Nurturing the Soul: The Experiences of Three Black Practitioners in an Afrocentric Academy

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Abstract: Amid today's racialized, radicalized, and polarized environment, Black professionals face unprecedented challenges in responding to the diverse needs of the Black community. This article delves into our experiences as three Black practitioners who participated in a year-long program to become equipped with the necessary tools, knowledge, and understanding to enhance our practice while navigating the complexities of being Black. The program, rooted in Afrocentric principles, provided a space for reflection, replenishment, and transformation. We explore the program's impact on our professional journeys through personal narratives, emphasizing the importance of cultural grounding and community-focused interventions. The reflections shed light on the need for specialized training for Black practitioners, addressing the gaps in traditional social work education. Our article advocates integrating Afrocentric perspectives in professional training to empower Black professionals in meeting the unique challenges faced by the communities we serve.

***Keywords*:** impact, journey, specialized training, Afrocentricism

Introduction

This article explores our experiences as three Black practitioners who, as adjuncts at a social work institution, undertook a transformative journey through participation in the National Association of Black Social Workers' (NABSW) African-Centered Social Work Academy year-long course. The authors, sharing frustrations common among Black practitioners, highlight the challenges rooted in the Eurocentric approach prevalent in the educational journey of Black social workers. Their narratives underscore the disconnect between traditional social work education and the Afrocentric principles essential for effective engagement with the Black community.

The reflections delve into our struggles and frustrations, emphasizing the need for interventions that align with the unique experiences of Black service users. The impact of Eurocentric education on both Black practitioners and students is explored, shedding light on the resulting unmet needs and diminished returns for the Black community. We argue that addressing these disparities requires post-master training, focusing on the historical context of Black social work rooted in oppressive practices.

The article further advocates for a paradigm shift in social work education, urging Black practitioners to seek training integrating Afrocentric perspectives. By reconnecting with ancestral responses to community needs, Black practitioners can replenish themselves and develop skills aligned with community, togetherness, belonging, upliftment, and encouragement. We posit that such interventions are crucial for cultivating a new generation of Black social workers capable of addressing the complex needs of their communities.

Patricia Antionette Gray

Registering for the course and viewing the syllabus brought excitement and concern that we had bitten off more than we could chew. Authors Nadjete and Shawneladee, my colleagues, laughed and responded, "*Well,* we spent all this money; let us see." I grunted like an authentic Jamaican and said, "OK." The first class arrived, and because of COVID-19, we participated via Zoom monthly with the caveat that we would also have group assignments via Zoom. The class mainly consisted of Black professionals across the United States. After listening to the introductions, I was impressed by the years of experience, the level of community involvement, the number of years affiliated with the association, and mainly, the number of Black professionals gathered to learn about African-centered social work practice.

To open the learning environment, the instructor introduced a Ritualist to open the class, which was new to me. The Ritualist asked the elders for permission to speak; he then briefly shared the purpose and importance of requesting guidance, protection, and blessings from our ancestors. I sat forward in my seat, and as he began with the libation, the inflection in his speech and tone as he asked the cohort community to call out to their ancestors gave me goosebumps. My first thought was, "Why is he calling duppies [dead people] in the room?" I immediately sought my colleagues' faces on the Zoom boxes to see if they were as surprised as I was. Over the next 11 months, I was awed by this ritual. When he called on our ancestors who lived hundreds of years in Africa, the world, and the United States, the ritualist's knowledge flooded me with new knowledge. New knowledge as I do not recall having this experience in Jamaica or here in America. I learned that the history books omitted important ancestral rituals from our work (Asante, 2003, 2010) and our community (Bangura, 2012). Therefore, the omission of the full scope of Black history is detrimental to our understanding that Black history does not begin from the slave trade but from our contributions to math, science, religion, and language (written and spoken).

The dual journey of learning and practicing while Black emphasizes the transformative experience of uncovering the contributions of Black pioneers in social work. I reflected on a seminal lecture that delved into the lives of significant figures such as Mary Church-Terrell, Charlotte Hawkins-Brown, A. Phillip Randolph, George E. Haynes, Victoria Earle Mathews, Marcus Garvey, Amy Jacques Garvey, Madam C. J. Walker, Ida B. Wells, Margaret Murray Washington, Lugena Burns-Hope, Eugene Kinke Jones, Jane Edna Hunter, Jamie Porter Barrette, and Virginia Randolph. I sat enthralled as I could not recall ever receiving this information comprehensively, concisely, or objectively in my 50-plus years of attending school, training, or programs. I wondered, "How come I did not know? Was I asleep?" While I knew some names like Ida B. Wells, Marcus and Amy Garvey, and Madame C. J. Walker, my education was lacking.

Our debriefing sessions often had the same reactions, such as "Thanks; however, I did not know this information" and "I knew some of the names but not all." Once we moved beyond our initial shock and awe of our ancestral contributions, we pondered as a group how best to infuse the information learned about Black pioneers in social work into our day-to-day practice. There

was a shared commitment to apply this knowledge meaningfully, ensuring it becomes an integral part of the service delivery to the Black community.

The profound impact of attending a year-long African-Centered Social Work Academy course, sharing the acquired knowledge with my students, and witnessing students' reactions to the rich history and principles presented reflected a collective realization of the gaps in their education. As a professor, I witnessed a transformative moment as students expressed a deep hunger for knowledge previously absent from their curriculum. The students' comments ranged from, "How come I was not taught this rich history?" and "Professor, where did you get this information?" to "Professor, you need to keep and share this information with other students," and "Professor, can I use this information at work for my training?" The cumulative student reactions reflected parallels drawn between the historic calls to action by influential figures such as Dr. W. E. B. DuBois and the rallying cry of Bowles and Hopps (2014) about the profession's role in preparing practitioners to deliver services to vulnerable populations.

My learning continued by introducing how to structure and write an intellectual biography, which develops an account of life through writings of the subject's motives and beliefs. I was fascinated with W. E. B. DuBois as a sociologist, scholar, and writer; he would be the subject of the intellectual biography assignment. However, I was unprepared for his vast scholarly writings, the number of books he authored, and the level of academic, community, and world recognition afforded to Dr. DuBois. My first draft from my instructor on my initial paper included comments like "your paper did not go far enough in providing DuBois's lived experiences, sayings, utterances, and philosophical thinking." I felt deflated because I thought I had provided a good paper. Nevertheless, I took the feedback, immersed myself in the utterances and sayings of Dr. DuBois, and resubmitted the paper. My second submission received positive feedback, with comments like "yes, Sister," "good job, Sister," and "you made my daddy proud as he was a scholar of DuBois." The positive feedback made the long nights and feelings of ineffectiveness seem unwarranted. The thoughtful and encouraging feedback nurtured my soul as I wanted to succeed in this program centered on African values and traditions through collective learning.

Nadjete Natchaba

I was not fully prepared for the intensity of the course and less prepared for my realization of cultural elements I had taken for granted, particularly the significance of elders' voices and the pouring of libation for ancestors in critical gatherings. As a woman who was born and raised in Togo, a colonized country, I did not want to have anything to do with practices that were categorized as indigenous. Some of the cultural practices consisted of honoring our ancestors by invoking their names before any important gathering as well as having elders open and close every gathering. I recall my parents' seeking permission from their elders before speaking at gatherings and how youngsters were also reminded quite often of the greatness they come from and the need to rise up to keep the mantel. These Togolese cultural practices, particularly the invocation of ancestors, beautifully connected our past to the present to keep us grounded and encouraged and to the future so we can internalize the sense of responsibility and the imperative to uphold the greatness of the tribes. During the course, these cultural practices, deeply rooted in

my heritage, became central to my journey in the Afrocentric course. Despite witnessing these rituals, I must admit I lost aspects of incorporating my ancestors' role as the invisible guiding force in my life.

Our class started with a robust ritual signaling that I was embarking on a journey to connect my brain and spirit. The rituals from Baba (one of the elders) took me back to my childhood because I recognized some phrases ("*Ago, Ameh*") Baba was saying and the practice of inviting the ancestors before and during every critical gathering. I realized that these ritualistic practices were categorized as primitive and unable to exist in the academic space because cultural imperialism and coloniality are the frames that guided the Western education I partook in for 37 years in Africa and America. I was moved by how eloquently the class merged rituals and academics.

For the first time, I felt a connection to the American-born Black people as I saw the oneness of our being. I realized that instead of being afraid of the spirits taught by Eurocentricity, we all welcomed our ancestors' spirits as actual Africans; we knew the ghosts were our superpower and source of wisdom. As we progressed through the lectures, it became evident that I could do this work in a way that honors my whole being and not feel like an imposter, mainly because my roots are on the African continent. I also felt great racial pride and the purpose of belonging even though my positionality differed from those born and raised in America or migrated from the Caribbean. Traditions anchor Africans to engage in spiritually motivated behaviors vital to our success (Ani, 1997, 2004). I distinctly remember how my parents reminded us of the greatness of the people we come from to motivate us to stand tall in front of life's challenges. My dad often told my siblings and me, "You are descendants of proud people who lead with honor, dignity, and humility." My mother would nod in agreement. My uncles would echo my dad. These positive affirmations remind me of the importance of never becoming enslaved physically or mentally.

As the course progressed, I learned and read about powerful, intelligent, and brave Black people who disrupted various systems of oppression even before the enactment of the civil rights laws. This newly acquired information ignited a sense of pride and a burning desire to continue the legacy of the pioneers through our daily engagement with the world. I needed to recognize the complexity of the pioneers' contexts and show appreciation for their visions, missions, and actions. These pioneers were strategic in navigating the world, especially in white spaces that aimed to make Black people invisible. The point is not just learning about these leaders but learning and adapting their approaches to help us be agents of change and improve the world. I have been asking myself: How can I exemplify some of the values and strategies I learned from the pioneers as an administrator in a nonprofit organization? How do I infuse this material with students of varying races and ethnicities in my co-learning environments? Do I want to share the brilliance of our pioneers with white students and academics alike, and if I do, can they relate?

As I struggled to answer the above questions, the assignment to complete the autobiography of a pioneer led me to a monumental Black woman who effectively and graciously modeled how to use allyship to effect change. Dr. Mary Mcleod Bethune's leadership approach resonated with me, especially as a Black woman in the C-Suite in a not-for-profit organization. Bethune (1946)

firmly believed in working within the system to create change and elevate Black people. Her belief affirmed my decision to be in social work and academia.

My community often sees me participating in systems of care and knowledge that are destroying them—a criticism Bethune (1946) faced—but Bethune stayed true to herself. Her accomplishments afforded Black people, especially Black women and youths, opportunities for societal advancement. Though my impact will not be as significant as Bethune's, I am committed to helping my Black and Brown people improve their situation by building a virtual community, advocating, mentoring, teaching, and brokering job opportunities. I am intentional about my role in institutions as I want to continue to walk in my purpose and be a gate opener like Dr. Bethune. An example of being intentional is connecting with a dynamic Black woman who was providing culturally relevant trauma work via her newly established consulting firm. As an executive, I brought her in to provide culturally relevant grief support work to our staff, who are 90 percent Black and Brown.

Since learning about Bethune, I have openly shared with my staff and students the rationale for my teaching and leadership approach, which emphasizes interdependency and Karenga's (1995) Nguzo Saba principles rather than individualism. Bethune's leadership style embodied the following Nguzo Saba principles, which should be a value system to guide the actions of people of African descent (Harvey, 2018). For Bethune (1946), we can see how she exemplified the following principles:

- *Umoja* – Unity (bringing Black women together through formal organizations)
- *Kujichagulia* – Determination (advocating for Black people to have power over programs that affect them)
- *Ujima* – Collective work and responsibility (developing and leading the Black cabinet)
- *Ujamaa* – Cooperative Economics (developing social enterprises to make money)
- *Nia* – Intentions (her vision to elevate the Black race)
- *Kuumba* – Creativity (unorthodox approaches to solving problems and gathering resources)
- *Imani* – Faith (Using her faith to fuel her drive and motivation to keep pushing)

This course showed me that the Nguzo Saba principles are more than just a holiday celebration. My needs prompted me to operationalize the Nguzo Saba principles using Bethune's work to help others—and me—who want to move from seeing the principles as just concepts to their application in our personal and professional lives. The course instructor at the Academy praised my efforts by stating that I did an excellent job of simplifying and operationalizing the Nguzo Saba principles. Further, students and peers expressed interest and the desire to learn more about principles they previously only related to the Kwanzaa celebration. They wanted to understand better how to incorporate those principles in their daily work/decision-making. I aim to lead and teach in ways that demonstrate my embodiment of the Nguzo Saba principles.

The graduation ceremony was intense; I was overwhelmed with significant emotions of great pride and a strong sense of obligation toward my community. I felt (1) the presence of our

ancestors—I had goosebumps and could not understand nor control my tears, (2) the responsibility to do more with our talents to honor their sacrifices—I felt the ancestors whispering to me the need to focus on righting the injustices they suffered, (3) the expectations from the elders/instructors to continue the work we started in the Academy, and (4) an embracement of the obligation of actively participating in the restoration of Black greatness and pride in the Black community. I left the ceremony with a feeling of the Renaissance! Unlike any other courses I have taken, this course intentionally impresses on us the need to use our skills and talents to uplift our communities. Therefore, I feel the need to produce work that captures the journey of rediscovering and rekindling this cultural wisdom within the context of sharing the power of this knowledge within my community, organizations, and academic spaces.

Shawneladee C. Cole

I am a long-standing member of a social work organization where I actively engage in community work. I have wanted to take the class my co-authors described for years; however, travel demands across the country for in-person classes before COVID prevented me from participating.

While typical complaints about remote learning include technological challenges and a lack of social interaction, I was not deterred. These issues paled in comparison to my excitement of finally taking this class. For me, accessibility and flexibility far outweighed these difficulties. Like most of my cohort, I feel the absence of reflection on Black history in mainstream social work education and the subsequent impact on the practitioner's understanding of their role in fostering positive change within Black communities is an abusive act of cowardice.

Fellowship and camaraderie are essential. The diversity within our friendship, showcasing stimulating conversations and occasionally differing views on race, class, or culture, was typical. Despite these differences, a deep respect for each other prevailed, fostering a sense of unity as we collectively completed this transformative journey.

I concur with Gray; I, too, wondered if we had bitten off more than we could chew when I saw the syllabus and the time commitment. The course content addressed long-standing historical inequities and the denial of our ancestral contributions to the field of social work. I share the Pan-African spirit of fostering a sense of fellowship and connection with all people of African descent living inside and outside Africa (Odlum, 2015).

We connected with colleagues in all areas of social work, such as policy, education, and research. We were all working on issues impacting urban communities like my own. As a psychoanalytic and psychodynamically trained therapist, I was excited to work with African-centered social workers nationwide. We all struggled to integrate these interventions into our various work specialties.

African-centered social work uses *Afrocentricity*, centering the experiences and peoples of Africa and the African diaspora within their own historical, cultural, and sociological contexts to understand and disseminate professional social work practice (Bent-Goodley et al., 2017).

Unfortunately, professional social work training programs omit this content, leaving Black professionals with limited resources to respond effectively to the Black community's needs (Bent-Goodley et al., 2017; Carlton-LaNey, 1999). The course content filled in some of these gaps. However, I still needed support and guidance in navigating psychodynamic theory with Afrocentric theory.

Psychodynamic theory is a study of personality—it tries to understand the impact of the past experiences on our present life experiences and functioning (Berzoff et al., 2021), while the Afrocentric approach emphasizes that my community is part of a larger collective (Schiele, 2000). This collective includes my ancestors, peers near me in this country, and those far away from other countries. This joint focus also provides preparation for future generations. Additionally, recognizing our need for self-care has compelled me to include my love of flow arts, particularly hula-hoop dancing, as an alternative wellness intervention.

I envision a world where members of the African Diaspora can comfortably seek care from various Black African-centered mental health practitioners, regardless of their theoretical orientation. I learned from this class that practitioners must be able to reach back into our culture to facilitate not only personal change but also our collective racial healing. As I learned more, I started to contemplate the myriad of ways in which the Black community may deal with mental health hardships arising from racial oppression and in what ways we can use the Afrocentric perspective to address these barriers. This class helped me to identify the infinite number of ways oppression occurs institutionally, interpersonally, ideologically, and internally.

I wholeheartedly embraced the teachings of Afrocentric thought and theory. Our instructors often provided a roadmap to individual healing and contributions to the broader goal of collective racial healing within society. We saw artifacts, research, and documented histories of our strengths and victories assigned to short sections in our American history books at best, but habitually.

I am proud to learn of our Black initiatives and responses to historical oppression. The African American holiday Kwanzaa and how it originated from the seven African principles of Nguzo Saba provided a different perspective and added new meaning to each of them. Of the seven principles, I mainly connected with Kuumba, meaning creativity, and Kujichagulia, meaning self-determination. They resonated with my interest in providing healing through the flow of arts mentioned earlier. We learned that when our ancestors were kidnapped, forcibly removed from Africa, and enslaved in various countries, they lost many original traditions no matter where they were placed. Although we did not lose everything, our ancestors could no longer pass on all our culture to future generations—in many ways, it was stalled, ridiculed, and forgotten.

Asante (2003) teaches that the loss of culture led to our dislocation, further allowing enslavers to enforce Eurocentric practices on vulnerable people. Today, these descendants are more likely to speak European languages such as English, Spanish, French, or another non-African language (Asante, 2003). They are less likely to know or claim the African history of their ancestry but will understand and celebrate the origin of their oppressors. All of this serves to maintain our dislocation and disconnection from our past. We learned that dislocation for many is so

prevalent that any connection or even recognition that they are descendants of enslaved Africans is forgotten. As indicated earlier, the content was not just for our clients but also a healing experience for us.

The significance of reaching back to Africa and its cultural practices to address historical trauma and emphasizing the mandate of Kujichagulia, I advocate for a transformative process of breaking free from Eurocentric cultural constraints and reclaiming a sense of self-determination. The profound impact of Kuumba, emphasizing the need for creative approaches to relearning and embracing African traditions in the present context, is critical to moving forward. This creativity becomes a cornerstone of integrating agricultural clinical social work practices and interventions through the expressive mediums of flow arts. The importance of these principles in shaping a culturally responsive and innovative social work practice that not only heals historical wounds but also nurtures the growth and resilience of individuals within the African Diaspora is encouraged.

Kuumba permitted us to be creative in providing service in America and the diaspora in 2023. It allowed me to stretch my thinking to consider alternative methods of treatment embedded within the cultural context of the clients I served. I was encouraged to use every talent, experience, and education to pass on our heritage and rich history in our social work practice. I combined my love of the flow arts with our music to allow another form of expression for both me and my clients.

Incorporating African-centered teachings into my clinical practice is a gradual process. My first attempt arrived in 2023, when I was accepted to present my proposal, incorporating Afrocentric theory (Schiele, 2000), psychodynamic theory (Berzoff et al., 2021), and the flow arts. In this work, I used both theories to guide hula-hoop dance as an alternative mental health and wellness care intervention. After my presentation, participants shared, “I like the importance of using the hula-hoop to engage participants,” “Wow, that was different,” “You brought back memories of using hula-hoop with friends,” and “Really, I never thought of that as a strategy to engage adolescent girls.” Feedback from the conference chairs shared that my workshop was a success. The written feedback had mixed responses. Responses included, “Collapse and leave out the psychodynamic stuff and use the African-centered perspective,” “I wanted more about psychotherapeutic interventions,” “Maybe with time, I could learn how to integrate African-centered strategies such as the use of hula-hooping,” and “Introduction to the topic is rarely explored in social work education.” While I was ecstatic about the feedback, both orally and in writing, one of the participants in the room was a peer who also attended the year-long workshop. It reinforced that the camaraderie, support, and allyship developed during the year were excellent as my peer left another state, participated in the conference, and chose my workshop to attend.

This reflection acknowledges the impact of the year-long course. It signals a commitment to an ongoing journey of learning and development in the realm of African-centered social work practice.

Lessons Learned

We learned that NABSW developed its course from Afrocentric thinking. Concern for the Black community's collective needs drove the course's creation. We also learned African-centered values, principles, and rituals to pass on from generation to generation.

It would be unjust not to acknowledge the history and origins of the NABSW National Academy for African-Centered Social Work. The class was created from NABSW's commitment to educating African American practitioners and the collective diaspora. In 1996, Leonard G. Dunston, the then NABSW President, led through the principles we learned from Nguzo Saba in this paper. NABSW purposefully created and certified this course identifying the values, knowledge, and skills needed to create a framework specifically engaging African American community practice. The experience encourages students to find creative ways to reclaim our African past for practitioners and the clients we serve.

Our fantastic instructor, Dr. Colita Fairfax, began the tradition of naming each cohort after they completed their cycle. Our class was named Akinyemi of Aminifu. We were named after our sage, Dr. Aminifu R. Harvey.

Our reflections underscore the critical examination of historical narratives and the limitations of conventional education in providing a comprehensive understanding of the African American experience. *The 1619 Project* author and journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones (2021) emphasizes the need to question and reassess the narratives that have shaped perceptions of Black history. Further, Hannah-Jones highlights the potential biases and gaps in historical education, suggesting that the conventional narrative may not accurately capture the richness of African American history, traditions, and culture. Thus she encourages reevaluating historical perspectives to uncover a more nuanced and authentic portrayal of the African American experience.

The challenges faced by Black Indigenous People Of Color (BIPOC) in social work training programs, where Eurocentric practice theories often dominate the curriculum, are highlighted. The Council on Social Work Education accreditation standards underscore the systemic nature of these challenges, as students must adhere to institutional methodologies for graduation and licensure. The authors strongly suggest that participating in the African-Centered Social Work Academy can help address these deficits by encouraging a departure from Eurocentric approaches.

The course provided a valuable opportunity for Black practitioners to engage with clients more deeply, drawing on their shared history and experiences. The emphasis on creating treatment styles based on collectivity, humanness, fellowship, love, responsibility, and partnership reflects a commitment to a more holistic and culturally responsive approach. We advocate for a more inclusive and culturally sensitive approach to social work practice.

Recommendations

Our collective stories testify to the transformative power of reconnecting with cultural roots and incorporating ancestral wisdom into professional practice. They advocate for recognizing and integrating diverse cultural perspectives in social work education and practice, urging practitioners to embrace their cultural heritage as a source of strength and guidance. In this vein, we suggest the following recommendations:

- Recognize Eurocentric bias: Acknowledge that traditional social work education is grounded in European views, causing emotional injury to Black practitioners and those seeking services.

- Embark on Afro-centered learning: Black practitioners interested in serving their communities meaningfully and increasing racial pride and belonging should consider learning and understanding Afro-centered social work.

- Integrate Afro-centered practice within the social work curriculum: Social work educators should find ways to integrate Afro-centered social work practice in classrooms, ensuring that graduating students are aware of Black social work pioneers and interventions developed explicitly for Black communities.

- Raise consciousness: Recognize the duty and passion for continuing practice by learning and raising consciousness within the Black community.

- Intergenerationally transmit culture: Encourage Black professionals to use African-centered intergenerational transmission of culture to pass on knowledge to present and future generations.

- Connect and share knowledge: Black professionals should continue connecting with African-centered individuals, learning, and embracing information to share with the community.

Conclusion

This reflection paper by three Black professionals highlights the transformative impact of a year-long program focused on Afrocentric practices. The recommendations emphasize the need to address Eurocentric biases in social work education, integrate Afro-centered practices, and continue learning and sharing knowledge within the Black community. The overarching goal is to nurture racial pride and provide practical tools and strategies for Black professionals practicing in their communities. The call to introduce Afro-centered social work practice in classrooms underscores the importance of reshaping social work education to serve Black communities better.

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