

AFROCENTRICITY: OPENING THE AFRICAN MOUTH AND MIND

MOLEFI KETE ASANTE

Temple University



ABSTRACT

This paper is an exercise in the exorcizing of white racial supremacy in the minds of African intellectuals. Asante connects the ancient Nile Valley Complex of cultures (Kemet, Kush, and Axum) to classical concepts that were disseminated throughout the African world. Explaining the distorted view of African society because of European marginalizing of the African continent's gifts, Asante proposes the amplification of an Afrocentric assertion where the agency of African people assume the leading role in any interpretation of African phenomena.

Keywords: *Afrocentricity, African renaissance, Pan Africanism, African people, inferiorized African ideas*

INTRODUCTION

I offer this short paper as a type of opening the mind ceremony for students and colleagues in the same way that our ancestors in the Nile Valley held opening of the mouth ceremonies to help avoid hazards for those who made the journey through the underworld. In this case I am approaching you at NWU because you are wide awake. African renaissance like Pan Africanism cannot be declared; it must be actualized by conscious African intellectuals and ordinary people seeking to bring the renaissance into existence. Since 15th century when Europeans, especially Portuguese and Spaniards, began to settle in the Americas, to eradicate the indigenous populations, to capture Africans along the west African coast, and to forcibly transport Africans to the Americas, the Western nations have been on a quest to destabilize and dis-establish the agency of African people. Indeed, the Western episteme replaced in some cases, and competed in others with the earlier Arab invasions of North and East Africa with the capture and enslavement of Africans from the 8th century. Thus, Africans had to contend with both intrusive and hegemonic epistememes which inferiorized African ideas.¹

¹ See Chancellor Williams, *The Destruction of Black Civilization*. Chicago: Third World Press, 1992.

In South Africa the arrival of European settlers in 1652 had a similar effect of creating confusion among the people, destabilizing the commonly held polity among the people, and eradicating some of the long-held traditions of the people. The assault against Africa and Africans has been frontal, sustained, and violent at physical and psychological levels using all dominative instruments of language, symbolism, and warfare. The consequences of this war on Africa have been profound, giving rise to doctrines of white supremacy and black inferiority, African servility, and the negation of African civilization.

Two physical attacks on Africa in the form of enslavement and colonization led to the internalization of these ideas even by Africans themselves. So thoroughly was the acceptance of African peripheralization that Europe was successful in convincing the rest of the world that Africa, the mother continent of humanity and civilization, was a mere child in human civilization terms when in fact *Homo sapiens* arose on the African continent and tamed, civilized, and maintained human existence.² Thus, African internalization of the lack of agency and the acceptance by other people of a negative narrative about Africa undermined the subject place of African people. The question is, “Who were we African people without and before the encounter with Europe five hundred years ago?” Indeed, put more expressly, “What were the mechanisms that threw Africa off of its own terms?” Who took charge of writing about African culture, religion and language? What was the reason that those whose conquest was physical, then had to sustain it in their minds and ours in a psychological way? Here is the reason for the split in the theoretical thinking between decolonization and decoloniality. One normally sees decolonization as the way people disengage themselves from occupying people. In effect, when the political control of a people’s nation is taken over by the majority, in a democracy, we say that it has been decolonized. However, the act of decoloniality is removing the vestiges of colonization from the society. On the other hand, Afrocentricity is the assertion of an African agency in every phenomenon which answers the question of what happens once you have done decolonization and decoloniality.

The practical result of the destabilization of African people has been bizarre behaviors that demonstrate how far we have lost our minds. For example, the use of the powdered European wigs for some African jurists in courts of law is directly related to the fact that we have not only inherited the imposition but that we have embraced it. When the Kenyan Parliament threw a few Kenyan parliamentarians out of the legislative assembly because they were wearing traditional African cloths, I recoiled at the incident but knew that it meant the work of dislocation and decentering had been successful. Furthermore, the enforcement through cultural support and resources of the importance of European languages. Repetition of a lie can sometimes make the lie appear to be reality.

Until African intellectuals can turn over every concept, look under them, and sweep clean the debris of insults and the dust of omission of African achievements, we will not be able to recover our sanity, our centered position in our own narratives. We are not mere imitation of Arabs or Europeans, but agents in our own history with thousands of years of culture reflecting the accumulated wisdom, tradition, and reason of our ancestors, who are often forgotten, peripheralized, or minimized in human arts and sciences. Who created the first solemn assemblies, named the gods, established music, and moved to the rhythms of the universe in dance, if not our own ancestors? Who gave the world the first mathematical calculator if not the women of Eswatini who made the Lebombo bone?

I have advanced the theory of Afrocentricity to confront all forms of African decenteredness and marginalization with a special interest in the self-conscious recovery of the collective African selfhood.³ Afrocentricity is a philosophical paradigm that emphasizes the centrality and agency of the African person within a historical and cultural context. As such it is a rejection of the historic marginality and racial alterity often expressed in the ordinary ideology of European racial domination which seeks to desacralize African languages, religion and culture.

What is more, Afrocentrists articulate a counter-hegemonic view that questions epistemological ideas that are simply rooted in the cultural experiences of Europe and are applied to Africans or others as if they are universal principles.⁴ This may be discovered in the type of language, art forms, expressive styles, arguments, economic and social ideas

² Molefi Kete Asante, *The History of Africa*. New York and London: Routledge, 2018.

³ Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Manifesto*. Cambridge UK,: Polity Books, 2007.

⁴ Lehasa Moloi, *Developing Africa?*. London: Anthem, 2023; Simphiwe Sesanti, “Teaching Ancient Egyptian Philosophy (Ethics) and History: Fulfilling a Quest for a Decolonised and Afrocentric Education,” *Educational Research for Social Change*, Volume 7, June 2018, pp. 1-15

within an interactive situation. Thus, the Afrocentric idea is critical to any behavioral activity that involves Africans or people of African descent. Just as Yoshitaka Miike, the Japanese scholar, has advanced the idea of Asiaticity as a legitimate advancement of Asian cultures, the Afrocentrists as pioneers in this type of work have articulated the view that all cultures have something to bring to the table of humanity and no one should be shoved to the margins.⁵

Afrocentricity is a celebration of humanity rather than a separation. Europe only cries “separatists” when African views do not conform to the acceptance of Europe as universal. European scholars see the Afrocentrists as rejecters of European exceptionalism and they are right to see it in that regard because Afrocentricity is a much more humane way of approaching African culture. Why would Africans want to see their own culture through the prism of Europe?

African languages and cultures must be mined for valuable, positive, and creative ways of knowing, ritualizing, and developing human capacity. One of the great crimes of European colonization is the stunting of our inquiry into our own ways of knowing. The famous writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o, the philosopher Robert Mangoliso Sobukwe, and the activist intellectual Steve Bantu Biko, all knew that it was essential for African people to speak their own special truths as part of the human process. Why should Africans step back to allow anyone else to pass by as if what Africans, as the longest existing *Homo sapiens*, have to offer is less than others?

In the field of African Studies, that is, Africology, the Afrocentric study of African phenomena is central to any understanding of the past, present or future of Africa. Afrocentricity continues to hold the reigning paradigmatic place in the study of African phenomena because it seeks to add substance to the idea of a African perspective on facts, events, texts, personalities, historical records, and behavioral situations. Thus, it is the critical turn that is essential for an intellectual and ordinary person to be fully committed to making a difference in the analysis and interpretation of situations involving people of African descent. Who can now continue to make analysis of African situations without advancing the idea of Africans as subjects within our own narratives? In the past, we have seen Europeans, and, to a lesser degree, Arabs and sometimes Indians, dislocate Africans from their own terms to establish a dependency relationship based on the notion of African inferiority. In these instances, Africans have been undermined in religion, language, symbolism, fashion, sciences, art, and even the naming of children because we have given up or been removed from being the subject of our own narratives. This is precisely why some African people on the continent and in the diaspora are influenced to look for Christian names or Muslim names because these names are considered more important than the names of our own ancestors. This is obviously psychological and mental dislocation caused by years of Pan European indoctrination of white supremacy.

Necessitated by the conditions of history that have seen Africans alienated from cultural, expressive, philosophical, and religious terms, the Afrocentric idea seeks to re-position Africans in the center of our own historical experiences rather than on the margins of European experiences. This is a philosophical turn that is essential for the subject place of Africans as agents and actors in discourse and analysis even while it had remained so and remains so today in reality. What this means is that although Africans had acted as agents, Europe had interpreted those actions as marginal or peripheral to culture and civilization. For example, if one were to examine the earliest boats, the most intricate monumental structures of Africa like the Inzalo Y’Langa in Mpumalanga, the Eredo Trench of Nigeria, the pyramids of Sudan and Egypt, the *dzimbabwes* of Zimbabwe and Mozambique, the monoliths and obelisks of Ethiopia and Egypt, the giant tombs and temples throughout the continent, or the epics such as Mwindo, Woyengi, Shaka, and Sundiata, among others, one would discover European writers who almost in every case would minimize the achievements or claim that some aliens from outer space must have made those accomplishments because Africans could not have conceived of them. Thus, if we are not subjects in our own situations, not given credit for making our own monuments on the continent, not recognized for our own innovations, then the old patterns of marginality adhere and consequently the interpretations of activities cannot be authentic; they become only subject-to-object, but never subject-to-subject communication because Europe has defined Africa as the inferior other. In my opinion this can occur whether the opinion maker, researcher or historian is European, African or Asian so long as he or she operates from a Eurocentric base. Unfortunately, there are some Africans who write as if they are Europeans, seeing reality through the eyes of those who have dominated them. The activist Malcolm X recalled in a speech that there were enslaved Africans in America who often were more eager to save the burning plantation houses than the slave masters. They would speak

⁵ Yoshitaka Miike, “The Asiatic Turn in Asian Communication Studies,” in M. Asante, Y. Miike, and J. Yin, *The Global Intercultural Communication Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2014.

as if the plantation belonged to them. “Our house is burning down,” the enslaved would say, as if he owned something of the house.

In its attempt to shift discourse about African phenomena from ideas founded in European constructs to a more centered perspective, Afrocentricity announces itself as a form of anti-racist, anti-patriarchal and anti-sexist ideology that is new, innovative, challenging, and capable of creating exciting ways to acquire and express knowledge.⁶ The denial of the exploitative expression of race, gender, and class often found in older constructions of knowledge is at once controversial and a part of the evolving process of a revolutionary paradigmatic development. Afrocentricity confronts this marginality of Africans and critiques European patriarchy and sexism as a part of the baggage of the hegemonic tendencies frequently found in Western social and behavioral sciences. Hence, the most mysterious achievement of Afrocentricity, it seems, is the opening of the minds of African people so that we can then speak, through our own open mouths, the truths embedded in our ancient histories.

Note: **Molefi Kete Asante** is Professor, Department of Africology, Temple University, and the author of 104 books, and more than 500 articles. He holds distinguished positions in the United States, South Africa, and China. www.molefiketeasante.com

⁶ Molefi Kete Asante and Nah Dove, *Being Human Being: Transforming the Race Discourse*. New York: UWP, 2021.