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Lessons From the Maafa

Rethinking the Legacy of Slain Hip-Hop Icon Tupac Amaru Shakur

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The culture of hip-hop and the legacy of some artists have received much criticism during the past two decades. At the center of that controversy is one artist who is never forgotten, for better or worse, Tupac Amaru Shakur. Although the legacy of Tupac looms large in urban centers around the world among the popular culture of youth, there has been little attention paid to him as a central figure in the professional literature. This article explores his life and lyrics, placing his contributions and struggles on a cycle of the Maat, Maafa, Sankofa paradigm, challenging critics to rethink his legacy.

Keywords: *Tupac; Maat; Maafa; Sankofa; hip-hop; double consciousness; urban youth culture*

You try to plant something in the concrete and if it grow and the rose petal got all kinda scratches and marks you not gone say, damn look at all the scratches and marks on the rose that grew from concrete you gone say, DAMN A ROSE GREW FROM THE CONCRETE. Same thing with me, I grew out of all this. Instead of saying, you did this you did this, you should be like DAMN HE GREW OUT OF THAT, HE CAME OUT OF THAT? That's what they should see, all I'm trying to do is grow and make good out of the dirty nasty unbelievable life style they gave me.

Tupac Shakur, 2000¹

For many, the name Tupac Shakur evokes negative images of a young male rapper full of anger and hatred. The titles alone of some of his CD tracks, such as "If I Die Tonight," "Death Around the Corner," "Life of an Outlaw," "Fuck the World," "Bomb First," and "Thug Passion," capture evidence of rage against authority figures, the police, women, Whites, societal

institutions, and other Black males. Tupac's lyrics further expose his sense of alienation and express in extreme terms what he considered to be reality. It would be simple to accept this popular image and delve no deeper, but a careful examination of Tupac's life and musical contributions reveals a far more complex reality. Tupac is not only "a rose growing from concrete," an apt metaphor for an African American reared in inner city street life, he is someone who suffered greatly for what he believed. Currently, there is a gap in knowledge about the social and political implications of the life of Tupac because little attention has been given to him in the professional literature. This critique is an attempt to fill some of that void.

African traditionalists believe that their clan ancestors charge each generation with the specific missions of ensuring the survival and continuation of the clan and facilitating the reemergence, development, and expansion of the national reality. Certain members of the clan, charged with carrying out these missions, are chosen to reenter the physical and are then endowed with the necessary skills, talents, or personality features to facilitate the consummation of their task (Agye & Akoto, 2000). Tupac was charged with a similar mission during the course of his physical experience. Taking on the role of a soldier and educator, Tupac used his voice to challenge European domination over the thinking and socialization of people of African ancestry. He often used his own life experiences as an example of the grave contradictions faced by the poor living in urban America.

Here, we explore the deeply rooted values and struggles of Tupac Shakur, so eloquently expressed through his life and lyrics, bridging the perceived gap in understanding between his values and struggles and those of the larger African American community. This article honors his voice, his contribution, and the great sacrifice he made as master storyteller, reflecting the plight and reality of African American people living in the Maafa.

The total impact of the Maafa and its residue of spiritual alienation and double consciousness are scarcely understood. Analyzing the psychological residuals of the Maafa on the development and movement of hip-hop culture from an African-centered perspective begins to help reshape our understanding of Tupac Shakur.

This essay illustrates the life of Tupac Shakur. However, the significance of the tools used for exploration exceeds this unique individual. With the proper understanding of this cycle and its application on the continuum of the African American experience, observers can imitate the ancestors, imitating the cosmic consciousness, and reap the spiritual fruits, as did the ancestors' previous unfolding knowledge that expands our understanding of the great impact of the Maafa on African American life.

This article explores Tupac's experience within the framework of the Maat Maafa Sankofa paradigm as presented by Ani (2003) at the National Association of Black Social Workers Academy for African Centered Social Work Institute.² The concepts Maat, Maafa, and Sankofa create a model for understanding the experiential realities of African people. Maat represents African generation and connectedness, with Africans functioning together as members of a complete whole. Maat is wellness. Maafa represents degeneration and the disconnectedness of African people. Sankofa is a regeneration period preparing one to return to optimal health, which is Maat.

Tupac's life is presented here as a young man resisting and critiquing the Maafa while desperately seeking to return (Sankofa) to Maat. The critique reveals the deep enlightenment he experienced, but yet the ultimate adverse effects living in the cycle had on his life. The article further explores Tupac's connection to Black Panther Party ideology, using his voice to bring attention to the Black urban poor and the consequences of his double consciousness, challenging readers to rethink his legacy given his place in the Maat, Maafa, Sankofa cycle.

Maat, Maafa, Sankofa Paradigm

The paradigm begins with Maat, the originating substance of African Civilization representing the vision of a divine cosmic order, which the ancestors endeavored to imitate. The process of African civilization requires periodic renewal and cleansing so that African people can be reminded of their purpose and return to the vision and standard of Maat (Ani, 2003).

The original essence of Maat and the Weighing of the Soul was captured by the people of Ancient Kemet (Egypt) in their earliest writings, which are commonly referred to as hieroglyphics. The original name given to these writings by the ancient Kemites is *Metu Neter*, meaning the writings of God, or divine speech. These writings decorated temples, coffins, and papyrus and carry wisdom of the spiritual nature of human beings and ways to encourage spiritual liberation, awakening, or revivification from ordinary human consciousness and mortality to cosmic consciousness and immortality (Browder, 1992).

Maat is centered on seven fundamental virtues, the pathways to the highest of human excellence: truth, justice, compassion, harmony, balance, reciprocity, and order. The seven virtues are drawn from 42 laws that govern the way a person should live his or her life. These commandments are known as the Negative Confessions or Declarations of Innocence but are

here referred to as the 42 Admonitions of Maat. The admonitions are the guidelines for righteous conduct and the standard against which the soul of the dead will be judged. Those who live in strict adherence to the principles of Maat are assured a just reward in the afterlife (Ashby, 2002).

The Akan cosmological concept of Sankofa is a cultural regeneration that restores the natural misalignments for civilizational perfectibility (Maat). Sankofa teaches people to go back and fetch it and return to the source of power. It is natural for a civilization to cleanse and experience restitution. Optimally, a civilization would remain in a cycle of Maat and Sankofa; however, for African people throughout the Diaspora devastated by European enslavement and colonization, the Maafa infringes on this healthy cycle and forces African people into an alternative cycle of healing that constantly takes them back through the Maafa until the journey back to Maat through Sankofa is completed (Ani, 2003). The cleansing is called Sankofa, and it allows African people to return to the inspirational source (Maat) of the culture that African people created together (Ani, 2003). Sankofa is a roadmap that gives direction to help African people restore that which has been lost to return to the *asili* (source) of their power. The natural and healthy condition of the African civilization process is a continuous repetitious spiral of Maat and Sankofa, Maat and Sankofa, and so forth.

The introduction of the Maafa breaks this creative and healthy cycle of living and healing. The “Maafa” is a Kiswahili concept introduced by Marimba Ani (2003) referencing the “great disaster” of the African Holocaust by violent European cultural infringement. It refers to the physical as well as psychological enslavement and oppression of the African (Richards, 1980). Kambon (1998) cautioned that the Maafa “cannot be overlooked in an analysis of African cultural reality and its historical underpinnings and contemporary condition” (p. 67). The interrupted rhythm now requires the African to balance these paradoxical and incongruous patterns.

The psychological consequences and implications of the “great disaster” have caused great suffering for African people. Specific consequences include the conditioning of African people to view themselves through the eyes of others (double consciousness), removal from traditional African cultural value systems, acceptance of a foreign European value system, and disconnection of African people from healthy relationships with each other and from African spirituality.

Ani (2003) warned that the Maafa disaster causes cultural disease among African people by breaking the rhythm of African wholeness where the Sankofa cultural regeneration is no longer possible and so the rhythm of African civilization is halted. Through this experience, African people are

dependent on their enemies, who have attacked them spiritually and culturally. In the Maafa, Africans experience powerlessness. Convinced of the superiority of their oppressors, sovereignty is lost and they must deny who they are in order to be free in a European dominated world (Ani, 2003).

In the Maafa—Who Was Tupac Shakur?

Caught between genius and tragedy, poverty and “cash money,” racism and justice, sanity and insanity, law and outlaws, love and lies, stability and a world full of contradictions, Tupac was raised by the streets. His connection to street life and the condition of urban Black America was a constant theme in his poetry, lyrics, and interviews. In *The Rose That Grew From Concrete* (2000), a book of poetry written by Tupac, one is allowed a tour into the mind and complexity of Tupac Shakur. The stories he told of himself and his perspective on life create a huge mirror into the souls of so many others like him, but often without words and voice to speak and act on their own behalf.

Tupac is a study in duality. Rooted in the socialist views of the Black Panther Party, he later seemed to embrace capitalist materialism. Perhaps it was because the only thing he really ever hated was poverty (A. Shakur, Toffler, & Lazin, 2003). Kambon (1998) believed the experience of Africans in America is one in which the Eurocentric worldview has been superimposed on the natural African self-consciousness or worldview. Consequently, most African Americans function with an unconscious African worldview and a conscious Eurocentric worldview (Kambon, 1998). Du Bois (1903) suggested that this cultural assimilation of Africans created a double consciousness: “one Negro and one American” (p. 3). According to Kambon, Du Bois saw both the African and American orientation harmoniously coexisting within African Americans and ultimately becoming a normal state of African existence. Kambon went on to assert that Du Bois further believed the mastery of both consciousnesses would represent optimal mental health for Africans in American society. This perspective can be employed to view the complexity of understanding Tupac Shakur.

African personality disorder occurs when an alien and/or anti-African worldview orientation is superimposed on the natural African self-consciousness (the natural African cognitive structure) through intense, prolonged, and pervasive alien cultural oppression producing contradictory or anti-African psychology functioning and behaviors in African people, resulting in the formation of a dual system of cognitive structures within the African personality

(Kambon, 1998). Thus, “the implant of a Eurocentric cognitive structure/the European survival thrust within the African psyche as a psychological aberration, a condition of cultural psychopathology-mental disorder in Africans, not as a state or condition of psychological health” (Kambon, 1998, p. 340). Tupac, like so many others, was an example of what happens when generations of flourishing seed are uprooted from their culture of origin and planted in foreign soil.

Keeling (1999), in her article titled “‘A Homegrown Revolutionary’? Tupac Shakur and the Legacy of the Black Panther Party,” was the first to propose the notion of Tupac and double consciousness in the professional literature. She defined “the Tupac discourse,” casting him as a symbol of the contradictions, disappointments, strivings, and realities of the Black Power era’s children. Keeling further stated,

The conclusion most often drawn about him in the Tupac discourse (and, by extension, about the generation of which he is symbolic) is that he failed to live up to the potential offered him by the new opportunities open to black people since “the 60s.” Because in Tupac’s lyrics and interviews he offered his listeners insightful observations about the connection between the violence and nihilism in the world in which he lived and the systemic oppression of black people in American. “The Tupac discourse,” in the same breath in which it castigates him, also hails him as a 1990s-style revolutionary. Armond White says in one of the more thoughtful meditations available about Tupac, “The child who attempts to make a new world from his parents’ past is a homegrown revolutionary.” (p. 60)

Keeling gave a very thoughtful critique of how society romanticizes the exploits of the past or the “good old days,” circuitously making it not feasible for future generations to meet an unattainable standard. They are expected to advance on the precedents offered in the idealized past and their labors are compared in that idealistic yet false light. This view causes inherent disappointment when the romanticized view is complicated further when the current generation is expected to achieve the unrealized dreams of past generations (Keeling, 1999).

The verve with which Tupac lived provides a window into the *asili* (seed or source) of African American culture (Ani, 2003). For example, in a special issue of *Vibe Magazine* (Light, 1997) dedicated to Tupac, Kevin Powell, who had the opportunity to interview Tupac, recalls him standing before a room of teachers and administrators explaining that T.H.U.G. L.I.F.E. (The Hate You Give Little Infants Fucks Everyone), which Tupac so valiantly trumpeted, is an expression of the laws of karma. He forced

society to face up to its role in shaping the very object of its disapproval. His dynamism in all avenues of life gave onlookers access to themselves, for he was an exaggerated version of our collective multiplicity. It is for this reason that Tupac remains of colossal interest to such a wide array of people. Tupac told stories about the social, physical, and psychological conditions of African people living in the Maafa. These are stories most African American people know, but they retreat from acknowledging them, as if by consciously ignoring and refusing to give voice to African American suffering they would somehow be able to reduce the pain and reality of its existence. Acknowledging and giving voice to the suffering is, however, a critical element of the *Ayare-sa* (healing; Ani, 2003; Martin & Martin, 1995).

Sankofa: The Struggle To Return

In order to know Tupac, one must also know, and to some extent support, the vision and ideas of the Black Panther Party. Tupac was a second-generation Black Panther, profoundly influenced by the teachings of his legendary godfather, Geronimo Pratt. It was within this community that Tupac was conceived, born, nurtured, educated, and brought to manhood. In *Revolutionary Suicide*, Huey Newton (1995), the founder of the Black Panther Party, wrote,

The street brothers were important to me, and I could not turn away from the life I shared with them. There was in them an intransigent hostility toward all those sources of authority that had such a dehumanizing effect on the community. In school the system was the teacher but on the block the system was everything that was not a positive part of the community. My comrades on the block continued to resist that authority, and I felt that I could not let college pull me away, no matter how attractive education was. These brothers had the sense of harmony and communion I needed to maintain that part of myself not totally crushed by the schools and other authorities. (pp. 73-74)

The Black Panther Party was born out of this spirit. The party was formed in the midst of an African rebellion movement, in which African Americans were publicly fighting against their oppressors to free themselves from the bowels of the Maafa. Despite the popular nonviolent movement, Newton and friend Bobby Seale were compelled to form an organization directed at the needs of the underprivileged and disenfranchised after witnessing countless acts of police terrorism. The Black Panther Party's attempt to restore dignity and to empower the community can be seen as Sankofa on

the Spiro cycle. Tupac was spawned amid this movement, and these principles were integral to his rearing. While the Panthers were forging a reputation in the larger society as violent agitators, their reputation within the communities they served was much different. Tupac was criticized and celebrated in a similar fashion. In fact, according to Tupac's sister, Sekyiwa, and countless other family members, he was the shining light of his family, providing needed support even before he became famous. He would let his sister know growing up that "all I had to do was be a little girl, he would take care of everything, he was completely nurturing and actually maternal" (A. Shakur et al., 2003).

While pregnant with Tupac, his mother Afeni was charged along with the others in the infamous New York 21 conspiracy to bomb several public areas in New York City. She was sent to the Women's House of Detention in Greenwich Village. While in prison, she fought to obtain a court order to be allowed one egg a day for the nourishment of her unborn child. Shortly after her acquittal, Tupac Amaru (Inca words meaning "shining serpent") Shakur (Arabic for "thankful to God") was born on June 16, 1971, in New York City. The family moved to Baltimore and later to California. His stepfather and godfather were imprisoned for their brazen political ideologies, so Tupac grew up without a father figure in the home (Dyson, 2001).

After Afeni moved her family to California, her role within the Panther movement changed. She went from outspoken activist leader to full-time mother and homemaker. Rejected and marginalized, she turned to drugs (Dyson, 2001).

In *Holler If You Hear Me: Searching for Tupac Shakur*, author Michael Eric Dyson (2001) documented how Afeni and her children had to adjust to the major move from being at the heart of the Black Power movement to being literally rejected. And although this experience was not uncommon for those who once served as members of the Black Panther Party, it would have a profound impact on a particular Panther child who would not allow the suffering of his family and his comrades to go unnoticed. Dyson explored the impact this transition had on shaping the man who the world would later know as Tupac Amaru Shakur. In fact, Dyson offered one of the most holistic approaches to exploring the life and contributions of this very controversial African American icon.

I exist in the depths of solitude pondering my true goal, Trying 2 find peace of mind and still preserve my soul. Constantly yearning 2 be accepted and from all receive respect, Never compromising but sometimes risky and that is my only regret. A young heart with an old soul how can there be peace.

How can I be in the depths of solitude when there R 2 inside of me. This Duo within me causes the perfect opportunity 2 learn and live twice as fast as those who accept simplicity. (Shakur, 1999, p. 5)

Tupac despised the multiple contradictions he witnessed in the world around him, but he was unable to prevent himself from falling prey to the confusion it caused inside and outside of him. He acknowledged sexism in both the Panther Party and society at large. Tupac's work illustrated the challenges that arose from his struggle in the Maafa. He actively sought a return to power but did not know Maat and therefore could not find the source.

Some have mistakenly separated African cultural values from Panther Party ideology. However, an analysis of the poetry in the Panther newspaper by Jennings (1998) revealed the party's roots in traditional African values such as collectivism, community, and survival of the group. Some members of the organization would later implement and espouse a more direct African-centered worldview. Talented rapper and artist Mos Def stated in his interview with Eric Dyson (2001) that "the social repression experienced by the Panthers and their children had devastating consequences" (p. 67).

An avid poet and student of literary arts, Tupac was well versed in onomatopoeia, metaphor, allegory, and other prose. His lyrics, like the traditional African narratives and poems, were full of symbolism and imagery, not just simplistic extreme hate diatribes coined for shock value alone. His lyrics and poetry are filled with truth, pain, suffering, and hope, which were used to meet others in the dark corners of their own reality. The success of White supremacy requires that African people deny their divinity, relinquish their natural power, and believe the lie that they are inferior. Sankofa becomes the repudiation of that lie (Ani, 2003). Tupac accepted his divinity, cultivated his natural power, and knew that the resilience of African people could never be inferior. In these enlightened moments, it became clear that Tupac experienced cycles of Sankofa.

Similar to the plight of many African people throughout the Diaspora, Tupac existed within the confines of multiple realities, not just a dual reality. Ironically, Tupac's rise to prominence as hip-hop icon fell between the "golden era" and "gangsta rap," much like being caught between Maat and the Maafa. The socially conscious mentality popularized in the genre that preceded him was redolent of his rearing by Panthers while the pragmatic deliverance of the ideals and messages was interwoven with the popular so-called "gangsta rap" era. Tupac's meteoric rise from backup dancer and member of a group to West Coast rap's spokesman was facilitated by his

infectious energy and his expanded notoriety, which resulted from his starring in Hollywood movies. He was one of the pioneers of rappers-turned-actors, setting the trend for the many who followed. With this exposure, his “juice” was heightened, and he became one of the most influential people in Black youth culture. Hip-hop provided a mass vehicle for Tupac to voice his social and political views while at the same time allowing him to explore his creative genius without boundaries. An example of these views is in the following quote:

Did you hear about the rose that grew from a crack in the concrete / Proving nature’s laws wrong it learned 2 walk without having feet / Funny it seems but by keeping it’s dreams it learned 2 breath fresh air / Long live the rose that grew from concrete when no one else even cared! (Shakur, 1999, p. 3)

In Search of Maat

Role as Hip-Hop Cultural Icon

Tupac flourished in the role of superstar, going from celebrity to cultural icon. His fame rose with each album, arrest, movie, court date, interview, and controversy. He articulated the experiences and attitudes of millions and was heralded by many as the voice of the people.

For many, he was much more than an African in a European-controlled society and a revolutionary among assimilationists. He was socially and politically conscious; he loved and sometimes hated women; he loved life, but he prepared for war; he was critical of men who left women to raise children on their own; he hated drugs, yet he used them. He acknowledged rapping about things early in his career that never happened to him; rather, he told the stories of his peers (A. Shakur et al., 2003). His track titles alone provide the foundation for creating a curriculum on social and economic justice and advocating for social policy reform. Some of the most obvious lyric titles for some very engaging discussions include “Letter to the President,” “Baby Don’t Cry,” “Keep Your Head Up,” “Black Jesus,” “The Good Dye Young,” “Me Against the World,” “Dear Mama,” “White Man’s World,” “Against All Odds,” “Only God Can Judge Me Now,” and “Brenda Got a Baby.” Titles from his poetry that are also very alluring include “The Rose That Grew From Concrete,” “In the Depths of Solitude,” “When Your Heart Turns Cold,” “God,” “Family Tree,” “When Your Hero Falls,” “Government Assistance or My Soul,” “A River That Flows Forever,” and “Can You See the Pride in the Panther?”

Similar to his mother, Tupac's initial attraction to the Panther Party came from a sense of allure in seeing proud Black men and women attempting to answer racial oppression. However, as an adult, he later embraced ideas that conflicted with his Panther upbringing, especially his willingness to embrace capitalism as an important survival tool to escape the harsh realities of poverty (Dyson, 2001; A. Shakur et al., 2003). He stated that the only thing he really hated was poverty, bringing attention to what he perceived to be a flaw in the Panther Party's platform. Perhaps Tupac preferred to focus on the benefit to African people, utilizing capital to rebuild institutions. He attempted to find a balance between accepting materialism for collective benefit and protecting oneself from spiritual alienation. Tupac's inner and extended circle viewed his lyrics as very spiritual, and his life served as a testimony to his search for true spiritual identity. A constant theme in his interviews, poetry, and lyrics was God as the ultimate judge. His lyrics referenced the essence of the Weighing of the Soul scene depicted in the *Metu Neter* of the Ancient Egyptians, in which Maat weighed a man's deeds to determine the course of his afterlife.

Master Storyteller

In the African tradition, familial and cultural histories were bequeathed through storytelling. Also, moral lessons, value systems, and ethical codes were bestowed to future generations. Hip-hop artists have joined educators and parents as the teachers of Black children. Rappers indirectly dictate values and help to form and shape thought. Rappers continue the traditions of the oral artist by bestowing information filled with vital messages.

Among indigenous cultures, call-and-response was used as a communication technique between and among tribes. The same call-and-response format was used on the plantation among the enslaved Africans. Examining the songs of the enslaved Africans in more depth reveals more than just a call-and-response format. Spirituals were sung as a means of inspiration, encouragement, and motivation in order to survive the violent and inhumane plantation conditions. Though the *Maafa* consistently threatens the integrity of African cultural conservation, Africans have created ways to preserve it. Cleverly hidden in the songs were important messages that served as the only form of communication between plantations, announcing an escape time and location or some other detail. The call-and-response format and the cleverly crafted messages with double entendres are found in hip-hop performances. At hip-hop concerts, the artist interacts with the crowd in a call-and-response exchange. The artist may ask the crowd, "Is

Brooklyn in the house?" The crowd would then respond in a frenzied craze. The astute listener is privy to an exchange carrying historical relevancy that the general public often misses.

Tupac descends from the African storyteller tradition, in which oral artists were referred to as *griots*. In traditional Africa, oral artists played a very important role. It is rooted in significant symbols that require an audience response.

To a large extent, the oral artist is considered the prime organizer of the societal cultural universe using and changing words according to what situations and circumstances dictate and transmitting important messages to the entire community from one generation to another. Both the oral artist and audience are participants in the same symbolic system. The oral artist and the literary artist share the belief that language is a critical element in the formation and expression of thought. Oral art is not simply for entertainment; it is responsible for building the strong mental discipline that produces the oral materials of the next generation through ritual and education (Boadu, 1990).

Mugambi (2000) defines the role of a griot in her article, "Africa's Walking Library":

A griot, along with the elders of a community, epitomizes oral tradition. He is a professional storyteller, a teacher, a precursor to the contemporary literary artist. A master of oral communication, the griot is a historian, a "walking library," a praise singer, an advisor to the kings, a tutor, a tutor to the princes and an intermediary between families, among other roles. For these reasons, he functions as a pillar in traditional society. (p. 29)

In addition, this art form of transmitting culture and history through verbal art forms is not limited to professional storytellers, nor is it restricted by age (Mugambi, 2000). Tupac was a modern griot, for he encompasses the quintessence of an oral artist.

Tupac's voice echoed in perfect rhythms. When he uttered, "And even though you were a crack FEIGN Mama, you always was a Black QUEEN Mama," he elongated the pronunciation of *feign* and *queen*, reminiscent of a Southern preacher. He knew when to raise the inflection in his voice to stress certain syllables for emphasis of a specific word or phrase. Tupac's words had a powerful impact, yet they were simple. He used his gift to spread news to the masses of Black people through various communities. According to Jada Pinkett-Smith, Tupac was always telling her about a book he was reading and always eager to teach something new (Dyson, 2001). His selection of vocabulary allowed for his messages to reach different age groups, from various economic and educational backgrounds.

You can see where I spent a lot of time in the streets when you talk to me because of the words that I say, they are not the words that come from a mother's mouth or a father's mouth, they are words that come from a pimp's mouth or a prostitute's mouth or a hustler or drug dealer. (A. Shakur et al., 2003)

Although it may confuse some critics who refuse to look beyond the controversial words, it is no mystery that the more out of control Tupac's life became, the more CDs he sold, the more people loved him, and the more complex and ambiguous his life and lyrics became. At the age of 19, Tupac wrote poetry, some of which is now featured in *The Rose That Grew From Concrete*. A conscious analysis of his lyrics and poetry proves there was much more to Tupac than "THUG LIFE." His poetry speaks to his genius, love of life, commitment to a common struggle, pain, and anguish. Perhaps he was a THUG, but even more, he was a precious jewel and revolutionary.

Rethinking Tupac's Legacy—Behind the Armor

I rolled with Pac, he wasn't no Thug, he was a Soldier. (Treach, in Spierer, 1997)

Why are so many people drawn to Tupac Shakur? Why does his legacy continue to grow posthumously? One reason for his magnetism could be that his vivid exploration and articulation of wide-ranging subject matters and diverse perspectives allowed a variety of listeners to feel connected. He saw himself as a messenger for poor and oppressed Black people and lived his life accordingly. "In my life, I was many things to many people" (A. Shakur et al., 2003). Lauren Lazin, the director of *Tupac Resurrection*, stated during the commentary about the film, "There were two Tupacs, he lived and analyzed his life simultaneously." Mutulu Shakur tendered his opinion on his spiritual union to his stepson, Tupac, in an open letter written from prison on the day Tupac transitioned:

Like the four seasons, we come to this planet taking form, becoming elements of nature. Some of us are only one season and others like you were part of many seasons. This dynamic will scare most anyone who realized the burden at such an early stage of life. (Light, 1997; A. Shakur et al., 2003)

An internalization of the limitless and linear-less African worldview allows Tupac's complexity to become more knowable and less enigmatic. The veracity of his stories become no longer bound to his individual experience. Critics often attribute Tupac's magnetism to the fact that he was

emblematic of the progressive and regressive natures of people. However, there is limited mention of Tupac deliberately speaking to the sundry perspectives that constitute Black thought. Why should one assume Tupac's words are a direct and literal portrayal of either side of his dichotomy? This pervasive mentality, embedded in the Eurocentric construct of dichotomous thinking, is a clear illustration of the Maafa's presence.

The Maafa's penetration into the mainstream of hip-hop culture can also be seen in the expression "keep it real." The common connotation of this axiom is that an individual should not exaggerate his or her experience but rather should convey unmodified accurateness. It is implied in this adage that an individual's experiences extends not beyond the self. The Maafa's cultural infringement has detached the African from his or her traditional orientation. Tupac's life and lyrics need not represent solely his personal experience but rather should be viewed from the holistic nature of the African reality, thus drawing a link between the complexity of Tupac and his connection to so many other people of African ancestry.

African cosmological sciences mainly involve imagery and symbolism to allow an individual's education to determine understanding. Akbar (1994) reminded us that the ancient Africans believed observable phenomena were only representations and symbols and that a disunited attempt to understand this would lead to error and confusion in understanding the ancient African cosmology. He stated, "Integral to the understanding of the building of the pyramids is an understanding of what it takes to build the human spirit" (p. 32). There have been many failed attempts at reconstructing the pyramids because of this lack of understanding (Akbar, 1994). Similarly, there is much bewilderment in considering the life of Tupac Shakur. An outlook void of the limits of literal interpretation may reveal that Tupac's essence, much like the mighty structures, is a testimony to the union of energy, spirit, soul, and intelligence.

Hip-hop, deeply rooted in defiance of European standards, displays its vehement rejection and rebellion from the standard by making its own norms contrary to the mainstream. In its rejection of the mainstream, genuine hip-hop culture is in the cycle of Sankofa. Nevertheless, hip-hop's roots were born in the Maafa, so the ebb and flow of the Spiro cycle continues to vacillate between these streams.

Tupac provided a further example of hip-hop's rebellion of the dominant White culture when he was videotaped arriving at the courthouse on national television. While facing a federal judge would force many to conform to an uncomfortable disposition, Tupac strolled into a district courtroom in a vest and army fatigue pants and stuck his middle finger up at the

television cameras. This action was reflective of the antisystem sentiment felt by millions of Black youth. The vest and army fatigue pants carried a significant message; they are both apparel worn in war. Tupac fought a war that existed on many dimensions. He was at war with the forces inside his own nature. He was at war with the feelings of alienation displayed toward his family by society at large and the larger Black community. And he was at war with the exploitative systems that pervade the life of the oppressed.

A shahidi, or martyr, is someone who makes considerable self-sacrifice and suffers greatly for some cause or principle. As KRS-One expressed, Tupac died for his people. He died not for what he believed in but rather for what we believe in (Spirer, 1997). He was unwilling to separate himself from the people who admired him so. Tupac, Malcolm X, Fred Hampton, and other young revolutionaries, whose lives were cut short in dramatic ways, stimulate the public conscious and strengthen the legacy of their purpose.

Conclusion

Tupac's contributions cannot be viewed in isolation but rather must be viewed in the context of the collective African American experience. Tupac wanted to reclaim the source of his power, but without true self-knowledge rooted in the African values of Maat (the 42 principles that govern divine conduct in the Kemetic spiritual cosmology), one has no understanding of what they are struggling to reclaim. In addition, in traditional African societies, adults formed a circle that enveloped the children and youth so they were always protected. This literal and metaphoric configuration exposes the backs of the adults to outside forces yet embraces everyone within one circle. When this tradition is not practiced, children are left with their backs uncovered, and adult support systems are often undependable. Thus, we have what Tupac coined, T.H.U.G. L.I.F.E. (The Hate You Give Little Infants Fucks Everyone). A Thug is the end result of racism, oppression, and African cultural alienation. "I didn't create T.H.U.G. L.I.F.E. I just diagnosed it" (A. Shakur et al., 2003).

Tupac, like many young people, not only was raised with his back unprotected, but also when he said and did things members of the community didn't like, he was isolated. It is important to reevaluate both Tupac's voice and often "controversial" messages. If you listen to his words, you might hear the voices of thousands of Black men telling their stories and experiences. For every song he wrote that drew on negative images of African American women, he wrote a song that drew on nega-

tive images of African American men and he wrote another that empowered, uplifted, and acknowledged the contributions of African American women in the absence of African American men. Is this not reality? If you listen closely to his lyrics, it is not always clear where he ends and the stories of other African American people begin. Perhaps he responded to the voices of the ancestors and the masses of African people living in poverty and those suffering from oppression. Perhaps it was the community's failure to protect his back and eventual isolation, not his rhetoric, that resulted in his death.

Descendant from the griot tradition and nurtured in Black Panther ideology, Tupac's words were full of passion and fervor. His lyrics, rich in double entendre and layered with multiple levels of meaning, spoke for powerless and oppressed Black people who had no stage to voice their anger and despair. Record labels and societal institutions might have been able to corrupt urban Black youth culture and divorce it from its African roots, but they were ultimately unable to silence hip-hop's shahidi Tupac Shakur.

The life of Tupac grows old only on failure to recognize and remember its lessons and its demands. His experience will acquire a revival and vitality when Africans assume a posture of Maat and Sankofa and as values and behaviors become conversant by those dynamics. Given that the African worldview perceives no limitations in its conception of time and space, the life of Tupac transcends the narrow linear constraints of one individual and becomes applicable to the complex realities of the African American. It is the responsibility of African people to use his sacrifice as an example to expand consciousness and reach toward the wisdom of the ancestors.

You see you wouldn't ask why the rose that grew from the concrete had damaged pedals. On the contrary, we would all celebrate it's finesse, we would all love it's will to reach the sun, well we are the rose, this is the concrete and these are my damaged pedals don't ask me why THANK GOD. . . . ASK ME HOW? (Tupac Shakur, 2000, Track 12)

Notes

1. In 1999, the estate of Tupac Shakur released a book and CD titled *The Rose That Grew From Concrete*. Pieces of this quote were taken from the CD version of *The Rose that Grew From Concrete*.

2. Marimba Ani's "Healing the African Community" was presented at the National Association of Black Social Workers, National Academy for African Centered Social Work October Institute in 2003. Content articulated in this article on the Maat Maafa Sankofa paradigm comes from Dr. Ani's presentation and personal conversations with her regarding the paradigm.

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