

Archetypes of Healing and Transformation: Omolù and Oxumarè from Afro-Brazilian Shamanism

by Rhonda Mills

Healing and transformation have existed in traditions around the world, throughout time. Healing is a return to wholeness, to our naturalness, and restores a felt sense of interconnected flow. Transformation implies a movement from one state to another. Omolù and Oxumarè are archetypal principles of healing and transformation from the Afro Brazilian Shamanic tradition, which arose out of the experience of the Africans who were enslaved there and later became an important part of the Brazilian identity¹. Afro Brazilian Shamanism informs Biotransenergetics² which receives inspiration of the archetypal energies associated with the tradition in way that is transcultural, transpersonal, and integral.

Omolù and Oxumarè are archetypal principles connected with death and rebirth and with sacred expressions of nature. Omolù is an archetypal principle of healing and taking care, and Oxumarè is an archetypal principle of alchemical transformation. Biotransenergetics also integrates the Jungian perspective of archetypes. In The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious, Jung wrote:

“For our purposes this term <archetypes> is apposite and helpful, because it tells us that so far as the collective unconscious contents are concerned we are dealing with archaic or – I would say – primordial types, that is, with universal images that have existed since the remotest times.”

I experience connecting with archetypal energies as both distinctly personal and at the same time universal, much vaster than me or any individual. Multiple maps of consciousness exist which support understanding how this seeming paradox can exist. For example, Integral philosophy provides a way to understand the interconnected and holonic nature of a human being through four quadrants and five layers. Four quadrants describe experience as containing an internal and external component, as

well as an individual and collective component. One of the ways Biotransenergetics translates the four quadrants related to self-healing is: 1) individual internal is “I-Self”, 2) individual external is “I-You”, 3) collective internal is “I-Us”, and 4) collective external is “I-Them.” Five layers of the body-mind are described in multiple traditions. In the tradition of Tantric Hatha Yoga, the layers which cover the self, called koshas or sheaths, are described from the most gross to the most subtle: the physical body (annamaya kosha), energetic body (pranamaya kosha), sense mind (manomaya kosha), discernment or wisdom mind (vijñanamaya kosha), and finally the dreaming or bliss body (anandamayakosha). Biotransenergetics describes the body-mind, or organismic system, similarly as physical, energetic, emotional, mental, and spiritual. The individual organismic system, the microcosm, reflects the universal system, or macrocosm, which is beyond the human mind and essentially unknowable. The mesocosm is the realm of the archetypes, a portal through which what is deeply essential can be experienced.

The organismic system is transpersonal, including and transcending the individual, and is a vehicle which reflects the journey of our soul, or individuation process, through our manifest form. Joseph Campbell, in Hero with a Thousand Faces, wrote the following about the transpersonal nature of individuation:

“We have not even to risk the adventure alone, for the heroes of all time have gone before us. The labyrinth is thoroughly known. We have only to follow the thread of the hero path, and where we had thought to find an abomination, we shall find a god. And where we had thought to slay another, we shall slay ourselves. Where we had thought to travel outward, we will come to the center of our own existence. And where we had thought to be alone, we will be with all the world.”

In modern language, the separation from our essential selves is known as trauma, or more specifically as a trauma response – a way of adapting to a traumatizing situation by disconnecting from the flow of life, which is initially protective and later causes

symptoms if not addressed. In his book Healing Collective Trauma, Thomas Hübl makes a connection between shadow, karma, and the term *trauma* which creates symptoms in our individual lives as well as the collective:

“We may choose to understand these repetitions of shadow content as karma, a Sanskrit word originally meaning ‘effect’ or ‘fate’ (i.e., destiny). Or we may recognize them in light of our contemporary understanding as trauma.”

Afro Brazilian Shamanism

Afro Brazilian Shamanism is deeply connected with nature and transmits a living relationship with archetypal forces: both elemental archetypes directly connected with nature and archetypal principles which are not directly correlated with the elements. The archetypal energies in this tradition which are directly related to nature and the elements are referred to as orixàs. The word *orixà* may be spelled slightly differently depending on the source in the African diaspora and related with Yoruba, Spanish, and other languages, and conveys the sacred energy of each element plus its archetypal component. This sacred energy has magnified through dedicated practice over a long period of time.³

Each orixà has its own *axé*, its own specific sacred, healing transformational force which expands beyond the natural element, to the realm of the archetypes. For example, the orixà Nana conveys the sacred nature of earth, Oxossi - the metamorphosis of nature, Oxum - the flow of freshwater, Iemanjá - the generativity of the oceans, Ogun - the decisive cutting, parsing nature of metal, Xangô - the explosive strength of rock, fire, and volcano, and Iansà - the expansive movement of the winds and storms. Additionally each orixà contains both light and shadow expressions which can manifest harmoniously in interconnected flow or dis-harmoniously as difficulty or illness. The archetypal principles of Omolù and Oxumarè are not directly connected with a specific element, rather including and transcending them all.

Omolù

Omolù is the archetypal principle of healing: illness, death, and rebirth. Omolù conveys sweetness, compassion, and loving-kindness in turning towards suffering within oneself or another. While Omolù is a principle, not an orixà, Omolù is strongly connected with the orixàs, which are always present with Omolù. Which specific ones are present depend on what illness or wound is encountered. Omolù connects us with a healing process somatically, energetically, and with an inner attitude of turning towards the contents of experience with respect and humility, which opens a sacred space. Contacting our experience through the organismic body-mind system without a specific agenda or goal, purely meeting *what is* (as sacred) is by nature freeing, a disidentification with suffering. In his book Biotransenergetics: Something New, Something Old, a Path that has a Heart, Pier Luigi Lattuada wrote:

“If you die to the disease, disappear to the disease, healing can take place. Fighting it (without first turning towards with love and compassion) feeds it on the subtle planes. And even if the symptoms disappear, you will not heal on all five levels. The healing process starts from the soul and occurs on five levels - meaning liberation, renewal, self-transcendence.”

The attitude of *being with* and surrendering which belongs to Omolù teaches us that we must give up the presumption of knowing everything and having everything under control, and humbly and patiently turn towards the intelligence of life that flows moment by moment. The archetypal principle of Omolù allies us with a healing process with its own intent and intelligence. Through this healing process, we may come to recognize how much we have judged and punished ourselves, how unworthy we consider ourselves, how immersed we have been in identifications or survival strategies, how we have held back love and compassion from ourselves. By connecting with and through experience, we make ourselves available to comprehend beyond the symptoms, otherwise we remain in duality identifying the illness is one thing and the healing is another. Healing cannot take place without disidentification with the experience and a

connection with a greater power, or as Professor Simona Vigo wrote, “to a superior, archetypal, transpersonal force.” We are saying “yes” to the immanent transpersonal love of the self, which allows a return to interconnected flow within us and in the field around us.

In the healing modalities of Thomas Hübl’s work and NARM (Neuro-Affective Relational Model for Complex Trauma), I sense a resonance with the archetypal principle of Omolù: relating with an inner difficulty with compassion, even tenderness. Meeting and breathing with intention to honor the manifest experience with curiosity, a communication emerges. In the healing space, which is created through intention and presence, the difficulty may move or relax or express, allowing the natural restoration of inner movement into harmonious flow. In the spirit of Omolù, a humble orientation to what is and what has come before allows a blessing to unfold.

The archetypal healing principle of Omolù relates with compassionate awareness, acceptance, surrendering to a higher will, and resurrection after a psychic, emotional, or spiritual death. Surrendering in this way is not specific to nor limited by any religious practice or belief system and creates a felt sense of relaxation through the body-mind system and a deepening connection with life. Surrendering allows access to the soul and to a consciousness that transcends separation. Omolù’s process liberates us from the oppressive nature of suffering and allows renewal and hope to emerge.

In many spiritual traditions, the compassionate, taking care orientation of Omolù not only provides a way to be present with suffering, but also as a nondual orientation towards all experience. From the Tao te Ching, Stephen Mitchell wrote:

“The Master gives himself up to whatever the moment brings. He knows that he is going to die and has nothing left to hold on to: no illusions in his mind, no resistances in his body. He doesn’t think about his actions; they flow from the core of his being. He holds nothing back from life; therefore he is ready for death, as a man is ready for sleep after a good day’s work.”

When we turn towards what is happening in our organismic system with compassion and curiosity, we can eventually touch the hidden gems within our experiences. Each experience represents the ineffable, the essential that is contained within it. At the most basic level, life energy is animating everything, pulsing, living, flowing through us and the world we live in. Orienting with our experience through the body-mind system in this way is turning towards life itself, the macrocosmic power manifesting through the human experience: the ocean manifesting as a wave.

Omolù teaches us the kindness and care we bring to a difficult moment, a moment when suffering is present, is an expression of love and healing. When we bring the love of Omolù's archetypal force to the love inherent in the movements of our bodies, energy, emotions, thinking, and soul, we connect with the intrinsic healing potential contained within any experience.

Oxumarè

Oxumarè is an archetypal principle of transformation which overlaps with all the orixàs, representing openness to change, sensuality and vital energy, integrating masculine and feminine, and transmuting all opposites through an alchemical process which results in a third thing, a third way. Oxumarè is associated with Kundalini in the Yoga tradition: once it awakens from its slumber at the base of the spine, it moves up the spine in the direction of evolving and becoming: expanding consciousness; and it also moves down the spine in the direction of integration: grounding expanded consciousness into the body and into our world. Oxumarè transforms energy from bottom to top and top to bottom through a continuous movement which includes and transcends opposites.

Afro Brazilian Shamanism's Oxumarè is male for six months and female for six months, or simultaneously both half male and female, changing parts from top to bottom and bottom to top. They (or he or she) represent the colorful, rainbow bridge, whether across the depths of the abyss, connecting vertically between earth and sky, or even

through time - connecting past and future which become integrated into a dynamic, emergent presence.

The archetypal principle of Oxumarè represents the arts – beauty, sound, and sensual fluidity of movement of the body and psyche – which convey healing through magical artistry. Through Oxumarè, all the elemental archetypes of nature, the orixàs, can be expressed through us naturally, and our natural drive is awakened energetically and spiritually. Oxumarè can also be frightening, represented as a fierce, brightly colored serpent, with glittering eyes, who shines with the colors of the rainbow until transforming into a beam of light, like the clearness of the sky after a storm.

In life experience, the archetypal principal of Oxumarè can accompany us as a triad of the snake, the eagle, and the dragon, with the snake as the innate impulse/force of life, the eagle as an interruption of the flow, i.e. a difficulty, blockage, etc., and the dragon as the transmutation which includes, integrates, and transcends both. I'm reminded of Einstein's words,

“We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.”

Choosing to relate with a problem as the eagle who interrupts our flow allows us to expand our consciousness so that a transformation can occur.

Oxumarè enables passing through profound experience and an initiatory death, creating the powers of mystical seeing and healing. In a lecture I heard recently by Thomas Hübl, he asked, “How do we turn our own unconsciousness into seeing?” This reminds me of Oxumarè, in that we are having an experience (snake), we have a question about it (interruption of the experience of snake by the eagle), and being with both, including whatever unconscious or absent information led to the question in the first place allows a reunification that is represented in the form of the dragon.

In the tradition of Tantra as well as many other spiritual traditions, the ultimate goal is to become an illuminated light in the world (not out of it) connecting heaven and earth

through us, through our vertical alignment, our awakened spinal columns. The difficulties or blockages we face have a correlation to this upwards and downwards movement. How to be grounded in life and connected in this world which carries elements of trauma, including some systemic collective traumas which are hundreds or thousands of years old? The archetypal principle of Oxumarè provides some insight: as we meet the questions, difficulties, or blockages that arise in our lives in a way they can be re-integrated, the next step or possibility for integration will naturally emerge. As more of us come into flow in this way in our inner and outer worlds, all beings benefit. It's the dream we are creating.

Closing

I have loved learning about the archetypes in Biotransenergetics inspired by Afro Brazilian Shamanism. Each orixà, nature-inspired archetype, is beautiful, and I am especially intrigued by the archetypal principles Omolù and Oxumarè. Relating with the qualities of healing and transformation through their archetypal principles conveys a sense of the strength to reclaim a part of my soul.

Omolù reminds me that the medicine of healing is invoked through contact with the wound or illness: a relational, compassionate *turning towards* the contents of experience begins to restore interconnected flow, unfolding a deeper connection. Through the archetypal principle of Omolù, I touch a felt sense of harmony and peacefulness within specific parts of me and within the whole of me, inside me and in the space around me.

Oxumarè reminds me that apparent opposites which appear polarized are part of a whole, and in the experience of opposites coming together, a synthesis occurs, and I am "cooked" by my experiences so that something new emerges. Connecting with the archetypal principle of Oxumarè feels enlivening and stimulating, restoring connection with the life impulse within me which wants to move and express.

Omolù inspires me to remember how powerful it is to connect with the disease or issue without ambition: simply meeting, allowing, welcoming, communing, to discover what is emerging through the experience. Discovering the gem in the shadow, the intelligence of life through the illness, becomes a healing medicine on any or all of the five organismic levels of the body-mind.

Oxumarè inspires me to embrace vitality, that an interruption to my experience of flow (like the triad of snake, eagle, and dragon) may be related to as an eagle catalyzing me to a whole new way of being, and that difficult life experiences which create separation through any part of the body-mind system may yet yield their gifts. Willingness to include and unite opposites, and presence with the vertical line of energy up and down my spine is continually a resource, life flowing skywards and earthwards reminding me I'm a part of everything.

NOTES

1 - Afro-Brazilian Shamanism, spirituality and religions are ancient in origin, diverse throughout the African diaspora and deeply connected with the Brazilian national identity.

“Most of these traditions have roots in nineteenth-century Brazilian slave societies and are the creation of enslaved Africans and their descendants. The religions developed as part of Blacks' efforts to make sense of an experience of extraordinary disjunction and to create instruments that would sustain the deepest sources of their own humanity in the midst of great personal and collective trauma.”

Afro-Brazilian Religions, Encyclopedia.com

<https://www.encyclopedia.com/environment/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/afro-brazilian-religions>

The sustained existence of Afro-Brazilian shamanism is a living example of the archetypal principle of Omolù, the healing cure that can unveil love as a gift, a beautiful expression of the life force even through horrible suffering. As a person who lives in a white body with ancestors descended from both colonizers and colonized, I acknowledge and mourn the oppressive conditions which were imposed on enslaved Africans, and out of which Afro-Brazilian shamanism bloomed. The gifts coming out of the suffering benefit many, including me.

2 - Biotransenergetics is the foundation of the Integral Transpersonal Psychology program at Ubiquity University, in collaboration with the Integral Transpersonal Institute. This document is an assignment for the course Shamanic Archetypes in Transpersonal Counseling.

3 - In the Raja Yoga tradition, the magnification of spiritual power and energy through dedicated, devoted, and sustained practice is described as abhyasa.

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