

# Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change

**Molefi Kete Asante**

I am happy to be here in Guadeloupe. We have a common struggle to harmonize the world. Nothing we say here or do here will make much difference if it does not impact upon the way we view our identity. I am grateful that you have invited me to this beautiful land, a land almost as beautiful as the people. For more than twenty five years and in more than thirty five books I have tried to deal with the question of African identity from the perspective of African people as centered, located, oriented, and grounded. This idea I have named Afrocentricity to convey the profound need for African people to be re-located historically, economically, socially, politically, and philosophically. For too long we have held up the margins of the European's world and have been victimized by the illusion that we are working in our own best interests when, in fact, we have become the chief apologists for Europe.

Afrocentricity seeks to re-locate the African person as an agent in human history in an effort to eliminate the illusion of the fringes. For the past five hundred years Africans have been taken off of cultural, economic, religious, political, and social terms and have existed primarily on the periphery of Europe. Because of this existence we have often participated in an anti-African racism born of the same Western triumphalism that has entrapped our minds in the West. We know little about our own classical heritage and nothing about our contributions to world knowledge. To say that we are decentered means essentially that we have lost our own cultural footing and become other than our cultural and political origins, dis-located and dis-oriented. We are essentially insane, that is, living an absurdity from which we will never be able to free our minds until we return to the source. Afrocentricity as a theory of change intends to re-locate the African person as subject, thus destroying the notion of being objects in the Western project of domination. As a pan-African idea, Afrocentricity becomes the key to the proper education of children and the essence of an African cultural revival and, indeed, survival.

Afrocentricity is therefore a philosophical and theoretical perspective, as distinct from a particular system, whose origins are attributed to my works *Afrocentricity*, *The Afrocentric Idea* <afrocentric\_idea.htm>, and *Kemet, Afrocentricity, and Knowledge*. These books form the essential core of the idea that interpretation

and explanation based on the role of Africans as subjects is most consistent with reality. It became a growing intellectual idea in the 1980s as scores of African American and African scholars adopted an Afrocentric orientation to data. Afrocentricity is generally opposed to theories that "dislocate" Africans in the periphery of human thought and experience. Such theories see Africans in the diaspora only as creations of Europe, off-centered Atlantic products with little or no agency of our own.

I argue as an Afrocentrist that the Western dogma which contends that Greeks gave the world rationalism effectively marginalizes those who are not European and becomes the leading cause of the disbelief about African achievements. The Afrocentrists contend that the dogma that the Greeks gave the world rational thought is historically inaccurate and that the construction of the Western notions of knowledge based on the Greek model is a relatively recent construction beginning with the European Renaissance when Cosimo de Medici of Florence asked Marsilio Ficino to translate the Corpus Hermeticum and Plato's Republic in that order. In the standard Western view neither the Africans nor the Chinese had rational thinking. Only the Europeans had the ability to construct rational thought. Thus, the Afrocentrists contend that the Eurocentric view has become an ethnocentric view which elevates the European experience and downgrades all others. Afrocentricity is not the reverse of Eurocentricity but a particular perspective for analysis which does not seek to occupy all space and time as Eurocentrism has often done. For example, to say classical music, theatre, or dance is usually a reference to European music, theatre, and dance. However, this means that Europeans occupy all of the intellectual and artistic seats and leave no room for others. The Afrocentrists argue for pluralism in philosophical views without hierarchy. All cultural centers must be respected; this is the fundamental aim of Afrocentricity.

In the Afrocentric view the problem of cultural location takes precedence over the topic or the data under consideration. The argument is that Africans have been moved off of social, political, philosophical, and economic terms for half a millennium. Consequently it becomes necessary to examine all data from the standpoint of Africans as subjects, human agents, rather than as objects in a European frame of reference. Of course, this means that Afrocentricity has implications for intellectual, social, and artistic fields as different as dance, architecture, social work, literature, politics, and psychology. Here the motifs of locations and constituents of centeredness or de-centeredness become important. The architect who understands the significance of having buildings or

homes constructed on the basis of African culture and behavior.

We contend that human beings cannot divest themselves of culture; they are either participating in their own historical culture or that of some other group. They may, of course, choose to opt out of their own cultural heritage and appropriate that of some other people. This is rarely the case, however, with Europeans. They do not choose to become Indians or Chinese or Africans. In fact, the only people who have totally distanced themselves from their cultural origins are Africans in the diaspora. We have been victimized by the negative image of Africa and have therefore concluded that we wanted nothing to do with Africa. It is the voice of the person who says, "I am not an African. I never left anything in Africa." To such a question in the 1960s Malcolm X replied, "You left your mind in Africa."

A contradiction between history and perspective produces a kind of incongruity which is called decenteredness. Thus, when an African American writes from the viewpoint of Europeans who came to the Americas on the Mayflower, or when literary critics write of Africans as the Other, Afrocentrists claim that Africans are being peripheralized. Since Afrocentricity is not color-conscious, it is not a matter of color but of culture that matters in the orientation to centeredness. The Wolof people of Senegal say, "Wood may remain in water for ten years but it will never become a crocodile."

Metaphors of location and dislocation are the principal tools of analysis as events, situations, texts, buildings, dreams, authors are seen as displaying various forms of centeredness. To be centered is to be located as an agent instead of as "the Other." Such a critical shift in thinking means that the Afrocentric perspective provides new insights and dimensions to the understanding of phenomena.

Contemporary issues in Afrocentric thinking have involved the explanation of psychological misorientation and disorientation, attitudes which affect Africans who consider themselves to be Europeans or who believe that it is impossible to be African and human. Severe forms of this attitude have been labeled extreme misorientation by some Afrocentrists. Additional issues have been the influence of a centered approach to education, particularly as it relates to the revision of the educational curriculum. What is significant as knowledge if we seek to socialize children to live culturally in the world? A growing group of Afrocentric writers at major universities in North America and Africa has established several professional associations and journals. The premier center for the Afrocentric Movement is the Temple University School of scholars, frequently referred to as the Temple Circle. Among the

Temple Circle of Afrocentrists (including the C. Tsehloane Keto, Kariamuwelsh Asante, Abu Abarry, Ama Mazama, Theophile Obenga and Terry Kershaw) there is a strong emphasis on aesthetics, behavior, and ethics with Afrocentric location as the key component to interpretation. But this attention to place, to perspective, bothers many scholars and ordinary whites. They do not believe that the insistence on quality, rational thought, and control of time and space is legitimate and they rather believe that the aim of the movement is to remove the Western hegemony. This is probably a correct assessment. Why should not a Guadeloupean have a voice of her or his own? Why must we be seen as a reflection of Europe. This does not mean that we are not influenced or that we do not partake in other cultures, it simply means that we are unashamed to claim our own cultural heritage.

I believe that the European scholars who register a negative reaction to Afrocentricity do so out of a case of fear. The fear is revealed on two levels. In the first place, Afrocentricity provides them with no grounds for authority unless they become students of Africans. This produces an existential fear: African scholars might have something to teach whites.

The Afrocentric school of thought is the first contemporary intellectual movement initiated by African scholars that has currency on a broad scale for renewal and renaissance. It did not emerge inside the traditional white academic centers but in the cultural context of the African community seeking to assert itself. The second fear is not so much an existential one; it is rather a fear of the implications of the Afrocentric critique of Eurocentrism as an ethnocentric view posing as a universal view. Thus, we have opened the discussion of everything from race theory, ancient civilizations, African and European personalities, the impact of the glaciers on human behavior, and dislocation in the writing of African American authors. We examine these topics with the eye of Africans people as subjects of historical experiences. This is not the only human view. If anything, Afrocentrists have always said that our perspective on data is only one among many and consequently the viewpoint, if you will, seeks no advantage, no self-aggrandizement, and no hegemony. The same cannot be said of Eurocentrism.

The African Caribbean or American and African Eurocentrists are a special problem. They represent two cases. The first case is represented by those who have been so well-trained in the Eurocentric perspective that they see themselves as copies of Europeans. These are the Africans who believe they came to North America on the Mayflower or to the Caribbean as plantation owners or better yet they believe that classical European music is the only

real classical music in the world. Their rejection of Afrocentricity is tied to their rejection of themselves. Thus, the inability to see from their own centers or to position their sights on phenomena from their own historical and cultural conditions is related to what Malcolm X used to call "the slave mentality," that is, the belief that their own views can never be divorced from the slave master's. To a large degree these Africans tend to lack historical consciousness and find their own source of intellectual satisfaction in the approval of whites, not in the search for the interpretative key to their own history. I am not suggesting the stifling of this type of imitation in any politically correct way but rather I want to explain the response to Afrocentricity in an historical manner. The second case is also historical, that is, Afrocentrists find evidences of it in our historical experiences. These are the Africans who seek to be appointed overseers on the plantation. They do not necessarily believe they are the same as whites. They recognize that they did not come here as planters and owners but they aspire to universalism without references to particular experiences. For them any emphasis on particular perspectives and experiences suggest separatism and separatism suggests hostility. This is a fallacy because neither separatism nor difference suggests hostility except in the minds of those who fear.

In an intellectual sense these African Eurocentrists feel inclined to disagree with any idea that has popular approval among the African American masses. Much like the overseers during the ante-bellum period they are eager to demonstrate that they are not a part of the rebellion and that they distrust the ideas that are derived from the African masses. They might even consider themselves a part of the elite, almost white, separate from the rest of us. The progression of their dislocation is seen in the distance they seek to place between themselves and us. Indeed, they might even participate in what Louis Lomax once called "the fooling of white people" by telling white audiences that Afrocentrists represent a new and passing fad.

The point is that Afrocentricity is nothing more than what is congruent to the interpretative life of the African person. Why should an African American see himself or herself through the perspective of a Chinese? or white American? Neither the Chinese nor the European American views phenomena from the perspective of the African American and nor should they. Historical and cultural experiences and traditions differ and in order to understand the African American experience in dance, architecture, social work, art, science, psychology, or communication one has to avail one's self of the richly textured standing place of African Americans. In the end, you must ask yourself, why does such a simple rational position threaten so many people?

Late in the 18th century, at the University of Gottingen, Wilhelm von Humboldt and Alexander von Humboldt began to develop the racial hierarchical theories that would catapult European thought into the next centuries as the bedevillers of truth and cause Africans to question themselves.

So aggressive would they be in promoting their ideologies that they would not only conjoin them with capitalism but would spread them to other parts of the world and convince many Africans and Asians that their racist views were correct.

White scientists, scholars, men and women of learning would propagate the most abhorrent nonsense about race.

Make no mistake, what we have today in every sector: education, economics, law, medicine-is the legacy of five hundred years of white attacks on Africans.

In the Netherlands, Peter Campier, another racist of notoriety, (1722-1789) compared facial and skull measurements of blacks and monkeys and developed a hierarchy in which he said that the Greek statuary was the highest form and the lowest was the negro. Racist ideology was formed by a narrow group of clergymen, philosophers, physicians, and professors who lived on the salaries of church and university. These were the spreaders, the evangelists of white supremacy.

Africa stands at the door of knowledge in the West. Africa taught Europe in geometry, medicine, astronomy, philosophy, and literature. Africa was often the source and the method by which Europe got its information. Papyrus from which we get the word paper is native to Africa. Even writing as we know it is first of all an African invention. Paper was not invented by Europeans. Yet they have taken even this idea to be theirs. It was Ts'ai Lun, the Chinese inventor made paper of mulberry, bamboo, and other trees by soaking the wood and beating it until it became a pulp, after him the idea was spread through the Islamicized Africans to Europe, a thousand years after its invention.

In the Americas it was politicians, intellectuals, and slaveowners who perfected the white supremacy theories. Thus Jefferson could write "This unfortunate difference of color and perhaps of faculty is a powerful obstacle to the emancipation of these people...I advance it therefore as a suspicion only that the blacks whether originally a distinct race or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments of the mind and body."

Racist science took upon itself the task of universalizing racial differences. Thus, Georges Curvier, the French biologist, founder of paleontology, botany, and comparative anatomy wrote a 16 volume work, *The Animal Kingdom*, (1827-35), in which he said: "the African manifestly approaches the monkey tribe. The hordes of which this variety is composed have always remained in a complete state of barbarism.

He goes on to say of the European: They are distinguished by "the beautiful form of the head...also remarkable for the varieties and shades of the complexion, and the color of the hair. From this variety have sprung the most civilized nations, and such as have most generally exercised domination over the rest of mankind." Comte de Gobineau and Houston Chamberlain organized a European racial hierarchy which included the Aryan, Alpine, Mediterranean types. The darker skin Europeans of Southern Europe were suspected of having black blood.

In fact, Lothrop Stoddard said that Portugal's decline had resulted when they included African slavery in the southern part of the country and the blood was mixed with Africans. Stoddard popularized Gobineau's ideas. Euro-chauvinists and nativists claim an essentialist perspective for Europe generally, and for Greece specifically. They see it as a miracle of the white race.

Barthold Niebuhr, historian of ancient Rome, stated the racist manifesto in history in these words

"race is one of the most important elements of history still remaining to be examined that which is, in truth, the very first basis upon which all history is reared and the first principle upon which it must proceed."

This involved, not material circumstances or human interactions of classes and nations, but genetic endowments, racial purity, fixed and immutable national characteristics,

History became to these first racial romantics, the biography of race. This personification means that you can look for the origins of a race, its childhood, just like you would a human being. there was a search for the origins of the vigorous Europe. heroic stories were published, Scotland and Germany contributed scores of folktales but finally they would discover the European childhood in Greece. The medieval stories and the old Nordic gods and goddesses were not sufficiently heroic enough to go along with the new ideas of European grandeur. Wotan and Thor were no match for the ancient Ptah, Amen, Atum, and Ra.

In 1820 when the Greeks fought the Turks for independence the idea of Greek origins for Europeans reached a fever pitch, indeed Shelley, the poet, could declare "we are all Greeks, our laws, our literature, our religion, our arts all have their roots in Greece." Turkish rule over Greece was seen as an inferior race ruling over a superior one.

Wilhelm von Humboldt put it this way: "...in the Greeks alone we find the ideal of that which we would like to be and produce...from the Greeks we take something more than earthly-almost Godlike."

As descendants of such godlike beings the Europeans considered themselves the natural rulers of the world. They then taught Africans to think of this in that way. They OJ'ed thousands of brothers and sisters.

Karl Otfried Muller at Gottingen in the 1820's, coincidentally with the rise of Greek independence, began this new construction of antiquity. He introduced immutable characteristics of various groups to explain that Greece did not have any influences from Africa or Asia. He said the Egyptians could not have settled colonies in Greece because they feared sea travel. He said the Phoenicians could not have settled because they were seafaring and would not have established colonies inland.

Racists in Europe preferred the German and English notions of freedoms rooted in the native soil to the abstract freedoms of France, *liberte*, *egalite*, and *fraternite*. They feared the French Revolution might threaten privilege. It is the same as the Anglo-English in India, the creole classes in many Caribbean societies fearing the rise of the masses because of ideas based on the acceptance of Africa as a valid concept of history, and African people as agents of history.

So they used the Greeks to serve their purposes, the purposes of the propertied classes. Slow democratic reform, no emancipation of women, class of servants laboring for the propertied on plantations, etc. The *Bildung* was a model for the Germans and other Europeans.

Thomas Macaulay showed what this curriculum could produce. Like Shelley or Schiller in Germany he was convinced of the miracle of the Greeks, the divine nature and stature of the Greeks. He said he "wanted to forget the accuracy of a judge in the veneration of a worshipper" when he looked at the Greeks.

Macaulay could admit to having no knowledge of Arabic or Sanskrit and yet declare in his *Minute on Education* that "It is not surprising that whites think in these terms considering the information that is

imparted to them on a regular basis. How else could he write? Indeed in Macaulay's day it was clear what the purpose of the English curriculum was:

"to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and color but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect." (minute on education). This could be applied to Africans as well.

Europeans whose characters were formed with this outlook were by and large racists and many were asked to rule the colonial territories. They brought their attitudes to bear on the neo-European institutions that grew up with their occupation. The old traditions remained, unmoved and rooted in the structure of the people's mind, sown as it were in their blood and skin.

But the Europeans were eager to promulgate the idea of the Greeks as the masters of early human civilization. As Greeks were raised to gods; Africans and Asians had to become devils

The attack was relentless from the 15th century onwards.

In 1715 in the *Acta Philosophorum*, August Heumann, a climatic determinist and one of the founders of the University of Gottingen made the distinction between Egyptian studies and Greek philosophy.

There does not seem to be much difference between the two when you read the definition he gives of philosophy as the "research and study of useful truths based on reason." To imply, as he wants to do that Africans, in this case, Egyptians did not engage in philosophy is to assume that reason was unknown to Africa.

This is an extraordinary argument in which 5000 years of African achievement was reduced to a mere necessary backdrop to Greece. And Nubia, the mother of Egypt, is so far in the background that she fades into the night.

The racist line of thinking has been unabated. Indeed while the 15th century is the great beginning of the evil influence it seems, each century since has seen its share of eurocentric Aryanism in a self serving way in terms of interpretation of history.

Since recent scholarship has shown conclusively that Egypt, Kemet, was African, now some rearwarders are trying to minimize the significance of Kemet. Thus, Mesopotamia came to the fore in their minds in the late 19th century although there is nothing in

Mesopotamia, Babylon, Sumeria, that equals the majesty or monumentality of the African achievement. This is not to say that An and Enlil are not important, but to place them in the same category in human history as Amen-Ra and Ptah or Atum is to turn history rightside wrong.

Paranoia, para-nous, literally having another mind alongside one's own mind, in its original meaning in the Greek language, rather than its modern meaning of persecutory delusion, describes those Africans who have lost heir own minds and who have placed another mind alongside their own.

But we know that our distancing from self, from history, from community has been a long one.

It is important I think that I explain how Africa from the beginning of Europe's involvement has been strait-jacketed conceptually.

Molefi Kete Asante. The central topic of this cross-disciplinary work is the theory of "Afrocentricity," which mandates that Africans be viewed as subjects rather than objects; and looks at how this philosophy, ethos, and world view gives Africans a better understanding of how to interpret issues affecting their communities. History, psychology, sociology, literature, economics, and education are explored, including discussions on Washingtonianism, Garveyism, Du Bois, Malcolm X, race and identity, Marxism, and breakthrough strategies.

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