

African Constellations: how African Ancestral Healing Traditions can support the understanding and practice of Family Constellations.
By Tanja Meyburgh, 2010

Since my first experience of constellations, in the tradition of Bert Hellinger, in 2002, I intuitively knew that something African was at its core. However, beyond the obvious similarity in the placing of the elements to the throwing of the bones by the traditional African healer, and inclusion of the wider circle of ancestors, I had no knowledge of what this meant. I intuited that there was something really important to be discovered in the meeting of Africa and the West in Family Constellations, and this started a long search for very elusive information. This knowledge has now become a key to understanding and ensuring the health and well-being of myself, my clients and the training of facilitators.

Family Constellations have very clear foundations in African ancestral traditions, but the details are not easy to extract. In conversation with local people about the similarities it is difficult to get answers. At first I thought it is because I am white, and represent a tribe of people who have stolen enough from the African continent. What I came to realise is that this knowledge is usually only given to people who initiate as traditional African healers. It needs to be respected: it is not given lightly and it is not taken lightly for a reason.

“I experience fear (with family constellations) that I am tampering with something that is very sacred by talking about my ancestors, selling out a secret when in fact ancestors as spirit is a medium that is meant to be out there and need reverence rather than be tampered with.” (Ngororo, 2007)

Furthermore, the very act of writing knowledge down is not one that would have happened in traditional African society – it would have been passed on through songs and stories - and from teacher to initiate - to prevent misunderstanding and abuse from outsiders, and to protect the uninitiated.

The connections between African Ancestral Healing and Family Constellations

After interviewing the facilitator training graduates, the two most obvious connections between Family Constellations and Traditional African beliefs are confirmed. Firstly, the acknowledgement that our ancestors are vital for our wellbeing:

“The belief in ancestors is rooted in the need or desire to preserve the memory of known past generations and known or unknown lineages. The emphasis of acknowledging the excluded is the foundation of the cure for various ailments, like bodily discomfort, spiritual discord or common need to ward off misfortune or a curse that will be seen to be projected by malevolent spirits. The good spirits are acknowledged and given gratitude through ceremonies or cleansing rituals” (Mthembu-Salter, 2005).

Secondly, the use of divination by traditional African healers to receive the messages of the ancestors by “throwing the bones”. The bones consist of symbolic objects for various family members and elements relating to a person’s life: money, love, power, body organs, life force etc. Once the bones are thrown, the healer considers the arrangements carefully, including how the bones are facing, the distance between the bones, configurations or patterns.

“In African therapy the reading of the bones can be used to pinpoint pathology. However, it is more vital to reveal a pattern of affected pathological relationships – and resources. The bones reveal rituals and muthi (medicine) to settle family and ancestral relationships. In the same way, a Family Constellations reveals discomfort and resources within the entire constellation - rather than pathology of the patient. A constellation reveals remedies (“spiritual muthi”): such as bowing or saying certain sentences – which really are small acts of ceremonial ritual - to settle relationships” (de Wet, 2010).

To gain more insight, I entered the process of supervision and coaching with a Traditional African healer. I slowly became clearer of other connections between FC and the African traditions of healing:

- Acknowledgement that our ancestors and family are deeply connected to both well-being and disease, and that the relationship is symbiotic and of mutual resource.
- Understanding that the individual is an integral part of his family and ancestral lineage and can never be disconnected from it.
- Alignment in terms of order in the family – who comes first, generational lineage and continuity of the family tree; including taking into account those who could still be causing problems until recognised and acknowledged.
- The importance of the effect of the excluded part or issues in a family and person’s life, whether conscious or unconscious.
- Healing using symbolism.
- The spatial and physical representation of family members and intrapsychic elements of “throwing of the bones” are similar to placing representatives in family constellations.
- Honouring of elders and the hierarchy of parents and children.
- Connecting with the deceased and the rightful place of the dead.
- Collapsing of past, present and future into a time and place set by the ritual / constellation.
- The prescription of rituals and ceremony as homework after the consultation.

Family Constellations as ritual

African traditions have various levels of ritual with accompanying rules and observances for their practice. Family Constellation, in the view of the African ancestral healers that I have consulted, is considered to be a high-level ritual, which means that a lot of “random heat” (energies which can easily attach

themselves to vulnerable others and make them and their families ill) is created. They would have strict rules for preparation of the participants and facilitators, as well as for the space that is created around the actual ritual event. This is not done out of fear, but by observing and acknowledging potentially harmful consequences by containing them in relevant structures. It is considered irresponsible to have no knowledge of the different levels of ritual process when doing ancestral and healing work.

My thinking started to turn around: instead of searching only for the Zulu / African knowledge behind Family Constellations, I am now looking more towards what African traditional wisdom can contribute to what we already know in FC. Through this shift, the hidden knowledge starts finding me and has become the source of profound insight in working with my own and clients' wellbeing.

I believe, much of what has been left out of the traditional Family Constellation field has to do with the boundaries required for safe ritual work, and with the clear structure of training and initiation that is required to do ancestral healing. I am not advocating a move back to larger authoritarian structures, but rather to an honoring of ritual and initiation processes as a means to supporting the health of facilitators and their clients, and including this in workshops and trainings (as many are doing already).

Health of the facilitator, clients and representatives

In African tradition, the rules for ritual, ceremony and ancestral work include speaking with the ancestors by name before the event, dietary observances around the event, sexual abstinence and body cleansing before and after the event, as well as observances around the ritual space such as burning of herbs when spirits of the ancestors are to be invoked. Looking from a western perspective, I would say the function of these rituals is to:

1. Create advance awareness and preparation of the body and mind, and emphasise the importance of self-care before and after the constellation.
2. Consciously connecting to resources for support and strength.
3. Centering the client and creating awareness of the depth of ancestral healing – a threshold experience not to be entered into lightly.
4. Marking the event in time with a clear beginning and ending.
5. Acknowledging the role of body, its boundaries and how to protect it energetically.

By observing these points, without actually prescribing the actual ritual observances required by the African traditions, I have dramatically improved my own health and energy levels and those of clients following intense workshop experiences.

Training of the healer / facilitator

In most African traditions to become an ancestral healer, you have to undergo an intensive training process and initiation. Practices include: connecting daily

to all one's own ancestors by praying to them by name (always on your knees); kneeling whenever addressing those higher in the learning hierarchy and age than you are; being put into the position of not knowing what is going to happen next and learning to trust the process as it unfolds.

“The training sangoma, or thwasa, remains on his or her knees throughout training – and averts the eyes when talking to people. In spite of the seeming power imbalance of the position, it is a rich and charged space for exploring boundaries of communication and intimacy. It is like getting driving lessons in the spirit world. As the thwasa, accompanied by the guiding ancestor gets street-wise, he/she transforms the order with new levels of intimacy” (De Wet, 2010)

I have observed thwasa's whose knees are bruised and bleeding or have become hard with calluses. At first I thought this is a strange authoritarian power exerted by the teacher, but with time I have come to realise that this positioning is the primary movement required to facilitate ancestral work. Considering this, the position of the bow or kneeling as the respectful child makes sense in the healer's training processes and has been included extensively in the experiential element of the first FC training modules. I am also reminded that Hellinger was initiated in his own way on his knees into the Catholic Church.

On the knees again

A student on the current training, who recently graduated as a Traditional African healer and has similar African and German ancestry to my own, put it quite simply: “Family Constellations as a system is an outcome of the way the Germanic soul has integrated aspects of African culture” (de Wet, 2010).

From concerning myself with the unacknowledged African knowledge behind constellations, to possible secret knowledge that has to be protected, to starting to identify what could support FC by being re-included in facilitator training, I track a journey of empowerment of the African blood in my own veins. It has been a form of initiation for me. It was only when I placed myself in the position of the child before the African knowledge, and honoured what it had to teach, that it began to reveal itself to me.

Interview references

De Wet, A. (2010). *Family Constellation's roots in Africa*. www.africanconstellations.co.za

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