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# Changing Narratives, Changing Destiny: Myth, Ritual and Afrocentric Identity Construction at the National Rites of Passage Institute

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CHANGING NARRATIVES, CHANGING DESTINY: MYTH, RITUAL AND  
AFROCENTRIC IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AT THE  
NATIONAL RITES OF PASSAGE INSTITUTE

by

MICHAEL KARLIN

Under the Direction of Dr. Kathryn McClymond

ABSTRACT

According to the National Rites of Passage Institute (NROPI), African Americans have lost their authentic identity, which has led to inauthentic, broken individuals and communities. In order to reverse these trends, according to NROPI, African Americans must rediscover their authentic identity through a rites of passage program that plucks them from a Eurocentric narrative and places them into an Afrocentric one. This thesis explores how NROPI is a religious response to adversity that takes on a decidedly American form of contemporary religiosity. I argue that by analyzing NROPI and other contemporary rites of passage programs through the lens of religious studies, scholars can gain a deeper understanding of how these programs fit into the broader American religious landscape, and provide commentary on the changing nature of

that religiosity, and how their language and rituals can be used as rhetorical strategies for social cohesion and control.

INDEX WORDS: Religious Studies, Georgia State University, National Rites of Passage Institute, Paul Hill, Jr., Afrocentricity, Ritual, Rites of passage, Jonathan Z. Smith, Reflexive spirituality, Quest for authenticity, Charles Taylor

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MICHAEL KARLIN

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2009

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by

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May 2009

This work is dedicated to my wife, Ann, in appreciation for her love, guidance, patience and belief in me. I would never have been able to complete this work without her grounding and support. I would also like to dedicate this work to my three children, Benjamin, Rose, and Dov, who bring joy to my everyday and who constantly give me inspiration to grow in love, compassion, and patience.

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## INTRODUCTION

*“Today’s spiritual ferment may be less a forging of the new than a reclaiming of the old.*

*-Wade Clark Roof<sup>1</sup>*

In January 2008, a senior trainer for the National Rites of Passage Institute (NROPI) was called into Copley High School in Copley, Ohio outside of Akron. The African American population of the school had doubled in the previous five years, and, with it, the number of school suspensions had increased fivefold. In particular, black-on-black violence had escalated dramatically. To combat this trend, the NROPI trainer started an Afrocentric rites of passage program for African American students in Copley High School, which the students came to call “My Brother/My Sister.” This program slowly attracted approximately 50 students, or 25% of the African American population of the school, which equates to approximately 4% of the general school population. Even though this program involves a small number of students, its effects seem to be widespread. Since the start of the 2008/2009 school year, there has not been one African American student involved in a fight or suspended from school (Burton, interview, 12/3/08).

The National Rites of Passage Institute is the creation of Paul Hill, Jr. In 1981, Hill became CEO of the East End Neighborhood House, a community service center in East Cleveland, Ohio. Hill was deeply concerned about the plight of African American males in America. He believed African American young men were being programmed for self destruction (Hill, 1992: 42). Their ethnic identity had been stripped away from them, along with their pride, sense of self, purpose, and masculinity. History and society had conspired to place them in a no-

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<sup>1</sup>1998:222.

win situation. “The crisis, dilemma, peril, and images of African American males have been externally created to deny them wholeness and greatness as the first men to walk the Earth” (Hill, 1992: 19). Hill sought a solution that would ground African American males (and later females) in their ethnic identity and teach them “who they are, where they should be going, what they need to do to get there, and what they must have when they arrive” (Hill, 1992: 73). For Hill, the final destination of this process is both healthy individuals and a strong, interdependent, thriving community.

Hill looked to the past—the distant, mythic past—to reclaim an ethnic identity he felt had been lost in the Middle Passage that brought Africans to America in chains. In seeking this ethnic identity, Hill also found religion, for, as he puts it, to Africans, “religion permeates all of life” (Hill, 2007: 173). The result was an Afrocentric rites of passage program that was as much about religion as ethnicity. Hill calls this kind of religion “spirituality,” rather than religion, as he believes that “modern religion is nothing more than the failed attempt to institutionalize spirituality” (interview, 10/10/08). In October, 1984, Hill launched *Simba Wachanga* (“Young Lion”), an Afrocentric male rites of passage program, which eventually grew into the National Rites of Passage Institute.

According to NROPI’s worldview, African Americans have been placed into a Eurocentric<sup>2</sup> narrative<sup>3</sup> that has been highly toxic and destructive to the African American community. According to this worldview, African Americans have lost their Afrocentric identity, which has led to inauthentic, broken individuals and communities, represented by increasingly

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<sup>2</sup> The “Euro” in “Eurocentric refers to white Americans of European descent.

<sup>3</sup> Following Ricouer and others, I use the term “narrative” to mean a mode of understanding and organizing one’s reality. “Narratives, in virtue of their form, are all fictions. And yet it is through these fictions that we give a narrative form to our experience, be it individual or communal” (144-145).

high rates of divorce, children born out of wedlock, high crime and murder rates, lower life expectancy, and excessive instances of drug and alcohol abuse. According to NROPI, in order to reverse these trends, African Americans must discover “who they really are,” grounded in an Afrocentric value system and cultural representations, through a rites of passage program that effectively plucks them from the Eurocentric narrative that has been thrust upon them and places them into an Afrocentric one. I will argue that NROPI is a religious response to adversity that takes on a decidedly American form of contemporary religiosity (i.e., reflexive spirituality). Further, I will argue that by analyzing NROPI and other contemporary rites of passage programs through the lens of religious studies (as opposed to social work, education, etc.), scholars can gain a deeper understanding of how these programs fit into the broader American religious landscape, and provide commentary on the changing nature of that religiosity, and how their language and rituals can be used as rhetorical strategies for social cohesion and control.

In order to construct a foundation for this argument, I will first provide some historical, social, and theoretical context for NROPI, its founder, Paul Hill, Jr., the Afrocentrism movement, and the rites of passage process. Second, I will describe NROPI’s overall mythological narrative in order to provide an understanding of the worldview that informs and energizes its project. Third, I will show how this mythology becomes enacted in ritual and the way in which this ritual is designed to provide resolution to the state of crisis posited by the mythology. Fourth, I will employ Jonathan Z. Smith’s theories of ritual, space, and the sacred as a way to explain what is at work in NROPI’s rituals. Finally, I will show how NROPI fits into a broader American religious landscape and what is at stake in studying NROPI for the field of North American religious studies.

## I. CONTEXT

### **National Rites of Passage Institute and Paul Hill, Jr.**

The National Rites of Passage Institute evolved from the East End Neighborhood House, a Cleveland community center founded in 1907 that provides childcare, senior care, foster care, and other social services for an economically challenged neighborhood in Cleveland, Ohio. Paul Hill, Jr., joined East End in 1981 and launched his first rites of passage program in 1984 for his own children. (Hill is the father of seven.) In 1987 he co-hosted the first annual Rites of Passage National Conference, and in 1989, Hill received a W. K. Kellogg Leadership Fellowship that allowed him to travel to Africa, South America, New Zealand and Australia to study rites of passage practices of indigenous cultures in these regions. These events culminated in the official establishment of NROPI in 1993 (NROPI website).

NROPI grew through the 1990s, not only providing for rites of passage programs locally, but also organizing programs through a network of schools throughout Ohio and developing “The Journey,” a set of texts, manuals, organizational guides and training programs designed to enable NROPI’s programs to scale to African American communities nationwide. During those years, NROPI directly initiated five hundred youths, and adults trained by the institute initiated another ten thousand. In the five years between 1993 and 1998, the institute provided long-term training for 746 adults and short-term training for another 178 (Grimes, 2002: 145). The growth of the program slowed during the first years of the new millennium, but is on the rise again, according to Hill.

Paul Hill describes his work with NROPI as his “calling” and the fulfillment of his destiny. “Some people,” he states, “may not know what their destiny is. I have had the

opportunity to explore my destiny and get in touch with my destiny through my own initiation experiences” (Wilcox, 168). Hill was exposed to community building and activism at a very early age. His parents were both involved in community organizing and activism. As a child, Hill was shaped by the culture of the 60s in America and the burgeoning civil rights movement. His father was a member of the “Future Outlook League,” which predates Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. As a young boy of five or six, his father took him to meetings with other civic minded African American men. Hill refers to these men as “street soldiers,” because they demonstrated against businesses and organizations that discriminated against African Americans in their hiring process. These men demanded equal opportunity. According to Hill, these demands resulted in more African Americans gaining employment. Hill credits his parents and these “street soldiers” for preparing him to take on social responsibility as a way of life (Wilcox, 169). Hill’s worldview, and that of NROPI, was further influenced by Afrocentrism and, in particular, the writings of Molefi Kete Asante, an African American Studies scholar and activist who first coined the term, and Joan Myers, a scholar who focuses on the intersection of culture and psychology and the Afrocentric worldview (Hill, 1992: 34). Understanding Afrocentrism is key to understanding the mindset of Hill and NROPI’s programs.

### **Afrocentrism**

African religion and culture were decimated as a result of slavery. Historian Jon Butler argues that a virtual “holocaust” “destroyed collective African religious practice in colonial America.” He concludes that “no other religious event of the entire colonial period, including

the evolution of Puritanism or the emergence of American evangelicalism, so shaped a people's experience of religion in America" (Butler, 1990: 157). This holocaust left African Americans with little of their ancestral religious or ethnic identity.<sup>4</sup> Out of the ashes of this African American spiritual holocaust emerged a desire to construct an ethnic identity based on African history, culture and religion in the 1960s, now known as Afrocentrism, or Afrocentricity.

The term Afrocentricity was first coined and theorized by Molefi Kete Asante (born Arthur Lee Smith, Jr. in 1942) in his 1980 book, *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change*. Afrocentrism is an ideology that claims that African Americans should stress their African history, ancestry, and culture over that of the "Eurocentric" worldview to which they have been subjected. The claim is that the Eurocentric worldview does not work for African Americans, because it is founded on a history of oppression and cultural representations that are not authentic to African Americans. This dislocated worldview de-centers African Americans and is therefore toxic to them and hinders their ability to live successful lives.

The psychology of the African without Afrocentricity has become a matter of great concern. Instead of looking out from one's own center, the non-Afrocentric person operates in a manner that is negatively predictable. The person's images, symbols, lifestyles, and manners are contradictory and thereby destructive to personal and collective growth and development. Unable to call upon the power of *ancestors*, because one does not know them; without an ideology of *heritage*; because one does not respect one's own *prophets*. (Asante, 1, emphasis mine)

The emphasis is on knowing one's own ancestors, heritage and prophets, in order to see the world properly, or, in other words, African Americans must change their historical-cultural narrative in order to live authentically. According to Asante, this grounding in cultural history enables African Americans to center themselves in their own culture. "Afrocentricity is actually

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<sup>4</sup> While not all historians agree with this portrayal, this cultural decimation as a result of slavery and oppression are key components of Afrocentric thought.

a paradigm which infuses all phenomena from the standpoint of African people as subjects in human history rather than as on the fringes of someone else's culture. So that when I look at anything, I look at it through the eyes of a mature, subject person” (Turner and Asante, 718). Or as Asante poetically describes it, “No longer are we looking whitely through a tunnel lit with the artificial beams of Europe; we now are able to experience the Afrocentricity that the great prophets...predicted for us” (Asante, 1).

While the term Afrocentricity was first coined by Asante, he attributes many of the most important ideas to Maulana Karenga, probably best known for creating the African American holiday Kwanzaa. Karenga was born Ronald McKinley Everett in 1941 and is an African American author, activist and scholar. Many of Karenga’s most important ideas emerged in the 1960s and 70s. He established the radical black nationalist organization US (United Slaves) in 1965 (Howe, 216). Kwanzaa was established in 1966 and has its roots in this black nationalist movement. According to Asante, Karenga’s genius lies in his understanding for the need for the creation of a systematic national history and mythology. Karenga’s work is “the most extensive development of a cultural ideology to grow out of the 1960’s. Neither [Martin Luther] King nor Malcolm [X] articulated the designs and details of a system of cultural reconstruction comparable to Karenga” (Asante 20-21). Karenga’s work created the underpinnings for (re)constructed Afrocentric mythological, cultural and value systems. One of the most important of these is the Nguzo Saba, or Seven Principles, which is an Afrocentric value system celebrated during Kwanzaa and used throughout the movement (see Appendix).

Those in the movement use the image of the Sankofa bird as a metaphor to illustrate the ideas of Afrocentrism. The Sankofa is an image of a flying bird with its head turned back

towards where it came. It is found in the symbol system of the Akan people living in Ghana, Africa and means “one must return to the past in order to move forward” (Hill and Daniels, 198). Embedded in this process of looking back to move forward is the necessary belief in the unity of all peoples of African descent and a return to a type of primordial and essentialized notion of Africa. According to Oxford historian Stephen Howe, Afrocentrism tries “to assert the natural, psychic, and spiritual unity of all people of African descent” (Howe, 231).

This spiritual quality, along with the emphasis on African ancestors, cultural heritage, prophets, myth, folklore, ritual, and a value system have led some scholars to liken Afrocentrism to religion. “Although most of the leading theorists of Afrocentrism hold academic posts, the real aim some seem to pursue is to present, not a new scholarly approach, nor even a form of compensatory therapy for the disadvantaged, but something more akin to a new religion” (Howe, 227). I concur with this assessment, as will be explored in greater detail later in this work.

Afrocentrism is at the core of NROPI’s work. NROPI believes an Afrocentric locus of control is critical for African Americans, so much so that “if you do not operate from an Afrocentric locus of control base, then you are in serious ethical and cultural trouble.” They explain the totality of the approach. An Afrocentric locus of control “places descendants of Africans in the center. It proceeds on the basis of the question, ‘Is it in the best interest of African Americans?’ Such Afrocentricity questions the approach to every conceivable human enterprise. It questions the approach made to reading, writing, running, keeping healthy, teaching, organizing, parenting, preaching and working” (Hill, 2004: 183).

While Hill’s early influences as a child involved in the Civil Rights Movement and his exposure to Afrocentric ideology have influenced his worldview and dominated the construction

of NROPI's mythology, there are also places where his ideology differs with orthodox Afrocentrism. First, the Afrocentric rites of passage movement began in the United States in the 1960s as part of the black nationalist movement (Warfield-Coppock, 474); Hill, however, eventually distanced himself from the rites of passage network that he helped create, because the focus became too narrow and the practice too militaristic. "Nationalism is important to me, but it's not important as an end within itself" (Wilcox, 171-172). Hill's Afrocentrism is more universal, a result, in part, of his early family influences. Second, at its most ideological extreme, Afrocentrism posits a view of history whereby African Americans trace their lineage back to a black Ancient Egypt, called "Kemet," which they believe is the birthplace of all of civilization. "Egypt taught the Greeks, Romans, Hebrews and everyone else all that they knew; indeed, they could only degenerate from the perfection of Pharaonic forms. All wisdom that was to be found anywhere in the world had been carried there by Egyptian emissaries" (Howe, 68). This view has come under attack by scholars<sup>5</sup> and is only subtly hinted at, if at all, in NROPI's programs and materials.

These subtle differences in ideology between Hill and traditional Afrocentrism manifest themselves in a more universalistic form of Afrocentrism in NROPI's work. NROPI utilizes rites of passage as a way to take African American youth out of a Eurocentric narrative and place them into an Afrocentric one. Therefore, an appreciation of how NROPI conceives of and defines rites of passage is critical to understanding its project.

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<sup>5</sup> See Howe, 1998; Lefowitz, 1996.

## Rites of Passage

NROPI has self-consciously employed the theories of various scholars to construct and validate their rites of passage rituals. They rely heavily on anthropologists Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner in particular (Hill, 1992, 2004). Although these theorists have been criticized for over-essentializing their data and/or imprinting their own worldview onto the data in an imperialistic way, these theorists have, nonetheless, found themselves amongst the pantheon of those whom contemporary American ritual inventors and practitioners invoke. Hill, for example, quotes Van Gennep to articulate the essential nature of African rites of passage as a three stage process (*Harvest*, NROPI website). Commenting on this interesting form of appropriation, ritual studies scholar Ron Grimes states that in this way “*invented* patterns, treated as if they were *discovered*, came to be *prescribed* as if they were laws determining how rites should be structured” (Grimes, 107). Given NROPI’s reliance on these theorists, a brief understanding of how these theorists conceive of ritual will illumine NROPI’s concept of rites of passage.

Turner lived amongst and studied the Ndembu people, a pre-industrial African tribe, between the years 1950-1954. During that time he learned first hand about their social, economic, political and religious practices (Turner, 1969: viii). Turner based much of his work on the theories of Van Gennep, the first scholar to look at the rituals attached to the transitions of human life as a special class of ritual, which he termed “the rites of passage.” Van Gennep, in his groundbreaking 1908 book *Les rites de passage*, identified rites of passage as those “ceremonial patterns which accompany a passage from one situation to another or from one cosmic or social world to another” (Van Gennep, 10). Examples of these transitional passages include birth, puberty, marriage, and death. Van Gennep identified three stages to rites of passage, including

rites of *separation*, *transition*, and *reincorporation*. Van Gennep likened these rites of passage to the crossing of thresholds from one territory or space into another, and, therefore, also called the three stages *pre-liminal*, *liminal*, and *post-liminal*, based upon the Latin word *limen*, meaning threshold (Van Gennep, 10-11). He emphasized that, while theoretically all three of these phases are present in any rite of passage, “in specific instances these three types are not always equally important or equally elaborated” (Van Gennep, 11).

Building upon Van Gennep’s three-stage process, Turner, in studying the Ndembu Tribe of Africa, focused extensively on the liminal stage, believing that it is during this period that individual and communal transformation are possible. Further, he theorized that during rites of initiation, in the liminal phase, initiates are brought down in order to elevate them to a new social position. In other words, the initiate must descend in order to ascend. “It is as though they are being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new station in life” (1969: 95). In this way, they move into a primordial state of potentiality, like pre-formed human clay.

Manifold evidence from other societies suggests that they have the social significance of rendering them down into some kind of human *prima material*, divested of specific form and reduced to a condition that, although it is still social, is without or beneath all accepted forms of status. The implication is that for an individual to go higher on the status ladder, he must go lower than the status ladder. (1969: 170)

By being ground down in such a way, the initiate experiences a kind of death and rebirth as a new being, with a new social status and identity. As an integral part of this process the initiates are in a completely indeterminate state of being, both socially and sexually.

Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety

of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. Thus liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon. (1969: 95)

According to Turner, during this period of death and rebirth, sacred knowledge or wisdom is also passed to the initiate as part of his transformation into a new status. This knowledge is passed through experience, symbol and language. It has ontological value, affecting the innermost being of the initiate (Turner, 1969: 103). “The arcane knowledge or ‘*gnosis*’ obtained in the liminal period is felt to change the inmost nature of the neophyte, impressing him, as a seal impresses wax, with the characteristics of his new state. It is not a mere acquisition of knowledge, but a change in being” (Turner, 1967: 102). This stage not only provides an opportunity for profound individual transformation within the social order, but also serves to bind the community together.

During the liminal phase one experiences what Turner called *communitas*, “a ‘moment in and out of time,’ and in and out of secular social structure, which reveals, however fleetingly, some recognition (in symbol if not always language) of a generalized social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties” (1969:96). This period of anti-structure is in a dialectical relationship with the structure of ordinary life, and this dialectical relationship is critical for individual and social coherence. “[T]he immediacy of *communitas* gives way to the mediacy of structure, while in *rites de passage*, men are released from structure into *communitas* only to return to structure revitalized by their experience of *communitas*. What is certain is that no society can function adequately without this dialectic” (Turner, 1969: 129). The flow from the pre-liminal to the liminal to the post-liminal, the flow, in other words, from structure to anti-structure and back to structure again

is reminiscent of the constant inhaling and exhaling of a living being; without this dynamic flow, the being—individual or society—will atrophy and die. “It is rather a matter of giving recognition to an essential and generic human bond, without which there could be *no* society. Liminality implies that the high could not be high unless the low existed, and he who is high must experience what it is like to be low” (1969: 97). These ritual elements and outcomes derived from the study of a pre-industrial African people also apply to the rites established by NROPI. These initiation ceremonies take on a religious significance, serving to effect the state transition of the initiate and reinforcing social cohesion through common experience and reaffirmation of the sacred.

As we will see, NROPI has consciously incorporated these theories into their rituals. NROPI implements rituals that adhere to Van Gennep’s three phases—separation, liminality, and reaggregation. They conduct specific rites during the liminal phase that adhere to Turner’s notions of this phase, such as using this as time to transfer sacred knowledge, putting the initiates through trials to grind them down and build them back up, providing opportunities for initiates to experience “gnostic” revelations, and emphasizing the bonding or *communitas* that forms. They also, like Turner, liken the whole process to a form of death and rebirth. In these ways, NROPI has used these anthropologists as a form of instruction manual on the construction of rituals, and therefore, having a better understanding of these theorists, helps us better comprehend the rituals as they are lived out.

Finally, it is important to note that NROPI sees an inextricable link between myth and ritual. For them, ritual is the enactment of a myth.<sup>6</sup> “By participating in a ritual, you are

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<sup>6</sup> This is a concept Hill likely borrowed from Joseph Campbell, whom he cites often, but not in this case.

participating in a myth. Myths are stories of our search through the ages for truth, for meaning, for significance. We all need to tell our story and understand our story” (Hill, *Harvest*, NROPI website). Thus, for Hill and NROPI the interplay between mythology and ritual is of critical importance, and to understand their ritual, we need to understand their mythology.

In summary, this background on NROPI, Paul Hill, Jr., Afrocentrism, and the rites of passage process provides a firm foundation upon which to explore how NROPI has employed mythology and ritual to respond to a perceived state of African American fragmentation. NROPI’s mythology and ritual system have been constructed against this background of Afrocentrism and contemporary rites of passage theory. The next chapter will describe NROPI’s mythology and illustrate how it has become the overarching narrative of NROPI’s entire project.

## II. NROPI's MYTHOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

NROPI's project can be conceived as an attempt to construct and enact what Mircea Eliade would call a "myth of the eternal return."<sup>7</sup> Eliade's theory states that archaic cultures lived within a reality that was continually connected with the cosmos and its rhythms (Eliade, xxvii). They accomplish this connection by living according to archetypal models established in their cosmogonic myths. "The imitation of an archetypal model is a reactualization of the mythical moment when the archetype was revealed for the first time" (76). This continual return to mythic origins, the eternal return, enables them to abolish concrete time (85), to "live in a continual present" (86), to live at the "heart of the *real*" (95), and to be constantly regenerated (77). By enacting this "return," these archaic societies are able to live in a sacralized world that provides meaning and purpose to their existence. This process of return enables a continual regeneration of the individual and community. "What is important is that man has felt the need to reproduce the cosmogony in his constructions, whatever be their nature; that this reproduction made him contemporary with the mythical moment of the beginning of the world and that he felt the need of returning to that moment, as often as possible, in order to *regenerate* himself" (Eliade, 85, italics mine).

Simply stated, NROPI's mission is to engender just such a return. It aims to pluck African American youth out of what they consider to be a broken narrative, based on Eurocentric values, culture, and a history of oppression, and to return them back into their own sacred narrative—one based upon African identity, values, spiritual system, ancestry and cultural

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<sup>7</sup> Although Eliade has fallen out of favor in the academic community, he, like Turner, Van Gennep and Campbell, have been appropriated by many in contemporary America to construct and explain their mythologies and rituals. As such, viewing NROPI's constructed mythology through the lens of Eliade provides an effective way of understanding their project as one of return and renewal.

representations (Figure 2.1). This Afrocentric identity is grounded in a primordial, mythic African past (Hill, 1993: 95).

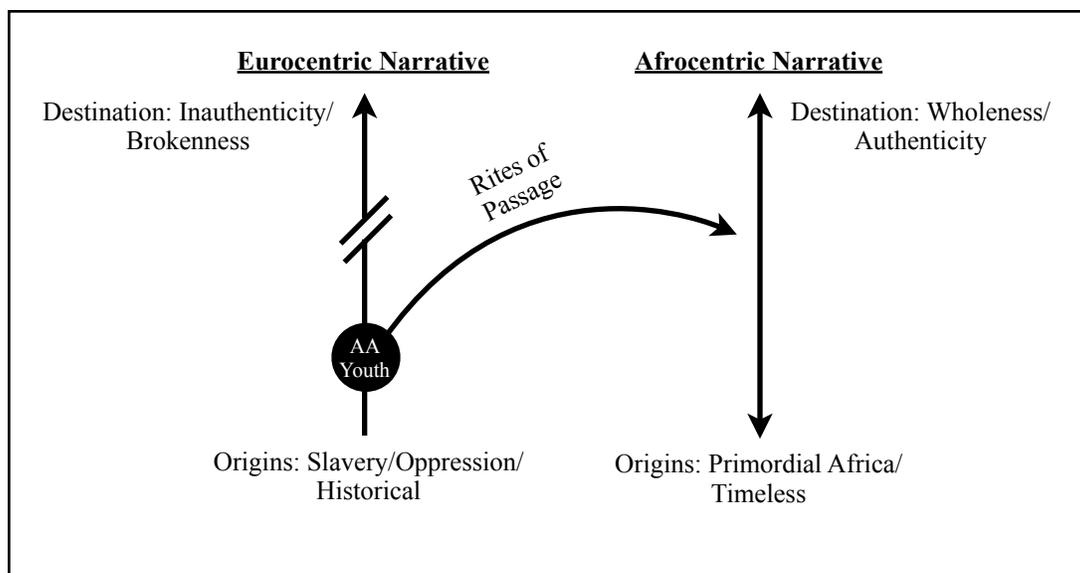


Figure 2.1: Changing Narratives

In an essay aptly titled “Back to the Future,” founder Paul Hill summarizes this clash with the Eurocentric world and the imperative of returning to Africa as an archetypal model.

One of the most devastating effects of the European slave system was that it caused much cultural confusion for the displaced African. New systems of thinking, acting and working were foisted upon the African as he entered the Caribbean and the Americas. Consequently, ritualistic and ceremonial practices which previously had great meaning for the African were suppressed or became so diffused by alien Western practices that their effectiveness on the lives of African people was diminished. Our African forbears, through ritual and ceremony, always knew who they were, where they were from, the place that they had in their society, and a sense of their own destiny. Life was laid out in stages. Each of these stages carried with it a special meaning for the individual. Life was like a mountain with a number of plateaus, which gave the person a new view of the world and a new meaning and responsibility for his or her life. (NROPI website)

For NROPI, Afrocentric Rites of Passage are the means to return African American youth to their African identity. This return-to-origins is the key to regeneration and survival, according to Hill. “Afrocentricity and Rites-Of-Passage offer Africans-in-America a chance to find or lose

our way. We have a mandate from history, a mandate from the living, the dead, and the unborn, to make this moment count by using the time and resources history has given. This is a serious responsibility; what we do now and what we fail to do will determine the destiny of the world” (Hill, 1992: 94). NROPI’s sense of African religion is archetypal and essential in its description and application. For Africans, according to Hill, “religion permeates all of life; there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and non religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life. Wherever the African is, there is his religion” (Hill, 2007: 173-174).

Like Eliade, Hill romanticizes, essentializes and extends these same characteristics to all indigenous or archaic religions. Further, in a move similar to Eliade, Hill prescribes a return to elements of this archaic religion as a salve for the ills of modernity (Eliade, 154-157). “It is not surprising that the same basic, ancient wisdom has been found throughout the world. The seeds of this ancient knowledge can prove to be the salvation of science and practice in our modern world” (Hill, 1993: 95).

For Eliade, a modern desire to return to an ahistorical, primordial sense of time is a reaction to the “terror of history” experienced by being bound in the mundane temporal world. “How would it be possible to tolerate, and to justify, the sufferings and annihilation of so many peoples who suffer and are annihilated for the simple reason that their geographical situation sets them in the pathway of history; that they are neighbors of empires in a state of permanent expansion” (Eliade, 151).<sup>8</sup> The myth of the eternal return is “a revolt against historical time, an attempt to restore this historical time, freighted as it is with human experience, to a place in time

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<sup>8</sup> Eliade’s theories are a reaction to his own experience of the “terror of history” he encountered during the lead up to and during WWII (Strenski, 77).

that is cosmic, cyclical, infinite” (Eliade, 153). Hill’s mythology, too, is a reaction to the “terror of history” and begins with a contemporary state of African American fragmentation.

### **African American Brokenness**

NROPI’s mythology is strongly grounded in Afrocentric ideology.<sup>9</sup> It begins with a contemporary sense of individual and communal African American fragmentation and contrasts this fragmentation with a sense of wholeness and authenticity experienced in Africa.

Fragmentation occurs as a result of slavery, the initial “Fall,” and ongoing white oppression.

Black men were stolen from Africa as whole people with a strong self-concept, cultural competence, high self-esteem, positive behavior, and group loyalty. However, through physical enslavement and the current chains and images of psychological enslavement, many Black men are now fragmented and fractured characterized by a confused self-concept, cultural incompetence, ambivalent behavior, depreciated character, adaptive behavior, confused group loyalty, and reactionary behavior. (Hill, 1992: 19)

While the problem originates with slavery and continues through ongoing White oppression, it has been exacerbated in recent decades through the materialism and hedonism preached through the “American Dream paradigm” and transmitted through the educational system. He identifies the values of the “American Dream” as individualism, materialism, and hedonism—“‘me’ at the expense of ‘we’; ‘things’ are more important than ‘people’; ‘immediate’ gratification and pleasure seeking as opposed to ‘deferred’ gratification” (2004: 177). As a result, the educational system in particular, and western socialization in general, “is more focused on individualism, whereas in indigenous cultures the emphasis is more focused on a social collective process” (interview, 10/10/08).

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<sup>9</sup> In this context I do not mean mythology in its modern vernacular meaning of falsehood, but I instead mean sacred narrative.

He sets up the basic tenets of the American Dream as the antithesis of an Afrocentric paradigm. For Hill, the basic tenets of the American Dream are:

- World View: Order is imposed by the stronger force. The stronger force gains the advantage by ordering the universe as it wishes.
- Ideology: Survival of the fittest promotes a drive for mastery and control of nature and the accumulation of possessions.
- Ethos: Control and mastery of all life.
- Cosmology: Humans exist apart and separate from nature in an independent and separate collection of entities which comprise the universe.
- Ontology: Worth is measured by utility, therefore, materialism is paramount.
- Axiology: There is a conflict of opposing forces representing a continual struggle whereby one must prevail over the other.

(Hill, *Back to the Future*, NROPI website)

This American Dream paradigm has had a disproportionately negative effect on African Americans. In particular, the combination of the ideals espoused by the paradigm and years of white oppression, place African Americans (males in particular), in a double bind, whereby they are expected to achieve an idealistic and largely unrealistic future (i.e., wealth, power, glamor, etc.), while being prevented from doing such by the system (i.e., lack of education, opportunities, stable families, etc.) (Hill, 1992: 30). This leads to *anomie*, or what Cornel West has called “‘the nihilistic threat’ or the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness and lovelessness” (Hill, 2004: 175). Citing Cornel West, Hill states, “the recent market-driven shattering of Black civil society—Black families, neighborhoods, schools, churches, mosques—leave more and more Black people vulnerable to daily lives endured with little sense of self and fragile existential moorings” (Hill, 2004: 176). This decline has led to disastrous results for the African American community and has had a major impact on family

structure and stability. Prior to 1917, for example, over ninety percent of all African children were born in wedlock. In recent decades, however, significant changes have taken place in the African American family. “As late as 1960, eighty percent of all African American children lived with both parents, but by 1990, less than fifty percent of African American children live with two parents” (Hill, 2004: 175).

Additionally, the black-on-black homicide rate escalated dramatically during this same period. “The 1980’s and 90’s will be remembered as the time when young African American men killed each other at a rate unknown anywhere else in the world. In one year alone, the Black-on-Black homicide rate was greater than the fatalities of the nine-year Vietnam War” (Hill, 1992: 57). Finally, the ultimate result of the *anomie* is a rapidly escalating suicide rate among African American men. “Until the early seventies Black Americans had the lowest suicide rate in the United States. But now young Blacks lead the nation in suicides” (Hill, 2004, 176). This bleak picture does not even touch on the issues faced from drug abuse, poverty, lack of education and other issues facing the community.

African Americans are indoctrinated into a Eurocentric narrative, predicated on the American Dream paradigm, through the U.S. educational system (Hill, 2004:63).

The public domain education system of the United States mirrors the essence of the dominant American culture’s world view, values, mores, and behaviors and embodies capitalism, competitiveness, racism, sexism, and oppression. Historically, African American parents and their offspring have been faced with the prospect of participating in a public schools system that values independence over interdependence and mutual aid, competition over cooperation, materialism over spiritualism, and youth worship over elder reverence. These values have confused African American people and oriented them toward the American definitions of achievement and success and away from traditional African values. (Warfield-Coppock, 471).

This system of socialization has left African Americans estranged from their authentic Afrocentric narrative. As a result, the ethno-cultural identity “that sustained Africans and their descendants through the American experience has been replaced by a popular consumer culture based on the American dream paradigm” (Hill, 2004:176). “A Eurocentric or segmented world view is the dominant conceptual system of socialization in this society” (Hill, 1992: 95).<sup>10</sup> African Americans, in short, have found themselves embedded in a Eurocentric narrative that is not working for them and threatening to destroy their culture and people.

### **From Eurocentric to Afrocentric Narrative**

As opposed to the duality, fragmentation, narcissism, and material nature of a Eurocentric model, an Afrocentric worldview “must be interpreted as an optimal or holistic conceptual system that functions to maximize positivity and the greatest good” (Hill, 1992, 95). The basic principles of an Afrocentric worldview, in opposition to the Eurocentric worldview, are:

- Humanity and nature are one.
- Both humanity and nature experience cyclical, periodic and inevitable change.
- In nature these changes are celestial. In humanity they are called "life crises."
- Both humanity and nature function by the law of "regeneration" which state the energy in all systems is eventually spent and must be renewed at intervals.
- In nature this process is symbolized as a Death and Rebirth sequence, is monitored by rites of passage.
- "Life Crises," by definition, are disruptive to both the individual and to the community.

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<sup>10</sup> “Eurocentric worldview” and “the American Dream paradigm” are often used interchangeably.

- The rites of passage, which assist and cushion the individual's passage, consisted of three essential phrases: separation (pre-liminal), transition (liminal), and incorporation (post liminal).

(Hill, *Harvest*, NROPI website)

Further, in contrast to Eurocentrism, Afrocentrism is focused on the “self” only as a means to connect with the community. The “self” is not an end, but a means to an end. The “self” has a broader frame of reference, namely the collective representation of one's identity. Hill cites the Akan people of West Africa as an exemplar of this thinking. For the Akan the self is at the center of seven concentric circles. “The smallest, innermost, and least important represents the individual. Moving outward we find the family, clan, tribe, nation, people, and ultimately, the world. Youth, children and the mentally impaired are expected to have a small self, but with maturity and responsibility the self is expected to expand....One is not considered a whole person until one knows where one's blood is coming from and where one's soul is going” (Hill, *Harvest*, NROPI website). In this way, NROPI prescribes a process of going inward to discover “who am I?,” the authentic “self,” in order to connect to one’s community (defined by ethnicity) and ultimately to the world. “I...out to the We...to the Universal, but it has to start with the I and the We” (Hill, interview, 12/3/08).

Afrocentrism, in this way, is the way to the universal, for NROPI. Hill likens Afrocentrism to an essentialized concept of what I will call “indigenous spirituality,” characterized by being in tune with nature. “No matter where, indigenous groups are just in tune. They haven’t been tainted by capitalism and haven’t been tainted by the West. The biggest problem is just materialism and capitalism. The whole economic thing just gets in the way” (Hill, interview, 12/3/08). This indigenous spirituality is universal. “It is not surprising that the same basic, ancient wisdom has been found throughout the world. The seeds of this

ancient knowledge can prove to be the salvation of science and practice in our modern world” (Hill, 1992: 95).

According to this mythological system, by returning to one’s authentic self within the context of one’s unique cultural heritage, one constructs the armor necessary to withstand the onslaughts of a toxic society. Therefore, Afrocentrism becomes “a cultural antihistamine to prevent the enslaved Africans and their descendants from experiencing an allergic reaction to the social toxins of the American experience....the cultural armor to beat back the demons of hopelessness, meaninglessness and lovelessness” (Hill, 2004:197). Yet, in order to achieve this authenticity and wholeness, African Americans must change their narrative; they must switch from a Eurocentric to an Afrocentric cosmogony.

### **Lack of Rites of Passage in the Modern World**

The process whereby African Americans will change sacred narratives is through rites of passage, and particularly initiation rituals. According to NROPI, the lack of rites of passage has been an important cause of the current predicament, and its resurgence can, therefore, be a central part of the solution.

What has been lacking in the socialization of African American youth in America, is the presence of an orderly process of maturation to prepare them for adulthood. Institutions have failed to fill the void. If human needs are not satisfied, human dysfunctioning will occur. Institutions are ineffective because of their own lack of preparation and commitment to respond to the needs of African American youth. As a result of this vacuum, most African American youth become indoctrinated by the streets, the electronic media, the over-glamorization of popular culture and the racism that continues to plague American society. It is little wonder that African American youth, particularly males, have become confused, embittered and demoralized. They are walking time bombs. (Hill, 2004: 183)

The absence of ritual, according to Hill, is endemic of modern, post industrial society as a whole, which is dominated by Eurocentric thinking. In this society, ritual is considered suspect, irrational, anti-intellectual and akin to witchcraft. Additionally, ritual is considered unchanging and ancient, which works against modern concepts of progress and evolution. These factors have combined to virtually eliminate rites of passage from contemporary culture. Hill directly links this loss of initiation rituals to the ills of contemporary society, for there is no way for youth to construct their identity in a healthy way and be charged with the responsibilities of the future of the community. “The foundering of contemporary youth—their identity crises and frantic searching for personal identity in the fires of intense experience—is a symptom of the loss of a discernible threshold over which one passes into accepted adulthood. The gateway is gone, leaving the younger generation to thrash through the underbrush on their own in the hope of finding reasonable passage” (Hill, *Harvest*, NROPI website).

Hill also laments the absence of a powerful mythology in contemporary American culture as a related cause of decline. As stated earlier, according to NROPI, rituals are the enactment of a myth. Here he cites Joseph Campbell, a popular mythologist, who, like Eliade, prescribed a return to myth and ritual as a way to re-enchant the world and create meaning. Hill asks, “What happens when a society no longer embraces a powerful mythology?” Citing Campbell, he responds, “To find out what it means to have a society without any rituals, read your local and national newspapers. The news is full of destructive and violent acts by young people. We, as adults have provided them no rituals by which they become members of the tribe or community. Where do the youth growing in the community get their myths? They create their own” (Hill, *Harvest*, NROPI website). He points to gang initiation as an insidious reaction to the dearth of

generative ritual and mythology in contemporary society. This form of ritual erupts out of the vacuum left by society (Hill, 2004: 186).

In contrast to the West, according to NROPI, rites of passage are an essential and authentic part of the African narrative, but their practice was disrupted when Africans were enslaved and colonized. “Initiation and puberty rites have historically been part of the socialization process for regenerating West and Central African communities. However, enslavement and colonialization disrupted the process” (Hill, 2004: 172). NROPI, therefore, calls for replacing the “American Dream” paradigm with rites of passage to develop whole, authentic people, bound by an African centered value system and cultural identity. “Whereas, the American dream paradigm separates individuals from their families, communities and ultimately, the world, an African centered paradigm rooted in rites of passage connects individuals with communal and cosmic resources” (Hill, 2007: 177 and 187). NROPI has constructed programs precisely to accomplish this “replacement” of one narrative with another.

To summarize, NROPI has constructed an elaborate mythological system that begins in fragmentation and promises wholeness. This mythological framework begins with a state of African American brokenness—the result of enslavement, oppression, and a socialization process anchored in a toxic Eurocentric narrative. In order to heal African Americans and their communities, NROPI’s framework calls for a change from a Eurocentric to an Afrocentric narrative. Rites of passage is the process for achieving this change in place. In the next chapter, I will describe NROPI’s rites of passage program and how it enacts NROPI’s mythology.

### III. THE ENACTMENT OF THE MYTH

#### **NROPI's Three Part Rites of Passage Framework**

For NROPI, rites of passage, and initiation rituals, in particular, are the key to stemming the accelerating path of decline. NROPI identifies three key components to initiation:<sup>11</sup> 1) a value system, 2) cultural specific representations, and 3) ritual and ceremony (Hill, interview 12/3/08). For NROPI, this model is a content-independent framework that can be transferred to other cultural and value systems;<sup>12</sup> they have focused, however, on implementing it within an Afrocentric paradigm for African Americans. The value system they employ is Karenga's Nguzo Saba, which consist of Unity, Self-Determination, Collective Work and Responsibility, Cooperative Economics, Purpose, Creativity, and Faith (Hill, 2007: 184-185, see Appendix). The centrality of this system is explained through Karenga's Kawaida theory, which maintains, "if the key crisis in Black life is the cultural crisis, i.e., a crisis in views and values, then social organization or rather reorganization must start with a new value system" (Hill, 2004: 182). As such, for NROPI, the Nguzo Saba is at the core of the way in which African Americans can begin to rescue and reconstruct their history, humanity and daily lives in their own image and interests (Hill, 2004: 182). The Nguzo Saba are incorporated into all of NROPI's rituals and programs.

In addition to a minimum value system, a proper rites of passage framework must contain cultural specific representations. Hill defines culture as "a way of life, the customs, the myths, the folklore of that particular group, the language, the dress, the food, the holidays, the names

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<sup>11</sup> This is not to be confused with Van Gennep's three phases of rites of passage.

<sup>12</sup> For example, NROPI has worked with an Appalachian community and Christian communities to develop rites of passage programs.

and their significance—all the things that represent the way of life of that particular group” (interview, 2009). For NROPI, this consists of celebrating holidays such as Kwanzaa and Martin Luther King Day; performing rituals, such as libations for ancestors; taking on Akan day names; playing djembe drums; wearing African inspired clothing; and becoming knowledgeable about African proverbs, mythology, prophets and symbols, such as the Sankufu discussed above.

Finally, there are the rituals themselves that aggregate these elements into orchestrated experiences. Once again, these rituals are dominated by the tripartite structure identified by Van Gennep and elaborated by Turner. The rituals are constructed with well-defined phases of separation, liminality, and reaggregation. As a result of these rituals, in a seemingly paradoxical way, the youth, in a process of *self*-discovery, are wrapped in a value system and cultural identifiers that bounds their construction of identity. Thus, key questions of self discovery, such as “Who am I?”, “Am I really who I think I am?”, and “Am I all I ought to be?” are bounded by these cultural constraints. For example, the criteria given for “Who am I?” is “what values, history, traditions and cultural precepts do I recognize, respect, and practice?” Similarly, “Am I really who I think I am?” is bounded by “To what extent do I have to understand, internalize, employ, and reflect the cultural authenticity of my people?” Finally, “Am I all I ought to be?” is bounded by “To what extent do I possess and consciously apply the enduring cultural standards and meanings which measure the ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ of Black people in terms of our cultural substance and concrete conditions?” (Hill, 1992: 94-95). This dialectic between self and culture, experienced through rites of passage, is designed to provide a new cultural narrative for these youth. The best way to understand how the three parts of the framework—values, culture, and

ritual—interact is to dive into some of the specifics of the programs and provide some examples of how it is employed in practice.

### **Going “Into the Woods”**

While NROPI has a multitude of programs, the central program of initiation is a three day weekend retreat at a camp facility in Ohio. They refer to this weekend officially as “The Rites of Passage Training,” or “The Training” for short, but it is more commonly known by those who have participated in it as going “Into the Woods,” as in, “have you been into the woods?”, or “when we were in the woods” (Karlin, field notes, 12/03/08). The goal of this training, as stipulated by NROPI, reflects the dialectical nature of the individual and his community, central to NROPI’s ideology. “The goal is to help the individual recognize that the work to be done is for the purpose of the individual and the collective. Responsibility for one’s brother and sister emerges from the reality of our natural connectedness” (Hill, e-mail, 1/21/09).

NROPI utilizes ten principles of African centered education, which are the guiding principles for how the above described rites of passage framework is implemented during the retreat. Hill claims that these principles “are found continent-wide [in Africa] for educating and socializing children” (Hill, 1992: 66).

1. Separating children from the community and routines of daily life
2. Observing nature
3. A social process based on age
4. Rejection of childhood
5. Listening to the elders
6. Purification rituals
7. Tests of character

8. Use of special language
9. Use of a special name
10. Symbolic resurrection

(Hill, 1992: 66-67).

The first and last principle are the separation and reaggregation phases of Van Gennep's model, while the principles in between represent aspects conducted during the liminal phase. Each of these is grounded in an essentialized notion of African education. For example, "Observing nature" is linked back to Africa by claiming that "African schools were built on observing nature. Cycles of growth and development are based on universal principles of life, so nature can become the teacher" (Hill, 1992: 66). Further, these attributes are often contrasted with the Western, Eurocentric educational system. For example, "education in Africa is a social process, as opposed to the Western educational emphasis on individualism" (Hill, 1992: 66).

The basis structure of the Training is:

Friday:

Goal: Isolation from a busy world, Reflection... Look Listen and Learn. Focus  
Patience Control

Activities: Separation from busy world; Bonding exercises, journaling, viewing  
historical videos, de-briefing after every activity.

Saturday:

Goal: Reflections and understanding about unity, relationships to each other and  
the world

Activities: Bonding exercises in nature, journaling, elder lecture, individual  
reflection, de-briefing after every activity.

Sunday:

Goal: Celebration of each other, acceptance of responsibilities and willingness to  
do the work!

Activities: Gift ceremony, final journal entries, presentations by participants, closing  
comments and sharing.

Final Result: We begin our awakening who am I what do I want how do I get it and in the process how do I get there with my brother and my sister?  
(Hill, e-mail, 1/21/09).

Participants take part in activities that bring together the African values and cultural representations within a ritual context. For example, participants watch *Roots*, the story of Alex Haley's African genealogy through slavery designed to give participants a context for why it is important to reclaim rituals from the past (e.g., African initiation rituals are portrayed in the first episode) and "to visualize the strength of a people today having faced the atrocities of slavery" (Hill, e-mail, 1/21/09).

Participants also take part in bonding exercises, not unlike those found on other retreats, like ropes courses and wilderness hikes. These activities, however, are set against specific cultural contexts, which enhances their meaning. For example, they climb a mountain together after learning about African American icon Harriet Tubman and her heroic work to free slaves in Maryland using the Underground Railroad. This prompts the group not just to reflect the idea of teamwork, but "to reflect on what it must have been like to 'pull together' during that time!" (Hill, e-mail, 1/21/09).

At various times during the weekend, and at the end of each day, Unity Circles are formed to enable debriefing interpersonal sharing. Through these circles, "the concept of unity is presented and felt." Individuals experience each other's "awakenings." "The activities are intergenerational. Adults are in the presence of a teen awakening and teens find out that adults are still searching awakening...we are all human!" (Hill, e-mail, 1/21/09). Here we see the emphasis on what Turner would call *communitas*.

There is a high degree of secrecy that surrounds “the Training.” As someone who has not been “into the woods,” I was only allowed a minimal amount of information about the specific activities. When asked for specific details about what takes place during the retreat, the elliptical reply was, “A man or a woman who is carried to the village does not know the distance to the village” (Hill, e-mail, 1/21/09). Hill expands on this by explaining:

the lessons of the weekend, while collective are primarily personal, driven by one’s own awakening of self against personal experience up to that weekend that we either choose to recommit to or shed to evolve into our new selves. Finally and perhaps most important is the personal responsibility that we commit to on behalf of others to not ruin their personal experience by giving them premises in advance that again reflect our subjective awakening. (e-mail, 1/21/09)

The retreat is designed to begin “a path of self-actualization and responsibility. It is a time that punctuates every moment of our lives: setting standards for the business of honoring self in the context of community. ‘I am because we are, we are because I am’” (Hill, 1/21/09). This interplay between values, culture, and ritual work together to achieve NROPI’s goal of helping African American youth reconstruct identity based on an Afrocentric worldview and thereby reconstructing community. For NROPI, the sense of community, first and foremost, is Afrocentric, but this is a pathway to the universal.

### **Afrocentric Rites of Passage as Universal Religion**

Although they do not refer to themselves as “religion” or even “religious,” a reconstructed notion of African religion is bound up in NROPI’s construction of identity and their programs. Citing African religions scholar John Mbiti, Hill claims that Africans always existed as a religious people with their own religious system. Further, for Africans there is no distinction between spirit and matter or the religious and non religious; religion permeates all of

life (Hill, 2007, 173-174). NROPI incorporates “certain features typical of African world views: perceiving the universe as alive; emphasizing the unity of all things; attributing spirit, therefore value, to nature; honoring elders; respecting ancestors; and relating ritually to both nature and society” (Hill, 2007: 187).<sup>13</sup>

Afrocentric rites of passage are based on this religious reconstruction, hearkening back to a mythic and timeless African religious past to formulate a uniquely Afrocentric program. “African people have sought to guarantee harmonious development on the personal, communal and cosmic level. This is a process which brings the person and the community together into a mutually supportive and reciprocal relationship. Ritual is a modality for learning and for transformation. It can be therapeutic and it is spiritual” (Hill, 2007: 169).

Ethnicity, community, and religion work together to construct an authentic and whole sense of “self,” placing the African American within the correct sacred narrative, complete with its attendant myths, rituals, values, ancestors, pantheon, and prophets. For NROPI, this new sense of history, community, and “Supreme Being” enables the African American to exist and thrive within a toxic environment.

Ultimately, this authentic existence enables one to tap into the interconnectedness of all humanity. According Zulma Zabala, COO of East End Neighborhood House and heir apparent to Hill:

It’s something we have innately in our spirits, if you really want to tap into it. That moment of awakening, where we can understand, that is by really being global, because we are all human beings and there is a Creator. When we do “The Training,” we are offering it from an African-centered perspective, but we are

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<sup>13</sup> Indeed, Afrocentric metaphysics has been defined by Mazama as “the energy of cosmic origin that permeates and lives within all that is--human beings, animals, plants, minerals, and objects, as well as events. This common energy shared by all confers a common essence to everything in the world, and thus ensures the fundamental unity of all that exists” (Mazama, 219).

offering you an opportunity to see the global connection, the human connection, and so, if in your spirit, you are ready to awaken, you can begin to connect that to life. (interview, 12/3/08)

This expansion to the universal is the final stage of the “awakening” that can result from “the Training” and rites of passage in general. Hill describes this process of going from the individual to the community and, ultimately, to the universal.

In order to be tolerant and accepting of others outside of yourself, first of all you have to deal with ‘self.’ Who am I? Do I feel comfortable with myself? ‘Who am I?’ is related to We. There is a cultural extension to We that is ethnicity. So being African centered a lot of people interpret that as being ‘anti.’ Sometimes it is played out that way, but relative to the way we operate being ‘pro’ is not being ‘anti.’ Because if you feel good about yourself and who you are and who you represent relative to We and ethnicity, then you can be more accepting of other groups of people. And you can tap into the universal. (interview, 12/3/08)

In this way, Afrocentricity is a means to an end, not an end in itself. There is a “thin line between being part of this particular group and humanity in general, but it’s a means to an end, a means to you becoming a part of a higher order, but it’s an important step to get you to that universal humanity” (Hill, interview, 12/3/08). This ability to tap into the universal is the end result of a rites of passage program that first must take the initiate out of his current narrative and place him into a new narrative—an Afrocentric narrative that begins in Africa, travels through a strong sense of African American community, and ends, at last in the universal.

In summary, NROPI’s rites of passage program attempts to combine cultural specific representations, a value system, and ritual to effect a change from a Eurocentric to an Afrocentric narrative. According to NROPI’s mythology, this re-emplacement into a new narrative is designed to create authentic, whole individuals and communities, rooted in African identity. This radical particularism, however, is ultimately meant to open individuals to a universal spirituality that connects all humanity and nature. In order to illumine what is at work in these rituals and

how they can effect this emplacement, I will next employ Jonathan Z. Smith's theories of place, ritual and the sacred.

#### IV. TO CHANGE PLACE: J.Z. SMITH AS AN EXPLANATORY MODEL

Arnold Van Gennep's theories of rites of passage and Victor Turner's theories of liminality and *communitas* could be employed to shed light on the rituals constructed and enacted by NROPI, but since these theorists were used to design the programs in the first place, it would be a circular argument. The analysis would be akin to trying to ascertain why so many Civil War battles took place in national parks. Instead, I will turn to religious historian and theorist Jonathan Z. Smith's theories of ritual and the sacred to illuminate our understanding of what occurs during NROPI's rites of passage programs. I have argued that NROPI attempts to take African American youth out of a Eurocentric narrative, based on the American Dream paradigm, and place them, instead, into a new, sacred, Afrocentric narrative, based on an African centered value system and cultural representations. Smith's notions of ritual and the sacred are grounded on a theory of place. This theory of place as a marker of differential signification will help explain the way NROPI's project utilizes ritual in order to place African American youth into a new narrative.

#### **Ritual as Emplacement**

A brief summary of some of Smith's theories of ritual and the sacred will prepare the ground for this analysis.<sup>14</sup> First, in opposition to the idea that place is simply a physical location, for Smith, place is also a metaphorical, socially constructed category defined by hierarchies of position. "Place is not best conceived as a particular location with an idiosyncratic physiognomy

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<sup>14</sup> I should note that Smith's theories have been well critiqued by Ron Grimes, see Grimes (1999), but Smith's theories continue to be useful and endure in the academic community. Additionally, Smith's theories are particularly useful in this context, and Grimes critique does not dismiss the importance of space and place in ritual, he simply does not agree that they are always the most important aspect, as opposed to action, for example.

or as a uniquely individualistic node of sentiment, but rather as a social position within a hierarchical system” (Smith, 1987: 45). Conversely, in addition to being constructed, place also constructs—place determines identity. “Place is the beginning of our existence, just as a father’—not simply in the sense of our environmental generation, but also in the sense of social location, of genealogy, kinship, authority, superordination, and subordination” (Smith, 1987: 46). Therefore, place, in these ways, is socially constructed and inextricable linked to identity.

Second, for Smith, this idea of place is also related to the sacred. Following Lévi Strauss, Smith compares the sacred with the signifier zero. In and of itself it represents nothing, but when attached to an object, it has a dramatic effect (e.g., 5 becomes 50 with the addition of a 0). “It is a mark of major difference, like the zero, signifying nothing, devoid of meaning itself, but filled with differential significance when joined to another number’...It signals significance without contributing signification” (1987: 108). In this way, anything can be made sacred by a community even though they believe this sacrality to be *sui generis*. This differential significance is conferred through place by way of ritual.

For Smith, ritual is a way of focusing attention on the sacred. As he states, “Ritual is first and foremost, a mode of paying attention. It is a process for marking interest....It is this characteristic...that explains the role of place as a fundamental component of ritual: place directs attention” (1987: 103). Ritual creates sacred place and “*sacra* are sacred simply because they are used in a sacred place; there is no inherent difference between a sacred vessel and an ordinary one” (1982: 56).

Finally, for Smith, ritual creates a place whereby life can be unfolded in a controlled way according to the way it ought to be, as opposed to the way it is. In this way, ordinary life is displaced in favor of an ideal image of that life.

*Ritual represents the creation of a controlled environment where the variables (i.e., accidents) of ordinary life may be displaced precisely because they are felt to be so overwhelmingly present and powerful. Ritual is a means for performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are in such a way that this ritualized perfection is recollected in the ordinary, uncontrolled, course of things.* (Smith, 1982: 63)

Smith calls this spilling over of ritual effects into the ordinary course of things the “gnostic dimension of ritual,” for in this way, ritual creates a form of experiential revelation. Through the experience of the tension of place itself, ritual has its power to transform. “Ritual thus provides an occasion for reflection on and rationalization of the fact that what ought to have been done was not, what ought to have taken place did not” (Smith, 1987: 109).

Smith ends his book *To Take Place*, his most extended contemplation on ritual and place, with an example of how the concept of place can be completely transformed from the material to the metaphorical. Using Ignatius of Loyola’s classic manual of Christian devotion, *The Spiritual Exercises*, as his example, Smith demonstrates how these meditations on the Passion ask the devotee “first, to ‘call to mind the narrative of the event’ and, second, to make a ‘mental representation of the place.’ Here, all has been transferred to *inner* space. All that remains of Jerusalem is an image, the narrative, and a temporal sequence” (1987: 117). In this way, place has been completely separated from physical space.

### **Changing Places: Concepts of Place in NROPI**

NROPI's Afrocentric rites of passage program is designed to change African American youths' place in the social, cultural, political, and historical hierarchies in which they live. It seeks to change their narrative from one that begins with slavery and ends in fragmentation, represented by crime, addiction, poverty and suicide, to one that begins in a primordial Africa, populated by authentic ancestors and supportive communities, and ends in an authentic sense of self, history, community, and spiritual well-being. By placing African American youth within a lineage of African and African American prophets and heroes, NROPI is trying to change their genealogy, by elevating the importance of community and expanding the concept of family structure, NROPI tries to change the notion of kinship; by shifting authority to the "self" and nature, NROPI is changing the concept of authority; and by elevating and glorifying Afrocentrism over Eurocentrism, NROPI is attempting to change these youths' place in the hierarchy of ideas and power. Through rites of passage, the African American youth is being placed into a different narrative, one that places him into a very different place in the social, cultural, historical, and spiritual hierarchy, thereby reconstructing their identity. Further, through ritual, in this way, values, culture, and the individual, himself, becomes sacred. "Ritual is not an expression of or a response to 'the Sacred'; rather, something or someone is made sacred by ritual" (1987: 105).

Further, in these rituals, we see Smith's theory that ritual is a way of imagining things the way they ought to be in opposition to the way they really are. I believe this tension is clearly represented in the dichotomy between Eurocentrism and Afrocentrism. NROPI's claim is unequivocally that African Americans are living within the Eurocentric narrative, which they

claim is toxic. Instead, through ritual, they experience Afrocentrism—“the way things ought to be.” Ritual place provides the participants the opportunity to reflect on how things in their world are not the way they wish them to be. This placement into an Afrocentric narrative does not annihilate the competing narrative or its ongoing impact on the participant’s life. He may have been placed spiritually, mentally, or cognitively into a new narrative, but the society in which they live is still dominated by the competing narrative. Yet, the placement in the ritual enables them to experience the tension between the two. As Northrop Frye puts it in speaking of metaphor in myth, “There is, or seems to be, an assertion that A is B, along with an undercurrent of significance that tells us that A is obviously not B, and nobody but a fool could imagine that it was” (7). The participants do not deny the existence of their Eurocentric reality, but instead put it in opposition to what they believe to be their “authentic” reality.

As such, the ritual is designed to have the “gnostic” effect that Smith discusses by living into the tension, and has ongoing effects on their lives in the non-ritual space. They must constantly live in the tension created by the difference. Like the ultimate end to Smith’s theory, where place is transformed into inner space, Africa, in this way, has been transferred to an inner reality made up of image, narrative, and temporal sequence, or in other words, culture, mythology, and ritual.

Through this cultural, mythological, and ritual system, NROPI has constructed a religious response to adversity that takes on a decidedly American form of contemporary religiosity. Therefore, in order to better understand NROPI, we will now explore how it fits into the broader American religious landscape.

## V. PLACING NROPI INTO A BROADER AMERICAN CONTEXT

While NROPI is an interesting case study in its own right, it can also be viewed against the backdrop of a larger American religious landscape. I argue that NROPI fits into 1) a widespread narrative of American decline in the modern period, emerging largely during and as a result of the tumult of the 1960s, 2) a resulting emphasis on the quest for “authenticity,” also related to 3) the emergence of new forms of spirituality, and, finally, 4) a movement of re-invented rites of passage programs, which combines these trends into a ritual form to try and react to the sense of decline. In this chapter I will briefly explore each of these phenomena and discuss how NROPI can be understood within their context.

### **American Decline in Modernity**

While NROPI identifies a very specific form of decline in the African American community, this claim of decline and fragmentation is not unique to them. Cries of decline echo from all sectors of the culture. Philosopher Charles Taylor sums up these feelings. “Everyone senses that something has changed. Often this is experienced as loss, break-up. A majority of Americans believe that communities are eroding, families, neighborhoods, even the polity; they sense that people are less willing to participate, to do their bit, and they are less trusting of others” (Taylor, 2007: 473). In this breakdown, the sense of self and authenticity are being threatened. Sociologist Wade Clark Roof notes there seems to be a general sense of “fragmentation and commodification of the self in modern society” (Roof, 1999: 35). Not all scholars agree that the decline is real, but the fact that it is a prevailing notion in society is significant for our analysis.

There are competing claims as to the origins and causes of decline. Like NROPI, many cultural critics have identified American individualism, materialism, hedonism, and narcissism as the causes of the breakdown.<sup>15</sup> “This shift is often understood, particularly by those most disturbed by it, as an outbreak of mere egoism, or a turn to hedonism. In other words, two things which were identified clearly as vices in a traditional ethic of community service and self discipline are targeted as the motors of change” (Taylor, 2007: 474). Interestingly, for many, this shift to individualism has also been championed as the solution—not a hedonistic or selfish individualism, but a quest for the “authentic self.” This is what journalist David Brooks calls a “higher selfishness,” where “they want to believe that they are contributing to the welfare of everyone; and they yearn for more meaningful community relations” (Taylor, 2007: 477). NROPI advocates this “quest for authenticity” as the solution, against mere individualism, and thereby, not only can be viewed within the narrative of American decline, but also within the larger movement towards a quest for authenticity.

### **Quest for Authenticity**

Let’s call this the Age of Authenticity. It appears that something has happened in the last half-century, perhaps even less, which has profoundly altered the conditions of belief in our societies. I believe, along with many others, that our North Atlantic civilization has been undergoing a cultural revolution in recent decades. The 60s provide perhaps the hinge moment, at least symbolically. It is on one hand an individuating revolution, which may sound strange, because our modern age was already based on a certain individualism. But this shifted on to a new axis, without deserting the others. As well as moral/spiritual and instrumental individualism, we now have ‘expressive’ individualism. This is, of course, not totally new. Expressivism was the invention of the Romantic period in the late eighteenth century....What is new is that this kind of self-orientation seems to have become a mass phenomenon. (Taylor, 473)

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<sup>15</sup> See Bellah, et. al, 2007, and Marty, 1996 and 2005 for some examples of this critique.

The key for Taylor is that this quest for authenticity does not have to be vapid or narcissistic, like many social critics have argued. On the contrary, there can be an “ethic of authenticity,” whereby the quest for the authentic self is placed in service to the community and the greater good. “It accords crucial moral importance to a kind of contact with myself, with my own inner nature, which it sees as in danger of being lost, partly through the pressures towards outward conformity, but also because in taking an instrumental stance to myself, I may have lost the capacity to listen to this inner voice....I can’t even find the model to live by outside myself. I can find it only within” (Taylor, 1991, 29). Like NROPI, this form of the quest does not occur in a vacuum, however, but is, instead, in dialogue with community or society in order to establish certain ideals. This is a picture of what “a better or higher life would be, where ‘better’ or ‘higher’ are defined not in terms of what we happen to desire or need, but offer a standard of what we ought to desire” (Taylor, 1991: 16). It is precisely this “higher” form of authenticity that is sought after in NROPI’s rites of passage .

### **Reflexive Spirituality**

The expressive revolution of the 60s, which ushered in the Age of Authenticity, destabilized traditional forms of religion and new forms have developed (Taylor, 2007: 526). One form is identified as “spirituality” where “they are seeking a kind of unity and wholeness of the self, a reclaiming of the place of feeling, against the one-sided pre-eminence of reason, and a reclaiming of the body and its pleasures....The stress is on unity, integrity, holism, individuality; their language often invokes ‘harmony, balance, flow, integrations, being at one, centered’” (Taylor, 2007: 507).

According to cultural historian Leigh Schmidt, spirituality emerges as a distinct cultural force with the rise and flourishing of religious liberalism in America in the 19th century through individuals and groups, such as Transcendentalists, romantic Unitarians, Reform Jews, progressive Quakers, devout disciples of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman, Spiritualists, questing psychologists, New Thought optimists, Vedantists, and Theosophists, among others (Schmidt, 2005: 7). While its most distinct American roots date back to this period, like Taylor, sociologists identify a further shift towards “spirituality” as a cultural force in the 1960s (Wuthnow, 1998, Roof, 1996) with the emergence of what are often called “highly active seekers” (Roof, 1993) and “seeker oriented spirituality” (Wuthnow, 1998). NROPI’s roots also trace back to this period of unrest. By the end of the 20th century, growing numbers of Americans were piecing their faith together from an ever more complex religious landscape of available images, symbols, moral codes and doctrines (Wuthnow, 1998: 2; Roof, 1999: 75).

The scholarly and popular literature offers a wide variety of definitions of “spirituality,” but an agreed upon definition of “spirituality” is lacking. In order for us to see the links between the work of NROPI and contemporary concepts of spirituality, I will develop some taxic indicators based upon these definitions to help make the link. Synthesizing especially the definitions sociologist Wade Roof Clark and the cultural historian Leigh Eric Schmidt, I arrive at the following four broad taxic indicators:

- *Primacy of experience*: aspiring towards direct mystical experience of the divine; the valuing of silence, solitude, and meditation; embodied participation in religious acts; and adventuresome seeking.
- *The quest for authenticity and wholeness*: seeking after one’s True Self; acknowledging the body; seeking physical and emotional healing, appreciating the immanence of the transcendent in each person and in nature.

- *Reflexivity*: a self-conscious construction of one's own beliefs and practices, with an ongoing willingness to develop those beliefs and practices by studying or experiencing the beliefs and practices of others; ultimately a belief that all religions are attempts to capture a universal Truth, and thereby are all equally true in their essences.
- *Pursuit of justice*: concern for social salvation, healing the environment, and a belief that inner and outer peace are tied together.<sup>16</sup>

Each of these four indicators may be emphasized in varying degrees by any one individual or group, but taken together, they represent a useful, broad definition of "spirituality," remaining true to most of the definitions offered in the scholarly literature.<sup>17</sup>

Comparing the work of NROPI to these indicators yields compelling evidence that NROPI fits within this category of contemporary American spirituality. NROPI's public documents and the words of its founder conform to a definition of "spirituality" as a form of expression that places a *primacy on direct experience, is concerned with a quest for wholeness, practices reflexivity, and is in pursuit of justice.*

It's amazing how transformational it is when you get a young person out of the city and in a natural environment...the difference is night and day. It's so quiet. What we ask those involved when we get them to camp is 'when is the last time you talked to a tree?' They look at us like we're crazy, and we say 'what's the difference between you and the tree? Are you more important than the tree?' But again, the tree is a living breathing organism like the earth is a living breathing

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<sup>16</sup> Specifically, according to Roof, spiritual seekers "privilege experience over belief, exploration over certitude, affirm the body as a feeling, sensing self, and hold to a Jamesean-like pragmatism emphasizing the insights and emotions garnered in experiential encounters" (1996: 152). Elsewhere, he defines spirituality as "a concern for the wholeness of life" and "the existential task of discovering one's truest self in the context of reality and cosmic totality" (1998: 215-216). Further, for Roof, there is an explicit reflexivity in modern spiritual seeking that acknowledges a post modern construction of identity, for "to speak of a reflexive self is to acknowledge that we are not what tradition or family or even our ascriptive social characteristics simply tell us we are but what we make of ourselves in interaction with our cultural heritage" (Roof, 1998: 217).

Schmidt equates "spirituality" with religious liberalism, and defines the qualities of a religious liberal as: "individual aspiration after mystical experience or religious feeling; the valuing of silence, solitude, and serene meditation; the immanence of the transcendent--in each person and in nature; the cosmopolitan appreciation of religious variety as well as unity in diversity; ethical earnestness in pursuit of justice-producing reforms or 'social salvation'; an emphasis on creative self-expression and adventuresome seeking" (Schmidt, 12).

<sup>17</sup> See also Marler and Hadaway, 2002; Streib and Hood, 2008; Zinbauer, et.al, 1997, Fuller, 2001, and Albanese 2007 for similar elements of this definition of "spirituality."

organism. And nature itself is like a womb that takes care of you, that centers you and balances you. (Hill, interview, 10/10/08)

As a program primarily focused upon ritual, NROPI accentuates the primacy of experience. This focus is evident throughout their materials, especially in a comment by Hill.

We operate on the process that 80% of what you know is based on experience. You have to experience it, so we've incorporated the nature piece which is very important for the type of transformation we are looking for and the association of the sacred and an understanding of the sacred. (interview, 10/10/08)

Furthermore, Hill writes, "the practice of rituals can increase bodily health, especially when rituals are acted out by the general participants—as opposed to being a passive audience. When the body is involved, ritual provides kinesthetic patterns and sensuous immediacy" (2007: 166).

NROPI acknowledges seven functioning domains of experience: Cognitive, Physical, Psychological/Emotional, Affective, Territorial, Cultural, and Spiritual. The Spiritual domain is the "inseparability between the living and dead. Quietness and meditation with self and nature. Universal force. Living in harmony with, rather than in opposition to, the natural laws of universe [sic], prayer, worship, and libation (acknowledgement and respect for ancestors)" (Hill, 1997:76-77). Here we find the focus on direct experience through meditation and solitude, and also an indication of the second indicator, a quest for authenticity and wholeness, as expressed through the concept of the immanence of the transcendent in nature, the inseparability of all life, and the belief in universal laws. Further, the very notion that all seven domains are equally important and how they are defined acknowledges the quest for wholeness.

Beyond the identification with nature and the immanence of the transcendent in nature, the quest for wholeness and authenticity is also reflected in the emphasis NROPI places on looking inward to find life's answers. They begin this affirmation of the self at a young age.

One of the first things taught to young children when they take part in NROPI after school programs is Paul Robeson’s “I am Somebody” affirmation, which they recite daily.

*I am somebody...I may not look like anybody, but I am somebody...I feel like I am somebody...I look like I am somebody...I act like I am somebody...everybody is somebody to somebody...*<sup>18</sup>

For NROPI, the first question on the quest is “Who am I?” “The ageless questions are based on the dicta, ‘Man and Woman-Know Oneself,’ and ‘All Knowledge Begins With Self Knowledge.’ The failure to ask and answer such questions has resulted in an endless adolescence and midlife crisis for many adults” (Hill, *Back to the Future*, NROPI website). For NROPI, wholeness hinges on the process of knowing oneself. “The word ‘education’ comes from the Latin word ‘educare,’ to bring forth. Education is nothing more than a teacher bringing out what you were born with, it’s all within you” (Hill, interview, 12/3/08). NROPI’s programs are designed to be education, in this way, as opposed to the “Western” educational system.

Hill, who describes himself as “spiritual, but not religious,” also believes that this quest for wholeness is universal, and that “more and more people are searching and looking for a sense of centeredness, a sense of wholeness, a sense of being” (Hill, 2002). Hill’s universal view reflects the qualities of *reflexivity*, whereby all religions are seeking the same essential, universal Truth, and each expresses this Truth in its own, limited way.

Spirituality is universal and is incorporated in all modern religions....Modern religion is nothing more than the failed attempt to institutionalize spirituality....Jesus didn’t have a church he operated out of. The community was his church. There weren’t four walls. All of this comes much much later and it has degenerated into gives us what we have now—movement away from being spiritual and part of the universe and operating from the universal laws, to these

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<sup>18</sup> The “I am Somebody” affirmation was developed by Paul Robeson, an African American actor, athlete, and civil rights activist. This affirmation is one of the first things taught to children by NROPI and recited often to build self-esteem and self-confidence (Jampolsky, 2002).

organized religions that have conduits between you and whatever the ultimate is. Men and women are imperfect and what they create will be imperfect too. To me the closest thing to a manifestation of whatever you want to call the Creator is nature. But look at the way we desecrate nature....Just the destructiveness of mankind, of humankind. But all in the name of modernized organized religion. (interview, 10/10/08)

Further, “when I think of the prophets, like Jesus, Muhammad, Krishna, Buddha. To me they reflected spirituality....To me they represented true spiritual leaders that were in touch and in tune” (Hill, interview, 12/3/08).

Hill’s reflexive spirituality has informed him throughout the development and implementation of rites of passage through NROPI. He is deliberately and self consciously combinative.<sup>19</sup> As a result of his research, experience, and particularly his Kellogg Fellowship, which enabled him to travel the world in pursuit of indigenous initiation rites, Hill blended together rites, beliefs, symbols, and practices from a wide variety of religions and cultures. For example, he acknowledges, “we incorporate some things relative to modern religion. Rejection of childhood. Like the apostle Paul said, ‘When I become a man I put away childish things.’” They also incorporate Native American sweat lodges during the initiation process, which produce an “altered state of consciousness.” After experiencing Outward Bound at the start of his Kellogg Fellowship, he was “sold” on the need to incorporate nature and solos, in which they were left out over night alone and had to journal. “I was sold and had to incorporate this into the process.” Even the African elements, which are central, come from a wide variety of different regions, utilizing different languages and rites from different ethnic groups (interview, 2008). All

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<sup>19</sup> I borrow this term from Catherine Albanese (2008). Albanese defines all of religion as vernacular religion, whereby “everybody glosses a tradition in one or another way to put life’s pieces together. In the religious vernacular, everybody creates; everybody picks and chooses from what is available to constitute changing religious forms” (9).

of this reflects the reflexive nature of Hill and NROPI. This self-conscious construction of spiritual beliefs and practices is a hallmark of the reflexivity of spirituality.

Finally, this reflexivity is reflected in their ceremonies. Speaking to a large gathering at the start of a rites of passage ceremony in Cleveland, musician Baba Coleman spoke to the unifying nature of rites of passage. “Rites of passage is a process that teaches us how to come together. If you are Muslim, you are a Christian, you are Yorubai, Jehovah. Whatever you are. Rites of passage shows us how to come together as one people. Can you say ‘one people?’” The crowd replied, “one people.” This was repeated three times, before the ceremony began (Jampolsky, 2002).

For NROPI, the *pursuit of justice*, embodied in their community focus and grounded in their ethno-religious understanding of Afrocentricity, is at the core of everything they do. Their Vision Statement is unequivocal on this point—“To institutionalize a process that will result in the development, support and regeneration of Healthy and Authentic Community” (NROPI website). As Hill states in *Reinventing Ritual: Coming of Age*, the documentary produced for Canadian television, “rites of passage is nothing more than a process for regenerating community” (2002). The rites of passage process is intended as a journey towards self-awareness that is in service to community. “The ideal ritual fosters both psychological and social well-being....Rituals, traditions and myths represent key variables in the socialization process of developing youth into adults and the maintenance of healthy and authentic community....You cannot be a complete or whole person alone” (Hill, 2007: 166, 178, and 198). The inherent interdependence of community and the importance of communal health and well-being are paramount throughout NROPI. Perhaps the best way to understand the way in which ethnicity,

community, and religion are united for NROPI is to appreciate the “Three Senses” that they are committed to creating and maintaining in the adults and youth who participate in their programs—the Sense of History, the Sense of Community, and the Sense of Supreme Being:

The Sense of History communicates to participants that we are, first and foremost, Africans. We are Africans because of our common cultural orientation which gives us the same sense of the natural universe and human conditions that characterize all African people.

The Sense of Community helps us understand that our identity and being is in the community. Community is our source of strength and not a burden to individual aspirations.

The Sense of Supreme Being helps us understand that there is power and a will that is greater than all else. The sense of the Supreme Being helps us realize that just as the natural path of living plants is to grow toward the sun, our natural path is to grow in understanding toward the Supreme Being. (Hill, 1992:75)

NROPI embodies the *primacy of experience, the quest for wholeness, and reflexivity*, and the *pursuit of justice*. Among other ways of categorizing their work, NROPI can clearly be included within the category of “spirituality” in America. Further, as spirituality, NROPI should also be considered a form of contemporary religion by scholars, per recent trends in the academy.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> At the 2008 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Chicago, religious studies scholars Heinz Streib and Ralph Hood presented a paper designed to deal with this question head on--should “spirituality” exist as a separate etic category for scholars of religion? After an extensive presentation of research in the field and their own research findings, they conclude that self-identified spirituality is religion. Spirituality as an emic term should continue to be researched and analyzed to understand its meaning, but as an etic term it should go.

The conclusions they draw from their research states, “There is no necessity for a conceptualization of ‘spirituality’ ....The concept of religion is sufficient. In more technical terms: ‘spirituality’ as an emic term needs to be taken seriously and we need to engage in research that clarifies the meanings of ‘spirituality’ for those who identify themselves as either ‘more spiritual than religious’ or as ‘spiritual, but not religious’ (Belzen, 2008). However, as an etic term, ‘religion’ is sufficient; the concept of ‘spirituality’ as an etic term can go” (Streib and Hood, 2008: 19).

## Broader Rites of Passage Movement

NROPI identifies the lack of rites of passage as a major factor contributing to the decline of modern western society, and they put forth renewed rites of passage as a primary part of the solution. In this way too, they are part of a broader trope in American culture—a movement of organizations and individuals preaching a message of decline and looking towards rites of passage as the solution. Whether substantiated or not, the notion that rites of passage are lacking in the West and that this absence leads to disastrous results is a common theme in the American and Western mythos. *The Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential*, published by the Union of International Associations, the “world’s oldest, biggest and most comprehensive source of information on global civil society,” declares:

The absence of rites of passage leads to a serious breakdown in the process of maturing as a person. Young people are unable to participate in society in a creative manner because societal structures no longer consider it their responsibility to intentionally establish the necessary marks of passing from one age-related social role to another, such as: child to youth, youth to adult, adult to elder. The result is that society has no clear expectation of how people should participate in these roles and therefore individuals do not know what is required by society.<sup>21</sup>

Often the lack of rites of passage, particularly initiation rituals, is linked to violence and disorder. “In the absence of rites of passage major transitions become ritualized. Bereft of the explicit framing of rites, unconscious and unintentional activities displace conscious and intentional ones, often with deadly consequences” (Grimes, 91). This sentiment is closely

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<sup>21</sup> Union of International Associations (UIA), *The Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential*, <https://www.diversitas.org/db/x.php?dbcode=pr&go=e&id=11616740>

Founded in 1907 by Nobel Peace Prize Laureate (1913) Henri La Fontaine and information scientists Paul Otlet, the UIA is an international organization that collects data about international non-governmental organizations and inter-governmental organizations. “The UIA documents this development, recording information about organizations, their concerns, their philosophies, and their goals.” They maintain consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). UNESCO recently designated them formal Associate status, which is held by only 20 organizations ([www.uia.be](http://www.uia.be)).

related to the views expressed by Hill, stated above, of the grim results of a society that lives without a powerful mythology and attendant rituals.

According to this theme, the lack of prescribed initiation rituals unravels into destructive peer-to-peer initiation rituals, which arise spontaneously to fill the void. “Initiatory activity arises whether or not we want it to and whether or not it is supervised by elders” (Grimes, 93).

The result, according to ritual studies scholar Ronald Grimes, is that

initiation in Western society often takes this postmodern, peer-driven form—adolescents initiating adolescents, sometimes compulsively, unconsciously, and violently. Such initiations, detached from family and community, are practices that may be substitutes for traditional initiation conducted by elders who represent a lineage. (94)

Again, this idea of the origins of gang initiation rituals is echoed by Hill.

The contemporary rites of passage movement hit its apex in the 90s, and declined between 2000 and 2008. Yet, according to Grimes, rites of passage are again on the rise (Grimes, 3). “Among many disaffiliated North Americans of European descent there is a growing hunger for compelling ritual experience, especially initiation with its apparent promise of adult identity and spiritual competence” (Grimes, 112). NROPI is part of a growing group of organizations and individuals that see the lack of rites of passage as the problem and their re-emergence as the solution. The best example of this trend is Global Passageways, a new non-profit organization headquartered in Boulder, Colorado, which is seeking to be an umbrella organization, of sorts, for this movement. They currently boast over 80 individuals on their “Intergenerational Advisory Board,” including Paul Hill, Jr. These individuals represent rites of passage organizations of all stripes, primarily located in the United States. According to their website,

Global Passageways is a growing community of our world’s leading rites of passage practitioners, positive youth and elder development specialists,

indigenous wisdom-keepers, transformational educators, inspired youth, and social change movement leaders who are working together for the healing and transformation of our lives, our societies, and the planet Earth.

Born from a call to adventure heard simultaneously by youth and elders around the world, this collaborative international project is dedicated to helping humanity navigate the narrow passageway of change we face in the twenty-first century.

Throughout history rites of passage have served as a fundamental source of transformation at all stages of the human life cycle. In cultures across the planet, they have been a pathway for consciously initiating youth into maturity by connecting them with their inner selves, their society, Spirit, and the great Earth community.

Today we find ourselves living in a global village that is increasingly lacking its elders, a sense of community, and rites of passage for our awakening youth. As we confront an unparalleled global crisis—what many are calling a time of global initiation—there is a growing recognition that the revitalization of rites of passage has the potential to play a leading role in the healing and transformation of our world.

Now more than ever, our youth need to be initiated in healthy and holistic ways so that they are deeply rooted in their connection with the Earth, with their bodies, with their inner lives, and with the societies they have been born into. We need our ‘olders’ to awaken to their role as ‘elders’ so that they can provide their greatly needed wisdom, guidance, and blessing. Most of all, we need healthy and whole communities in which all generations can come together in intergenerational collaboration, action, and celebration.

Many are calling our historical moment the time of the Great Turning, the Shift, the 11th Hour. Together we are recognizing the remarkable times we live in as the threshold of a great human awakening, a collective rite of passage, the transition of an Old World dying and a New World being born. And it is with this understanding that it is becoming clear that twenty-first century rites of passage will play a vital part in our planetary transformation and renewal.

In these uncertain times of global initiation, the quest to bring together youth and elders to revitalize rites of passage is being called to the center of our world's stage.

(Global Passageways website)

Global Passageways employs the same rhetoric of cultural decline and call for renewal inherent in NROPI's mythology, including the loss of rites of passage that have existed "throughout history" and the "growing recognition that the revitalization of rites of passage has the potential to play a leading role in the healing and transformation of our world." The sense of urgency is clear in phrases like "unparalleled global crisis," and "11th Hour." There is also the emphasis on wholeness, indigenous wisdom, connection to the Earth, and transformation, evident in NROPI's programs and "spirituality" in America.

The goals of Global Passageways are far reaching:

- To help youth and elders come-of-age in positive ways that serve the needs of our changing times.
- To revitalize rites of passage, initiation, and mentoring in ways that are appropriate for the 21st century.
- To honor and weave traditional and contemporary paths of healing and transformation.
- To create whole cultures and healthy communities by strengthening intergenerational relationships and collaborative action.
- To bring together the positive youth development community - youth leadership, youth service, youth social entrepreneur, youth activism, youth adventure, and youth civic engagement – to explore how these programs can more effectively serve as contemporary forms of rites of passage and initiation.
- To connect our pathways of personal transformation with our pathways of planetary transformation.

(Global Passageways website)

In order to achieve these goals, Global Passageways envisions a series of steps along the way. The first step was to hold a five day retreat for its Advisory Board and other interested parties in Hawaii in October, 2008, entitled "Generation Vision Quest: Rites of Passage for an Awakening World." Paul Hill attended this gathering. While he felt like the gathering could

have been better run and that there were too many competing egos, he still felt like the trip was worth his while and that he will stay involved in the organization. They have also launched an extensive website, and plan more gatherings in the coming years to advance their mission.

Although there are considerable and important differences between NROPI and the many organizations within the Global Passageways network, Global Passageways and the similarities between their mission and goals and those of NROPI provide compelling evidence that NROPI is part of a larger movement in America and beyond. As before, I argue that this movement should be viewed largely as a religious response to adversity, and, as such, should be studied through that lens.

### **Contestation**

Finally, NROPI fits into the larger American religious landscape in that it distances itself from “religion” and is contested by other religious groups. Separation and contestation have a unique quality in the United States for many reasons—the continued importance placed on religion, the increasingly diverse and self-defined nature of religion, the increasingly diffuse quality of religion, and the separation of church and state. In the United States, religion continues to be an important part of public discourse, practice and identity. The 2008 *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey* of the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life found that “despite predictions that the United States would follow Europe’s path toward widespread secularization, the U.S. population remains highly religious in its beliefs and practices, and religion continues to play a prominent role in American public life.” The Pew Forum additionally found an

“increasing diversity of the American religious landscape,” a “remarkable dynamism of its faith communities” and a “pervasive presence of religion in the American public square” (Pew, 1).

Religion in the United States has also become increasingly self-defined and diffused into all areas of culture.

Today more than ever we have become aware of an important fact: religion can no longer be understood as a separate sphere of social life, neatly compartmentalized and privatized, set apart from economics, entertainment, education, or politics. Religious sensibilities seep deeply into and permeate every part of who we are and how we live, driving personal, community, and national attempts to create order out of disorder, meaning in the face of suffering, and hope when all seems lost. (Laderman, 2)

The significance, diversity and diffusion of religion in America, combined with the unique history of the separation of church and state, create widespread possibilities for contestation; contestation, further, becomes itself an important way of identifying religious convictions and behaviors in what otherwise would not be identified as religious activities. These factors give contestation in the United States a distinctive characteristic.

NROPI differentiates itself from “religion” for many reasons, although not all of them stated. These include the negative image its founder holds of "organized" religion, an attempt to reconcile faith and reason, a related sense of superiority at not believing in antiquated and oppressive religious beliefs and practices, and the separation of church and state. Conversely, NROPI is contested by others precisely because it serves so many functions of religion that they are perceived as a threat.

When asked how NROPI relates to established churches, Hill confesses that NROPI has had difficulty with organized religion.

If there is one area that has really created tension that is [churches] see rites of passage as competition. It would be some, not all, of your different Christian

denominations. So what we do to try and deal with that is we put an emphasis on differentiating between religion and spirituality, because we have involved in this Christians, Muslims, but we don't emphasize or operate from the perspective of one religion or denomination. Spirituality is universal and is incorporated in all modern religions. But that's a tough one, because even though there are more Churches that are seeking out and incorporating this into what they do again with young people, initially they were very much threatened by rites of passage, and something out of Africa, something non-Western, something that embraces nature, in a lot of religions nature is looked upon as something that is negative. Something that is untamed and anything that relates to nature and female...It's problematic, it's better but still has a long ways to go as far as understanding and flexibility, and appreciating and valuing indigenous people and ethnic cultures. (interview, 10/10/08)

He is surprised that these institutions see NROPI as a competing form of religion, despite the religious language, symbolism, and rituals NROPI employs. Hill tells some illuminating stories about episodes of this contestation. In one case, NROPI was implementing a program through the county Career & Family Services branches in Ohio. In one situation in particular, in Richland, Ohio, NROPI was conducting a libation as part of a youth ceremony. Hill explains how this ceremony turned into a lawsuit over the separation of church and state.

Part of the ritual is the libation to give thanks for those that came before us, it has nothing to do with religion, we do it as part of Kwanzaa too, which is a non-religious, non-denominational celebration, but the libation is giving thanks to those that have come before us, and you do it with water that represents life, and you just pour the libation in the ground or in some earth, and ask somebody 'do you want to pour this libation for someone that has passed on, maybe kin or not.' There was a social worker that was there when this was taking place, who wrote a letter to the Attorney General's office, saying that this violated public dollars being used for religious purposes, and it violated separation of church and state. It was written up in the [news]paper, They were going to do an investigation, because of the allegations brought by this county worker, because of this ritualistic libation. Making some kind of sacrifice. The Attorney General dropped it after the investigation. (interview, 12/3/08)

In another situation, while a group of adults were participating in a Unity Circle, debriefing and sharing their experiences, a woman "jumped up and said, 'the Devil's in here!' I

mean it kind of shocked and threw everybody” (Hill, interview, 12/3/08). Hill describes this woman as a “very educated person.”

Although lawsuits and outbursts like these are rare, the feelings of discomfort are not isolated. According to Hill “the rituals and ceremonies really upset a lot of folks.” They make some people very uncomfortable, going against what they equate with their religious beliefs. “Because it’s foreign, it’s alien.” Summarizing his experience, Hill states, “The most difficult ones I’ve worked with are the churches. They are very, very, very difficult” (interview, 12/3/08).

Despite the many ways that NROPI’s work fits a definition of religion, they are very careful to differentiate it from religion. During a gathering of African American youth at Copley High School in Copley, Ohio, Sekou Burton, an NROPI senior trainer and the executive director of The Collective Cooperative, LLC, was about to review the Nguzo Saba with the group. Prior to beginning, he made the following disclaimer.

Keep in mind, I’ve talked to just about every parent [of every child] that is in this room to let them know that there are certain things that we are going to be going over; it has nothing to do with religion. And we’re going to put that out again, it has to do with what value system are you living up to. Okay? What value system are you living up to? You can always go back to this, like your mission statement, and find a way to move forward. (Karin, field notes, 12/3/08)

This preliminary statement was likely motivated by many factors, including the desire not to be perceived as a threat to the established religious beliefs and practices of the participants and the separation of church and state, as this program takes place in a public high school. Whatever the motivations, the need for the statement at all speaks to a contentious dialectic between NROPI and religion in America.

## VI. CONCLUSIONS

According to the National Rites of Passage Institute, African Americans have lost their authentic identity, which has led to fragmented, broken individuals and communities. According to NROPI, in order to reverse these trends, African Americans must rediscover their authentic identity through a rites of passage program that plucks them from a Eurocentric narrative and places them into an Afrocentric one. Through the construction of mythology and rites of passage, NROPI has created a religious response to adversity that takes on a decidedly American form of contemporary religiosity. By analyzing NROPI and other contemporary rites of passage programs through the lens of religious studies, scholars can gain a deeper understanding of how these programs fit into the broader American religious landscape, and provide commentary on the changing nature of that religiosity and how their language and rituals can be used as rhetorical strategies for social cohesion and control.

Unfortunately, from my survey of the literature on rites of passage programs, it appears that rites of passage programs are not, by and large, being studied within the discipline of religious studies. Other than Ron Grimes' book, *Deeply Into the Bone*, I was unable to find any recent works that deal with the broader rites of passage movement as religion. There are numerous articles that treat Afrocentric and other rites of passage programs from the perspective of prevention, intervention, and education of at-risk youth (Whaley and McQueen, 2004; Blumenkranz and Gavazzi, 1993; and Harvey and Hill, 2004), physical and mental health (Harvey and Rauch, 1997); and community development (Warfield-Coppock, 1992). Yet, the dearth of recent scholarship on these movements within religious studies, when they clearly fall under the definition of religion in a contemporary American setting, and in light of the fact that

the movement appears to be growing, suggests that further work must be done in this area by religious studies scholars.

Instead, this phenomenon is being studied by social workers, psychologists, health care professional, and sociologists. While these disciplines can bring valuable insights from their inquiry, I argue that by examining these organizations through the lens of religious studies (i.e., myth, ritual, liturgy, new religious movements, etc.), new and important insights can be generated. How do these programs fit into the broader American religious landscape? What commentary does that provide on the changing nature of religiosity in America? Are these rituals effective? How are their language and rituals used as rhetorical strategies for social cohesion and control? These are but a few examples of the questions that need to be asked and the direction in which the research can go.

This research also presses the question of the role of religious studies scholars as public scholars? Do we try to glean from this research normative claims about youth in America, a lack of rites of passage, a link to social and religious decline, and solutions to address these issues, if they exist? This is a critical issue facing the discipline today. Some scholars have argued that the lines between social science, humanism, and theology have been blurred in the academy to the detriment of the religious studies discipline. They argue that the proper role of the religious studies scholar is simply to expose the power structures and rhetorical strategies that underlie religion. Any form of normative claim is off limits.<sup>22</sup> Yet, I argue that there are appropriate times for a scholar to take what they have learned through research and comparison and apply it

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<sup>22</sup> See McCutcheon's *Critics not Caretakers* and *Manufacturing Religion*.

to the society of which they are a part. Clearly, reflexivity is key<sup>23</sup> to this form of comparativism, so that, as much as is possible, the scholar knows from whence he argues and is conscious of when he is moving from description and critique to “moral engagement in the world” (Patton, 14). As Diane Eck articulates, we are all “multiply situated selves” (143). We must acknowledge that situatedness. I argue that simply looking at the power dynamics that underlie religious systems leads the scholar to miss important elements of the data and produces weaker scholarship.

Yes, we have seen how NROPI, Hill, and the Afrocentricity movement all utilize sociorhetorical strategies for constructing shared identities, and this insight can give us a better understanding of the power dynamics at work in these institutions. Yet, what is lost by limiting the analysis to “exposing” the rhetorical strategies of these groups or “laying bare” the power dynamics at work below the rhetoric? In her essay, “Juggling Torches,” Kimberly Patton refutes three major post modern claims against the comparative enterprise—namely that comparison leads to totalizing, that context is primary and always unique, and that religion is simply pretext for power. Patton effectively illustrates how all three of these critiques are not absolute and that heeding their warnings too strictly can be a hinderance to responsible scholarship.

It is simply not true that abstractions or comparison, as intellectual processes, lead inevitably to oppression....To insinuate that even the remotest lives did not intersect with overarching ideas, cross-culturally shared categories of sanctity, or even numinous entities, must be inaccurate and is more surely unproductive....To discount as politically coded ‘pretexts’ the theological, cultic, or philosophical motivations offered by participants themselves in religious phenomena, movements, or controversies, is arrogantly to disenfranchise those we purport to understand. (167-168)

Patton offers a moderate and responsible approach to the study of religion.

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<sup>23</sup> For an extended discussion on the need for reflexivity in the social sciences see Paden, 190 and Eck, 146 in *A Magic Still Dwells*.

Adopting this more moderate approach can illumine some potentially interesting social consequences of NROPI. Returning to the beginning of this work and the “My Brother/My Sister” program at Copley High School, we can see that NROPI’s work reduced black-on-black violence and suspensions in Copley High School by 100% within 9 months. While I have not conducted enough research to make any particular claims, it seems that there is much more at stake in what is going on with the students in this school and NROPI as a whole than exclusively social formation and oppressive sociorhetorical strategies. Perhaps, upon more analysis, a normative claim can and should be made about the use of these programs to curb violence by religious studies scholars. By opening oneself to these possibilities, the scholar can be more than simply a detached critic. Critics and caretakers are not mutually exclusive categories, nor should they be.<sup>24</sup> The responsible scholar must be able to do both and to be reflexive enough to know when the appropriate time is for each. This is not a simple task, and will require every bit of the stealth, sensitivity, and humility that Kimberley Patton and her colleagues call for in a new school of comparativism (168).

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<sup>24</sup> I borrow the categories of “critics” and “caretakers” from McCutcheon (2001).

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## APPENDIX: THE NGUZO SABA

The Nguzo Saba is the moral minimum value system African Americans need in order to rescue and reconstruct our history, humanity and daily lives in our own image and interests. The Seven Principles are as follows:

### ***Unity***

To strive for and maintain unity in the family community, ethnic group, nation and planet.

### ***Self-Determination***

To define ourselves, name ourselves, create for ourselves and speak for ourselves instead of being defined, named, created for and spoken for by others. Power is defining one's reality and having it accepted by others.

### ***Collective Work and Responsibility***

To build and maintain our community together and make our sisters' and brothers' problems our problems and to solve them together.

### ***Cooperative Economics***

To build and maintain our own stores, shops and other businesses and to profit from them together.

### ***Purpose***

To make our collective vocation building and developing our community in order to restore our people to their traditional greatness.

### ***Creativity***

To do always as much as we can, in the way we can, in order to leave our community more beautiful and beneficial than we inherited it.

### ***Faith***

To believe with all our heart in ourselves, in our people, our parents, our teachers, a Creator, the righteousness and victory of our struggle. (Hill, 1992: 70-71).