

## Lecture Notes: Introduction to the African Unconscious

The first work the week is a fascinating piece written by Edward Bruce Bynum, Ph.D. who is a psychologist and director of the Behavioral Medicine & Anxieties Disorders clinic at the University of Massachusetts Health Services in Amherst.

I am beginning this course with the discussion of the Unconscious because it sets the tone for how we can begin to think about the purpose and thrust towards religion. Etymologically, the term religion is rooted in the term religare' which means to link back, similar to the term yoga. In linking back, then, what is it that folks are consciously attempting to link back to? Well, according to Bynum it is a deep ancient soul of sorts, called an African Unconscious. It is there in existence, informing how we think and behave, whether we are aware of this Unconscious or not.

So, first, what then is the African Unconscious? How does Bynum define the African Unconscious? Turn to the reading and begin to read the definition for clarity here. But he writes that, "The dimension of mental life in which information is processed outside of conscious awareness." So, the unconscious is a realm or dimension in existence that is unseen and non-tangible. And the unseen realm of existence influences thoughts and behaviors beyond our ego, or our conscious awareness, thoughts and desires.

Now Bynum suggest that the Unconscious is African. This is an important distinction here because on the one hand Bynum is speaking the idea this dimension of experience, while unseen, informed and influenced the experience of the earliest African hominids, our ancestors. Their experiences also shape "what's in" the Unconscious. What is in the Unconscious, then, are the experiences of early Africans and continue to impact all of humanity and their contemporary human experience(s).

The ego, then, is again, the conscious thinking and emotional self. for Bynum, is local, present and conscious. But it is also informed by the memories, experiences housed within that unconscious dimensions. Here, Bynum refers to this idea as nonlocal, as it is at once unseen and also accessible by humans when they relinquish, let go of, relax, the ego. Here many traditions rely on meditation, the use of deep slow-paced breathing to bring about a state of detachment from mind chatter, worries, fears, etc. that are often at the forefront (local) of our minds every day for instance.

If the ego is local, why does Bynum suggest the African Unconscious is nonlocal and what does this mean? See the reading for this.

There are expressions of this Unconscious in human existence. In other words, human beings as mentioned above have inclinations that inform the ego. (a way to think about the relationship between the Unconscious and the ego is to think about for instance a zodiac sign. What unconscious "traits" inform the similar personalities of let's say, of most Leos or Scorpio's etc. While this example could be improved, the point is made that if one does believe that there are similar personality traits, although not exact for all in the

zodiac, what indeed allows this to occur?) So, the Unconscious informs particular patterns among human existence. Study the following:

The African world believes in Personalism What is Personalism, according to Bynum? For examples of Personalism, see the quote on p 87.

What is the point here?

There is an energy, force, essence, in existence, that is within the material human body and mind, for example, which is its power for the mind to think, for the human body to be a “body” and to be that which it is! Among many African cultural groupings, they believe that even when a particular material body “dies,” the energy has the potential to move beyond the physical body and enter another physical body. What is the point? Like the theory of relativity, energy cannot be created nor destroyed, it just transforms! African folks thought this way before Einstein!

Another way of thinking about the extent to which the Unconscious manifest in the experiences of Ancient humanity (Africans), is that many, prior to enslavement and colonialism live according to a Conceptual System that sees reality as being an expression of an interconnected essence, spirit or in other words, energy. What, then, is a conceptual system? It is a pattern of thought that one can be conscious of thinking and behaving in accordance with. And one can also not be aware that one thinks and behaves in accordance with this system. Examine figure 22 on page 90 and the main themes of an Optimal Conceptual System to which Africans think and behave. Think also about these ideas within an Optimal Conceptual System:

1. Spiritual (energy, essence, force) source of all material reality;
2. Interpersonal relationships highly valued because each person is spirit, energy, essence and therefore interrelated and interconnected;
3. The self is divine and dynamic (not sinner) because the self is a spirit, an essence, a force;
4. Existence (including human experiences) occurs in cyclical patterns (see web of transformations, rhythm and organization)