

# The Tradition of Eldership

By

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... the ABPsi Council of Elders can be one of the most important structures created by The Association of Black Psychologists. Its creation signals and simultaneously will guide our continual movement toward the greater capacity of Black Psychologists to heal the whole community.

In the Yoruba tradition the Council of Elders is called the *Osugbo* or *Ogboni Society*. The *Osugbo* (*Ogboni*) Society is a society of male and female Elders who are responsible for the selection, installation and burial of kings. They also render judgment and stipulate punishment in cases of serious crimes in the society. As in most African cultures, the Council of Elders is one of the most important institutions created. Sitting on the Council of Elders requires wisdom and the ability to express what needs to be said in a way that is not socially disruptive or alienating. Integrity, wisdom, articulateness, subtlety, tactfulness and being listened to by others, are all qualities of an Elder. The Council of Elders ideally consists of the eldest and wisest male and female Elders of the community.

In the Amara Society of East Africa, persons over the age of 60 are known as

"*Shimagie*" (male Elder) and "*Bahter*" (female Elder). The primary work of the Elder is to advise, guide and oversee the work of various other councils (*Shingilina*). The Elders are the guardians of the culture, traditions and history of the people. They continually engage in the teaching of those who are younger. The experience and wisdom of the Elder is readily sought and freely shared with others. They serve as a link between the past and the present while guaranteeing that our way of life is extended into the future.

The symbol of the West African Ogboni Society (Council of Elders) is the *Onile* which is two iron figurine spikes (one male, one female) joined at the head with a chain. The Yoruba believe that the head is the site of the spiritual essence of the person. The *Onile* symbolizes the sacred bond shared between the male and female members of the Council of Elders and the importance of "the couple." The emphasis on sexual attributes of the *Onile* are designed to convey the mystical power of procreation and the omnipotence of the Elders. The importance of the complementarity between men and women is similarly reinforced by the Ogboni Society's unique gesture of placing the left (feminine) fist on top of the right (masculine) fist, with the thumbs concealed, in front of the stomach. This gesture represents both a sign of giving blessings as well as the recognition of the dominance of spiritual sacred matters — and the primacy of the spiritual over the material.

## The Role of the Elders' Council

With increasing years of longevity, one's status and value in the community rises. Living to a very old age is considered a blessing. It is thought to be an honor to even be in the presence of an Elder. In fact, to have Elders live with you, and for you to have available their daily guidance, is considered a great blessing and advantage. Eldership takes decades of ex

oriental learning and refinement. It is, however, more than mere aging. It requires increasing generosity, wisdom, integrity and gratefulness with advancing years. In the Yoruba tradition, the transition from adult to Elder involves a significant shift in personal and collective responsibilities. Generally, it is the responsibility of adult men to protect and defend the community while adult women's responsibility is to nurture and educate the community. Accordingly, adult men are often consumed with the purpose and task of obtaining and providing those resources that sustain life for themselves and their families. Similarly, adult women's time and interest is devoted to securing and establishing an environment or area which is conducive to the growth and development of Life.

However, when men enter the community of Elders they take on the role of "Baba Agbe" which means senior father, or more correctly, "nurturing father." When women enter the community of Elders they take on the role of "Iya Agbe" which means senior mother or "warrior mother." It is the "Iya Agbe" who have the primary role as the spiritual protector of the community. With the status of Eldership, women are devoted to protecting and defending (warrior mother) the spiritual balance of the community, while men are dedicated to securing and establishing (nurturing father) the spiritual harmony in the community. Although there appears to be a reversal in the male-female roles and energy at the onset of Eldership, the balance and complementarity of the male principle and the female principle is inviolate and always present.

As Elders, both men and women devote themselves to the higher responsibility of utilizing the collective spirit to guide and direct the permanent ascension of the community and to channel its vital life force. The utilization and understanding of the natural spiritual power of the community is, in fact, perceived as the "wisdom of Eldership." This is an all-

consuming task and in order to do this, Elders are generally not involved in the survival struggles of life (i.e., wage dependent work). They are generally "retired" and can devote themselves to the full-time pursuit of wisdom and the understanding of the high values and traditions of the community. In effect, the Elder's "work" is to synthesize wisdom from long life experience and to formulate this into a legacy for future generations.

Elders are responsible for continually contemplating the good and the right. Because of their Eldership status, they are not-or should not be-driven by personal interest or individual reward. They cannot be tempted or influenced by appeals to favoritism or personal desires. The status of Eldership places them above the needs of "getting over" or "what's in it for me personally?" Although male and female

Elders have distinct responsibilities in traditional life, in general, as Elders they share in the responsibility for correcting imbalances, maintaining peace, and revitalizing community life. Their singular goal is to guide and guarantee the cooperative good and collective advancement. The Elder knows the traditions, history, values, beliefs and

cultural laws that are inviolate. The judgments and decisions of the Elders are always consistent with their community's cultural integrity and directed toward Truth and Justice.

Accordingly, the community knows that submitting to the direction and governance of the Elders is not an abdication of individual rights or personal freedom. It is, in fact, a relationship that results in a deep sense of psychological security and collective homeostasis.

#### The Council of Elders of The Association of Black Psychologists

More than anyone else, Black Psychologists need to represent and reflect "normality" in our personal and collective behaviors. In traditional African healing, it was often



"normal" for the doctor to take the medicine she or he prepared for the patient. There are many reasons for this practice. One is to establish a symbiotic bond with the patient. Another is for the doctor to experience the effects of the treatment; another is to eliminate incompetent physicians.

For many of us, the reclamation of our traditional cultural practices is a requisite part of our collective healing. Accordingly, Black Psychologists need to take the medicine we are prescribing to our community. By reclaiming the tradition of Eldership, we, in fact, are realigning ourselves to a universal field of energy that recognizes the law of progeny and stimulates a vibration that constitutes the residue of an original form or process.

In addition to serving as advisors to The ABPsi's Board of Directors for the purpose of providing wisdom and guidance and conducting formal rituals and ceremonies (e.g., presiding over meetings, the pouring of libations, exhorting the President, etc.), The Association of Black Psychologists' Council of Elders will be responsible for providing clarification, interpretation or judgment regarding our traditions, beliefs,

positions and ethics. Our Council of Elders should therefore actively help The Association to determine what cultural laws, beliefs and traditions are inviolate in the African community in America. In cases of disagreement or during moments of confusion, the membership should defer or look to the Elders for opinion, clarification, direction and, ultimately, a decision. In this regard, and upon thorough deliberation and discussion, the Council of Elders should give the membership further direction or make an irrevocable decision relative to our deeper spiritual essence and the higher good. In this capacity, the Council of Elders will have the responsibility of guiding The Association and directing its path to higher levels of right living and functioning.

Traditionally, it is said that "the Elders have said" or "the Elders have spoken," which means

that this is how it will be and we accept their decision with a "good heart" (with no remorse or resentment). Once the Elders have spoken on an issue, they will have taken the issue and us to a higher level and we, the membership, should welcome the directive to move to a higher level of right thinking and right being.

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community.*

However, The Association of Black Psychologists' Council of Elders cannot correct imbalance, maintain peace and harmony, and reinforce our standards of rightness if the membership is not willing to accept the Elders' rule and our corollary role of acceptance and submission. Both our newly established Council of Elders and the membership as a large will need to respect and be obedient to the institution of Eldership as we practice this traditional relationship.

As our "Baba Agba" (nurturing fathers) and "Iya Agba" (warrior mothers), the ABPsi's Council of Elders can be one of the most important structures created by The Association of Black Psychologists. Its creation signals and simultaneously will guide our continual movement toward the greater capacity of Black Psychologists to heal the whole community.

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**The initial selection of The ABPsi's Council  
of Elders includes:**

*Harold Dent  
Ara Hilliard  
Anna M. Jackson  
M. Henry Pitts  
Joseph White  
Daniel Williams  
Robert Williams*



## *Elder*

*An Elder is a person  
who is still growing,  
still learning, still with potential  
and whose life  
continues to have within it  
promise for, and connection  
to the Future.*

*An Elder is still in pursuit  
of happiness, Joy and Pleasure  
and her or his birthright  
to these remains intact.*

*Moreover, an Elder is a person  
who deserves respect and honor  
and whose work is to synthesize  
wisdom from long life experience  
and formulate this into  
a legacy for future generations.*