

An
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An Afrocentric Manifesto

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Toward an African Renaissance

MOLEFI KETE ASANTE

polity

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First published in 2007 by Polity Press

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
350 Main Street
Malden, MA 02148, USA

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ISBN-13: 978-07456-4102-7

ISBN-13: 978-07456-4103-4 (pb)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Typeset in 11.25/13 pt Dante
by Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Manchester
Printed and bound in Great Britain by MPG Books Ltd, Bodmin, Cornwall

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Contents

1	Introduction	1
2	Ama Mazama and Paradigmatic Discourse	9
3	Afrocentricity: Notes on a Disciplinary Position	31
4	In Search of an Afrocentric Historiography	55
5	Kemetic Bases: The Africanness of Ancient Egypt	68
6	The Afrocentric Idea in Education	78
7	Sustaining a Relationship to Black Studies	93
8	Afrocentricity and History	105
9	The Black Nationalist Question	122
10	Race, Brutality, and Hegemony	132
11	Blackness as an Ethical Trope: Toward a Post-Western Manifesto	153
	<i>References</i>	167
	<i>Index</i>	174

Introduction

An overview

The African people of Georgia tell the story of a mother eagle that was flying low over a chicken yard holding her newly born baby eagle in her claws as she joined a large flock of eagles. A gust of wind forced the young eagle out of the mother's claws and it fell into the chicken yard. Although she looked for the baby eagle she could not find it. All she could see when she looked into the chicken yard were chickens. So after a long and exhaustive search, she reluctantly left the baby eagle and flew away with the large flock of eagles.

As the baby eagle grew in the chicken yard, it began to see itself as a chicken. Surrounded as it was by chickens, the little eagle received a chicken education, wore chicken clothes, ate chicken food, and attempted to imitate the walk and mannerisms of the chickens. Every day the little eagle practiced its chicken education. Its curriculum was a strictly chicken curriculum, one made expressly for chickens, to assist chickens in living in the chicken yard as good chickens. When the little eagle spoke, it spoke chicken language because it did not know eagle language. It carried its head like the chickens because it had only a faint knowledge, elementary knowledge, of what an eagle style or fashion or idea might have been. All traces of its earlier eagle training had been forgotten. In everything, the little eagle acted like a chicken until one day it started to think of itself as a chicken.

It tried to mimic the chickens. Whatever the chickens did, it did. If the chickens laughed, it laughed. If the chickens said, "It is a good day outside," the eagle said, "It is a good day outside." In everything that mattered the eagle saw itself as a chicken. It did not recognize itself as an eagle. In fact, all eagle consciousness was lost. Although it questioned why it looked different from the rest of the chickens, it just thought it was a funny-looking

chicken. Soon it never thought of itself as anything but a chicken, strange-looking and all. There were physical characteristics it did not like because they were not the characteristics appreciated by the chickens. It never saw itself in the light of its eagle history; it was simply a chicken.

One sunny day an old eagle flew over the chicken yard. It had no special mission and was not looking for anything in particular. However, as it was leisurely flying over the chicken yard, something caught its attention. It looked down and saw what it thought was an eagle. It flew closer and looked with keener sight and saw what it was sure was an eagle. It then flew to a tree just next to the chicken yard and it called out to the bird that looked like an eagle. "Come up here and talk with me, young eagle," the old eagle said. The eagle in the chicken yard ignored the old eagle because it knew it was not the eagle that was being called because it was a chicken. But the old eagle persisted and at last the eagle in the chicken yard recognized that he was being called. Whereupon the eagle in the yard turned and said to the old eagle, "I'm not an eagle, I'm a chicken." The old eagle, with knowledge that stretched back through generations of eagles, said "I know an eagle when I see one. You're an eagle. Open your wings and fly up here to this tree and let us talk." The young eagle in the chicken yard said, "I cannot fly because I am a chicken." After the old eagle had asked it several times, the young eagle stretched its wings and flapped them and flew up to the tree. It looked down at the chicken yard and said, "I did not know that I could do that." The old eagle asked the young eagle to fly and they flew effortlessly toward the setting sun.

Pinpointing the issue

I am a child of seven generations of Africans who have lived in America. My entire life, including career, struggle against oppression, search for ways to overturn hegemony, political outlook, fortunes and misfortunes, friends and detractors, has been impacted by my Africanness. It is an essential reality of an African living in America. Sometimes one has to learn what it is to be and this learning is how something seemingly essential can be translated into culture.

Afrocentricity is a paradigmatic intellectual perspective that privileges African agency within the context of African history and culture transcontinentally and trans-generationally. This means that the quality of location is essential to any analysis that involves African culture and behavior whether literary or economic, whether political or cultural. In this regard it is the crystallization of a critical perspective on facts (Asante, 1998). I do not present Afrocentricity as a settled corpus of ideas, as a worldview or as a closed

system of beliefs. It remains important that we hold back any reductive misunderstanding of the nature of human interaction and the creation of reality. The vast academic corporate grab for uniformity, rooted in the tradition of the assertive American reach for hegemony in thought, leads to the inevitable confrontation between Afrocentrists and those who would like to subsume all new ideas under one form or the other of Eurocentrism (Keita, 2000). What is now plain to see is that some scholars are nervous about the possibility of a perspective on data, that is, a locative thesis, which does not adapt to the overarching ideas of a European hegemony. At this moment in intellectual history there is a critical reading and an assessment of Afrocentricity in all disciplines. Every one has something to say and normally what they have to say is critical of the fact that Afrocentricity appears “outside” the mainstream. What is meant by this notion of being “outside” is that Afrocentricity traces its theoretical heritage to African ideas and African authors. It is not a Eurocentric idea because, for it to be, it would mean that Europe would be assaulting its own patriarchy and sense of superiority in language, content, and structure. Clarence Walker, a leading Eurocentrist, who happens to be black in color, writes in his book, *We Can't Go Home Again* (Walker, 2001, p. xviii), something quite naive and nonsensical when he says: “Although some of its advocates may claim that Afrocentrism is history, the methods by which its proponents reach their conclusions are not historically rigorous.” The naïveté occurs because Walker knows no Afrocentrist who claims that Afrocentricity is history. What is nonsensical about this charge is that any conclusion reached by Afrocentrists is usually based on the best arguments in the literature or orature. Clearly what would have been useful here is for Walker to cite some reference, some argument made by Afrocentrists, which suggested the lack of rigor. I accept the fact that he could not produce such an argument and therefore resorted to the most incredible example of the lack of rigor: the assertion without proof.

Walker's unfortunate intervention is built around two themes: (1) if everybody was a king, who built the pyramids? Afrocentrism and Black American History; (2) All God's Dangers Ain't a White Man, or Not All Knowledge is Power. With these two shadow pillars, Walker constructs a myth without foundation in the literature. He seeks to rewrite the intellectual history of African thought and to recast the Afrocentric movement in a negative light. For example, he claims that “Afrocentrism is a mythology that is racist, reactionary, and essentially therapeutic” (Walker, 2001, p. 3). While it is true that Afrocentricity is centered on the lived experiences of a particular group of people, namely Africans, it is not a mythology that is racist or reactionary. On the other hand it might serve as therapy to some people, and

that is alright, so long as the therapeutic nature of the intellectual activity of Afrocentricity does not stand in the way of advancing science. I think where Walker and I part company is on the question of white privilege in intellectual matters. It is difficult it seems for Walker to accept the possibility that a theoretical idea, based on African traditions and concepts, could exist apart from the European experience. He would probably come to the same conclusion about Asian ideas and traditions as well. The work of the Asiaticist theorist Yoshitaka Miike has advanced an Asian critique of humanity, culture, and communication that must challenge Walker's own self dislocation (Miike, 2004, pp. 69–81). Nevertheless I am willing to give Walker the benefit of any doubt in this area and to consider some of his other points. He assumes a position closely resembling mythomania when he tries to "steal" the Afrocentrist's core in order to divest it of any relationship to what he is calling history. It is a devious and ingenious statement to say "good history should give its actors agency, show the contingency of events, and examine the deployment of power" (Walker, 2001, p. 4) when he knows or should know that one of the strongest arguments for Afrocentricity is African agency (Asante, 1998, p. 177). Is Walker really trying to argue that Afrocentricity has demonstrated what good history ought to be or is he seeking to muddy the waters? I think that it is the latter course that he professes because he is unable to discover any significant philosophical error in the Afrocentric construction. Regardless of Walker's program for good history, the Afrocentric scholars have maintained that in all experiences where African people are discussed we look for African agency. In the book, *The Afrocentric Paradigm*, Ama Mazama discusses agency in connection with the philosophy and activism of Marcus Garvey (Mazama, 2003a, pp. 10–14).

The principal weakness in Walker's critique of Afrocentricity is that he engages a discourse that was put to bed several years earlier by my book, *The Painful Demise of Eurocentrism* (Asante, 1999). This discourse was based on the reaction to Afrocentricity written by Mary Lefkowitz in a book called *Not Out of Africa* (1996). As I will show in a later chapter, it was Lefkowitz's objective to reassert the idea that Greece did not receive substantial contributions from Africa through Egypt. Furthermore, it was her purpose to challenge the blackness of the ancient people of Egypt. These are the same arguments that Walker reiterates in his book.

Lefkowitz was put to rest after several biting rebukes of her book and numerous debates (three or four with me) over her ideas. Walker has avoided this discussion until now and it will be important to show how he differs from Lefkowitz. My comment regarding Lefkowitz's book could be applied to Walker's when I said, "tragically, the idea that Europeans have

some different intellectual or scientific ability is accepted doctrine and some scholars will go to any lengths to try to uphold it” (Asante, 1999, p. 53). But they always commit four fundamental flaws:

- 1 They attack insignificant or trivial issues to obscure the main points in a discourse.
- 2 They will make assertions and offer their own interpretations as evidence.
- 3 They will undermine writers they previously supported in order to maintain the fiction of a Greek miracle.
- 4 They will announce that both sides of an issue are correct, then move to uphold only the side that supports European triumphalism.

A serious reading of Walker demonstrates that he is a victim of these flaws. What is more frightening is that Walker’s argument calls for a special category for those Africans who are victims of self-hatred. He writes that “Afrocentrism is not a record of the black past, but a therapeutic mythology based on the belief that there is an essential blackness in black people” (Walker, 2001, p. 23). This is a strange statement because there are no Afrocentrists who claim that Afrocentricity is a record of the black past. There are those who claim that it is a quality of thought (Karenga), a paradigm (Mazama), a perspective (Asante), or a metatheory (Modupe), but no theorist has claimed that it is a record of the black past (Mazama, 2003a). There is no one who claims that it is a therapeutic mythology based on the belief that there is an essential blackness in black people. This is unreal. In the first place, many events, activities, behaviors, programs, and philosophies might be therapeutic. I can find no fault in therapy, if one needs it. But this is not the Afrocentric Manifesto. I do not call for therapy, although I have often seen the need for it, and I am confused by a historian’s use of the phrase “essential blackness in black people” because I think he has different axes to grind than literary theorists. It appears to me that we do not speak of the essential brownness in brown people or the essential whiteness in white people. Alas, self-hatred is a particular orientation of African people, or any people, who have been so destabilized by being “off-center” and “out of location” within their own culture that they have lost all sense of direction. I think that the ordinary African person on the streets of London, Philadelphia, or Paris will have a fairly good idea what it means to be an African in the Western world. They may not articulate it the same way that an Afrocentrist would with theoretical concepts but they would definitely speak to the uniqueness of the black person in a white-dominated

environment. The fact that Walker cannot see this may be a reflection of the environment he has created for himself; it is certainly not the case with the majority of African people.

There are some ludicrous arguments made by Walker that indicate he has rarely read any Afrocentrist or, if he has, he has not read reflectively. For example, he claims without proof that Afrocentricity is Eurocentrism in black face (Walker, 2001, p. 4). This is certainly an insult because Afrocentricity is not the reverse of Eurocentrism; neither is it a counter to Eurocentrism. Even if Eurocentrism never existed, there would be a need for African people to operate from their own sense of agency. With other options one might want to assume an Asian identity and Asian agency or, in the distant future, a Martian or alien agency. This would also be an escape from African agency. One does not have to pose Afrocentricity as a counter to Eurocentrism since the dislocation of Africans is a fact that should be corrected at any rate. While it is true that the cultural and intellectual dislocation of Africans has a lot to do with the fact that Europe colonized and enslaved Africans, it must be understood that for the African to assert his or her own agency is not a racist act, but a profoundly anti-racist act because it liberates the African from the dislocation that may have been created by Europeans and undermines any sense of European hegemony.

To render Afrocentricity more meaningful it might be useful to discuss what the options are if Africans particularly, and those who are studying Africa specifically, seek to resolve the intellectual issues surrounding the acquisition of knowledge. In the late 1970s, I wrote on Afrocentricity as a way of conceptualizing what we had called in the 1960s' Black Power Movement "the black perspective." The convergence of two influences worked to produce the idea that the "black perspective" needed a fuller, rounder theoretical construction. The first influence was the critical insight of the philosopher Harold Cruse who suggested that it was critical for the African community in the United States to articulate a political, social, cultural, and economic idea consistent with its own history (Cruse, 2005 [1967]). The second influence was that of Kwame Nkrumah who had argued in his book *Consciencism* (1964) that Africa itself had to come to terms with its own personality and create a scientific response to national and international issues based on the interest of Africa. I will examine how Cruse and Nkrumah contributed to the maturing of Afrocentricity in later chapters.

Of course, it should be observed that I was not the only person thinking along this line in the late 1970s. In many respects the Kawaida Movement founded by Maulana Karenga had articulated a vision based on the twin ideas of tradition and reason grounded in the African experience during the

1960s. Karenga's political essays and philosophical works, particularly around the importance of culture in true liberation of the mind, became useful guides in the evolution of my own theory of Afrocentricity.

I have written elsewhere, namely in *The Afrocentric Idea* (1998), of the struggle over definitions. Thus, it came as no great surprise to me that the Oxford dictionary defined "Afrocentric" as believing "that black culture was pre-eminent" (*New American Oxford Dictionary*, 2005). Needless to say, this is precisely the kind of distortion that led to the creation of the Afrocentric School of Thought in the first place. Many definitions of African people and their ideas appear to be either outright distortions or deliberate negations. For example, nowhere in the corpus of works called "Afrocentric" is the statement ever made that "black culture is pre-eminent," and the Oxford consultant who claimed such as the case misread the evidence and usage of the word. However, this is not unique and is quite representative of the way African ideas are discussed and defined by European and American writers. On the other hand, Eurocentric is defined by the *Encarta World English Dictionary* (1999) as "focusing on Europe or its people, institutions, and cultures, sometimes in an arrogant way."

As we shall see in following chapters, the sociolinguistics of racism and cultural imperialism have to be challenged and neutralized in order to produce an arena of respect where Africans assume more than a marginal role in their own discourses. Conversely, Europeans will see that respect cannot be created from aggressive linguistic adventures that seek to define and determine the boundaries of non-European experiences and ideas. Humility, often lacking in intellectual work, is the necessary trait of the person who would reach toward a reasonable arena of respect.

I think that it will become clearer as we proceed that a multiplicity of dislocations, disorientations, and distortions are at the foundation of the generative and productive system that demonstrates the strain of an imperialistic and triumphalist vision of the world. Afrocentricity, if anything, is a shout out for rationality in the midst of confusion, order in the presence of chaos, and respect for cultures in a world that tramples on both the rights and the definitions of the rights of humans.

Out of an experience of great inquietude over the past 500 years, Africans have now put into place, with great resistance as we shall see, the elements necessary for a truly African renaissance founded on African principles and the centrality of African interests. What is at stake is clear. Either the African people will escape the intellectual plantation that has paraded as universal or will be stifled in every attempt to express their own sense of culture.

Other centric expressions

The original work of Yoshitaka Miike on Asiocentric communication is instructive. Miike, alongside Jing Yin, has articulated a view of Asian culture that seeks to liberate the discourse around Asian communication ideas and rhetorical concepts away from being forced into the straitjacket of Western ideas. This is a remarkable undertaking that will have far-reaching effect on the course of social science and humanities discussions about culture.

My aim is to examine the relevance of Afrocentricity in a time when many intellectuals and activists are clients of two overlapping prisons of vision. While the dominant attitude that imprisons most of us may be called a Eurocentric worldview that gives rise to the spread of a particularism as if it were universal, we are also constrained by the infrastructures, by which I mean the maintenance systems, of dominance and privilege. They represent ideas such as globalization, postmodernism, modernism, structuralism, feminism, cultural materialism, and cosmopolitanism. Although this list does not exhaust the numerous manifestations, it should be a demonstration of the kinds of ideas that have served to enrich particularism as a universal value. I mean one does not have to be a genius to understand that the experience of Europe intellectually may not be the experience of Asians or Africans. Notice I said “may not” because I recognize the insidious nature of cultural ideas in a world where the control, as Samuel Huntington says in *The Clash of Civilizations* (1996), of almost all critical areas of power is in the hands of Europeans, whether in America or on the continent of Europe itself.

My intention has been to pinpoint the issue that we will return to in the following chapters. From here on out, it will be important to discuss the conceptual idea of Afrocentricity, place it in its own historical and philosophical context within African thought, and demonstrate how it operates in relationship to pedagogical, sociolinguistic, historical, multicultural, and gendered discourse. This means that I will have to discuss education, identity, class, and economics, and the meaning of blackness as a new construction for a human manifesto. But I am unable to do any of this without attention to the arguments for and against Afrocentricity. I shall try to deal with all arguments with equanimity, but I shall be especially careful to quote those who have taken an anti-Afrocentric view. In the end, what *The Afrocentric Manifesto* intends is to provide the reader with a clear, coherent, and persuasive argument for a reconceptualization of the way Africans view themselves and the way others have viewed Africans.

Ama Mazama and Paradigmatic Discourse

In her book, *The Afrocentric Paradigm*, Ama Mazama explains that Afrocentricity is not merely a worldview nor even a theory as such, but rather it is a paradigm that results in the reconceptualization of the social and historical reality of African people (Mazama, 2003a). Actually, what she suggests is that the Afrocentric paradigm is a revolutionary shift in thinking proposed as a constructural adjustment to black disorientation, decenteredness, and lack of agency.

Ama Mazama is an African who was born a French citizen in Guadeloupe, educated at the Academy of the Antilles in Guadeloupe, Bordeaux and La Sorbonne, where she obtained a PhD with highest distinction in linguistics. She became a professor in African American Studies at Temple University after making professorial stops at the University of Texas in Austin, Howard, Georgetown, and the Pennsylvania State University. Growing up as she did in the intellectual environment of French philosophical and linguistic studies but with the political and social radicalization of the Guadeloupean and Martinican campaigners for autonomy, Mazama reacted to colonial indoctrination that suggested the superiority of European culture over African culture. No one could convince her that the language of the black people of Guadeloupe was simply bad French nor could they influence her to believe that the Congo-based language of the people was inferior to any other language. In *Langue et Identité*, she establishes in a sustained argument the point that the Guadeloupeans were not merely imitators of French nor were they trying to speak French; they were speaking a language that had its roots deep in the continent. They were not creoles and there was no real creole identity. Maryse Conde, also a Guadeloupean, had argued a view that elevated and privileged creole status. In rejecting this formulation, Mazama was laying the foundation for her future work in Afrocentric theory. Already by the time she was getting her first Master's degree at Bordeaux, she had begun to see the damage that

was done to the psyche of black people in Guadeloupe by the insidious work of the cultural elitists. By the time she arrived in the United States to teach linguistics at the University of Texas, Ama Mazama had developed a clear plan for overturning the reigning paradigm in so-called Creole Studies. It was with deftness that Mazama established a formidable array of intellectual weaponry with books, monographs, and articles that attacked the very construction of creolization. In challenging creolization she was challenging the idea of white racial supremacy.

This work was soon followed up by lecture tours each year in Guadeloupe, interviews on the radio and television, and speeches to community groups. The masses of people were thirsty for the information, particularly the African connection that Mazama was now prepared to give them from her own travels and studies in Africa. But it was her philosophical and theoretical orientation, more than anything else, which grounded her in the tradition of Cheikh Anta Diop, Amilcar Cabral, Kwame Nkrumah, Marcus Garvey, Anna Julia Cooper, and others who have always believed that African people were not white people in color. Mazama knew that the horrendous situation of black people in Africa and in the Americas was not just a political and economic crisis, but a crisis of culture, theory, and philosophy. Of course, the French authorities would soon ban her from appearing on television in the land of her birth, but her videotapes and audiotapes would be played and used by the people to raise the consciousness of their children. While Mazama found the small island of Guadeloupe more and more difficult to navigate in terms of access, she found ample opportunity in France itself and also in Africa for her intellectual ideas. Her works soon became popular in France, Canada, Guyane, Benin, and other Francophone countries. Yet it is in the United States, as a leading theorist of the Afrocentric School, that she has made her greatest impact on students and colleagues. Because she understands the intersections as well as the centers and margins in the discourse around hegemony and domination, she has become one of the most prominent theorists.

Mazama's argument for Afrocentricity is therefore grounded in practical and intellectual experiences. Since she has both philosophical and linguistic training, her approach to the same general problem of African dislocation will be slightly different from my own. I am much more stilted, if not structural, in my approach to the phenomenological problem of agency.

Let us see if we can outline Mazama's principal argument. Although colonization of Africans has ended, Africans are still mentally subjugated. The reason for this sad mental state is that we have been fighting against the evil of colonization as an economic and political problem rather than a total conceptual distortion leading to confusion. Mazama further contends

that colonization “must be analyzed within the broader context of the European cultural ethos that generated the economic exploitation and political suppression” in the first place (Mazama, 2003a, p. 4).

The tension between the colonizer and the colonized is explicitly reiterated in Mazama’s work in much the same way as Albert Memmi and Frantz Fanon had done earlier. A hyper-valorized dominating culture and a “systematically denigrated” oppressed or colonized community is the standard formulation for the mental confusion of the dominated. This ontological reduction of colonized people was a necessary part of the process of bankrupting the intellectual and cultural space of the colonized.

Mazama contends that there is another aspect of the process of colonization that is more significant than ontological reduction that has gone relatively unrecognized because the leading critiques of colonization have been by those who operated within the framework of European thinking. For example, Fanon was a Marxist and accepted the idea of evolutionary change which led him to believe, along with Europeans, that Africans needed “development.” Because neither Fanon nor his countryman, Aime Césaire, constructed European development as problematic they never questioned the use of language such as “normal,” “natural,” and “universal,” all terms that Europeans had constructed to relate to themselves as normative. Mazama understands this phenomenon and insists that the “Afrocentric idea rests on the assertion of the primacy of the African experience for African people” (Mazama, 2003a, p. 5).

In a riveting critique of authors who have misappropriated the term “Afrocentricity,” Mazama highlights the obvious mischaracterizations in the literature. For example, Patricia Hill Collins, as early as 1991, misunderstood the idea of Afrocentricity as having “core African values.” This leads immediately to a misunderstanding that creates bad conclusions. There is a difference, as Mazama explains, between Africinity, which is what Hill Collins must have been writing about, and Afrocentricity. Africinity refers to the traditions, customs, and values of African people. But Afrocentricity is a much more self-conscious approach to the agency of African people within the context of their own history.

The special contribution that Mazama makes to the advancement of Afrocentricity has to do with the application and extension of the Kuhnian notion of paradigm. She argues that “Afrocentricity, within the academic context, will best be understood as a paradigm” (Mazama, 2003a, p. 7). She takes the idea of the cognitive and structural elements of a paradigm and applies them to Afrocentricity. Under the cognitive aspect of a paradigm are three constituents: metaphysical, sociological, and exemplary. Of course