans have inferior mental ability. This would ultimately mean that Western psychologies would be the yardstick used to engage behaviour in an assumed universal way in which theories are used/applied blindly, since they are deemed relevant, regardless of geographical position, history, culture, or cosmology. What is important to note from the above is that when we reimagine the practice of psychology or attempt to decolonise it, we need to do so with an understanding of the past and a knowing of how things came to be the way they are in the present. This extends to current psychological and social positions in which black people find themselves, and how we understand them.

Lastly, for psychology as a discipline to cement its place in the political landscape and to have relevance for the colonial/apartheid era, it became active in developing policies that would govern black bodies and black people's intellectual capabilities, physical movement, and knowledge (such as through education and the healthcare system). In the early 1900s, mental testing research became popular in the colonies, and this research contributed to the development of segregation laws and policies on education, occupations, and land. Intelligence test research in psychology (e.g. the Binet-Simon scale for measuring intelligence and Spearman's *g* and *s* factors) played a significant role in the development of many oppressive laws and policies. In addition, the studies followed a comparative route, where in South Africa, black (natives), coloured, Indian, poor white and white were respectively compared (Fick 1929: 905; Biesheuvel 1943: 17). Most of the studies claimed that natives had poorer intellectual abilities than other races. In other studies, poor intelligence extended to behavioural issues, and it was argued that native agency was poor (Dubow 1995: 239). The researchers who conducted these studies claimed that they were scientific and that all factors that may have disadvantaged the natives had been considered. The studies were consequently deemed valid and scientific. Fick (1929: 908), for example, claimed that he had included children who were a bit older to account for the fact that natives' educational background was poor and that he had included poor whites from government schools to make it seem like both populations were on the same footing when it came to the intelligence testing. Later, Porteus concluded that natives were only able to complete schooling up to secondary education level (Dubow 1995: 222). Regardless of the claims that these studies were scientific and valid, it has been argued that, methodologically, the studies were flawed and biased

(Dubow 1995: 244). This is in line with Du Bois's assertion that white people had a tendency to portray black people as a 'problem', rather than as human beings (Rabaka 2015: 17).

Intelligence studies enforced the policing of black bodies and black people's health and knowledge as codified in law. The creation of an inferior education system such as Bantu education and the introduction of occupations defined as 'kaffir' work (i.e. vocational work) were some of the consequences of racial intelligence studies. In addition, institutions such as the Department of Native Affairs, the Department of Interior Union of South Africa, and the National Institute for Personnel Research, to name a few, hired psychologists who mainly conducted research that focused on natives' inabilities and studies aimed at saving the white race. Consequently, the discipline of psychology was an active participant in the colonial system, the remnants of which can still be felt in the present in many respects. Many psychology textbooks still use and rely on theories that demonise black experiences and that position black people as people who engage in risky behaviour, as helpless, as lacking agency, and as highly dependent. How can we theorise about lives using foreign theories that were developed elsewhere, especially theories that uphold Western ways of being and position African ways of being as inferior or abnormal? An education system that alienates people from themselves can never be useful in helping people to understand and better their circumstances.

In his reflection on Western education, Kofi Busia notes:

I became painfully aware of my isolation. What does being educated mean? I understood my community far less than boys my age who never had formal education

<https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/features/Dr-Kofi-Dompere-On-Nkrumah-s-Scientific-Thinking-13-352260>).

Busia's reflection speaks to the importance of knowing one's history and the lived realities of one's people since they form part of one's identity. Euro-Western psychology has denied many people an opportunity to engage with who they are through an education system that never allowed space for African ways of being. Busia's reflection is echoed by the following statement by Ghanaian freedom fighter Kobina Sekyi (cited in Asante 2011: 97):

We cannot expect to get into the way of continuous development while we are following a system of education which depends on the borrowing of an alien physiology, psychology and sociology, a system of education which is based on eschewing by us of the social institutions of our ancestors on the ground merely that our ancestors were uncivilised for just as a condition of health in the individual is health in the society in which he is born, so a condition of self-respect in the individual is reverence for the institutions of his social grouping.

### **Becoming Strangers to Ourselves: How Psychological Theories Negate our Being**

Colonisation and its conditions coincided with the development of multiple theories and ideologies towards understanding African existence. The theorisation took different approaches due to the multiple functionality of colonisation. African scholars in different parts of the world such as Molefi Asante, Steve Biko, bell hooks, Frantz Fanon, Wade Nobles, and others, wrote on topics related to psychology, colonisation of the mind, the reclaiming of an African being and spirituality, and the dynamics of living through and surviving oppression. The conceptualisation of these discussions formed part of a quest to understand how black people perceived and lived through oppression. There was a need to understand and to construct what was considered 'African' and 'Black' in the face of oppression. A number of scholars such as Stephen Bantu Biko, Hussein Abdilahi Bulhan, and Wade W. Nobles noted that psychological warfare was important in the establishment and maintenance of the colonial system. Africans had to respond to the system in a way that allowed them to survive both physically and psychologically, since this 'war' was happening across multiple dimensions. Reinvention and self-sustenance took place on different platforms that were aimed at showing resistance and survival. African self-sustenance included reigniting African spirituality, fusing African ways of being with Western ways of being (e.g. as a way of preserving African ways, they had to be adapted, as can be seen in African forms of Christianity), and recreating knowledge for survival. Living in a colonial system meant that Africans had to find new ways of coping with both the physical and psychological violence of colonial rule and preserving some aspects of their knowledge systems. In discussing African ways of being,

we have to be cognisant that African bodies and minds have been politicised, and attempts at living and surviving are a response to various systems of oppression.

When people live under oppressive and dehumanising circumstances, they find ways to survive and to cope. Black bodies have been politicised over time and respond in varying ways to challenges that they persistently confront in their daily lives. In a way, people develop multiple selves that they display at various moments in their daily experiences. We have what we would like to call the *political self*: this is the self in relation to the colonial system. Africanists such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon and the South American scholar, Paulo Freire (to name a few), have documented that our encounters of living through the colonial system start with the colonialists themselves (whites). The point of departure for the oppressed is striving for humanity, or humanisation. However, their humanity is denied by injustice, exploitation, oppression and violence at the hand of the oppressor. Freire (1970: 44) maintains that the oppressed always yearn for freedom and to recover their humanity. The search for humanity translates to the behaviour/psyche of black people in relation to surviving and being in the world that is opposed to their humanity. Seeking humanity could mean assimilating into the system of oppression, navigating acceptance in the world of the oppressed and the oppressor, and resisting the oppressive system. All these alternatives are quite taxing on one's mental and psychological well-being. Thus, seeking freedom and liberation involves psychological warfare and mind games from the oppressive system. Physical (visible) oppression has always been regarded as important; however, psychological oppression is equally (if not more) important if one is to understand the depth of the suffering of marginalised people as a result of colonisation.

In his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (1970: 45) speaks about the encounters between the oppressor and the oppressed in the search for humanity and liberation. He explains how the oppressed adopt the oppressor's identity, which is individualistic in nature since the oppressed do not have consciousness of themselves. He further maintains that the behaviour of the oppressed is always prescribed by the oppressor and follows the guidelines of the oppressor (Freire 1970: 46). This speaks to the inferiorisation of Africans' being in the world and their epistemologies, but also their assimilation into a system that might reward them for acting according to the oppressor's way of being. At this point, they might be required to abandon their

African ways of being. However, this is not the case. Freire (1970: 48) explains that the oppressed suffer from duality, meaning that as much as the oppressed seek to assimilate to the system, they also want to retain some aspects of themselves. Du Bois (1903: 03), in his 'The Souls of Black Folk', refers to this as double consciousness, which entails that Negroes (black people/ people of African origin) look at themselves through the eyes of others and measure their souls by the images of others' world. Du Bois's (1903: 03) concept of having two souls explains the need to be African and a world citizen at the same time, inhabiting and drawing from the various world systems. Moreover, Frantz Fanon highlights how living in duality/ in double consciousness could lead to cognitive dissonance, where people's beliefs and reality do not correspond, making it difficult for them to accept the evidence of reality (Fanon 1986: 149; Bulhan 1985: 68).

What we can gather from the above is the psychological manifestation of oppression. In a system that perpetuates oppression, the oppressor's reality and behaviour are imposed on the oppressed. Consequently, as we have indicated earlier, African ways of being become silenced. This cultural imposition, with its pseudo-consent from black people, results in colonial mentalities or psychologies. The guidelines and prescription of behaviour that Freire speaks about, in addition to the imposition of culture by the discipline of psychology, further add to the oppression of African being, epistemology, and cosmology. It is therefore important to understand the discourses of colonial activities and systems and how they manifest in people's lives (especially the lives of the oppressed), thus demonstrating how important and pertinent it is for psychology as a discipline to understand the makings of postcolonial individuals (Okazaki, David & Abelmann 2008: 93).

Unpacking the history of psychology, the colonial strivings of psychology and colonial mentalities is crucial in the process of learning and teaching psychology. hooks (2010: 3) and Freire (1973: ix) express two important tenets that psychologists may find beneficial if they are serious about (relevant) psychology education. They argue that education should be a practice for freedom (hooks 2010: 3) and that education should be used for critical consciousness (Freire 1973: ix). For people to gain critical consciousness, they need to problematise natural, cultural, and historical reality and develop theories that are rooted in historical struggles. However, the perpetual dominance of Euro-Western forms of being makes it difficult for alternative ways of knowing to come to the forefront.

## **From a Psychology of Naïve Consciousness to a Psychology of Critical Consciousness**

Euro-Western knowledge systems make advocating for critical consciousness difficult. The Euro-Western education model that South Africa insists on following leaves little room for African ways of knowing to thrive. The politics of post-apartheid South Africa have seen a move from segregation to integration, and from right-wing education to liberal education where Africans/ Black South Africans are just accommodated or included in a larger education system that oppressed them. There seems to be convenient ignorance of and a failure to see and acknowledge the role that education plays in the formation of a citizen and how he/she will respond to the world. If we are to imagine a shift in how we relate to and engage with our communities, then our theories and methodological underpinnings need to change. This is where a move towards decolonisation and Africanisation becomes very critical since it will assist with the process of reimagining what education is and the role it plays in society.

The discipline of psychology in South Africa continues to silence African cosmologies. The discipline suffers from what Freire (1973: 41) refers to as naïve consciousness, where the focus is on the symptoms of psychological challenges people are confronted with instead of looking broadly at possible influencing factors. The teaching of psychology continues to ignore the context in which psychology is practised, thereby promoting assumptions about people's lived realities. While we acknowledge the attempt that is being made to be 'relevant' as far as the teaching of psychology is concerned, we argue that this move is slow and universities continue to produce psychologists who are removed/distant from their communities. This disconnection from people's lived experiences is what Bulhan (1985: 68) refers to as experimental solipsism, which speaks to the ways in which theories of philosophical psychology are based on how white, middle-class males experience the world.

There has been an increase (though not nearly enough) in the number of African scholars who choose to follow the route of critical consciousness in their teaching and practice of psychology. This implies that a shift is possible. We acknowledge the hurdles that many will have to cross in attempting to disrupt systems that have been put in place over time and the challenges that may accompany such attempts. However, for psychology to truly serve people, it has to be rooted in the contexts in which it is taught and practised. There is a

need to move towards a liberatory approach where multiple forms of being and knowing are acknowledged as legitimate.

## **Reclaiming our Humanity: Negritude, Afrocentricity and Black Consciousness**

Since the master's tool will never dismantle the master's house (Lorde 1984: 132), to reimagine or decolonise psychology, our approaches should be rooted in perspectives that centre the humanity of all. It cannot be ignored that for a long time, Blackness and being black in the world was never core psychological focus. To this end, we call for the need to engage Black studies with a particular focus on Negritude, Afrocentricity, and Black consciousness. Black studies serves a theoretical hub for social and political movements, such as the Civil Right movements, Black power movements, Black Consciousness, and Black Arts movements (Colon 2008). Black Studies aims to bring together theory, academia and praxis needed for individual and collective transformation within Black communities (Colon 2008). Taking into consideration the current challenges faced by our communities, it is important to understand these from a holistic perspective at both the micro and the macro level, where historical, social, cultural, and structural issues are taken into consideration. Black communities have and continue to struggle with multiple injustices and inequalities that render many of them perpetually poverty stricken, struggling with family disintegration as people (mostly men) seek employment far from their families, and unequal access to opportunities. It therefore becomes pertinent to practice a psychology that acknowledges these intersecting challenges. To this end, Afrocentricity, Negritude, and Black consciousness, might offer us tools that assist in responding to challenges faced by black communities.

The Negritude movement and Afrocentricity offer us the vocabulary to understand the conditions of Africans all over the world, especially the impact of slavery and colonisation on the mind and consciousness/psyche of Africans (Nobles 2013). These Africanist movements provide a psychological view that have the African people's lives, histories, and experiences at the centre of understanding what well-being means and how it could look like, without pathologising. The Negritude movement was developed in the 1930s as a rejection or a critique of Western colonisation, its philosophy and its marginalisation of African people and their philosophies. It highlights the importance of accepting one's Blackness and the history and cultures of black

people (Rabaka 2015: 4). The movement further advocates the importance of Black pride and self-consciousness, especially in the presence of whiteness and its philosophies (Rabaka 2015: 4). Instilling pride and self-consciousness is critical within an education system since it helps people to understand who they are and how they are connected to others. Du Bois (1903: 5) and Fanon (1986: 16) have highlighted in their works the difficulty of being Black in a world replete with white supremacy. Fanon and Du Bois' work, not only assist us in understanding the psychology of the oppressed, it encourages us to engage with interdisciplinarity in psychology. For example, scholars such as Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor in the Negritude movement make use of multiple texts and sources such as poetry, music, philosophy archives, folklore to address issues of Blackness (McKittrick 2016). If psychology, then insist on disciplining thought, and not engaging at an interdisciplinary level, it is bound to continue addressing blackness through a colonial lens and further perpetuate anti-blackness (McKittrick 2016).

In addition to the aforementioned, we draw from the Black consciousness movement, which theorises the ways in which colonialism and the South African apartheid regime affected the psyche of Black people. Steve Biko (1976) defines Black consciousness as an inward-looking process that aims at restoring the life of Blacks, and fill it with dignity and pride giving Blacks a positive outlook. Biko (1976) further describes Black consciousness as the attitude of the mind and a way of life. Biko's description of what Black consciousness entails closely reads the suffering experienced by Black people and offers possibilities of what Black love could offer. For Biko (1976), Black consciousness is about decolonisation of the mind, where Black people learn to love themselves and create spaces that affirm their humanity. Black Consciousness also advocates for the new sense of self, which could be the removal of beliefs, perceptions, and experiences that negatively affect the state of mind of Blacks people. Biko's (1976) conception of Black consciousness is presented in his writing as a process of attaining agency, awakening, awareness of deeper structural elements oppression, and their impact on the mind, and a foundation for emancipation.

Black or oppressed groups continue to be dislocated psychologically and culturally and, in many ways, they understand themselves through the eyes of the oppressor. Using an Afrocentric approach as a way to understand ourselves and the world would mean that we need to start considering the importance of the psychological and cultural location of Blacks/Africans in a

given historical moment (Asante 2007: 40). According to Locke (1925: 4), to assert a new sense of ourselves would require an Afrocentric perspective in psychology and an assertion of how Black people can exist or fight the cognitive dissonance they continue to face. This expression of the double consciousness, we argue, could be suppressed by the agency that Afrocentric theories advocate. This agency is self-consciousness and it provides Black people with psychological and cultural resources within the context of their history (Asante 2007: 42). One of the ways in which such consciousness could happen is through the acknowledgement of the role that spirituality plays in how people make sense of the world and their understanding of well-being. It is to the role of African spirituality that we now turn.

## **Psychology and African Spirituality**

In the domain of ‘science’ the logic of exclusion speaks to deficient democracy in the construction of knowledge. The systematic and sustained exclusion of other sites of knowledge and peoples renders the knowledge acquired and elevated to the status of ‘science’ unrepresentative .... Democratising knowledge and science means the practical recognition of the *sangoma, ngaka, chiremba* or *nyanga* as authentic doctors in their own right, doing so in terms of their healing paradigm second to none (Ramosé 2016: 68).

Mkhize (2004) argues that many societies in Africa still draw heavily on their traditional beliefs and cultural heritage and that it is therefore pertinent to take these into consideration when we teach and practise psychology. As a society we have lost harmony with ourselves, the environment and other natural beings. In some ways, this is linked to an education system that fails to highlight the interconnectedness of life. In the previous section, we highlighted the historical underpinning of the discipline of psychology and how it was used to dehumanise black people. Psychology is preoccupied with human behaviour and it looks at human behaviour in compartments where the various sub-disciplines (e.g. cognitive, behavioural, social, community, developmental and environmental) almost often function independently. This compartmentalisation contributes to the categorisation of human beings (and their behaviour).

We need to practise a liberatory psychology that encourages relatedness and that emphasises the importance of the collective and not the individual. Additionally, we need a psychology that highlights the importance of the spiritual aspect of our being. African psychology offers this possibility. African psychology does not pathologise; instead, it calls for a holistic understanding of our being. One of the ways to do this is to acknowledge the critical role played by spirituality. Nobles, Baloyi and Sodi (2016: 39) argue that,

with the centrality or essentiality of spirit, the African process of knowing and comprehension may be better understood as the interplay of radiations, vibrations, fields, planes, waves, and points of energy between and among the realms of reality.

Knowing and being are not linear, but they are circular, and go back and forth, highlighting the complexity of life and existence.

Human beings are in constant connection with one another. The idea of relatedness becomes critical since it points to the interdependence of existence. We call for a psychology that is centred on African knowing and an African cosmology and worldview. This would also include African languages. The Euro-Western form of education, in general, and psychology, in particular, has put African languages on the periphery and, by so doing, has marginalised many of the crucial ways in which people understand the world. African languages carry a wealth of wisdom and guidance on how to understand one another and the world around us. For example, the notion of ‘life’, as discussed by Nobles *et al.* (2016), offers a glimpse of the importance of language in practising psychology. In Sesotho, the word for ‘life’ is *bophelo*. *Bophelo* means both life and health. If people do not have *bophelo*, it may mean they are not well and that there is some imbalance in them, or it may mean they are dead. Not having life (*ho se be le bophelo*) can be understood on a multidimensional level (i.e. from a physical, psychological, spiritual and existential perspective), which speaks to the complexity of human functioning and the understanding of human functioning from an African (Sesotho) perspective. Nobles *et al.* (2016: 47) argue as follows:

Black behavior [sic] is most clearly understood by Black people as extensions of a spiritual core. An assumption of a spiritual core implies the existence of an irreducible element in man [or woman] which has

a divine origin, an eternal fate and a moral function.

People's behaviour can therefore not be separated from the spiritual part of themselves. Refusing to consciously acknowledge this connection implies denying an aspect of people's existence. Therefore, when we think about psychological well-being, we should note that,

restoration or healing must involve the experience of being human; the expression of being human, and the essence of being human itself (Nobles *et al.* 2016: 47).

This would reveal itself in how we engage with one another, fulfil the roles entrusted to us and acknowledge that well-being is a holistic experience and not a compartmental one.

## **By Way of Conclusion: Towards a Psychology that Breathes Life**

Our training and education in Western thought, particularly Euro-American psychology, has made it difficult for us to contemplate traditional African thought as scientific and our traditional spiritual and knowledge systems as nothing more than untested religious beliefs and/or quaint native folk practices (Nobles & Cooper 2013: 347).

The aim of this paper was to provide a brief historical excavation that highlights the role colonialism has played in the establishment of psychology and the way it is practised in South Africa. We engaged the problematic ways in which psychological theories were used to render black people as inferior and less intelligent. Hiding behind 'scientific proof', Western scholars developed theories that undermined people's histories, ways of being in the world, and relations with one another and the world. We deem it critical for the discipline of psychology to engage in self-reflection and to confront its dark genesis to be able to look at possibilities for psychologies that contribute towards the betterment of people's lives. One of the possibilities we propose is that of drawing from an Afrocentric approach, where theories of the South, in general, and knowledge from Africa, in particular, are offered a substantive

home in institutions of higher learning. Furthermore, we call for a type of psychology that is centred on African spirituality. This would mean understanding well-being from a holistic perspective where the individual is understood in relation to others – the living, the yet to be born, and those who came before – as well as the world around a person. This kind of psychology is one that affirms people's being and acknowledges their complexities without imposing irrelevant labels, categories, and diagnoses of their behaviour. We issue herewith a call for a psychology of life.

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