

CONTEXT AND THEORY

Molefi Kete Asante and the Afrocentric Idea

AFROCENTRICITY

Definition

Afrocentricity materialized as a theory of knowledge in 1980 under Molefi Kete Asante's philosophical thinking while also posing a systematic challenge to Western epistemology. It emerged in the African American cultural panorama as a set of premises that would account for the understanding of an African sense of totality and wholeness in a network of multiple and particular manifestations of different fields of knowledge to address the life and experience of people of African descent in America, in the African continent, and in other diasporas.

Departing from the recognition that Eurocentricity as a particular worldview is "a normal expression of culture but could be abnormal if it imposed its cultural particularity as universal while denying and degrading other cultural [. . .] views" (Asante, 2003c: 61), Asante's theory of social change was primarily addressed to a detailed investigation and questioning of the Eurocentric nature of knowledge; to avoid personal and collective destruction of people of African descent; to reclaiming an African cultural system

as the coherent meeting point of every African cultural and historical past. By historicizing concepts, perspectives, and common cultural traits among people of African descent; by identifying the symbols, which as a whole will become a transformative agent for the empowerment of African people, Asante (1980) has set the basis of this revolutionary approach to history and culture that he named Afrocentricity.

By stepping outside of the historical constraints of the fixed European historicism to generate new interpretations, new criticisms, and ultimately the acquisition of new knowledge, Afrocentricity challenges the orientation to history foreign to the history of the African subject; it demands an epistemological location that places the critic/scholar inside the African experience and African ideals and values at the center of inquiry framed by African codes, paradigms, symbols, motifs, and myths that give meaning to the history of the African subject and a sense of place in the world arena.

Although some critics, following an Althusserian concept (Althusser, 2001, "Lettre à D.," July 18, 1966) may see theories as being really nothing more than organized epistemological orientations derived from daily praxis "intended to explain universal phenomena across space and time" (Miike, 2006: 20), Afrocentricity transcends mere reorganization of ideas to become a transformative project. Theoretically rooted in the pursuit of human knowledge from a culturally and historically located perspective of the subject, it questions moral, political, and intellectual justifications of taken-for-universal values in clear epistemological rupture against what in this work is addressed as Westernity. By providing agency to the African subject in the voicing of his or her own history contrary to being the object of study or the mere subject matter in the framework of Eurocentric disciplines (Asante, 1998), Afrocentric theory informs a clear epistemological rupture with the Eurocentric paradigm.

While it poses a severe criticism over the preponderant Eurocentric myths of universalism and challenges the colonizing concepts and racist theories that preside over the triumph of Western thought, it also offers the possibility of a nonhegemonic alternative perspective in the understanding of human expressions in our

diverse multicultural society. Most importantly, however, unlike Eurocentric theories, Afrocentricity does not bear a totalitarian spirit because it does not seek to replace “white knowledge” with “black knowledge” (Asante, 1998: xi). On the contrary, being a direct critique to every sort of prejudice and racist theory, Afrocentricity is a theory of wholeness that seeks ways of unity based on mutual respect for the cultural agency of all people, as I intend to demonstrate. According to Asante, “the Afrocentric idea is projected as a model for intercultural agency in which pluralism exists without hierarchy and respect for cultural origins, achievements, and prospects is freely granted” (1998: xii).

Actually this means that Afrocentric theory seeks neither a totalizing nor a universal scope and certainly not an essentialized perspective on knowledge. It does not set itself up as a universal standard and does not criticize Eurocentrism in its particularity. Of course, what the Afrocentric perspective on knowledge requires is *location*: African *location* as the methodological approach to African traditions and cultures while refusing the subaltern place that has always been conferred to Black expressions, artistic and cultural, by Eurocentric scholars. As Asante emphasizes, there is nothing wrong in addressing European culture, history, philosophy, ethics, and aesthetics from a Eurocentric perspective as the Eurocentric paradigm is indeed the European epistemological locus.

However, Asante contends,

By regaining our own [African] platforms, standing on our own cultural spaces, and believing that our way of viewing the universe is just as valid as any, we will achieve the kind of transformation that we need to participate fully in a multicultural society. However, without this kind of centeredness, we bring almost nothing to the multicultural table but a darker version of whiteness. (1998: 8)

As a cultural theory Afrocentricity is committed to the reclamation of ancient African classical civilizations as the place for interpreting and understanding the history of African peoples, narratives, myths, spirituality, and cosmogonies. Since the ancient

African civilizations did not separate religion and philosophy, and their contributions to art, literature, and science were directly connected to the principles of ancient wisdom, African world-sense, cosmogonies, institutions, concepts, symbols, and voices can only be fully perceived and appreciated through a holistic paradigm like Afrocentricity. Embracing all these aspects in a systemic network of meanings, Afrocentricity conveys African peoples' sense of the world and of their existence and provides an epistemological tool to deal with social and cultural manifestations either from a cultural/aesthetic, social/behavioral, or even a political/functional perspective, in search for the foundations of African identity. It must not be forgotten that African aesthetic creative forces are never dissociated from real life and from an African axiological pattern, where the highest ethical value is the human responsibility to prevent chaos. Therefore, an in-depth analytical and deconstructive¹ approach to every African artistic expression when located in the anteriority of classical Africa will provide a more consistent understanding of the African *pathos* and of the aesthetic and philosophical dimensions that underlie the interplay of different African rhythms and subject matters.

Being a philosophical, social, and cultural theory committed to the construction of a holistic epistemological paradigm centered on African cosmological, ontological, ethical, and philosophical anteriority of classical African civilizations, this theoretical approach is supported by a rigorous methodology that calls for a constant awareness of location and agency of African people.

However, Afrocentricity is not an essentialist theory as some critics claim, because it does not reject other perspectives to account for the experiences of African people inside and outside the continent. What is imperative for Afrocentricity is the whole notion of an African *Weltanschauung*² distinct as much from the European *Weltanschauung* as from the Asian conceptualization of the world; a cosmological edifice common to African cultures before it has been impacted, even distorted, by the European and Arab worldviews; a sense of cultural, historical, and philosophical heritage rooted in the anteriority of major African civilizations like Kemet, Nubia, and Ethiopia in order to understand the modern African in Africa, in America, or anywhere else (Diop; James; Bernal; Du Bois; Asante; Karenga).

This is where the concept of location in Asante's terms—epistemological, cosmological, ontological, ethical, and aesthetic—denotes a conceptual organization of the world that is not compliant with the European conceptualization and radically rejects the notion that Africans should exist on “borrowed terms” (Asante, 1998; Mazama, 2003).

Therefore, in Afrocentric terminology the conceptual category of *Weltanschauung* will have, of necessity, to be replaced by an African concept like, for instance, the Kiswahili term *Utamawazo*, as used by Marimba Ani (1994), which denotes “the culturally structured thought [. . .] the way in which cognition is determined by a cultural *asili*,” or the cultural seeds of a people or their cultural logos (Gaffin, 2006: 299).

Historical Grounds

You control the human lives
in Rome and Timbuktu.
Lonely nomads wandering
owe Telstar to you.
Seas shift at your bidding,
your mushrooms fill the sky.
Why are you unhappy?
Why do your children cry?
—Maya Angelou, “These
Yet to Be United States”

The experience of enslavement and racism in American society has most certainly created the conditions for the emergence of the Afrocentric theory in the same sense that Marxist theory is a response to the economic constraints and oppression imposed on Russian peasant working forces still kept under a feudal system by the Czars that persisted well into the early twentieth century and that feminist theories resulted from the inevitable questioning of a Western male-dominated society and from the need to establish legitimate epistemological grounds for women's voices and for equal social and political status in an oppressive patriarchal society.

Like every other theory Afrocentricity has a history. It is the philosophical and methodological corollary of five hundred years of works and struggles of many of its author's African and African American predecessors, scholars, scholar-activists, writers, poets, and intellectuals, such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Cheikh Anta Diop, Langston Hughes, Harold Cruse, Malcolm X, Ida B. Wells Barnett, George James, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Carter G. Woodson, and Anna Julia Cooper, among many others. It emerged hand in hand with the cultural and spiritual revitalization of Black people through the works and activism of Maulana Karenga, Rosa Parks's and Martin Luther King Jr.'s civil disobedience, Marcus Garvey's Pan-Africanism, Booker T. Washington's theory of economic independence, W. E. B. Du Bois's reclamation of African civilization as the cradle of humanity, Malcolm X's cultural nationalism, and Nat Turner's revolt (Asante, 1988). The major influence however, comes from Cheikh Anta Diop. Indeed he has consistently been credited by Asante as one of earliest pioneers to Afrocentricity "because he reconstructed African cultural theory with Africa as subject" (Asante, 1988: x). The reconnection of Egypt and ancient Kemetic civilization to Africa was in Diop, as well as in Du Bois, Asante, Karenga, Ama Mazama, Théofile Obenga, Marimba Ani, Tsehloane Keto, Ben-Jochannan, and other African men and women thinkers, the one and only way African writers could write their own history and confront the distortions and falsifications with which European "tunnel history" (Blaut, 2000: 5) supported and legitimized racial superiority and the colonial enterprise.

While Asante recognizes in Diop "one of the first historians to articulate a decidedly Afrocentric point of view" (Asante, 2007b: 81), he is also aware that other movements and ideas to which Afrocentricity is indebted like Négritude and Kawaida (Asante, 2007a: 116) offer but partial responses to the crucial taking of action toward the acquisition of an assertive cultural, historical, and psychological self-identity. The much deeper Dio-pian influence on Afrocentricity goes beyond the different tactics used by Asante's intellectual predecessors to elevate the status of Africans and attain the common goals of cultural reconstruction and liberation of African people. For Asante, Diop "remains the most penetrating figure in (our) African intellectual tradition

because he went directly to the core of the racist reasoning and defeated it in its lair” (2007b: 29). Booker T. Washington’s economic independence would only have meant freedom if it were to be achieved within the framework of an ideology of liberation through the political and cultural deconstruction of a rhetoric of oppression, which never happened. On the other hand, Du Bois’s and Karenga’s leitmotif toward mass education for African Americans and consciousness raising of an African rich cultural heritage; the need for the unity of all Africans to assert racial power and a cultural nationalist and Pan-Africanist philosophy as proclaimed by Garvey and Malcolm X; or the nonviolent strategy of Martin Luther King Jr. to confront the unabated racism that kept denying African Americans equal treatment in matters of rights and citizenship, for the most part became trapped in a similar cul-de-sac resulting from an appreciation of oppression through the ideological lens with which the oppressor determines his rule. All shared the same paradigm, which made it impossible for them to truly liberate the articulation of their projects from the stigma of a Du Boisian double-consciousness. Although precious in many ways in their contributions to the liberation of the African people from the colonial disruptive impact over African cultures, and from racist ideologies and practices by countries whose economic growth and consolidation depended on systems of enslavement and oppression, Afrocentric predecessors’ work has almost invariably been lost in the obfuscating nets of Westernity. As Asante recognizes, “Du Bois prepared the world for Afrocentricity” (1988: 16), and Karenga’s philosophical reclamations were a foundational influence in liberating cultural symbols to be used as cultural artifacts to regain African centeredness and free enslaved Africans from an enslaved mentality. In fact, Karenga’s (2006) extensive study of the philosophical and ethical geneses of Kemet society offers valuable scaffolding analytical parameters vital to Afrocentric hermeneutics. An overturning philosophical structure and a paradigmatic rupture with Westernity was however to come with Afrocentricity and the publication in 1980 of *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change*, which was primarily concerned with a methodology of agency of African people as subjects instead of objects of history, and with their cultural/ontological centeredness. For this simple reason is Afrocentricity

a confrontational and radical theory designed to confer people of African descent a sense of existing on their own terms (Asante, 1998). Notwithstanding the fact that the American experience of African people has produced a unique understanding of the genesis of every system of oppression, the Afrocentric philosophical reach goes beyond African people's assertiveness of their Africanness or mere modes of expressing their social bonds; it applies to a consciousness-raising of the centeredness of everything African that calls for agency.

WESTERNITY

Definition

The term "Westernity" used in this work denotes Asantean European particularism as a universal value (Asante, 2009a) and the "Eurocentric Model of the World" (Blaut, 1993) that has migrated with European colonization to the Americas to become the mainstream white American ideology, the extended image of the United States, and the model that America has been and still is committed to impose on the world. Therefore Westernity is equated with Eurocentricity as the European model of the world that has been imported, embraced, and adopted by WASP³ America to become the single and only legitimate, lawful, and valid model and perspective from which to assess humanity. Asante defines Westernity as a European form of particularism that has "a paradigmatic insistence that portrays values of the Euro-American culture as culturally dominant and naturally conquering [with] the characteristics of the most invasive aspects of contemporary European and American cultural and social behaviors [for the purpose of] the promotion of European, meaning white, dominance in all sectors of society" (Asante, 2009a: 67).

Modern Western philosophy and cultural paradigms based on individualism and on the autonomous individual as center of the universe have been shaped by the systematic attempt to control the natural order in a quasi-supra-natural understanding, and ultimately, replication of an almost *divine* power, as the secular human being became the locus and center of rationality with the

methodological skepticism of René Descartes (1596–1650) and the power of the reasoning mind of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), eventually the two most influential philosophers of the modern epoch.

Since Plato, the quest of human kind for the limits of human nature, the definition of what is to be a human being and of his or her possibilities, the desire for a stabilized sense of identity and embodiment of a universal subject, all have invested Western revisioning and speculative discourses, metaphorical explanations, scientific knowledge, idealistic and materialistic reasoning. With the European Renaissance the “man” of reason has assumed the overpowering role of the divine in recovering the platonic concept of “hero,” where the human, separated from God, is the closest to Him according to Greek classical thought, and by inaugurating an anthropocentric philosophy has become the ideal model of Westernity or the Western canon.

However, over five hundred years of building a project that presumed to revolve around human rationality and for that matter emancipation and progress, the credibility of modern ideals of social well-being and equanimity is being profoundly questioned as individual and collective greed, secular and religious powers alike, have plunged Europe and the world into consecutive humanitarian disasters since European modernity has emerged.

Historical Grounds

Historically, the religious and political interplay of Christianity and secular powers in Western Europe has set the tone for its political and economic development since the Middle Ages.

Actually, as information was being collected and organized for this project, two premises, two grand narratives, emerged as central to this discussion: the construction of Western thought around religious and economic grounds, that is, Christianity under the Roman Catholic Church, and capitalism, the economic system born with modernity.

However, it is neither a religious nor an economic discussion that will be pursued here but the foundational impact of these

two mainstay principles in the development of Western European history, philosophy, culture, and the prevailing paradigm of modernity.

I believe that in order to understand the eventual collapse of the capitalist model of society, the challenges that neoliberalism and globalization are bringing on the so-called peripheral regions of the world, which obviously includes Africa, and the objectification of human beings, which means reducing them to the role of *commodifiabiles* of powerful Western international corporations, we have to critically discuss the foundational ideas of the Western European concept of the world.

The Roman Catholic Church, whose dogma concentrates on the Sacred Family, on the one hand, and on the salvation of the individual soul into eternity for those who worship Christ, on the other hand, has been the major spiritual leading force in Western Europe, at least from 1417 after the Great Schism, while the dogmas of the New Testament have been and continue to be the gluon that produced and sustains the catholic⁴ mentality prevalent in the Western world. These are, in my opinion, the two aspects of the Catholic branch of Christianity that helped in the establishment of the concepts of the centrality of the nuclear family and that of individuality. In fact, it is ultimately between God and the individual that responsibility for personal human acts is to be litigated.

Beyond matters of human belief, the consolidation of religious credos is also a matter of power relations in society, and Europe has also been the stage where, historically, religious wars took place hand in hand with secular struggles for the definition of the political boundaries of its nations throughout the early Middle Ages. Secular and spiritual powers often shared the same interests, and the success of the spiritual influence of the Roman Catholic Church in Western Europe was based on the enormous secular influence that it engendered and the wealth it accumulated during the first half of the first millennium.

The Roman Catholic Church⁵ became both extremely rich and powerful with its own laws and lands, with the authority to collect taxes. As its power grew with its wealth, the Roman Catholic Church became the designer of European politics owing to its enormous influence over kings and rulers of Europe until

a newly emergent urban, extremely wealthy, and intellectualized bourgeoisie slowly came to politically, economically, and artistically dominate European society. Several factors must be taken into account to understand the sense of unprecedented accomplishment according to the European standards that emerged with this European Renaissance. As a reaction to the theocentric scholastic logic imposed by the Roman Catholic Church during the Middle Ages, the emergence of an autonomous human reasoning brought about an anthropocentric optimism and a strong belief in the almost unlimited power of human beings (Pires, 2004). This profound transformation in the European history of ideas has inaugurated a new historical epoch: modernity.

The concept of modernity, vast and ambiguous, at least in the definition of its emergence and boundaries, has been addressed by historians, philosophers, cultural analysts, sociologists, anthropologists, and is far from reaching consensus.

For the purpose of this work the historical definition seems to be the most appropriate. In the historical context modernity is seen as a long period characterized by deep historical transformations, a new economic, social, and political order. It was marked by the rise of commercial activity, a movement toward urbanization, economic affluence, a new powerful economic social class, and the inherent intellectual and artistic development concentrated around the Italian city-states of Rome, Genoa, and Florence that may be traced back to the fourteenth century. Historians and thinkers (Karl Marx, Max Weber, J. M. Blaut) attribute the onset of modernity to the expansion of commercial routes opened by Portugal during the mid-fifteenth century and the consolidation of the capitalist economic model with the powerful bourgeois Italian families like the Medici and the Condottieri.

As far as the cultural paradigm is concerned, modernity does not necessarily overlap with the historical boundaries of the period but equates with the Cartesian discourse and the project of the Enlightenment where modern democratic political and social European thought has its roots. According to the Cultural Studies paradigm, Enlightenment and the historical period during which this intellectual movement developed can be characterized by three key concepts of power: power of reason over obscurantism; power of a rationally organized world over a chaotic one;

power of science over superstition (Pires, 2004: 64). From my critical perspective another key concept was also created with the Enlightenment: the power of unreason of racist ideologies.

These are also, according to Blaut (1993), the foundational arguments that sustain Eurocentric historians' and philosophers' conceptual structure of Westernity that will be subject to scrutiny and discussion throughout this work.