

The background features a dark blue gradient with faint, light-colored circular patterns and a scale. The scale is a large arc on the left side, with numerical markings from 140 to 260 in increments of 10. Several smaller circles and arcs are scattered across the background, some with arrows indicating direction. The overall aesthetic is technical and abstract.

African American Womanism and the Baha'í Faith in Dialogue

NEW APPROACHES TO THE 'MOST
CHALLENGING ISSUE'

Layli Maparyan, Ph.D.

WILMETTE INSTITUTE WEB TALK, JANUARY 26, 2020

PRESENTATION GOAL

- To offer a different way of thinking about “the most challenging issue” as presented in the Baha’í Faith, based on insights from African American womanism.

ROADMAP

1. Review Shoghi Effendi's text on "The Most Challenging Issue" through a close reading.
2. Overview of womanism and African cosmology – key concepts: spirituality, community, ecology.
3. Explore implications for eliminating racial prejudice and eradicating racism.

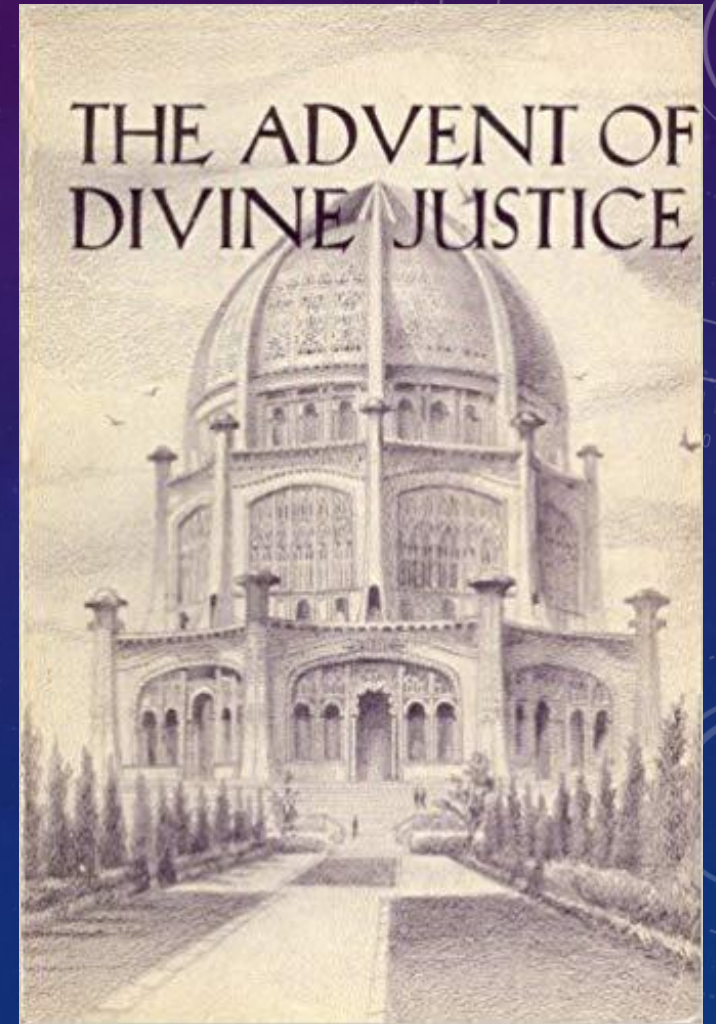
The background is a dark blue gradient with a subtle pattern of white stars. Overlaid on this are several technical diagrams. In the top right, there is a large circular gauge with concentric rings and numerical markings from 80 to 210. In the bottom right, there is a diagram with dashed lines and arrows forming a circular path. In the bottom left, there is a diagram with solid lines and arrows forming a circular path. In the top center, there is a small circular diagram with a curved line and an arrow.

“THE MOST CHALLENGING ISSUE”

A Review

THE MOST CHALLENGING ISSUE

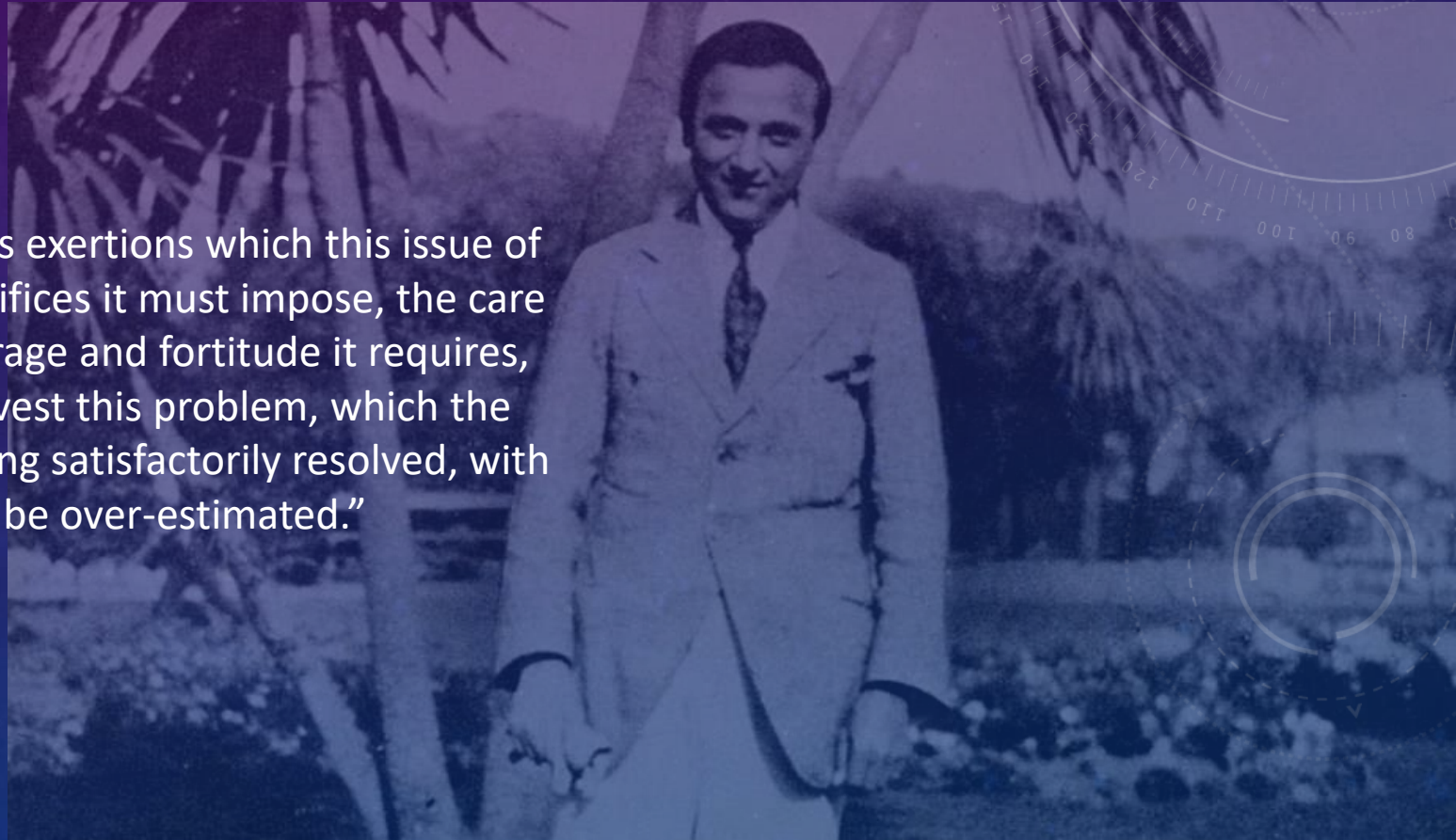
- Shoghi Effendi writes: “As to racial prejudice, the corrosion of which, for well nigh a century, has bitten into the fibre, and attacked the whole social structure of American society, it should be regarded as constituting the most vital and challenging issue confronting the Baha’í community at the present stage of its evolution.”



*Shoghi Effendi's letter to the U.S. and
Canada, © 1938*

THE MOST CHALLENGING ISSUE, CONTINUED

- Shoghi Effendi elaborates: “The ceaseless exertions which this issue of paramount importance calls for, the sacrifices it must impose, the care and vigilance it demands, the moral courage and fortitude it requires, the tact and sympathy it necessitates, invest this problem, which the American believers are still far from having satisfactorily resolved, with an urgency and importance that can not be over-estimated.”



Shoghi Effendi, undated photograph

THE MOST CHALLENGING ISSUE, CONTINUED

- Shoghi Effendi next asserts: “White and negro, high and low, young and old, whether newly converted to the Faith or not, all who stand identified with it must participate in, and lend their assistance, each according to his or her capacity, experience and opportunities, to the common task of fulfilling the instructions, realizing the hopes, and following the example, of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.”



'Abdu'l-Bahá in Brooklyn, New York, in 1912

THE MOST CHALLENGING ISSUE, CONTINUED

- Shoghi Effendi continues: “Whether colored or non-colored, neither race has the right, or can conscientiously claim, to be regarded as absolved from such an obligation, as having realized such hopes, or having faithfully followed such an example.”

THE MOST CHALLENGING ISSUE, CONTINUED

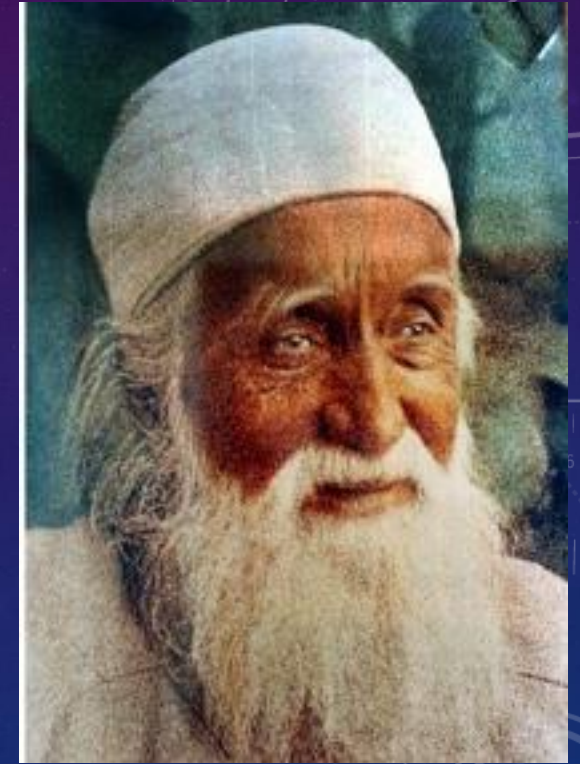
- Prophetically, Shoghi Effendi writes: “A long and thorny road, beset with pitfalls, still remains untraveled, both by the white and the negro exponents of the redeeming Faith of Baha’u’llah. On the distance they cover, and the manner in which they travel that road, must depend, to an extent which few among them can imagine, the operation of those intangible influences which are indispensable to the spiritual triumph of the American believers and the material success of their newly launched enterprise.”



Photo credit: Carl Mydans for Farm Security Administration, circa 1935

'ABDU'L-BAHÁ'S EXAMPLE

- Shoghi Effendi hones in again on the example of 'Abdu'l-Bahá: "Let them call to mind, fearlessly and determinedly, the example and conduct of 'Abdu'l-Bahá while in their midst. Let them remember His courage, His genuine love, His informal and indiscriminating fellowship, His contempt for and impatience of criticism, tempered by His tact and wisdom. Let them revive and perpetuate the memory of those unforgettable and historic episodes and occasions on which He so strikingly demonstrated His keen sense of justice, His spontaneous sympathy, for the down-trodden, His ever-abiding sense of the oneness of the human race, His overflowing love for its members, and His displeasure with those who dared to flout His wishes, to deride His methods, to challenge His principles, or to nullify His acts."



'Abdu'l-Bahá visited North America for 239 days in 1912 and promoted racial amity extensively while here.

THE MOST CHALLENGING ISSUE, CONTINUED

- Further along, Shoghi Effendi states: “To discriminate against any race, on the ground of its being socially backward, politically immature, and numerically in a minority, is a flagrant violation of the spirit that animates the Faith of Baha’u’llah.”
- In fact, he continues: “If any discrimination is at all to be tolerated, it should be a discrimination not against, but rather in favor of the minority, be it racial or otherwise.”



Baha'is in Malawi

INJUNCTION TO BAHÁ'ÍS

- Shoghi Effendi gives this specific injunction to Baha'ís: “Unlike the nations and peoples of the earth, be they of the East or of the West, democratic or authoritarian, communist or capitalist, whether belonging to the Old World or the New, who either ignore, trample upon, or extirpate, the racial, religious, or political minorities within the sphere of their jurisdiction, **every organized community, enlisted under the banner of Baha'u'llah should feel it to be its first and inescapable obligation to nurture, encourage, and safeguard every minority belonging to any faith, race, class, or nation, within it.**”

SPECIFIC INSTRUCTIONS TO WHITE PEOPLE

- Says Shoghi Effendi: “Let the white make a supreme effort in their resolve to contribute their share to the solution of this problem, to abandon once for all their usually inherent and at times subconscious sense of superiority, to correct their tendency towards revealing a patronizing attitude towards members of the other race, to persuade them through their intimate, spontaneous and informal association with them of the genuineness of their friendship and the sincerity of their intentions, and to master their impatience of any lack of responsiveness on the part of a people who have received, for so long a period, such grievous and slow-healing wounds.”

SPECIFIC INSTRUCTIONS TO BLACK PEOPLE

- Shoghi Effendi then says: “Let the negroes, through a corresponding effort on their part, show by every means in their power the warmth of their response, their readiness to forget the past, and their ability to wipe out every trace of suspicion that may still linger in their hearts and minds.”

INSTRUCTIONS TO BOTH GROUPS

- Shoghi Effendi is clear: “Let neither think that they can wait confidently for the solution of this problem until the initiative has been taken, and the favorable circumstances created, by agencies that stand outside the orbit of their Faith. Let neither think that anything short of genuine love, extreme patience, true humility, consummate tact, sound initiative, mature wisdom, and deliberate, persistent, and prayerful effort, can succeed in blotting out the stain which this patent evil has left on the fair name of their common country.”

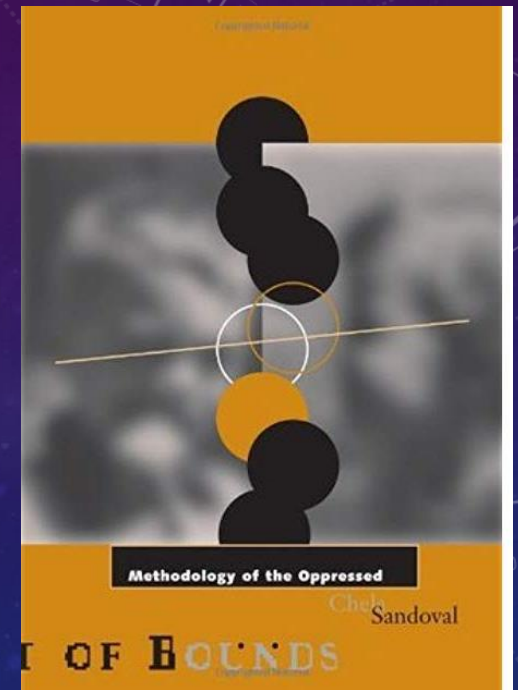
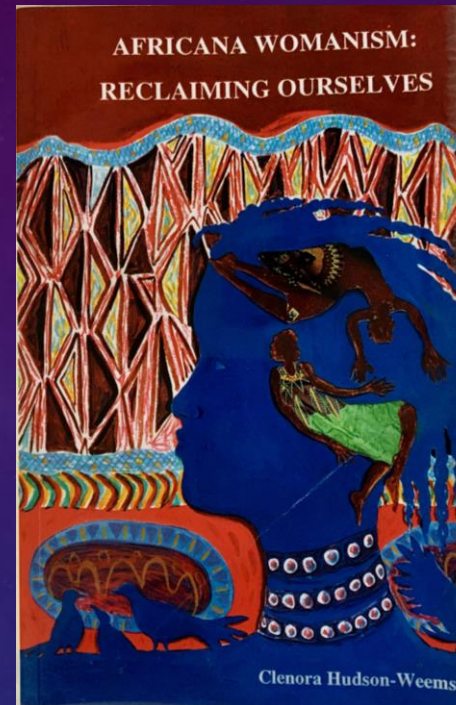
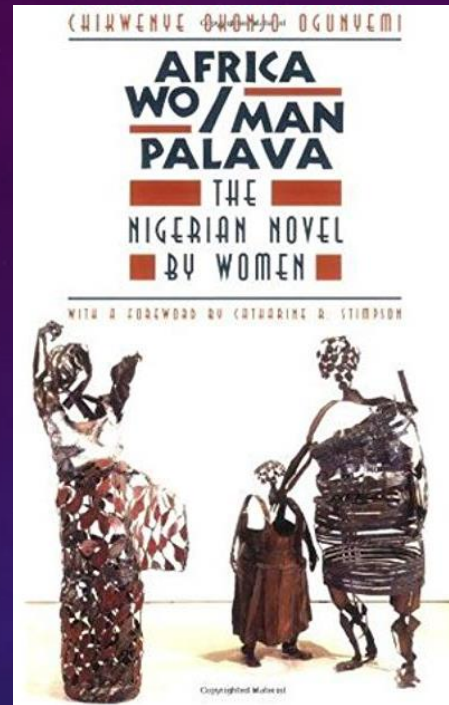
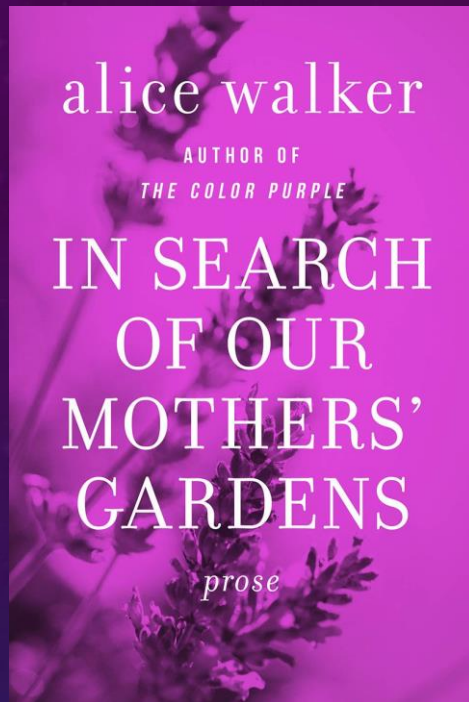
THE MOST CHALLENGING ISSUE - SUMMARY

- Even though I have only presented extracts from Shoghi Effendi's passage on "The Most Challenging Issue" in *The Advent of Divine Justice* (1938), these points should be readily apparent:
 - Racial prejudice is one of the most corrosive elements in human society.
 - The responsibility to eliminate it for once and for all falls on all parties.
 - Baha'ís must exercise leadership following 'Abdu'l-Bahá's example in every setting in which they live and work.
 - 'Abdu'l-Bahá's example has attributes that distinguish it from prevailing theories about how to end racism.



WOMANISM

What It Is and What We Can Learn from It



WHAT IS WOMANISM?

The African Worldview, Applied & *In Action*

WOMANISM AS PRACTIS

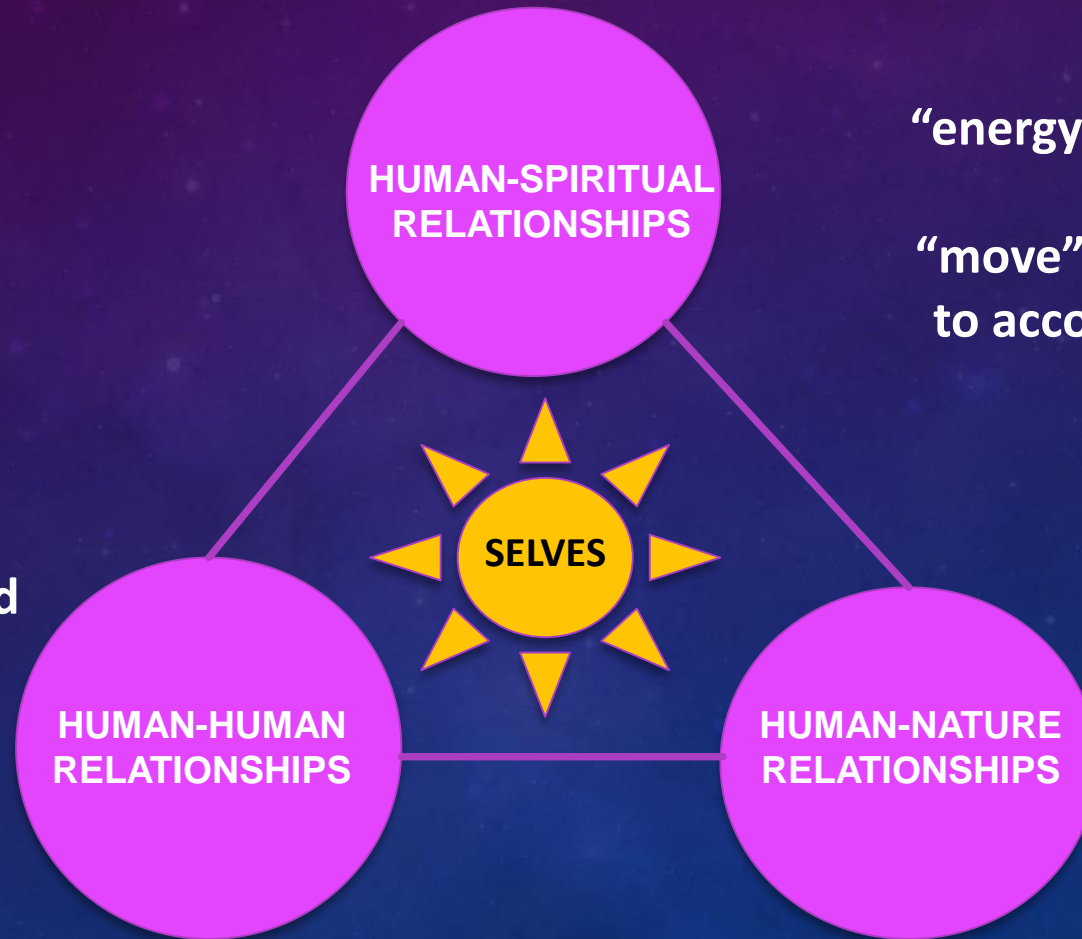


Womanism offers a social change praxis developed by Black (African-descended) women worldwide based on African cosmology and culture, inflected by historical experiences and geography – and offered to all humanity as a gift in these urgent times.



WOMANIST TRIAD OF CONCERNS

The **human-nature-spirit ecosystem** is a dynamic, interconnected whole in which all parts are always influencing each other, and must all be considered simultaneously.



Human beings are “energy-transforming machines” with the ability to “move” and “transmute” energy to accomplish a variety of ends, including healing and social change.

WOMANISM & CULTURE

- Womanism is *action-oriented*.
- Womanists *apply* spiritual knowledge to create spiritual movement in everyday settings.
- Womanism is *humanity-focused*, not limited to women of color.



AFRICAN COSMOLOGY

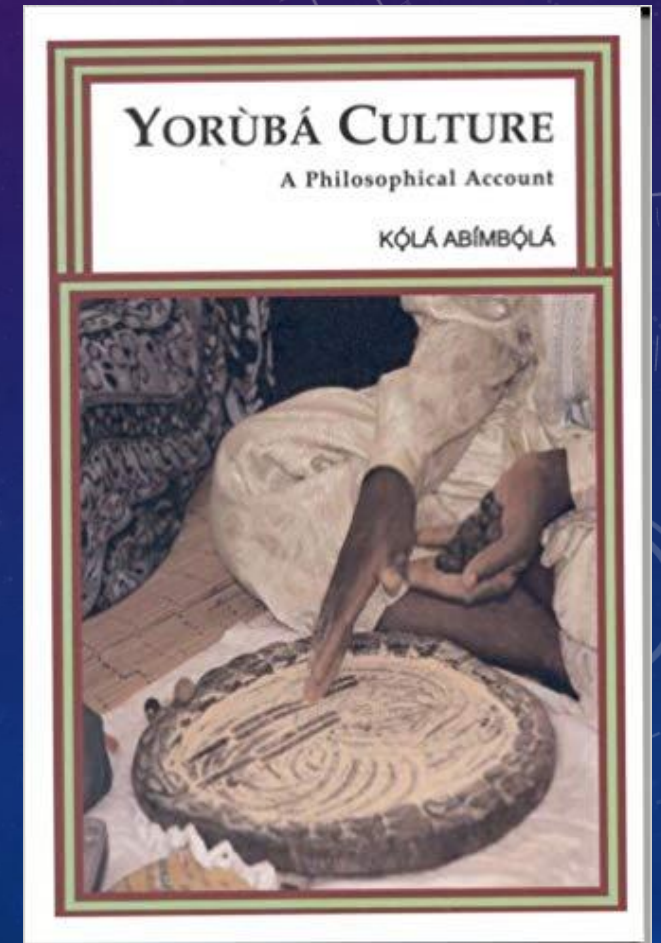
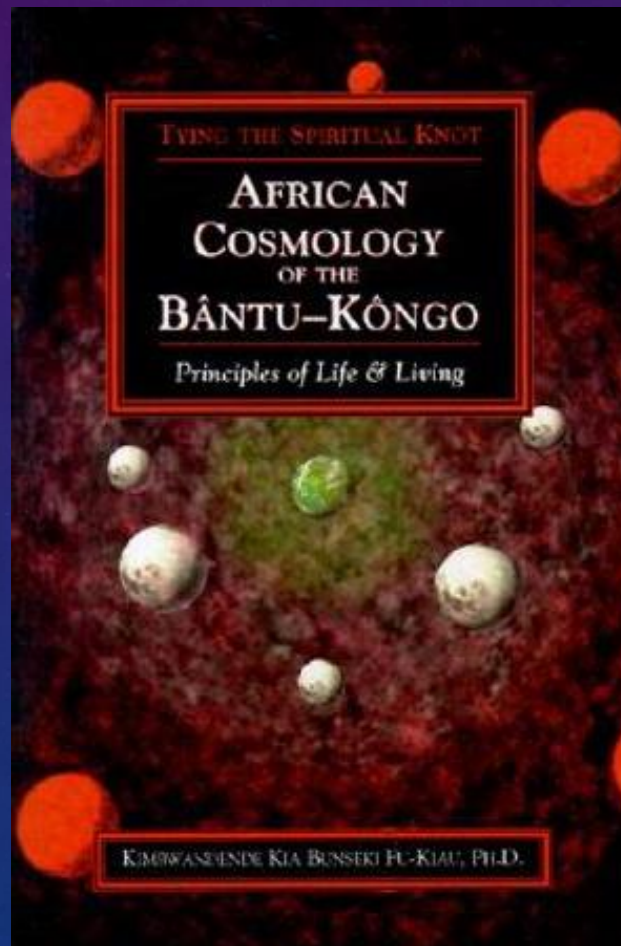
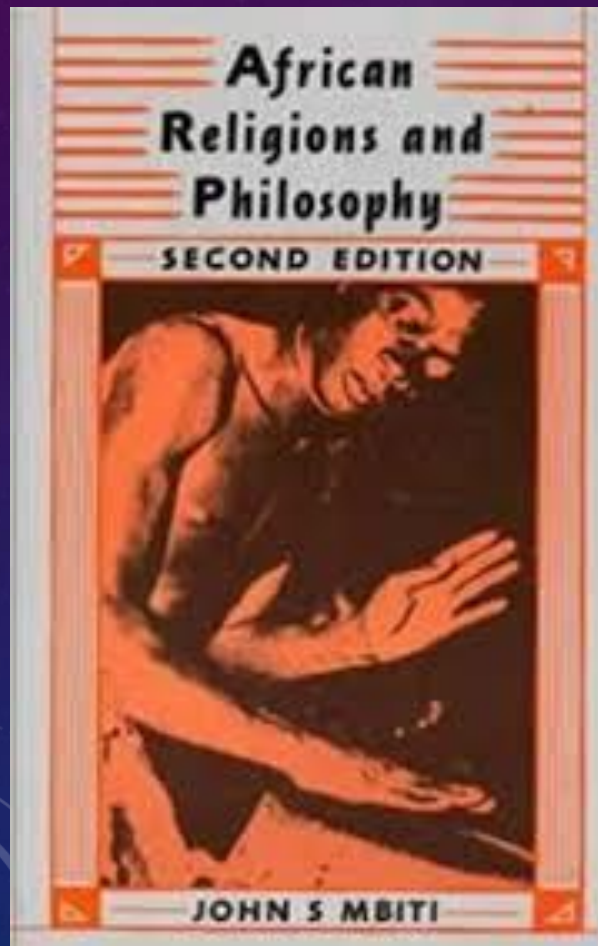
Foundation of Womanism

THREE CENTRAL BUILDING BLOCKS OF
LIFE IN THE AFRICAN WORLDVIEW:

- Spirituality
- Community
- Ecology



THREE GOOD REFERENCES ON AFRICAN WORLDVIEW





Other books that relate to African cosmology and the African worldview – check them out!!

SPIRITUALITY

In African cosmology,
everything is spiritual,
infused with spirit, or of
spiritual significance...



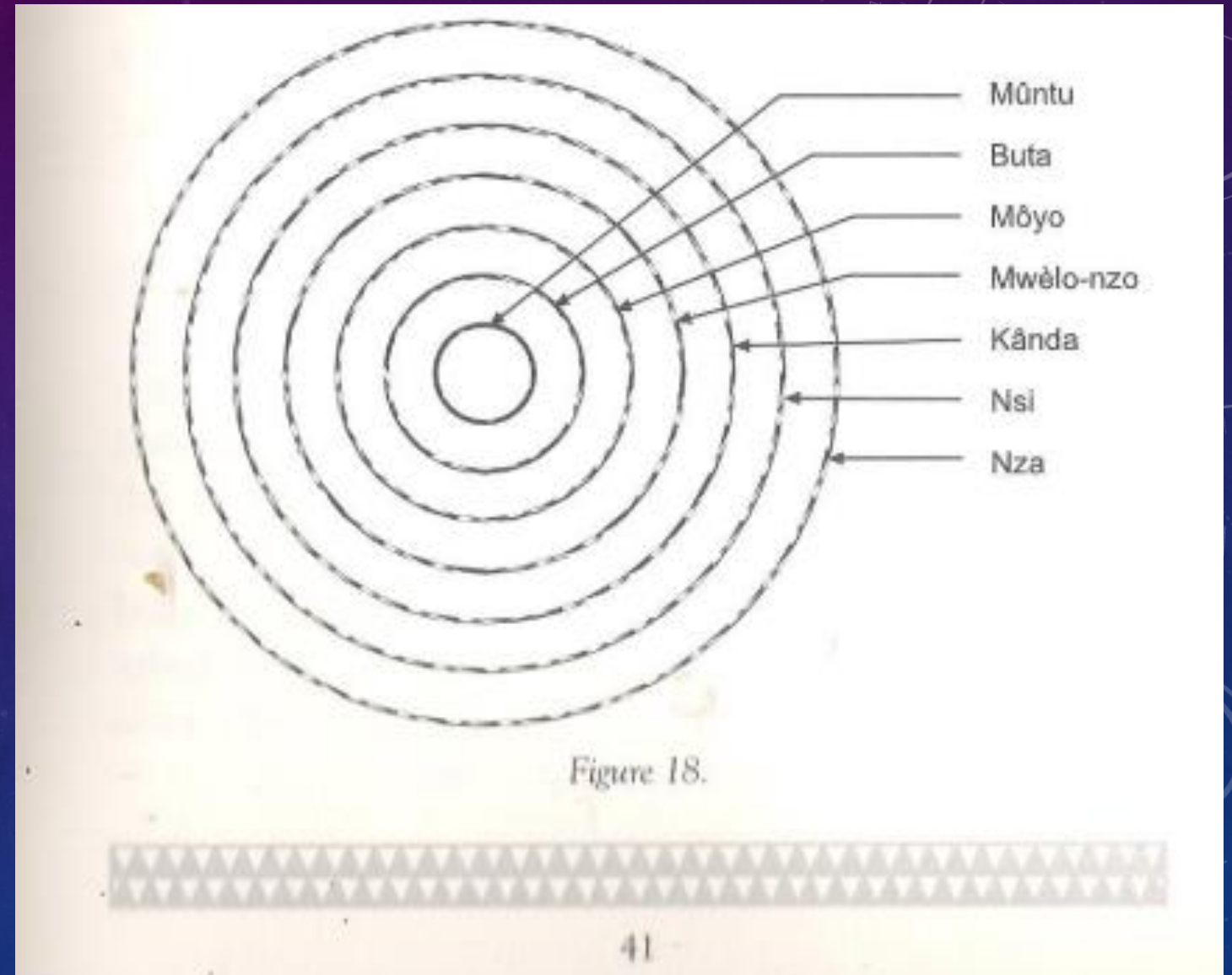
COMMUNITY

Kinship is the fundamental organizing principle of life, from family to community to humanity to the cosmos.



THE CONCEPT OF EVER-EXPANDING COMMUNITY IN AFRICAN COSMOLOGY

Many African cosmological accounts refer to ever-expanding circles of community and inclusion. At the center is the individual or dyad, followed by one or more levels of family, followed by tribe or nation, and culminating in all humanity or the cosmos.



From *African Cosmology of the Bantu-Kongo*, by Fu-Kiau (1980/2001)

ECOLOGY

Humans form a community with all other beings, from animals, plants, and minerals, to forces of nature, the cosmos, and the spirit world.



THE INVISIBLE REALM

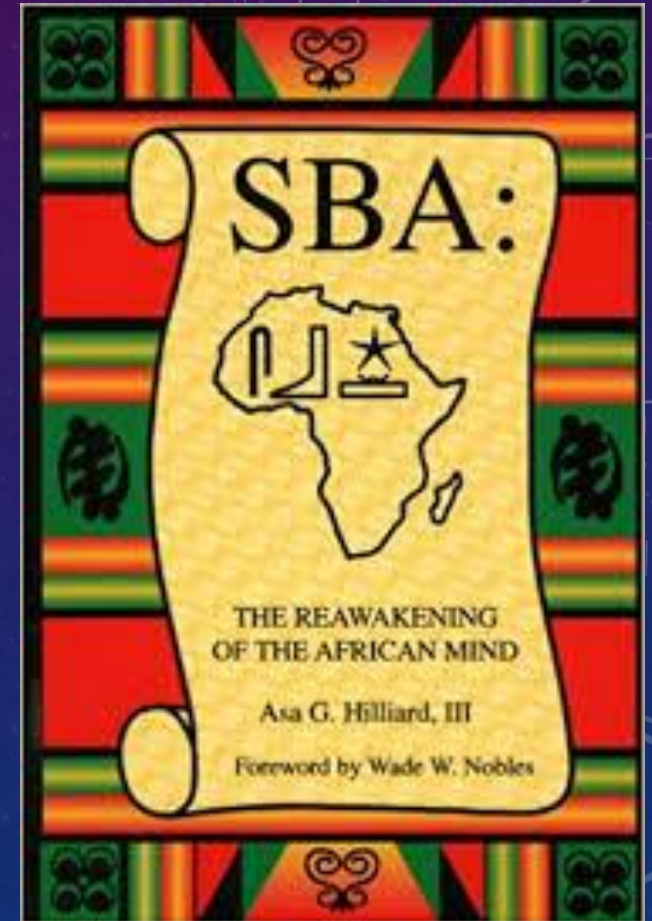
In African cosmology, the invisible realm is a very crowded and active place, and it interpenetrates the material world.



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CULTURE AS WEALTH

- **Cultural wealth** evinces from cosmological knowledge and wisdom and everything that has grown out of that over historical time.
- It is an alternative to the all-too-pervasive “deficit view” of culture that is often applied to people who don’t belong to the dominant / white / Western / Christian culture.



CULTURAL WEALTH, PLANETARY IDENTITY, & THE EMERGING GLOBAL TRANSCULTURE

“For womanists, race is not color but culture, and **culture is not deficit, but wealth....**”

“The ***emerging global transculture*** is a global culture that is transcending but not overwriting individual cultures in the face of globalization, the evolution of human consciousness, and increasing awareness of the oneness of humanity....”

“This ***planetary identity*** is a new development in the history of humanity. The time has come to recognize it and name it.”
(Maparyan, 2012, p. 11)



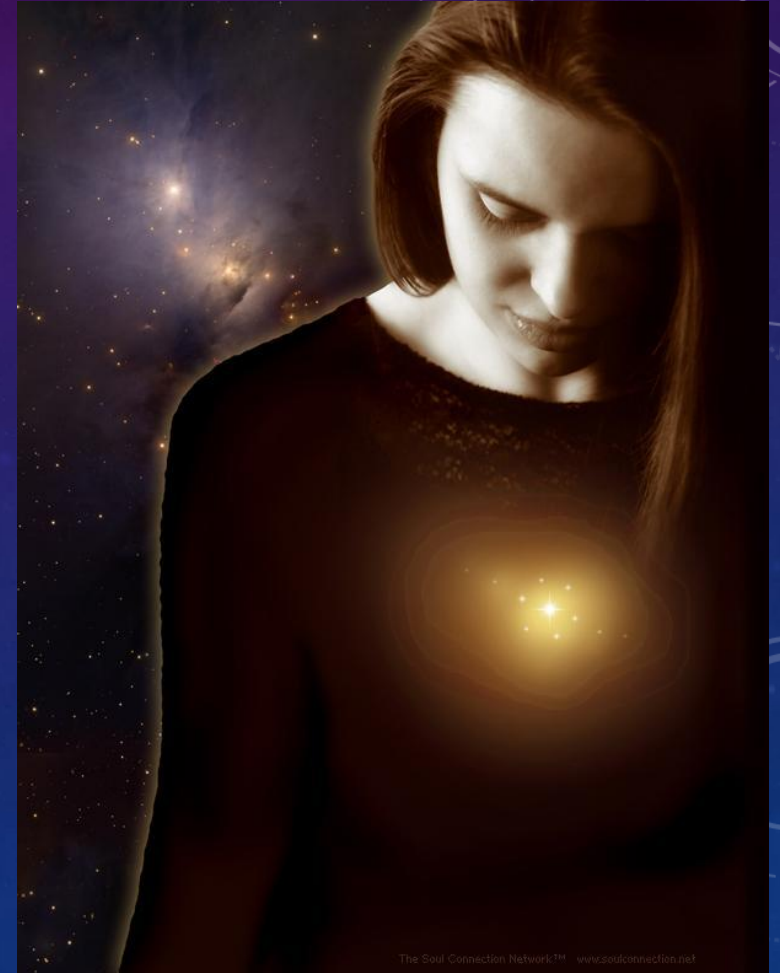
A KEY WOMANIST CONCEPT: SPIRITUAL ACTIVISM

- ❖ **Spiritual activism** is social or ecological transformational activity rooted in a spiritual belief system or set of spiritual practices.
- ❖ **Spiritual activism** is putting spirituality to work for positive social and ecological change.



WOMANIST SPIRITUAL MOVEMENT

- ❖ **Spiritual movement** means movement of consciousness – i.e., **changing hearts and minds** – in order to change the substrate of outward reality.
- ❖ **Spiritual movement** is the higher octave of social movement, which merely addresses outward conditions in the material realm.
- ❖ Without **spiritual movement**, social change is not sustainable.



The background is a dark blue gradient with a starry field. It features several faint, light blue geometric patterns: a large circular scale with numbers (100, 110, 120, 130, 140, 150, 160, 170, 180, 190, 200, 210) and arrows on the right side; a smaller circular scale with numbers (80, 90, 100, 110, 120) and arrows at the bottom right; and a circular scale with numbers (100, 110, 120) and arrows at the bottom left. There are also some dashed lines and arrows scattered throughout the design.

RETHINKING THE MOST CHALLENGING ISSUE

From a Womanist and African Cosmology Perspective

THREE WAYS OF THINKING ABOUT RACE

- Color
- Culture
- Cosmology

A CHERISHED QUOTE

“Consider the flowers of a garden. Though differing in kind, color, form and shape, yet, inasmuch as they are refreshed by the waters of one spring, revived by the breath of one wind, invigorated by the rays of one sun, this diversity increaseth their charm and addeth unto their beauty. How unpleasing to the eye if all the flowers and plants, the leaves and blossoms, the fruit, the branches and the trees of that garden were all of the same shape and color! Diversity of hues, form and shape enricheth and adorneth the garden, and heighteneth the effect thereof. In like manner, when divers shades of thought, temperament and character, are brought together under the power and influence of one central agency, the beauty and glory of human perfection will be revealed and made manifest. Naught but the celestial potency of the Word of God, which ruleth and transcendeth the realities of all things, is capable of harmonizing the divergent thoughts, sentiments, ideas and convictions of the children of men.”

(‘Abdu’l-Baha, quoted in *The World Order of Baha’u’llah*, p. 42)

A CHERISHED QUOTE – COLOR LENS

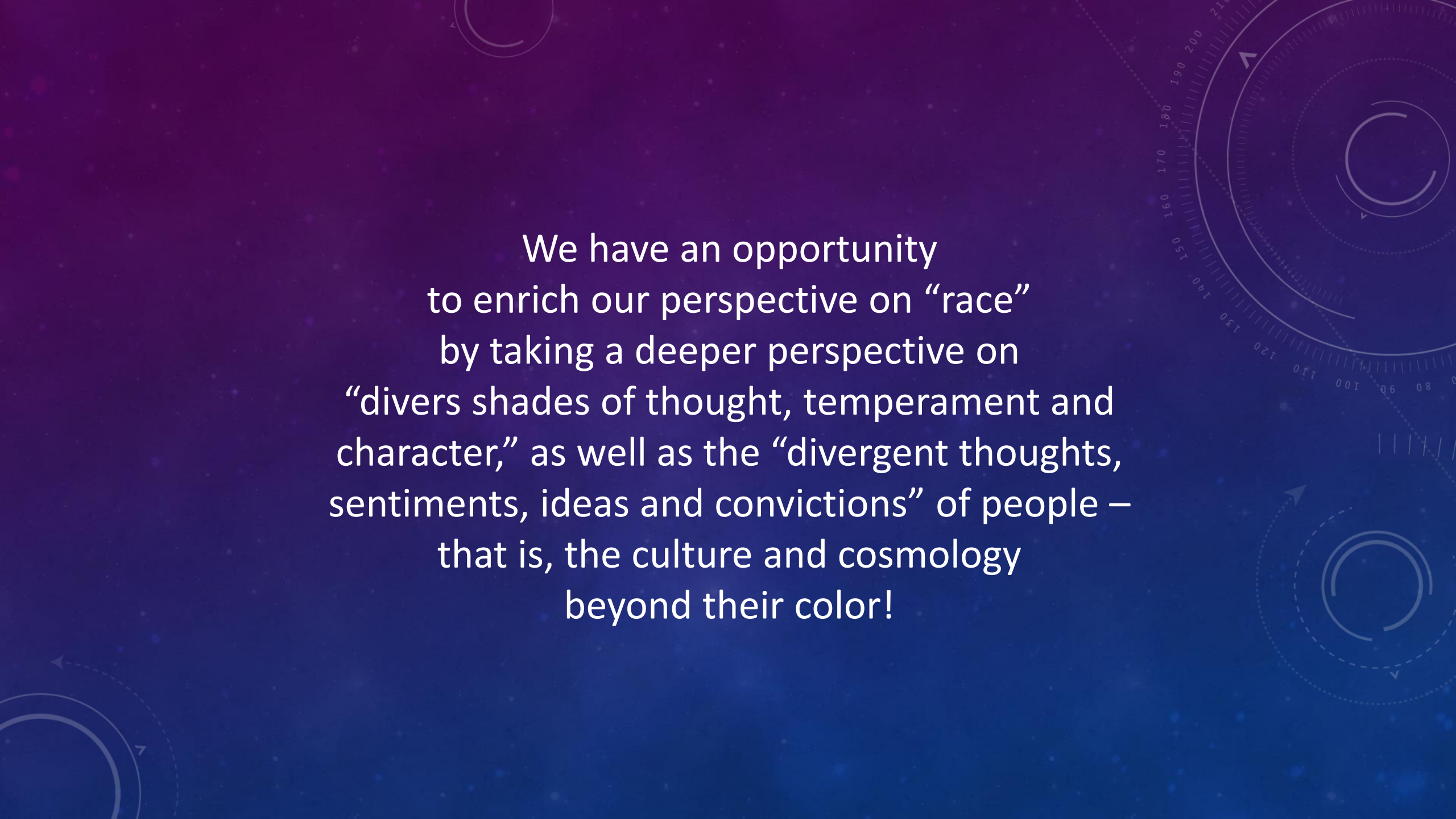
“Consider the flowers of a garden. Though differing in kind, color, form and shape, yet, inasmuch as they are refreshed by the waters of one spring, revived by the breath of one wind, invigorated by the rays of one sun, this diversity increaseth their charm and addeth unto their beauty. How unpleasing to the eye if all the flowers and plants, the leaves and blossoms, the fruit, the branches and the trees of that garden were all of the same shape and color! Diversity of hues, form and shape enricheth and adorneth the garden, and heighteneth the effect thereof. In like manner, when divers shades of thought, temperament and character, are brought together under the power and influence of one central agency, the beauty and glory of human perfection will be revealed and made manifest. Naught but the celestial potency of the Word of God, which ruleth and transcendeth the realities of all things, is capable of harmonizing the divergent thoughts, sentiments, ideas and convictions of the children of men.”

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A CHERISHED QUOTE – CULTURE & COSMOLOGY LENS

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(‘Abdu’l-Baha, quoted in *The World Order of Baha’u’llah*, p. 42)

The background is a dark blue gradient with a field of small white stars. Overlaid on this are several technical diagrams. In the top right, there is a large circular gauge with concentric rings and numerical markings from 80 to 210. In the bottom right, there is a smaller circular diagram with concentric rings and arrows. In the bottom left, there is another circular diagram with concentric rings and arrows. The text is centered in the middle of the image.

We have an opportunity
to enrich our perspective on “race”
by taking a deeper perspective on
“divers shades of thought, temperament and
character,” as well as the “divergent thoughts,
sentiments, ideas and convictions” of people –
that is, the culture and cosmology
beyond their color!

The background is a dark blue gradient with a field of small white stars. Overlaid on this are several faint, light blue geometric patterns. On the right side, there are concentric circles and a circular scale with numerical markings from 80 to 210. On the left and bottom, there are partial circular arcs and dashed lines with arrows indicating direction.

To truly understand Black people –
African-descended people, anywhere in the world –
we have to understand African cosmology as the
framework for a collective way of being in the world
that shapes all aspects of life and self – including
everything Baha'í and our approach to
the Most Challenging Issue!

COSMOLOGICAL NEGATION vs. COSMOLOGICAL AFFIRMATION AND EMBRACING

- The use of “color” as our only index for race NEGATES the richness and value of culture & cosmology – and when people feel negated, they withdraw and separate from those they feel negated by (or they adopt hostile/defensive postures with regard to them) – we don’t want this!!
- ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s exhortation that we “consider the flowers of a garden” is an invitation not just to look at color, but also to consider culture and cosmology, and thus to AFFIRM and EMBRACE difference in a new – more positive, nuanced, and generative – way.

WHAT WOMANISM OFFERS THE EFFORT

- Womanism, rooted in African cosmology and flavored by women's experiences as community nurturers, offers an approach to eliminating racial prejudice and eradicating racism that is:
 - Heart-centered
 - Connection-maintaining
 - Executed in everyday behaviors and settings
 - Ecologically robust – taking people, the environment, and the spiritual realm into account
 - Candid yet loving – “tough love” approach
 - Group oriented and effective at group mobilization
 - Energy-conscious – tuned in to psychological and social dynamics and able to transmute them
 - Healing oriented (rather than oppositional) in terms of social change methodology
 - Practical – focused on the fruit of the effort, results-oriented

Let's briefly take a few examples...

EXAMPLE 1: A SPIRITUAL APPROACH

- Womanism and the Baha'í Faith both agree on the fundamentally spiritual nature of human beings. Spirit is a source of innate human divinity (womanist) and innate nobility (Baha'í), and recognition of humans' innate divinity and nobility is a catalyst towards overcoming racial prejudice and racism because we act with reverence and awe towards those whom we see as noble or divine, and awe and reverence are incompatible with feelings (or actions) of racial prejudice and racism.

EXAMPLE 2: AN ECOLOGICAL APPROACH

- Womanists understand that the Divine permeates all created things, human and non-human, and that all things emit a kind of energy into the world; Baha'is emphasize the importance of creating a spiritual atmosphere that is conducive to sacredness and virtue. Both understand that the environment around people influences how people feel, think, and act. Thus, environmental interventions – not just social interventions – are needed to eliminate racial prejudice, eradicate racism, and promote racial amity, harmony, accord, and justice. What do we need to remove from our environment and what do we need to add to our environment to achieve this?

EXAMPLE 3: AN INVITATIONAL APPROACH

- Prevailing approaches to racial harmony and racial justice rely upon an oppositional model and bellicose metaphors (“struggle,” “fight,” “win,” “beat,” “attack”) that implicitly divide and polarize people at the same time as they strive towards peace, love, and justice. These methods have a “means-ends problem” – that is, their means are inconsistent with their ends. Womanists and Baha’ís share an approach to racial harmony and racial justice that could be described as invitational – that is, inviting people to amity, inviting people to their higher selves, inviting people to the recognition of their own and other people’s nobility, and inviting people to build a new world together. Peaceful, loving, and just means are thus consistent with the aims of peace, love, and justice in human relationships and society-at-large.

EXAMPLE 4: STARTING WHERE YOU ARE

- Womanists have a "DIY" (do-it-yourself) / "make a way out of no way" ethos that insists that we can always start where we are, with what we have and who we are with, to make change. The Baha'í Faith emphasizes the importance of starting social change processes with our immediate neighbors and those with whom we interact every day by thinking about how we can serve the needs of others, find spiritual solutions to social and economic problems, and build the new world everywhere we already are. Both approaches also emphasize the importance of doing the "inner work" and refining our own selves as a necessary prerequisite to contributing to the betterment of the world.

FINAL SUMMARY

- Womanism brings much from Africana women's cultural wisdom and historical experience as community nurturers and maintainers to larger global conversations about human problem-solving, in the arena of race and elsewhere.
- The perspectives that womanism brings from and about Black people and Black culture can help deepen and accelerate the profound social problem solving that is called for in response to "the Most Challenging Issue" identified by Shoghi Effendi.
- Baha'is and womanists in dialogue can mutually enrich one another's approaches to bringing about the elimination of racial prejudice, the eradication of racism, and the emergence of racial amity and racial justice.