

# CONFERENCE REPORT

## Reflections on the 1st International Congress of the Forum of African Psychology, 27 to 29 March 2014, Polokwane

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1<sup>st</sup> International  
Congress of the  
Forum of African  
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The Forum of African Psychology hosted its first International Congress of the Forum of African Psychology (FAP) from the 27th to the 29th of March 2014. As a division of the Psychological Association of South Africa, this innovative conference aimed to initiate dialogue not only amongst psychological professionals, but also directly with the communities it endeavours to service and learn from. As such, the Forum through dialogue generated by the congress, aimed (and aims) to progressively conscientise and mobilize the profession of psychology in creating a psychology that is relevant to the context-specific needs of the African continent. This inevitably involves a reconceptualization and re-structuring of psychological knowledge that is typically imported uncritically from Anglo-America, towards a psychology that is contextualized to the lived experiences and knowledges of those on the African continent. This movement towards an African-centered psychology therefore implies a movement towards an African relevant psychology. This necessarily involves a process towards a decolonization of our thinking as a profession towards a willingness and ability to incorporate new knowledges that are relevant to those we seek to help and engage with.

In an attempt to incorporate African cultural and philosophical paradigms into traditional psychology, the congress utilized a collaborative approach by attempting to engage in meaningful dialogue with African traditional healers. This collaborative effort, though imperative to navigating towards an African-centered Psychology, raised questions or tensions, the resolve of which are not easily reconcilable without transparent critical dialogue.

A central tension that arose through participation in the conference centered on the term “African”, what it means to be “African”; and “who Africans are”. This tension cannot be dismissed as mere semantic labeling or philosophical eccentricity since its definition guides the epistemological and ideological underpinnings, debate, conversations, and subsequent knowledges produced by the Forum. It also holds significant consequence since the word “African” forms a key differentiating word within the title and narrative of the Forum. It is also indicated in the vision and the mission statement of the Forum which endeavours to “be the world- class custodian of African- centred psychology” by proactively advancing “African-centred psychology that reflects African philosophy and realities”. Whilst keynote speeches aimed to provide an understanding of what African and consequently, what African Psychology is, the lack of varied perspective combined with an inadequate attention to the complexities surrounding a clear workable definition of what “African” and “African Psychology” means filtered into confusion of what African philosophies, spirituality and realities are. This is unfortunate especially since the first congress for the Forum offered the foundational space in which such clarity should have been made explicitly.

The practical implications of the above tensions are deconstructed using the example of colleagues that attended the conference who by categorisation according to the South African Census would be identified as black South Africans. Based on their ethnicity, their ancestry which is clearly rooted within traditional indigenous customs and practices, and their geographical origin- their “Africanness” is not immediately questioned. The inclusion of Sangomas to bless the opening ceremony of the Forum by calling on the ancestors, should not by virtue of their outward appearance be taken to be offensive. However, internal conflict was provoked in these colleagues as their current religious beliefs and customs were not congruent to the traditions and customs of those that came before them. Their present religious beliefs necessitated a leaving behind/aside of the traditional beliefs of their forefathers. Possible reconciliation of these appearing disparate worlds were offered during certain plenary talks but unfortunately did not provide comfort to these colleagues who felt that the interpretation of what it meant to be African to them was not catered for by the Congress because their view of being African did not mean a belief in traditional indigenous healing knowledge systems.

This caused a questioning of what it meant to be African since to them the congress implicitly defined African with having beliefs consistent with one’s ancestry. Through

a process of free association that arose spontaneously from such conversations other questions became evident such as: Who qualifies as African? Does African mean black? Does African mean the embracing of indigenous knowledge systems only? Does the rejection of indigenous traditional knowledge systems by black Africans in acceptance of other world knowledge systems constitute an unacceptable dissociation from what African truly means? Does this dissociation relinquish one's claim to be authentically African? Does denouncing one's indigenous past make one whiter in the Fanon sense? What does it mean to be authentically African? Are people of other ethnic and racial origins born on the African continent African? Are all who perceive themselves to be African actually categorized as being African by the Forum? Are there levels of Africanness with some being more African than others?

These are contentious questions that are by no means new. They may not be able to be resolved in the sense of global consensus but they need to be resolved within the context of the Forum going forward. These questions are contentious because the term "African" is highly politicized and ideologically loaded courtesy of the continent's and its people's forced historical legacy of colonialism, forced immigration due to slavery, oppression, subjugation, exploitation, demonization, together with a host of other adjectives that leaves a singular definition of the African Identity problematic.

This problematic is further compounded by a false homogeneity and a unified inclusiveness of social norms, beliefs, language, food, mannerisms, governance, constitutions, political strategies, global alliances, traditions, and customs that the term "African" implies across the over fifty independent countries and Islands that make up the second largest continent on earth. African as a continent boasts over 1000 ethnic groupings with over 700 hundred languages. Africa as a continent is also diverse in terms of its geographical terrain and climate as it is in its defining of what it means to be African. This heterogeneity is not something that needs to be reconcilable under one agenda for psychology in Africa. Instead African Psychology represents the exciting possibility for various African Psychologies the focus of which is in developing and applying psychological knowledge contextually in service to humanity on the African continent thereby circumventing the imposition of one restrictive practice for another. A defining project for the Forum would therefore be to employ sensitivity in the use of the term "African" in relation to producing an "African Psychology" that is universal to the "African Continent". This re-thinking and re-defining is imperative in avoiding misunderstanding and misrepresentation of what African means thereby mitigating the risk for exclusion in the Forum's future endeavours.

Whilst the Forum has taken the necessary first step in engaging in conversation with traditional indigenous healers, a consideration that traditional indigenous healers form only one segment of black African belief and practice needs to be acknowledged for the purposes of avoiding exclusion of those eager to contribute

to the progression of the profession in context. This was exemplified through the exclusion (intention or unintentionally) of non- Sepedi speaking individuals during the plenary discussions of the conference between academics and traditional indigenous healers. It can be argued that the conversation needed to be conducted in Sepedi to aid understanding and inclusion of the traditional healers present. But this excluded other races and other black speakers who were not able to understand the language. The same argument of exclusion could be made against the use of English as the dominant language of a conference in conversation with the traditional healers who were not fluent in English. The language barrier presented a unique barrier to effective communication that left many confused and unsure as to their role going forward. One such example arose when aiding a traditional healer with his feedback form. His primary concern focused on the biological and needing clarity in how his medicinal knowledge, as a cure for cancer and HIV, could be incorporated into the National Healthcare System. This represented a clear misunderstanding in terms of his role in relation to psychology.

The debate of South Africa's lead in defining an African Psychology relevant for the entire continent is centred in macro- political discourse from which the Forum's vision and mission cannot be divorced from. Some may even argue as to the contribution of South African in developing an African Psychology representative of the African continent since South Africa is undoubtedly influenced by its contemporary diversity fuelled by increasing global hegemony. Resistance to South Africa's role in BRICS and its potential role in being the "gateway" to the rest of Africa is a topic of heated argument from other African States. The Forum's ambitious aim to produce the development of an African Psychology universally applicable for all African States needs to be considered with caution if it is prevent an outright rejection (though extreme) of its knowledges because of a lack of consideration of the wider political and social landscape that operates within and defines relations in South African and Africa. The importance in carefully arching out a working definition of African in relation to what the Forum aims to contribute to contextualising psychology in and to South Africa and Africa will inevitably prevent the Forum from following in the footsteps of the western psychologies it has justifiably found the need to redefine.

In so doing, alternative ways of speaking, in and by, the collective need to be appreciated in defining multiple ways of articulating African identity and African Psychology.

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE



**Janice Moodley** is a lecturer in the Department of Psychology at Unisa. Her interest areas are health psychology within the developing country context; critical health psychology at the intersection of poverty, race, gender and class; and the use of critical discourse analysis in exploring the political context of social inequality and injustice with a developing country context.