

Bringing The Light Into A New Day:
African Centered Rites of Passage

By

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**The Purpose and Function of
African Centered Rites of Passage**



ESE NE KETER EMA
(Teeth and Tongue)

No child is born with its teeth.
We improve and advance.

The primary purpose of the rites of passage process is to transfer the collective "cultural wisdom" of a people to members of the group. To transfer their collective wisdom, a coherent society will use rituals and ceremonies to provide metaphors for the philosophies and values which shape that society. Therefore a healthy society creates structures by which members can successfully come to know purpose and meaning for their lives. These structures are typically arranged to correspond with stages of life or states of consciousness as defined by the society. It is this combination of rituals, ceremonies and the corresponding conceptual structures which form the rites of passage process.

In many "modern" societies the rites of passage process has been replaced with a formal education system. Nonetheless, the rites of passage process is universal to the human condition. Regardless of where humans are, there will be rites of passage. What changes are the deliberateness and consciousness of the values and philosophies being transferred. By transferring collective wisdom, a society ensures its existence and development. The conscious transferring of collective cultural wisdom (heritage) provides a base for developing new ideas, self determination, and historical continuity, while encouraging extended family (fictive kinship) bonds and communal responsibilities. Conversely, a society that does not consciously transfer collective cultural wisdom relegates each generation to "invent" old ideas, and will ultimately lead to the death and destructions of that society. Thus, the loss or "heathenizing" of the rites process has been one of the most devastating legacies of slavery and colonialism of African people.

The methods and philosophies used to disrupt the cultural continuity of a people have been discussed by various scholars (see note 2 and Appendix 1). Some of the methods and philosophies used in the "New World" to oppress

blacks were and continue to be: breaking family and fictive kinship bonds, brutal control over cultural symbols, and validating those who abandon personal and cultural integrity for the sake of white European male supremacy. Fundamentally, in order to oppress a group of people effectively over long periods of time, an oppressor must sever sankofa - the historical continuity achieved by transferring collective cultural wisdom.

The relevant literature strongly asserts that culture is a learned activity. Cultural values and ethos are transmitted through the evaluation of experiences - a primarily cognitive process. However, where the issues of the black race are concerned, it seems many people believe that culture is a function of race, a primarily genetic process. Unfortunately, many in the African American community have also adopted this belief. A belief that race equals culture is a product of a racist and oppressive system (Maquet, 1967/1972). As Freire (1970) stated, the projection of absolute ignorance onto the oppressed is a tendency of the oppressor. In the United States, the mainstream used race as justification for oppression. Being black (genetic) is the reason for ignorance. Ignorance (cognitive) is the reason for deficient culture (performance).

Many African Americans have taken issue with the Race/Genetic-> Ignorance/Cognitive -> Culture/Performance assumption. To do so, African American scholars and leaders have attacked the assumption of ignorance and deficiency, by providing examples to the contrary. However, many have accepted the connection between race and culture. Consequently, genetic characteristics have often been used as criteria to determine culture. Thick lips and nose, "tightly curled" hair, "big" butt, and dark skin have often been used as determinants for African self consciousness. Of course, how one values such

characteristics may reflect frame of reference, but having such characteristics does not equate to African centered frame of reference. Culture should be seen as a deliberate and conscious act, one demanding a conscious and deliberate transmission to the next generation (Hill, 1987; Kunjufu, 1985; Perkins, 1986; Some, 1994).

Imagine if students simply went to school until they had enough, with no test or chance to discuss what they learned with knowledgeable people. Students receive no evaluation of their skills, nor do they have any constructed opportunities to practice what they have learned. Students could sit in on classes, but have no required classes. No graduation. Just at the end of the day someone tells you, "You're done; don't come back." Sounds crazy? How much less ludicrous is it to bestow adulthood or eldership on someone just because he or she wandered around long enough?

By providing African centered rites of passage to African descendants throughout the diaspora, the African community ensures its existence and that individuals throughout the African community will better understand what it is to be a member of the African community. The culturally and spiritually based rites of passage process is not a panacea for life's problems, just as exercising and eating "right" do not guarantee that a person will not have a heart attack or other medical conditions. However, persons who have exercised are better prepared to deal with a medical condition than if they had not exercised. Likewise, a person who has entered a cultural-spiritually based rites of passages is better prepared to deal with life than someone who has not.

The proverb, "It is better to raise a child than to fix a man," provides some insight into when one should enter the rites process. It confirms that proactive conscious development, such as cultural-spiritually based rites of

passage, is something with which one should start life. Many development theorists support the notion that personality, thinking patterns/cognitive schemes, and consciousness development start very early in life (Young, 1996). According to Freud's (1933) Psychoanalytic Theory of human development, one's basic personality is set by age five. Theorist Erikson (1982) has put forth a Psychosocial Theory of development, based on Freud (Shaffer, 1993), that maintains there are eight stages of development. Each stage has a conflict or crisis that must be resolved before passing onto the next stage of life. However, if these crises are not resolved, then the individual will eventually lose the ability to adapt to society. Thus, it is necessary to resolve childhood before adolescence and adulthood. Even behaviorists, such as B. F. Skinner (1953), suggest that the habits formed during childhood are powerful predictors of what is possible in adulthood. Cognitive development theorists focus their attention on the development of thinking patterns. Piaget (1954) suggests there are four stages of development through which children must progress: sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational. One cannot reach the final stage of cognitive development without successfully completing the previous stages.

Most recently, research on the development of the brain has provided new awareness to the importance of early proactive conscious development. Researchers have found that there are "windows of opportunities" in which certain development should (and in some cases must) take place. Some windows close as early as age two. The research suggests that the first ten years of life are critical. Once past this stage, "hard wiring" connections between cells and parts of the brain no longer take place; only those connections that have been "substantially" used will be maintained, while unused connections fade away. What I find interesting is that theories of human development from psychology,

biology, and anthropology point to the transition to adulthood around age thirteen, emphasizing the importance and enduring effect of development of "self" (see note 3) in childhood to the rest of a person's life.

The African centered rites of passage process is not a single ceremony or a program a child goes through at age thirteen, but a process which takes the individual from birth to ancestry - from the Creator to the Creator. Dr. Anthony Mensah defines rites of passage as:

... those structures, rituals and ceremonies by which age-class members or individuals in a group successfully come to know who they are and what they are about - the purpose and meaning for their existence, as they proceed from one clearly defined state of existence to the next state or passage in their lives.

African centered rites of passage is a process which an individual enters. It is meant to be a vehicle for self-conscious development. Each ritual and ceremony is a marker, collectively a map to understanding one's purpose - the why to which the Creator has created. Depending on the traditions and philosophies of the group, each transition through various stages of life would be marked differently. However, each would be marked. Here again the proverbs speak to us: "If you do not know where you are going, any direction will do." The proverb suggests that not only should development be a deliberate act, but also that proper development starts with the end in mind. Otherwise, any behavior is acceptable and any idea has merit. Therefore, life has no meaning or focus. There is no code of conduct based in cultural heritage, and no defense against the racist philosophies prevalent in the American system.

These are symptoms of what Dr. Francine Childs

(1997) calls "CAIDS" (Culturally Acquired Immunity Deficiency Syndrome). She is obviously drawing a parallel with AIDS; a disease caused when a harmful foreign virus infects a host. The virus attacks and weakens the immune system. The immune system is weakened to the point where "opportunistic" viruses, bacteria and fungi cause deadly sickness and the body slowly rots away. Opportunistic denotes those viruses, bacteria and fungi that are not a threat to a healthy system, only to bodies with weakened defenses. Also, AIDS is a social disease. It is passed from host to host through sharing body fluids (experiences which should give life).

Likewise, a person suffering from CAIDS is infected with racist philosophies. These philosophies have attacked and weakened the host's mind until he or she is incapable of coping with conditions that a "healthy" person could. Though few CAIDS victims die as a direct result of a racist act, CAIDS causes victims to make deadly decisions. Examples include killing one's consciousness and potential by underdeveloping and misusing talents by undervaluing self; one's mission (purpose) in life; one's responsibility to the Creator, family and community; and by mimicking "others" and adopting others' interpretations of one's existence. In this state of confusion, victims suffering from CAIDS often infect those to whom they should be giving life, thereby ensuring the sickness is passed throughout a community and from generation to generation. Individuals and communities suffering from CAIDS are left to whims of "opportunistic" philosophies and systems of oppression, which depend upon the oppressed to participate in their oppression.

In the United States, people of African descent suffering from CAIDS do not have a strong connection to African cultural heritage. Subsequently, a person does not have the basic tenants necessary to form a philosophical

generation has to build a "nest egg," when will it hatch? Please note the inheritance is not just material things, but includes understanding, wisdom, safety - essentially, the means to be productive.

Sankofa tells us to reach higher levels of existence, we must build upon the collective wisdom of African people. It also implies that without reflecting on the collective wisdom, a society, family and/or individual is weak or stagnant. Thus, collective wisdom must be accessible and transmitted.

Ten Basic Assumptions

(adopted in part from Dr. Anthony Mensah)

Not only is African centered, family based, community linked rites of passage a method for transmitting collective cultural wisdom, it is a necessary response to beliefs about the relationship between the Creator and the development of authentic self.

The Creator does not create for failure. This is a recognition that if God creates something, then it is created for a specific purpose and that purpose is not to fail.

All humans are one with the Cosmos (the Creator and creation). This stems from the understanding that all things are connected to one another, both physically and spiritually. Whether you subscribe to evolution (science), creation (spiritual) or both (see note 4), it is an undeniable fact. Specifically, let us examine humans. According to the theories of evolution, all life is connected. The great diversity of life forms on Earth has a common ancestor, and that ancestor was a by-product from the materials (chemicals and compounds) that formed the Earth. The Earth was formed from elements of the universe. Also, mathematically all things are connected through gravity. Each thing in the universe has a direct gravitational pull on every other thing

in the universe (see note 5).

The theory of creation states that God created man from the dust of the Earth. God made the human body from the materials already in the universe. Not only do humans share common materials with the universe, we share the Creator. When an artist creates, each creation is an expression of the artist. The same is true for the universe (the creation). Each aspect of the universe is tied together by the Creator and expresses some characteristic of the Creator. Consequently, we must recognize that each person is part of the cosmic whole. Therefore, we must seek to understand our place and responsibilities in the Cosmos.

Every person has the capacity to succeed. Because the Creator does not design for failure, all people have within them the potential to fulfill successfully their purpose.

We are born with a driving intent to express the capacity to succeed. Not only is every person born with the capacity to succeed, but also has within him or her a "nagging" need to be successful.

When the intent of the Creator is not met with appropriate content, a person's potential for success is ruined. This is the recognition that a person may be born to succeed and has the need to succeed; however, without proper preparation ability to succeed is lost. This also implies that "proper" is relative. What is proper content for one may not be proper for another. Therefore, it is imperative that those who provide the preparation are in tune with the Creator to discern the specific intent of an initiate.

Inappropriate content brings reaction, and not intellectual growth, and the child's ability to interact (use his or her intelligence) falls increasingly behind. Thus, the further one's intelligence falls behind, the more energy must go into compensation. This is an understanding that without proper preparation a child will not have the mental tools to be creative, proactive, productive and "fit" into the

community. Without such preparation, "anything" can cause a child to respond. The child has no discipline or patience. And, the longer the child is left in this state, the more energy, time, money, and resources will have to be spent to correct the damages.

With the infusion of inappropriate content, the young person's intelligence is still out there in the previous passage, trying to make functional [sense] the intent of the Creator. Rites of passage helps a person move successfully into the next stage and corresponding responsibilities. Without rites (proper content and preparation) a person will move through life physically with a consciousness stuck at the last stage he or she could complete successfully. For example, many of us know 30 or 40 year old teenagers. These are people trying to live a 30-40 year old's existence with a mentality of a teenager, playing teenage games in an adult world. This is not to suggest that one should grow "old" in the negative way that mainstream society implies. Old or eldership does not mean feebleness or uselessness. However, as the Apostle Paul implies in I Corinthians 13:11, "When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me." With proper preparation elders are griots, wisdom keepers, teachers and leaders in families and the community.

He who does not cultivate his field will die of hunger.

This proverb conveys the understanding that a community that does not nurture its children will eventually die. Everything that the community needs to grow is potentially in its children. The next doctor, entrepreneur, artist, teacher, you name it... whatever the community needs will be found in its children.

Rites of Passage in the child's education provides a meaningful response to the intent. The success of the Creator's plan hinges directly on the person (infant, child, adolescent, or adult) being provided with content proper for

the intent of that person. This logic stems directly from the implications of the aforementioned assumptions. If the Creator creates each person to fulfill his or her purpose successfully and the Creator instills within each person the "drive" to express his or her purpose; if one must be prepared to express his or her purpose; and if the Creator's intent for a person is meant to "nourish" a community and eventually the Cosmos, then a process where people come to know and understand their unique purpose (talent, gift, mission, genius) is necessary. Not to provide such a process is ultimately detrimental to the community. Consequently, a malnourished community must spend its social energy and capital fixing the damages and insanity of its members, particularly the youth. In fact, not to provide such a process is to be in direct opposition to the Creator and out of rhythm with the Cosmos (Evans, 1993).

Also, this belief implies that education is a divine endeavor, a partnership between the individual, family, community and the Creator. Proper education provides the foundation to examine the world critically. It fosters intellectual growth by equipping a child with experiences and knowledge that help in the organizing and development of concepts. These concepts become the tenants and tools necessary to seek, understand, and strategize to fulfill each person's purpose.

All persons who experience this type of education will benefit from it. This is an affirmation that if the family and community have provided an educational process by which a person can learn to align him or her self with the intent of the Creator, then "good" happens. The Cosmos moves on your behalf: "If God be for you, who can stand against you?" (Romans 8:31).

Meaning Making, Consciousness, Context

If the purpose of the African centered rites of passage process is to be a vehicle for conscious self development by transferring collective cultural wisdom, then the function of rites is to provide a context in which active "meaning making" can take place by a conscious being. To understand the function of rites, we must examine three concepts: "active meaning making," "conscious being," and "context."

Active meaning making is the process by which a person assigns significance and understanding to symbols, ideas and experiences. In short, active meaning making is active learning. Active denotes a person who is purposefully engaged in meaning making, a person who takes responsibility for learning and applies "self" to an experience. To meaning make actively is to be a critical thinker - not cynical or pessimistic, but seeking truth, understanding and integrity.

Critical thinking requires a person to sort fact from fiction, filter emotions, focus on solutions, prioritize wants, responsibilities and needs, reflect on experiences, and select credible resources. A person engaged in active meaning making is better able to:

1. Resist oppression and manipulation
2. Discern the connection between symbols, experiences and concepts
3. Overcome confusion
4. Manage the complexities of life

It is this search for truth, understanding and integrity which tends to entice the need for self examination, an imperative for self consciousness.

Consciousness is one of those vague terms we often

use, which tend to mean different things to different people. I will use another sport analogy to illustrate my definition of consciousness. When an athlete's consciousness is being examined, he or she is evaluated on his or her strength, balance, and response to the following questions: Where are you? What's your name? How many fingers do you see? Can you follow an object with your eyes? How do you feel/Can you protect yourself? Do you want to continue? I suggest to you that a conscious person could:

1. Control oneself in order to garner enough strength for the task at hand.
2. Control one's actions to move in sync with one's intentions.
3. Articulate and know who one is, which also implies an understanding of whose one is, to whom one is accountable, and for what one will be held accountable (purpose).
4. Articulate a clear vision of oneself and one's environment.
5. Accurately assess one's position as it relates to executing purpose.
6. Assess one's attributes and determine one's effectiveness in executing one's purpose, through self reflection (which also implies a person can analyze the obstacles and challenges to be faced).
7. Amass the willpower to execute purpose.

It should also be noted that consciousness is not a static state, but dynamic awareness of becoming. One does not simply become "aware" and then no longer need to reflect and examine one's self and environment. Awareness and active meaning making are continuous. Now the question is: How does one become conscious?

Various Nigrescence (Black Identity Development) models have maintained there are five stages to Black consciousness: 1) Pre-encounter, 2) Encounter, 3) Immersion-Emersion, 4) Internalization, and 5)

Internalization-Commitment. These models suggest that Black identity or African self consciousness is a function of some event in which one can no longer deny one's "Blackness." As often implied, the event is traumatic and negative in nature: "...having a rug pulled from under you" (Cross, Parham, & Helms, 1991). Next, this person immerses his/her self into a search for African identity. The Nigrescence models also state that a person in this stage of consciousness will tend to develop a counter culture or militant reference to mainstream. The fourth and fifth stages of consciousness are Internalization and Internalization-Commitment, respectively. Internalization is the stage where the new identity is internalized. This indicates a resolution between the old and new self. This is also the stage where one's reference center moves from responding to mainstream to being African. Internalization-Commitment is the stage where a person finds and becomes committed to his or her life's purpose.

What sparks the development of African self consciousness? Simply the need to "be." Some experience forces one to consider the question articulated by Asa Hilliard III: "To be African or not to be?" Hilliard is not simply asking to be African or not to be African, but to accept one's African heritage or cease to exist, to lose one's consciousness and meaning.

I would argue that the nature of the encounter has a major effect/affect on the development of consciousness. As most often described, the development of African self consciousness is reactive, not proactive. As aforementioned, to develop a sense of self in opposition to something is to be centered by that something. Therefore, few are able to move into Internalization and Internalization-Commitment. However, when families, churches, and community organizations provide African centered rites of passage as an essential part of the healthy development of a person,

there is no old self to reconcile. The African centered rites of passage process provides a proactive and positive context to "encounter" the need for African self consciousness.

Context refers to the surrounding factors which support a particular event, concept or process. There is a context which sustains the "rites" process and a context created by the process. Anthony Mensah (in MECCA, n.d) describes one group of factors which aids in the rites process as the matrix, which consists of energy, potential and safety.

Energy represents the efforts of the Creator, the initiate, ancestors, parents, family and community. Potential is the gifts, talents and purposes placed within the initiate (the intent of the Creator), and their development. The further one develops his or her talents, the greater the potential. However, the opposite is also true. The longer a talent is undeveloped, the greater the decrease in potential (see note 6). Safety is the place where the enemy and danger do not reach. For example, the womb provides the optimal conditions for the baby to grow and develop, protected from the outside world. However, at some point in the development, it becomes necessary to enter the world. If proper development has taken place, the baby would have developed some ability (realized potential) to aid in its survival. As parents, we should provide protection from those things that are still a threat: from others who would do harm (physical, emotional, intellectual), weather and general dangers (baby proofing the house). As the child grows, we introduce and provide opportunities for the baby to take challenges until what once was a danger is no longer so.

Also, a part of creating safety is identifying who are friends, allies and enemies. Friends are those who will work directly and regularly with the initiates to facilitate fulfilling the initiates' intent. Allies are people and organizations that may work with parents, family and community to meet the

needs of the initiates, but do not work directly or regularly with the initiates. Enemies are simply anything that would deter the initiates from fulfilling their specific intent.

Let us not forget where we are. We are strangers in a strange land. For 246 (1619 - 1865) of the 379 (1619 - 1998) years (64.9%), the prevailing status or legal definition of African people by American society was one of property. Also, of these 379 years, people of African descent have had the protected right to vote (the right to make decisions about policy and resources) for only 41 years (1870 - 1877 and 1964 - 1998; 10.8%). Therefore, for 89% of the African presence in "American" society, the African American was legally marginalized and relegated to second class status. Though laws have changed and have been reinterpreted, many systems of oppression were left intact and are still operating today. It is simply foolish to think that the American society is no longer oppressive and racist.

The Apostle Paul urges the Ephesians to put on the full armor of God (Ephesians 6:11). The armor creates a safe place in the midst of those who would do harm. The function of African centered, family based, community linked rites of passage is to ensure a person finds and knows how to use the armor and the weapons formed for his or her specific mission, such as having the ability to turn stumbling blocks into stepping stones - reinterpreting information.

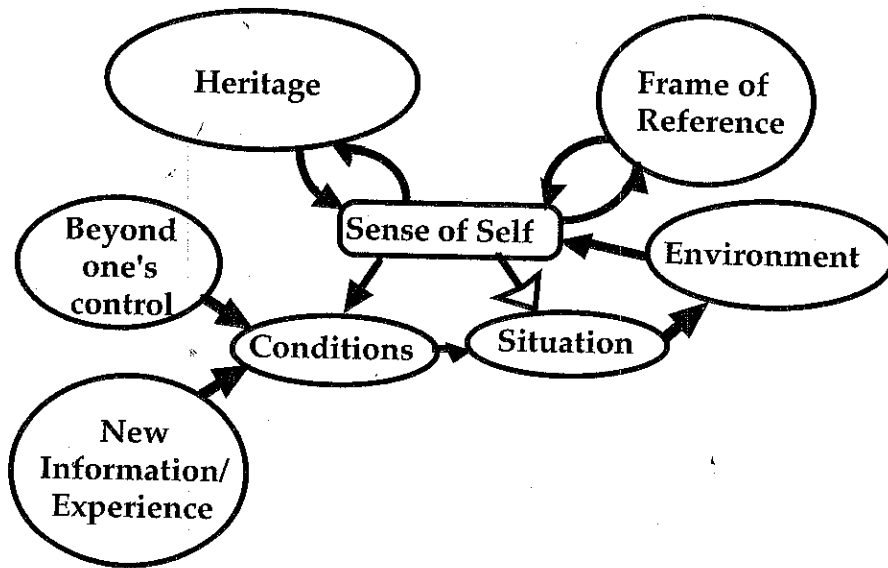
Culture provides the essential mental tools for interpretation. According to Vygotsky (1962), humans cognitively function at two levels: lower and higher. Lower cognitive functions include reactive attention, associate memory, and sensory motor thought. Vygotsky believes these are innate biological functions. Higher cognitive functioning consists of the maintenance and development of cultural tools/heritage or collective cultural wisdom. Generally, these mental tools fit into at least one of four categories: the ability

to focus attention, deliberate memory, purpose and symbolic thought. For Vygotsky, the only method to reach high level thinking is in cohort with another (peer, teacher, parent).

Vygotsky contends that a student can learn a certain amount of information on his/her own, and there is an amount of information that can be learned with the assistance of a teacher. What the student learns without help represents the lower end of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). The ZPD is the gap between what students can learn on their own and what students can learn with help. Vygotsky argues that learning is socio-cultural specific, maintaining that the social context has an influence on how and what we think.

Social learning theorist Albert Bandura (1977, 1986) supports the use of symbols as one of the cognitive factors which influence learning. It is through symbols that one will translate observations into internal models which can guide future actions and can be used to formulate possible courses of action before actual performance (P540 Bandura Group, 1996).

In my first book, African Centered Rites of Passage and Education, I represented this process in the Information Transformation Model



Frame of reference/World view is the philosophical conceptual framework used for seeing reality and understanding order. This includes an individual's concept of the relationships between self, nature and society.

Heritage refers to the set of techniques; strategies and traditions (collective wisdom) developed to solve problems of existence. Heritage is based upon the contributions of ancestors, elders and those in the current generation. Heritage, as it is defined here, is not a static heirloom simply passed from one generation to the next, but a dynamic interaction of antiquity and the present. This definition also implies that there is a collective and specific nature to heritage. There is a common heritage shared by a group of people. However, there are specific traits more prevalent within certain subgroups, such as a family.

Conditions are the existing circumstances which happen for reasons: 1) beyond the control of the individual,

2) new information/experiences or 3) created or influenced by the individual.

Situation is one's status in regard to conditions. Status is contingent upon one's evaluation of the circumstances. Evaluation is a function of the self (Rogers, 1956). Thus, for this discussion, situation is defined as the manifestation of the self through the application of values and ethos on a particular set of conditions.

Environment is the natural, social and cultural situations that affect development of self. Each new experience has within it both obvious and hidden values and meanings. Access to African cultural heritage allows people of African descent to evaluate and reinterpret experiences with the understanding of the ancestors and elders, thereby creating meanings and solutions consistent with (not necessarily the same as) the collective cultural wisdom. Without the ability to evaluate and reinterpret an experience, the values and meanings latent in that experience will become a part of the environment unchecked and unexamined. Once infecting a person's environment, the values and meanings will affect the development of self, which in turn will effect one's frame of reference, how one sees or does not see the world (CAIDS).

When the values and meanings that have infected and affected self development are based in white European males' superiority, a frame of reference develops which allows two people of African heritage to refer to one another as nigger (nigga) as common vernacular and see nothing wrong with it. This frame of reference will allow a pastor to hang a picture of a blond, blue-eyed Jesus, and not question the picture's validity, nor question what the image is doing to the minds (self) of the parishioners (see note 7). Youth will accept "mainstream" perceptions of their capabilities and avoid education for the sake of sports (see note 8). Essentially, these people are pathologically confused about

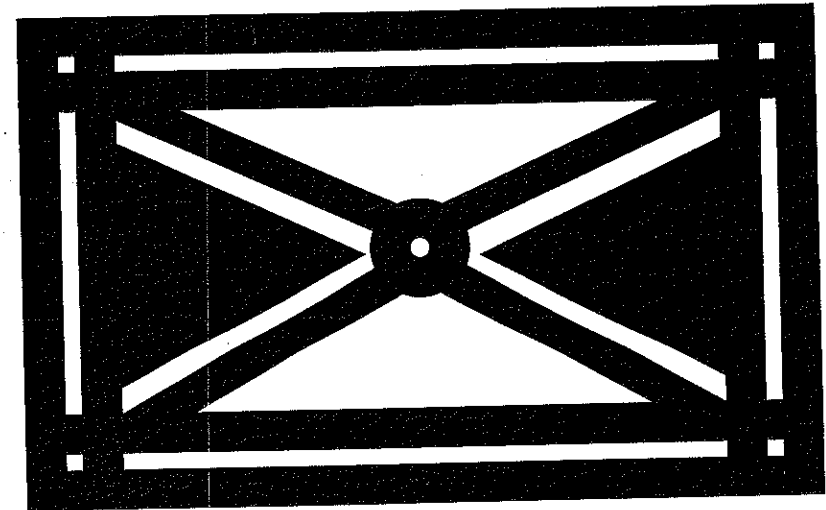
their life's intent and responsibilities.

For African Americans, African centered rites of passage transfers the collective cultural wisdom, which contains the basic tenets for forming authentic self. These tenets include: 1) historical continuity, 2) development of meaning and purpose in one's life, 3) the ability to transform and interpret information (active meaning making), 4) community and parental expectations for development and maintenance of the society, and 5) development of fictive kinship bonds among members of the community. This person is more clearly able to discern how the Creator has worked through his or her family and one's own experiences to manifest intent for one's life.

For a person who has a strong sense of self that has been nurtured and supported by community, heritage and authentic expectations, his or her sense of self goes beyond a particular situation. For example, a student can enter a classroom or a set of conditions, be challenged at best or oppressed at worst, and deal with the circumstances at hand and not have his or her self efficacy (see note 9) crushed or determined by that moment. This becomes a situation that an individual goes through, not one by which the individual is defined. Instead, the individual learns how to define the situation.

The African centered rites of passage process provides a context which nurtures the linkage to heritage, therefore allowing a person to access collective wisdom when evaluating experience; this in turn, provides guides for interpreting information and developing strategies for fulfilling his or her mission (intent) in life. (Thus, the process promotes a person's positive self-efficacy, his or her sense of competence.) These are ultimately the purpose and functions of African centered rites of passage process.

The Structure and Process of African Centered Rites of Passage



MFRAMA-DAN
(Wind House)

A house built to stand
windy and treacherous conditions

There are some basic concepts that must be understood and components in place in order to construct and implement an African centered, family based, community linked rites of passage. The two "most" basic concepts are African cultural context and family traditions.

Perhaps Wade Nobles provided the best description of culture when he stated, "Culture is to humans as water is to fish." This statement points out that a person that is abruptly removed from his or her culture is like a fish out of water - suffocating, panic stricken, and unable to do what a fish does best. Not only does a fish need to be in water to be a fish effectively, but depending on the historical developments, certain fish need certain water conditions to flourish. For humans, culture is the median in which all activity takes place, and determines how an activity takes place. It is also true that groups of people have unique experiences which have shaped their symbols and meanings. These symbols and meanings have in turn influenced the way the group practices its activities. So in order for a person to maximize his or her potential, there must be synchronization between that person's particular cultural heritage and the activities in which he or she engages. This is not to suggest that we cannot and do not learn from other cultures. However, the new information and activities are best learned when they are interpreted through cultural filters (Biko, 1978; Irvine, 1991; Shade, 1989; Vygotsky, 1962). Cultural heritage provides the lenses by which we view and the foundation on which we interpret the world. Thus, learning cannot be separate from the social/cultural context of the learner. Consequently, culture is fundamental to the rites of passage process.

Therefore, African centered rites of passage must be consistent with the symbols and meanings developed by the philosophies of African people and cultures. Again, it should be noted that Africa is a diverse continent. Yet, despite the

diversity among African people and their respective cultures, there are common themes.

African Cultural Context

According to Boykin (1986), traditional West African culture is centered around: 1) Spirituality, 2) Harmony, 3) Movement, 4) Energy, 5) Affect, 6) Communalism, 7) Expressive Individualism, 8) Oral Tradition, and 9) Social Time Perspective. Boykin's observations are consistent with research by Ani (1994), Asante (1987), Karenga (1994), Maquet (1967/1972), and Patton (1993).

Spirituality is an understanding that there is a creative life force which connects all phenomena and entities in the creation one to another. This understanding stems from a belief that there is a spirit realm which interacts with the natural. Spirituality is also a recognition that there are agendas, missions, purposes that the spirits are trying to fulfill in the natural world. And since humans are a part of both the natural and spirit worlds, then each person has a mission to fulfill. Simultaneously, one must choose which spirits to align him or herself and guard against being manipulated against one's purpose.

Harmony is a notion that seeks to allow all entities to coexist in order for each to maximize its purpose. This is not to say there are no "rights and wrongs" or absolutes. However, the emphasis is "both/and" and peace, rather than the Eurocentric tendency toward "either/or" and domination. The belief in harmony is the basis for the concepts of balance and rhythm in African cultures.

Balance between what is supernatural and natural, male and female, individual and village, old and new, and between the ancestors, elders, adults, children, and those not yet born. *(Please notice that I use supernatural and*

natural and not supernatural vs. natural - which is Eurocentric). The concept of balance encourages one to find one's "proper" place and responsibilities in the Cosmos. Chaos is a function of persons not fulfilling their proper intent (see note 10). Therefore, there is emphasis on finding life's purpose and rituals which seek to foster acceptance and fulfillment of responsibilities.

Rhythm is more than just a musical concept. It is a recognition that certain things happen at particular times for a specific duration in synchronization with other phenomena. It is an understanding that it is not only important to find purpose and meaning in one's life, but it is also important to learn when to enact purpose and power. To be out of rhythm is to be in chaos, and not reaching one's best potential. There are certain roles that each of us must play in order to maintain harmony.

Energy is the force that has the power to change. Physicists describe energy as being either kinetic or potential. All things which were created have energy. Everything was created to make some difference. Therefore, it is necessary to use these energies wisely. Otherwise, one may come into conflict with the intent of the Creator. **Movement** is outward evidence of energy and, therefore, life.

Affect is a way of responding to and viewing one's environment as a whole. It is a recognition that "things" and people are influenced by a variety of events and forces, and typically not a single factor. An affective approach towards life tends to see life as an experience rather than a problem (Biko, 1971). This person will "feel" an experience and not just think through it. For example, a learning environment must not only have a teacher, book, etc.; it must also create a learning atmosphere. Of course, the proper environment to foster a particular outcome must be harmonious with the Cosmos, the Creator's intentions.

Communalism is a commitment to maintaining and

developing social connections and relationships. Communalism stresses that individual rights ought not intrude on social harmony. The word community itself suggests there is a "common unity" of interest and values around which a group of people have agreed. It is this social harmony which allows the trust necessary for collective work and responsibility (ujima) and accountability. The spiritual understanding of "connectedness" and the communal commitment are the basis for the African propensity to see members in the community as family, thus, development of fictive kinship (extended family) bonds. Members of a community share more than geographic proximity. They share common destiny and are accountable one to another. Therefore, it is in the best interest of everyone to see all people develop to his or her best potential (the intent of Creator). Consequently, "It takes a whole village to raise a child."

Expressive Individualism refers to the belief that each person has unique and distinctive talents which must be developed and expressed in order to bring validity and meaning to one's life. It is a notion that each person in the community has something to contribute, a unique genius, to the maintenance and development of that community.

Take, for example, jazz, where a musician or singer is encouraged to find/develop his or her own style. So whatever the musician plays or the singer sings, it becomes unique. In contrast, European classical music stresses "sameness." The goal is to play the music as closely to how it is written as possible so that there is little distinction between the composer's intentions and the musician's expression. In jazz, there is planned spontaneity, the improvisation. This not only makes each song unique, but also provides an opportunity for the participants to put their "signature" on the song. We see expressive individualism in other forms of music, particularly rap and gospel. Please carefully note

that expressive individualism and communalism are not necessarily opposites. Though Theolonius Monk, Count Basie, and Joe Sample would play "A-Train" differently, they would not play the song so differently that it is no longer recognizable as "A-Train."

The individual expression must fit into the continuity of the song. Individual expression is essential to bringing new energy and genius to the community; however, that expression should not destroy the common unity. This does not mean that one can/should not challenge or question those values and interests around which common unity has been formed. Otherwise, the village becomes stagnant. The proverb, "I am because we are, we are because I am" constantly reminds us there must be balance between the community and the individual in order for both to exist.

Oral Tradition refers to the importance placed on the speaking and interpreting of words. Beyond the obvious that oral communication is an expedient way of conveying ideas, African heritage places high importance on the ability to use and interpret words creatively, to be able to choose words that communicate complex ideas in simple phrases (proverbs and parables). Thus, the importance of the griot, the story teller.

Consequently, oral tradition places high importance on the ability to understand what was said and not said, and how it was said - being able to decipher the multiple meanings of words. So that, when a person hears the proverb, "Though a log may lie in a river for 100 years, it will never become a crocodile," he or she is able to get past the obvious and apply the metaphor.

At the base of oral tradition is a belief that the spoken word carries with it positive or negative power, energy, a spirit which becomes a part of and changes the universe. Asante (1987) labels this belief as "nommo," a word from Dogon people of Mali. Nommo maintains that if parents

want to rear a smart child, they ought not call the child dumb or use other terms derived from a deficiency analysis (see note 11). This is consistent with what cognitive theorists have come to realize. Language (symbols and their corresponding meaning) is necessary for logic. Therefore, the type of language to which a person is exposed will affect one's ability to form logical thought. Furthermore, if a person is to form logical thought, then it is necessary to use language that is based in his or her cultural heritage. Otherwise, one will form logic that is inconsistent with one's own existence (self-destructive). Thus, the oppressed can never use the language (symbols and their corresponding meaning) of the oppressor to obtain freedom.

Jesus addresses the power of words in Matthew 12: 33 - 37 NIV:

33 "Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. 34 You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. 35 The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. 36 But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. 37 For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned."

Rev. Jerome Peters (1997) in a sermon summarized:

Jesus is alerting us to the fact of being cautious of how we speak and what we speak. Words or statements that are idly spoken expressions either to persons, about persons, or in general

conversations which are not beneficial or uplifting, such biblically unprofitable engagements must never be a practice by disciples of Jesus Christ. It is the words that we speak that will work to our condemnation or to our blessing.

My son, Tre, was born with his eyes wide open. Within three days, he could follow an object with his eyes. Shortly thereafter, a few people labeled him as "nosy." I corrected them, saying "He is inquisitive." At his age, not knowing all the proper social norms about "minding business," he was merely examining what he saw. "Nosy" has negative connotations while "inquisitive" suggests intelligence. Is it any wonder that a child who is reared in an environment where examination and inquiry are seen as negative or bothersome is likely to avoid science, math, critical thinking? The words that enter our environment will shape how we see ourselves and eventually what we will do.

Social Time Perspective is a necessary philosophical stance given the aforementioned characteristics of African centered culture and philosophy. It is a way of perceiving time as a function of environmental influences and spiritual interpretations. Social time perspective tends to see time as cyclic phenomena; time is not simply a linear march through predictable chronological units. If something is not fulfilled and "it" is meant to be, it will return, though it may return in the next generation.

Many have concluded that social time perspective is why "black folks are always late." There is some truth to that conclusion. Just because an event is scheduled to start at 2:00 p.m., there is no guarantee there will be anybody there at two, especially if the proper social cues are not present. However, for many African Americans "it's going to start late anyway" becomes a self-fulfilling and perpetuating prophecy. Having developed a self consciousness based on

America's perceptions of the inferiority of African people, many African Americans have never learned to interpret social and spiritual cues "properly." Consequently, they are often late or miss opportunities for growth.

Social time perspective is a more complex view of time than chronology. It requires a person to be able to decipher the meanings of the various phenomena surrounding a particular experience, of which chronology is one thing to consider, in order to determine if "the time is right." Thus, if a child is to be an adult at the age of eighteen, then there must be certain "things" in place socially and spiritually, which are in harmony with the Cosmos, in order for adulthood to be on time.

It is important to recognize that the whole of African centered thought and culture is not captured by these nine common themes, nor by my brief description of them. We must constantly remind ourselves that Africa is a richly diverse continent. Therefore, we need not try to oversimplify ourselves to form a homogeneous group. Africans throughout the diaspora have had experiences unique to their local and family traditions. Though we all might have used the same tools, it does not mean that we have built the same solutions. Just because I have a ball and a stick does not mean that I have to play baseball. Each family has specific experiences which have shaped the lives of its members. Consequently, there are specific lessons to be learned about how to live or not live life. And, of course, each person has had experiences where "God is trying to tell you something." For each one of us, our African experience is both collective and personal.

Family Traditions

Family traditions are those "ways" of living that

members of one's family have adapted to solve life's problems or to make life significant. Family traditions are subsets of culture, like families are subsets of the village. Where culture is the collective wisdom of the community, family traditions are the specific wisdom of people with whom one is most closely connected. Family traditions are a child's first introduction to the culture of which the family is a part - much like how one's childhood influences adulthood. Family traditions affect how one learns to relate to the village. Therefore, if family traditions are dysfunctional, not synchronized (in rhythm) with the collective cultural heritage of the village, then the children produced through such traditions are likely to be dysfunctional in their relationships with the village. Thus, the proverbs warn "The ruin of a nation starts in the homes of its people" and "The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world," suggesting that what takes place within the family will eventually affect the society and culture of which that family is a member. Given the influence of family traditions on one's development and that nothing happens without reason, it is necessary for one to study his or her family traditions in order to understand for what purpose he or she was created.

Again looking at the life of Jesus (Matthew 1 and Mark 3: 23 - 38), we see that the Old Testament is essentially the story of how God interacted with Jesus's family to set the stage for Him to come and fulfill His purpose. True Jesus is a divine being, however, the Creator is working a purpose through all our lives. The Creator has been setting into motion all necessary things to bring about fulfillment of your life's purpose. We must seek wisdom and understanding to see the Creator's plan. One way to gain insight is for a person to examine how has the Creator interacted with those people that had the most influence on that person's development. Family history and stories provide specific examples of "living life" by people with whom one has direct access.

When examining family traditions, answer the following questions: What are the recurring themes, accomplishments and struggles? How were they resolved? What was the impact on the family? These questions can help a person to understand the influences that shape his or her development, positively or negatively. Not all family traditions bring a person to the awareness of one's life's purpose. However, with sankofa (reflection, examination and action) all family traditions provide wisdom, even if it is the lesson of what not to do or what needs to be changed. By understanding the ingredients that went into a person's creation, that person can better understand for what he or she has been created. Thus, allowing him or her to better assess how prepared he or she is for fulfilling purpose.

Components of Rites of Passage

Anchored in the conceptual foundation of African cultural context and family traditions are the components of village, understanding of the rites process, and sacred knowledge. These provide a frame on which the African centered rites process can be built.

Village

The village is at the heart of the African experience, which is not surprising given the emphasis on spirituality and communalism (Biko, 1972). Africans brought to the United States did not lose the village perspective. In the book Ritual: Power, Healing and Community, Some (1993) provides insight about the village community:

A true community does not need a police force. The very presence of a law enforcement system in a

community is an indication that something is not working. ...A community is a place where there is consensus, not where there is a crooked-looking on looker with a gun, creating an atmosphere of unrest.... The absence of doors is not a sign of technological deprivation but an indication of the state of mind the community is in. The open mind and open heart.... Elders say that the real police in the village is spirit that sees everybody. To do wrong is to insult the spirit realm.... A functioning community is one that is its own protection. And one cannot form a community whose goal is to tear the rest of the society apart..... A true community begins in the hearts of the people involved. It is not a place of distraction but a place of being.... Finding a home is what people in community try to accomplish. In community, it is possible to restore a supportive presence for one another, rather than distrust of one another or competitiveness with one another.... The elder cannot be an elder if there is no community to make him an elder. The young boy cannot feel secure if there is no elder whose silent presence gives him hope in life. The adult cannot be who he is unless there is a strong sense of presence of the other people around. This interdependency is what I call supportive presence. (pp. 68 - 69)

For many years segregation and limited transportation technology geographically forced these elements to exist in central locations, so that people in one's neighborhood were the people with whom one was engaged in community. The people who taught the children lived next to the parents. They would attend the same church. They would have shared experiences.

However, with greater mobility the African American community is becoming more and more decentralized.

Consequently, it is less likely that a neighborhood is engaged in community. In such a situation, it is understandable why parents would not trust people in the neighborhood to participate in the rearing of their child, or other significant aspects of life.

Some (1993) states that unity of spirit, trust, openness, love and caring, respect for the elders, respect for nature, and recognition of the ancestors are the essence of the village community. These characteristics are not functions of geographic location, but of a group of people practicing them. Thus, "village" is not a geographic location, but people practicing community. Therefore, it is possible to create "village" with people who live across town or out of state. Consider churches.

Historically, African Americans have used the local church as a village, where the community worshipped the Creator; where children were dedicated, taught, tutored, and where they learned how to interact with the village. Members of a church often turned to other members for help, using the village resources; and this still continues. Though many churches are no longer "local," having members driving in from a variety of neighborhoods, still families meet in common unity, drawing upon the resources that the village provides. Churches are the places where many of our most significant rituals and ceremonies take place, providing both family tradition and community linkage for its members. In the church, African Americans have practiced respect for elders by having deaconate boards, church elders and mothers. When we take a close look at many of the churches where African Americans worship, we will tend to see the essence of the African village.

One of the primary responsibilities of the village is to provide models for living. According to social learning theorist Albert Bandura (1977, 1986), modeling is one of the basic means of learning. Bandura contends it is through

visual and verbal observation that the learner forms meanings which will: 1. serve as a social prompt to initiate similar behavior in others; 2. strengthen or weaken internal models used for performance of particular behaviors; and 3. construct new symbolic representations. Bandura suggests there are three stimuli that trigger this process: 1. live models, 2. symbolic models, and 3. verbal descriptions or instructions. One example of this is when young children mimic parents' actions or repeat words they have heard. The success of the models to stimulate "making meaning" hinges upon the learner's perceived relevance and credibility of the model.

When a person wants to learn how to fly a plane, he or she will go to a flight instructor. If you want to learn math, you will go to someone who knows math. Even those who claim to be "self taught" had others whom they watched, listened to, and modeled. It is necessary for a child to see adulthood practiced in order to become a proper adult. More specifically, if an African American child is to learn to be a conscious, spiritual, productive, African American adult, that child must be in the company of conscious, spiritual, productive, African American adults. As a child even Jesus learned from his elders:

46 After three days they found him [Jesus] in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions..... 52 And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men (Luke 2: 46, 52 NIV).

None of us are of our own making. Consequently, it behooves the members of a community to learn and know their "role" in the village. To be engaged in "village" is to be held accountable to the members of the village for the maintenance and development of that village, by ensuring:

that the safety, energy, and potential matrix is intact; that the children receive an authentic education (rites of passage); and seeking wisdom from the Creator.

Village is composed of the following:

1. **Creator** is the unifying creative force in the universe. This spirit is called by a variety of names: God, Allah, Dios, Dieu, Mungu, etc.. It is the recognition of this spirit that demands harmony in the creation.
2. **Ancestors** are the members of a village or a family which have returned to the spirit world, and whose energies and accomplishments were the instruments which the Creator used to provide the **f o u n d a t i o n** (collective cultural wisdom) of the village. Generally, ancestors can be described as the elders of the elders. On rare occasions, a person can live so long and reach a level of spiritual awareness that he or she is considered to be a "living ancestor."
3. **Elders** are the people who have the most invested in the village and therefore are most accountable. Elders have had the time to perfect living and gain wisdom; therefore, they are typically the oldest of the living. Eldership is a position earned by sharing what one has learned and accepting accountability for the growth and development of the village.
4. **Adults (Nation Builders)** are the people who have reached a level of maturity and consciousness that makes them accountable for their actions and, thus, accountable for their contribution to the village. Adults are old enough to be accountable, yet young enough to have the energy to do what must be done.
5. **Children** are essentially adults in training. They represent the future of the village. Children are second only to the Creator as the most powerful force in the village. The health of a village can be diagnosed by the condition of the children. When elders and adults

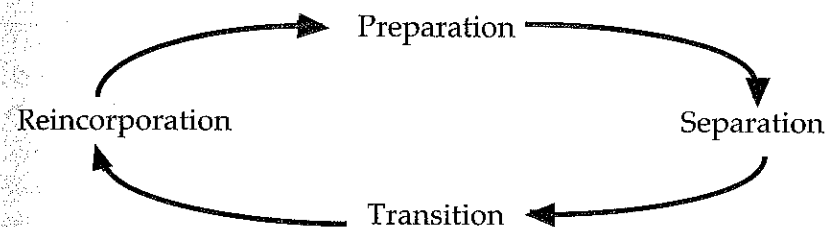
are fulfilling their responsibilities, children are respectful to the village and Cosmos; children feel safe, and they explore and practice their unique geniuses. However, when elders and adults have not fulfilled their responsibilities, the children are disrespectful, confused, and violent (Some, 1993). Often these children have not been reconnected to the Creator. Therefore, the children will seek value and purpose in material things. In such an environment, elders and adults become afraid of their own children and bewildered. Consequently, to neglect children is to destroy the village community. All activities in a healthy village will ultimately add to the development of its children. A healthy village recognizes that the children contain within them all the village needs to exist.

6. **The Unborn** are the future generations. To recognize their existence is to have faith in the Creator to supply the village needs. Therefore, one can never "give up" on the village community, particularly the children. To "throw away" or to lose a generation, a village is likely to lose the generations to follow. Also, to recognize the unborn is to understand that one's purpose is a part of the ongoing will of the Creator. That your activities will be the foundation on which others, unknown to you, will stand (or fall). The unborn reminds us that life is not stagnant. One day we will be the ancestors. (How will we be judged?)

Process

As alluded to earlier, there are many different models on which the rites of passage process can be based; however, the process is universal. The rites of passage process consists of preparation, separation, transition and

reincorporation stages (Goggins, 1996).



Preparation is the stage where the initiate learns what it is to be a member. The preparation stage starts with some basic assumptions about the Creator's intent. **Separation** is the stage when the initiate is tested. It is in this stage that the initiate must demonstrate the ability to fulfill his or her responsibilities within the group and within his or her particular stage of life. **Transition** is the stage in which the initiate is transformed into a member. It is the between/betwixt. This is usually marked with a ceremony where the initiate enters as a nonmember and exits as a member. **Reincorporation** is the stage where the new member is presented back to the community. This is also the point that the new member will be accountable for his or her new responsibilities.

It is important to note that progression through these stages is not necessarily linear, nor are the stages mutually exclusive. There are many factors which will greatly influence the time spent in and emphasis on each stage. Consider marriage and high school graduation as examples.

Marriage is more than the wedding ceremony. There is a time of preparation. This is a time in which the two individuals would learn what it is to be a "good" mate. Generally, this would be within the concept of a good adult. There is a time of separation - engagement. The individuals separate themselves from other relationships. They also seek counsel from an elder (minister) who will test and approve their decision. The transition, the wedding, is the ceremony

where individuals enter as not married and exit as married. Reincorporation comes at the end of the wedding ceremony. This is when the couple is introduced to the community as "Mr. and Mrs." It also marks the beginning of accountability for fulfilling the responsibilities of marriage. In many cultures, marriage legitimizes parenthood; therefore, marriage is part of the preparation stage for the rites process for parenthood. So, the marriage process is not only its own rites of passage, but it is also part of another process.

Another example would be high school graduation. Preparation would be Kindergarten through 12th grade. However, preparation would also include preschool, prenatal care, all experiences which affected the education of the graduate. Separation would be exams and other tests necessary to graduate. Transition would be the graduation ceremony itself. The reincorporation stage would follow the graduation. The graduates would be expected to apply what they have learned in school to be "productive" citizens. Of course, high school is the preparation for college. The previous examples illustrate the many layers of the rites of passage process.

Rites of passage is not a simple progression through a "program," but a process which prepares a person to live life. The rites constitute a dynamic "overlapping" process, which connects past, present and future; intentions with actions; life with purpose. Therefore, it is inappropriate to refer to rites of passage as some program one would go through. Instead, rites of passage is a dynamic process which one enters. Each stage that is successfully completed provides the preparation and insight in other areas of life and eventually for future stages and challenges.

Also important to understanding the African centered rites of passage process is an understanding of rituals and ceremonies. Rituals are metaphors for philosophical principles. Consider the following examples: a) the ritual of

blessing food puts into practice beliefs that one should be grateful to use God's creation - the prepared food may harbor danger and requires God's sanctification, and all "good" things come from God and therefore require acknowledgment; b) The ritual of taking attendance supports the belief that being in school is important and students should attend; c) Before I speak to a community, I will ask the elders' permission to speak. This ritual is done to show respect to the elders and supports my belief that elders should be the guardians of the community. They have (should have) the most time and effort invested in the community. They are (should be) the wise ones. Therefore, they should provide permission before anyone speaks energy (nommo) into the community. Rituals unite abstract concepts with tangible actions.

There are three types of rituals: 1) Communal; 2) Family; and 3) Individual (Some, 1993). **Communal rituals** affirm unity and cohesiveness. Every adult member of the village is obligated to perform. An example of a communal ritual would be the invocation at the beginning of a public event. The invocation is meant to draw people together under one spirit and mind, or to be "on one accord," so that they can practice village. Also, it is the time where the village/community comes before the Creator as a single entity. Other examples of communal rituals would be "fellowship time," voting, parades, block parties, and holidays. **Family rituals** provide unity and cohesiveness for family units, and are performed by family elders and every responsible family member, those initiated into adulthood. Family rituals may include such things as reunions, Sunday dinner, sitting at the adults' table or anything that the family does routinely. **Individual rituals** are those rituals which individuals must perform to maintain proper relationship with the Cosmos, such as a bedtime prayer, time spent in meditation, or a walk in the park. It is anything that a person routinely does

to connect to the Cosmos and to strengthen that connection to the Cosmos.

Communal, family, and individual rituals provide consistency between the community, the family and the individual. By performing these rituals, the member demonstrates his or her ability to fulfill his or her responsibilities within that culture/society and demonstrates a commitment to the development and maintenance of the village.

Ceremonies are visual representations of what happens as a result of rituals. They mark the transition from one stage to the next. Thus, the quality of the ritual is embedded in the intent of the ceremony, and the ceremony is only justified by the successful completion of the necessary rituals. Therefore, rituals and ceremonies are only significant if they move a person through the rites process in a cultural context towards purpose (intent of the Creator). Rituals and ceremonies help us stay in "rhythm" with the Cosmos.

Sacred Knowledge

The last component necessary to frame the rites of passage experience is sacred knowledge. Sacred knowledge is the knowledge necessary in order for a person to fulfill his or her purpose at a particular stage in life. What makes the information sacred is the assumption that one's purpose is determined by the intent of the Creator, thus making one's purpose an act of God. Subsequently, any knowledge which is necessary for a person to fulfill his or her purpose is sacred. Sacred knowledge is the "special" set of meanings and wisdom; if possessed, it will transform a nonmember into a member.

Sacred knowledge is transformative. For example, sacred knowledge dynamically changes from one stage of

life to another, from person to person, from time to time, and from community to community. Consider that an infant (0 - 2 years) must learn certain things to "successfully" be an infant: how to follow objects with his or her eyes; how to walk; begin to use language. As a child/person matures, the knowledge expected to be known increases. Therefore, what is considered to be necessary knowledge changes. Another example: there is a set of information I needed to possess to navigate successfully being a single man with no children. I needed another set of information to be successful as a married man with no children. And yet another set of information for a married man with a child. Though there is unique information in each set, there is also information common in each set. Each life has a rhythm, where a certain purpose must be fulfilled as a requirement during a particular stage of life. Likewise, each stage has specific sacred knowledge.

Of course, as the Creator's specific intentions change from person to person, the necessary information to fulfill those intentions changes. A medical doctor needs to know different information than a mechanical engineer. An entrepreneur needs different information than an educator. However as specific sacred knowledge can be, there is common sacred knowledge as well.

Common sacred knowledge is the knowledge necessary to exist in "proper" relationships with others in the community. Social norms such as common courtesy phrases, the proper way to address elders, family members and other members in the village, and acceptable behaviors are examples of common sacred knowledge. Also, common sacred knowledge includes information about the physical environment. For example, in an environment where there are cars, sacred knowledge includes how to cross the street. Simply, common sacred knowledge is what a member of a group is expected to know in order to contribute safely and

successfully to the development and harmony of the village.

Sacred knowledge transforms the possessor of it. This transformation is evident through one's actions. Specifically, when a person's conduct is consistent with a particular "code," it suggests knowledge of and accountability to that code. Therefore, an adult must act like an adult and to act like an adult is to be knowledgeable about adulthood and to be accountable to the responsibilities of being an adult. To possess knowledge and not be transformed by it suggests that one's transformation is yet to happen. A child is being prepared to be an adult. However, some of the knowledge learned does not become necessary until the child becomes an adult.

Since sacred knowledge is so dynamic and complex, it requires elders and adults to examine constantly what are the necessary lessons of life. It is the responsibility of the elders and adults to discern the essence of sacred knowledge and determine why this knowledge is sacred. Subsequently, elders and adults must seek constantly clarification from the Creator and assess the present conditions in order to provide opportunities for the children and themselves to learn sacred knowledge. Therefore, if elders and adults are to fulfill their responsibility properly, they must be connected to the Creator. Would you go to Volkswagen to learn how to properly maintain a car built by General Motors? In other words, if we (elders and adults) are to rear children properly to fulfill the mission the Creator has created the children for, then we consult the Creator of the children in order to discern what the children must know. It is the wisdom of the Creator as it has been demonstrated through the ancestors, through the Cosmos, and through meditation/reflection/inquiry which allows elders and adults to see the essence of sacred knowledge.

To determine and evaluate the essence of sacred knowledge, a person must be able to discern the lesson to

be learned. For example, there was a time when the Maasai would require their group of warrior initiates to kill a lion. By our standards (African Americans in 1997), on the surface this may seem brutal. However, closer examination reveals something more profound. The Maasai place a high value on cattle and live on the savanna (grass lands); therefore, it is very likely that a Maasai will have to protect his cattle from a lion. Thus, being prepared to do so is wise. However, there are still even deeper lessons in this ritual such as: working in groups; learning the methods of the enemy; and bravery in the face of fierce opposition. It is these lessons which are at the foundation of the essence of that sacred knowledge of how to kill a lion. The elders and adults of a village are responsible for determining which lessons are still necessary. Furthermore, how are those lessons to be taught and what rituals and ceremonies will be used to teach those lessons? The elders and adults may decide to continue the ritual or create a new one.

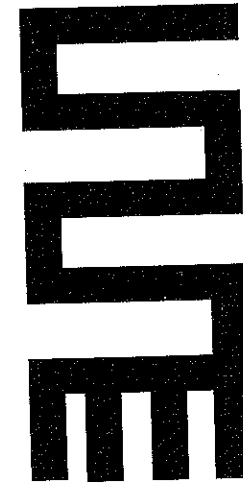
Many African American adults and elders decided that their children would not have to "go through what I went through," forgetting that what they went through taught them valuable lessons about how to live life. It is perfectly normal to want to protect one's child from the cruelty of a racist and oppressive society. However, the African proverb warns, "When you take a knife away from a child, give him a piece of wood instead." It is not good enough to take away something bad, but it must be replaced by something constructive. In the case of the generations that came into adulthood during the times of social struggle and then decided to shield their children from society's opposition, they did a disservice to their children if they did not provide other opportunities for the children to learn what can be learned when people struggle together. As Frederick Douglass suggested, "Where there is no struggle there is no progress." Of course, parents do not want a child to struggle

Bringing the Light...

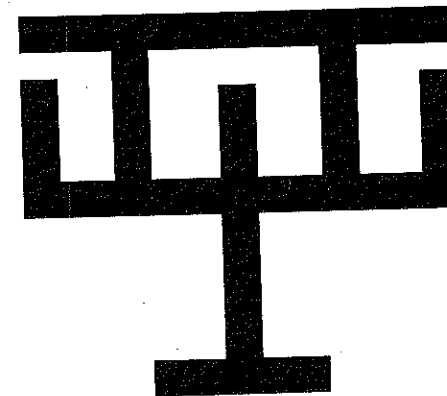
with hunger, poverty, poorly equipped schools, drugs, racism and discrimination. However, those who experienced these "lions," and were able to survive, learned things like: how to make a meal out of bare cupboards; working together for a cause greater than oneself; that preparation, effort and opportunity are connected; and faith in the Creator to create a way out of no way.

Though elders and adults may wish to abandon certain rituals or conditions, they must be careful to examine the essence of such experiences, determine if the knowledge learned from such experiences is still needed, and, if so, then create new rituals which teach the necessary knowledge in order for the children to be prepared to fulfill the intent of their Creator. For example, if the elders and adults of a village decide that confronting a lion is no longer necessary, but still agree that the lessons of bravery, camaraderie, and strategic planning are important to adulthood, they might replace confronting lion rituals with organizing and implementing a needed community service or event. Or elders and adults may decide that learning computers is as important to survival in the 21st century as learning how to hunt in previous years. It is also important to note that sacred knowledge will change over time. What was needed to be known 20 years ago may not be necessary today. At an Urban League dinner, Dr. Robert L. Hewitt summarized this concept in the statement, "We have to adjust to changing times, while maintaining unchanging principles." To recognize sacred knowledge is to recognize the need for specific means of transmitting specific knowledge. Transmission can be secret or open; written or oral; formal or informal, but it must be. It is only through the rites of passage process and its supporting spiritual/philosophical structures that a person can know and ultimately fulfill the Creator's intentions for his or her life.

Transformative Power of Rites of Passage



NKYIN KYIN (Changing One's Self)



HWEHWEMUDUA
(Searching Rod or Measuring Rod)
Excellence, Perfection, Knowledge and
Superior Quality