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CULTURAL OPPRESSION AND THE HIGH-RISK STATUS OF AFRICAN AMERICANS

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One of the persistent and perennial challenges faced by African Americans is that of cultural oppression. Although the effects of oppression on African Americans have received enormous attention, much of the focus has been on political and economic oppression as the primary sources of the social problems that African Americans confront. Less emphasis has been placed on connecting political and economic oppression to cultural oppression and on viewing cultural oppression as foundational in explaining the high societal vulnerability of African Americans. This article identifies and examines how cultural oppression has produced three risk factors—(a) cultural estrangement, (b) attenuation of Black collectivism, and (c) spiritual alienation—that diminish African Americans' ability to advance and prosper in the United States. Separately and collectively, these factors place African Americans at high risk of experiencing continued obstacles toward group affirmation and empowerment.

Keywords: *cultural oppression; African Americans; social class divisions; spirituality; Eurocentric domination*

One of the greatest group successes of United States history is the survival and continuation of African American life (Billingsley, 1992; Martin & Martin, 2002). After experiencing some of the most brutal forms of injustice and dehumanization in U.S. history, African Americans continue to survive and function with remarkable resiliency. This tenacity for survival is embedded in the history of African American resistance and an intense desire to be free (Asante, 1988; Dawson, 2001; J. Franklin, 1980; Karenga, 2002). Although the resiliency of African Americans and their aspirations

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to be free are quite real, the persistent albatross of oppression remains. The oppression of contemporary times, however, is not as terroristic as in the past but instead can be characterized as more subtle, insidious, and seductive (Bobo, Kluegel, & Smith, 1997; Collins, 1998; Kambon, 1998; Marable, 1996; Schiele, 2002). This form of oppression by seduction, although certainly not eliminating oppression by terror, regulates cultural values and interpretations. Young (1990) refers to the regulation of values and interpretations as cultural imperialism and conceives it as "the universalization of a dominant group's experience and culture and its establishment as the norm" (p. 59).

Under cultural imperialism, or what is referred to in this article as cultural oppression, the worldviews of divergent cultural and ethnic groups who share a common geopolitical space are unequally validated (Hanna, Talley, & Guindon, 2000; Kambon, 1998; Schiele, 2000; Young, 1990). Inequality exists in the value given to divergent interpretations and life experiences. The experiences and interpretations of those who control societal institutions are endorsed and imposed onto all who rely on these institutions, whereas the experiences and interpretations of those who wield less control find little validation and expression in the broader society (Hanna et al., 2000; Kambon, 1998; Schiele, 2000; Young, 1990). Because people of European ancestry have had more power relative to other racial groups, their experiences and interpretations have dominated the American sociocultural landscape (Ani, 1994; Asante, 1999; Hacker, 1992; Oliver, 2001; Turner, Singleton, & Musick, 1984; A. Wilson, 1998). Although diverse, the experiences and interpretations of European Americans, when compared to other racial groups, are deemed more credible representations of what often is referred to as the American experience (Ani, 1994; Asante, 1999; Hacker, 1992; Oliver, 2001; Takaki, 1993; Turner et al., 1984; A. Wilson, 1998). Cultural oppression in the United States, therefore, is expressed through what some refer to as Eurocentric domination, that is, through the imposition and universalization of the diverse yet distinctive interpretative frameworks of European Americans (Ani, 1994; Asante, 1999; Baldwin, 1985; Dove, 1996; Graham, 2002; Karenga, 2002; Rashad, 1991; Schiele, 2000, 2002).

Although Eurocentric domination has had unfavorable consequences on the ability of all groups of color to optimally affirm and freely express their traditional cultural perspectives, African Americans may be its most conspicuous victims. Their involuntary entry into the United States as slaves, and their prolonged and intergenerational captivity, have rendered the history and cultural traditions of African Americans particularly vulnerable to vilification from cultural oppression. The intergenerational bombardment of this cultural denigration continues to sully the quality of contemporary U.S. race relations in that the “plantation ghost” (i.e., the legacy of slavery) still haunts contemporary times (Akbar, 1996). Slavery’s legacy has contributed enormously to the continued disproportionate representation of African Americans in many social problem categories (Akbar, 1996; C. Anderson, 1994; Billingsley, 1992; A. Wilson, 1998). As a result, African American political/economic power and potential have not been optimally achieved.

Much of the attention, however, devoted to unraveling the effects of oppression on African Americans has attributed African American social problems to oppression’s political and economic dimensions. Although underscoring the role these dimensions play in fostering the injustices experienced by African Americans is critically important, it is just as significant to link these dimensions to cultural oppression and to conceive cultural oppression as a foundation for explaining the high societal vulnerability of African Americans. This article contends that cultural oppression, as expressed through Eurocentric domination, has generated three risk factors that limit African Americans’ ability to advance and prosper in the United States: (a) *cultural estrangement*, (b) *attenuation of Black collectivism*, and (c) *spiritual alienation*. How these factors threaten the collective advancement and prosperity of African Americans is this article’s focus.

CULTURAL ESTRANGEMENT

Perhaps the most important and comprehensive consequence of cultural oppression for African Americans is the risk of being

unaware and unappreciative of their ancestral homeland and its customs, traditions, and contributions. This risk can engender a form of alienation from one's traditional cultural values and worldviews, a kind of cultural estrangement. Cultural estrangement is synonymous with cultural amnesia, which is a collective loss of memory about the content and character of a group's history and traditions (Martin & Martin, 1995). In this amnesia, favorable characteristics of a group's past are suppressed and systematically excluded not only from the memory of the culturally oppressed but from the culturally dominant as well (Martin & Martin, 1995).

The existence of cultural amnesia does not imply that the culturally oppressed have no cultural reference point. Indeed, they do, and it is that of the culturally dominant. Although similarities may exist between the worldviews of the culturally oppressed and the culturally dominant, there are also important differences. For example, European Americans and African Americans emanate from two distinct sociocultural histories, and some even suggest that these histories were oppositional (Ani, 1994; Diop, 1978; Kambon, 1998; Williams, 1987). Several writers maintain that divergent cultural themes emerged in Europe and in Africa (Ani, 1994; Bradley, 1991; Diop, 1978; Horton, 1993; Rashad, 1991; T'shaka, 1995; Van Sertima, 1989). Cultural themes of materialism, individualism, and competition tended to be more dominant in Europe than in Africa where greater attention was given to achieving a more spiritual and interdependent understanding of human beings (Ani, 1994; Bradley, 1991; Diop, 1978; Horton, 1993; Rashad, 1991; T'shaka, 1995; Van Sertima, 1989). Because the dominant sociocultural history of the United States can be understood as a modified sociocultural heir of traditional Europe—especially its Anglo-Germanic strain—some claim that the imposition and universalization of this sociocultural tradition prevents African Americans from knowing and tapping into their traditional, cultural identities (Akbar, 1996; Akoto, 1992; Atwell & Azibo, 1991; Boykin & Toms, 1985; Dove, 1996; Kunjufu, 1985; Oliver, 1989; Shujaa, 1994). The result is not only cultural amnesia but also exposure to a distinctly different sociocultural ethos.

The primary implication of this cultural estrangement for African Americans is what Kambon (1992, 1998) refers to as cultural misorientation. In this misorientation, African Americans mentally affirm and embrace the traditions and customs of European American culture. For Kambon, European American traditions and customs are not only culturally different from that of African Americans but they also denigrate African American traditions and customs. Cultural misorientation precludes African Americans from knowing, accepting, and validating their traditional cultural worldviews while concomitantly placing them at risk of internalizing pejorative messages and images about their history and their homeland and, by extension, themselves (Kambon, 1992, 1998; Schiele, 2000).

The internalization of these unfavorable messages and images has at least two implications for the advancement of African Americans. First, the internalization can generate a sense of ethnic self-depreciation or what some have called low cultural, ethnic, or racial esteem (Belgrave et al., 1994; Brooks, 1996; Jacobs & Bowles, 1988). Low cultural, ethnic, or racial esteem can prevent African Americans from viewing their ethnic heritage favorably and from providing the cultural nurturance necessary for developing maximum group self-confidence and self-pride (Belgrave et al., 1994; Brooks, 1996; Jacobs & Bowles, 1988). Without optimal group self-confidence and self-pride, the ability to acquire an independent spirit vital in establishing and sustaining social and economic structures that promote a group's interests and interpretations is minimized (Akbar, 1996; C. Anderson, 1994; Karenga, 2002; Kunjufu, 1991).

Second, the psychological distortions of low cultural, ethnic, or racial esteem for African Americans are accompanied by psychological distortions of White supremacy (Burgest, 1981; Kambon, 1998; Khatib, Akbar, McGee, & Nobles, 1979; Welsing, 1991; West, 1991; A. Wilson, 1990, 1992). African Americans are at risk of viewing the culture and history of European Americans as supreme and universal. As supreme, African Americans may develop the belief, whether consciously or not, that European Americans have constructed the most advanced civilizations and

have special intellectual talents not possessed by others. As universal, African Americans may be at risk of believing that European American cultural values and interpretations are applicable to all people and that all people have exactly similar human preferences and proclivities. The internalization of this form of cultural universalism may obviate many African Americans from acknowledging the belief in cultural relativity. Cultural relativity or relativism fundamentally assumes that human normality is shaped significantly by the particularity of a group's preferences, interpretations, and experiences (Johnson, 2000). However, one of the grave consequences and legacies of American slavery is that it systematically disparaged the cultural traditions of African Americans, which placed many African Americans at risk of denying the particularity of their West African cultural origins (Akbar, 1996; Asante, 1988; Baldwin, 1985; Herskovits, 1941; Kambon, 1998; Stamp, 1956; Woodson, 1933). The systematic vilification of African American cultural particularity has caused some to presume that efforts by African Americans to reclaim and assert their particularity, especially in schools and universities, represent reverse racism, ethnocentrism, or anti-Americanism (see Chavez, 1994; McWhorter, 2001; Schlesinger, 1991).

In short, cultural estrangement may preclude many African Americans from recognizing the presence and importance of their human particularity. This acknowledgment is critical, some say, to a group's ability and willingness to truly express its positive potentiality, to educate others about its contributions to human history, and to form institutions that infuse its interpretive frameworks and that protect its political and economic interests (Akbar, 1996; Dove, 1996; Karenga, 1996; Mahubuti, 1998; Shujaa, 1994; A. Wilson, 1998; Woodson, 1933).

ATTENUATION OF BLACK COLLECTIVISM

To a considerable degree, the persistent opposition to African American survival and advancement has compelled African Americans to coalesce and work toward common goals of racial equality

and justice. This same opposition, ironically, may have created considerable tension among African Americans to sustain a collective focus. More specifically, the racial inequality in access to wealth, education, cultural esteem, and social status associated with cultural oppression may place many African Americans at risk of compromising the overall vision of group advancement for personal gain. This compromise may be particularly observable in the postsegregation era, wherein African Americans have achieved greater access to the rights and privileges of citizenship. Two forces, emanating from and reinforced by cultural oppression, may be attenuating the collective focus among African Americans: (a) material deprivation and (b) internal class stratification.

MATERIAL DEPRIVATION

Some authors suggest that material deprivation, brought on by oppression, can contribute to an inordinate attraction to material items, especially when this deprivation has occurred across generations (Addams, 1960; Akbar, 1994; C. Anderson, 1994). This observation may be especially germane to a society such as the United States where the acquisition of material items and capital accumulation are highly valued. The many years of slavery and legal racial injustice endured by African Americans have engendered mass, intergenerational material deprivation (C. Anderson, 1994; Lipsitz, 1998). This deprivation continues to be discerned by data indicating that African Americans have considerably lower family and household incomes than do European American families (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002c); that a lesser percentage of African Americans, compared with European Americans, have at least a college education (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002c); that the homeownership rate of African Americans, although increasing, continues to fall below that of European Americans (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002c); and that the net worth of African Americans lags significantly behind that of European Americans (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002c).

The unrelenting experience of these disparities for African Americans is associated with intergenerational racial injustice

(Brooks, 1996; Hacker, 1992; Lipsitz, 1998). The intimate agony with injustice may place many African Americans in jeopardy of acquiring material items without the sagacity of a collective focus. The acquisition of material objects and wealth is clearly needed for an oppressed group to advance itself. If, however, the concern over obtaining material items is confined to fulfilling needs of personal pleasure and comfort, the potential to view their attainment as a means to augment the collective power of the group may be lost (Akbar, 1996; C. Anderson, 1994; A. Wilson, 1998).

The fundamental assumption here is that because of their long-standing experience of intergenerational material deprivation, African Americans may be at a higher risk of capitulating to the seduction of American consumerism and conspicuous consumption. Addams (1960), in her studies of poor European immigrant families in the early 20th century, found that often the purchasing and wearing of flamboyant apparel was a method to compensate for the stigmatization of poverty. According to Addams, it was also a means to embellish the poor person's economic status because clothes are often, and mistakenly, used to evaluate one's wealth and worth. Because many African Americans experience poverty and low-income status, Addams's analysis may be applicable. Indeed, African Americans spend a higher percentage of their after-tax income on apparel than do other U.S. consumers (Humphreys, 1998).

Although the latter finding could be attributed to many additional sources, the confluence of a consumerist worldview with the experience of intergenerational material deprivation may be a relevant explanation. If the internalization of a consumerist worldview among African Americans is in part a function of their experience with intergenerational material deprivation, many African Americans may be prone to view their greater access to material goods as an indication of the declining significance of racism. The expansion of American consumerism, occurring on the heels of the abolition of legal, racial segregation, has increased dramatically the consumer options and mobility of African Americans (C. Anderson, 1994). This new freedom, however, may come at the expense of diminished emotional attachments that traditionally centered on racial affiliation. Instead, African American personal identity and

social connection increasingly may be influenced by the gratifications and other emotions generated by product consumption (Schiele, 2002). If this is so, the adoption of a consumerist worldview by African Americans, and the promise it offers for emancipating them from the stigmatizing intersection of racism and classism, might enervate the bonds of racial solidarity that African Americans may have felt more intensely in the past.

CLASS STRATIFICATION

The collective focus also has been weakened by greater socio-economic class inequality within the African American community. The civil rights and Black power gains of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s have propelled greater numbers of African Americans into the middle and upper classes (E. Anderson, 2000; Billingsley, 1992; D. Franklin, 1997; Landry, 1987). Concomitantly, there has been a growing underclass of African Americans who lack the training and skills needed to enter primary and legitimate labor markets (E. Anderson, 2000; Murray, 1999; Wilson, 1987, 1996). These parallel phenomena have created an increased class schism in the African American community.

One way to examine this class inequality is to evaluate the Gini ratio for African Americans. The Gini ratio or index is used by the U.S. Census Bureau to measure income inequality, and it ranges from 0 (perfect equality) to 1 (perfect inequality). In 1966, the first year the Gini ratio was applied to African Americans, the ratio for African Americans was .375, but by 2001, the ratio had increased to .447 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002a). Although the Gini ratio has increased steadily for other racial groups as well, income inequality among African Americans is greater than the income inequality for both European and Hispanic Americans (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002a). Although many explications of the greater income schism between the Black poor and the Black middle and upper classes exist, one primary factor is the contradictory paths the postsegregation era has produced for African Americans of divergent, social class backgrounds (E. Anderson, 2000; Marable, 1995; Reed, 1999; W. Wilson, 1979, 1987). African Americans who have

achieved higher educational training are in a better position to exploit civil rights gains than African Americans who do not hold college, graduate, or professional school degrees (Billingsley, 1992; Landry, 1987).

If race as a source of personal identity is in jeopardy among African Americans and class inequality has simultaneously increased, class may be rivaling race as a means of personal identification for many more African Americans today. The rival between racial and class identity for African Americans should not be separated from cultural oppression. Cultural oppression through Eurocentric domination seeks to invalidate the lives and traditional narratives of African Americans. Greater opportunities for African Americans to acquire more wealth and prestige may be accompanied by greater exposure to the narratives and interpretations endorsed by and through Eurocentric domination. If this is true, greater numbers of African Americans are at risk of internalizing narratives and interpretations that may imperil their ability and willingness to resist Eurocentric cultural hegemony. These greater opportunities also may jeopardize the value of maintaining a Black cultural identity. Some suggest that this risk varies by social class in that African Americans in the middle and upper classes tend to adopt the values of the majority group (i.e., European Americans) more than those in the lower classes (E. Anderson, 2000; Frazier, 1957; McDermott, 2001). In this sense, concerns over out-group acceptance among upwardly mobile African Americans may override concerns about sustaining in-group support and solidarity (Postmes & Branscombe, 2002).

The implication here is that the variation in social class status may lessen the psychoemotional bonds between Blacks who have more and Blacks who have less, which also may reduce the chances of preserving common cultural ties between the two. Indeed, what may emerge from this class cleavage among African Americans is what Ginwright (2002) and Rose (1997) describe as *class culture*, an interpretative framework shaped by specific social class experiences.

One possible contributor of class culture among African Americans is the ever-increasing residential separation between African

Americans of different social classes. For example, Black suburban areas that are overwhelmingly populated by middle- to upper class African American families are increasing, whereas the inner cities, from where many of these suburbanites have fled, are increasingly populated by lower income African American families (Dent, 1992; Jargowsky, 1996; Pattillo-McCoy, 2000).

The dichotomy in residential locations may not only be a matter of income and educational disparities; it also may represent disparities in daily life experiences. One possible illustration of this life experience distinction is the prevalence of street crime in inner cities and the accompanying lifestyles and social circumstances. Violent crimes, especially those related to the sale and distribution of illicit drugs, are more prevalent among residents of inner cities than those of the suburbs (U.S. Department of Justice, 2002). This disparity may place more African American residents of inner cities, as compared with residents of the suburbs, at risk of participating in, and grappling with the devastating effects of, street life. Although many African American suburbanites have relatives in the inner cities and, thus, also may be personally affected by the street life, they are residentially removed from having to confront the daily challenges, manifestations, and corollaries of street violence.

The differences in daily life experiences may help engender divergent social identities that drive an even wider psychosocial rupture between African Americans in the suburbs and those in the inner city. For example, McCall (1997) intimates that many African American professionals who reside in the suburbs, although not expressing animosities against low income, inner city African Americans, appear to demonstrate very little commitment to helping them improve their conditions. McCall suggests that many suburban inhabitants enjoy living in their protective cocoon separate from poor Blacks and Whites, generally, and appear to be committed only to financial security, individual career advancement, and personal comfort. Although anecdotal, McCall's observations underscore how class differentiation among African Americans may reduce a sense of collective racial consciousness that may have generated stronger solidarity among African Americans in the past.

Two outcomes of the increasing residential separation of Black haves from Black have-nots that may have further implications for the attenuation of Black collectivism are (a) the relocation of Black religious congregations to the suburbs and the establishment of new ones there and (b) the emergence of a new and growing generation of young African Americans who have not experienced the hardships of financial instability and uncertainty.

National data indicate that the income disparity within the African American community also can be gleaned from the increasing separation of religious worship locations between Blacks of divergent social class backgrounds (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Mukenge, 1983). Thus, the locus where African Americans are said to have the greatest degree of unity is becoming more separated along social class lines. This splinter is discernible in the proliferation of mega Black churches in Black suburbs whose membership reflects higher income African Americans (Trussell, 2001). Because larger churches with more financial resources have been shown to participate more in outreach activities, and because these churches tend to have African American members with higher income levels (Billingsley, 1999; Billingsley & Caldwell, 1995), the outreach activities of these churches may not be targeted at the hardcore African American poor who are most vulnerable and who tend to reside in inner cities (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). In essence, the relocation of inner-city Black churches to higher income suburban areas deprives inner-city African American residents of a vital source of social and economic resources (Trussell, 2001).

The new generation of African American youths, who are the children of successful African Americans who frequently live in high-income suburban areas, also may pose a threat to Black collectivism. These young African Americans, who make up what is referred to as Generation X or what Kitwana (2002) calls the hip hop generation, have been reared in socioeconomic environments that have afforded them vast social and educational opportunities. For this article's purpose, these socioeconomic environments represent that proportion of African American households that have annual incomes of \$75,000 or more. In 2001, 12.4% of African

American households had annual incomes that met this criterion (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002b). Young African Americans who are reared in these households are probably less likely to experience the struggle for financial resources and access to higher education endured by their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents. Benefiting from previous generations' successful protest movements to secure African American civil rights, these young African Americans have had the privilege of not having to grapple with the material and symbolic consequences of state-sponsored racial repression. In addition, the high socioeconomic status of their parents may help to buffer them somewhat from experiencing the brunt of contemporary racial injustice.

The paucity of tangible experiences with financial hardships and uncertainty may have placed many young African American suburbanites at risk of not identifying with the plight of lower income African Americans, especially those who reside in the ghetto. More precisely, the high socioeconomic status of these young African Americans may render them significantly vulnerable to interpretations of the ghetto promoted by and through the lens of Eurocentric cultural oppression. They may be in jeopardy of blaming lower income African Americans for the social problems they experience (Schiele, 2002) and may be at risk of rejecting nefarious aspects of the American social structure, such cultural oppression, as explanations of these problems. Ironically, although many young African American suburbanites may hold contemptuous attitudes toward ghetto residents, they also admire and emulate facets of ghetto culture that are glorified in rap music and lyrics (McCall, 1997).

SPIRITUAL ALIENATION

Spiritual alienation is the last risk factor generated by cultural oppression. It is defined by Schiele (1996) as "the disconnection of nonmaterial and morally affirming values from concepts of human self-worth and from the character of social relationships" (p. 289). The critical concept in this definition is *disconnection*. This discon-

nection or fragmentation precludes people from viewing themselves as intimately conjoined with others and with a Supreme Being (i.e., God) and from believing that every living entity has been formed from a similar universal source (Schiele, 2000). It also fosters an extreme emphasis on individualism and materialism and creates what Ward (1995) refers to as a cutthroat morality that extols and nurtures a callous and combative social environment.

Some suggest that Eurocentric societies have been especially vulnerable in supporting and reproducing spiritual alienation (Ani, 1994; Berman, 1981; May, 1975; Myers, 1993; Nobles, 1984; Schiele, 2000; T'shaka, 1995). This evolution dates back to the philosophy of Plato, who was one of the first to facilitate the separation between the knower and the known, which severed the spiritual-emotional link that connected the two (Ani, 1994; Havelock, 1963). This dismemberment of emotional attachment caused the known to become objectified, that is, increasingly viewed as an external object to be controlled and manipulated (Ani, 1994; Berman, 1981; Havelock, 1963). Along with the emergence of secular rationalism, this epistemological method became increasingly characterized as objectification. Some believe that objectification is a hallmark of Eurocentrically based societies and has rendered them highly susceptible to values that undergird the ideology and practice of domination (Ani, 1994; Berman, 1981; Leonard, 1995; Rashad, 1991; Schiele, 2000), which essentially are grounded in the notion of unavoidable human conflict. Within this framework, the ideology and practice of domination are considered outcomes of spiritual alienation.

As an important aspect of Eurocentric societies and therefore Eurocentric cultural oppression, it is suggested that spiritual alienation has adversely influenced the lives of African Americans by placing them at risk of (a) believing that human conflict is inevitable and (b) objectifying God.

INEVITABLE HUMAN CONFLICT

A primary indicator of spiritual alienation is the belief that human beings are innately antagonistic and conflict-driven (Myers,

1993; Nobles, 1984; Schiele, 2000). This is because antagonism and conflict, although important in abolishing injustice, prevent human beings from unifying or connecting in ways that are mutually beneficial. African Americans have great exposure to this belief and may be at risk of its internalization through their strong affiliation with the Judeo-Christian tradition. Data from several surveys reveal that African Americans are overwhelmingly Christian and that their church attendance rate is enormously high (Brown, Ndubuisi, & Gary, 1990; Chatters, Taylor, Lincoln, & Schroepfer, 2002; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Paris, 1995). This high religiosity may place African Americans in jeopardy of adopting the central Christian principle of original sin, which is assumed to be the primary source of the belief in the conflict-driven human being.

In Christian theology, original sin emerges from the Garden of Eden narrative found in the book of Genesis in the Bible. In this narrative, both Adam and Eve, the first human beings, succumbed to the deception of the devil who, through the likeness of an upright serpent, got them to question why they should not eat of the fruit from the tree of knowledge that God said was forbidden. In their inquisitiveness to know the special qualities of the tree, and in violation of God's commandment, Adam and Eve ate from the tree. As retribution for their act, God cast Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, which prevented them, and the entire human race, from having an everlasting and tranquil life. Rather, the human race was doomed to a finite life of struggle and strife for Adam's and Eve's disobedience. From this narrative, at least two themes emerge: (a) When given the opportunity, humans tend to cheat and disobey; they do not exercise self-discipline or self-mastery; and (b) human life is marred by conflict and struggle. Because religious ideas are strong indicators of a group's values (Elkins, 1995; Mbiti, 1970), and because African Americans are fervently wedded to the Judeo-Christian ethic, they may be at risk of employing the Adam and Eve narrative as their philosophical foundation to interpret the inherent character and potential of human beings.

One important aspect of this interpretation is that it casts considerable doubt on the human being's capacity to influence positive

social change. Viewed as inherently combative, human beings may be considered useless in bringing about a peaceful and just world in which all are equally validated. If humans are deemed irrelevant in constructing a just world, then only God can be relied on to eradicate human misery and oppression. The essential recommendation emanating from this logic is that the best that humans can do is to pray for God's intervention, learn to adapt to the doomed existence of humankind, primarily be concerned with how one lives his or her life, or embrace a philosophy that anticipates personal reward in an afterlife. Although these recommendations are not intrinsically problematical, their justification in the belief in inevitable human antagonism can place African Americans at risk of not viewing and using themselves as agents of positive social change. More fundamentally, the belief can encourage African Americans to conceive oppression, particularly Eurocentric domination, as a natural human phenomenon. Indeed, the notion of original sin may give privileged groups a rationalization for domination and exploitation by suggesting that unavoidable human conflict implies inevitable material inequality.

For African Americans, the internalization of inescapable human conflict is believed to contradict a more inclusive concept of human behavior found in many traditional African societies, from which African Americans descend (Asante, 1990; Gyekye, 1992; Karenga, 1993; Mbiti, 1970). In this more holistic perspective, human beings are thought to possess proclivities of unrestraint and self-mastery, but self-mastery is believed to govern unrestraint, not vice versa (Akbar, 1994; Hilliard, 1989; Karenga, 1993). This viewpoint is poignantly represented in the ancient Kemetic—now Egyptian—statue of the Sphinx, which is characterized by the body of a lion and the head of a human. The lion's body represents the unrestrained tendencies of humans that can encourage mischief and conflict, whereas the human head symbolizes the ability to regulate and suppress those unrestrained impulses (Van Sertima, 1989). The extent to which African Americans reject this ancient and traditional African understanding of the nature of human beings for one that emerges from Eurocentric cultural oppression may reflect the degree to which that oppression has been successfully internalized.

GOD OBJECTIFICATION

Objectifying God also is an important dimension of spiritual alienation that stems from Eurocentric cultural oppression. God objectification can be defined as a theological framework in which a deity, supreme being, or creator is viewed as an external entity separate from human beings (Ani, 1994; Karenga, 1993; Schiele, 2000). This form of objectification validates a fragmentary and dimensionally static paradigm that conceives God as situated exclusively in the spiritual world, which is thought to be distinct from and unreachable in the material realm. Because humans are a part of the material world, the ability to internalize a spiritual being and conceive it as intimately inside of the person is confined. Humans are believed to connect or reconnect to God only after death when they return to a spiritual, unseen existence. Although God may be loved, worshipped, and prayed to, God objectification is assumed to restrict people's willingness to subjectify God. God subjectification "means conceiving 1) that the totality of oneself is spiritual and is divinely inspired, 2) that one has the potential to tap into the power, sagacity, and creative genius of the Creator, and 3) that one is a manifestation, though a small part, of the whole of the Creator" (Schiele, 2000, p. 116).

A major, inimical corollary of objectifying God for African Americans, and others who are at risk of this objectification, is the justification of unfavorable deeds toward others (Schiele, 2000). The justification of unfavorable acts can increase the probability of at least two phenomena: (a) the belief that power is inherently evil and (b) the intellectualization of morality (Schiele, 2000).

The belief that power is inherently evil, or *negative power*, can generate the expectation that power absolutely corrupts all people all of the time. With negative power as a foundation, power is inescapably conceived as an instrument of exploitation and domination, that to be powerful is to ruthlessly regulate the lives of others. Besides the previous discussion on inherent human conflict, Harkness (1957) suggests that the concept of negative power also stems from the Judeo-Christian notion that God should be feared and obeyed, that the relationship between God and people is fundamentally

antagonistic and potentially punitive if one disobeys. This observation indicates that if the power God has over humans is punitive, the power that humans exercise over one another should be the same.

The notion of negative power has special implications for oppressed groups such as African Americans. First, it may prevent African Americans from successfully establishing and maintaining organizations that combat Eurocentric domination. Challenging domination requires a unified and systematic organizational strategy that respects the diverse talents displayed by organization members (Morris, 1984; Schiele, 1999; Williams, 1987). This entails that people should maintain a vigilant focus on organizational visions and objectives that precludes obstacles such as self-aggrandizement, jealousy, and rugged competition that can derail broader visions of group advancement. However, these obstacles often get in the way of executing essential organizational roles and other procedures necessary for high organizational performance and success. The problem may be that the overlay of the concept of negative power, engendered and reproduced by Eurocentric cultural oppression, may place African Americans at risk of personal preoccupations with gaining power for self-aggrandizement in organizations that supposedly have the collective interests of African Americans at heart. Consequently, broader organizational objectives that endeavor to resist Eurocentric domination may fall short of fruition because of the selfishness of some who would rather forsake the broader objectives for personal fascinations with attaining negative power. This apparent paradox is resolved when one acknowledges that at its core may be the objectification of God that substantially limits the range of positive, human possibilities in the social construction and practice of power.

Next, whereas the above scenario of negative power would prevent, or at least restrict, African American organizations from achieving the mission of African American advancement and liberation, a second problem with negative power is that it might prevent African Americans from organizing at all. The internalization of negative power as inherently evil could preclude some African Americans from recognizing the need to organize because they may believe that this might cause African Americans to emulate the

oppressive methods of the beneficiaries of Eurocentric domination. Because power has been used so shrewdly to repress the spirit and freedom of African Americans for centuries, some African Americans may conclude that power is altogether malevolent and that the best thing to do is to remain clear of its potential abuse. This attitude not only may obviate action to advance and liberate African Americans from Eurocentric cultural oppression but also may serve as an enabler of that domination. By being inactive, African Americans may provide beneficiaries of Eurocentric domination with further legitimacy by contending that African Americans are satisfied with their sociopolitical status and that much has been achieved on the civil rights front, a belief that now casts the United States as an exemplary meritocracy (see, for example, Connerly, 2000; Franks, 1996; Steele, 1990).

The intellectualization of morality is perhaps a better illustration of the injurious effects of God objectification because, in this process, morality is severed from human behavior and is exclusively associated with ideas (Akbar, 1994; Ani, 1994; Schiele, 2000). The likelihood of planning, rationalizing, and engaging in unfavorable actions toward others is enhanced because people can be considered moral without their behavior being critically evaluated. Although several authors contend that traditional African American culture accentuates the importance of consistency between ideas and deeds (Asante, 1988; Brisbane & Womble, 1991; Martin & Martin, 2002; Paris, 1995), cultural oppression through Eurocentric domination may have diminished this focus among many African Americans. Reinforced by negative power, the intellectualization of morality may be seen by many African Americans as a necessary strategy to progress in Eurocentric societies. Although the "walking the talk" philosophy might be viewed ostensibly as the right thing to do, it has significant liabilities in a society that thrives on and effectively promotes material and physical pleasure as the essence of human existence. Indeed, those who are skilled in producing and marketing products that maximize these pleasures are frequently the most affluent, revered, and influential people in the United States. The experience with intergenerational deprivation examined earlier may place many African Americans at seri-

ous risk of compromising the walk-the-talk paradigm so that they may attain the wealth and social status they rightfully deserve but too often achieve at the expense of abandoning virtues of honesty, responsibility, and collectivity. Without these virtues, a sustained and formidable effort by African Americans to overcome the perils and pitfalls of continued cultural oppression may be further from fruition.

CONCLUSION

Cultural oppression is a primary source of the social problems experienced by African Americans and has placed them at risk of cultural estrangement, a weakened Black collectivism, and spiritual alienation. Together, these risk factors make it difficult for African Americans, their communities, and their families to elicit their vast, positive human potentiality. Although African Americans have undoubtedly demonstrated their resiliency at overcoming the barrier of persistent, intergenerational oppression, the gains accrued from civil rights and Black power struggles have increased African American exposure to Eurocentric cultural oppression. This exposure, along with new civil rights protections and privileges, may have diminished the spirit of collective and critical consciousness among African Americans and the desire to embrace their traditional cultural values and practices. Traditional African American culture can serve to protect African Americans from the adverse effects of Eurocentric domination and allow them to freely express their unique human particularity. Although this particularity is clearly not monolithic, its variance may not be completely accepted until its distinction is first acknowledged. Eurocentric cultural oppression profoundly obstructs this particular pursuit toward human affirmation. By obstructing the free expression of African American particularity, and because African Americans are members of the global community, Eurocentric cultural oppression can be interpreted as an impediment to the essential pursuit of worldwide human liberation.

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