

## **Integrating Principles Underlying Ancestral Spirits Belief in Counseling and Psychotherapy**

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### **Abstract**

This article discusses the traditional beliefs, of many indigenous cultures of Africa, associated with ancestral spirits and its use as powerful therapeutic agent for influencing behavior or lifestyle changes. Explanatory models of attachment to ancestral spirits by living descendants are first discussed, followed by a discussion on major factors responsible for real sense experience of ancestral spirits. Special emphasis of the paper is on the employment of exemplary behavior or status of dead relative, during their lifetime, for influencing different aspects of life of living descendants including lifestyle and career choices. Also featured in the paper are the drawing of significant parallels between traditional and Western psychotherapeutic practices and suggestions as to how to incorporate ancestral spirits belief into conventional counselling and psychotherapy.

**Keywords:** attachment to ancestral spirits; belief in ancestral spirits; conventional counseling; exemplary behaviors; indigenous cultures; living descendants

### **Introduction**

The general widespread assumption or conviction, among most traditional cultures of the world, is that people exist in two main realities. Many indigenous cultures in Africa believe that human beings are comprised of two closely intertwined realities or dimensions (Wager & Ngcobo, 2010; Buhrmann, 1990; Bynum,

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1999). From the African traditional perspective, man is believed to be unitary being consisting of biological body and spiritual body (Chiakwa, 1999).

The biological body is the physical reality while the spiritual body is the non-physical reality which is often referred to as the mental component of a person. Although during a person's lifetime these two realities (biological or physical body and non-physical spiritual body) form a unity, the spiritual body or the non-physical reality is believed to be capable of separating from the biological body (or physical reality) especially in situations such as in a dream, trance or some other altered state of consciousness (Mabetoa, 1992). For instance, the spiritual body is believed to be separated from the biological body when a person is not responding to the immediate environment, or when a person loses the awareness of his/her immediate environment. In death, the belief is that the spiritual body is freed completely from the biological or physical body and continues to exist as an indestructible entity. The belief by indigenous people is that death is just a passage from one form of being or reality to another - from physical reality to non-physical reality (Gelfand, 1959; Mitchell, 1965; Zambuko, 2010). A simple way to explain the term "spirit", or non-physical reality of a person, therefore, is to consider it as that which exists beyond any physical realm. Mabetoa (1992) contends that the spirits are the collective unconsciousness of the indigenous people who believe in them and are influenced by them. Ngubane (1977) earlier asserted that the spirit is that aspect of a person that survives and continues to live in the mental psyches or minds of living descendants. Gumede (1990) also considers ancestral spirits as the spirits of dead family and community members, while Grimassi (2000) also refers to ancestral spirit as the collective consciousness of one's ancestors.

### **Bases for Attachment to or Consciousness of Ancestral Spirits**

Many cultures of the world have different explanatory models for attachment to or consciousness of ancestral spirits. For instance, according to Buhrman (1989), in most indigenous African cultures, the belief is that, for the gift of life, a child is forever indebted to the parents and owes the latter obedience and deference and that even after the death of parents a child is expected to continue to provide for the parents in the spirits world. In this regard, attachment to ancestral spirits is an affirmation of the multiple realities of human

beings – that dead people are still very much around even though they are in non-visible dimension of reality.

The attachment to ancestral spirits is an acknowledgment that the spirits of the dead still live on, the dead persons have only transcended to another realm and need to be treated warmly with respect and honor (Wilber, 2000). For instance, in Kenya, as in many other African cultures, people place a lot of respect and reverence for departed loved ones and or ancestors (Wambugu, 2010). Ancestors are believed to be capable of controlling events in life (Gumede, 1990; Ngubane, 1977; Wanbugu, 2010). The Zulu and Xhosa, in South Africa, believe that fortune (*inhlanhla*) comes by acknowledging ancestors (Africanshama, 2010). Acknowledgement and good treatment of ancestral spirits are believed to translate to good will and successfully life, for living descendants, with indices such as bigger crops, better business deals, or achievement of other desirable goals, since the ancestors are believed to still have interest in the well being of their living family members (Africanshama, 2010).

Walsh (2010) advanced the theory of unfinished business to explain attachment to ancestral spirits of dead family members. According to Walsh (2010), some family members, who after death, feel compelled to complete their unfinished business with the living and, therefore, are believed to hang around the family. For example, a mother or father who might have died prematurely, and whose presence is strongly felt, is said to be because the children or living family members still believe she or he is still very much around to protect their children. Since ancestral role of parents is that of protection of their families, therefore, even after death it is believed that they are still around, in spirits, to continue to perform this protective role and it is in recognition of this that their ancestral spirits are acknowledged, respected and cared for (Buhrman, 1989).

A third explanatory model for attachment to ancestral spirits is that given by Makhosi Sarah Wager (Zambuko, 2010:17) and contained in the comments on Shona culture that ancestral spirits consciousness has always been with us since it is a way by which we affirm our identity and connect to our root.

### **FACTORS RESPONSIBLE FOR REAL SENSE EXPERIENCES OF ANCESTRAL SPIRITS**

Ancestral consciousness, “real” sense connection to or experience of ancestral spirits is made possible because of the means of

manifestation or evidences which seem to suggest that ancestors are obvious and or real (Africanshama, 2010). Some of these means of manifestation are in forms of tangible or material evidences which can be seen or felt while some are those held in the minds or mental psyches of people. For instance, an understanding of Zulu cosmology and the nature of ancestral spirits reveal that while all dead people survive as spirits, only those with exemplary behavior or status, during lifetime, especially *amaKhosi* (or chiefs, homestead head and diviners) become operative ancestral spirits upon death (Africanshama, 2010, Buhrman, 1999, Chiakwa, 1999). Through these exemplary behaviors the living descendants are believed to maintain continuous communication, engagement with or attachment to ancestral spirits of their dead family members (Gumede, 1990). Included in the exemplary behavior patterns by which ancestral spirits manifest themselves to the living are the memories of positions or statuses they occupied during lifetime.

Special or unique roles and responsibilities performed, in lifetime, either in the family or community, what one did for a living (career) and even one's leisure time activities may make one exhibit exemplary behavior patterns. That is, exemplary behaviors may manifest in terms of career or occupation, works of arts and some rare, exceptional or extraordinary lifestyles, all of which distinguished one from other people and have made it possible for people to acknowledge, respect and continue to remember whoever performed the behaviors even long after their death (Chiakwa, 1999). For instance, ancestors may have performed, during lifetime, exceptional deeds of charity, gallantry, unselfish attitudinal tendencies or self-sacrifices in efforts to give their families and or communities security or to provide for their family or community's needs and maintain harmony or tranquility in their environment. Community-oriented deeds certainly are capable of creating indelible impressions in people (living family and community members) and, therefore, distinguish a person and be known and remembered long after death. From African traditional perspectives a person with exemplary behavior, who become operative ancestral spirit, upon death, would be one who, during life, had integrated in, contributed to and had ensured continuous peace and harmony within the family and community (Edwards, 1985; Grimassi, 2000).

Nyasani (1997) catalogues some specific personality qualities or characteristics which can be subsumed under exemplary behaviors

and by which a person would be acknowledged, respected and remembered long after death. These personality qualities include sociability, hospitality, patience, friendliness, tolerance, courage, hard work, selflessness or unselfish attitudes, acceptance, good neighborliness, consensus and common framework-seeking principle. These qualities reflect values, skills and attitudinal tendencies which define African identity and personality and which are often collectively referred to as *ubuntu* (Nguni, Southern Africa) or *omoluwabi* (Yoruba, West Africa) to describe that one is always thinking of the good of the community rather than of individual (Makgoba, 1997; Suleiman, 2003). These qualities also reflect the principles underlying the collective consciousness tendency by which Africans are known.

Personality qualities referred to as exemplary behaviors are often collectively referred to as legacies by which ancestors are acknowledged, recognized or remembered (Nyasani, 1997). Legacies may be subtle and or ingenious, elusive, mysterious or metaphysical and are held in the mental psyches or remain in peoples' memories or consciousness. Many legacies are tangible or material and visible and these may include houses or family dwellings, crafts such as masks, statues, monuments, tools, etc. Some of the positions, statuses, actions and works by which exemplary behaviors may manifest include one's leadership position in the community (such as a ruler or *amaKhos*, a chief or community leader, religious leader or priest) or one's occupation (traditional healer, a farmer, a hunter, a business man/woman, a warrior or soldier, an entertainer or musician, a custodian of family or community histories or craft-man/woman, etc.). For instance, an ancestor, who, in lifetime, was a farmer, may be remembered for his or her role in providing food by which his or her family and community depended on for survival. As a successful farmer he/she might have maintained large family and or large workforce, owned properties and had many people dependent on him or her and, therefore, wielded influence and power. An influential farmer with such virtues, as described, would be acknowledged, remembered, cultivated and venerated. Living family or community members would want to be associated with such good virtues of their ancestors and to ensure that they continue or be cultivated by living relatives and, therefore, there would be some sense of attachment or emotional connection to such ancestral spirits (Bynum, 1999; Edwards, Thwala, Mbele, Siyay, Ndlasi, & Magwaza, 2008).

An ancestor might be a soldier or warrior, during lifetime, and might be remembered for such virtues as gallantry, valor, fearlessness, or by such virtues as unique physique or strong physical power or personality exuding with energy, high stamina, endurance or other unique physical power which could be regarded as mystical or invisibility. With such virtues an ancestor, during life, might have been depended on by the family and community for safety, security or protection or for the defense of the family or community. A blacksmith, during lifetime, might have used his skills and creative power to provide his community with farming and hunting tools for producing food to feed the community, or weapons or tools for the defense and protection of the community. An ancestor could also be a craftsman, during lifetime, with creative power or skills and might have built crafts, statues and monuments which are seen as repositories of community knowledge and histories. Again these behavior tendencies or actions of ancestors are means by which living descendants become emotionally attached to or develop consciousness of their ancestors ((Bynum, 1999; Edwards, Thwala, Mbele, Siyay, Ndlasi, & Magwaza, 2008). Other behavior tendencies or actions of ancestors which could make living descendants to be emotionally attached to or be conscious of their ancestors include good leadership skills, healing power, or other virtues by which the ancestors during life have influenced or contributed positively to the quality the life or well being of their family or community members. In general, therefore, people with exemplary behaviors who become operative ancestral spirits, upon death, usually leave behind some evidences (legacies) by which they are acknowledged, recognized, respected and remembered and through these evidences are linked or connected to the living descendants. As these legacies continuously evoke feelings of emotional attachment to or consciousness of ancestors by living descendants and these means of manifestation by ancestors are perceived as serving as the ancestors means of communication or interaction with the living family or community members by the ancestors (Gumede, 1999; Mabetoa, 1992; Nzimkulu, 2000), .

### **Integrating Principles of the Belief in or Consciousness of Ancestral Spirits into Counseling**

Counseling is about managing, modifying or influencing human behaviors (values and beliefs included) much more likely inn a positive way (Bojuwoye & Edwards, 2011). In this connection ancestral spirits belief or ancestral consciousness incorporates

principles that parallel behavior changing mission of conventional counselling (Bojuwoye & Edwards, 2011) . The key premise in the belief in ancestral spirits is about the influences, this strong sense of connection or emotional attachment with ancestors, on the behavior, lifestyle choices health and wellbeing of living descendants. The principles underlying the belief in ancestral spirits are the same or similar to that which gave rise to mind-body medicine – in this regard how the mental representation or the thoughts about ancestors influence behaviours and actions of living descendants. These principles can certainly be integrated into many aspects of conventional counseling especially in terms of what is done, how it is done and under what circumstances and the different therapeutic arenas (individual and group counseling situations). That is, communicating information about ancestors can lead to behavior or lifestyle changes since such information, when it is targeted to the cognition and emotions of the people to which communication is directed, can result in better comprehension or understanding, insight or new awareness which influence decision making in favor of behavior change (Conkie, 2007)..

That the belief in ancestral spirits has therapeutic values is clearly an established fact (Edwards, Makunga, Thwala, Mbele & Kunene, 2004). Many tribal or indigenous societies, all over the world, consider illness and diseases to stem from spiritual disharmonies and, therefore, the belief in ancestral spirits' power to heal or inflict illness has a powerful placebo effect which diviners often exploit to heal or deliver healthcare (Edwards et al, 2004). Placebo effect is the measurable, observable, or felt improvement in health or behavior not attributable to a medication or invasive treatment that has been administered, the improvement is often attributed to the physician's belief in the treatment or the patients faith in the physician (Moerman, 2002; Skrabanek & McCormick, 1990). Apart from this placebo effect of belief in ancestral spirits' influence on well-being there are many common elements of effective therapies which are also in the principles underlying the use of ancestral spirits belief to effect change in behavior or life styles. These elements, according to Frank (1982) are expectation, mastery, interpersonal relationships and emotional arousal. In this connection the next section of this paper discusses a number of aspects of human life to which counseling can be applied and the effectiveness of such counseling better enhanced if integrated with the principles underlying the belief in ancestral spirits which incorporate these common elements of

effective therapies. Such aspects of human life include personal (individual) and family healing and or well-being (Walsh, 2010), self-empowerment (Muchemwa, 2002; Zambuko, 2010), social health and or general well-being (Binsbergen, 2003), career and lifestyle choices or decision making situations (Wanbugu, 2010). Each of these is explained below.

In terms of utilizing the belief in ancestral spirits for procurement of individual or personal health, this can be from the perspective of employing ancestors as role models or people one's life can be patterned after. According to Edwards and others (2004) the best gift for a younger generation is a good example from an older generation. Those who operate as ancestral spirits, upon death, are those with exemplary or extraordinary behavior by which, in lifetime, they have contributed to the safety, protection, peace and tranquility of their families and communities. Becoming aware of one's ancestral exemplary behaviors can be both inspirational and healing as well as important motivation for cultivating health promoting behaviors or lifestyle choices.

The belief in ancestral spirits provides adherents with a sense of rootedness, an anchor and or identity (Edwards, et al, 2004). Since healing is to make healthy and/or happy, it goes without saying that nothing heals better than for a person to know who one is (ascendancy) and especially knowing that one has good heritage (Edwards et al, 2004). People experience anxiety from not knowing who they are or from identity confusion (Bynum, 1999).. Therefore, helping someone to reestablish or reconnect with his or her root, in therapy, by helping to be aware of one's family backgrounds or the good legacies of one's ancestors can lead to better self-esteem which in turn contribute to personal health and/or wellbeing. Information about one's ancestors can stimulate emotional arousal which in turn can encourage behaviour or life style changes.

Belief in ancestral spirits also provides a sense of security for adherents. For instance, in some indigenous African cultures ancestors are regarded as guardian angels who protect their living descendants from serious accidents or guide their path in life (Mufamadi & Sodi, 1999; Wanbugu, 2010). Ancestral consciousness or the notion that one's ancestors are watching and protecting their living descendants. This belief can provide some sense of security or

make one feel less anxious, but relaxed and, therefore, it is personally healing.

In terms of family health, the belief in ancestral spirits gives a sense of belonging as members or integral parts of a family and ancestral lineage. (Edwards et al, 2004). Ancestors or ancestral spirits are, therefore, rallying points by which family members are connected together. Mental images of exemplary behaviors or good virtues of ancestors or lineage can serve as an organizing focus of identification. Family members come together in ceremony to remember (e.g. as in burial anniversary) and to venerate ancestors thus creating an atmosphere or climate of togetherness or solidarity, love and cordiality as people communalized together and find outlets for their anxieties (Edwards et al., 2011). Since belief in ancestral spirits provides family members with the awareness of their shared connectedness, therefore, its social support function to the family in the cultivation of kinship values, such as filial piety, family loyalty and continuity of the family lineage are health promoting. Such principle of bringing family members together can be utilized in therapy (as in group or family therapy) for family members to communalize and by so doing achieve health as the sense of togetherness or connectedness is activated and as members affirm their common fate and achieve family unity and or harmony. A lot of the anxieties people experience are results of isolation, loneliness or lack of sense of belonging which in turn could be associated with loss of identity, rootedness or anchor (Grimassi, 2000; Walsh, 2010). The principle underlying the belief in ancestral spirits may therefore be said to offer adherents a way to connect deeply with one's roots and ultimately create harmony as well as health, especially social and or emotional health.

Belief in ancestral spirits can be integrated into counseling to achieve self-awareness and self-empowerment. Knowing about one's root, its history and the exemplary behaviors and or good virtues of one's ancestors can certainly facilitate self-awareness and or self-empowerment which ultimately is health promoting in several many ways (Edwards et al, 2004). In African traditional counseling self-awareness and self-empowerment are achieved by making clients aware or knowledgeable of their ancestral lineage achievements or exemplary behaviors. Some African cultures use poems or praise songs to trace family genealogy and to highlight lineage achievements, lifestyles and values. For instance, among the Ngunis

(South Africa) the belief is that fortune (*inhlanhla*) comes from abiding by or emulating customary behaviors and rituals (Africanshama, 2010). Ancestral exemplary behaviors are communicated in praise songs with the intention to persuade living descendants to cultivate their ancestors' exemplary behaviors. For instance, an Nguni praise singer could be heard chanting *Se kun jalo* severally translated as "it is finished", "let it be", "this is it" or "no one can change it", in an apparent attempt to indicate that the person being praised succeeded because he or she is aware, acknowledges and respects his or her ancestors' good virtues and or lifestyles and by so doing has been blessed or is in harmony with nature and no one can change that. Since ancestral fortune (*inhlanhla*) has come his or her way, no other peoples' witchcraft and ill-intent (*umthakathi*) can inflict misfortune (*isinyama*).

In a slightly different way the Yoruba (West Africa) praise singer, after recounting achievements in a person's lineage, would challenge the person being praised, by querying that: *O o le se bi baba re ni?* (Can't you behave or perform like your fore-fathers?) in an apparent gesture of persuasion towards self-empowerment in order to promote happiness or health. In both cases the underlying principle is that there is inherent potentials in living family descendants to achieve as their ancestors. That living descendants have inherited the exemplary behaviors or skills of their ancestors. Therefore, once the ancestral exemplary behaviors are known living descendants can activate the inherited potentials and thereby achieve success and happiness.

Many indigenous cultures make various efforts to perpetuate their ancestors' legacies and to ensure the latter's continuity. This is because ancestral legacies give hope, encouragement and help to affirm one's potential and by so doing are health promoting. According to Dupierry (1999) many indigenous or traditional societies make masks by molding on the dead ancestors' faces and worn as means of acknowledging or remembering the ancestors and as symbolic gesture of possession of the ancestors' spirits, power, behaviors and skills. That is the since the masks symbolize ancestors or that the wearers have become the venerated ancestors. Thus by allowing the ancestors to occupy the living descendants' bodies, in this way, is also a symbolic indication of the biological origin of behaviors (Dupierry, 1999).

Attempts to perpetuate exemplary behavior patterns of ancestors are more common in career decision making (Walsh, 2010). Intense feelings of love, pride or admiration for ancestors' exemplary behaviors often serve as motives for career choices (Mudhovozi, 2010). In attempt to demonstrate respect and to give honor or rightful place for the values of one's ancestors, living descendants often feel the need to continue the professions, social or religious values of ancestors. Continuity of ancestors' professions, traditions and religions is also often considered because of the belief that ancestors' exemplary behavior patterns are genetic or that living descendants have inherent potentials for these good virtues of ancestors (Mudhovozi, 2010). For instance, among many ethnic cultures in Southern Africa it is believed that people are called to be diviners or traditional healers (Mufamadi & Sodi, 1999). There is the notion that if a diviner has been identified in a lineage there is then every likelihood that members of that lineage have inherited potential to be healers. Reluctance to heed the call usually lead to anxiety and even more serious personality disorders which only dissipate when a living descendant activates the inherited potentials by seeking training to become a diviner (Mufamadi & Sodi, 1999). Experience of anxiety by living descendants may also be the result of the latter not wanting to offend, or disappoint ancestors for not wanting to perpetuate the profession of the ancestors. In general, a way of explaining how involving principles underlying belief in ancestral spirits into counseling and psychotherapy, in decision making situations, such as in career choices, is to argue that, for the adherents, the belief in ancestral spirits belief provides opportunity for better self awareness, it serves social support function, it provides motivation for career choice and information on skills, values and attitudinal requirements for entrance into or successful performance of a career.

### **Summary & Conclusion**

Ancestral spirits are invisible and remain largely in the minds or mental psyches of people. Belief in ancestral spirits is often used to activate people's mental state and by so doing influence their behaviors and or lifestyles. There is, therefore, a parallel between belief in ancestral spirits and conventional counseling since the two can be used to manage or modify people's behaviors.

Some principles underlying the belief in ancestral spirits parallel those of conventional psychotherapy in terms of explanatory model

as to the etiology or causation of ill-health. The principle underlying belief in ancestral spirits holds that health (and by implication, ill-health) could be biological in origin. Living descendants are told that they have inherent potentials to perform extraordinary behaviors as their ancestors. Good knowledge of ancestral lineage or achievements often helps to activate these potentials. Thus involving the principle underlying belief in ancestral spirits in therapy certainly has promise for psychological outcomes including those related to mental and emotional well-being - that is, good mood, motivation and better perceptions or enhanced self-esteem - all of which are health promoting (Edwards, et al, 2004).

Another important parallel between belief in ancestral spirits and conventional Western-oriented counseling is in terms of the use of social support network system to procure health by both. By employing social support principle in the belief in ancestral spirits not only confers the benefits of hope at spiritual level, but also affirmation of identity, enhanced self-esteem and self-empowerment.

Perhaps the most important benefit to derive by integrating the principle underlying belief in ancestral spirits into counseling is in terms of social learning principle, and, in particular, the employment of ancestors as models by living descendants. Ancestors with exemplary behaviors provide for their living descendants someone to look up to, to admire, to be inspired by and to imitate or to pattern one's life after. A model does not have to be a real person. It might be a fictional character, an historical figure, a cartoon character or even an animal. A model portrays a way to be in order to overcome difficulties and move toward a goal - that of psychologically healthy person. These roles of models are essentially what ancestors perform and by so doing bring healing to living descendants.

There have been persistent calls to make counseling relevant to the cultural contexts of clients. Perhaps as a response to these calls is the employment of services of traditional healers in the Student Counseling Centers of some tertiary institutions in South Africa. Efforts to provide context sensitive counseling service like this would need evidence-based information from research into traditional psychotherapeutic practices for a more effective practice and for collaboration, sharing of information and cordial working relationships among Western-oriented psychologists and traditional healers in such counseling centers. Research is especially needed for

better understanding, reconstructions and interpretations of cultural practices that are relevant to counseling and or psychotherapeutic practices.

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